

Sebastian Cupid

The Arrows – Book One

J.J. Martin

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TO ELAINE

For teaching me the value of "what if."

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PROLOGUE

That was the day Sebastian decided he'd had enough. When the first slap landed on his jawbone, realization popped into his head. He stood watching tears run out of the corners of her eyes, her lips trembling, and he was thinking to himself, *"What the hell? There has to be a better way than this."*

Sebastian said all the right things, of course. That's his job. He told her it was him, not her. He told her it was a very confusing time in his life. It was all truth. He handed her tissues and accepted the second slap as she walked out the door. It worked like it always had for hundreds, even thousands of other women before her.

The other Arrows would be telling him to get over it. They'd sit him down at the bar, hand him a fresh brew, and start telling him the same things they tell each other every time someone in the group goes through a rough one like this. That's their job. They talk about the greater good and the ends justifying the means, etc, etc, and they wouldn't be lying. They really mean it, and most of it is true.

On this particular day, none of those explanations helped. Sebastian watched Cynthia Bledsoe stomp out of the Italian restaurant which he would avoid for the rest of his days and decided he had enough. Discontent with the assigned method fluttered around in his head all day, like bats circling around a street light. When he sat at his desk that night, looking down on the lights of the city, he penned Cynthia's name in his book next to all of the other names. He'd done her a great service, though she'd never know. For once, even the knowledge of that wasn't enough. If he had to reduce his purpose

J.J. Martin

down to one sentence, he'd never be able to sell what he did to any woman.

My name is Sebastian Cupid, and I'm here to break your heart.

ONE

Sebastian realized how cliché the whole scenario was. He kept grimacing while he stood there, leaning against the bar, running the tablets in his pants pocket through his fingers. The thumping bass of techno music pounded his skull in time with the flashing strobes attached to the iron grid in the ceiling. Couples dressed in black leather and fishnets slithered all over each other on the dance floor. Sebastian personally hated that he hadn't come up with a more original place to do what he needed to do. However, he couldn't discredit the obvious advantages to a place like this. He needed to be ignored. This was the flashiest crowd in Chicago at the moment and a good chance to disappear.

Sebastian had debated how to dress for this. He didn't want to stick out in the crowd, but he'd drawn the line at leather and fishnets. He was dressed in simple black jeans and a t-shirt. It was hard enough to slip under the radar without flashy gear. Sebastian had been designed to attract attention. The Arrows were all tall, handsome, and shockingly beautiful. Mortals couldn't get enough of them. Tonight he needed to be invisible, which wasn't going to be easy.

Sebastian pulled his curly, dark hair into a stocking hat, which was fortunately "in" right now. He couldn't think of a way to hide his bone structure without making himself stand out more, so he settled for large sunglasses to hide his eyes and part of his face. He was receiving cursory glances from both women and men, but nothing lasted long. Sebastian kept his eyes to his drink, forcing himself to bob to the ridiculous music pounding his head into submission.

Sebastian heard people say all the time you never find your true love in a bar. A select few were going to prove that saying wrong tonight.

If he managed not to screw it up.

It was just after midnight on a Friday, and the club was starting to fill up. It was the end of a long workday for most, and everyone was ready to unwind. Sebastian was counting on it. He watched out of the corner of his eye as patron after patron lined up at the bar. He got an idea as he saw people waiting on drinks. In a joint like this, it didn't matter how many bartenders were on duty. The ratio of drinkers to bartenders always got out of hand, and people were starting to pile up around the bar. Pretty soon, they started lining up behind Sebastian's bar stool, trying to flag down a drink with annoyed looks on their faces. Sebastian fumbled in his pocket for one of the tablets, his hands starting to get a little sweaty with the notion of what he was going to do. He took a swig of Killian's to ease the dryness in his mouth. This needed to work. Sebastian didn't want to think about the consequences of his plan going badly considering how many chips he had used up to get approval for it in the first place.

Sebastian held one of the tablets, about the size of a pencil eraser, in the palm that rested on the bar while he held his drink. He held it loosely so the sweat and heat clinging to his skin wouldn't make it dissolve. If he had to wait too long, he would have to throw this one away and start again. Just as he was reminding himself not to chew his lip, the bartender clunked two drinks down on the bar in front of him and gestured behind Sebastian's stool. Sebastian placed his beer back on the bar, picked up both drinks that were dark in color (perfect!), and passed them to the patrons behind him. As he did, he dropped the tablet from his palm into one of the drinks. A tall blonde guy with a Mohawk and three piercings in his left ear said, "Thanks, man," as he passed the glass with the tablet in it to the short, black-haired girl standing next to him.

"No problem," Sebastian grunted. There was a very tense moment when the girl raised her maroon colored eyebrows while sipping the drugged drink and cocked her head to one side with a look of serious

Sebastian Cupid

concentration. Sebastian turned back to his beer, pretending not to be at all interested in them anymore, just another patron in the bar.

A few seconds later, he heard her say, "The drinks are always too weak here." Sebastian exhaled almost audibly as he took a shaky sip of his own beer. He figured he was going to need to start drinking a lot more if he was going to start doing it this way. He'd have to see how the rest of the night went.

Sebastian didn't drop any more tablets until almost an hour later. The crowd was really starting to get sloppy, and people weren't noticing much anymore. That's what he was counting on. He only placed tablets in dark colored drinks, afraid the light brown tabs would be more noticeable in drinks of any other color. He was really, really tempted to drop tabs in beer bottles because then they'd be completely hidden, but he knew he couldn't chance it. Someone would be far more likely to notice a person touching the lip of a beer bottle than the edge of a glass. Sebastian dropped three more tabs within two hours. Two of them went to girls, and one to a young man with a fro and a neon t-shirt. Sebastian was definitely getting better at it anyway. He didn't have the jitters anymore. He'd only had a couple beers because he couldn't afford to get sloppy about it, but it helped calm his nerves.

At nearly three o'clock, people started to leave, and he knew he needed to drop the last tab and get out of there. Five people in five hours would be a serious improvement over the alternative. Sebastian was only momentarily worried the tabs wouldn't work, but he saw the dark-haired girl from the first tab gazing into the eyes of Mohawk guy on the dance floor. Mohawk guy looked like he'd won the lottery, and she...well. Sebastian had done his job, and he hadn't had to break any hearts to do it. Let the games begin.

The problem was there weren't as many people at the bar as there had been earlier. People were no longer smashed up against the back of Sebastian's bar stool trying to wave down disinterested bartenders. He didn't want to waste a tablet. They were too time consuming to make, and the contents were semi-precious.

He moved to the edge of the dance floor instead, leaning against the rail that ran around the room. The air was thick and hazy with fog

machine smoke. He found himself grateful smoking had finally been banned in Chicago bars, but his eyes were starting to sting anyway from the liquor, the fog machine, and the hour. Sebastian had been up all day trying to make these tablets, and he desperately needed sleep. He also couldn't remember the last time he had eaten a meal. It was time to call it a night.

Sebastian glanced over the crowd from behind his sunglasses, making sure his actions would go unnoticed before he dropped the last tab into a full beer bottle. As he dropped the tablet, he glanced behind him into the accusatory face of a woman on the other side of the rail. Shit.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Sebastian just raised an eyebrow, his arms folding nonchalantly against his chest, where his heart was threatening to jack-hammer through. “Problem?”

The woman stomped around the railing to Sebastian wearing six-inch heeled boots, which made her right at eye level. Her strawberry blonde hair was pulled up into a high pony tail on her head. The huge silver hoops in her ears swung with each step. She was thin, almost bony, but her attitude was that of a body builder. He had no doubt he was in for it now.

She walked right up into his face. Her hazel eyes pinned him as she grabbed the front of his shirt in her left hand. “Do you think it's funny?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Sebastian said evenly, trying to sound insulted instead of panicky.

Her eyes, outlined in smoky eye shadow, widened as she cocked her head to one side. “Oh, you think you're cute don't you? What planet do you people come from?”

Sebastian was losing patience now. Too much was riding on this for some goth chick in a club to fuck it up. “Listen, lady. Either tell me what the hell your problem is or go away. I'm not interested.”

“Oh, really?” She gave him a little shove as her voice started to rise. “Only interested in the drugged up ones, huh?” She leaned in close. “You make me sick.”

Right as Sebastian decided the best thing to do was make a run for it, the best possible thing happened.

Sebastian Cupid

Russell appeared from nowhere. He walked up to the red-head and put an arm around her waist. Sebastian noticed Russell was dressed to fit in and had to keep himself from smirking at the leather jeans and tight-fitting shirt. All humor was lost, however, when Sebastian saw Russell making the same look at his own sunglasses and hat.

Russell leaned down to gaze into the eyes of his date as he asked, "What's up, Alex?"

To Alex's credit, she didn't seem to be at all derailed by Russell's devil-may-care good looks. She continued to leer at Sebastian threateningly, only glancing at Russell. "I just caught this asshole slipping a roofie into someone's drink."

Russell looked down at Alex briefly before glancing up at Sebastian. "That right, buddy?"

Sebastian shrugged one shoulder, seeing how they were going to play this. "I don't know what she's talking about. I just sat my beer down here, and she comes stomping up and getting all bitchy. Has she been drinking?"

Russell just snickered, as if he didn't give a shit, and turned back to look at Alex. "You probably just misunderstood, babe." Alex shoved off Russell's hand as he reached over to calm her down.

"I know what I saw," Alex said, crossing her arms over her chest.

Sebastian picked up the beer from the rail and looked Alex in the eye. "Whatever. I don't feel like dancing after all." He kept his eyes on hers as he took a deep swig from the bottle, hoping the owner of it wasn't going to choose this moment to come looking for a drink. He turned, his eyes meeting Russell's briefly as he strode toward the door. Sebastian dropped the beer in the trash on the way out of the noisy venue, escaping to the street.

Holy shit. Sebastian was immediately relieved by clear air of the summer night, the noise of the traffic and trains much more welcome than the pounding bass of club music. He walked to the end of the block and turned the corner so he could lean against the wall of the store building and collect himself. He yanked off the hat and glasses, tossing them into the doorway of the closed shop.

"Hey!"

Sebastian nearly pissed down his own leg as he turned, ready to kick the shit out of whoever was there. "Russell! Damn it!" Sebastian punched Russell's arm, his heart in his throat. Russell immediately started laughing while Sebastian groaned. "You trying to kill me?"

"No, I'm trying to keep you out of jail. Mom would kill us both if you wound up in there again."

Sebastian shook his head, leaning back against the wall. Russell leaned there with him, waiting. Sebastian saw Russell reach for his smokes before he remembered there was no front pocket on the tight fitting shirt.

"Nice costume." Sebastian snickered.

"Well, you too, asswipe. Were you trying to impersonate the unibomber? You couldn't have looked more suspicious. Hell, a cop would have tried to pick you up for something if Alex hadn't busted you first."

"Where's she at?"

"I left her at the bar. She came with friends. I told her I was gonna split."

Sebastian groaned as he realized what he had done. "Oh, Russell. I'm so sorry."

"It's alright. We'll get her another time. She needs it bad too. Pissed off at the world in general."

Russell tapped Sebastian's arm as he turned to start walking to the red line. "Come on, man," he said. "I could use a smoke." They cut across the street to the alley at the other side. Russell was rambling on about what Sebastian missed at Temple that day, but stopped mid-sentence as Sebastian yanked him to the wall at the mouth of the alley, shutting him up. Russell jumped and was ready to start yelling until he saw Sebastian's face. Russell looked around the corner into the dark alleyway, where Sebastian gazed. "Fuck," he whispered. "That's not...is that...?" Russell turned and vomited into the street.

On the ground, blood crusted the pavement under Sebastian as it dripped out of the alley. Battling his own nausea, Sebastian gazed into the face of Jeremy, another Golden Arrow, who was on the ground less than ten feet into the alley, staring lifelessly into the night.

TWO

A few phone calls and a couple hours later, Russell and Sebastian were sitting in the lobby at Temple. Russell was gazing at the opposite wall, methodically turning his coffee cup in his hands, his eyes glazed and blank. Sebastian wasn't looking too good himself. He had to remind himself a million times not to chew on his lip, which is what he did when he was thinking about something too hard. He was fidgeting with everything in his reach from the glossy magazines on the side table to the cuffs of his dress shirt. Russell and Sebastian had changed upon arriving at Temple. This was out of respect, not requirement. Psyche wouldn't care if they showed up in their underwear, unlike Grandma. If Grandma had seen them in their outfits from earlier, she would have laid an egg.

Sebastian decided he had enough sitting and stretched into a standing position so he could start pacing a hole in the floor next to a window overlooking the moonlit gardens. Russell heaved a sigh behind him, and Sebastian turned to see his brother scrub his face with his hands, his cigarette shaking between two fingers. "I don't get it, Sebastian," he muttered.

Sebastian rested an elbow on the window sill and propped his hand in his springy hair, which he was sure was frizzy by now. He may be an Arrow, but they all had their setbacks. "It has to be turf wars."

Russell threw his head back onto the armchair, looking at the ceiling. "But how the hell?" His foot tapped nervously. He leaned his head forward to pinch the bridge of his nose with his hand. It made Sebastian motion sick to watch him shuffling from position to position. "I mean, have you ever heard of this?"

Sebastian just set his coffee cup on the window sill and watched the breeze shift the branches of the magnolia tree outside, shaking his head. No. He'd never heard of this. Even nightmares had some sense of realism, and this was the farthest thing from reality he could imagine.

Russell looked up at Sebastian from behind his hand, cigarette smoke billowing to the ceiling. "Victoria said most of the blood was drained from his body. She said..." He gulped and leaned forward to place his elbows on his knees, his hands holding his arms as if he was trying to hold himself together. "She said he had burns all over his mark. It was like whoever did that to him was trying to ...I don't know." Russell jumped up. "Hell! 'Trying to,' nothing! They did it!" He walked over to Sebastian, his face pinched in worry and fear. He reeked of cigarettes. Leaning closer to where Sebastian stared out the window, Russell's brown hair fell into his eyes as they pleaded with Sebastian to help him make sense of it all.

Sebastian sighed as he leaned back. "I don't know, Russell. All I can figure is the only ones that have anything to gain from this are the Lead Arrows." Sebastian and his brethren were only one half of the Arrow family. He was a Golden Arrow. His step-family, the Lead Arrows, were as dark and heavy as their names. Frankly, they gave him the creeps.

Russell leaned closer, his eyes only inches from Sebastian as he whispered, "But did you think they'd ever figure out how to do it? Did you think they'd ever find out how to kill us? Shit!" Russell stepped back, gesturing wildly with his hands. "I never thought we could be killed."

Sebastian just turned his back to the window, leaning on the sill, fidgeting with his hands. "It's been done before. In the old stories, immortals have been taken down from time to time."

Russell leaned on the old window. "This isn't supposed to be like old times. This isn't anything like the Fall. We've been established here for centuries. And Jeremy..." Russell stopped at this, his eyes filling as he looked back across the huge, empty lobby. Sebastian placed his hand on Russell's shoulder. He knew what Russell meant. Of all of the Golden Arrows, Sebastian never would have thought that anyone could have taken down Jeremy. Jeremy was one of the best. After centuries of

Sebastian Cupid

peace, they'd lost a brother, and it was a well-aimed attack. Jeremy's murder struck each of them to the core, a statement among statements. Jeremy had been one of the first, an older brother to them all.

Russell and Sebastian both turned toward the sound of footsteps as Evans approached from the entrance. Her radiant blonde hair swinging at her waist, her slim frame rushing up to meet them. "Sebastian?"

Sebastian hated the horrible moment of searching and hope in her face. She was waiting for him to tell her it was all a lie. He found he couldn't speak, so he just opened his arms. Her face registered shock as she realized what he couldn't say. She took an instinctive step back as her hand flew to her mouth, her eyes spilling over with tears. She shook her head as Sebastian approached, her eyes closing. "No," she whispered. Evans's hands went over her face as Sebastian enveloped her into his chest, her sobs shaking them both. He held her head to his chest as she wept. After a few minutes, Evans turned to look at Russell, her beautiful, timeless face lined with shock and grief. Russell sighed and pulled her into his arms. He kissed the top of her head. "How did you hear, love?"

Evans's shaky voice vibrated as she said, "Victoria called me. She said someone had found Jeremy. That he was..." She choked up, unable to finish. It didn't matter. Her sobs were almost worse than hearing it said. Sebastian looked at Russell.

"It won't be long before everyone's here." Russell had his arms wrapped around Evans. Sebastian recognized the look on Russell's face. He had seen it a hundred times before. It was the look of protection and duty. Russell may be shaken by what happened to Jeremy, and Jupiter knew they both had a million questions, but Russell could always be counted on to step up when push came to shove. Russell looked down at their sister.

"Let's go get a drink, Evans." Evans shakily wiped her tears and nodded. Sebastian reached over to give her arm a squeeze. She lifted herself up on tiptoes to kiss his cheek before Russell steered her away toward the kitchen. Almost immediately, Victoria walked into the lobby.

“Sebastian,” Victoria said. She approached in her militant stride, her supple figure tucked into a black office suit of her rank. He smiled slightly as he embraced her in greeting.

“Hey, Victoria.”

She gave Sebastian a quick hug before she took a step back to look him over. “You’ve looked better.” He tried to chuckle, but the sound had little humor. Victoria’s dark, wavy hair spilled over her shoulders as her head cocked to one side, studying him. “Are you going to be okay?”

“That’s a good question for all of us right now, Victoria.”

She crossed to the window, leaning against it to look at Sebastian, crossing her arms over her chest. “Mom is ready to talk to you. I’ve called the other Golden Arrows. We’ll have a meeting in just under an hour, but she wants to talk to you first. Where’s Russell?”

“He took Evans to get a drink.”

Victoria’s eyes softened at the mention of their sister. “Is she okay?”

“Russell is helping her, but she’s pretty upset. We all are.”

Victoria nodded and took his arm in hers, walking toward the main office, where she knew their mother waited. “We’ll all be here to comfort each other.” Her voice cracked on the last word. Sebastian would have reached over to hug her, but she separated herself from him and turned, leaving him at his mom’s office door. “I’ll be here after.”

He grinned, knowing his tough sister would rather he punch her in the face than hug her in a time of grief. Sebastian exhaled heavy as he looked at the heavy oak door in front of him. He knocked twice, firmly, and heard his mother call, “Come in, Sebastian.”

Sebastian walked in, closing the door softly behind him. Psyche’s office was dimly lit, the soft light making the rich reds of the upholstery seem even darker. The walls were papered in a soft beige color, the trim a rich oak. His mother sat in an armchair to the right of her desk, and she rose as he walked to her. Sebastian gathered her small frame into his arms, placing his chin on top of her long, blonde hair. He felt her sigh against his chest. “Are you ok, Mom?”

Sebastian Cupid

Psyche pulled back and looked at Sebastian's face. She honestly only looked a couple years older than he. Her unlined face was the color of peach rose petals, her eyes a sea foam green. Her frame was supple, and young. She, like all of them, was timeless. She was known for her beauty, and there was a reason for it. After all, Psyche was the one who captured the heart of his father. She was a legend. Despite the shocking beauty of her form, her eyes were filled with grief. She patted Sebastian's arms then moved to sit in her chair, gesturing him to the chair opposite.

"I just don't know what to think of this mess." Psyche held all the composure of royalty, but he could see she was tired. She shook her head, looking from her hands in her lap to his face. "You saw no one?"

Sebastian sighed, stretching his tall frame out from the chair, leaning an elbow on the arm. "By the time we happened across..." He found he could not say Jeremy's name, especially not in front of his mother, who looked at him with those sad eyes. Sebastian cleared his throat and shook his head. "No. It was obvious he'd been there for some time."

Psyche sighed and closed her eyes. "Yes, that's what Victoria said too."

"You don't think it's the Lead Arrows?"

Psyche shook her head, adjusting the lapels of her vest, practical yet professional. "Mars assures me his people were not involved."

Sebastian nearly snorted before he stopped himself. "Mars? Do you really think we can trust Mars?"

"He's never given me any reason not to."

Sebastian shook his head as he shifted, uncomfortable with the topic. "Maybe not to you, specifically. We both know Mars has been known to use whatever means he deems necessary for his ventures and damn the consequences."

Psyche lowered her hands to her lap and held him in her gaze, which, despite her soft beauty, was sharp and direct. "Sebastian, I know you do not approve of Mars and his methods, but his service is much darker than ours and just as necessary. He's never given us reason to question his motives when it comes to the relationship

between the two Arrow families. We have an alliance for a reason, and that's because one of us cannot survive without the other."

Sebastian decided to bite his tongue, for now. Mars had always stayed just one toe to the wrong side of the line, leaving it there to determine how much he could get away with before someone stepped in. Sebastian considered his mother to be overly soft-hearted or naive. Jupiter knows, she'd seen enough to fill hundreds of mortal lifetimes, but she tended to turn a blind eye to Mars. That was mainly because, while the Golden Arrows' business was that of love, the Lead Arrows' was that of hate. Sebastian thought those circumstances made her more tolerant of Mars's methods than she should have been. Her only concern was to protect the alliance and keep balance in the mortal world. It was something Sebastian weighed constantly, every minute, in his own work.

Psyche snapped Sebastian out of his daze. "Where is Russell?"

"He's with Evans."

Psyche took a sip from a glass at the corner of the side table. "Oh, my. I imagine she was a complete mess."

"Yes. Russell will take care of her."

She smiled, "Yes, Russell would, wouldn't he? You always can depend on Russell to put his own needs aside when others' needs rise."

That was precisely why, of all his family, Sebastian spent most of his time with Russell. They suited each other in that way. Russell was goofy, hyper, and a bit finicky, which Sebastian never was. Russell was always game for a laugh while Sebastian was always serious. However, Russell always fought with an arm of steel and a heart of gold.

Psyche raised one well-groomed eyebrow, a talent Sebastian envied, and asked, "And how did your little experiment go?"

Sebastian thought back to his adventure in the night club. He tried not to shudder, thinking of the near-disastrous ending. He attempted to keep his face even as he replied, "Very well."

Psyche chuckled, "Had some trouble, did you?"

Sebastian just shook his head and tried not to smile as he fidgeted with his cuffs. "How do you always know when I'm fibbing?"

Sebastian Cupid

Psyche leaned forward a little, her blonde hair shimmering as she shook her head. "That's my job, dear. What kind of mother would I be if I didn't know my own children?"

Sebastian chose his words carefully. "It did go well. I still have some kinks that need working out."

His mother's eyes lit up in interest. "And the mortals? Did your plan work as the normal approach would have?"

Now Sebastian grinned, eager to share the results with her. "Yes. Four mortals, though Russell needs to get credit for one."

Psyche gasped, and she nearly stood before remembering to remain composed. "Four? So many in one night?"

Sebastian nodded and tried not to look too proud of himself.

"Well! Well..." She shook her head, surprise clear on her face. "I must admit, I never considered you would be able to reach a four month quota in one night."

He chuckled before correcting her. "Three month quota, Mom. Russell really does get one."

Psyche looked him shrewdly. "Bailed you out, did he?"

Sebastian tried not to look guilty but was sure he failed miserably. "I'm hoping he'll forgive me when he figures out he's got a one month vacation coming."

Psyche stood and moved to her desk, trailing one hand along the surface as she walked, considering. "I'm impressed. I'm looking forward to being able to offer an alternate method." She looked at him with intensity, leaving no doubt of the seriousness of the situation. "The less contact we have with mortals, the better. Especially now. We cannot afford to bring mayhem to our family at a time like this. You are both going to need time off from your regular duties to help with the issue at hand. In this way, your timing could not have been better."

Sebastian stood and walked to his mother, placing a hand on her shoulder. Psyche patted his cheek, smiling softly. "I want you to be aware. If you're going to continue this project, you must perfect it, be absolutely sure of it. We cannot afford any mistakes. And you're only going to get a month's vacation."

He wasn't really upset at this news, because he suspected he would be needed. "To help with the arrangements?"

She squeezed his wrists before walking around to her office chair, sitting, and pulling a file open. "For that, and I also need to send you away on state business."

Now he was curious. His mother had never asked such a thing of him before. "Where?"

"Rome. I need you to meet with Mars."

Sebastian stopped himself just before he protested. Resentment flooded through him at the thought of having to meet with the leader of the Lead Arrows. Before he could think of a proper rebuttal, Psyche silenced him with a look. "I will be busy with other arrangements for our current tragedy. Surely you will not ask me to leave our Temple at this time?"

Sebastian exhaled, returning his vision from red to normal. Also, he felt the sting of shame. What was he doing? He could put aside his personal feelings for Mars for one visit. For Mom. And Jeremy. "No, of course not. When do I leave?"

Psyche handed him a packet with his plane ticket. "The flight leaves at 4 am Saturday, May 7th. That's next weekend. You will be expected at the Rome Temple from Saturday through the end of the first quarter review, which will last about one week. Your father is already there. I have explained the situation, and we both agree it is best if one of us stays here at all times. We need to have a meeting with all Golden Arrows to discuss the events of the evening and what it means for us. That meeting will be later today at 6 p.m. Please be present."

Sebastian nodded and tucked the ticket into his jacket pocket. "Of course."

Psyche stood and moved to the window behind her desk. Dawn was coming fast, and the light crept into the garden, covering the already fairytale-like courtyard in a pink hue. Sebastian saw his mother wipe her eyes discreetly. He approached her from behind, handing her his handkerchief. "Thank you, Sebastian," she said as she took the white linen and wiped gently under both eyes. She cleared her throat and looked over the gardens. "This is going to change everything for us. Dear Jupiter, that one of us would go this way."

Sebastian Cupid

He placed a hand on her shoulder as a knock sounded on her office door. Regaining her composure, Psyche turned, handing the handkerchief back to Sebastian as she answered the knock. "Yes?"

The door opened to reveal Victoria, looking as competent as ever. Her dark head bowed as she introduced her arrival. "Mother, Hans and several others are here and waiting."

"Very well, Victoria. Sebastian, you may go join the others. I will come out and we'll have a moment of silence and prayer with everyone present."

Sebastian nodded to Psyche and advanced toward the door as Victoria ducked out of sight again. He stopped just before he walked out to look back into the office. "Mom?"

"Yes, Sebastian?" Psyche approached her desk again, barely sparing him a glance.

Sebastian tried not to shuffle like a child as he considered how to phrase his question respectfully. "I was just wondering, not because of myself but because of the quota, especially since I am going to the fiscal meeting in Rome. Why only a month off? I will likely only be in Rome for a week or two."

Psyche sat as she looked at him, shuffling as she glanced toward where he stood. "Oh, sweetheart." She shook her head, failing to keep her face clear. Her sad eyes lifted to look at him as a tear spilled over.

"The extra month working is not to fill your quota. It's to fill Jeremy's."

THREE

At 5:57 that night, Sebastian walked back into the main lobby at Temple. He'd showered, shaved, and eaten. He hadn't slept much, though. He had sunglasses on again, this time to cover up his red eyes. Everyone else had tense looks on their faces and were dressed in very much the same fashion as he: black suits, dress shoes, and sunglasses. Once again, the sunglasses were out of necessity and not fashion. From the looks around the room, it was obvious most of his brothers and sisters had spent the day crying. Most of the women had yet to stop. Sebastian caught sight of Victoria carrying a cup of something to Evans. Victoria was wearing the same black suit from earlier in the day, and he was sure she hadn't left. Evans had been home to change into a long, black dress. She wore a black hat and a tissue was pressed under the left lens of her sunglasses as she attempted to stop the flow of tears. Off to her side was Russell. Sebastian headed in their direction.

Russell lifted his head as he approached. "Hey," he said. "You get some sleep?" Sebastian shook his head. "Yeah, you don't look like it."

"I tried my best," Sebastian muttered.

Russell nodded. Evans floated over to Sebastian, and he slid an arm around her shoulders. "Hey, Evans."

"Sebastian," she said. "Did you talk to Mom?"

"Yeah, before I left."

"She says you're to go to Rome."

He sighed and tried not to groan. "Yeah. I guess I am."

Evans looked at him sympathetically and patted his arm. "I'm sure it won't be that bad. Mars isn't the same guy he was in the beginning."

Sebastian Cupid

“Yeah, you’ve got that right,” Sebastian muttered, watching as the door to Psyche’s office opened. Instantly, the room fell silent. Hans, Psyche’s personal Guardian and the head of all the Guardians at their Temple, carried a file to the podium in the corner of the large lobby. All around Sebastian, the other Golden Arrows began taking their seats. There were over one hundred of them in the Chicago Temple. It always overwhelmed Sebastian a bit to see them all in one place, to realize how long they’d been operating together. A long time had passed since they had reason to worry for their safety.

Russell and Sebastian leaned against the wall as Hans cleared his throat and spoke to the room. “Thank you all for coming.” He shuffled papers in front of him before he looked at up with his sad eyes, his athletic form standing militant over the podium. “I understand it is hard in our service to cancel plans at the last minute, and we’re grateful to you for doing just that. We also know a lot of you haven’t had any rest after coming off of your shifts, and for that I’m sorry. It is necessary to meet together to discuss the tragedy that occurred last night in Boys Town. I’m going to turn this over now to our goddess. Psyche?”

Psyche stood, her lithe form moving to the podium, her hair pulled back tightly into a bun at the top of her head. Her light vest suit from earlier had been traded for a black tailored suit with the Golden Arrow insignia pinned on the lapel. She looked much more composed than she had been earlier in the day, but Sebastian could see traces of exhaustion on her face. Even so, she was stunningly beautiful.

Standing tall behind the podium, she looked at them all, her eyes settling longest on Sebastian in the back of the room. “Good evening, my children,” she said. “I had hoped the day when we’d have this discussion would never come. It has happened occasionally in the distant past that someone in the service of Jupiter was removed from our world. Those were days of terrible violence. We saw much destruction of life, even immortal life, both before and after the Fall.”

Many heads around the room nodded slowly as they watched their mother speak of the horrible crumbling of their empire in ancient Rome. Psyche took a deep breath and continued. “However, times are changing. The world is just as violent now in some areas as it was

during the most desperate times, even during the Fall. Mortals kill each other every day in droves. We have been struggling to keep the unrest at bay and away from our organization. The other Temples have reported it is the same everywhere. I have contacted the Lead Arrows' director, Mars." Heads began to bow together across the room and the whispering began.

"That's enough," Psyche said, and the muttering and whispers silenced immediately. "We've always had a very stable relationship with the Lead Arrows. While we might not approve of their methods, we do not have their job. You were chosen to spread love to the mortals of this land. Ask yourself what your life would be like, how different your days, if you were asked to be the ones responsible for their hate."

Several of Sebastian's brothers and sisters began fidgeting and avoiding Psyche's gaze. "It is important to keep our alliance strong. The Chicago Lead Arrows have been invited to the memorial for Jeremy, which will take place tomorrow night here at Temple, in the chapel."

There was no stopping it this time. Pandemonium immediately broke out across the lobby, people jumping from their seats to protest. "Mother, do you think that's a good idea?" asked Barron, his face filled with shock.

Elizabeth spoke from her seat a few feet away. "We don't know the circumstances of Jeremy's death yet. Shouldn't we wait?"

Psyche shocked them all into silence as her small fist pounded the podium, the blast ordering them into submission. Her eyes glowed slightly as she looked around the room, truly the immortal leader now, every illusion of softness gone. "That is quite enough!" she thundered. "Don't you forget that without the Lead Arrows you are useless!"

A deafening silence descended over them, the Golden Arrows' eyes not even daring to meet each others' as they sat in silence, confusion and shame clouding their features. "Do you all not remember the Fall?" Psyche walked away from the podium, walking between the rows where her children sat. "Do you remember what the world was like when there were no Golden Arrows? Do you not see the exact same thing would occur were there no Lead Arrows?" She stopped in the

Sebastian Cupid

middle of the room, the eyes of those nearest her still not daring to look around. “These times make our union too fragile. The Lead Arrows have no more to gain from our demise than we do theirs. Our societies are not the only immortal clans. There are many that would gain from the destruction of the Golden Arrows, but the Lead Arrows are not among them. As awkward as they may make you feel, they are not your enemies. The sooner you can get that into your heads, the sooner we can stop the ridiculous tension that holds us apart.” Psyche sat in a vacant chair in the middle of the room, but with a presence as strong as hers, she might as well have been standing on a seven-foot-tall platform. Her face softened as she looked around at her children.

“Don’t you see?” Eyes wandered until they met hers. “We should be one family. It is the resentment we have built up in our hearts based on our differences that has kept us apart.”

Sebastian exhaled as he realized what their immortal mother was saying. She wanted to make the Lead Arrows and the Golden Arrows one family, operating together. As he looked around the room at the faces of his brethren, he knew it would be a long time, if ever, before that dream was realized. There were too many hard feelings between the Golden Arrows and the Lead Arrows. The Lead Arrows’ very existence on this planet, their purpose for being, was exactly opposite of his.

It wasn’t a one-sided hatred. The Lead Arrows couldn’t stand Golden Arrows either. Unless Sebastian was way off, he doubted there would be many attendees tomorrow night from that side of the “family”.

Psyche stood and walked back to the front of the room where the podium stood. “Enough politics. These things will happen when the time is right. After all, time is all we have. Most of you know I am going to be visiting all the locations of our Temples over the next few months to discuss the events of last night with all divisions of the Golden Arrows. This is a very time-sensitive duty. Therefore, Sebastian will be taking my place at the fiscal meeting this coming term in Rome.”

Eyes around the room found Sebastian and smiled, showing their approval. He nodded in return, the reason for the assignment still

heavy on his mind. Psyche should be going to this meeting, and Jeremy should be alive.

“Sebastian has been working very hard on a project for the Golden Arrows as well, which I trust him to keep working on, and we hope to have updates on this next term.”

Sebastian’s eyebrows raised in surprise as his mother looked at him from her place in the room. He had not expected her to bring this up at all. It was still a risky venture, and they both knew it. Heads around the room turned to look at Sebastian quizzically, and he dodged direct glances. No pressure, huh?, he thought to himself as he gazed at his watch for a really long time.

“As always,” Psyche continued, “I would like to thank you for your continued dedication to our mission. You keep the mortal world at peace, with the help of the Lead Arrows. Always when your path seems too steep, your objectives too harsh, remember why you are called here today. Your father is very proud of you. Even now, Cupid is in Rome, informing the Golden Arrow Temple of the events of last night. Which brings me to another issue: security.”

Psyche looked to the hallway as many Guardians of the Temple entered, carrying heavy, black canvas bags. These bags were placed on the long oak table at the side of the room.

Arrows stood to watch as a few guns and several boxes of ammunition were pulled from the bags. They were simple hand guns, .45s, like their own standard issue weapons.. Sebastian’s eyebrows raised, and heads around the room began to shake. “I know what you’re thinking,” said Psyche. “No, these would not protect you from Jeremy’s fate. You already carry guns to protect yourselves in the field from mortals. However, the ammunition is the key to protection from other immortals.” Psyche reached into the podium in front of her, pulling a silver dagger from a cabinet. Walking to a table in front of the podium, she sliced open her palm. Sebastian unconsciously took a step forward, but already she was spilling several drops of her blood on the table. Russell moved to stand beside Sebastian, and they both watched as Psyche gestured to one of the Guardians who walked to the table holding a vial. He held the vial high above the blood, and they saw a single drop fall to mix together with the puddle of red on the table.

Sebastian Cupid

Instantly, the blood began to sizzle and burn, smoke spiraling toward the ceiling. Many of the women watching gasped and placed their hands over their mouths. The men's interest perked up. Victoria moved next to Russell and said, "Well, I'll be damned. She finally did it."

Psyche wrapped her hand in a handkerchief, looking across the room. "This is a formula that was devised with the help of your father and Garrett, whom most of you know as our Temple physician and scientist. We have been working on it for some time, waiting to release it until it was needed. It appears that time is now."

"This concoction is in each bullet. When it comes in contact with immortal blood, the blood will burn. It will not kill, but it will give you a chance for escape. Everyone is to carry their weapons loaded with these bullets."

Sebastian's family began to line up to get ammunition. Russell, Victoria, and Sebastian simply watched and waited. "Well, well," Russell said, grinning as he looked at them. "Momma went and got hardcore."

Victoria reached over and smacked him forcefully in the gut, which had him groaning and grabbing his stomach. "Shut up, idiot. She's saving your dumb ass."

"I was just messing around, for Jupiter's sake!"

"Was Jeremy messing around, Russell?"

Sebastian placed an arm on Victoria's shoulder. "Hey, hey," he said. "He's just trying to lighten the situation. Don't go postal."

Victoria just shook her head. "This is serious, Sebastian." He groaned. Victoria, the drill sergeant. The situation was serious, but you couldn't crack a smile about anything in front of Victoria unless you wanted the shit kicked out of you. She couldn't see how someone would want to joke around in any situation that involved life or death. Russell always had to joke to keep from going a little crazy. Really, when Sebastian thought about it, they'd never had to consider death before. Russell was just as wiped as any of them were about the whole deal. Russell's reaction was to laugh while Victoria's was to get ready for the Apocalypse.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Russell said, rubbing his stomach and looking warily at Victoria. "Give me a break. I've been up all night. I'm getting tired."

Victoria ran her hand over her face and pushed back her black hair. "I know. Shit, I'm sorry."

"We're all going to be keyed up for a while, guys," Sebastian said. "The last thing we need is to take it out on each other."

"Well," Russell said. "Mom's right about one thing."

"What's that?" Sebastian asked.

He straightened up and looked over to where the Golden Arrows were grabbing their ammunition. "This brings us one step closer to the Lead Arrows. They're always ready to be attacked." Victoria and Sebastian looked at each other, eyebrows raised. He was right.

Psyche walked to the podium, and said, "One last thing. As you're out doing your service, try not to go out alone. Let someone know where you're going, try to double up. Always stay armed. There is little chance of us catching the person responsible for what happened to Jeremy." The room went dead silent. "But we are going to keep trying. We have no choice. The fact of the matter is, there are a great many immortals that would benefit from the fall of our empire. It's like digging for a needle in a haystack. However," her gaze turned hard as she looked them over, "any information you come across would be extremely useful. Now, let us all bow our heads in silence and go in peace. We'll see you here in the chapel tomorrow night, at nightfall."

With this, they bowed their heads. Goodbye, my brother, Sebastian thought as he listened to the sounds of breathing and weeping in the room. You were the best of us. We'll see you in the Afterlife.

Slowly, at their own pace, faces lifted and Arrows left in silence. Russell, Victoria, Evans, and Sebastian left Temple quickly after collecting their ammunition, walking into the balmy summer air as they approached their cars.

"Well, one thing's for sure," Russell said, looking at Sebastian.

"What's that?"

"Tomorrow is not going to be boring."

Sebastian Cupid

Sebastian groaned as he remembered. Lead Arrows and Golden Arrows in one room over a dead brother. “Maybe Mom should have waited until after the funeral to hand out the ammunition.”

FOUR

A couple hours later, Sebastian stood in his office overlooking the Gold Coast. The lights were all off in his apartment as he gazed at the city lights below. The thunder of Lakeshore Drive traffic echoed back to his window, which was open, the air stirring the edges of his curtains. Sebastian stretched and took a step back as he took another sip of scotch. He turned to set the glass down on the desk next to his gun, which contained ammunition he had received only tonight. He hesitated as his eyes skimmed over the dark metal. Who would have known one day they'd be carrying weapons to use against other immortals?

Sebastian took his drink and walked to the back of the apartment to the bathroom where he washed his face and stripped out of his suit. He pulled his springy black curls back from his olive face and tied them in an elastic hair band. This face was the same one that had been looking back at him for centuries. It and the body it was attached to looked to be about thirty-five years old, which was the age on his driver's license. He'd been in Chicago for nearly five years, which meant he was due for a transfer soon. Due to the nature of their jobs and their immortal bodies, Arrows, Lead or Golden, were only posted in one location for three to six years. In a large city like Chicago, they could get away with a little longer. In small towns, a matter of months at most.

Sebastian walked with his drink and gun into his large bedroom and opened the tall French doors to the patio. He sat at the patio table, his gun placed next to his drink, and rested on one of the matching wrought iron chairs. He looked around at the city as its sounds

Sebastian Cupid

vibrated through him. Sebastian would miss Chicago. He had been here before, of course, like all of their other stations. The Golden Arrows' service extended him around the globe. He sipped his drink, pondering what the next day would bring.

He was looking forward to his vacation. It was a strange feeling. He'd completed his job, and there was no depression, no let down knowing someone was hurting because of him. He'd done his duty, and he had no names to pen into his book, no tears to remember and pray forgiveness for. If all went well, eventually all Golden Arrows would be able to do their duty without the heartbreak associated with their jobs. Maybe even Lead Arrows, Sebastian mused. How different would Lead Arrows really be if their jobs didn't involve face to face contact with mortals?

Sebastian snickered as he walked back into his room with his empty glass and gun, closing the doors behind him. Lead Arrows had a reputation for being malicious and unfeeling. He doubted they cared one way or another how their job was done. While the mission of Golden Arrows was to spread love, the Lead Arrows were charged with spreading hate. Their methods...

Sebastian sneered into the darkness as he slid into his bed. Well, that was what separated them. His mind tossed these thoughts around tirelessly for many hours more. His room had already started to lighten with the dawn by the time he fell asleep.

Sebastian never wanted to see this again. All the Chicago Arrows from both sides of the family were assembled to see Jeremy off to the next life. Sebastian had to admit he was impressed at the show of Lead Arrows at the ceremony. He was not surprised, however, that the line between them was anything but figurative. Mars stood with the Lead Arrows to the north while Psyche stood with Golden Arrows to the south. Every Arrow stood facing west as the sun set behind the coffin that contained their brother's remains. The walls directly behind the monk and the coffin were made of glass and allowed the sun to shine directly into their eyes, making Sebastian wish he'd thought to wear

his sunglasses again today. The dream-like quality of the situation was amplified as the sunlight and rain mingled together. The weather was suitable for this occasion, the first Arrow death in centuries. Realism had no place here.

Evans leaned on Russell's shoulder, crying into a handkerchief. Her sobs carried over the sound of the rain on the Temple roof and murmuring voices as the Lead and Golden Arrows eyed each other from across the room. The words the monk said flowed in and out of Sebastian's ears, but he didn't remember one of them. Instead he asked himself questions. Who was responsible for Jeremy's death? Was it a lone act? Would they attempt to do it again? Were the Lead Arrows really innocent?

Sebastian looked to his right at Mars. The god of war stood in a black suit, his chiseled face staring resolutely forward. He wore his trademark sneer. He was as beautiful as any of them, but it was a cold beauty. A woman directly to Mars's right with long dark hair pulled into a ponytail looked at Sebastian and scowled. It was almost comical to think of the words of his mother from the day before. If they were a family, they were the most dysfunctional family he had ever seen. Sebastian snapped back into attention as the monk said, "...and now Psyche and Mars shall lead us to the gravesite." That was his cue. Russell, Sebastian, and six of their brothers, which also included three Lead Arrows, stood at the front of the room to be pallbearers. There was a tense moment as Lead and Golden Arrows came face to face over the body of their dead brother. Eyes clashed, and Sebastian wondered if they'd get through the service without blows. However, no one, not even the Lead Arrows, dared do more than sneer under the watchful eyes of Psyche and Mars. The moment passed, and an Arrow opened up the glass doors at the western end of the room, allowing them to carry Jeremy into the sunset. A soft rain bounced off of the casket on Sebastian's left shoulder as they walked over the paved stones in the graveyard. They stopped in unison at the prepared gravesite and lowered Jeremy onto the rack above the open grave. Psyche and Mars both laid their hands on the casket as the pallbearers moved back to take their place in the crowd. Even though everyone was outside, the division line between the Lead and Golden Arrows was as defined as it

Sebastian Cupid

had been inside Temple. They all wore their insignia pins, which were in the shape of arrows, matching the tattooed mark on every Arrow's back. Sebastian and the other Golden Arrows had gold pins, in direct contrast to the lead ones on his step family. The metal insignias winked at Sebastian as he took his place among the golden flashes of light. Mars and Psyche stood motionless above the caskets, their hands starting to glow on the fine wood of the casket as the god and goddess blessed the soul of their immortal child so he could ascend to Olympus. Light spread from their hands, brighter than the setting sun. At last, they stood back to watch as the casket was lowered into the ground.

No more words were said. Sebastian watched with Russell, Victoria, and Evans as the last shovelful of dirt was thrown onto the coffin an hour later. Russell placed his hand on Sebastian's shoulder, and Victoria leaned her face into his left arm for a few moments.

As they turned to go back to Temple, they nearly plowed over their Grandmother. "Venus," Sebastian said in greeting. She would never allow them to call her Grandmother. "I didn't know you'd come."

Venus stood looking at her grandchildren with her stunning golden hair shaped into a knot at the back of her head. Like all immortals, her face was unlined by time. There had only been one face in all of history to compete with Venus's, and that was Psyche's.

"Of course I'd come," sniffed Venus. "How insulting."

Sebastian bowed, quickly. "I'm sorry, Venus," he said. "I did not mean to sound offensive."

At this she waved her hand in front of her as if shooing a pesky fly. "Never mind, never mind." She stood regally watching as Mars approached from the rear of the group. With him was the dark-haired woman from earlier and a tall, muscled man Sebastian hadn't noticed before. Neither of them looked particularly friendly. Sebastian felt Russell and Victoria stiffen next to him, and Evans shifted back slightly.

Mars extended a hand to Venus. "Venus, this is a pleasure."

Venus took his hand stiffly. "Mars. Thank you for coming."

Mars flashed his greasy smile, his eyes darting from face to face before settling back at Venus. Sebastian tried not to flinch under his slimy gaze. "Of course, wouldn't miss it for the world. Terrible tragedy."

He didn't look like he thought it was so terrible. As a matter of fact, he was grinning. Sebastian felt Russell shift, and he felt his next statement was more damage control than social obligation. "I'm told I'll be seeing you next week."

Mars glanced at Sebastian with raised eyebrows. "Ah, yes. Psyche mentioned you're going to be taking her place at the fiscal meetings. In fact, we all go back together."

Sebastian's eyebrows raised at that. "The Lead Arrows stay for a week? What about the quota?"

Mars chuckled. "No, no. Not all of the Lead Arrows, though I'm sure they would...be honored." He said the last words with obvious sarcasm. The two Lead Arrows with him managed to look even more disagreeable, if that's possible. "No, just myself, Rogan, and Aspen will stay." Sebastian looked to the two Arrows at Mars's side. While Lead Arrows were also built to be beautiful and amazing creatures by necessity of their duties alone, Sebastian felt no attraction toward either of them. It was hard to forget what it was they did day in and day out. The breeze fluttered Aspen's black hair as she stared Sebastian down.

Mars spoke to Sebastian again, this time with interest. "Your mother tells me you've been working on a special project, though she won't tell me what it is."

Sebastian kept his face clear, despite the irritation in his mind at having state business discussed out in the open among their somewhat hostile relatives. Apparently, Psyche was taking her goals to unite the two families very seriously.

"It's not completed," Sebastian replied, stiffly. "I'll not be prepared to discuss it in Rome."

Mars only laughed. "Relax, dear boy. I had no intention of making you discuss it." However, Mars's gaze hovered a little too long on Sebastian for him to be comfortable. Sebastian began to recount his ponderings of the night before, when he wondered if Lead Arrows would be able to benefit from the new method he was researching. He hadn't been sure they would be interested in his research at all, but it was obvious now Mars was very interested.

Sebastian Cupid

Sebastian decided the time to part was more than present. He nodded to his grandmother, his brothers and sisters following suit. "It was lovely to see you, Venus." He took her hand and kissed it before turning back to Mars, his face as hard as stone. "I guess I'll see you next week here at Temple before we head back."

Mars grinned, his perfect white teeth glittering in the setting sun. "Indeed. We depart at three a.m. sharp for O'Hare. I have many interests waiting for me back home." Sebastian stretched his hand out for a quick, obligatory shake before walking past Aspen and Rogan with his brethren. They had barely cleared the Temple doors before Victoria cursed to herself.

"Damn it! As if we need those slime bags hanging around any longer than normal. I won't be able to rest knowing they're staying here another week."

Sebastian shrugged, incised by other issues. "I'm sure Hans is more than aware of the risks. There never was a better captain of the Guardians, except for maybe Ethan." Ethan was the head of all Guardians in every Temple, and Sebastian knew Hans strongly admired his boss.

Russell chuckled, "Actually, Ethan always reminded me of Alfred from Batman."

Evans giggled nervously as they made their way out of the front of Temple and back onto the street. "The Michael Gough version or the Michael Caine version?"

Russell took Evans's arm amicably in his own. "Oh, the Michael Gough version, of course! Only packing some serious fire power. Have you ever seen Ethan spar? That man is unstoppable!"

Victoria just rolled her eyes, and Sebastian grinned as they climbed into their cars to head back to the city. The Temple was situated several miles outside Chicago. As much for mortal protection as their own, the property was a vast, gated community well hidden from prying eyes. The ride back to the city took almost twenty minutes. Sebastian parked his car outside of their favorite pub, the Dock House, and the others followed suit. As they entered the noisy and dark atmosphere of the bar, Aspen watched quietly from the other side of

J.J. Martin

the street, her eyes narrowing as she waited in the dark alley for Sebastian to emerge again.

FIVE

The next morning, Sebastian simply absorbed the bliss of taking time off. Sure, he had to go to Rome in a matter of days, with Mars's pets Aspen and Rogan for company, but that was a small price to pay for a month of complete solitude. Imagine! No scheduling dates, buying flowers, falling head-over-heels for a woman he would have to cut loose less than a month later, breaking both of their hearts. Freedom had never been an option before. He needed to dedicate his last working week to making his approach better. He spent hours outlining the process he used to distribute the tablets a few nights before and listing suggestions for future outings. The sooner he was able to make it fool-proof, the sooner he would be able to deliver this freedom to his brothers and sisters.

The thought of his brethren still suffering the same emotional turmoil he no longer had to face made him feel guilty. Sure, they handled it better than he did and always had. Only the Golden Arrows closest to Sebastian could guess how sensitive he was about their charge. No one else would guess that underneath his hard, serious exterior, Sebastian shouldered the depression of every single mortal he serviced. His brethren, most of them, accepted it as part of their job. Sebastian couldn't, even though he understood it. Still, Sebastian felt all Golden Arrows deserved nothing less than the freedom he was enjoying.

That thought propelled him back into his office for the first three days of the week. He spent all his days and most of his nights developing a new tablet that would dissolve faster and was smaller without being fragile. Dear Jupiter, the flexibility he'd have if he could just use a liquid form! But that wasn't possible. His blood changed

when it touched the air, especially for extended periods of time. He thought maybe, one day, he could give his ideas to someone with more experience in these matters, maybe at the Temple in Rome. Sure, he'd picked up plenty of chemistry and lab experience over the years, but he hadn't used it since sometime around the mortals' Great Depression, when Mars had to make the Lead Arrows stop their operation entirely. Those were dark enough times without their help.

By late afternoon on Wednesday, he'd made a dozen more tablets in a lighter weight that dissolved faster. He was happy with his efforts, but exhausted. Sebastian sat back in his desk chair and glanced out the window. It was drizzling outside. He decided he needed to get out, stretch his legs, and get a bite to eat. He ran to the bathroom to brush his teeth, barely glancing in the mirror as he swiped up his keys before running out the door.

Walking toward his favorite coffee shop in Bucktown, the Sacred Grounds, Sebastian felt like he was floating. Independence was grand. The only thing spoiling it for him was the situation surrounding Jeremy. Thinking about it brought tightness to his chest. While it was easier for Sebastian and his brothers to accept death because death was never finite for Arrows, it was still hard to go through his days knowing Jeremy wasn't going to be with him anymore. Sebastian and his siblings knew without doubt there was an Afterlife. This planet was only a tiny little speck in the universe. Since time was all Sebastian had, he simply looked forward to seeing his brother again on the other side, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to miss him in this world.

His smile started to fall as he thought about the pain his brother must have suffered in death. Garrett confirmed Jeremy had been bled out, completely, his mark burned off. All Arrows had a mark on their right shoulder, given to them in their rebirth into this life. All the marks were shaped like an ornate wrought iron post, an arrow. Jeremy's had been burned off his flesh.

Sebastian was outright frowning now as he turned the last corner and entered the coffee shop, taking his regular seat in the back. He absently ordered his coffee and a sandwich from the waitress, ignoring the suggestive glances from her as he pondered the circumstances surrounding Jeremy's death. Sebastian leaned back in his chair,

Sebastian Cupid

turning over the evidence in his mind. If his mother was right, the Lead Arrows would have just as much to lose from the Golden Arrows' demise. Who could benefit from the fall of their empire? Psyche was right about them being a target for many immortals these days. Arrow Temples had risen to the height of power. Love and hate were commodities that never depreciated in the mortal world.

He was distracted from his thoughts as the waitress returned to his table, swinging her hips. He nearly chuckled as the waitress placed his coffee on the table and her phone number on a napkin, which he ignored. She was a pretty little thing, but he had no desire to work during his month off. The bliss of being able to turn down women made him nearly giddy. He took a drink of his coffee and sat back in his seat, stretching out his long legs.

The truth is, many immortals would benefit from the fall of the Golden Arrows. Any other immortal looking for more territory would aim toward the Arrow empire first if they really wanted more power, only no one had been ballsy enough.

Until now.

In the beginning of the population boom, they hadn't had to worry about that. So many new souls, so much to go around. Then the world started rotting. People started dying, killing each other and themselves. Mortals continued to worship possessions and money to this day, and, much to their own demise, there wasn't a god behind it. They stopped praying for things that mattered, and the gods behind those commodities had so few believers, such little faith to live off of. It was making them desperate. Now the immortal world was unstable and becoming more so every day. The Arrows' portion of the empire was the only one that was still thriving. Prayers for love, revenge, and war never ceased.

As if these clues weren't vague enough, there was the way Jeremy had been murdered. Sebastian never heard of an immortal being drained for blood. Obviously, the Golden Arrow blood had power, but, like Sebastian observed when setting up the tablets earlier, the blood changed when it was exposed to air. The blood drained from Jeremy would have been useless. Also, if one was going to drain the blood for use, why would they do an impromptu draining in an alley? There was

also the possibility the body had been drained elsewhere and dumped in the alley.

He didn't like the sound of that.

Before Sebastian got any further into his musings, he was interrupted by a female voice saying, right in his ear, "Shit, I can't believe it."

Sebastian glanced quickly over his right shoulder, startled, to look into the face of a skinny woman with long, red hair. By the look on her face, she wasn't happy to see him. He quickly went through the catalog of his recent breakups, but didn't recall this one. Of course, he didn't claim to remember every single girl he'd dumped over the last thirty years, and this woman didn't look to be much older than that. By the look on her face, whatever he'd done had been something which deserved capital punishment, at least.

Sebastian turned slightly, glancing around the shop, before looking into the very angry face of the tall, pretty woman. Struggling to look cool under fire, he said, "I'm sorry, do I know you?"

"I'm Alex. I saw you at Berlin the other night."

Oh fuck. This was the tall red-head that caught him dropping a tablet in a beer. She looked different in the daylight without all that makeup and the six-inch heels. Sebastian struggled not to panic. He couldn't afford for some mortal to ruin his research. He was careful to keep his face blank as he shook his head slowly. "I'm sorry, I haven't been to Berlin lately."

Alex rolled her eyes, shifting the bag she shouldered to ease the weight as she glared down at him. "Whatever. I already know you're a perpetual liar."

Just then, his waitress came back to the table carrying his sandwich wrapped in deli paper. He quickly slid a twenty, which was far more than the sandwich and coffee was worth, onto the table. Standing, he picked up his dinner, deciding home was the best place to eat after all. The waitress's mouth popped open as she saw how much money he'd left.

"Keep it," he said.

Alex tapped her foot as she looked at him and then glanced at his waitress. "You know this guy is a sicko, right?"

Sebastian Cupid

Okay, now this chick was just pissing him off. "Listen lady," he said, his waitress's eyebrows jumping into her bangs at the drama going down right in front of her. "I don't know what your problem is, but I'm leaving."

Sebastian turned to walk out of the shop, past the upturned eyebrows of his waitress. He didn't look back as he pounded his way out of the door and onto the sidewalk. The sun had set while he was in there thinking and waiting, and the evening was setting in.

"You have a real problem, you know that?"

This time, Sebastian actually cursed and turned. He glared down into the hazel eyes of the fiery red head and tried very hard to keep his composure, thinking of how much trouble he would be in if he revealed himself to a mortal. "Look. Back. Off. Get it? You don't like me. I don't like you. I don't care."

Alex snorted. "I do care. You'll just go to another bar to try that shit again, won't you? Don't you know you're sick? That you're hurting people? Does date rape turn you on or something?"

Okay, that was too much. This snotty little brat had no idea the lengths he went to helping fixing mortal lives like hers every day, and he was not going to waste two more minutes with some ungrateful little hot head. He took a threatening step closer to Alex, and she had the decency to swallow loudly and take a step back before Sebastian leveled her with his eyes and said, "That's enough. I'm leaving. Don't follow me."

His glare boiled her down as he turned with a whip of his head. He thought he might have seen her chin wobble a bit before he turned away, but he chose to ignore it as he stomped off. Half a block later, he slipped into an alley to take a short cut home.

And nearly ran into Aspen.

"Sweet Jupiter!" He hollered as he jumped back. Sebastian whipped his gun from his holster just in time to point it directly at the barrel of her gun as it came up. Aspen glared at him over the cold steel of her weapon, sneering. "Aspen?" Sebastian asked. "What are you doing here?"

"It looks like you need someone to help you stay out of trouble at the moment." Aspen grunted, her gray eyes staring him down.

“What...are you following me?”

Aspen opened her mouth to answer when a loud bang sounded from deep in the alley. Both Aspen and Sebastian whipped their heads toward the sound as clouds moved to cover the sky, throwing them into darkness. Thunder started to rumble, which was eerie in comparison to the soft summer breeze they had been standing in moments before. The storm was obviously conjured.

Sebastian glanced over, nervously. “Aspen, what the hell are you doing?”

Aspen looked at Sebastian, her eyes cold and alert. “This isn’t me.” A strong wind burst through the alley, nearly upending them both. At that moment, a squeal sounded from behind them, and Sebastian nearly swallowed his tongue as he looked behind him to see Alex. “Alex, run!”

“No, stay!” yelled Aspen.

“What?” Sebastian demanded. “Are you crazy?”

Aspen looked over at Sebastian and grumbled. “We can’t let her go now, chief. She’s seen us standing here with guns for Jupiter’s sake, and she already thinks you’re a rapist. You wanna explain this to Psyche or Venus? I sure as hell know I don’t want to call Mars and ask for bail.”

Sebastian nearly cursed out loud as he realized she was right, but there was no time for him to respond to Alex because a large creature of the night hurled itself out of the dark and launched itself directly at Sebastian. Aspen grabbed Alex and thrust her onto the ground as Sebastian jumped to the side, shooting at the lower demon, whose claws just barely missed him. The bullets fired loudly in the alley as the shots plunged into the creature’s chest. The demon was only about twelve feet tall hunched over, which wasn’t much of a threat under normal circumstances. Of course, fighting a demon in an alley in Chicago wasn’t going to go unnoticed for long. Sebastian groaned as he realized he was going to be in trouble after all. The demon started advancing, and none too quietly. Its roar was deafening when it hurled its head back, reeling from the pain of the new bullets, smoke billowing out of the holes in its chest.

Sebastian Cupid

Sebastian glanced nervously behind him, expecting mortals to come into the alley any second because of the noise. Aspen was grabbing Alex up off of the ground. Alex's eyes looked about to pop out of her head, and Sebastian might have found it funny if it hadn't been for the situation at hand. "Sebastian, look out!" Aspen yelled. He whirled back as the demon recovered and made a second jump at him. Sebastian's few seconds of distraction cost him. The beast scratched his arm, tearing long, jagged marks into his flesh. Sebastian yelled in agony. The demon's talons seemed to be poisonous. His flesh started bubbling immediately, and the pain was excruciating. Aspen shoved Alex back down again, telling her to stay put, as she ran to help Sebastian fight off the demon. Its oil-slick skin and razor-sharp teeth were her primary concern. The injury he had suffered was making Sebastian weak. Aspen looked at him, quizzically. Sebastian looked over and gasped at her as he fired another shot into the demon. "Poisonous."

Aspen jerked her head back toward the beast, jumping to miss a swipe of claws herself. She ran around to the nearest fire escape and pulled herself onto the first level. From there, she fired half a dozen shots at the back of the beast's head as it lowered itself to finish off Sebastian. Unearthly wails filled the air as the ammunition broke through the beast's hide. It reared and turned around, swiping at Aspen, who jumped to avoid the claws and was forced to dive to the ground. It was a long fall, and she felt her ankle snap as she landed. She cried out in pain. The ankle would heal quickly, but not quickly enough. The demon was retreating though, badly wounded from the bullets. Sebastian sank to the ground on his knees, his arm beginning to go numb, his skin clammy. He looked up in time to see the demon disappear in a gust of wind and pillar of smoke. Aspen advanced slowly to Sebastian, limping badly because of her injured foot. Sebastian cried out as the sting of the poison intensified, and his head went heavy.

Aspen looked over at Alex, who sat mutely on the ground. "Well that shut you up, didn't it?" Aspen asked, grinning. Alex seemed to shake herself as she stood, looking around, but she didn't speak. Her

eyes were dilated and seemed huge on her face. “Shit. She’s going into shock.”

Sebastian would have replied, but his motor skills were getting worse. Suddenly his arm went completely numb, and he fell against Alex, who jumped out of the way. Aspen lifted a hand to steady her. “Listen,” she said. “Why don’t you just sit down a minute?” Aspen tore the sleeve off of her shirt as Alex sat, numbly. Tying the fabric around Sebastian’s arm, she moved to help him stand. Fortunately, Aspen was nearly as tall as Sebastian, and well-muscled. She bowed under his weight, but she could handle it. As long as he stayed conscious.

Aspen started walking to the far end of the alley, away from the street, which they had to avoid now. “Alex, you need to come with us.”

Alex shook her head slowly. “No! I...” Suddenly, Alex started shaking from head to foot.

“Damn it!” Aspen yelled as Alex hit the ground. Aspen dropped Sebastian to the brick wall, where he slumped, before she dove down next to Alex’s body. “She’s convulsing!”

Sebastian groaned. His vision was getting rough. “Aspen, we have got to get out of here.”

Aspen rolled Alex to her side, feeling along her head. Suddenly she stopped and lifted her hands, jumping back. “Shit, shit!” she yelled. That snapped Sebastian back enough to have him looking over at Aspen as she looked at him, her eyes filled with worry. “You got your blood on her.”

So? Sebastian thought. His face must have registered that thought because Aspen yelled at him. “Wake up, damn you!” She shook her head and realized how screwed she was as Sebastian fell to the floor of the alley. “I got my blood on her too.” Just as she reached in her pocket for her cell phone, a huge crack of lightening filled the alley with light. That was the last thing Sebastian saw before everything went black.

SIX

Within the first few seconds of Sebastian regaining consciousness, he regretted it. Everything from his toes to his forehead, especially his forehead, was throbbing. His eyes opened slowly, taking in the room around him. This bed was not his. The room was large and open. Tall windows covered in sheer white curtains lined the wall closest to the bed. It looked to be early morning by the color of the light. Sebastian tried carefully to sit up, but the pain in his arm was enough to make him give up that venture. Slowly, he remembered the attack in the alley as he lifted his aching arm to look at the medical bandage affixed to his bicep. He was shirtless, and a little investigating revealed he was wearing only underwear. He glanced around the room and was just considering attempting to get up again when Victoria opened the door. "Oh," she said, "you're awake."

"Where..." Sebastian cleared his throat when the first word cracked and stuttered out. "Where am I?"

Victoria walked to the side table and poured a glass of water which she carried over to him. "You're at Temple. You're being treated like royalty."

Sebastian glanced around and realized he was in a guest room. "How long have I been here?" asked Sebastian, taking a careful drink from the glass Victoria held to his mouth.

"Since last night. Aspen and Mars carried you and the mortal in here. It looked like they pulled you out of a burning building or something." Victoria's face creased as she looked at Sebastian. "Aspen said you were attacked."

Sebastian thought back to the events of the night before, trying to remember details. "Yes. How is Alex?"

Victoria looked confused. "Alex?"

"The mortal."

Victoria tilted her head to one side, surprised by his personal interest. "You know her?"

Sebastian sighed as he lay back down, irritated he was still weak. "It's a long story, but yes. So does Russell."

Victoria thought about grilling him for information, but decided better of it when she saw the pallor of his skin and the way he rubbed his temples as he lay back on the pillows. "She's not good," Victoria said. "Aspen says your blood got on her."

Sebastian's brow furrowed as he recalled Aspen yelling something similar at him before he'd blacked out. "Yeah, I remember Aspen saying something about that...I think. I don't get it. Why did that cause problems? That's pretty normal."

Victoria stood and walked to the window facing the coming dawn. "It wasn't your blood that was the problem." Victoria turned to face Sebastian. "Aspen got her blood on the mortal as well."

Sebastian lay staring at the ceiling. "But...what does that mean?"

Victoria shrugged. "No one knows. It's never happened before. Obviously, whatever it is, it isn't good. She's conscious, but her vitals are very unstable. Mom's got her best medical people in there with her now, including Garrett. They've pulled the crash cart for her already once."

Sebastian lifted his good arm to rub a hand over his face. "Shit." He sat up in bed again and threw back the covers, fighting a wave of nausea as he lowered his feet to the floor.

Victoria rushed to his bed, her wavy, dark hair swinging behind her. "What are you doing, Sebastian? Get back in bed! You have a lot of demon poison in you, and you're still weak!"

Sebastian shook his head as he lowered his feet carefully to the ground. "No. I need to go see her. It's my fault she's here."

Victoria moved to the chest of drawers against one wall. After tossing a pair of sweats on the bed, Victoria rushed to Sebastian's side as he slowly stood, pulling the pants on over his underwear. After he

Sebastian Cupid

got the sweatshirt on and zipped it up the front, Victoria slipped under his arm and held hers around his back to help him stand. “How do you know her?”

Sebastian sighed as he and Victoria walked slowly and shakily across the floor toward the door of the bedroom. “You know the project I’ve been working on?” Victoria nodded. “Has mom told you much about it?”

“Only what you told me yourself. You’re working on an alternative to having so much mortal contact associated with our job.” Victoria reached forward to open the door for Sebastian. “I know how much you hate the downside of what we do.”

Sebastian and Victoria stepped into the hall. Now Sebastian recognized his surroundings. He was down the hall from his mother’s office and the entrance of the lobby. Victoria led him in the opposite direction, deeper into the hall. As they walked slowly toward their destination, Sebastian said, “I found a way.”

Victoria stopped, making Sebastian stop mid-step. She turned to look at him, shock etched on her face. “You did it?”

Sebastian was still flying high enough on his limited success to smile broadly at Victoria’s reaction, even though it made the pain intensify behind his eyes. “Yes.”

Victoria’s large brown eyes lit up as it dawned on her what this would mean. She grasped Sebastian around the chest in a hug, and he returned it, his chin resting on her hair. Victoria leaned back, exuberant. “If you weren’t sick, I’d probably tackle you right now, so you’re lucky.” She laughed out loud. “Jupiter, I cannot believe you figured it out! Does it work?”

Sebastian and Victoria started walking down the hall again as he explained. “I’ve only tested it the one time. I managed to service four mortals.”

Victoria gasped. “Four mortals? In one night?”

Sebastian nodded. “Yes.”

Victoria’s steps slowed as she considered this information. “How in the world did you manage it? What did you use?”

“It’s too confusing to go into now, but it works. I have to work on it some more, and there are some risks involved. That’s where Alex

comes in.” He placed a hand on Victoria’s arm, and she turned to face him. “Alex nearly busted me. I ran into her again before the demon attack at the coffee shop. She thinks I was trying to drug people.”

Victoria smiled and considered before she said, “Well, you kind of were.”

Sebastian shook his head, smiling in spite of himself. “No, you don’t understand. She thought I was trying to give people a date rape drug. She thinks I’m a rapist.”

Victoria took a slow step back as she lifted a hand to cover her mouth, chuckling in spite of herself. “Oh, good Jupiter.”

Sebastian rolled his eyes. “It’s not funny.”

Victoria laughed out loud now, throwing her head back. “Well, no, it wouldn’t normally be, for anyone else. But for you. If she had any idea how much you go out of your way to avoid hurting mortals.”

Sebastian sighed. “Well, she thinks I’m a bad guy. She started a scene in the coffee shop, I ditched her. She followed me...” Sebastian suddenly remembered Aspen had been following him. He narrowed his eyes.

Victoria stopped laughing, watching Sebastian. “What?” She went serious. “What is it?”

Sebastian was saved from a response by a door opening to their right, startling them both. Psyche stepped out. Her eyebrows rose as she looked at the scene in front of her. “Sebastian!” Psyche turned to Victoria. “Why on earth is he out of bed?”

Sebastian lifted a palm to take Psyche’s hand. “Don’t be upset with her. I insisted to come and see how Al-...the mortal is doing.”

Psyche pursed her lips, noticing how weak Sebastian looked, and sighed. “I suppose I know you well enough to know whose idea this was. Okay. You may go see her, but I want to see you in my office briefly in ten minutes. Then you are to go back to bed.” Her chin wobbled, destroying her professional demeanor. She took her son in her arms, turning her face into his chest. “I was so worried,” she whispered.

Sebastian hugged his mother, ignoring the pain in his arm and head. They held each other for a minute before Psyche pulled back,

Sebastian Cupid

wiping her eyes. "Go on then" she said, turning to head back down the hall to her office. I'll see you shortly."

Victoria waited until they heard the door to Psyche's office click shut before she turned to her brother. "Whew. You got off easy."

Sebastian grinned. "She must have really been worried." Victoria turned to the door of Alex's room, and gently turned the handle. The door swung open silently as Sebastian and Victoria entered the room. The scene here could not have been more different from Sebastian's room. A nurse entered notes on a chart next to the medical equipment that lined the walls and enclosed the single bed in the room on which Alex lay. The curtains on the windows were drawn, the shades pulled down, enclosing the room in darkness. Beeps sounded from one of the machines periodically. Russell sat in a chair next to the bed. He stood and approached Victoria and Sebastian as he saw them enter.

"Hey, buddy!" Russell's blue eyes looked Sebastian up and down. "Are you alright? You looked like hell when they brought you in."

"Yeah?" Sebastian replied. "Good thing I don't remember it then." He looked to the bed where Alex's figure lay like a little, white snow drift, covered in blankets. "How is she?"

Russell shook his head and exhaled loudly. "You can imagine my surprise when they walked in carrying her! Holy crap! After seeing you both come in the way you did, you about sent me to the Afterlife early." Russell turned to look over his shoulder at the sleeping form of Alex. "She's bad, man. Real bad." His voice lowered as he glanced at Victoria. "Aspen said it was a lower demon?"

Sebastian nodded, his face serious. "It came out of an alley I was trying to get through to avoid Alex. I ran into her at Sacred Grounds. Given our last meeting, I'm sure you can figure it didn't go well."

Russell snickered. "She's got balls all right."

Sebastian smiled but shook his head. "Well, she lost them real fast. A storm rolled in bringing this nasty demon with it. I think she about died from fright. She thought I was a turd before, but that's probably nothing compared to now."

Victoria frowned as she looked up at Sebastian. "That doesn't explain what Aspen was doing there."

Sebastian said, "I know. I'll need to talk with her soon. You said Mars brought us back?"

"That's right. He said you were in a hell of a fix. The mortal was convulsing, and you were passed out. Aspen was injured and on her own with the two of you. Fortunately, Mars flew in there and helped her get you two. He pulled a few godly tricks out of his sleeves, of course."

Sebastian turned back to the bed. He was expected in his mother's office any minute, and there was something he had to do. "Hey, you guys. Can I catch up with you later?"

Victoria followed Sebastian's gaze and tucked her arm into Russell's, turning for the door. "Sure. We'll meet you back in your room later. I'll bring you some ice cream."

Russell chuckled. "Ice cream? Whatever. Bring the man a beer."

Sebastian suppressed a smile as his siblings left the room. He turned back to the bed. As he approached Alex, he was shocked by how lifeless she looked. She had been thin and pale when he met her, but now she seemed downright fragile. Her skin was ashen, reminding him of death. Her strawberry blonde hair fanned out on the pillow she laid on, looking like fire that lost its vibrancy. The blankets on the bed seemed to swallow her.

Sebastian was distracted by the nurse whose name tag read "Bridgett". He cleared his throat. "Ma'am?" Bridgett turned, grinning at Sebastian, the interest he'd come to expect in the opposite sex lit up her eyes. "Would it be possible for you to leave us for a moment?"

Bridgett pushed her hair back off her shoulder and beamed a two-hundred-watt smile at Sebastian as she tossed her hip. "Sure, honey. You just push that there button if you need anything at all, hear me?" she said in her southern drawl. She left the room in her white nurse's shoes, only the click of the door indicating when she'd gone.

Sebastian took a shaky breath and lowered himself carefully into the chair Russell vacated when he left. This was partially to be closer to Alex and partially because he was weak from the short trip to Alex's room, though he'd never admit that in front of his brethren.

He shook his head as he thought of the demon attack that had nearly taken the life of a mortal. He could die in shame knowing Aspen

Sebastian Cupid

saved his hide and a mortal's life while he'd been powerless to stop it. The Golden Arrows had spent so many years in peace, he wasn't prepared for war. Aspen had been. Of course, Mars was the god of war, so they were prepared for anything. Sebastian found himself admitting he could learn a thing or two from the Lead Arrows.

Sebastian looked down at Alex's face. One of the tubes going into her arm was carrying blood that ran through a machine for a transfusion. He'd never considered before the blood of both Arrows introduced at the same time might be toxic to a mortal. Sebastian jumped as Alex stirred in her sleep before turning her head toward him on the pillow and going still.

Sebastian sighed as he placed his hands together on the edge of the bed. He was responsible for the horrible incident that brought Alex here. He thought back to their disastrous first meeting. If he hadn't messed up that last tablet, she'd be with the love of her life right now, courtesy of Russell. Instead, she was lying in a strange room, struggling to stay alive. Sebastian wondered if she had family. He wondered where she worked. People in the mortal world were probably starting to become concerned about Alex. She likely had a job. She looked about twenty-five or so. Maybe she was a student.

Sebastian lowered his forehead to his hands as he prayed to the gods to spare the mortal's life and forgive him for dragging an innocent into danger. When he finished, he looked into her pale face. He sighed as he sat back, wiping his hands across his face. He was exhausted already, but there was another business matter to see to. He stood slowly, pressing the nurse's button as he turned to the door. He thought of the interrogation to come and groaned. Knowing Mars, groveling would be involved. Sebastian ground his teeth as he walked out the door and turned down the hall.

SEVEN

The scene in Psyche's office was even grimmer than he expected. As Sebastian let himself into the room, he bit back on a groan. Not only were Mars and Aspen present, but Venus as well. This ought to be delightful, he thought as he took an empty seat facing his mother's desk.

Sebastian felt severely underdressed in sweat pants and a sweat shirt and naked without his insignia, which everyone else in the room was wearing. His grandmother's gaze skewered him as she took a sip from a tea cup before placing it back onto the saucer at her elbow. He swallowed under Venus's gaze as he waited to be addressed. The room was as silent as a tomb. Psyche smiled warmly as he waited. "Hello, Sebastian. How are you feeling?"

Sebastian tipped his head toward his mother. "Fine."

"Well, I know that isn't true, but I'm afraid this discussion cannot wait until your full recovery. We've been waiting very anxiously for you to wake up so we could confirm Aspen's account of what happened last night."

Sebastian glanced at Aspen, who was seated next to him. She continued to gaze straight forward at Psyche. Sebastian turned back to his mother. "Anything I can do to help."

"Will you please tell us your version of what happened?"

Sebastian wondered why Aspen's version was being questioned. He cleared his throat and began. "I was walking home from Sacred Grounds. On the way, I entered an alley I use as a short cut. The sky got very dark and the wind picked up. It was very violent."

Sebastian Cupid

At this, Venus shifted in her seat, looking at Aspen. “You did not mention the wind.”

Aspen shook her head. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know it was relevant.”

Venus frowned. “Anything could be relevant.”

Aspen returned her gaze to Psyche, who nodded at Sebastian. “Continue, please.”

“A demon came out of the storm. He was a lower demon, only twelve foot or so. He attempted to grab me. I was snagged by his claws, which were poisonous. I fired shots at the demon, which slowed him down.” At this point, Sebastian hesitated and glanced at Aspen.

Venus lifted her chin and gazed at Sebastian. “At what point did Aspen join you?”

Aspen turned her head and joined her dark eyes with his. Sebastian turned back to his mother. “She was with me when I entered the alley.”

Psyche’s face registered her surprise. “So, it’s true then?”

Sebastian felt lost, looking at the surprise in Psyche’s face. What was he agreeing to? “I don’t understand.”

Venus snarled impatiently, gesturing toward Aspen. “It’s true you and the Lead Arrow over there were talking, had dinner together, and were walking to your apartment?”

Sebastian very carefully kept his face clear as he tried to think about how to answer the question. Aspen was lying. He glanced at her while she stared at Psyche. Sebastian was in a sticky spot now, and he knew it. He felt offended at the insinuation he and Aspen were returning to his apartment, which may have been true in the sense that she was tailing him. He never did find out why that was happening either. Still, he owed her his life and the life of the mortal in the other room who was hovering precariously a breath away from death. He swallowed his irritation as he nodded. “Yes.”

Venus made a very deep sound in her throat that could have been anything from a curse to “hmf!” Psyche sat back in her chair, transfixed. “Well, this is a surprise.”

Venus leaned forward, gesturing wildly with her hands, obviously distraught. “What in the world were you doing hanging about with a Lead Arrow?”

Mars, who had been completely silent and nearly invisible during the discussion, leaned forward now, pinning Venus in a stare nothing short of arctic. “What are you saying, Venus?”

Venus turned her nose slightly into the air, appearing even more haughty than normal, before replying, “You know what I’m saying, Mars. We both know Lead Arrows and Golden Arrows never spend any social time together.”

Psyche looked at Sebastian over her desk while he made a concentrated effort not to fidget. He’d be damned if he started sweating now. “Sebastian, I am pleased you are getting to know your Lead Arrow family, but this causes issues.”

“I don’t understand.”

Psyche sighed. “Since you and Aspen were together, you both got the blood of battle on the mortal, which we still need to discuss.”

Venus sneered. “More so, it also implicates Mars as the possible attacker.”

At this, Mars jumped up, and Aspen gasped, whirling to look into the face of her superior. Sebastian was surprised as well.

“What the hell are you saying, Venus?” Mars’s face was a deep red, and his eyes began to glow with the heat of anger.

Psyche lifted both hands and said in a stern voice, “Sit. Down. Now.”

Sebastian supposed it was astonishment more than anything else that had Mars lowering back into his chair. Psyche was normally very mild mannered toward him. Venus was looking slightly mollified by these developments. Aspen, Sebastian noticed, was very distraught. She looked over to where Sebastian sat, shaking her head slightly. Sebastian could see this wasn’t what Aspen hoped to develop from her lie. She stared at the floor, her heart pounding, wondering how she got into this mess.

Psyche skewered the room in one sweep of her eyes, ordering, “Everyone calm down, please.” Psyche turned to Mars. “If the demon attack happened in Aspen’s presence, she might have known what she was leading Sebastian into. We all know Golden Arrows and Lead Arrows haven’t been particularly fond of each other.”

Sebastian Cupid

Mars glowered. "Then why would she save his hide? If she was ordered to lead Sebastian into a trap, she wouldn't risk exposure and personal damage to save him."

Venus snorted. "We all know plans would have changed with a mortal involved. Even a Lead Arrow wouldn't risk explaining the injury of a mortal to Jupiter."

Mars shouted, "I saved them, Venus! This is ridiculous."

"Enough!" yelled Psyche, quieting them all.

In a matter of seconds, the room returned to a very uncomfortable silence. Venus practically purred from her seat while Mars steamed away like a freight engine in the corner. Aspen fidgeted wildly with her jacket sleeve. Sebastian was completely confused, wondering how he had gotten involved in all of this. He remembered the look on Aspen's face when the demon appeared. He was certain she was not responsible; it had not been a trap. On the other hand, why the hell was he lying for a Lead Arrow? The answer was right there, even though he hated to admit it. He owed Aspen his life. If it had been up to him to save Alex, he would have failed. The gaze he shot her very clearly said, You'd better make this worth my while.

Sebastian cleared his throat. "Mother?" Psyche turned to Sebastian, shooting a warning glance to Mars, who looked like he didn't need a good excuse to start creating a ruckus.

"Yes, Sebastian?"

He met his mother's gaze and said, "It was my idea. I invited her. I chose the route through the alley."

Venus leaned forward in her chair. "What?"

Sebastian ran his hand over his cheek, which was covered in stubble. "I was talking to Aspen about Rome's Temple. Mars informed me Aspen and Rogan would be my escorts back to Rome. I was simply getting to know more about the itinerary for next week."

Mars smiled slightly and sat back in his seat, and Aspen looked over at Sebastian in surprise, which everyone would have noticed if Venus had not chosen that moment to say, "That doesn't explain why you would invite a Lead Arrow back to your apartment, Sebastian."

Good Jupiter, she had him there. Never in a million years would Sebastian think of inviting a Lead Arrow back to his place for a night

cap. Not that Aspen wasn't attractive. Hell, all Arrows are gorgeous when created. Her hair was pin straight and probably hung to her waist when it wasn't twisted up in a knot. She was solid muscle, her form fitting into the black suit in an appealing way. Her eyes were the color of smoke, her skin darkened with tan. She was a looker, just like all of them, but that didn't mean he ever considered Aspen in a romantic or sexual sense. He nearly growled as he looked over at her. Her eyes clearly asked him what the heck he was going to do now.

He was in too deep to back out, and he only had one chip left to put on the table. Sebastian turned back to Psyche, and said, "I was going to talk to her about my research."

That was a proper distraction. Every single person had a visible reaction to Sebastian's admission. Jaws dropped across the room. Venus exclaimed, "Sebastian!" Mars laughed. Psyche's mouth actually fell open. Aspen turned to face Sebastian, her eyes filled with gratitude, and...excitement?

He didn't have a chance to register the meaning of her look fully before he was forced to look back at Psyche, who was addressing him. "Well, I...I have to admit. I didn't see that coming."

Venus positively sputtered, glowering at her grandson. "Well, I never thought I would see the day when a Golden Arrow would start sharing secrets and privileges with Lead Arrows."

Mars laughed at loud, his head thrown back. "And why not, Venus? You've used us time and time again for your dirty work over the years. Don't think I've forgotten about all the favors you've called in to me, some of them involving Psyche's demise as a mortal. It appears you have a very selective memory about our past as well."

Venus screeched, and her face flushed maroon as she jumped to her feet to stare down Mars. "That's dirty and rotten, and our past be damned! We both know how much you love your work, Mars. Enough to forgo judgment more than once!"

Mars reared back for an attack. Psyche shot out of her chair, a blue light surrounding her, the frigid air shimmering, her green eyes radiating her displeasure. "STOP, NOW."

While both gods did stop their verbal argument, neither one of them took their seats. They continued to glare at each other from

Sebastian Cupid

across the uncomfortably small space. Sebastian and Aspen remained seated, their eyes locking frantically.

Slowly, the two offended gods sat in their chairs. Psyche's immortal light faded until her appearance returned to normal. She looked down at her son and smiled. "While I am surprised, Sebastian, I am also proud of you."

Sebastian looked up at her in shock, and she laughed, even as Venus grumbled to herself. Psyche took her seat again as she continued to speak, her arms resting on her desk as she leaned forward to address him. "I know how much your research means to you. I know what it is you're really fighting for. I know you well enough to know if you thought you could get answers from Pluto himself, you'd go to the pits of the Underworld to make this a reality. Involving a Lead Arrow in your research truly makes sense."

Now Sebastian had to fight not to squirm as guilt began to seep in. All of these things might be true, because nothing meant more to him right now than his research. However, he hadn't thought to ask Aspen, or any other Lead Arrow for that matter, how to improve his work.

Oh didn't you? He asked himself. He remembered sitting in his apartment only a few nights ago wondering if the Lead Arrows would benefit from his findings. He turned to look at Aspen again, her face filled with wonder as she waited to see what would happen next. But then Sebastian looked at Mars, and he was sickened as he saw the greed on his face. Mars had always been the reason he didn't trust the Lead Arrows. He tried to remember what Psyche always said. Without the Lead Arrows, the Golden Arrows would be nothing. Feeling the need to back paddle in front of Mars, he turned back to Psyche.

"We never got a chance to discuss anything about the project. The demon interrupted us."

Venus tucked her chin almost in to her chest as she glared at Sebastian. "What about the mortal?"

Sebastian sighed. There was no easy way around this one, and he was too exhausted to fib his way out of it. He looked up at Psyche. "Alex...the mortal...was the one I gave Russell one of my quota numbers for. She recognized me from that night and followed me to the alley. It was an accident."

Psyche nodded. "That explains your guilt over her condition."

Sebastian exhaled as he sat back in his seat. The discussion was starting to make him light headed. Psyche was right. If Russell had been permitted to do his job with Alex, she'd have been nowhere near him. Hell, she might have been honeymooning in Italy or something.

Psyche nodded slowly, glancing around the room. "I think this is enough for today. Sebastian, you may return to your room and rest. Aspen, you're free to go as well. Mars and Venus, I would like to discuss with you the unfortunate results of the mixture of Golden and Lead Arrow blood to the mortal. Garrett is on his way here."

Sebastian rose slowly, still watching Psyche. "Is she going to be ok?"

"We don't know, Sebastian," Psyche replied. "She had a major transfusion, and she'll have to have another. She's very weak. Apparently, contact with both of your blood at the same time had a response like we've never seen. If it had been only one of you, we all know what would have happened. No two Arrows have ever tried to treat the same mortal at the same time."

Sebastian nodded as he and Aspen turned to leave the room. Once in the hallway, Aspen exhaled loudly and turned to Sebastian. "Thank you."

Sebastian groaned as he looked at Aspen, his irritation obvious. He ran his hands through his springy hair as he glared at her. "There better be a damned good reason why I just lied to three gods. You owe me an explanation."

Aspen nodded. "I do. I had no idea it would get so out of hand. I had no idea they would implicate Mars based on the fact we were together beforehand."

Sebastian crossed his arms, his head hurting now. "We weren't."

Aspen shuffled and groaned. "I know, I know. Listen, can you meet me later? After dark?"

Sebastian pushed his hands in his pockets. "Fine. I'll meet you at the Oracles' Fountain at ten o'clock. It's a common area, so no one will freak out if they see us together, and it should be deserted by then."

Aspen nodded before turning on her heel and walking away toward the lobby.

Sebastian Cupid

Sebastian shrugged at her abrupt departure, glad to have her gone for the time being. He got within two feet of his door before remembering his brethren were waiting for him inside. Groaning, he prepared for a long bout of explaining.

Sure enough, as he entered the room, Russell and Victoria were engaged in a conversation, facing each other in two chairs next to his bed. They stopped as soon as Sebastian entered the room. He tried not to look like a complete invalid but figured he was failing pretty miserably when Victoria ran to his side, helping him across the floor.

Russell snickered as he walked to Sebastian. "There are much more subtle ways of getting feminine affection."

Sebastian grinned as he sank down onto the mattress. "I'll keep that in mind, bro. Note to self: do not get the puss beat out of me by a giant demon."

Russell threw his head back and laughed as Sebastian lay back on the covers, obviously exhausted. "Giant demon? I could have sworn you said it was a lower demon."

Sebastian grimaced as he bumped his arm trying to get under the covers. "Well, I guess it wasn't lower enough."

Victoria swatted Russell out of the way so she could help Sebastian pull the covers back up. "Russell, for Jupiter's sake, move your stupid ass. Leave the man alone. He just had to meet with Venus for crying out loud."

Russell grimaced. "Venus? Shit. I didn't know she was in there."

Victoria puffed a breath of air out between her teeth as she stood back, watching Sebastian, her arms tucked over her chest. "I was here when she arrived. I showed her into Mom's office, and she didn't look happy."

Sebastian stretched out in bed, amazed at how weak he was. "Yeah, I've seen her in better moods."

Russell followed Victoria's lead and sat in a chair next to the bed. "What was she pissed off about? It's not your fault a demon was trying to beat you up for lunch money on the way home."

"No, it's not. She was pissed off at me for inviting a Lead Arrow back to my apartment."

Victoria jumped up as Russell slid forward in his chair. The unified way they screeched, "What?!" would have been a lot funnier if Sebastian didn't feel like he'd just done round two with a demon.

"Which I didn't do."

Victoria coughed out a chuckle, and Russell snorted. "I thought not."

"Of course you didn't," said Victoria, visibly relieved.

"But I told them I did."

Victoria's mouth actually popped open for a second before she stammered and said, "But why?"

Russell rolled his eyes. "I'm sorry, dude, but that's just stupid. I mean, a lower demon is no match for a battle with Venus."

Sebastian closed his eyes, a dull ache in his head slowly building up to what felt like a migraine if he didn't get his siblings calmed down quickly. "I'm not sure." Victoria lifted her hands and started to speak, but Sebastian raised his hand, relieved when she took the hint and shut up. "Because that was Aspen's story."

Russell shook his head. "Is this another ruse for female affection? We really need to work on your skills."

Victoria groaned. "I don't get it, Sebastian. What was she even doing there in the first place?"

Sebastian shrugged against the pillows. "I don't know. She was following me, but I haven't found out why yet."

Russell frowned, his face turning serious for a rare moment. "Wait." He leaned forward until his hair brushed his temple as he looked at Sebastian, considering. "She followed you, made up a story to Venus, and you just went along with it?"

Sebastian growled, partially at them and partially at himself for getting into this mess to begin with. "Listen, I know it doesn't make sense now, but you should have seen her face. She didn't have anything to do with the attack. She was just as freaked out as I was. If it wasn't for her, both Alex and I would be dead."

Victoria cut him off there. "Sebastian, I know your sense of loyalty and fair play, and I respect it. However no amount of gratitude is worth pissing off Venus and possibly losing your position. Do you have any idea how much trouble you'd be in if Venus found out you lied? Mother

Sebastian Cupid

too! And I cannot even imagine what her reaction was when she thought you were hanging out with a Lead Arrow on purpose!”

Sebastian had to chuckle. “Mom was actually pleased. The rest of it was a mess, though.”

Russell smirked. “Why did Aspen even say that in the first place? She wasn’t hanging out with you anyway, right?”

“No, but Venus was trying to pin the attack on Mars, and I knew Aspen wasn’t responsible. Venus thought Aspen had been setting a trap for me, and I walked in on it. Since I said going that way was my idea, it took the blame off of her.”

Victoria huffed. “You mean off of Mars.”

Russell slapped his leg. “Yeah! How do you know she isn’t guilty? You know this is the kind of thing Mars would do if there was something in it for him.”

Sebastian frowned. “That’s exactly it, don’t you see? Aspen definitely didn’t know what was happening or she wouldn’t have risked her life to save me and the mortal.”

Victoria sighed. “Frankly, I’m surprised she even bothered with the mortal.”

Russell shook his head. “Damn it! Alex wouldn’t even have been there if I had finished my job last Saturday.”

Sebastian chuckled, humorlessly. “Yeah, and whose fault is that, Russ?”

Everyone went silent, thinking of Alex. Victoria cleared her throat. “You know, we hurt mortals all the time in order to make their lives better, but it is really sobering knowing a mortal almost died because of our ties to them.”

Russell cleared his throat. “She’s going to be okay.”

Sebastian closed his eyes. “How do you know?”

“I just came from her room. She’s awake. She wants to talk to you later. I told her you’d be in after dinner. She has a lot of questions, but she’s too weak to push anything. She’s busy trying to stay alive, but she is getting better. The nurse said she’s improving and the transfusion went well.”

Sebastian grimaced. “You know I can’t really tell her anything.”

Russell shook his head. "Who would believe her, man? Seriously? And who's she gonna tell if she takes a turn for the worse?"

Victoria slapped Russell again. "Be serious, Russell. You know Sebastian is right. The more mortals know, the more danger they are in. Look at what happened to her."

Russell sat back in his chair, frowning, but giving up for now. "Fine, whatever. The main question is, who is calling in demons?"

Sebastian sighed. "I don't know. Mars seems to be cleared but..." Sebastian stopped, considering.

Victoria leaned forward, inclining her head. "What?"

"I mentioned that there was a strong breeze before the demon came. Venus seems to think that was significant somehow."

Russell's eyebrows pinched together. "Significant how?"

Sebastian's eyes started to slide down, and he had to blink a couple of times. "I don't know."

Victoria stood, dragging Russell with her. "Come on, he's almost asleep already."

Russell got up and looked down at his brother. "I'll check on Alex, make sure she's okay. If anything changes, I'll come get you."

Sebastian nodded as Victoria leaned down to kiss his forehead. "I'll bring you some dinner in a few hours. Get some sleep."

Before Victoria could even finish her sentence, Sebastian's breathing was slow and even. He was asleep before the door clicked shut.

EIGHT

Victoria was true to her word. At six-thirty that night, she brought him dinner. He tried to shoo her away, but he was eventually forced to give in to her coddling. He was certain even Evans could kick his ass in his current condition. He also knew Victoria needed to do something to help the situation. His sister was a busy-body and never felt right unless she had something to do and four things behind that waiting to be done.

Sebastian ate every bite of his food then forced Victoria to leave so he could take a shower in the adjoining bathroom. The stubble on his face was driving him crazy, and he could smell himself. It wasn't pretty. He moved carefully, peeling the bandage from his arm, looking at the pussing mess underneath. He carefully faced away from the spray of the shower as he washed, moving gingerly, hissing every time the hot water dripped into his wound. By the time he got out of the shower and shaved, he felt cleaner, but his arm was throbbing. Still, he much preferred this over lying in bed like some kind of invalid.

He changed into a clean sweat suit Victoria had brought him from him from guest stores. He'd be glad when he could get back to his own apartment and his clothing. He didn't like walking around Temple in the equivalent of pajamas. It was like going to the Whitehouse in a hospital gown.

He walked down the hall to Alex's room. When he opened the door, he saw Russell sitting next to Alex's bed, laughing softly at something she'd said. Russell turned when Sebastian entered the room, rising. "There you are. I wondered if Victoria had mothered your ass out of bed."

Sebastian grimaced. "She tried to, but I drew the line at a shower. There's no way I was going to let my sister scrub me off."

Russell chuckled as Sebastian approached the bed. Alex was indeed awake, and she looked a little better than before. Sebastian took the seat Russell vacated next to her bed. "Hello, Alex. How are you feeling?" She only shrugged. "I heard you have questions."

She shook her head. "They won't tell me anything." She frowned as she looked at Russell. "Even him."

Sebastian looked over his shoulder at Russell, who only grinned sheepishly. Sebastian turned back to Alex. "I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to tell you much more."

Alex swallowed thickly. "Who are you?"

"Sebastian. I'm Russell's brother."

Alex rolled her eyes. "I know that."

Russell cleared his throat. "I told her that you're my brother, and she's in our house under the personal care of our medical staff."

Sebastian decided that was true enough. "Okay, so you know who I am."

Alex rolled her eyes, closing them briefly before focusing on Sebastian again. "Cute. You know what I mean. I was right about you. You're not who you seem to be."

Sebastian sighed and hesitated. "It might be more dangerous for you if you know who I am."

"You're already dangerous. That's why I'm here."

Russell started to speak, but Sebastian raised his hand to stop the flow of words. "You're right, Alex. I am. That's why I warned you not to follow me. You went against my advice. I'm sorry you have to pay the price of that."

Alex's chin quivered as she said, "I don't understand what happened."

Russell cursed and walked a few steps away. Sebastian sighed, considering. The truth was, she had to be seriously messed up in the head about all of this. Sure, there's the demon showing up in the mortal world and all that, which was fucked up enough. Now she was viciously sick, dying maybe, and she had no idea why.

Sebastian Cupid

Sebastian pinched the bridge of his nose in his fingers. He took a deep breath and then looked at Alex. "I know. Basically, being near me and Aspen at the same time had some...unexpected medical consequences."

Alex's brow furrowed as she gazed at him. "Aspen?"

"The girl that was with us last night."

"Oh." She considered this. "What about that...thing?"

Sebastian sat back in his seat and shook his head. "I'm just not qualified to answer all of these questions. Russell?"

Russell came up from behind Sebastian looking just as miserable as his brother. "Yeah?"

"Get Mom, will you?"

"Yeah." Russell turned quickly and escaped out of the room to get Psyche.

Alex looked at Sebastian. "I met your mother. She's...different too."

Sebastian just nodded slowly, keeping his eyes on Alex's. "Yes. She is."

"She's the most beautiful person I've ever seen." Her face was lit with awe.

Sebastian just nodded, not sure what to say or not say anymore. This is why Psyche rarely traveled outside of Temples. Mortals just plain couldn't handle the sight of her. "She is, but she's still my mother."

"Am I going to die, Sebastian?"

Sebastian just shook his head. "I don't know."

"You look like an angel. Your mom and Russell and that Aspen woman too. I've never seen people so beautiful in all my life. I don't trust beautiful people."

Sebastian could completely understand that.

"I didn't listen to you, so now I am going to die. God's punishing me," she said.

Sebastian jumped in shock, standing up. "What? No!" He paced around. "This is my fault. I interrupted Russell that night. If I'd let him..." Sebastian realized where his linear conversation was going and dropped off, cursing that he couldn't explain.

Alex looked at Sebastian. "I want to see my brother. Before I die. I cannot die without seeing my brother."

Sebastian knew he might have to deny her request. How had he found himself in this situation? He had broken his back and nearly gotten busted trying everything he could think of to stop causing mortals pain, and here he was, putting Alex through misery.

Thankfully, Psyche chose that moment to appear. Hans escorted her to the door, and she entered with Russell and Aspen. Sebastian's eyes found Aspen's, an unspoken question in them. Psyche walked to her son, recognizing the look of torture on his face. "Oh sweetie," she said. "I know how much your duty hurts you. I'm so sorry." Psyche then moved to Alex's bedside, standing regally, her blonde hair shimmering. Alex looked awed by her.

"How are you, dear?" Psyche asked.

Alex seemed to shake herself mentally, her eyes wandering until she found Sebastian's. "I'm scared. I want to see my brother. I want to know if I am dying. I want to know..." her voice broke as the tears she'd been holding back started pushing forth, tumbling over the rims of her eyelids. Alex knew she was exhausted, or she wouldn't be feeling so weak. She was embarrassed to be falling apart in front of these people. She'd never felt more alone.

Psyche patted Alex's hand. "Of course. Of course you want answers." She motioned to Sebastian and Russell, and they approached. "Sebastian, why don't you try to explain, in simple terms, what it is we do." Sebastian turned to look at his mother, his eyebrows raised. Psyche nodded. "Just basic information. She is here in our care, and she's alone."

Sebastian sat next to Alex's bed again, taking a steadying breath. He gazed at the bed spread for a moment, trying to think of the best way to explain. It was like trying to explain chemical engineering to an eight-year-old. When he raised his eyes, Alex was watching him quizzically, considerably more on guard than she had been when he came into the room. Psyche was right. If they didn't start explaining things, she was going to be hysterical, and they could lose her just over the stress of the situation.

Sebastian Cupid

“Okay. Russell and I...all of our brothers and sisters too, actually...perform a service for mor-...for people like you.” He paused here, trying to piece together the next idea into something that wouldn’t sound completely bogus to a mortal, who could only see a tiny slice of reality. Alex just waited, her eyebrows raised. “It is our job to make sure people fall in love.”

Alex just stared at Sebastian, disbelieving. She shook her head. “You’re...a matchmaker?”

Sebastian exhaled heavily, certainly not happy with that mediocre description of his job, but he realized it would have to do. “You could say that.”

“You get paid to make people fall in love?”

Sebastian considered this. “It supports us.”

Alex clearly thought this was ludicrous by the look on her face. “Your whole family does this?”

Sebastian thought of the thousands of his brothers and sisters all over the world, and he knew, again, a simple answer was the best one. “Yes. Well...my...the other side of the family is in another business. They are committed to...balancing out what we do.”

Alex shook her head and looked at the ceiling. She snorted. “They make people break up?”

Once again, a very simple form of the truth, but so be it. Sebastian looked over at Aspen, shrugging. Aspen exhaled, heavily, and turned to answer Alex. “If no one ever knew what it was to be miserable, no one would ever truly know what it is to be in love.”

Alex turned to look at Aspen. “So are you on the love part or the misery part?”

Aspen’s face went blank and cold as she answered. “The misery part.”

Alex swallowed thickly, and Psyche reached over to hand her a cup of water with a straw so she could take a slow drink. After she was done and had repositioned herself on her pillows, she shut her eyes. “None of this makes any more sense than not knowing anything.”

Sebastian sighed and looked down at his feet, his hands fidgeting with each other. “I know this doesn’t explain your condition or why we

can't tell you anything. Basically, you were exposed to both Aspen's and my blood at the same time. We've...made you sick. On accident."

Alex stared at them both, the wheels turning in her head as she tried to piece things together. "You're both contagious, and you made me sick?"

"More or less."

"What about that creature?"

Aspen shrugged. "That creature has nothing to do with us. Bad timing."

Alex started to laugh, which turned into sobs. "I can't..."

Psyche approached, laying her hands on Alex's, gazing at her. "I'm so sorry it's this hard. I promise you this is not something we're happy about. This kind of thing has never happened before, and we are just as baffled as you. We are trying everything in our power to make you better."

Alex looked over her shoulder at Russell. "You had no idea this was going to happen that night?"

Russell jumped, shocked. He approached the bed and took Alex's hand in his own. "Jupiter, no! Alex, I was there to help you fall in love."

"With you?"

Russell shook his head. "No. Never with us. We can't do that. But I was there to give you the gift of love with someone else."

Alex thought about that and looked at Sebastian. "Until I caught you..."

Sebastian groaned and looked at his feet. "Yeah. I messed it up. If you and I hadn't started arguing, you would never have wanted to follow me. This wouldn't have happened."

Aspen spoke from behind them. "You had no idea what was going to happen." Sebastian turned to her, surprised, but Aspen continued on. "When was the last time we saw a demon in America? The last one I saw was..." Aspen glanced at Alex and stared at her feet, trailing off. "...a really long time ago."

Alex's face registered surprise at Aspen's spiel. "You guys have been doing this for a while, huh?" They all nodded, even Psyche. "Listen, I just really want to see my brother. He's the only family I have left, okay?"

Sebastian Cupid

All faces in the room looked at Psyche as she considered. “The problem is, Alex, now we’re aware of how dangerous we are to you....to all outsiders. What do you think your brother would say to you being like this and us not being able to give him a detailed explanation as to why?”

Alex thumped the bed with her fist angrily, making everyone jump. “And why the hell is that? It’s my ass in this bed, not yours! You’ve not given me anything but walk-arounds and bullshit since I was carried in the door! You tell me it’s your fault, but you won’t tell me how. Why the hell should I be doing you any favors?”

“Because they’re trying to save your ungrateful ass.” Sebastian jumped as he turned with everyone else to see Mars and Rogan enter the room. Mars approached Alex. “We came in during your little outburst. From what I gather, you’ve been told a lot more than anyone else in your situation ever has been, so maybe you should be grateful.”

Alex’s jaw dropped as Mars approached the bed. “You!”

Mars stopped mid-stride. “What?”

Alex nearly sat up, but winced and stopped halfway up, suspending her pointed finger at Mars. “You were there. I ran into you while I was chasing Sebastian to the alley.”

“What?” Russell turned, and Sebastian jumped to his feet.

Aspen stared in shock. Psyche glanced at Mars before looking back at Alex. “What do you mean? You saw this man before you saw the creature that attacked the three of you last night?”

Alex nodded, and struggled to hold herself up as she gazed at Mars. “Yes. I was running, and he was coming from the other direction, fast. He almost knocked me off of my feet.”

The room sprang into action as Russell pulled his gun and pointed it at Mars. Sebastian reached for his and remembered what he was wearing, cursing. Rogan growled and pulled his gun, pointing it at Psyche. Sebastian moved to stand in front of her. Aspen’s jaw dropped as she looked at her superior. “Mars?” Her eyes begged him to give her an answer.

Mars snarled at Psyche. “That quick, huh? Our alliance falls apart at the mutterings of a bed-ridden mortal?”

Psyche spoke calmly, quietly as she walked around Sebastian to face Mars. "Why were you there, Mars? Why were you running in the opposite direction?"

Russell's blue eyes flashed with anger as he spat, "That's how you got there so fast! We were all wondering how you managed to get there before anyone else! You were there the whole time!"

Mars advanced on Russell, "Don't you go forcing your stupid assumptions on me, Golden Boy."

Psyche raised her voice to be heard over the arguing. "Mars, I've always supported you. We've been through a lot together, despite the heat I get for it from my own family. You need to tell us what is going on."

At that moment, a series of beeps sounded from behind Psyche, and everyone half-turned from the spectacle, their weapons still raised, to see the mortal they had forgotten convulsing on the bed. Aspen ran to push the call button, as Russell yelled, "Alex!"

Moments later, the nurse ran in, as well as several Guardians. In a moment's notice, they had their weapons raised, pointed at Mars and Rogan. The nurse yelled for back up while Hans dashed into the room, sporting his magically charged Sword of Light, the chosen weapon of all Temple Guardians. Before anyone could blink, he held the sword to Rogan's throat, forcing him to drop the gun. Aspen yelled while Guardians forced Mars and Rogan to the ground. She dashed to them, but was pulled back by Psyche. Meanwhile, more nurses ran into the room, followed by Garrett, who ran to take care of Alex. The medical machinery continued to whine and beep behind them. Aspen looked dazed as she stared at Mars, who only looked coldly over the whole room. "You have no idea what you've done," he growled as he was forced through the door.

As soon as he was out, Psyche released Aspen, who ran after Rogan and Mars. Russell and Sebastian exchanged glances while Russell lowered his gun then turned to the bed. Psyche addressed Garrett. "What happened?"

The doctor raised his head from his evaluation of his patient. "She's in a coma."

Sebastian Cupid

Russell looked at Sebastian, his eyes on fire. “What?” He looked back to the doctor. “She was just talking to us!”

“Well, she’s not talking now,” Garrett replied.

Sebastian approached the bedside and sighed. He turned to look at this mother, who had her lips pressed together in a fine line. She nodded once and then looked at Russell.

“Go get her brother.”

NINE

Aspen paced back in forth in front of the Oracles' Fountain at about five minutes after ten o'clock that night. She had no reason to believe Sebastian would remember their meeting or even care to show up after the nasty episode in the mortal's room earlier that day. Still, she felt obligated to show him she could keep her promises. And, if she was honest, she could admit she was more than a little interested in proving her innocence. Aspen quit wearing a path in the concrete for a moment, staring at the glittering water of the fountain. Her eyelids lowered as the spray from the water misted over her face, cooling her skin, which heated when she thought of what happened. How in the world could she have known Mars was involved in the demon attack? The fact that she was a member of Mars's Temple, here with him on business, and with Sebastian at the time of the attack put her at the top of the accomplices list. The only thing that saved her was her reaction to the news.

Aspen sighed and tucked her arms across her chest. She felt guilty about that too. Staring up at the concrete statue face of Jupiter surrounded by his Oracles in the fountain, she shuffled her feet, unable to keep still. Mars was under arrest, and all she'd been able to do was stare in disbelief. How could Mars have launched a demon attack? What possible reason could he have for setting a demon on Sebastian? What's worse, did he not care she was with him? What if she'd been taken out too? She was hurt and confused. Hans had taken both Mars and Rogan into custody, not allowing Aspen to see either of them. Aspen wondered if Rogan had known of Mars's plans. She knew Rogan

well enough to know he would have defended Mars whether he had known or not.

Like she should have.

Just as Aspen was going to give up and go in, Sebastian entered the courtyard. His tall form was once again encased in a black suit of rank with the Golden Arrow insignia on the lapel, the sweat suit left behind. He might have been feeling a bit better, but his face was dark, tired. He approached Aspen, stopping with several feet between the two of them.

Aspen exhaled heavily. "I didn't know if you were still coming."

Sebastian grunted. "I wasn't."

"What made you change your mind?"

"Nothing, actually. I expected you to be gone by now. I'm waiting for Venus. She's due to be here shortly."

Aspen nodded, considering. "You think I had something to do with this?"

Sebastian scowled. "I don't care. I defended your ignorance of the situation because you saved my life, as well as Alex's. My debt is repaid. Whatever happens from here on out is on your shoulders."

"Do you honestly think I would have subjected you to a demon? The mortal too?"

Sebastian snapped out. "We both know Mars has hurt others for his own ends more than once. It would not be beneath him to sacrifice a mere mortal to gain some power."

Aspen moved a step closer to Sebastian, incensed. "Do you really think I would have stuck out my neck to save you both if I knew what was going on?"

"Why were you even there?"

Aspen's mouth opened then closed. She shook her head and looked at the bubbling water. "I heard you were working on a less personal way to turn the mortals. I was interested in seeing it work."

Sebastian snorted. "I'm over quota. I'm not going to be doing it again anytime soon, and I don't perform for audiences."

Something inside Aspen snapped. Intending to wipe the cold, distant look off of his face, Aspen closed the distance between the two of them, aggressively shoving him. "What the hell is your problem?"

Sebastian Cupid

Sebastian braced himself, turning on his back leg. He kicked out and swept his other leg behind Aspen, knocking her off her feet and onto the ground. The air whooshed out of Aspen's lungs as she looked up at Sebastian. Before she had a chance to gain her bearings, Sebastian placed a foot on her throat, threateningly pressing down with this toes. "Don't ever threaten me in word or action. I owe you nothing, and I don't trust you. I only made up a story about showing you my work because I was in your debt. I no longer am. I have no reason to talk to you about my project. If and when things change, you will be notified of the change by your god, assuming he hasn't been excommunicated. Is that clear?"

Aspen's eyes widened, nodding her head. Had she imagined a more compassionate Sebastian? Where was the Arrow who had sat by the mortal's bedside less than five hours before? She hadn't thought Sebastian was a spoiled, rotten pretty boy like the others, but maybe she was wrong. Maybe Mars was right. Maybe all Golden Arrows were only in it for games and fringe benefits.

Sebastian took his foot off of her neck and turned, leaving Aspen on the ground. He walked in the direction of the Temple drive, where a long, black limousine was pulling up to the curb. Aspen hastily pulled herself up off of the ground, rubbing her neck as she hurried away, careful to keep her eyes downcast so no one would see the tears sparkling in them.

Sebastian walked to the curb, blood pounding in his ears. He tried to bring his emotions down from a boil - to replicate on the outside the owner of the careless, cold voice he had used. It wasn't working. He had stuck his neck out for her, using his own reputation as leverage. As a result, Alex was in a coma and he possibly defended someone responsible for the demon attack, either directly or indirectly. He'd be damned if he'd fall for Aspen's doll-face tactics again. Maybe Venus was right. Maybe all Lead Arrows were in it for the blood and glory and screw the consequences.

Keeping his resolute stone face in check, he pulled open the rear door of the limo as his grandmother emerged. She exited the limo smelling of gardenias and wearing a fine light beige skirt suit. Giving

him a peck on the cheek, her blue eyes drank in the sight of him as her arm linked through his.

“What is it?”

Sebastian tried not to curse or even acknowledge his displeasure at being caught. Why in the world wasn't he better at masking his feelings? “There's been an incident.” At least he could hang all of his emotional struggles on a factual occurrence, even if it wasn't the sole reason.

Venus walked with him back toward the fountain. “Is that why you've come to greet me?”

“Yes. Mars is under arrest.”

Coming abreast of the fountain, Venus turned to look up at her grandson. “What happened?”

“Al- ...the mortal recognized him. She saw him walking quickly away from the alley while she was following me.”

Venus nodded. “I always suspected him. He's never been trustworthy, as his past actions have shown. Though I actually hesitate to believe Psyche placed him under arrest.”

Sebastian gazed at the fountain. “Rogan pulled a gun on Psyche when Russell pulled his gun on Mars. Hans came in with the other Guardians and took Mars and Rogan out. They're both in Hans's custody now.”

“What about the woman that came with them? Aspen?”

Sebastian growled internally and struggled to relay information without bringing his own opinion into things. “She didn't move to defend Mars. She didn't seem to be aware the demon was called. That makes sense because she defended the mortal and I last night.”

Venus evaluated her grandson carefully. “But you don't believe it.”

Sebastian sighed, cursing his inability to stay professional about the situation. “Her actions show us she isn't a threat. She seems as confused as the rest of us.”

Venus cackled as she turned to walk toward the Temple again, Sebastian falling into step with her. “Confused? Hurt, more like. Well, this wouldn't be the first time Mars used one of his underlings. That's what happens when you pay worship to the wrong god.” She paused as they entered the foyer. “He's not acting alone.”

Sebastian Cupid

Sebastian's eyes met Venus's, trying not to think about Aspen playing the part of a loyal and hurt underling. "What do you mean?"

"I've just come from Auster's Temple."

"Aust-..." Sebastian took a heavy breath as his eyes met those of his Grandmother's. Auster was a god of wind. "That's why the wind was significant. Auster used the wind to bring the demon into our path."

Venus nodded. "No one has seen Auster for weeks. His Temple in Madrid says he's in Rome, but Cupid knows he's not in Rome because Cupid has been there for three weeks. If you call Rome, they tell you Auster's in New York, but he's not there either. Each Temple tells you he's at another Temple, but it's just a diversion. Who knows how long Auster's actually been missing."

Sebastian's eyes clouded as he gazed at the floor of the foyer. "But Auster is a supporter. He's always been a dedicated supporter of Cupid, even when the orders went against his best interests."

Venus shook her head. "Maybe for some things, but you'll also remember he went against my wishes more than once, Sebastian, when I was trying to protect Cupid." Venus was speaking of the trials she sent Psyche through as a mortal. Auster helped Psyche cheat. He also brought Psyche's envious sisters to visit, which was the only reason Psyche ever tried to see Cupid's face. He had to leave her once she knew his identity because he was the son of a goddess. "Auster nearly messed up everything for good once, making emotional decisions. Now that we are all in the same league he can't play favorites." Sebastian and Venus crossed the lobby, heading toward Psyche's office. "We're in a world where each god has to look out for him or herself. These are not old times. No one believes anymore. Without followers, we are powerless. There isn't a single god who isn't interested in having a slice of our kingdom. We have the most successful one."

Sebastian thought about this as they approached the Guardians who were posted outside of Psyche's door. Sebastian knocked twice. A call came from inside Psyche's office, and Sebastian opened it for his grandmother, who turned to look at him as she crossed the threshold. "Remember, Sebastian. These are uncertain times. No one can be trusted anymore." With that last bit of advice, Venus closed the door

with a click behind her, leaving Sebastian in the hall. Hesitating only for a moment, he turned and walked back to his room.

In the corner of the front lobby, Aspen exhaled as she came from behind a potted fig tree in the corner. She really hadn't intended to eavesdrop, but she didn't want to have another confrontation with Sebastian. She'd only meant to wait until they passed then go back to her room. Venus thought Auster was responsible for the demon attack? Aspen felt certain Mars wasn't working with Auster. She'd not seen Auster at all in her travels, and she knew Mars thought poorly of Auster. He was too wishy-washy, Mars always said. Mars always respected steadfastness in his Temple. Aspen flushed, thinking of how she failed that test today.

Aspen knew an alliance with Auster went against everything in Mars's nature, so she didn't trust it. Turning, she walked quickly, quietly back to her room. She began yanking open drawers and doors, throwing her belongings into her bags. She needed to find Auster, to find out why he was involved with demon activities against the Arrows.

Aspen cracked open the door of her room and walked quickly down the hall carrying her belongings. Once she was outside, she wasted no time in running to the end of the private drive. She doubted very much she'd be able to get away without questions if she were spotted.

She messed up today, big time. She questioned her god, failed to protect him, and harmed her budding relationship with Sebastian. He was the closest thing to an acquaintance she'd ever had in the Golden Arrows.

Aspen detoured into the trees off the side of the main gate, vaulting the fence. She walked almost two miles before she was able to hail a cab. Settling back in her seat, she directed the driver and opened her cell phone to begin her search.

TEN

A loud crash woke Sebastian. He jolted upright in bed, grimacing at the pain in his arm and trying to get his bearings. Shaking his head, he reached for his gun at the same moment he heard footsteps thundering down the hall past his room. Fumbling into a pair of pants that were on the floor, he recognized Hans's voice going past his door. He threw open his bedroom door and ran down the hall, quickly following the Guardians running into Alex's room. Bursting in, he saw Russell in a wrestling match with a man he didn't know on the floor. The Guardians raised their weapons, trying to get a clear shot. Russell saw them raise their guns and grunted, "No! No! Don't shoot him!"

Sebastian had no idea what to think of that order, but he'd be damned if he was going to stand by and watch Russell get attacked by whoever this guy was. He jumped on the back of the man at the first opportunity, forcing his good arm around the guy's neck. Taking advantage of the break, Russell rolled out of the fight. Meanwhile, the red-haired man in Sebastian's arms flung curses and thrashed about. Sebastian's injured arm grazed the ground, and he yelled out in pain. Russell placed his hands on his knees and tried to catch his breath. "Sweet Jupiter! He's as strong as an ox!"

As the man started to wear down and thrash less, Sebastian grunted at Russell. "Who the devil is he?"

"Alex's brother, Glen."

Sebastian waited until Glen stopped trying to get out of the chokehold before he spoke into the man's ear. "Listen, I'm gonna let you go now. Please don't give the Guardians any reason to shoot you, ok?"

Sebastian waited until he got a nod from Glen before quickly releasing him and stepping back out of the line of fire. The Guardians kept their weapons locked on their target as Glen rolled into a sitting position, breathing heavily, glaring at Russell and Sebastian in turn. "What have you done to her?"

Russell shook his head, still breathing heavily. He looked at Sebastian. "I tried to tell him there was an accident, but he didn't believe me. I called for Garrett with the button thingy, and he attacked me right after. Garrett walked in on this and called the Guardians."

Sebastian snorted as he looked at Glen. "You really think incapacitating the people taking care of your sister is going to make her better?"

Glen glared at Sebastian, his face flushed with fury. "All I know," he said, "is that your buddy here tells me she's in a coma, and he can't tell me why. Just it was an 'accident'. Why the hell isn't she in a hospital?"

Russell leaned back against the wall next to Alex's bed. Sebastian approached Glen and offered him a hand, which he scowled at but took, rising to his feet. "Because your hospitals wouldn't be able to help her."

Glen shook his head, backing toward the bed. He turned and thrust a finger toward Russell. "Why the hell did he blindfold me on the way here? What are you people into?"

Russell spoke up from behind Glen, making him turn. "You're lucky you're even here. You're the second guest we've ever had, and the first is right behind you."

Glen gazed down at the bed where his sister lay. "Some way to treat your guests."

Sebastian looked behind him to where the Guardians still stood on full alert. Hans raised his eyebrows at Sebastian. Sebastian shrugged, glancing at Glen. "You guys can bail. I'll let you know if there's trouble. I know you've got your hands full elsewhere."

Hans gave a curt nod before the Guardians filed out of the room, the door clicking shut behind them. Sebastian looked back to where Glen stood. Taking a deep breath, he moved to the corner of the room where a mini-fridge sat. He pulled three bottles of water from within and tossed one at each of the two men in the room with him.

Sebastian Cupid

Glen opened the bottle warily, and Sebastian didn't miss how he eyeballed the seal on the cap first. Thinking of what he had been up to less than a week before, Sebastian chuckled at the irony.

Glen's head jerked up at the sound of laughter. Sebastian noted his expression and shook his head. "Never mind. It doesn't have to do with this. Just remembering something."

Glen looked down at Alex. "She asked for me?"

Russell approached his elbow. "It was of great importance to her. She wanted you here very badly. The coma set in right after."

Glen shook his head and sat down in a chair next to the bed. His hands rubbed his face in frustration. "Please. Please tell me what happened."

Russell shook his head and looked at Sebastian. Sebastian decided to hell with it.

"We're immortal."

Glen's hands paused, and he brought his face up to glare at Sebastian while Russell's mouth dropped in surprise. Sebastian just sighed and moved to stand on the other side of Alex's bed.

Glen's face turned red as he lifted himself to his feet. Russell moved behind him, defensively reaching for his gun. Sebastian raised a hand to ward Russell off and waited to see what Glen would do. "You drag me here, won't tell me what's wrong with my sister, and then make up some story..." Glen bit on his words, visibly trying to keep his temper in check. "What the hell is wrong with you people?"

Sebastian glanced at Russell, who shrugged. Sebastian looked back at Glen and considered him, pursing his lips. "If I can prove it to you beyond a shadow of a doubt will you shut up and listen?"

Russell looked as if he was going to object, but Sebastian shook his head briskly. Russell clamped his lips together, his eyes darting at Glen. Glen considered for a moment. "You're all crazy aren't you?"

Sebastian stood, planting his hands on his hips. "Yes or no?"

Glen shook his head. "You should all be locked up."

Sebastian looked over at Russell, gesturing. "Russell, give him your gun."

Russell shook his head. "This is crazy, Sebastian."

Glen laughed, looked at Sebastian. "See? Even your buddy here thinks you're crazy. Bunch of crack pots."

Sebastian took his own gun and pulled out the magazine. He slipped out the bullets inside, replacing them with the old bullets that were still in his pants pocket. He held the reloaded gun out to Glen. "Go on. Take it."

Glen eyed the gun, warily. "No."

Sebastian sighed heavily, rolled his eyes, and then turned the gun on himself and shot himself in the chest. Glen jumped back and yelled as Sebastian's body fell to the floor, blood splattering on the wall. "Sweet mother of God!"

Russell shook his head, groaning. "Sebastian, that's gonna hurt like hell for days, man."

Glen jumped back several paces when Sebastian's voice answered from the floor on the other side of the bed. "I know, I know."

Glen continued to back away, shaking his head, as Sebastian's hand appeared and grasped the edge of the bed. His head soon followed, his face grimacing in pain. Glen looked over this shoulder at Russell, now only a pace behind him, then back at Sebastian. "What the...how the...?"

Russell shook his head. "Shit, Sebastian. He's still not gonna believe you. Look at him."

Sebastian stood up, blood all over his shirt. He glanced at Glen then raised his shirt up so Glen could see the hole in his chest from the bullet wound, which was slowly closing in on itself, bruises flowering out from the wound site. Glen's mouth hung open as he shook his head. Sebastian walked slowly around the foot of Alex's bed. "Is that how it is, Glen? You're gonna fight like hell for your sister, and then when you find out the truth it's too much for you? You can't handle it?" Sebastian's voice rose as he continued to approach Glen, who was steadily backing away. "You're going to demand answers and when those answers aren't good enough, 'Oh, see ya later! Too much for me!' Is that how it is?"

Glen shook his head. "I didn't...you're..."

Sebastian Cupid

Sebastian stopped suddenly, lifting his hands palm up. "Immortal..." Then he remembered Jeremy. "Mostly, anyway. I can't help it. Your sister needs you. Can you face this?"

Glen swallowed, hard. His face was dangerously pale, his freckles standing out against his white skin. His eyes bugged out as he looked back and forth between Russell and Sebastian, who now stood side by side, awaiting Glen's answer. Glen lifted a hand slowly as he struggled to steady himself. He walked around the perimeter of the room as he considered. "How did my sister get involved in all this?"

Russell sighed. "Your sister was an innocent bystander. Sebastian and another immortal were attacked the other night. She just happened to be there."

Glen stopped. "She was attacked when she was near you and you guys think the best place for her to be is with you again?"

Sebastian shook his head. "Regular doctors wouldn't know what to do for her. There were problems with...exposure to dangerous toxins. Your doctors wouldn't even recognize them."

Glen jerked his head toward where his sister lay. "What toxins?"

Russell grimaced, and Sebastian exhaled heavily. "My blood."

Glen whipped around, incensed. "Your blood? You just shot yourself right next to her!"

Sebastian held up his hands. "No, no. Not just my blood. My blood actually has positive effect on mortals. It was the combination of my blood and the blood of my half-sister that caused the reaction."

"Why were you both bleeding all over her?"

"Because we were being attacked. In protecting her, we accidentally hurt her. We had no idea it would happen." Sebastian lowered his voice. "It was an accident. Honestly."

Glen approached the bed. "And now she's in a coma."

Sebastian and Russell nodded, but it didn't make a difference because Glen only had eyes for his sister. Glen lowered into the chair at Alex's bedside, resting his forehead on his hands which he folded on her blankets. "What are you doing for her?"

Russell slowly approached the bed. "Garrett said he's giving her another transfusion of mortal blood. The first transfusion actually went well, and she was getting better. He hopes a second transfusion

will wipe out any trace of the exposure to Sebastian and Aspen's blood."

Glen nodded. "The only thing..." he turned to look at Sebastian. "The only thing saving you from a serious fight is you were being attacked when it happened."

Sebastian sighed, lifting his hand to massage the bridge of his nose. "I know a lot of this doesn't make sense, but you have to calm down and trust us. The only thing that might bring Alex through this is the knowledge someone is standing by her."

Glen glanced at Sebastian before moving his hand to brush the hair from Alex's brow. "Do you think she knows I'm here?" he asked.

Sebastian nodded. "Absolutely."

Glen leaned down next to Alex's ear. Taking a deep breath, he began to speak to Alex. "Hey, Sis. It's your stupid brother. Listen, I'm here with Sebastian and Russell. They're telling me a whole bunch of bullshit, but that doesn't matter. They're trying to help you. I'm not going to leave your side. I want you to know you're going to get through this. If these wack jobs have been around as long as they think they have, they know a whole bunch of shit by now..." Russell snorted into his palm as he glanced over at Sebastian. "...and they've got a way to make you better. I'm going to sit right here and make sure they don't fuck it up." Glen's voice cracked on the last word as his eyes filled. Shaking his head and closing his eyes, he lowered his voice as he pressed his lips to Alex's hands, which he clutched in his own. He turned his head only slightly to indicate he was speaking to Sebastian. "Get out."

Sebastian gave one curt nod before he and Russell left the room. Once out in the hall, the door closed behind them, and Russell let out a huge whoosh of air. "Holy shit, man. How did you pull that off?"

Sebastian grimaced at his messy shirt in disgust. "I figured the man had nothing to lose. The way he was taking you on? He was going to do whatever he had to do to save his sister, even if it was to listen to a bullshit story."

"Too bad it's not bullshit. Do you think Mom's gonna kill you for saying something?"

Sebastian Cupid

Sebastian shook his head. “No. Things are changing. Mortals might actually be better allies than our half-brothers and sisters at this point. Come on, I need to change.”

They headed toward Sebastian’s room as Russell exhaled heavily. “I know. Can you believe Mars? I felt bad for Aspen. She was nearly wiped out by her own god.”

Sebastian grunted, noncommittally. He didn’t want to think about Aspen. He thrust open the door to his room, moving to the closet where a few changes of his clothes had been picked up from his apartment earlier by a Guardian. Russell stood, thinking. “I mean, how would you feel if you found out Psyche sent a demon to wipe out Aspen, knowing you were there?” Sebastian silently took his clothing from the wardrobe, saying nothing. Russell raised his eyebrows. “Sebastian?”

Sebastian yanked off his shirt, wincing as he moved too harshly. “What?” he spat out.

Russell took a couple of cautious steps toward Sebastian. “You don’t think ... you know she wasn’t involved, right?”

Sebastian threw a shirt on the bed before moving to the sink in the corner bath. Over his shoulder came a non-committal grunt. “I don’t know what to think anymore.”

Russell approached the bathroom. “Wait a minute. She saved your ass. And Alex’s.”

Sebastian looked over from the sink where he was scrubbing the blood from his chest. “Oh yeah? How do you know? How do you know it wasn’t just part of the master plan? She was following me, you know.”

Russell leaned against the door jamb, evaluating his brother. “Did she tell you why?”

Sebastian just sighed, throwing a bloody washcloth into the laundry basket in the corner. “She said she was interested in the project.”

Russell raised his eyebrows. “Could be true, you know?”

“Well, could be true doesn’t seem to be strong enough conviction to me.”

“But thinking she interfered with her god’s plans for some higher agenda does?”

Sebastian shoved past Russell. “Listen, I don’t know. I don’t know how I feel about any of this.”

“You’re hurt.”

Sebastian snorted. “Hurt? By a Lead Arrow?”

Russell nodded. “Yeah.”

Sebastian raised his eyes at Russell. He wasn’t confessing that to anyone. Not even to Russell. “I just came to my senses is all.”

“Well, I’m not convinced she had anything to do with it. I think we should talk to her. Find out what else she knows. If she helps us, she might actually be telling the truth.”

Sebastian considered this, shrugging on his clean shirt. He delayed his response, staring out the window. “We cannot afford to make any mistakes. We’ve already got two mortals involved, and mortals haven’t been with us for many years. I’m not talking about selected mortals, like Garrett. I’m talking about pedestrian mortals. We’ve got Mars covering up shit. We’re holding a Lead Arrow and a god in our Temple for crimes we cannot prove. The whole system is shaky right now. Trusting the wrong person could be disastrous.”

Russell walked up to Sebastian, waiting until he looked up. “So we don’t trust her. But we have to talk to someone on their side that gives half a shit what we think. She’s the only Lead Arrow that would give us the time of day. Unless you want to start questioning Rogan?”

Sebastian snickered. Russell chuckled as Sebastian nodded his head. “Alright. We’ll talk to Aspen.” He twisted right and left, rolling his shoulders, checking the severity of the remaining damage from the bullet wound.

“Are you gonna need Garrett to look at that?”

Sebastian shook his head as they walked to the door. “Nah. The bullet went through, and it’s not like it has demon poison in it.” He looked at his arm. “I can’t believe how long it’s taking this to heal.”

“It’s only been a day.”

“Yeah, and I just healed from a bullet wound in fifteen minutes, but my arm still hurts. That’s ridiculous.”

Sebastian Cupid

They walked a few paces toward Aspen's room. Just short of her closed door, Sebastian stopped. He paused before looking at Russell.

Russell tilted his head to the side. "What's on your mind, bro?"

Sebastian exhaled. "I don't want you to think I'm being an asshole about Aspen. Truth is, I was honestly shocked to find out Mars was involved. I never liked the rat bastard or really trusted him, but I never thought he'd go so far as to turn traitor on Mom."

Russell nodded his head. "Take it out on all the Lead Arrows, spare no one scrutiny?"

"Right now the shoe fits. I'm just being careful."

Russell nodded, understanding. Sebastian was always the more cautious of the two of them. They turned toward the door. "Look," Russell said, pointing at the sliver of light under the door. "She's already awake."

"Well, it's almost dawn by now," Sebastian said, knocking gently. They waited, but heard nothing. Sebastian knocked again, louder. Turning the door handle, he called out as he pushed open the door. "Aspen?"

The door swung open to reveal a crisply made bed, a bare room, all of Aspen's things gone. Sebastian moved to the closet then the chest of drawers, pulling open doors and cabinets, all empty. He grimly turned to study Russell. "Still think she's innocent?"

ELEVEN

Mars scowled into the dark. He sat on a chair in the center of a white pentagram called a “circle.” It was flashing brilliant white light against the walls of the darkened room. Hans knew his job well, no doubt. The circle was the only thing that could hold a celestial being against his will, not that Mars fought it. He knew if he talked to Psyche, convinced her of his innocence, he would be released. However, Mars was offended and hurt Psyche had turned against him so quickly, and he needed to carefully consider the turn of events.

He studied the floor under his feet, remembering the incident in the mortal’s room from only a few hours earlier. He didn’t blame the mortal. It was mere coincidence the mortal had remembered him. He knew now why he had been there, though he didn’t before. It all seemed common chance at the time. Now he knew better. Now he would wait to see what she wanted with him.

He didn’t wait much longer.

The windows behind Mars gently breezed open, the curtains fluttering. He stood, ready to greet his visitor. However, no one entered his room. A few seconds later, a pristine, beautiful voice floated through the window to him. “Have you thought about my offer?”

Mars chuckled. “Amazing you should ask. You know very well you’ve put me in this position so I have nothing to consider but your offer.”

The beautiful voice tittered. “Indeed. It worked out even better than I planned. You realize Aspen has run?”

Sebastian Cupid

Mars was careful to keep his face clear. He'd have to consider that one later. Another disappointment, surely. "I don't see how that matters to me."

"It doesn't - except it means everyone is leaving you."

Mars laughed outright. "You are so heavily disillusioned. Do you forget all of the Lead Arrows? My entire Temple?"

"And what good," asked the voice, "is your kingdom if they are all drained of their blood?"

Mars took a step too close before he realized it. When his foot grazed the edge of the circle, white fire flashed, throwing him back a couple of steps. He threw his hands up in rage. "You threaten my Temple? Are your crimes not enough as it is? Do you have any idea what will become of you if anyone discovers what you are up to?"

"Oh, are you going to tell them, Mars? Are they going to believe you against a poor mortal eyewitness on her death bed? How many Golden Arrow supporters do you really have? How many of the people in this Temple would stand by you if you wanted to leave? You know as well as I do. Your fate is sealed by a series of very poor decisions. If only you'd tried a little harder to win over the affections of the Golden Arrows in your time, you wouldn't have been locked up. They've only been humoring Psyche's affection for you over the years. We both know how poorly your past decisions have reflected on your loyalty."

Mars frowned. "I did what was needed to sustain my Temple."

"Yes," chuckled the voice. "At the expense of every other god in your realm. What a pity you and I both know you don't stand a chance. However, you can take up my offer. You'd have your Temple back. You'd have the bulk of the followers of all of the Arrows."

Mars growled at the voice. "How many other gods have agreed to this? I see Auster, at least, agreed to your terms."

"Indeed. I must admit, I didn't think it would take much effort to convince you. You are, after all, the god of war. This would be the war to end all wars. You'd be at the top of your game."

Mars shook his head, turned to face the opposite wall. "You don't know what you ask. The balance of the entire realm would be shaken by a war such as this. Temples destroyed, gods ruined."

“And what of it? You and I both know there are no longer enough followers for all of them anyway. Mortals stopped believing in gods long ago. They lumped them all together in one “God”. No mortals ever visit the Temples, unless they are visiting some tourist attraction. When people stop praying to you, you lose your power. You and I both know I speak the truth. Do you want things to go back to what it was like during the Fall?”

Mars shook his head. He took a deep breath before turning to face the window. “You must allow me time to consider.”

“I already have.”

“Another day.”

“Very well. I give you twenty-four hours to make your decision, though we both know what it has to be. Try not to agonize over it too much. I am going to make you a powerful god again.”

The windows blew shut with a click. Moments later, the door swung open, and two Guardians entered with their swords raised. One turned on the lights as the other approached, looking warily at Mars. “Who were you speaking with?”

Mars snorted and sat on the chair in the circle as though he didn’t have a care in the world. “Do you see anyone here?”

There wasn’t much of a search to do, as the room was empty. The chair Mars sat in was the only furnishing. “I heard something.”

Mars sneered at the Guardian. “Maybe it was your conscience.”

The Guardians rolled their eyes. The Guardian that had not spoken turned and went back to his post saying, “See? I told you it was nothing.”

The door closed with a click as Mars exhaled. She was right about one thing. There was about to be a war to end all wars. The question was, what side did Mars belong on?

About 2,500 miles away, Aspen was getting very pissed off. She pounded on the door of the Temple again, the booms from her fist echoing against the stones of the courtyard enclosure. This was her last stop, as Seattle was the least-likely place she was going to get help.

Sebastian Cupid

She'd already been to New York, San Antonio, Norfolk, and Washington, D.C. She was over it. If she went anywhere else, it'd have to be Rome, and she really didn't want to go there. Surely Cupid already knew what was happening in Chicago. If she showed up, there'd be hell to pay. Besides, stirring up the Lead Arrows could lead openly to revolt, and she didn't want to go that route.

Yet.

After the sixth knock went unanswered in half as many minutes, Aspen stomped around the side of the Temple to the chapel entrance. This door was smaller, wooden, and not nearly as glamorous as the main entrance. It was also the least likely place one would expect a visitor to enter. An "employee door", so to speak. As such, she might get lucky. She decided to forgo knocking, and pushed the heavy lead handle. Clicking loudly, the door swung open. Bingo.

Aspen entered the room slowly, her hand on her gun as she allowed her eyes to adjust to the dimly lit room. It was just about two hours until dawn here, and there didn't seem to be anyone up yet, but that didn't ring true. The monks of the Temple wouldn't have ignored a summons on the main gate, even at three in the morning. Aspen carefully and quietly tip-toed to the front of the chapel sanctuary, passing empty pew after empty pew. She passed the altar, where the offering baskets sat, empty from their last collection. The candles for prayer were lined against the heavy stone of the altar, and they were all unlit. Two of them had burned down to the bottom of the jar and had never been replaced. Aspen turned to the right of the altar, toward the rooms at the back of the Temple, where Auster's monks would stay. The sanctuary was far too quiet, her breathing too loud. She could hear each thumping heartbeat as she moved without stirring the air. Her nostrils twitched as she skirted the pews. Reaching the vestibule doors, Aspen knocked softly on the wood before declaring herself clearly. "Temple Auster? This is Aspen Cupid, of Temple Mars. I've come seeking your guidance."

After waiting several seconds, it was obvious she wasn't going to get an answer. The room was just as silent as before. Aspen was certain now that something wasn't right. Lowering a slightly shaking hand to the door knob, she turned it quietly as she lifted her gun with

her other hand. Pushing open the door, her sense of smell sounded the alarm in her head long before she saw the blood and bodies that were strewn throughout the room. Aspen's eyes wheeled from corner to corner, despite her mental plea to calm herself. She searched for an intruder, but all she could make out was the blood, a huge sea of it, cloaking the room. The monks of Auster were strewn about like rag dolls, their white robes covered in the dank color of dried blood. Pressing her hand to her mouth, Aspen looked over the room with watering eyes. An altar boy, hardly ten years old, lay broken over the bunk in the corner, his eyes staring blankly at the wall. Two more bodies lay a pace away, their faces frozen in the silent screams of terror. Aspen turned and vomited into the corner closest to the door, the stench too much for her stomach. She retched feebly as she placed a shaky hand on the wall to steady herself.

The one pale light from the window facing the courtyard grew dim alarmingly fast. Aspen whipped around, pointing her gun at the door. The room was dark in seconds, leaving her blind. Her breath echoed in the small room, and she willed herself to quiet the sounds of her fear. Suddenly, a huge gust swept the room, and Aspen shrieked, "Auster!" She screamed before something heavy and hard hit the side of her head, and she blacked out.

TWELVE

Sebastian looked around his apartment. Had it really only been days since he was last here? It seemed like months, and it felt as though he hardly recognized the place. He wouldn't get to stay, either. With the recent attack on Sebastian and the question of Mars's involvement, all Golden Arrows had been called to Temple. It was their duty to go without hesitation. He sometimes found it inconvenient to answer his Temple's call to arms, but this was not one of those times. They were hardly safe at Temple, let alone strewn all over Chicago. Across the world, Golden Arrows were retreating to Temples as Cupid tried to negotiate peace with the remaining Lead Arrows in Rome. Since the two main Lead Arrow officers had stayed behind with Mars in Chicago, there was no head to the Rome Mars Temple. The situation was tense. No Arrow would dare stand against Cupid, but the situation was certainly hostile. A few remaining officers from Temple Mars prepared to reconvene back at Temple Cupid in Chicago, where Mars was being held.

Since Aspen's disappearance, Sebastian had little hope for reconciliation. Aspen was the one Lead Arrow that showed promise of forming a warmer alliance with the Golden Arrows than what already existed. Aspen had abandoned all of them, even her own god. It seemed the Lead Arrows had forgotten their duty. Their one duty above all others was to provide balance to the mortal population before they died out, killed themselves, or killed each other. If the Lead Arrows turned against the Golden Arrows, they were in serious risk of another Fall.

Sebastian sighed as he sat in the chair at his desk. In front of him was his book. He flipped again to a name he would never forget: Cynthia Bledsoe. She was the start of his desire for a new method, the beginning of his research. Holding the leather binding in both hands, he fanned the pages toward the front of the book, watching as his work history winked at him through the fluttering pages. His entire existence had been dedicated to establishing peace and balance in the human race; toward maintaining the realm of the gods before it died out. Before the gods themselves turned as savage as the world they were trying to hold together. The last time this had happened had been during the Fall.

Back in the days before his father had met his mother, the world was much more privy to the wishes of the gods. The gods had been free, their whims changing with the weather. The mortals worshiped everything about them. Apollo had received prayers every time his chariot of gold rose above the horizon and again before it winked out on the other side of the Earth. Venus had received daily prayers from women looking to conceive or get married. Jupiter's vast realm of gods had flourished. While there had definitely been scuffles, as is typical of gods, there was never any real reason to fear the destruction of the realm. However, gods have no power when no one believes in them anymore. At that point, it would be necessary to start over. The realignment of power, wiping out the human race.

Armageddon.

No one wanted that, but it was inevitable. The mortals' faith diminished every day. It had gotten to the point where only one collective "God" received the prayers for the doings of all gods. It was enough to survive on, certainly, but it wasn't ideal. All gods struggled for a place in this world. Fortunately, Sebastian and his family were in the business of love and hate. Those two commodities never got old among humans. Without one, the other would not exist, and that was the balance of the Arrows. Without that balance, Sebastian had no idea what would happen.

In the last Fall, Venus ordered Cupid to kill the one mortal on earth that was stealing her kingdom. This mortal had beauty that turned every eye, mortal and immortal, and she began to be worshiped as a

Sebastian Cupid

goddess. This mortal was his mother, Psyche. However, Cupid had fallen in love with Psyche and hid her away, though he hid his identity from her. He made her promise she'd never try to find out who he was. But she did find out, and Cupid was hurt that Psyche had defied him and scared to have his identity known to a mortal. He ran back home to Venus. When Venus discovered what happened, she was furious and threatened to put an end to Psyche. However, she made a cruel game of it. Sending Psyche on various odd tasks designed to kill her, Venus waited for the day when Psyche would fail. But she never did. She accomplished all of her tasks with the help of the other gods, Auster included. Finally, Jupiter himself, the god of all gods, blessed Psyche, a mortal, with the gift of immortality. She had ruled the realm of love with Cupid and Venus ever since. Of course, Sebastian thought, grinning, there had certainly been rough times between Psyche and Venus over the thousands of years since the day Psyche was added to their realm. Simply put, Psyche was now a goddess by Jupiter's own divine powers. She was equal to Venus in every facet. Though this infuriated Venus for many years, she'd managed to put her personal irritation of the situation behind her in order to maintain her relationship with her son and the Temples. Now they all ruled together.

However, one could never quite forget how horrible things had been when Cupid had pined for Psyche. Almost everyone, even mortals, knew of Cupid's golden arrows that brought love to anyone touched by them. Very few mortals remembered the lead arrows, because they were used almost exclusively during the Fall, when Cupid was in rage and misery over losing Psyche. For a span of weeks, Cupid only used his lead arrows, which inflicted hatred and resentment on those they touched. Fear, misery, and war suffocated the mortal world. The realm of Venus began to collapse. They called that time of horrid pain and sadness "the Fall", meaning the fall of Venus's realm. Cupid returned to using his golden arrows after Psyche was restored to him as an immortal, but the modern mortal world couldn't take only happiness and love. When they were surrounded by nothing but graciousness and love, they failed to recognize it. After hundreds of years, the golden arrows lost power, affecting mortals no more than

common drinking water would. The lead arrows were still needed to place a balance between the two.

When the population began to explode hundreds of years ago, Cupid recognized he would need help carrying out his task of balancing mortal emotion. He selected many immortals in his realm to help him. Infusing his “children” with the power of his arrows, the Gold and Lead Arrows were born. Placing the Lead Arrows under the care of Mars, all had been very balanced, if not slightly dysfunctional, for thousands of years.

Until the demon attack. With Mars’s possible involvement in the attack, the first real threat to the realm arrived. Sebastian was never a fan of Mars. Mars was the god of war, through and through. Whatever would bring the most upheaval to the realm, Mars would choose, drawing his power from struggle and chaos. This is why Sebastian never trusted Mars. If Mars ever had the option for war, he took it, which is why everyone could believe he was behind the demon attack, the Golden Arrow murder, and who knows what else. What made it hard to believe was that Mars had developed a kingdom of the Lead Arrows. While the need for war was never short in this world, Mars didn’t have to worry about worshipers. He’d always have believers. Why shake things up when war was running strong and he had a full Temple? It didn’t make sense.

Sebastian stopped himself and snorted. He went to the window and looked down on the cloudy Chicago day, rain bouncing off the streets. What was he thinking? He was talking about gods here. The infinite struggle for power in the universe. Besides, who’s to say Mars wasn’t getting bored with the easy life?

Sebastian shook his head and moved through his apartment, packing the items he would need for a stay at the Temple. He only needed a few things. His Temple would provide the rest. Sebastian moved to his office and collected books and lab supplies, intending to continue his research while he was called to arms. Now more than ever, the Golden Arrows could use a less intrusive way of completing their service. If they weren’t exposed to the outside world as much, they’d be a lot safer. Who knows what kind of world they’re living in

Sebastian Cupid

now, with demons popping up on the street? The sooner Sebastian made more progress on his research the better.

He had everything packed into two duffle bags and was on the way out the door before he remembered his cell phone. He'd been so distracted he'd walked out the other day without it. He wasn't on the clock, and he'd been around everyone that would call him. He was surprised when he saw a message blinking on his phone. Sebastian unplugged the phone from the wall charger and turned to watch the Chicago skyline as he waited for his message to play. His face grew eerily still as he listened to the voice on the other end. A few seconds later, he snapped his phone shut with a loud click. Throwing the charger and phone into his bag, he marched toward the door of his apartment. He armed his security system and quickly left. His face creased in concentration as he tried to figure out what to do. He'd need help. Everything had just gone from bad to shit.

Russell and Glen were still sitting in Alex's room at Temple. It was mid-morning, but it was obvious Glen hadn't slept at all. Russell sighed and stretched, going to look out the window. "You should get some sleep."

Glen just shook his head. "I slept."

"Passing out for a few seconds in an armchair isn't sleep, Glen. It's desperation."

Glen turned his head testily toward Russell. "She's my sister. I'm not leaving her."

Russell sighed as he watched Glen return his gaze toward the bed. "What happened to your parents?"

"What do you mean?"

"I haven't heard either one of you talk about them. You've only ever mentioned each other."

"That's because we've only got each other. Our parents died when we were little. We had no family left, so we went into the system - orphanages. I did everything I could to make sure we would stay together. That only lasts so long, you know?" Glen stood and moved to

the mini-fridge to grab anything inside that looked like it had caffeine content. "They started talking about getting us foster care. It's hard to keep kids together in foster care. I was fourteen and no one wanted a grown boy as a foster kid. Everyone wants babies and shit." Glen shrugged as he downed the first half of his cola. "I busted us out. We ran away, living off of the streets, and it worked for a couple of years. Then they found us. They threw us back in. I bounced us again. We managed to stay out that time until I was of legal age. The rest is history."

Russell nodded. "What do you do now?"

"After Alex was old enough to be on her own and was doing a good job of it, I decided to travel." He looked over at Russell with a face that challenged him to make fun. "I'm an artist. I travel a lot."

Russell nodded, impressed. "What kind of art?"

Glen sat by the bed again, the soda can tapping against his knee. "Sculptures, mostly. Sometimes I work in charcoals. That's what I sketch with. Otherwise, I work in wood."

Both men turned their heads toward the door as Evans entered. She smiled. "Russell, it's time for you to get some rest." Her lithe frame moved easily over the carpet like a dancer. Like all the Arrows he'd seen, she was gorgeous, and Glen told himself it was completely natural to be a bit dazzled by her.

Russell swooped his little sister into the air, kissing her nose before he plunked her back on her feet. "My savior!" He looked back at Glen. "No offense, Glen. If I don't get some sleep, I'm never gonna look as pretty as you."

Glen chuckled and rose to his feet. "That's a losing battle, buddy."

Russell extended his hand, shaking Glen's warmly. He turned to Evans. "Did you meet Glen, Evans?"

Evans turned her soft brown eyes on Glen, who felt his pale face going flush as she faced him. Evans extended her hand. "Only briefly, yesterday."

Glen took her hand in his, its cool, smooth weight sliding in and out again before he was even aware. "Yeah." He shoved his hands in his pockets as he turned to the bed, forcing himself to look away from Evans. Russell turned and walked out of the room, trying not to shake

his head or chuckle at Glen, who was obviously stuck on Evans. Poor guy.

Evans sat by the bed as Glen tried not to fidget, sitting slowly beside her. Evans looked over at him. "They say she's better today, more stable. Have you been talking to her?"

"Yeah. Whenever I can get Russell to shut up." He grinned over at her.

She tossed her hair lightly as she laughed. "Oh, that's not easy! He's been here constantly, though. Even before you were here, Russell never left Alex's side. He feels incredibly responsible for what happened to her."

Glen glanced over at Evans in surprise. "He does? Why would he feel responsible? He wasn't even there!"

Evans sighed as she looked at Alex's too-still frame. "She was on his list just before the incident." She blinked then looked at Glen. "She was supposed to have been gifted by us."

Glen blinked rapidly, and then jerkily looked at this sister in the bed at his elbow. "He was going to make her fall in love? With him?" Evans sighed. "It doesn't really work that way. Mortals fall in love with us for only a short time. Then they move on. The first person to turn their head after us receives all the love we give."

Glen swallowed, considering this. "You have no control over who they fall in love with? You have no way or making them stay with you?"

"None."

Glen looked at Evans, speaking carefully. "You're one that spreads love?"

"I am a Golden Arrow, yes."

Glen's green eyes gazed on Evans's golden hair, the early morning light from the window shimmering off the tresses. He lifted a hand without being aware to push a lock behind her shoulder. "That sounds very lonely."

Evans's lips parted, but words wouldn't come to her immediately. She swallowed, watching Glen stroke her hair, the fierceness in his eyes, the gentleness in his touch. "It can be. We do a great service, though. There is some comfort in that."

“Do you fall in love with them?”

“The mortals?”

Glen nodded.

“Yes, sometimes. But we move on. Time heals all wounds and our time is endless.”

Glen placed his hand carefully back on his knee. “How does it work?”

Evans blinked. “What do you mean?”

“How do you...bestow your gift on mortals?”

Evans colored, looking away from Glen for the first time in too many seconds. “It varies, but the simplest way is a kiss.”

Glen’s eyebrows rose. “A kiss?”

Suddenly needing to put some distance between Glen and herself, she stood, moving to the other side of the bed. “Body fluids of any kind, really. Our very blood holds the power to change a human heart.”

Glen sat there, considering this. He looked down at his sister, brushing a hand over her hair before he dropped a kiss on her forehead. “So Russell is upset because he was supposed to turn her. She’d be off with the love of her life right now, instead of here?”

Evans’s heart broke as she watched Glen care for his sick sister. “Nothing like this has ever happened before, Glen. We never would have wished this on a mortal in a million years. It’s our job to serve you, not condemn you.”

Glen stood and faced her. “The ones that spread hate, the Lead Arrows? Don’t they harm mortals?”

“Only so mortals can feel love. Without hate in the world, no one would ever really know love. They are necessary for our work to be a success.”

Glen approached Evans, his spiky red hair glittering in the sun as he approached. Evans felt her mouth go dry. This was exactly the kind of mortal that always reached her the most. This man was full of fire. There wasn’t a single cool cell in his whole body, she was sure. He stopped just a few feet away from her. “You’re the first one I can really believe. It doesn’t take a genius to see any man would fall in love with you.”

Sebastian Cupid

Evans bit her lip as she turned to look out the window. She knew Glen meant it as a compliment, not an insult, but nothing upset her more than being branded a heartbreaker, which is exactly what she was. "I only do what I have to."

Glen placed his hands on her shoulders, turning her to face him, his eyes intense and serious on his face. "Don't you think I see that? It's written all over you, Evans. You scream of heartbreak. Ever since you've walked into this room, I've been dying to kiss you, and you want me to! I can see it. But it wouldn't do us any good, would it?"

Evans's mouth dropped open slightly at his words. She was used to mortals going all mooshy over her. That was normal. But this mortal had a fire and determination she wished to see in herself.

Glen lifted her hand and brushed a kiss over her palm, which seemed to sizzle. "If I kissed you, I'd have to say goodbye to you one day. I'm not ready to do that, are you?"

Evans shook her head slightly, awed. She'd never been permitted to talk with a mortal this way. She felt all of her secrets and fears and wishes rush forth. She spent so many years pounding them back. All of her hopes, desires, and emotions had grown so heavy.

Glen lowered his head to her ear, brushing it lightly with his lips. Evans's face flushed, and she rocked back slightly on her heels as Glen braced her with his frame. "Me neither," he whispered.

Evans bit down on her lip to hold back a sigh. Glen brought his face slowly back in front of her, his eyes full of a raw magnetism. Evans could hardly say no to him. Fate was cruel.

A sigh sounded from the bed. "Glen, stop flirting. You're terrible."

Glen and Evans both jumped and turned to the bed. Alex laid there, her eyes just barely open. Glen ran around to the side of the bed, grasping her hand. "Alex!"

Alex turned her head to him. "I can't leave you alone with a single female in the world, can I?" She chuckled, but tears sparkled at the corners of her eyes. "I'm so glad they went to get you."

Glen lowered his head down near her face, brushing her hair back as tears filled his own eyes. Evans felt the tickle of tears in her throat as well as she watched the two of them. Glen smiled. "I wouldn't let anything keep us apart. You know that."

"I imagine there was a hell of a fight when you got here."

Glen laughed out loud. "I might have bruised up your friend Russell a bit."

Alex gasped. "You didn't!"

Glen only chuckled. "Oh, it's not going to hurt him."

Evans cleared her throat, and Glen turned to look at her. "We didn't get to tell Alex everything before she went into her coma."

Glen nodded, looking back at Alex. "It doesn't matter. We'll talk about that stuff later. I'm just glad you're awake."

"You never left the whole time, did you? You look like hell."

Glen laughed, shaking his head. "I'm still cute as a button, and we both know it."

Alex smiled, but her smile changed into something too still. She struggled to speak. "Glen?" Then she was shaking and gasping for air.

Glen's face went rigid with alarm as he threw a look at Evans, who ran for the doctor. "Alex!"

Alex's limbs began jumping off of the bed as she shook. Glen ran to the door and roared, "Someone get in here!" He turned back to the bed to clasp Alex's hand as Garrett entered with two nurses, Evans right on their heels. "Just hang on, Alex. The doctor is here." Garrett began barking orders at his nurses, who ran to follow them. Glen was pulled back from the bed by Evans. He was in raw panic as he watched his sister slip from consciousness once more.

Garrett looked at his nurses, "Crash cart!" Glen and Evans watched as the doctor began performing CPR on his patient while a nurse charged the paddles. Evans jumped as the first electric shock was administered through Alex's body. Tears fell over her eyelids as she watched the medical team try to save Alex's life. For nearly five minutes, Garrett struggled to get Alex's heart going again. Finally, he turned to Glen. "I'm sorry," he said. "She's dead."

THIRTEEN

Earlier, after Russell left Alex's room, he walked toward the guest rooms on the third floor. The staircase was a grand, ornate fixture in gleaming oak. He recalled that his idea for staircase bowling to break in the new Temple had been hastily dismissed, though he still mused that the old oak craftsmanship would stand up to a few bowling balls just fine. Oh, well.

He turned up the staircase, groggily swaying as he ascended the stairs. He was more tired than he had realized. He hadn't left Alex's room since Glen had arrived, other than to bring Glen some food every so often. Russell grinned as he remembered the struggle he'd gotten into with Glen upon his arrival and figured he had earned a good rest. Russell was so sleepy when he arrived at the third floor, he almost bumped into Victoria as she came scurrying down the hall. "Whoa, whoa," he said, steadying her with one hand. "Where's the fire?"

"What?" Victoria glanced back over her shoulder toward end of the hall. "Nothing. No fire."

Russell's eyes narrowed as he glanced down the darkened hallway. "That's where Hans is keeping Mars and Rogan, isn't it?" Victoria swallowed and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. It was a move so jittery and uncharacteristic of his sister that Russell's grip tightened on her arm. "What's going on?"

Victoria strengthened her resolve and told herself to stop being transparent. She put on her best face of annoyance, as she swatted away his arm. "Nothing's going on, you big oaf, other than you trying to run me over. What are you doing up here?"

Russell frowned as Victoria turned him the other direction. "I'm getting a shower and some shut eye. I don't believe you, Victoria."

Victoria straightened her spine as she approached one of the guest rooms, throwing the door open for Russell. "You just need sleep. You're getting paranoid."

Russell eyeballed his sister as he stood in the doorway of the guest room. She looked normal enough now. Maybe he was making things up. He rubbed his hands over his face. "Shit, I'm sorry, Vicky. I'm a little wiped out."

Victoria patted his arm in relief. "That's okay, but that doesn't mean you get to call me Vicky."

Russell snickered as he walked into the room. "No? I could take up calling you something much more annoying until I get my way....like sugarplum or cupcake."

Victoria didn't have to fake her annoyance this time as she backed toward the door. "Sure. Try that for a while and see what happens."

Russell laughed. "I've gotta get some rest. All the Golden Arrows are on their way in, right?"

Victoria nodded, biting her lip, another uncharacteristic move, as Russell bent to pull a couple of towels from the drawers by the window. "Yes, they're arriving as we speak."

"Well then, I'd better get some rest. I'm sure Psyche has plans to get us all assembled."

"We'll be meeting in the lobby at seven tonight."

Russell yawned as he stumbled toward the bathroom. "See you then."

Victoria eased the door shut with a click and ran back down the hall toward Hans's holding areas. She eased open one of the doors and disappeared into the room moments before Sebastian ascended the staircase at a run, carrying his bags. He turned toward the guest rooms and knocked on the first one he came to. Receiving no answer, he knocked on the next. Hearing a muffled reply, he stuck his head in. "Russ?"

What he assumed was Russell's voice came from the back of the little apartment. Sebastian jogged through the room to the bathroom at the back. Throwing open the door, he startled Russell in the shower,

Sebastian Cupid

who jumped back, banging his elbow against the towel rod. "Ouch! Damn it! Sebastian, what the hell?"

Sebastian threw open the shower curtains. "We have to go. Now."

Russell sputtered as Sebastian turned off the water, leaving Russell dripping sudsy water and looking very wet and confused. "What the hell are you about?"

Sebastian threw Russell's towel into his face before running back into the bedroom, grabbing clothing out of the drawers and tossing them on the bed. "Where's your gun?"

Russell came limping out of the bathroom, having stubbed his toe on the toilet in his haste to get out of the shower. "In the bathroom. What the hell is going on, Sebastian?"

Sebastian turned to Russell, tossing clean clothes in his face, making him drop the towel he was holding. "Aspen."

Russell pulled a shirt over his head. "What about Aspen?"

Sebastian walked to the doorway of the room, where he had dropped his duffle bags. He rummaged through one of them, coming up with two more boxes of ammunition. "Someone has her."

Russell shook his head to clear it before stepping into his pants, not bothering with underwear. He jumped into them comically as he sputtered out, "What? Who?"

Sebastian shook his head. "I don't know, but we've got to go get her."

Sebastian was so busy running around, that he didn't see Russell until he was right in front of him, hands up. "Whoa. Stop."

Sebastian came up short to keep from plowing Russell over before he yelled. "WHAT? We need to go, Russell!"

Russell shocked them both by delivering a punch to the underside of Sebastian's jaw. Sebastian stumbled back, losing his footing and nearly overturning the dresser before he yanked his head up to look at Russell. "What the fuck?"

"Stop," Russell spoke clearly and way too serious for the brother Sebastian knew. His long, wet hair hung over his shoulders, dripping water all over the floor. Russell took a step toward Sebastian. "Sit down."

"You don't get-..." Sebastian began.

“You’re right, I don’t!” yelled Russell. “I get that whatever it is must be really damned important, so you’re going to sit your ass down and tell me what the hell’s going on so we don’t fuck it up!”

Sebastian took a deep breath before he sat down heavily on the corner of the bed. He put his fingers over his eyes. Shaking his head, he muttered. “She tried to call me. I left my phone at the apartment.”

Russell nodded his head, glad that Sebastian was at least attempting to make sense. “Okay, Aspen called you?” Sebastian nodded. “How long ago was this?”

“Before dawn.”

“Okay. What did she say?”

Sebastian sighed and looked at the floor between his feet, his elbows resting on his knees. “She just...” He shook his head. “She was crying. She said she’s at Temple Auster in Seattle. She said...” Sebastian swallowed as he covered his face.

Russell took a deep breath. “Okay. Someone is messing with us. You realize this is a trap, right?”

“Russell, I told her I didn’t believe her. She must have found out about Auster’s involvement and went there to figure stuff out. Now Auster’s got her, probably with more of those things.” Sebastian shook his head. “She didn’t run from us at all.”

Russell nodded. “I get why you’re freaking out, but we cannot walk into a full-on trap, okay? Auster’s expecting us to show up and bring in a whole army of Golden Arrows his demons can snack on. Mass kill.”

“I know. So I figured you and I would sneak in instead. Maybe we can sneak her out. Or at least get a lay of the situation to figure out what to do.”

Russell exhaled heavily and sat on the bed beside Sebastian. “All this over a Lead Arrow, Sebastian?”

Sebastian’s head jerked up as he growled at Russell. “Don’t say that.”

Russell nodded his head. “I thought as much.” He stood. “Well, I’m a sorry candidate for this one, as I’ve been up over twenty-four hours, but you’re not going alone.”

Sebastian stood, his face a picture of relief. “Thank you, Russell.”

Sebastian Cupid

Russell smacked his arm, chuckling. “Ha! I figure you got me this vacation. I need something to occupy my mind. Do me a favor and let me finish dressing. I’m not fighting without underwear on. Go find Hans and get some real weapons. And some backup.”

Sebastian nodded and ran out of the room as Russell walked back to the bathroom, wondering if his life would ever be normal again.

Less than ten minutes later, two Guardians were accompanying Russell and Sebastian on their ride to O’Hare airport. In an SUV with black-tinted windows, Russell drove while Sebastian leaned into the back of the vehicle, talking strategy with the Guardians. They had been equipped by Hans with a small arsenal, which Sebastian hoped wouldn’t get put to use. The idea was to slip in, slip out, using the darkness of night as their cover. Auster was obviously busy doing dirty work at night, so Sebastian was hopeful for a quick rescue mission. If not....well, it’s a good thing they’ve been trained fully in martial arts and hand-to-hand combat since the early 1600s.

Russell listened to the talk as he navigated the car into the parking lot at O’Hare. They quickly moved through a small terminal in the back of the airport run by their own people. The bags containing the weapons were moved to cargo as they joined the other passengers.

Sebastian tried not to think too much about Aspen and what their delay was doing to her. She’d left that message several hours ago. He grimaced and fidgeted the whole flight as Russell tried unsuccessfully to distract him with horrible and often perverted jokes. They disembarked and made their way effortlessly through security again.

A rental car was waiting for them, but they only took it within a mile of the Temple gates. They needed to stay undetected, and they couldn’t afford to blow it. Night was falling as Sebastian and his companions walked the remaining mile or so to Temple Auster. The main entrance was off limits as far as Sebastian was concerned. The Guardians snuck ahead first to the monks’ side entrance. Listening closely, they popped the door and took a peak around before gesturing to Sebastian and Russell, who moved in, silent as cats. Slipping into the

Temple, Sebastian felt his heart slip into his stomach. Something was disastrously wrong.

The Temple smelled of death and fire. Sebastian glanced quickly over at Russell who held his gun steadily before him. The Guardians slipped to the opposite side of the large, ornate lobby, and both parties moved in sync to the door of the chapel. The black night didn't allow for much light to come into the Temple, and no candles were lit. Sebastian approached the door at the same time as one of the Guardians. He was a younger Guardian named Seth, who nodded once before slipping around the corner into sanctuary of chapel. Neither one of them moved a single step into the sanctuary as their eyes adjusted to the darkness. Slowly, they came to understand what they were seeing.

The chapel was covered in blood. There was blood smeared on the walls and on the floor. There were two small candles on the altar which were sputtering, nearly burnt out. There, on a stone platform, laid Aspen. Sebastian stopped himself from crying out as he stepped forward. She looked dead.

Quickly, Sebastian and Russell moved to the sides of the room, looking above and around them, making their way to the front. Sebastian's eyes dilated as he looked everywhere for signs that they were being observed. The Temple was cold as a tomb and just as quiet. It was unholy.

Approaching the altar, the Guardians stood back, covering Sebastian and Russell while they bent to check on Aspen. Sebastian hastily set aside his weapon as he leaned down and listened near her mouth. She was as pale as death. Blood seeped from several deep cuts in her body, running down the stone slab to the floor. He listened carefully, gritting his teeth. Hearing what he was listening for, he looked up at Russell and nodded. Aspen was breathing. Now they just needed to get her out of there. Sebastian quietly slipped his gun into its holster as he knelt down and slipped his arms under Aspen's back and legs. She didn't wake when he picked her up, but he could hear the sound of her thready breathing and muffled pulse as he lifted her in his strong arms.

Sebastian Cupid

Sebastian turned to walk down the aisle, but the first step he made sounded like thunder. He stopped abruptly, bending his knees and looking up as Russell and the Guardians went on full alert. A huge wind ripped through the sanctuary, as well as a horrible growl. Russell turned to Sebastian. "It was the aisle!" he yelled. "It was an alarm."

Sebastian cursed himself as he ran full out toward the entrance of the Temple, Russell close at his heels, covering his back. Guardians led the way to the entrance of the sanctuary, where they came to a stop. On the threshold was a demon, and it was no lower demon. The growl issued from its mouth again, which was covered in spores. Its reptilian skin covered muscles that looked as though they had been crafted of steel. The demon was a good twenty feet tall, and its eyes glowed red as it flexed its sizable claws. Sebastian and Russell both jumped back as the Guardians rushed forward, their Swords of Light now free of their scabbards. The eye splitting white light danced across the blades as they moved into position to fight off the demon. Seth looked over his shoulder at Sebastian, "Go! Now!"

Sebastian and Russell backed toward the door they had come from. Sebastian yelled, "What about you?"

Seth swung his sword at the demon. "This is what we were made for!"

Russell grabbed Sebastian's arm. "Come on!"

As Sebastian ducked out, he heard a roar from the demon as a blow from Seth's sword struck it. Even demon hide won't hold up against a Sword of Light.

Sebastian and Russell ran as best they could with Aspen to the nearest tree cover and not a moment too soon. Flying demons swooped out of the sky, landing on the Temple Auster. Sebastian guessed there were two dozen or more of them. Long, razor-sharp beaks and claws slashed out windows, ripped apart pillars. Sebastian and Russell wasted no time in running back to the rental car, which Sebastian wished was closer. The distance from the road would help hide the demons from mortal eyes, but the going was slow for them while carrying an unconscious Aspen all the way.

Russell ripped open the back door, and Sebastian launched himself and Aspen into the car. Russell was already pulling away from the curb

as Sebastian began ripping open Aspen's vest and tearing off pieces of his own t-shirt to dress her injuries.

Russell glanced in the rearview mirror, thankful that their rented SUV had tinted windows. There'd be hell to pay from mortal police if they got stopped, and they didn't have enough time to get out of it. "How's she doing?"

Sebastian didn't look up as he bandaged her ankles and wrists, and moved on to her legs. "Bad. Real bad. She's not poisoned, though. She was just being bled out. Looking at her wrists, my guess is she was originally bound until she lost too much blood to fight back."

Russell glanced back. "Do you think she'll regenerate?"

Sebastian shook his head. "I don't know. Too early to tell. She's lost a lot of blood. Her mark is whole," he said, looking at the lead-colored Arrow tattoo on her shoulder. "We'll have to see."

Russell pondered their situation as he drove toward the interstate. "Well, we can't fly back. Not with her like this. We'll have to drive back to Chicago, stopping along the way."

Sebastian nodded. "I'll call Garrett, see what I can do for her from here." After binding Aspen's injuries, Sebastian allowed himself to look at Aspen's face. She was completely ashen. Her black hair was stuck to her chalky brow with her own blood. Sebastian lowered his hand to her forehead, wiping blood and hair from it. She was too cold. Sebastian pushed Aspen across the seat and lay across her. Russell saw Sebastian sink behind the seat back. "What are you doing?"

Sebastian's muffled voice rose above the seat. "Warming her up. She's too cold. Even if she did have enough blood, it wouldn't flow anywhere." Sebastian laid his head on Aspen's chest, wrapping his arms and legs around her. He folded her arms across her breast. Lying still, he listened to her heart. It was slow, sluggish, like it was trying to push honey through a straw. Sebastian closed his eyes and prayed.

Cupid, father, please forgive me for forgetting my duty. It was my own selfish reaction that put one of your children in this position. The fault is mine. She's done nothing wrong. Please help me to restore her health.

Jupiter, God of us all, please spare the life of this servant of your realm. Please give us direction.

Sebastian Cupid

The car suddenly halted, nearly throwing Sebastian from his seat. His head jerked up as he looked out the windshield. "What is it?"

Russell gestured. "Traffic jam. There's a detour about a half mile ahead. What do you think?"

Sebastian blasted off a heartfelt prayer of thanks as he looked skyward. "Take it!"

Sebastian situated himself back over Aspen's body as Russell pulled into the right lane to take an exit. He listened to the slow, uneven beats of Aspen's heart and continued to pray as they struggled to save her life.

FOURTEEN

Sebastian waited in the SUV as Russell went into the main lobby of the hotel to take care of any paperwork needed for their stay. They had driven, taking turns, until they crossed state lines into Idaho. They were literally in the middle of nowhere, which was perfect. Aspen's condition hadn't changed in the five hour drive. Sebastian continued to check her wounds, which had closed up, but much slower than would be expected of an immortal. She was healing faster than an injured mortal would but moving along very slowly, and her pulse was still weak.

Sebastian was ready to start pulling his hair out by the time Russell came back to the car with the keys to their room. Sebastian quickly drove around the back of the complex to a secluded room, something Russell had arranged by flirting casually with the desk clerk. They were commissioned all the time to use their good looks for the betterment of mankind. Russell figured the gods weren't going to wipe him out for using his good looks to save one of their own. It was the middle of the night, and the darkness made a great cover as they slipped their bags and Aspen into their room. There were two beds, and Sebastian lowered Aspen to the nearest one, carefully. He reached into his pocket for his cell phone, looking over at Russell. "I'm going to check in with Garrett again. He said to call once we got somewhere safe."

Russell nodded, yawning as he moved to the bathroom in the back of the room. Sebastian waited impatiently until Garrett answered the phone. "Sebastian. You made it there okay?"

“Yes. She’s about the same, doc. What else can I do for her now that we’re stopped?”

“I’ve talked with Manny, the doctor in our San Francisco Temple, and he agrees with me. Your blood will work.”

Sebastian blinked. “My blood? But, we aren’t the same...”

“Technically, you are. All the properties of your blood are the same. Manny tested it in the lab at his Temple some time back, and there were no negative side effects for a Lead Arrow using a Golden Arrow’s blood. You said you took your research supplies with you? You have an IV bag and everything you’ll need?”

Sebastian glanced at the bag by the doorway. “Yes. I brought everything with me when I left.”

“Good. That will make things a lot cleaner. You start her out with a unit tonight then wait. Arrow blood is powerful, and she will regenerate her own blood cells quickly on a small donation from you. Call me if anything changes for the worse. Otherwise, give her an additional unit when you leave in the morning. Make sure you don’t take more from yourself or Russell than you need.”

Sebastian nodded, considering. “Thank you, Garrett. Is there anything else going on there we need to know about? Are the Lead Arrow council members there yet? Are all the Golden Arrows there?”

“Yes, we are all on hold with political issues concerning Mars until day after tomorrow to allow time for the funeral.”

Sebastian blinked, his forehead crinkling. “Funeral?”

“You didn’t hear? It happened just before you left. The mortal died.”

Sebastian hissed out his breath, closing his eyes. “I didn’t know.”

“She came out of her coma for a few minutes and then passed away. It was quick. Evans and the brother were with her.”

“When are the arrangements?”

“Tomorrow night at sundown in the chapel.”

“What? They’re giving her a service in Temple?”

“Yes, your mother thought it appropriate we give proper respect to a mortal who died as a result of our cause.”

Sebastian remembered Glen and his anger. “Her brother was okay with it?”

Sebastian Cupid

“Glen has been very agreeable through everything. He’s starting to understand the circumstances a bit more. Honestly, I think your mother is a little excited to have a mortal ally. We might need help in the near future.”

Sebastian barely heard himself dismiss Garrett and hang up over the noise of his thoughts. A mortal had died because of him. The click of the bathroom door made Sebastian jump. Russell emerged, rubbing a hand towel over his face. “What did the good doc have to say?”

Sebastian swallowed. He had just gotten the news himself and wasn’t prepared to tell Russell. Russell looked up, and, seeing the look on Sebastian’s face, sobered immediately. “What is it?”

Sebastian sighed, and decided to just say it. “Alex died.”

Russell’s face froze in a look of shock. The towel dropped from his hand to a wet heap on the floor. “Oh, Jupiter.” He sank down on the bed nearest the bathroom, covering his face. “I killed her.”

Sebastian moved to the bed. “Stop it. You know as well as I do we did everything we could to save her.”

Russell shook his head. “If I had just stayed at the club that night, she’d never even been following you.”

Sebastian sighed. “If anyone is to blame, it’s me. It was my blood that killed her.” Russell massaged his temples, his face a sickly shade of white. Sebastian patted his shoulder. “You need some rest. You’re tired. You haven’t slept in nearly two days.”

Sebastian stood and moved to the duffel bag on the floor, unzipping it and pulling his lab equipment from it. “They are doing a funeral at Temple for her.”

Russell jerked his head up. “They are? Really?”

“Mom is very, very set off by the whole thing. Glen even agreed to it.”

“Yeah. He’s gonna be agreeable.”

Sebastian looked up in surprise. “Why in the world would you say that?”

“He’s hooked on Evans.”

Sebastian blinked. “Oh.” Then he took the IV bag and needles to Russell’s bed, sitting on the other side to face Aspen. “Oh.”

Russell chuckled. "Well, it's not as if mortals don't fall in love with Evans every day. And he's been informed. Hopefully that makes him more cautious than the average mortal."

Sebastian considered this. "Is Evans interested in him?"

Russell's eyebrows jumped up. "Is Evans...?" He stopped for a moment, thinking. "I don't know."

Sebastian exhaled. "It wouldn't be unheard of, a mortal and an immortal hooking up."

Russell stood and shook his head as he started peeling off his clothes. "It's forbidden."

Sebastian raised his eyes as he tied a tourniquet around his arm. "Love doesn't care what's forbidden."

"Love? What the hell are you talking about? It'd be a crush, if anything." Sebastian grunted noncommittally as he prepped a needle, sliding it under his skin. Russell glanced over. "What are you doing?"

Sebastian didn't look up from the needle as his blood started to run into the tube and down into the bag at his feet. "Getting blood."

Russell jerked and looked up from removing his pants from one leg. "What? You're using your blood?"

"Apparently, it's the same."

"Yeah, but the power is different."

Sebastian shrugged. "I guess Arrow blood is Arrow blood. After I got to thinking about it, Garrett is right. Aspen and I bled all over each other during that first demon attack and nothing bad happened. And earlier, she was bleeding all over me, all the way here."

Russell exhaled as he sat on the bed. "Wow. I guess so."

Sebastian shifted to look at the bag on the floor as he held the needle in his arm. "She needs blood, Russ. She's not going to be able to regenerate without it."

Russell nodded, staring blankly at the wall. "We can't afford to lose anyone else, Sebastian."

Sebastian nodded, his face grim. He looked over his shoulder at his brother. "Go to sleep."

Russell shook himself and leaned back on the pillow, turning his back to Sebastian. Sebastian returned to his task, nearly filling the 500 ml bag. Thank the gods this wasn't a mortal transfusion. Blood had to

go through all kinds of processes before you could give it to a mortal. Immortals never carried illness. They never got sick. There was no need to cleanse his blood, and it was at its peak fresh. He didn't even have to change needles. If anyone was contaminated with demon blood it was her, and he had no reason to believe she had been attacked. The wounds on her skin were smooth, not jagged. She was cut open and left to drain.

Like Jeremy.

Sebastian pinched off the hole from the needle in his arm, waiting a few seconds to let it heal before he moved to Aspen. Her breathing was shallow, but she wasn't bleeding anymore. Now she just needed some fresh blood to keep her going until they could get her home and into Garrett's care. Sebastian slid the needle into the vein of Aspen's left arm, which was the one closest to the bed he'd share with Russell. He turned on the table lamp, looking for something to hang the IV bag on. There was a little hook with a fake plant hanging above the table lamp. Sebastian reached up and took the plant down, trying not to sneeze at the plume of dust that billowed off of the plastic leaves. He placed it as his feet and took the IV bag from where it lay on the bed next to Aspen, reaching up to hang it on the wall.

Making sure that the line and drip were set right, he knelt on the floor next to Aspen. She was still wearing the clothing she'd had on at Temple, which was covered in blood, sweat, and grime. Sebastian moved quietly to one of his bags and pulled out a pair of gym shorts and a t-shirt. He tossed those at the foot of Aspen's bed before he walked to the bathroom to wet a washcloth with warm water. As he passed Russell, coming back into the room, he saw that his brother was dead asleep with his mouth open. Sebastian was glad. He'd never seen Russell looking so rough. Nothing had been normal for any of them for quite a while. Sebastian no longer had confidence his world was the same one he'd woken up in a week ago.

He approached Aspen's bed and made sure the tape on her IV was secure. Sebastian pulled his pocket knife from his pants and sliced through Aspen's sleeve and the side of her t-shirt, freeing the cloth from the arm that had the IV in it. He hastily turned the bedside lamp

down to the lowest setting in case Russell woke up before he turned back to Aspen.

In the dim light of the room, her face seemed almost waxen. Sebastian told himself he wasn't an evil dog for removing Aspen's clothing while she was asleep. He was careful to keep his eyes on the task at hand as he slipped the tattered shirt from her body. There was an undershirt beneath it, which should have been a completely modest piece of clothing, very basic. Sebastian tried hard not to notice the way Aspen's curves filled out the camisole as he sliced the straps on both shoulders and cut up one side of the top. He carefully slipped the shirt off, telling himself not to look, just remove the shirt and change her, but he needed to tend the cuts on her sides. They were healed shut now, but the blood that had dripped out of them had dried over the healed cuts.

Sebastian ground his teeth together as he gently washed the blood from her skin. Why? Why had Auster set himself on trying to take out the Arrows? His anger over the attacks still welled inside of him. Sebastian carefully wiped Aspen's cuts clean. Her muscled arms were covered in skin as pale as alabaster and soft as satin. In the interest of not interfering with the IV line, Sebastian cut up the side of the clean t-shirt he brought. He carefully lifted Aspen to put the t-shirt on her. As he picked her up, her soft body brushed across his chest, and he jolted. He looked quickly up to her face, as if expecting her to be looking at him accusingly. She was just as unconscious as she had been before, but he wasted no time pulling the sides of the open shirt around and tying it at the waist and shoulder.

Sebastian moved to the foot of the bed, which was sure to be much safer territory. He removed her boots and socks. He pulled a pair of his own clean socks over her feet. They were far too big for her, but they'd keep her warm. He quickly moved to her waistband, hastily removing her jeans. Again, he cleaned the dried blood before slipping his gym shorts over her.

Sebastian moved to her side, feeling her pulse. It seemed a little stronger now, though the touch of her skin was still too cool. He reached to the other side of the king-sized bed and simply pulled the covers up and over Aspen's unconscious form, wrapping her in a

Sebastian Cupid

cocoon of blankets. He moved back into the space between her bed and the one Russell slept in, snoring soundly.

Sebastian knelt on the floor next to Aspen, carefully brushing the hair from her face so he could wash the dried blood from it with the washcloth. Her black eyebrows stood out on her pale face. He had rarely seen her without a look of concern or irritation. She looked as though she was peacefully sleeping. He thought about the night at the fountain when she insisted she had no idea Mars was involved in the demon attack. Sebastian was still inclined to believe Mars had something to do with it. It was too big of a coincidence for Mars to be there, running in the other direction, right before the attack.

However, as he looked at Aspen and thought about their conversation, he wondered if Aspen really hadn't known. If she had run to save herself, Auster's Temple would not have been the place for her to run. If she was in on everything, Auster would have nothing to gain by harming her. Sebastian rubbed his face. It was all too much to think about right now. He yawned widely as exhaustion weighed him down. Sebastian looked at Aspen, her soft, pale face turned toward his on the bed. He leaned forward until his lips pressed against her brow. He pulled away after a moment and looked at her eyelids, exactly as he would if they were open. "I'm sorry," he whispered. He stood slowly, stretching the kinks out of his neck and shoulders. He only bothered to strip down to his underwear before lying on top of the covers next to Russell and falling into a fitful sleep.

FIFTEEN

Sebastian jumped back into consciousness a few scant hours later when a cold hand touched his arm, which was hanging off of the side of his bed. Jerking awake, he looked across the dimly lit room into Aspen's face. She was awake and reaching toward him. Sebastian quickly sat up and moved across the small space separating the two of them, his heart hammering in his chest. "Are you okay?" he whispered, urgently. "Are you in pain?"

Aspen shook her head slowly from side to side, gently wetting her lips with the tip of her tongue. Her eyes slowly blinked as Sebastian pulled himself out of bed and went to the bathroom, filling a hotel cup with cold water. Russell was snoring softly as Sebastian entered back into the room, bringing the cup to Aspen's bedside. He knelt there as he carefully lifted Aspen's head to the cup. She put a weak hand down on the bed to brace herself as Sebastian helped her drink. She swallowed painfully before she lowered herself back on the bed. Sebastian's heart beat in his chest as he saw her eyes, half closed, looking up at him in the shadows of the darkened room. She was alive, and she was healing. Relief was a welcome sensation after hours of worry. Sebastian took her near arm with the IV needle it in and looked at the cuts that had been at her wrist. They were healed over, and only a faint pink line remained. He let out a breath he wasn't even aware he had been holding.

Aspen whispered something he couldn't hear. He lowered his head closer to her, inclining his ear toward her lips. "Thank you for saving me."

Sebastian Cupid

Sebastian shook his head as he turned again to look at Aspen. “No. Don’t. If I had listened to you, you wouldn’t have been there.”

“I thought...,” she said, swallowing thickly. “I thought I could find Auster, talk to his Temple, find out if Mars was innocent so Psyche would release him.”

Sebastian nodded. It was almost exactly like he had thought. “Auster was there?”

Aspen closed her eyes, a pained expression on her face as she tried to remember. “I don’t know. There was darkness and a heavy wind. Then something hit me. When I woke up, I was tied to the altar, and there was so much blood all over...” Aspen’s voice shook.

Sebastian hushed her and held her up for another drink, considering. If there was a gust of wind like that, Auster was certainly involved. However, if he struck out against a member of Mars’s Temple, Mars may not be involved after all. So why had he been at the coffee shop right before the demon attack? Aspen sighed heavily as she lay back down. Sebastian helped her and arranged the blankets over her. “Are you still cold?” Aspen shook her head slowly, her eyes drifting closed. Sebastian held her hand as she struggled to keep her eyes open. “Rest now,” he said. “You can sleep for a few more hours.”

Aspen nodded, already drifting away as Sebastian watched her with a furrowed brow. He didn’t fall back asleep. He just watched Aspen as she slept, trying to figure out the puzzle. He would need to ask Aspen some more questions soon, but for now she just needed to heal.

Two hours later, Sebastian shook Russell awake, and they assembled all of their belongings. Carefully supporting Aspen, Sebastian and Russell moved her to the car. She wasn’t able to walk yet, but she was conscious as Sebastian slid her across the back seat. He had her wrapped in his coat with his sweat pants over the shorts she was wearing. He made Russell stop at the first store they could find to pick her up a blanket and pillows. While Russell did the shopping, Sebastian sat in the passenger seat, filling another IV bag with his blood. Aspen quietly watched from the back seat.

“It’s amazing we can share blood.”

Sebastian nodded. "Lucky, I'd say. I don't know how bad you would have gotten if we couldn't give you more blood to heal on."

"Why do you have that stuff?"

Sebastian checked the bag at his feet. "For my research."

Aspen's interest perked up immediately. "How does it work?"

Sebastian glanced behind him, barely hesitating before he replied. "So far, I take my blood and use it to make a dissolvable tablet. You have to be really careful because once the blood touches the air, something changes it. It loses its potency. The first batch I tried only made mortals happy for a couple hours, which really pissed me off. I spent seven months on that first batch of pills." He grimaced. "Then I started trying different methods of adding my blood, and I figured out it couldn't be exposed to air."

"And you put it into pill form?"

"Yes. I had to have something that would dissolve with contact to fluids, so I tried a lighter placebo, not unlike a nitroglycerin tablet. That worked really well. After spending three months perfecting that one, I ran into Alex at Berlin." Sebastian smiled at this. "So it went mostly well, I guess you could say."

Aspen whispered from the back seat. "I'm sorry about what I did to Alex."

"Don't be. It's my fault too. If I had been more careful, Russell would have turned her and none of this would be an issue." He hesitated before he turned to look at Aspen. "Alex died."

Aspen gasped. "She did?"

Sebastian nodded. "Yesterday. Her funeral is tonight at Temple. If we hurry back, we'll be able to make it. I think that's important to Russell. He's been really hard on himself about it."

"They're giving her a funeral at Temple?"

"I was surprised too. Psyche is taking this really hard. This is the first mortal to die at the hand of a Golden Arrow. Psyche wanted to give her the honor of a Temple funeral."

Aspen looked out the window at the oncoming sunrise. "Your research could change everything."

Sebastian finished prepping the bag and then climbed over the console to the back seat where he hung the bag from the utility hook

Sebastian Cupid

next to the back door. He glanced into Aspen's face as he started running the IV tubing again. "I wasn't sure, before I met you, that Lead Arrows would be interested in my research."

"What? Why?" Aspen nearly lifted herself off the seat.

Sebastian hastily reached over to steady her. "Whoa, whoa! Careful there! What are you doing?"

Aspen shook her head, her confusion showing on her face. "How in the world could you think that Lead Arrows, of all Arrows, wouldn't have an interest in your research?"

Sebastian shook his head, quizzically. "I guess...I donno." As he thought through his reasoning more, he looked back at his task to avoid her eyes. "I guess I thought you enjoyed the personality of your jobs, you know? The ... struggle of it."

Aspen gasped and tears jumped to her eyes. "You think we're monsters." Sebastian started and looked up. The expression on Aspen's face was agony. He immediately regretted having said it, or even buying into the prejudice of the Lead Arrows in the first place.

"I'm sorry." He grasped her hands with his own. She began to shake as he slipped his arm around her shoulders. "Hey, hey! I'm sorry. I didn't mean I think you're all monsters. Golden Arrows have always wondered why you use some of the methods you do to meet quota."

Aspen shook her head, looking out the opposite window. "I don't understand."

Sebastian sighed. He didn't want to get into this in a department store parking lot in the back of an SUV, but he couldn't think of a good way to get out of it now. "I've heard Lead Arrows have sex to pass on their 'gift'. I've heard you also start fights, spread it through blood."

Aspen snorted, shaking her head. "Did you ever consider those are things that happen because we've passed on our gifts?" Sebastian swallowed and watched the side of Aspen's face. A large tear rolled over her left cheek. He itched to wipe it away. Aspen sighed. "Some of the mortals we turn...get very violent. They try to kill us. That's why we always carry weapons. Always. Some get really depressed. If we didn't show them affection, they'd kill themselves on the spot." Aspen looked at Sebastian. "What would you do if every mortal you ever touched was filled with hatred or despair?"

Sebastian closed his eyes, considering her words. He was an idiot. Why had Golden Arrows been led to believe Lead Arrows had been chosen to do their work because they enjoyed the nastiness of it? Aspen was obviously in misery. Suddenly, he felt guilty his part of the “gift” wasn’t more burdensome, to put them on even ground. Sebastian wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pressed her to his chest as he leaned his chin on her head. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have ever assumed.”

Aspen’s muffled, teary voice floated up to him. “That’s why it’s so important you finish your work. If you figure this out, I’d never have to worry about carrying weapons in my purse when I go out. I’d never have to look into the eyes of a man that is ready to shoot himself in the head and think of the right things to say to make him stop. I’ll never have to kiss someone I could never love because of some stupid quota. I’d be able to sleep at night.”

Sebastian pulled back and looked down at Aspen. She wiped her tear-streaked face and looked at Sebastian. He nodded. “You’re right. That also explains why you were following me that night. Your whole world would be changed by this.”

“All of us.” She shook her head. “Frankly, I couldn’t figure out why a Golden Arrow would try to find another way to serve.”

“Well, our job is no picnic either. What is it Lead Arrows say about us?”

“That you’re a bunch of playboys, heartbreakers. You enjoy the game of it, have multiple affairs, lure mortals with sex.”

Sebastian raised his eyebrows. “And now?”

Aspen considered. “I’d heard all the same things about you that you had heard about me. Now that I think about it...it’s probably for the same reasons, isn’t it?”

Sebastian nodded. “Not everyone takes it well when we leave. The last girl I left cussed me out in the middle of a restaurant and slapped me twice before storming out. That was almost nice. The one before insisted that I was cheating on her, then dissolved in tears and drug me to bed. By the time she woke up, she’d forgotten all about me. The one before that pulled a knife on me.” He smiled. “We may be dealing with love, but there is a fine line between love and hate in our business.”

Sebastian Cupid

Aspen nodded, the rising sun glowing in the tinted window behind her. Sebastian was very aware of the curve of her in his arm, the tickle of her black hair on his wrist. Silence hung in the back seat like fog. Suddenly, Aspen's glistening lower lip jumped into his vision, and he felt his stomach tighten. His mind jumped back to the night before, to the swell of her breasts against his chest. Her lips fell open, and he could have leaned forward just an inch or two to kiss her. He probably would have too, if Russell hadn't chosen that moment to open the front door, thrusting an armful of shopping bags into the front seat. Sebastian and Aspen both jumped apart, like naughty children. Sebastian hastily moved from the seat to the floor board, straightening the tubing from the IV bag as Aspen lay back down, clumsily. Russell climbed into the front seat, throwing a glance toward Sebastian's back.

"Everything okay back there?"

Sebastian looked into Aspen's face and was rewarded with a sheepish smile that warmed him from the inside. He grinned back, like a kid that got a cookie out of the jar without getting caught. "Yep, we're good." He lifted Aspen's IV arm to give it a quick kiss that was shielded from Russell's view by his back. Aspen's grin changed into something deeper than play as she watched him. Russell tossed a pillow into the back seat which wacked Sebastian in the back of the head. "Hey!"

Russell laughed. "Sorry, I couldn't help it."

Sebastian rolled his eyes before taking the pillows and blankets from Russell, tucking them under and around Aspen, covering her well. She'd need to keep her temperature as close to normal as possible and just let the blood do its work. After he made sure she was settled, he crawled up to the front seat. He was careful to keep his face as blank as he could while Russell started the car. A few moments later, Sebastian looked over to see Russell grinning at him.

Sebastian frowned. He was surprised how much effort it took to not grin like an idiot. "What's your deal?"

Russell shrugged and turned back to the road, still grinning. Sebastian shook his head and looked out the window. His eyes were heavy. He'd only slept a couple of hours. A yawn surprised him. Russell looked over. "Go ahead and get some more sleep. I'll wake you up if I need to trade off."

J.J. Martin

Sebastian nodded and looked behind him as he carefully lowered his seat. Aspen's eyes were heavy, her skin still pale. "Are you comfortable?" She nodded, and Sebastian grinned in reply, sliding down in his seat. Less than three miles later, he was asleep.

SIXTEEN

Sebastian, Russell, and Aspen arrived at the Chicago Temple an hour before dusk. One of the Guardians came to take the car back to the rental agency while Sebastian and Russell showed Aspen to one of the medical rooms on the first floor. She was able to walk now, though she looked pretty out of it. Russell left to get ready for the funeral as Sebastian stayed to watch Garrett and his nurse get Aspen situated. Garrett inspected the IV needle in Aspen's arm. "Good work. I take it the blood worked?"

Sebastian nodded. "Seems to. She was conscious about two hours after the initial dosage. I gave her another unit on the way back, as you instructed."

Garrett nodded. "And you feel you are improving?" he asked Aspen. She nodded. Garrett continued to ask questions for a few more minutes, inspecting Aspen's healing wounds and checking her vitals. He left a short while later.

Sebastian sat in the chair next to Aspen's bed. "It looks like you're on the road to recovery. I'd better head out and get ready for Alex's funeral. I need to check on Glen and see Mom too."

"I'd like to go to the funeral. Do you think I can?"

Sebastian thought about it. "I'll talk to Garrett. Maybe we can figure something out."

Aspen sighed. "Everything's so crazy right now."

"I was just thinking that yesterday. How nothing is the same anymore. Our world seems to be changing at break-neck speeds." He reached for Aspen's hand, holding it. "You probably want to talk to Mars too." Aspen nodded. "I plan to talk to Mom about that."

Sebastian Cupid

He stood, placing Aspen's hand back on the bed and brushing the dark hair from her brow. "If you don't make it to the funeral, I'll come to see you after, okay?"

Aspen nodded, her eyes heavy. Sebastian backed away from the bed, turned to the door, and let himself into the hall. He made sure to find Garrett right away and informed him of Aspen's wishes. Then he went to get ready.

Since the second demon encounter, Sebastian hadn't washed much but his face and hands. Ten minutes under the scalding spray of the shower in his room made all the difference in the world. His bags had been placed back in his room. Sebastian checked the contents and emptied the clothing before locking them up in his wardrobe. He dressed in the formal attire of a Golden Arrow: black suit with a black tie and shirt, the golden insignia pinned to his lapel. He towel dried his springy dark hair, giving it a cursory glance before running out of the room to find someone that could give him news.

He saw Russell on the stairs. Catching up to him, Sebastian called, "Hey, wait up."

Russell paused, looking over his shoulder. "Back among the land of the living, I see."

"You're looking a lot better yourself."

Russell was also in uniform, his long, dark hair pulled into a damp pony tail. "Are you heading in to see mom?"

Sebastian nodded. "Yeah, you?"

"I feel like I haven't seen her in forever. First all that time with Alex and Glen..." Russell paused before continuing. "...and then running off with you to play hero."

"I know. I need to get in touch with Hans too, see if he heard from those Guardians that accompanied us on the rescue."

They both reached the landing and headed toward Psyche's office. The Guardians at the door nodded at Sebastian as he knocked twice. After he heard prompting from within, he opened the door, and they stepped inside. Psyche stood at the window looking out at the approaching sunset. She turned at their approach. "Ah, my boys return." She advanced on them and gave them hugs, right before she

shook them both by the arm. “What were you thinking, running off on a rescue mission without telling your mother?”

Russell looked sheepishly at his feet. Sebastian cleared his throat. “We didn’t mean to worry you. We knew if we showed up with a whole bunch of Golden Arrows, it could be a real mess. If it had been too much to handle, we would have called.”

Psyche only pursed her lips. Russell glanced up from the floor. “We told Hans.”

Psyche rolled her eyes. “Oh, yes. Hans tells me, but my own sons don’t.”

Sebastian rubbed her arm. “We really didn’t mean to worry you. What should we have done differently?”

“You are such boys. I just want to be told. You did everything as I would have, of course, because you are good boys.” She faced them again, the hint of a smile at her lips. “Just tell your mother.”

Russell glanced at Sebastian and grinned. Psyche sighed. “How is Aspen?”

“I just left her room. She’s doing well. She wants to come to the funeral,” Sebastian replied.

“What was the situation?”

Russell cleared his throat. “It was like Jeremy. She was being drained.”

“Demons were involved?”

Russell and Sebastian nodded. “And...” Sebastian started, and then stopped.

Psyche raised her eyebrows. “Yes?”

“There was a large wind.”

Psyche frowned. “Auster.”

Sebastian nodded. “We were forced to leave two Guardians there to take care of the demons while we helped Aspen make her escape. She was unconscious at the time. I still need to check in with Hans to see what the situation with those Guardians turned out to be. Aspen recovered well.” Sebastian sighed, his own guilt pressing him. “She went there to investigate, clear Mars’s name.”

“She’s a very dedicated one, he tells me.”

Sebastian Cupid

Sebastian raised his eyes, quizzically. "You've been speaking with him?"

Psyche tilted her head. "Of course. When I found out what happened to Aspen, I needed to tell Mars, naturally."

Russell fiddled with his sleeve. "Is he still under Hans's supervision?"

Psyche nodded. "For the time being. We have a meeting about all of this tomorrow morning at first light. Tonight is for Alex. Did Hans tell you about Alex?"

Sebastian shook his head. "No, Garrett did when I called him yesterday about Aspen's condition."

"Such a terrible waste. It really doesn't make any sense. She was getting better, and then she just crashed."

"How is Glen?" Russell asked.

"Beside himself with grief. He's been spending some time in the combat room with Victoria and Evans, working off his anger."

Russell nodded. "He's a decent fighter."

Sebastian glanced at his mother. "Will he be staying on? Here at Temple?"

"For the time being. I'll not turn out Alex's brother right after this tragedy. We'll see what he's thinking, by-and-by."

Russell glanced at his watch. "We'd better go, Sebastian, if we want to find Glen before the funeral."

Psyche walked them to the door. "He and Evans were just in here. They said they were going to go ahead and head over to chapel."

Sebastian hugged Psyche. Russell followed suit, and the duo went back out to the hall toward the chapel in the back of the building, just beyond a courtyard. The summer heat was dimmer now with the setting of the sun. The dusky light was warm and colorful, filtering through the leaves of the gardens along the walkway. Sebastian and Russell didn't speak on the way there, each lost in their own warring thoughts about the situation at hand.

When they arrived at the chapel, they saw Glen standing with Evans at the back of the room. Sebastian and Russell approached silently. Evans smiled. "Hey, boys." She gave each a warm hug. "It must have gone well?"

Russell considered. "We got her. We brought her back."

At that moment, Sebastian saw Hans enter the building. "Excuse me a moment," he said and went to go speak with Hans.

Evans followed him with her eyes. "Is Aspen okay?"

Russell nodded. "She was being held captive. There were demons involved again. Things got a bit sticky, and we were forced to leave two Guardians there to hold off the demons while we smuggled Aspen out. We got out just in the nick of time too. Several dozen demons were descending on the roof while we were leaving."

Evans closed her eyes, shaking her head. Glen's eyes turned hard. "More of those things that attacked my sister?" Russell nodded. "Where are they coming from?"

Russell shrugged. "No one knows for sure, but we think another god has been flying them in, using them to do his dirty work."

Glen's eyes raised. "Flying them?"

"He's a god of wind."

"Well, that's handy."

Russell looked at Evans. "It was just like Jeremy, Evans. He was draining her."

Evans gasped. "But she's still alive?"

"Yes. Sebastian gave her a lot of his blood. She regenerated off of that."

Evans blinked in surprise. "Really? Well, that's interesting!"

"It came as a bit of a shock to me too."

Glen just looked between the two of them. "Why?"

Russell turned to him. "Do you remember...the bad reaction that happened to your sister? Because of the mixing of bloods?" Glen, nodded, somberly. "We were afraid that mixing the immortals' blood when they have two different powers would cause complications, but they don't seem to. Only when the blood touches mortals. I guess it makes sense. We can't affect each other with our power."

Glen glanced at Evans, who bit her lips and looked at the floor. Russell looked between the two of them as Sebastian rejoined the group. "Good news. The Guardians made it out. They're a little worse for the wear, and they had to burn down the Temple entirely to get out, but they did it."

Sebastian Cupid

Russell exhaled heavily. "Wow. Okay. So much for 'slipping in and slipping out'."

"Didn't work exactly like we planned, but we made it out."

A bell tolled above their heads, and Russell looked around, realizing it was time. The chapel had filled while they had been talking. He noticed two new faces near the front of the room wearing Lead Arrow insignias. "Are those the Lead Arrow representatives?"

The others turned to see where he gazed. Evans nodded. "Yes. That's Elaine and Stephan. They arrived this morning."

Russell grimaced. "Well, they certainly fit the stereotype."

Sebastian nodded. They both had horribly sour expressions on their faces and stood very stiffly. Sebastian turned to look at Glen. "I suppose Evans can take you to your seat of honor, Glen." Sebastian extended his hand. "I am so incredibly sorry. None of this was supposed to have happened this way."

Glen nodded, taking Sebastian's hand. "I know." His voice quivered a little, so he took a deep breath to still it. "Parties on both sides were hurt. Too bad your immortality wasn't contagious. That would have come in handy."

"I wish it was."

Evans took Glen's arm and led him to the front of the room, gracefully escorting him to his seat. Sebastian and Russell stood in the back of the room, watching quietly as everyone was seated with the last toll of the bell. The room fell silent as the setting sun in the western windows began to kiss the horizon. Psyche sat at the front of the room, Hans on one side and Glen on her other. Evans sat on Glen's other side. The casket at the front of the room glowed with the light of the falling sun, its bright yellow glare making Sebastian blink rapidly to clear his vision.

A monk made his way to the front of the room, and Sebastian was hit with a wave of *déjà vu*. He had been to more funerals this week than in the past three hundred years combined. The thought made his brow furrow again, discontented with the rate of change in his world.

The monk, whose name was Nathan, spoke in his smooth, low voice. The room was as quiet as a tomb. "Thank you all for coming here today. We are here to celebrate the short life of Alex Milligan. It is rare

in our Temple that a mortal be given such an honor as to be laid down with the other bodies here, but Alex had the heart and courage of a hero, and we recognize her for it.”

Glen’s head lowered at that, and Evans slipped her hand into his. Nathan continued. “We are all sad to see Alex go. In her short, mortal life, she was a professional singer and actor.”

Sebastian looked at Russell in surprise. “I didn’t realize that,” he whispered.

Russell nodded. “I guess she was quite good. Glen says she had billing in New York before she moved here six months ago to start at the Piccolo.”

Sebastian raised his eyes and nodded. “She had the figure of a dancer.”

Russell frowned, growling at Sebastian. “You’re talking about a dead woman, show some respect, for Jupiter’s sake.”

Sebastian glanced over in surprise, but said nothing else. He hadn’t meant anything by it, of course. He noticed, though, Russell had grown soft where Alex was concerned. Sebastian tuned into the eulogy again.

“...Having only her brother by her side, they traveled the country, using their arts as their trade in the streets,” Nathan continued. “Honing her skills, Alex auditioned again and again in the theatre, waitressing at nights to save enough money for acting classes. Her brother, Glen, helped her save for her dream by selling his art, mainly in the form of sculptures.

“As the years passed, Alex’s skills ramped up, and she spent more time acting for pay than waitressing. Glen moved to Scotland to continue to work on his sculpting technique. He has only recently returned and is now a guest of our Temple.”

Glen looked at his hands, a tear landing on his wrist. Evans covered it with her own hand, looking at his pained face. Her heart broke for him.

Nathan continued. “Alex Milligan may have lived a short life, but it was a full life. She saw more on the streets of her country than most mortals. She identified with the rougher side of life, which is something that every Arrow here can appreciate.”

Sebastian Cupid

There were nods around the room as all of the Golden Arrows considered this. The Lead Arrow counselors remained motionless.

Nathan gave the signal for pallbearers. "All rise." Glen and several Guardians rose. Sebastian and Russell rushed forward to tap two of them on the shoulder, taking their places. They approached the coffin with Glen, whose tears were streaming down his face, unchecked.

As a unit, the entire congregation of Chicago's Golden Arrows stood, facing the casket somberly, every one of them touched by the horrible fate that had taken one of the very mortals they served every day.

Glen took his place at the front of the casket. Russell stood behind him, and Sebastian stood on the other side. In unison, the eight pallbearers lifted the casket, moved to the glass doors along the western windows of the Temple, and carried Alex's body out into the balmy air and setting sun. Russell felt a tear slip out of his eye and rested his cheek against the casket as he followed Glen's footsteps. Once out the doors, Russell saw Victoria standing with Hans, watching the procession. Her face was creased with worry and sadness.

Glen and the Arrows gently lowered the casket above the gravesite that had been prepared in Alex's honor. The tombstone was beautiful. In rose-colored marble, it read:

ALEX MILLIGAN

March 25th, 1986 - August 13th, 2011

Whose heart is pure,

Whose spirit is immortal.

We honor you.

Stepping back, the pallbearers all faded into the crowd that had followed the procession outside, with the exception of Sebastian and Russell. Victoria and Evans came to join them. Sebastian was tapped on the shoulder and turned to see Aspen at his side in a wheelchair held by one of the nurses. He knelt to be beside her, taking her hand as they faced the grave. Psyche stood at the casket on her own, her hand radiating a light on the casket as she closed her eyes and asked Jupiter to admit her soul into the Afterworld. At length she stood back to take

a place next to Glen. All the Arrows watched as shovelful after shovelful of dirt was poured over the grave. No one moved or spoke as the last sliver of the sun winked out of the night sky, leaving the moon to her realm. The gentle summer night's breeze flitted through Aspen's hair, tickling her cheek on which a single tear rested.

After the last scoop of dirt was laid over the casket, Psyche placed a hand on Glen's shoulder, briefly, and then turned to go inside. All of the Arrows turned to go back to the chapel and then back to Temple. Sebastian, Russell, Victoria, Evans, Glen, and Aspen remained, quietly. The laborers that covered the gravesite turned to go inside. Glen exhaled heavily, his tears drying on his face as he looked at the gravesite of his baby sister. There were so many things they had been through. They survived all the odds until the odds finally outweighed them both. He cleared his throat, "She was honored by gods." He turned to Evans. "She was honored by gods in her death." He smiled, sadly. "I guess I couldn't ask for better."

Evans slipped her hand into his, quietly. Russell, who was on Glen's other side, placed a hand on his shoulder. Glen shook his head and looked at the ground, his short red hair standing up at all angles against the sky. Victoria stood there a moment more before she quietly faded away. Sebastian looked down at Aspen, whose eyes were barely open. She was here out of duty and guilt, but Sebastian could see she needed rest. He looked over at Glen, resting a hand on his shoulder. "I'm going to take Aspen in, Glen." Glen nodded, glancing behind him before he turned his attention back to Alex's grave. Sebastian took the handles of Aspen's wheelchair and turned back to the Temple, the nurse who had accompanied her falling in behind them as they left.

Glen breathed deeply and then moved to sit at a concrete bench that was a few feet away, positioned under a weeping willow tree. He faced Alex's grave. Russell and Evans sat beside him. They were silent for a long time. Evans picked at her handkerchief. Russell listened to the birds in the trees. He turned to look at Glen. "What would you like to do now, Glen?"

Glen shook his head, looking at his feet below his arms, which rested on his knees. "I don't know." He lowered his forehead to his hands, running them through his hair. "I've realized since I came back

here I've only ever lived for myself, my art, and Alex for years now. I don't know what else to do."

Russell exchanged glances with Evans over Glen's back. Russell said, "Psyche has confirmed you are welcome to stay at Temple with us."

Glen snorted. "To do what? Make sculptures? Draw pictures? What use is any of that now?"

Evans sighed, but Russell chuckled. Evans threw a disapproving look at Russell, who just shook his head. "I'm sorry, I can't help it. I think of what the Muses would say to that."

Glen glanced up. "The Muses are real too?"

"I kind of think of them as distant aunts. They're very funny...and fickle."

Glen shook his head. "This is all so screwed up. I can't keep my head on straight. In a matter of days, I've lost my sister to a creature that isn't supposed to exist, befriended people that don't die and make a living out of making people fall in love, and seen warfare that simply scares the crap out of me." He turned to look at Russell. "Is it even safe to stay here? I know there's a lot going on in your Temple right now."

Russell sighed. "Things aren't as stable here as they've always been, but all of the Golden Arrows were called here because it is the safest place to be right now. Mom and the Guardians are here to protect us."

"And she's a goddess, right?" Russell nodded. Glen looked back at his hands. "Is there anything useful for a mortal to do at your Temple?"

Russell considered. "I think mom thinks there is. She's...interested in you. She believes you would be a great ally to us in communicating with other mortals. Sebastian has been working on some research to make our work better. To make our jobs more..." he considered for a moment. "...tolerable for both us and the mortals we serve. Having a mortal's input could be extremely useful."

Glen snorted. "Meaning I'd be a lab rat."

Russell shrugged. "Not what I was thinking, but that might be helpful too." Evans reached over Glen to slap Russell in the back of the head. Russell began laughing, and Glen joined in.

"I'd be your resident schizophrenic if you guys started testing hate and love juice on me." That just made the two of them laugh harder. Evans rolled her eyes before standing. "Glen, I'm going to go check on your room and talk to mom, okay?"

Glen nodded, pulling his hand from hers. Evans smiled and walked toward Temple as both men watched her go. Russell turned and caught Glen's eye as he watched Evans walk away. "Got it bad, huh?"

Glen sighed, heavily. "I know. I know. I'm a fool. Evans has explained to me you're all engineered to be perfect. You're all beautiful and strong and all that. But she's more than just a pretty face, you know?" Russell nodded. Glen blinked and looked at Russell, blushing a little. "Of course, you probably don't want to hear me talk about your little sister like that, right? God knows I'd pound in your face if I heard you talking about Alex like that."

Russell tried not to look guilty as he replied. "Evans isn't a sister to me like you and your sister. We didn't grow up together. We didn't have Christmases as children and watch each other's heartbreaks happen and stuff. We're simply two people who were induced into a brotherhood together."

Glen thought about this for a moment. "Do you Golden Arrows ever...hook up together?"

Russell shook his head. "There's too much grief in our world. It's too confusing. And..." he considered for a moment, "...we don't really feel that way about each other. It's more of an affection, you know? We don't feel attracted to each other."

Glen grunted. "Sounds lonely. I've said that to Evans too."

Russell nodded. "It is a lot of times. But this is a life of service, not entertainment. We're not here for our own means. We serve the gods, and gods need mortals on their side to survive."

"Love and war must be crackerjack industries in the god-world."

"They are that."

Glen looked over. "So you've never been in love?"

"Oh, several times."

"With mortals?" Russell nodded. "But they can't stay with you, right?"

"No. They move on, and they fall in love and are happy."

Sebastian Cupid

Glen shook his head. "You've never been in a real relationship?"

"Not since I joined the Arrows."

"And when was that?"

Russell grinned. "Oh, about 2,300 years ago."

Glen shook his head. "Unbelievable."

Russell laughed. "You're telling me. I swear I just woke up yesterday and it was the 1800's."

Glen blinked. "I'm a lost cause aren't I? With Evans?"

Russell sighed. "I don't know. I've never heard of it before, but the bulk of what I've never heard of seems to be happening all around me lately. With Sebastian's research, anything could be possible."

Glen nodded, and yawned. He shook his head, sheepishly. "I'm sorry. I didn't really sleep last night."

"I can assume that just by looking at you. Why don't you go in and get some sleep? We can talk more about what you plan to do after you've had some rest."

Glen stood slowly. He turned to Russell, hesitating. "Do you want me to stay here? At Temple?"

Russell smiled. "Of course! I've never had a mortal friend before."

Glen rolled his eyes. "Geez, I'm just a giant guinea pig aren't I?"

Russell chuckled, patting his back. "Don't feel too bad. Something tells me you wouldn't mind being Evans's guinea pig." He wiggled his eyebrows. "She ought to have your bed all made up for you by now."

Glen groaned. "God, are you trying to kill me? I'm never gonna get sleep thinking of that!"

Russell stood, laughing as Glen headed back into Temple. Russell stayed by the weeping willow tree, looking at Alex's grave, thinking of all the things he had wanted to say and hadn't. He felt horribly guilty now for keeping so much from her while she was alive. He sighed, shaking his head. He was an expert in life not being fair, but it never got any easier to swallow over the years.

Russell moved over to the gravesite, crouching in freshly turned dirt to place his hand on the tombstone. He lowered his head, exhaling as he tried to conjure up his parting words to Alex.

"I'm sorry. I never meant to be dishonest with you. I never meant to fail in my duty to you. I was supposed to set you free to fall in love in

your world, where you would be happy in the arms of another. I failed. I don't think I'll ever be able to forgive myself for it.

"We're going to take care of your brother. I promise you that. He may think he's got options, but I promise he'll stay with us, or at least where we can keep an eye on him for the rest of his days, which are few, like all mortals.

"I pray Jupiter will throw open the gates of the Afterworld to you. I know he will."

Russell lifted his head. "It is time to say goodbye. All servants of the gods eventually return home, and I'll be able to visit you when I do. Time is endless for you now, as it is for me. We will meet again."

Standing, Russell brushed his hands together and moved a couple steps back from the dirt on the ground. "Good bye," he whispered as he turned away.

He had only taken a few steps when the ground began to shudder. Startled, Russell reached into his holster for his gun, turning all around, looking for the demon that had somehow gotten inside the safe holds of Temple. Only clear night sky surrounded him. Russell turned to shout at the Temple. The ground shook more violently, and he heard yells from inside. Could it be an earthquake? In Chicago? He doubted it. Of course, add it to the list of impossibilities he'd seen lately, as far as he was concerned. It was a week for rarity.

Russell felt something like sand hit his face, and he wiped at his cheek. He looked at his fingers to see a streak of brown. Looking at the ground, he saw that dirt was flying up from Alex's grave in a thin spray, right from the center. He backed away slowly, his gun held in front of him. He heard the thuds of running feet, and turned to see Hans and three Guardians join him, as well as Glen.

"What's going on?" yelled Glen.

"I haven't got a clue," Russell shouted back. "You'd better get inside Temple in case it's another demon attack."

Glen backed slowly away, his eyes wide. Then all of the men were thrown to the ground as Alex's grave burst open, dirt splattering everywhere. A fallout of dirt rained on them like the rubble from an explosion. Russell protected his eyes from the spray of pummeling earth and rocks. After it had stopped, Russell raised his head and gun.

His eyes bugged out of his sockets as he saw a hand come out of the grave. "Oh, Jupiter."

Glen stammered as a grunting sound came from within the grave, the hand grasping at the edge of the dirt cavern. "Alex?"

A shaky voice issued from within the grave. "Glen? Is that you?"

Glen jumped up to run to the grave, but Hans and another Guardian jumped forward to stop him. Russell rose to his feet and cautiously approached the open grave, gun ready.

Alex, dirt masking her face, shivered and looked up at Russell from the bottom of the six-foot hole, still standing in the inside of the coffin. It was the most morbid thing he'd ever seen. "Russell?"

Russell blinked, shocked beyond words for a moment. Swallowing, he said, "Alex?"

Alex nodded, tears washing muddy tracks down her face. Russell knelt at the side of the tomb and lowered a hand to Alex, who grasped it. Russell stood, grunting as he pulled Alex's slim frame from the hole. She was clothed in what she had worn at her funeral, less than an hour before. The black slacks and turtleneck camouflaged her form as well as the dirt that covered every inch of her. Russell carefully lowered her to the ground, where she stood, shakily looking at all the guns pointed in her direction. Everyone stood there, speechless, especially Glen, whose eyes bugged out of his head.

Alex's chin trembled as he looked at Russell, pleading with her eyes for him to say something.

Russell licked his lips, nervously. His gun lowered, but his finger remained on the trigger. The other men kept their guns pointed on target. "Alex," Russell whispered. "What happened? How did you do that?"

She looked at all the guns pointed in her direction before she turned back to Russell. "Are they going to shoot me?"

Russell looked behind him and indicated with his hand for them to lower their weapons, which they did, slowly. Hans and the other Guardian who had Glen in their grasp did not loosen their hold, waiting to see what would happen. Russell looked back at Alex. "They're not going to shoot you, Alex. How did you do that?"

Alex lifted her hand, palm up, and pointed her index finger of her other hand at it. The soil collected in her palm shivered and then floated in the air, inches away from her hand. There was a unified gasp as the men saw, in the light of the full moon, Alex's new talent. Her eyes swam with tears as she looked up at Russell, who simply stared back at her in shock. "Russell, what did they do to me?"

Hans's voice came from the back of the crowd, and everyone turned to look at him as he said, "Jupiter, indulgeo nos. We've created a demigod."

SEVENTEEN

“How did this happen?” Psyche asked Garrett, her face creased with worry. Russell, Sebastian, and Garrett sat together in the three chairs in front of her desk, all shell-shocked at the events of the evening.

Garrett shook his head. “It could have been a multitude of things, but nothing – nothing – indicated this was happening when she died. There was no life in her at all. I was there the whole time, even while she was prepared for burial.”

Psyche sighed and looked out the window, which was black with night. Alex was back in her room with no less than a half dozen Guardians. To maintain her sanity, Glen and Evans were with her. “It goes from bad to worse. First we kill a mortal, and then we create a demigod, which is strictly forbidden by Jupiter.” She closed her eyes briefly before looking back at Garrett. “I’ll be informing Cupid, and then both of us will inform Jupiter. I need every medical record you have on Alex. Find her records from the mortal doctors too.”

Garrett nodded. “I sent for those before I started on her treatment. I will give you both.” He rose to his feet, bowed slightly, and then left the room.

Psyche waited until he was gone before addressing Russell. “How is she?”

“Pretty shaken up. To be honest, so am I. I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

Psyche smiled. “Well, you wouldn’t have. The last demigod was Hercules, and that was thousands of years ago.”

Sebastian Cupid

Sebastian cleared his throat. "So if she's a demigod, she's not immortal."

"That's right. She's still mortal, but she has immortal powers. Usually the powers a demigod form are closest to skills they have as a mortal. At least, the demigods in the past took on the best of both parents, immortal and mortal. Since she was a professional actor, her powers of persuasion are honed, and it would not surprise me to see that she has persuasion over both solid objects now and eventually people."

Sebastian exhaled. "I thought demigods were only born, not created. I can assure you she's not my kid."

Psyche smiled. "There's no doubt of that. However, the immortal blood, her prolonged exposure to it, seems to have changed her DNA. I've never heard of it happening before. The thing is..." Psyche cleared her throat. "Someone made a mistake."

Russell and Sebastian exchanged glances before Sebastian turned to look back at his mother. "What do you mean?"

Psyche rose and moved to the front of her desk, sitting on the edge to look down at her sons, who tried not to twitch in their seats. "This must not leave this room."

Russell and Sebastian swallowed, waiting. Whenever Psyche had that expression, she need never say the words. The look was command enough, and neither of them would have ever considered uttering a word to anyone else. Sebastian shook his head, and Russell spoke, "Of course not."

Psyche nodded once, briefly. "Very well, then. After we learned of Alex's death, the Guardians started going through the biohazard containers from Alex's room. They took the IV bags from the containers and ran tests on them. Only one of the transfusions was done with mortal blood. The other was immortal blood."

Sebastian and Russell both swiftly inhaled, glancing at each other. Russell leaned forward. "What does that mean? Did Garrett make a mistake?"

Psyche placed her hands in her lap, looking down at them. "Garrett has not been informed. According to his medical records, he instructed the nurse to administer mortal blood, type B positive. According to the

nurse's log and serial numbers on the bag, it should have been mortal blood."

Sebastian blinked. "So there was a mistake when the blood was collected?"

Psyche shrugged. "Possibly. Or someone tampered with the bag before it was administered. We do not keep mortal blood on hand. It has to be shipped in, and it would be highly irregular if the mistake happened during the collection of blood. Obviously, mortals and immortals don't exactly donate in the same places. Immortals donate their blood at Temple. Mortals donate in blood banks."

Both men took a moment to absorb this information. Sebastian looked up first. "You suspect tampering, don't you?"

Psyche nodded. "Yes, I do. It's the simplest explanation."

Russell threw up his hands. "But...why? Why would someone mess with a mortal's blood?"

Psyche stood and moved back behind her desk. She sat, straightening her skirt as she lowered herself into the leather desk chair. "I have a few theories, but nothing I can prove. It could be whoever switched the blood didn't realize the effect it would have on Alex, but we were, after all, treating her for exposure to immortal blood. It is only natural someone who knew what she was being treated for would assume more exposure to immortal blood..."

Russell scowled. "Would kill her."

Psyche nodded. "Precisely. So then we have to consider who would want to kill her."

"Mars," Sebastian and Russell said in unison.

Russell nodded. "Remember the look on his face when she called him out? The sooner the eye witness is gone, the better."

Psyche sighed. "The problem is Mars and Rogan have both been under lock and key, and Aspen was being held hostage. There is no way for Mars and Rogan to get out of Hans's circles until he deems it. Their rooms are guarded night and day. They must have someone working for them, if they are the culprits, and there were no other Lead Arrows in Temple at the time of Alex's death but the two of them."

Russell swallowed, remembering something. "Oh, shit."

Sebastian Cupid

Sebastian and Psyche turned to him with interest. Psyche speared him with her eyes. "What is it, Russell?"

Russell's eyes were large, glancing quickly at Sebastian. "I ran into Victoria in the hall before we ran to get Aspen. I was really out of it, but she almost ran me over. She was coming from Hans's corridor on third."

Sebastian sputtered. "You can't...it isn't possible..." His face started to get red as he struggled to defend his sister.

Psyche lifted a hand. "Stop, Sebastian. Russell is not accusing anyone here, but we need to know what he knows."

With a great deal of effort, Sebastian settled back in his seat, but his face was still hard. Russell hesitated, but went on. "She was...like I said, running from the end of the corridor. I stopped her and asked her what she was up to, but she just pushed me off. I thought she was acting funny, but she insisted I was just being silly. To be honest, I had been awake all night, up with Glen." He looked up at Psyche. "I don't think she would team up with Mars against her family, but..." he glanced at Sebastian. "...I do think she is hiding something. I didn't press it at the time. I regret that now."

Psyche nodded. "We need to find her, talk to her. I also do not think her devotion to the Golden Arrows would waver, but perhaps she's being blackmailed."

Sebastian and Russell stared at their feet, their emotions at war with one another. Psyche cleared her throat, and they both looked up at her. "This is not an interrogation. No one is being accused. With Aspen coming back into Temple in the state she did, along with what she found in Seattle, there is a great amount of doubt of Mars's involvement." Psyche turned to look at the clock on the wall behind her. It pointed to ten minutes to ten o'clock. "As it stands now, we are meeting with the visiting Lead Arrows from Mars's Rome Temple at eight o'clock tomorrow morning. You both need to be there, as well as Aspen. I think Glen and Alex should stay out of it for now. There is already controversy enough with us holding Mars, pending possible charges, let alone us accidentally creating a demigod. I just hope your father gets back here in time to help me sort it out."

Psyche suddenly looked very tired, and Sebastian and Russell both felt sorry for her. "Don't worry," said Russell. "We'll go talk to Alex and Glen, calm them down. If we see Victoria, we'll talk with her."

Psyche smiled. "You're both excellent sons." She gave them each a peck on the cheek before she walked them toward the door. "I will see you both in the morning."

After the door closed and Sebastian and Russell had walked out of the earshot of the Guardians, Sebastian slipped a glance to Russell. "You think Victoria had something to do with this?"

Russell could hear the tightness in Sebastian's voice. "That's not what I'm saying. I'm saying she's hiding something. Maybe she's being bullied. Do you want to let Mars bully her?"

Sebastian shook his head. "Honestly, I just hate that she's hiding anything." He sighed. "Sorry I was rough on you."

Russell laughed. "Rough? That wasn't rough. I remember the time you put ink in my coffee for hitting on Rosa Perkins in Nashville. That was rough."

Sebastian laughed, looking over at Russell. "Alright. What first? Alex? Victoria?"

Russell sighed as the two of them reached the top landing on the stairs. They hesitated there as they looked down the hall. Alex had been moved to guest quarters since she wasn't sick anymore. "Whatever we do, we had better tackle it together. You know how women are when you ask them about shit. All emotional and defensive."

Sebastian groaned. "How could I forget? I've only had a week off. Memories don't fade that fast." He considered, looking down the hall. "Let's talk to Alex first."

Russell nodded, and they made their way to her room. Two Guardians were stationed outside. When they entered, they saw another four were in the room along with Evans and Glen. Alex was sitting on the bed, looking scared out of her wits. She looked relieved when they came in. Russell looked at the Guardian closest to him. "You can all leave now." The Guardian raised his eyebrows. "We need to talk to Alex, and we can't do it with you here. Go."

The Guardians had no choice but to leave, though they did it hesitantly. Russell had no doubt Hans would be informed immediately.

“Hey, Alex.”

Alex sat on the bed with her knees cradled in her arms, pressed against her chest. She had showered and changed into a sweat suit.

“Hey, Russ.”

Russell approached the bed and looked down at Glen, who said, “Hey.” Glen looked a lot worse for the wear. Evans stood behind him, one hand on his shoulder.

Russell sat on the edge of Alex’s bed. “I suppose you have a lot of questions.”

Alex shrugged. “Evans answered some. I want to know how it happened.”

“We’re looking into it. Basically, instead of your body rejecting the immortal blood, it changed to accommodate it. You became a demigod. Normally, this only happens in childbirth. Trust me when I say we’re just as surprised as you are.”

Glen snorted. Russell looked down at him, frowning. Glen met his eyes “Sorry, but you’ve been saying that an awful lot lately.”

Russell rubbed his eyes. Sebastian stepped forward. “We’re doing the best we can with what we’ve got. When we have more information, we’ll tell you. We don’t know for sure what happened or why. We have to pull all of the medical records, go through them. It takes time.”

Alex looked up. “Evans said demigods are forbidden.”

Russell glanced at Evans before looking back at Alex. “It’s true. Jupiter decreed it to be forbidden thousands of years ago. Basically, if a mortal and an immortal have a child together, it’s a demigod. Demigods are mortal, but their powers are that of an immortal. The heartbreak for the immortal parent at losing a child to the mortal world is too much. Jupiter decided demigods would only result in heartbreak. He forbade them to be created anymore.”

Alex looked up. “But I wasn’t created in childbirth.”

Russell nodded, placing a hand on her arm that lay across the top of her knees. “I know. We don’t know what Jupiter is going to say to all this. It’s new.” Alex looked terrified and little in her bed. Russell leaned

forward. "He's not mean, Alex. He's a very compassionate, loving god. He's the same "God" you pray to."

Alex shook her head. "I don't pray."

Russell grinned. "Maybe you could start. It couldn't hurt your case." Alex snickered. "On the other hand, you're the coolest mortal in the world right now!"

Glen looked up. Alex glanced at them all. "I haven't done it again...since earlier."

Russell hopped up. "Why the devil not?"

Evans stepped forward. "Do you really think that's a good idea?"

Russell rolled his eyes. "Why not? We give her awesome powers and tell her not to use them? Hell, it's the only thing she has going for her right now." He looked down at Alex. "And it is super cool."

Alex smiled a little and blushed. "I am a little cold, so..." She lifted a finger, and her robe came flying to her bed from the hook on the bathroom door.

Glen inhaled. "Wow."

Alex laughed. "That's so neat." Sebastian and Russell laughed while Evans smiled. Alex looked up. "This is something you guys see all the time, isn't it?"

Sebastian shrugged. "Around here, yeah, but never from a mortal."

Russell crossed his arms and grinned at her. "You may as well practice. It can be a very good defensive tool for you."

Alex nodded. "In the combat room?"

Russell shrugged. "Sure. Glen knows where it is. He's been spending some time there. It's definitely the safest place to try something new. Just don't get into the weaponry with this new talent yet. If you don't know how to use it, you're just gonna hurt someone."

Alex's eye lit up as she gazed at him. "Will you teach me?"

Russell's face registered surprise. "I'd better ask Mom first, but I don't see why not."

Alex sobered again. "When do we talk to Jupiter?"

Sebastian cleared his throat. "We have to talk to Dad first. Then I think he and Mom will speak with Jupiter. Rest assured, nothing bad is going to happen to you."

Alex looked back at Russell. "Promise?"

Sebastian Cupid

Russell nodded. "Promise. Jupiter is very fair. This was not intentional. In any case, you wouldn't be the one in the frying pan."

Glen chuckled. Sebastian and Russell looked down at him. He grinned. "I just find it a little funny you guys might actually get in trouble for something."

Sebastian rolled his eyes, while Russell punched Glen's arm. "Only if we get caught."

Evans yawned. Sebastian looked at her, and then the others. "You all need some rest. We have business to attend to in the morning regarding another matter. We'll leave you to go to bed."

Alex stood as they turned to leave. "Are you sending those men back in?"

Russell shook his head. "No. I'll talk to Hans."

Alex smiled, her face registering her relief. "Thanks."

Russell nodded and left the room behind Sebastian. When they were in the hall, Sebastian turned to the Guardians. "No more supervision is required inside that room. If Hans has a problem with it, just ask him to see me, okay?"

The Guardian closest nodded as Russell and Sebastian walked further down the guest corridor. Russell raised his eyebrows as he turned. "Victoria?" Sebastian nodded. They approached Victoria's door, knocking gently. There was no reply. Turning the handle, Russell called out, "Victoria?" looking in. Her room was empty, the bed made. Russell took a few steps into the room. "Well." He turned to look at Sebastian. "I didn't see this happening more than once in a week, did you?"

EIGHTEEN

They didn't find Victoria that night. Russell and Sebastian looked all over Temple, visited her apartment, and called her cell phone, which went straight to voicemail. By the time they decided to give up, the hour was late. Sebastian looked at Russell and said, "You and I better just head back. We'll see her in the morning."

Russell nodded and turned his car back toward Temple. There was no way Victoria would ever miss the meeting in the morning. They went back to Temple, stumbling to bed.

Sebastian tossed and turned most of the night. He woke early and then walked down to Aspen's room. She was still asleep when he entered the room, so he stood at the window, watching the sunrise as it colored the room and stung his eyes. The ball of light was well into the horizon before Sebastian heard Aspen shift. Her eyes opened sleepily as he approached the bed. "Oh!" she gasped. "I didn't see you."

Sebastian walked to the side of her bed and sat. He let his eyes linger over Aspen's flushed face and creamy skin before he smiled in reply. "I hope I didn't wake you."

She sat up, feeling a little off-balance at knowing Sebastian had been there while she slept. "Not at all. I assume you had a long night."

Sebastian nodded. "It was one for the books, that's for sure."

"Is Alex okay?"

"Much better after Russell and I talked with her and Glen. She's just confused, which is understandable."

Aspen sat, slowly, pulling her covers up under her arms to hide her camisole. "How did it happen?"

Sebastian Cupid

Sebastian hesitated only a moment, knowing better than to tell secrets, though it surprised him a little that he wanted to. “We don’t know all the details. We do know the immortal blood in her system mutated her genetic makeup. It bonded with her as opposed to killing her, even though it looked like that in the beginning.”

Aspen exhaled heavily. “All from a little splash of blood?”

Sebastian wanted to groan, but, to his credit, he remained quiet. “We’re not really sure of all the details yet, but Psyche is reviewing the situation.”

Aspen nodded. “You don’t have to tell me.”

Sebastian smiled. “It’s worth more than my position or service to the Arrows to talk about it right now.”

Aspen knew a thing or two about loyalty to her god. “Of course.” She stood quickly, moving to her robe which lay at the foot of her bed. Sebastian watched as her arms slid into her sleeves, tucking her Lead Arrow mark on her left shoulder into its soft, white folds. Aspen belted the robe, feeling a little more confident.

Sebastian rose from his seat, watching. “You’re moving a lot better now.”

Aspen nodded. “I didn’t really want the wheelchair last night, but it was the only way Garrett would let me out of the room.”

Sebastian chuckled. “That sounds like Garrett.”

Aspen smiled. “I am just about back to normal. A night’s worth of sleep sure makes all the difference in the world.” She colored prettily as she looked up at Sebastian’s face. “And blood donations. When is the meeting?”

Sebastian looked at his watch. “In about a half an hour.”

Aspen nodded. “Good.” She walked to the bathroom, where Sebastian heard her turn on the shower. When she came back out, she was wiping her face on a hand towel. “I’m just going to grab a quick shower before I go.”

Sebastian smiled. “Is it okay if I wait here?”

Aspen looked up, and a jolt of lightening jumped through her belly. She tossed her head as much to clear it as to look nonchalant about the question. “Of course.” The effect was totally ruined as she almost ran

into the door frame on her way back into the bathroom. Sebastian kept a straight face until she shut the door, and then he chuckled softly.

Once Aspen was in the bathroom, she cursed herself for being a stupid, silly woman, and then quickly washed in the shower. The water felt amazing against her recently healed skin and muscles. Her cuts were completely healed over. She wasn't pale anymore. She felt a bit like she'd been through a blender, but she felt strong again. She wasn't ready to go on a demon hunt, but she was more than capable of returning to business.

When she came back out to the bedroom, Sebastian was standing at the window, waiting. He turned when the door opened. Aspen looked very clean and fresh in her suit, her hair pulled back tightly from her face in a severe knot. Her face was all business, and it annoyed him. He'd been unable to focus on anything but mental images of her naked body, which was separated from him only by a thin door. He swallowed as he remembered again what her body had looked like in the light of the hotel room. Frustrated, he took several steps until he was right in front of her. Surprised by his sudden approach, Aspen took a hasty step back, bumping into the wall behind her. Before she could think or react, Sebastian's hands were in her hair. She threw a shocked glance upwards in time to register his intense stare before his dark head lowered and dominated her upturned mouth.

A squeak of surprise slipped out, but it quickly turned to a sigh as Aspen angled her head to deepen the kiss. Sebastian's hands were rough and hard against the soft skin of her neck. His breath scorched her mouth, and the heartbeats that pounded against her chest could have belonged to either of them, so incredible was the thudding in her ears.

Aspen rose up on her toes to match his height. He threw her arms around his neck, then he slipped his hands around her waist, lifting Aspen up off of the floor to grate against his clothing. Suddenly his uniform felt too tight, his skin itching to be free to taste her and touch her more. His lips slid open as her soft mouth yielded to his tongue. Her breaths were short gasps of excitement. Sebastian's hands tightened over her clothing, his fingers greedily ripping into her sides.

She was completely dominating every sense, every thought in his head. He felt like he was drowning in her. Aspen's scent filled his nostrils, and every movement she made was amplified, like the tremors of an earthquake through his body. Startled by his own reaction to her, he pulled back with great effort, but it did him no good. Aspen moaned and threw her legs around his waist. He stumbled forward into the wall behind Aspen, thumping her back against it. He groaned in desperation as the solid wall held Aspen's hard, muscled form against his own. Aspen looked up at Sebastian, her eyes searing his. She smiled slightly as she leaned forward, licking his neck from collarbone to ear.

Groaning, shaking, Sebastian bit into Aspen's neck, savoring her purr against his open mouth. Her arms wrapped around his back, and Sebastian thrust his hands under the edge of her jacket, pulling at her dress shirt while thrusting against her, pinning her to the wall. Aspen leaned her head back, and her hair slipped from its pins, the long, wet masses spilling over her shoulders. She faintly heard a button pop as her shirt was liberated from her waistband. Sebastian's hands moved over the skin of her ribs, molding it with his hands. His thumbs dipped below her waistline, teasing. Sebastian looked up into Aspen's eyes, the fire inside them scorching the air. Aspen smiled, slowly, liquidly. Sebastian was surprised into smiling himself. Aspen started to laugh as they brought their lips together for another lusty, erotic kiss.

A knock sounded at the door. Sebastian jerked his head back, snarling. Aspen hastily lowered her feet and turned into the bathroom, snapping the door shut just as the door to the bedroom swung inward. Russell poked his head in. Sebastian tried not to pout as he angled toward the window, internally growling at the interruption. He turned only slightly as Russell spoke. He didn't dare turn completely around in his current condition.

"Hey! Where's Aspen?"

Sebastian motioned toward the bathroom door.

Russell nodded and entered the room, walking slowly to the window where Sebastian stood. "Is she going to the meeting?"

Sebastian nodded. Russell pursed his lips and looked at Sebastian quizzically. "What's up with you?"

Sebastian scowled. "Nothing's up with me. What's up with you?"

Russell just shrugged. The door to the bathroom opened and Aspen emerged, looking as presentable as she had before Sebastian had gone to work on her. His lips curved slightly as he noticed her jacket was closed now, hiding the missing button on her blouse. "Hello, Russell," she said.

Russell smiled. "You look much better."

Aspen nodded, smiling. "It was just a matter of blood and rest." She walked toward the bedroom door, completely composed. The men turned to watch her. "I'm going to go check on Mars and Rogan." She frowned. "You guys don't think there's much more point to them being in Hans's care now, do you? After yesterday?"

Sebastian shook his head while Russell shrugged. "I don't know," Russell said. "I don't think Mars knows what Auster's up to, but what happens to Mars will be determined by Dad. He's on his way here now."

Aspen nodded, shortly. "All the same, I'm going to go see them. I haven't seen them since I got back. I'll see you both at the meeting."

Sebastian didn't realize he was holding his breath until Aspen left the room. Russell chuckled. Sebastian scowled and looked over. "What?"

Russell only laughed and walked toward the door. "Nothing."

Together, the two men left the room, walking toward the lobby where over a hundred other Arrows were gathered for the meeting this morning. As they stepped off the base of the stairs, Sebastian noticed Psyche was deep in conversation with Elaine and Stephan, the Lead Arrow representatives. She looked concerned, but the Lead Arrows looked plain outraged. Sebastian nudged Russell and nodded toward Psyche. Russell's face went hard as he saw Stephan take a step closer to Psyche. Sebastian took Russell's arm before he could storm off. "Hang on there, champ. Mom can take care of this."

Sure enough, a few seconds later, whatever Psyche said made Stephan quickly take a step back. Elaine took his arm and led him to his seat, at the front of the room. Psyche turned and took her seat at the center of the table on the platform at the front of the room next to Venus, waiting for the room to come to order. Venus glanced over and muttered a few words to Psyche as she sat.

Sebastian Cupid

Slowly, the room quieted, all of the Arrows waiting for Psyche to speak. The seat next to Psyche was empty, which meant Cupid had not arrived yet. Sebastian noticed Aspen enter the lobby from the stairs right before Psyche stood to speak, accompanied by Victoria. Aspen saw him, and they walked to where Russell and Sebastian stood in the back of the room.

Psyche started into her speech immediately, not giving Sebastian any time to talk with either of them as they approached. "Arrows, thank you for coming. Please join me in welcoming our Lead Arrow allies to our meeting this morning, Elaine and Stephan."

A flurry of clapping ensued, which stopped quickly. Nothing on the Lead Arrows' faces indicated that they were honored to be present.

Psyche forced a diplomatic smile as she looked out at the room. "Let us also welcome back Aspen, who assures me she's almost completely recovered."

Aspen started in surprise as over a hundred pairs of eyes fell on her, but she smiled and nodded to the applause anyway.

Psyche smiled warmly at her before she continued. "We are here today to discuss two very, very important issues at hand. The first is the issue of Arrow safety. As you know, we've had a succession of Arrow attacks in the last week. One of these attacks resulted in a loss of a beloved Golden Arrow brother. Our most recent attack nearly claimed the life of a Lead Arrow sister. I was informed by Elaine and Stephan upon their arrival there have been attacks in other cities as well, and Cupid confirms this."

Russell and Sebastian glanced at each other. Victoria's brow furrowed as she listened. Psyche looked across the room as she spoke. "I refuse to see us lose more Arrows to demon activity. Since we are not sure exactly who is sending out demons against our Temple or why, we are forced to pull all Arrows from the streets."

There was a clamoring outburst at this statement as Arrows bent their heads to whisper and exclaim. One Arrow spoke outright. "But how can we maintain peace among mortals without meeting quota?"

Another Arrow nodded. "It will be chaos and war without the service of Arrows."

There was a lot of nodding and sounds of agreement to this statement. Psyche nodded as she went on. "I agree. This decision was not easy, but it is very fortunate we have a backup plan." All of the Arrows stopped talking and waited to hear what Psyche had in mind. "Sebastian Cupid, you have been working on a project for a little while, have you not?"

Sebastian should have been surprised, but ever since he heard where the line of the conversation is going he assumed this would come up. "I have, Mother."

Psyche nodded. "Please come forward and briefly tell us what you've been working on, sparing the technical details."

Sebastian felt the eyes of his brethren on him as he walked to the front of the crowded room, toward the table at which his mother stood. She sat as he approached, giving him the floor. Sebastian turned to face the eyes of his peers, noting the smiles on the faces of Russell, Aspen, and Victoria at the back of the room. He noticed now Evans wasn't in the room, but Glen and Alex weren't either. That's likely where she was spending her time.

Sebastian cleared his throat. "For some time, I have been researching a way to serve mortals with the gifts of love and war without personal contact. Or, at least, not as personal as we are used to. Earlier this week, I succeeded."

Murmurs broke out in the room. "This worked on the streets?" one Arrow asked, whom Sebastian recognized from other functions.

Sebastian nodded. "Last Saturday, I managed to serve four mortals."

Pandemonium broke out. "In one night?" an excited Arrow asked.

"It worked as well as the normal method?" a girl Arrow right beside him asked.

Sebastian nodded as Psyche rose to her feet. Her raised hands quieted the crowd until she could talk above them. "Arrows, I know this is a big change. We've been doing everything the same way for thousands of years. Sadly, the world is not the same as it was thousands of years ago. To protect our Temple, we need to consider other methods to care for mortals entrusted to our service. Sebastian has tested this process, and he seems to have found a way to make it

Sebastian Cupid

work. The reason why we implement this action now is to protect you. We would like for all of you to move back home to Temple until the threat has been eliminated. Hans and the other Guardians can protect you far better here than anywhere else. We would like to have everyone accounted for until further notice.”

Heads bent together throughout the room as faces lit up with worry. Nothing like this had ever been suggested before. An Arrow stood, facing Psyche. “Where is Cupid? What does he say to this?”

At this statement, Elaine rose from the table at the front, looking at Psyche. “My point too, Psyche. You are not the only god in Temple Cupid. Where is the god of love himself?”

Venus’s cold voice quieted the room. “Maybe you think you are better than the word of the gods, Elaine? Lest you forget, I am a goddess too.”

Elaine colored, but stood her ground. “I’m not following you blindly through this. None of us are. What about Mars? And now I hear there is a demigod in your Temple.”

Sebastian glanced worriedly to the back of the room as voices rose around him. Russell met his glance, shaking his head. Sebastian turned to look at his mother. Psyche raised her hands. “Please, quiet yourselves. This shall take much longer if you do not.”

The voices reluctantly dimmed as Psyche turned to gaze coldly at Elaine and Stephan. “Yes, there is the issue with Mars, which is the other topic we need to discuss this morning. Based on the findings from Aspen’s rescue, I’m inclined to drop all charges against Mars and release him and Rogan.”

Several Arrows jumped to their feet. Psyche’s eyes glowed as she commanded, “Silence!”

All discussion stopped with the ringing echo of her voice. The standing Arrows sank reluctantly into their seats, faces creased in worry. “There is no reason to suspect Mars. Aspen was attacked in the very same manner our Jeremy was killed. If Sebastian and Russell had not gone to her aid, we’d be having her funeral right now instead of this meeting.”

Arrows all over the room glanced at Sebastian and dropped their gazes. "Mars is innocent. As soon as the meeting is over, he will be released, and I will be extending my apologies."

Stephan spoke quietly from his seat at the table. "What about the demigod?"

Faces turned eagerly to Psyche to see what she would have to say. As she opened her mouth to speak, the door to Temple was thrust open, and the mighty form of Cupid entered the lobby. All Arrows, even the Lead Arrows, bowed as he entered and approached the platform. "The demigod has been pardoned, by order of Jupiter," he said, his rich voice echoing in the hall. No one dared speak against this new information, not even Elaine and Stephan. Cupid moved behind the table, where he bent down to kiss Psyche lightly on the lips. "I'm sorry I'm late."

Psyche smiled. "You're never late."

Cupid turned to face the congregation. Sebastian moved to the side of the room as Cupid untied his cloak, handing it to a Guardian who stood at his side. As the black overcoat was removed, all eyes in the room were riveted to Cupid's magnificent wings. After thousands of years, the shocking beauty of Cupid's wings never faded. They were a rich gold color and spanned three inches taller than his head while they were closed. Opened, they extended out ten feet on either side. It was magnificent to behold. Being the only active god with wings, the novelty never faded with time. Standing at over six and half feet, his cherubic face took in the congregation, his eyes tranquil. However, Sebastian knew looks were deceiving. There were few gods who had grown as strong as Cupid since the fall of Rome.

"Elaine, Stephan," Cupid inclined his head to the table, and was rewarded with inclinations from both of the guests, however reluctant they might have been. "It is good to see all of my Chicago Arrows again. I have missed you while I have been away in Rome. Psyche and I have been talking almost every hour about recent events, and it is from our discussions these decisions have been made.

"The Temple of Auster has been destroyed in every city." While this came as no shock to Sebastian and his close brethren, everyone else in the room gasped. Stephan almost rose from his seat before

Sebastian Cupid

stopping himself. "It's true. I sadly report most of his followers have been slaughtered, the Temples reduced to ruins. Sebastian has seen evidence of this recently while on his rescue mission to retrieve Aspen."

Again, heads around the room turned to look at Sebastian and Aspen. Sebastian ignored them, waiting for more information. "Every Temple of Auster seems to have been destroyed by demon activity. Two more Arrows have been found dead." Gasps and cries echoed out. "It is only by sheer luck Sebastian and Russell were able to stop the most recent attempt. Demons destroyed that Temple within the hour after they made their escape. The Guardians that witnessed it are safely with us again."

Several women in the room lowered their heads and sobbed as Cupid continued. "Nakaya and Halle Cupid have moved on to their rightful places in the Afterworld. Let us take a moment of silence."

Sebastian's heart sank as he glanced at Victoria. Tears were running down her face openly, though she remained as steadfast as ever. Nakaya had been one of her roommates when she was stationed in Tokyo.

After a long pause, Cupid raised his head, the glow from the morning light shining through his golden curls which lit up like a halo. "Never before have we been challenged by such a front of evil as this. Auster is missing. Now that we have seen the state of his Temples, we have to believe that, while his power obviously still remains, he is captive somewhere. Demons have been pitted against the holy realm and continue to strike against us. We do not know why our realm is the target, but Psyche and I realize we are in danger of losing our Temples in the same manner if we do not take immediate action.

"Since we do not know where the demon activity is coming from, we're locking down our Temples. Sebastian's method is working. It will protect all of you."

Whispers started as Cupid paused. "As I understand," he continued, "Sebastian's new method also reduces some of the more challenging aspects of our service."

Arrows began to talk excitedly and look about the room as Cupid nodded to Sebastian. "It's true," Sebastian confirmed. "I serviced four mortals in five hours last week. They had no idea I was involved."

Cupid nodded. "I'm deeply grateful for your efforts in our cause, Sebastian. Are these methods available for use now?"

Sebastian considered, nodding. "I will need the blood of Arrows, but not much. If we set up a rotation for donation, we'll be able to evenly contribute."

Calamity struck the room as Arrows talked together excitedly. Sebastian allowed his eyes to pass over the back of the room where Aspen stood. She smiled brightly at him, her dark eyes and military stature breaking only slightly as she acknowledged him.

Stephan rose and the speaking came to a halt. "What does Mars have to say to this?"

"I'm sure Cupid thinks it would be a huge benefit to us both." Mars spoke from the back of the room. The room fell silent as Arrows strained to see Mars walking to the front of the room.

Cupid inclined his head. "Welcome back to us, Mars. Please forgive us."

Mars chuckled, slightly. "Oh, think nothing of it, brother."

Sebastian's lip curled at his tone. Even Aspen was disturbed by his response, which held more than enough malice to start a quarrel. Before that could happen, Psyche cleared her throat and hastily changed the subject. "The demigod, Alex?"

Cupid nodded. "I have spoken to Jupiter about the unusual circumstances surrounding the recent acquisition of the newest member of our Temple, Alex. All of you know she was only just laid to rest last night from her mortal life. It was not known she would rise again as a demigod." Whispers among the Arrows started before Cupid continued. "The prolonged contact of immortal blood seems to have changed her mortal DNA. Her weakened state enabled a mutation. While the exposure to mortal blood seemed to be killing her, her body accepted the change. She and her mortal brother have been invited to join our Temple. She has accepted."

The outburst at this statement would have gone to astronomical proportions had Mars not chosen that moment to begin laughing out

Sebastian Cupid

loud, shocking the hall to silence. Cupid turned his eyes coolly to Mars. "You have something to contribute to this, Mars?"

Mars chuckled in his throat as he responded. "You seem to be able to get everything you need to continue on safely, Cupid, just as you always have. Tell me, what does it feel like to be the Golden Child?"

Cupid's expression darkened. Sebastian's breath hissed between his teeth. Cupid stood stonily, resting his eyes on Mars's impudent form. "I understand if you are upset with us for our hasty decision to hold you captive, Mars. We still need to discuss this matter."

Mars growled. "There is no discussion. You took the word of a mortal over that of a god who has been in your service for thousands of years. Your 'loyalty' is a mar on the family name."

Cupid roared. "You were seen at the site of a demon attack right before it happened."

Mars bellowed into the hall. "Right before one of my own Arrows was attacked! Does thousands of years of service to our combined Temples, my guidance over the Lead Arrows to maintain mortal balance amount to nothing? NOTHING?"

Storm clouds billowed in the sky and darkened the room as Mars's eyes glowed red with dismay. "You are nothing but a pack of corrupted lobbyists, kissing ass to make sure you get your way. I am tired of being subjected to ridicule and speculation because of the nature of the job that you bestowed on me!"

Psyche and Venus rose and stood behind Cupid as the wrath of the war god flickered across the skies in the form of lightning and thunder. The Arrows glanced around the room, dismayed at the sudden turn of events. Cupid stood regally. "We have admitted we have done wrong by keeping you hostage here, and we ask your forgiveness, Mars. We cannot do any more than that."

Mars glowered at Cupid as he slowly strode up the aisle, ignoring the snarls on either side of him as he passed. "Yes, you can." Mars stopped twenty feet from Cupid, his face a dark and ugly smear of hatred and pain. "You can keep your Temple away from me. As of now, the Lead Arrows are done serving you."

Silence was a thick blanket on the room as Cupid evaluated Mars. "You mean this? You would leave union with the Temple? Our alliance? What of your service to the mortals?"

Mars sneered. "Unlike how you have painted me as of late, Cupid, my dedication to my service has never wavered. The mortals are my charge. Since we are the ones taking the hits for our service, we'll now be the only one reaping the benefits from it. Prayers for revenge and war will come directly to my Temples, not filter through yours."

Cupid shook his head. "What about the new method? Could you not benefit from Sebastian's research? Use it for your Temple and the health of your Arrows? What about the protection of the Guardians?"

"We don't need your shortcuts, Cupid. We'll manage without your help. We're strong enough to do our job the real way."

Sebastian turned to look at Aspen, who was openly staring at Mars, a look of shock on her face. Sebastian remembered how, in her moment of weakness, she'd revealed how horrible her experiences with mortals sometimes were. Sebastian hastily stepped forward. "Mars." Mars turned to look at Sebastian, surprised at the interruption. "Please reconsider."

Mars crossed his arms. "Arrow, I have you to thank for returning Aspen to us. Knowing her as I do, she was only trying to clear my name, but don't meddle in politics you don't understand." He turned to take in the room with his red eyes, his long, dark hair billowing in the electrified energy of the storm that was now battering the Temple. "All Arrows need to consider your future. If you come to find you don't agree with what's happening here, the dangers you find yourself facing, remember there is more than one way to serve the cause of the Arrows. My door is open to you."

Cupid took a dangerous step forward, anger warring on his face. "Do you speak of mutiny, Mars? In *my* Temple?"

Mars turned only slightly, as if Cupid's anger was of no great consequence to him. "I speak of survival. There are things even you aren't prepared for, Cupid."

At that moment, Rogan entered the lobby hastily and approached Mars. "New York has been attacked!"

Sebastian Cupid

Mars growled as he strode for the door. Cupid ran behind him. "Mars! Don't face this alone!"

Mars whirled on Cupid. "I already have been! You have forced it on me!" Mars looked at the faces of Psyche and Venus behind Cupid and snarled. "I've been told a great war is coming. I suggest you all make ready. I'm going to go save what's left of my Temple."

Mars turned and strode from the lobby. Elaine and Stephan ran to join him. Sebastian rushed to where Aspen had been, but she was already following Mars. "Aspen!" he yelled. She did not slow down as she strode away from him. "Aspen!" This time he grabbed her arm, swinging her about.

"Stop it, Sebastian!"

Sebastian scowled. "It's just like that, then? You are abandoning us too?"

Aspen's face was like granite as she replied. "I am following my god, like I should have done the first time. I'd expect you to do the same."

She attempted to go again, but Sebastian held her fast, not heeding the threat in her eyes. "You know this isn't right. You know you can't face this alone."

Aspen yanked her arm roughly from Sebastian's grip. "I'm not screwing this up, Sebastian!"

If it hadn't been for the note of desperation in her voice, he might not have let her go. Since he heard it, he was shocked into standing and watching her leave. He didn't hear Russell approach until he spoke in Sebastian's ear, startling him. "She's making up for not listening to Mars the first time, when he was innocent."

Sebastian shook his head. "Mars is going to lose his Temple to the demons. The future of all the Arrows will be like the ashes of hell if the Lead Arrows fall."

Russell and Sebastian looked at each other as the Arrows in the room broke into a panic. Sebastian gazed at the front of the room where Cupid, Psyche, and Venus stood, deep in conversation. Sebastian whirled to the stairs, and Victoria and Russell followed him as he took the steps two at a time. Russell strode with Sebastian to his rooms. Victoria panted from behind. "What are you doing, Sebastian?"

Sebastian shook his head. "I don't know. I have to find a way to convince Mars we are better in this war if we are united against the demons and whoever else."

Russell turned to Victoria as they approached the door of Sebastian's room. "Come clean, Victoria."

She blinked. "What do you mean?"

Russell snarled. He had never once in his life shown her any anger, and the effect was immediate as she looked at him in shock. "No games! What were you up to in Hans's corridor the day Sebastian and I went to save Aspen?"

Victoria swallowed. "I was...talking to Rogan."

Russell blinked. "Talking to Rogan?"

Victoria nodded, slowly. "I've been...staying in his room."

Sebastian chuckled. "It seems that there's more going on here than you think, Russell."

Victoria nearly blushed, but then caught herself. "The Lead Arrows have a lot more in common with us than you think, Russell."

Sebastian nodded as he finished packing a bag. "That they do." He looked up at Victoria. "We need to go show them we aren't giving up on them."

Russell stepped up to Sebastian. "You can't go do this. Not without Cupid's okay."

"I know. I'm going to go get it."

Victoria nodded. "Me too."

Evans burst into the room, followed by Alex and Glen. "Is it true?"

Russell, Victoria, and Sebastian all glanced at each other before Russell shrugged and replied, "Which part?"

"The part where Mars's Temple in New York was attacked?"

Sebastian nodded as he went to unlock his wardrobe and retrieve his duffle bags. "Seems to be. Mars just left, right after he excommunicated all of us."

"What?" Evans replied in shock.

Russell nodded. "It's been a real mess of a morning, added to the fact Victoria's been seeing a convict on the sly."

Sebastian Cupid

Victoria promptly reached over and punched Russell in the gut, hard. Glen snickered as Russell grasped his stomach. Evans just shook her head. “Never mind. What is going on?”

Sebastian sighed. “The short version is that Mars is pissed with us for locking him up. He’s headed to New York to try to save his Temple. All Golden Arrows are on lock down. I’m going to New York. Questions?”

Everyone started speaking at once. Sebastian raised his hands, silencing them. “Stop. If you have a valid argument, speak. Otherwise, leave me alone to pack in peace.”

Victoria shook her head. “I have about a million arguments, Sebastian.”

“Do any of them hold up against my rebuttal that it’s the right thing to do?” Everyone looked at each other silently. “I have never liked Mars. You know this. But I don’t think he has had anything to do with the demon attacks. We screwed up, kept him hostage, and now his Temples are in danger, which puts us all in danger.”

Russell turned to him. “This doesn’t have anything to do with Aspen, does it?” Sebastian scowled at him, and he raised his hands. “Never mind.”

Sebastian grabbed his duffel bags from the wardrobe and threw them on the bed. “It has to do with all Arrows. Without Lead Arrows, Golden Arrows won’t exist. Without their support, we’re doomed to lose our Temple too.”

“He’s right.”

Everyone turned to see Venus standing in the bedroom doorway, flanked by Cupid and Psyche. Sebastian’s hands stopped packing. Venus entered. “You’re going to Mars?”

Sebastian swallowed. “I was coming to see you all first. I need your support to go talk to Mars.”

Cupid nodded as he approached Sebastian. “You think you can convince him to join with us?”

Sebastian shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Psyche sighed. “Sebastian, I know you want to fix everything, but you know we can’t let you go into a war zone.”

Sebastian crossed his arms and looked at his duffel bag, considering. Venus tilted her head at him. "Mars made his choice. He has to live with it."

Russell cleared his throat. "Even if it means the collapse of Mars's empire? You know if the Lead Arrows collapse, we will eventually collapse too."

The room was silent as everyone considered this. Sebastian looked back up into the eyes of his father. "Mars is only reacting to what we've done, and it's my fault it happened in the first place. If I hadn't interrupted Russell that night, Alex would never have been there in the first place. I wouldn't have infected her with my blood. She wouldn't be a demigod. She wouldn't have falsely identified Mars, and we wouldn't have taken him prisoner."

Psyche shook her head. "You're forgetting something, Sebastian. Mars wasn't falsely identified. Alex saw Mars. We don't know what he was doing there yet, and he left before we could find out."

"If his empire falls, we may never find out."

Psyche looked at Cupid. Cupid faced Sebastian. "Mars left a few minutes ago. If you rush, you might be able to catch him before he flies to New York. Do not go to New York, understand?" Sebastian nodded. "If you are able to talk to him before he leaves, find out what you can. Let him know he will have the support of the Golden Arrows if he returns here. We can send out our Guardians to stop the demon attacks at all of his Temples. It is in our best interests to keep the Lead Arrows in operation. The survival of the mortal world depends on it."

Sebastian hurriedly turned to the wardrobe and pulled the last duffel bag out. He carried it to the foot of his bed and opened it, turning to speak with Psyche. "You can start collecting blood from the Arrows to begin creation of the tablets so we can maintain peace among the mortals while we are off of the streets. Garrett should be able to help you. My notebooks in this bag give step-by-step instructions on how to get started."

Cupid unzipped the bag and began sifting through the contents while Sebastian turned to collect ammunition from his dresser. "I'd like to take Russell and Victoria with me."

Glen glanced over. "Can Alex and I help?"

Sebastian Cupid

Sebastian considered. "It's just not a safe place for a mortal."

Alex stepped forward. "I could help."

Evans shook her head. "Definitely not. You're not familiar with your powers yet."

Alex lifted a hand and all of the doors and windows slammed shut at the same time. "I've been practicing."

Russell lifted his eyebrows and looked at Sebastian. "You have to admit. It might be extremely useful to have someone around that might be able to slow Mars's departure."

Everyone turned to look at Cupid, who had been silently considering everything. He nodded slowly. "You can take Alex. Glen stays here. Take several Guardians and Russell and Victoria."

Sebastian nodded briskly, and they started for the door. Glen prepared to state a rebuttal, but Evans shook her head at him. He glowered silently. Just before Sebastian left the room, Psyche glanced over her shoulder. "Sebastian?"

He turned. "Yes, mother?"

Psyche held up the duffel bag. "There are no notebooks in here."

Sebastian stopped, confusion crossing his face. He walked to the bag and sifted through it, throwing lab equipment on the bed as he dug through. Frustration crossed his face he went back over to the wardrobe. He yanked open the doors and drawers and started tossing things out of them. "But, I don't... I locked them in here." He stopped moving suddenly. "They were here before the meeting, Russ."

Russell looked down at Sebastian. "All of us were in the meeting."

Venus shook her head. "All of us but Rogan and Mars."

NINETEEN

Sebastian, Russell, Alex, Victoria, and a handful of Guardians stomped out of the front doors of Temple less than three minutes later. They all piled into the van waiting for them in the drive, and one of the Guardians took the wheel, speeding off toward O'Hare Airport.

Sebastian turned to Alex. "We have to stop him. If that research gets into the wrong hands, all the Arrows are in danger. How does your talent work?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you have to see stuff to move it?"

"I don't know. Hang on." She closed her eyes and moments later a handful of change floated up into the air. "Okay, let me try something else." She closed her eyes again and concentrated very hard for a few moments before shaking her head and looking at Sebastian. "I can move stuff I can't see, but I have to know where it is. I could get the change out of my pocket, but I couldn't bring myself a cup of coffee from Temple. I can't remember where my coffee mug is."

Sebastian considered this. "I don't think I should call and ask Aspen where they are. It just might make them run faster. What about changing things so we can go faster than everyone else?"

Alex considered this and nodded. She looked up at the stoplight they were approaching. Instead of turning yellow like it was about to do, it stayed green. The van maneuvered its way around cars, zipping through traffic. Alex continued to manipulate stop lights and slow neighboring traffic as the group made their way toward Mars. It was morning, and the work commute traffic was starting to build as they

got closer to O'Hare. Russell glanced at Alex and realized her coloring was pale. "Are you okay?"

Alex nodded. "I've never done this much at once before. I guess it's making me a little tired."

Russell grabbed a bottle of water from his jacket pocket and passed it to Alex. "Here, have a drink."

Alex took the bottle, gratefully. She downed half of the bottle in a few gulps and smiled. "That actually feels much better. Thanks."

Victoria suddenly pointed through the windshield. "There they are!"

Sure enough, Sebastian could see Mars's SUV in the traffic in front of them. He looked over at Alex. "We need to talk to them alone, where we aren't going to be disturbed. I'll call and ask Aspen to meet us at that parking lot right over there. In the event they refuse, can you manipulate the cars that way?"

Alex nodded, but Russell noticed she wasn't as attentive as she had been. "Try calling them first, Sebastian."

Sebastian took his cell phone from his pocket and found Aspen's number, which he had from the night he'd gotten her S.O.S. call. After a couple of rings, Aspen's voice came over the line. "Aspen, it's Sebastian." Russell strained to hear what Aspen was saying in reply, but couldn't make anything out. "Listen, we need to meet with you guys before you leave town. We're right behind you." Sebastian paused as she replied. "You don't understand. Mars has something of mine, and we cannot let him leave town with it. Cupid sent us to talk to him on his behalf."

A few seconds later, Sebastian nodded. "We're right behind you now. Just pull into that parking lot to the east. We won't take more than a couple of minutes."

Sure enough, the van in front of them pulled into the exit lane, and they followed. Russell leaned over and patted Alex's hand. "You can stop now, Alex." She nodded and leaned her head back on the seat, sipping the rest of the water. As she closed her eyes, the color began returning to her face.

"I think I need to practice more. Maybe I'll be able to do it for longer."

Sebastian Cupid

Russell smiled. "You did amazing. We never would have caught up to them if you hadn't been with us."

Alex smiled, happy to have been able to contribute. The van pulled off of the interstate right behind the SUV. They followed into the empty parking lot of a nightclub. Quickly, they all exited the van, the Guardians leading the way. Only Alex stayed behind to rest.

As Sebastian approached the SUV, Aspen got out of the car, a look of annoyance on her face. "This is really too far, Sebastian. You know why I have to leave."

Sebastian scowled. "This actually isn't about you at all. We really need to talk to Mars. He has my notebooks."

Aspen blinked in surprise, and then looked behind her as Mars emerged from the SUV. "What is it, Sebastian?" His face was forced into a snarl as he approached. "We don't have time to waste on Golden Arrow business."

"We came to offer assistance. Cupid has promised he will give you full Guardian support if you return to Temple. We'll send them to your New York Temple right away."

Mars laughed, but it was cold and low. "Are you kidding? I ran from your Temple on purpose. You guys are more dangerous than what I am running to."

Victoria stood up next to Sebastian, along with Russell and the Guardians. In response, the SUV's occupants began lining up beside Mars and Aspen. Elaine and Stephan stood on either side of Mars while Rogan stood next to Aspen. Sebastian stood stiffly, watching Mars. "I can't let you leave until you tell us what you're up to."

Mars shouted. "Are we going to go over this again? I am not the guilty party. The fact that you would even accuse me so soon after you've screwed up my whole Temple is insulting." He advanced threateningly. "I should wipe you out just for implying it."

Sebastian placed his hand on his pistol, but it did no good. At a flick of Mars's hand, all of the guns the Golden Arrows were carrying slid across the pavement, landing several yards away. "You dare threaten me, a god, with your measly weapons?" Mars glowered.

Sebastian yelled. "Whether you come with us or not, I can't let you leave until you return my notes!"

Mars only glowered at him. "Notes?"

Victoria shouted. "The notes from Sebastian's research. They were missing when you left from Temple."

Sebastian nodded and looked back to Aspen, who was watching Mars. "They were in there this morning before our meeting. After Mars has left, the notes are gone."

Mars's face began to turn red with anger. The sky boiled with his temper, the thunderclouds he conjured billowing overhead. "YOU DARE ACCUSE ME AGAIN, SEBASTIAN?" he spat. "You know NOTHING!" Lightning ripped across the sky and the breeze sifted around Mars as he stared them down. The Guardians quickly reached for their Swords of Light, which sprang to life at their touch, their light flashing in Mars's red eyes.

Sebastian shook his head. "Don't do this Mars! If you attack us, you destroy everyone! We want you to return with us, protect all the Arrows!"

Mars shouted, "What good would that do? I've got Temples burning to the ground as we speak, and there is no lack of hostility at your Temple."

Sebastian shook his head. "If you go on your own, you at least need to return my notebooks."

Mars frowned. "I don't know what you're talking about. I have no notebooks."

Sebastian growled. "No games, Mars! My research. The notebooks were there this morning before the meeting, and now they are gone. You're the only one who has left."

Awareness flashed through Mars's face, and he glanced at Rogan. "Oh, no," he said.

"What? Mars?" Russell yelled as the Lead Arrows and their leader exchanged glances.

Mars turned and faced Sebastian. "You're in even greater danger than you know..."

The wind began to howl, and a suffocating expanse of air suddenly pressed down on them all. Dust flew up from the streets, and Sebastian heard the squeal of tires as cars were jerked from their lanes, crashing into each other on the interstate beside them. Before their very eyes,

Mars's feet started to lift from the ground. "Stop!" Mars howled. Aspen and Rogan ran to grab him, but they were too late, and Mars began to whirl into the sky. Suddenly he stopped in mid air. His eyes popped open in shock as he looked behind Russell. They all turned to see Alex standing in the open door of the van, her hands held up to the sky, intense concentration on her face as she struggled to hold Mars against the howling wind. The storm was still raging, but Alex just barely managed to keep Mars suspended with her power.

Russell looked at Alex in panic as sweat beaded down her brow. "I can't hold him for very long, Russell," she said. "The wind is too strong, and I'm still weak from before."

Aspen and Rogan yelled at Mars as he threshed in the sky. Sebastian ran under him. "Mars!" he cried up to the war god. "Who is it? Who is holding Auster?"

The wind cried and a bolt of lightning flickered through the sky. The wind tangled with it and sparks flew as it bounced off of the pavement. "Mars!" yelled Sebastian. "Stop the storm!"

Mars shook his head. "It's not me this time," he yelled as he was tossed head over feet. The Guardians ran to his aid, but how does one attack the wind? Then a small car flew over their heads. They all ducked except for Mars, who was broadsided by the vehicle. Twisting in the air, he suffered the brunt of the impact. A long finger of air from a funnel cloud started descending out of the sky as Mars was dragged upwards. He gasped as he looked down at the ground. "You have to stop her!" cried Mars. Then the sky lit up in a great flash. Russell jumped and threw Alex to the ground as a pillar of lightning struck where she had been standing. As soon as Alex hit the ground, Mars was released as though he had been held in a sling shot. He flew into the storm clouds above them all, disappearing in seconds, panic on his face. Sebastian looked up in time to see Mars vanish with a final rumble of thunder.

The remaining Arrows and Guardians panted as they watched the sky, looking for a sign of Mars. "I don't see him," yelled Victoria.

Rogan turned and shoved Sebastian. "What the hell are you doing? Why did you stop us? We could have been on the way to New York by now."

Russell jumped to his feet, his long hair whipping across his face as he went to stand next to Sebastian. "And what good would that have done, Rogan? How would being in an airplane make you any more protected from that?"

They all looked into the sky. The wind began to die down and the storm faded. Sebastian wondered if this meant Mars's powers were stopped or if he was only too far away. Sebastian turned to look at the group. "We can't stay here. It could be one of us next." Sebastian turned his face toward the sound of sirens in the distance. "And the mortals are coming."

Rogan and Aspen looked at each other. "What should we do?" Aspen asked him.

Victoria motioned back to their van. "You had better all come with us."

Rogan snorted. "What? Back to your Temple?"

Russell shrugged. "Where are you going to go? Back to yours? It's gone by now, and we both know it. The best option you guys have is to go back to ours and assemble your Arrows there, under the protection of all of our gods and the Guardians."

Elaine and Stephan glanced at each other, then at Rogan. Aspen stepped forward. "How do we know they will protect us?"

Russell laughed. "We offered you protection before! The only reason you're in this position is because you walked away from us the first time."

Rogan stepped forward to retort, but Sebastian lifted his hands, cutting him off. "Listen, we've all made mistakes, but we can't divide forces now. Whoever is behind this is dangerously close to ending everything." He walked to the Lead Arrows' SUV and started digging around.

Rogan turned around and shouted. "What are you doing?"

Sebastian started throwing things out of the Lead Arrows' car. Aspen stood with her mouth open as their various possessions bounced off of the pavement. Sebastian ducked out of the car to look at Russell. "They aren't here. If Mars had them, they were on his person."

Rogan growled. "He told you he didn't have them."

Sebastian Cupid

Sebastian turned and yelled at Rogan. "Would you be willing to bet on your life and the life of every Arrow you know that it wasn't in your car? That no one in your car took them?" Rogan and his group looked among each other, warily. "I don't trust you right now, and I don't think you trust me either. That's just fine with me. Fact of the matter is, whoever took that notebook has the key to putting an end to the entire Arrow empire."

Sebastian marched past them toward his own van. Aspen followed, quickly. "How is that even possible?"

Sebastian turned, nearly making her run into him. He gazed down at her. "Because those notebooks document how to maintain mortal peace using only Arrow blood."

Aspen stopped short, gasping. Elaine took a tentative step forward. "You mean...?"

Russell cursed and turned. "That's it! That's why Jeremy's blood was drained."

Aspen stuttered for a second then looked up into Sebastian's eyes. Sebastian tried not to feel anything as the fear shone in hers. She swallowed as she said, "That's why they were draining my blood."

Stephan spoke, matter-of-factly. "Someone has been following your work."

"At first I thought it was Mars."

Victoria considered this. "That would explain why he was at the café before the demon attacks, even if he didn't send the demons."

Sebastian nodded. "And then Aspen followed me."

Aspen nodded, looking at the group. "And I was following him because of the research, but only because I wanted to talk to him about it out of my own personal interest. I wasn't acting on anyone's orders."

Rogan stepped forward. "Aspen?"

She turned to look at him and nodded. "I'm sorry, Rogan. You and Mars were arrested because I was foolish. Everything got way out of hand."

Rogan shook his head. "It's not like I don't understand, Aspen, I just..."

Everyone else just looked between each other quizzically, as Rogan and Aspen fell silent. Sebastian shook his head. "We can go over all of this later. Right now, we need to get back to Temple."

The Guardians nodded. "We need to all go in the van," one said.

"Why?" asked Elaine.

"Because we can't protect you all in two different vehicles."

Alex nodded. "And I can't protect what I can't see."

"Yes, let's leave now. Aspen?" Sebastian said.

She turned to look at him, her brow furrowed. "Yes?"

"Call all of your Temples. Have them all go to the Golden Arrow Temples, where the Guardians can protect them. It looks like we're at war."

TWENTY

The atmosphere was in a state of panic when Sebastian and the others returned to Temple. Lead Arrows had started arriving. Golden Arrows and Lead Arrows alike were lining the hallways, talking animatedly in corners. There was a thick degree of separation between them, but they didn't seem as preoccupied by social status as they had been only days ago.

When Aspen and Sebastian led their group in through the front doors of Temple, heads turned around the room and Arrows pointed, whispering urgently to each other. Nodding at a few, Sebastian and the others didn't dare stop on their way to Psyche's office. They were met at her office by Guardians who opened it without knocking. Russell moved Alex to a seat in front of Psyche's desk immediately while the others stood, waiting for Psyche to speak. Russell was still concerned about Alex's pale complexion. Psyche walked to Alex and knelt in front of her. "Are you okay?"

Alex nodded. "I really am. I'm just tired, and Russell is a worry wart."

Russell scowled while Psyche chuckled. "He is, but you can't tell him that. You did us a great service today, Alex, and we will not forget it." Psyche stood and turned to the Guardians at the door, which stood open. "Go get Glen, and close the door behind you."

The Guardians nodded and went to carry out her orders. As the door closed, Psyche turned to the rest of the group. "Are all of you alright? Was anyone hurt?"

Heads shook around the room. "We're fine," Victoria said. "But Mars..." she hesitated and turned to look at Rogan, who glowered.

Sebastian Cupid

Psyche nodded. “Sebastian told me Mars was taken when he called me on the way here. Cupid is sending Guardians to all of Mars’s Temples to bring the Lead Arrows safely into our Temples. Mars’s New York Temple was destroyed.”

Aspen gasped, and Rogan cursed. Sebastian didn’t seem shocked at all. There was a knock at the door, and Glen entered, followed by Venus. Psyche nodded to Venus. “I just finished telling them about New York.”

Venus pursed her lips. “Such a waste. If we don’t step in, Mars’s Temples will be like all Auster’s, his Temple members scattered to the winds.” She turned to Sebastian. “How soon can we start collecting blood for the lab to make into tablets?”

Sebastian shook his head. “We can’t.”

Psyche’s eyes widened as she stepped forward. “Mars didn’t return the notebooks?”

“He claimed to not have them. I looked through the car after he was taken. They weren’t there. Even if he did, they are in the wrong hands now.”

Psyche braced her hands on the edge of her desk, sitting shakily. Venus looked coldly at Rogan and Aspen. “You never saw Mars with the notebooks?”

They both shook their heads. Rogan spoke up. “There wasn’t time. He left straight from the meeting...”

Venus cut him off. “Yes, but there were several minutes between when he was released and when he came to the meeting that he wasn’t accounted for. He was supposedly packing his belongings.”

Sebastian looked up. “Did you search his rooms?”

Venus nodded. “They were clean.”

Psyche took a deep breath, shaking her head. “With the fall of Auster’s empire and the threatening of Mars’s, our world is beginning to show its cracks. If we stop providing services to the mortals, we will soon see a rift in the mortal world as well.”

Alex looked up from her seat. “What kind of ‘rift’?”

Russell looked down at her and swallowed before he turned to Glen. “The kind of thing you’d expect. Fights, murder, thefts. Literally no one will fall in love without us. Not even infatuation.”

Glen blinked. "If there is already war and fighting without your help, why are the Lead Arrows still needed?"

Victoria looked at him. "Without Lead Arrows, one would never fall out of love. They wouldn't care about anything else but the love they've found. They'd ignore their jobs, their kids. There has to be a balance to everything."

Glen swallowed. "Will this happen to me too?"

Evans looked over at him. "Yes." Glen met her eyes. They were full of emotion as she continued. "You'll eventually just not be able to find anything good in the world. You'll stop wanting to live."

Sebastian turned to look at Psyche. "I can remember part of the codes. I might still have something at the apartment. The bulk of my most recent research was in the notebooks, but all of my completed research from the last trial is backed up to my computer. I can go get it."

Aspen walked forward to stand next to him. "I'll go with you."

Psyche nodded. "You made a good team before against the demon. Go get whatever you can. Watch each others' backs. Rogan and I will work on getting the Lead Arrows out of Mars's Temples and into ours."

Aspen looked at Psyche. "Mars didn't do this."

Psyche nodded. "I know." She sighed. "I knew in my heart he didn't. I should have trusted that."

Rogan looked at Psyche. "Will all of our Temples have to fall?"

Psyche placed a hand on his forearm. "Our hope is if we pull the Lead Arrows out of your Temples and place them under the protection of the Guardians, the demons will stop attacking. Whoever is sending them will see it is useless to send them against empty Temples. We just don't have enough Guardians to send to all the Lead Arrow Temples. We'd fall short and leave ourselves unguarded."

Rogan nodded. "Are you investigating Mars's disappearance?"

"Cupid has gone straight to the place where you left him only minutes after you left. He took a legion of Guardians with him. Sadly, he was not optimistic."

"Why not?" asked Victoria.

Sebastian Cupid

“It seems as though Auster’s powers are being used, which is really wise of his captor. Auster’s powers span the globe. Whoever it is can act from anywhere without being detected.”

Sebastian hesitated before asking the question on everyone’s mind. “What does Jupiter think about all of this?”

“He’s begun interrogating every god under his realm. He started with Pluto in the Underworld, for the obvious reason. But since Pluto is in charge of his own powerful realm, there was little suspicion on him. On top of which, he has been accounted for during all of the attacks.”

Rogan spoke. “He investigated all of you?” Russell turned to gape at Rogan, who shrugged. “It’s a fair question.”

Psyche nodded. “It is. We are going to be, yes, though we are low on the list. It’s our realm that is being attacked.”

“As well as ours,” Rogan said.

Psyche nodded. “I consider them as one, since one cannot survive without the other. The survival of us all weighs on our ability to safeguard all Arrows from these attacks and maintain balance in the mortal world.” She turned to Sebastian. “We need to get information so we can start, Sebastian.”

Sebastian nodded and turned, Aspen joining him as they crossed the threshold. They didn’t speak again until they were out of Temple, away from the inquisitive eyes and ears of other Arrows. Sebastian turned to look at her. “What do you think?”

Aspen turned to look at Sebastian. “Mars was being threatened.”

Sebastian turned to her in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“Rogan was telling me on the way to the airport he often heard a female voice in the neighboring room where Mars was being held in your Temple. He couldn’t make out the owner of the voice, but it was a woman’s. She was usually arguing with him.”

Sebastian frowned at the sidewalk, considering this as they made their way to his apartment, flanked by two guardians. “And then when he was taken today, he said ‘stop her’.”

Aspen nodded. “Rogan said there was always a wind whenever the voice came to Mars. It would rattle his window. The actual person

never was there. The door never opened or closed. Plus, whoever it was would have to get past Guardians stationed outside his door.”

Sebastian turned the corner onto the street where he lived. “Whoever it is isn’t stupid. Whatever she said to Mars must have scared him because he never confided in any of us.”

“He must not have given in to her, because she’s started attacking his Temples.”

Sebastian nodded, slipping his key into the front door of his apartment building. “He didn’t heed the threat, and now he’s being punished.”

Aspen swallowed as she looked up into Sebastian’s face. “What do you think she could do with the powers of the god of war in her control?”

Sebastian turned to look at her. “I don’t know, but it’s going to be a lot worse if the mortals are in a state of panic. They have too many weapons of mass destruction to be allowed to be emotionally unbalanced for any length of time.”

He entered the building, holding the door for Aspen. They took the elevator to the third floor where Sebastian’s apartment was located. A few feet from the elevator entrance, Sebastian came to an abrupt halt, holding up a hand to stop Aspen. They both reached for their guns, holding their weapons as they walked carefully down the hallway toward Sebastian’s apartment door, which was slightly ajar. Aspen took up a position on one side of the door while Sebastian took the other. Nodding silently at Aspen, he pushed the door open slowly with one hand while Aspen covered the area with her gun. Sebastian glanced over his shoulder into the apartment. He slipped silently through the door with Aspen behind him. They worked their way methodically through the apartment. Sebastian tried to ignore the destruction and wreckage of his place. Drawers were emptied, cushions slashed open. Glass was shattered in the kitchen. The security alarm’s wires hung from the wall where they had been snipped. Coming through the apartment from opposite directions, Sebastian and Aspen met in the living room, near a window which was open.

Aspen swallowed before speaking. “They came in through the window, left through the door?”

Sebastian Cupid

“Yes. You can see by the treads on the carpet.” He walked to the open window and looked out. There was no hand or footholds on the side of the building. He glanced at his feet on damp carpet as he faced her again. “Did it rain yesterday?”

Aspen shook her head. “Not that I remember.”

“This happened more than a day ago. Someone came here when Russell and I left town, after I got the message here about where you were.”

“You think someone was watching you?”

“There is no forced entry. Whoever it is came right in through the window, using wind. There’s no way to climb up here. Then, knowing I wasn’t here, they just walked in and disabled the security system.” He walked into the office, and Aspen followed. She carefully stepped around the papers and books scattered all over the floor. Sebastian walked to his desk and opened the drawers, which were almost all empty. He checked the contents, pulling some papers out and making a pile of them on the top of the desk. Kneeling on the floor, he opened the panel where the computer tower was stored. Glancing at the floor, he cursed before he rose up and placed the tower on the desk. It was dripping.

Aspen raised her eyebrows. “They put water on it?”

Sebastian nodded. “It’s password protected. They must have realized they weren’t going to get anything out of it and tried to destroy it. Russell works with computers a lot, I’ll take the hard drive to him, give him the passwords.” Sebastian popped open the cover and pulled the hard drive from its slot.

Aspen glanced around the room. “You think whoever was here was the same one that took your notebooks?”

Sebastian shrugged. “Evidence here points to the same person. They used Auster’s powers to get in. If it was the same person, though, that’s really bad for us.” Aspen looked at him silently until he turned to face her. “Whoever took the notebooks in Temple had to be able to get past security. Mars was invited, so he could go wherever he wished, but no one without Arrow blood can enter our Temples uninvited. If Mars didn’t take those notebooks, it could only mean someone else within the Temple is involved.”

Aspen nodded. "And that same someone would know when you were leaving and where you were going."

"Exactly."

Aspen shivered. "Mars is right about it being dangerous everywhere right now. No wonder he felt the need to run." She glanced up at Sebastian. "Why do you trust me?"

Sebastian looked down at her in surprise. "You were nearly drained when I found you, steps away from going to the Afterlife."

"You think I owe you?"

Sebastian shook his head. "Not at all. You were willing to sacrifice yourself for the Arrows. There are few people I could trust that much."

Aspen smiled, in spite of herself.

Sebastian lifted a hand and brushed it on her cheek, pushing his lips to her brow. "You're not what I expected at all."

"I'm sorry."

Sebastian laughed. "It's okay. I meant that in a good way."

Aspen shook her head, looking up at him. "No, I mean I'm sorry I left Temple like I did, following Mars."

Sebastian shrugged. "No apology needed. The one thing we agree on is we are obligated to support our god. It's also the one thing that can tear us apart."

Aspen closed her eyes, breathing deeply. She didn't like admitting someone reached her. In the business of being an Arrow, you couldn't afford to invest your emotions. She swallowed as she turned and opened her eyes, walking toward the door of the office. She resisted the urge to run her shaking hand over her heart in an effort to push it back into her chest where it belonged.

Sebastian exhaled as she walked away, thinking some distance was safer. Who knew where they would be tomorrow?

TWENTY-ONE

When they got back to Temple, the crowd was no less subdued than it had been before. Sebastian immediately went off in search of Russell while Aspen went to find Rogan and Psyche, who were still trying to get the Lead Arrows to safety. Sebastian knocked on Russell's door. Checking to verify he wasn't there, Sebastian walked back down to the second floor, which is where all of the combat rooms were. It didn't take much searching for him to find Russell, who was engaged in a spar with Glen.

Sebastian smiled as he entered the room. Russell and Glen were faced off in the middle of the floor, circling each other in concentration. There was no sound for several seconds as they weighed each other. Then Russell sprang forward, catching Glen with a strong left hook. Barely a second later, Russell's foot swept under Glen's throwing him to his back. Russell knelt over Glen, pressing a knife at his throat that seemed to materialize from nowhere.

Sebastian shook his head. "I keep running into you two like this."

Russell glanced up and grinned. Glen made use of the distraction by sweeping his hand up, disabling Russell's knife hand and rolling him over to switch positions. Glen now had the advantage and the knife. Glen grinned. Russell grunted. "Good."

Sebastian walked to Glen. "You're pretty strong for a mortal."

Glen shrugged and got up, handing the knife back to Russell. He was breathing hard and a slick sheen of sweat glistened on his face. "I lived on the street for most of my life. Unfortunately, for many years my competition was bigger than me."

“At least you’ve found a good place to channel your negative energy.”

Glen glanced at him in surprise. “How did you know?”

“That you feel like crap? You look terrible.”

Glen shook his head. “I can’t explain it. Everything seems so...dark.”

“Well, if Russell would stop playing around, we could get to work on it.” Sebastian reached into his jacket pocket and produced the hard drive and papers. “Someone trashed the apartment, including my computer.”

Russell stopped cleaning up the combat room to look at Sebastian. “When?”

“It looks like when you and I went to Seattle.”

“It was someone that knew you’d be gone.”

Sebastian nodded. “It looks that way. No forced entry other than to disable the security system. And they flew in. Third floor window was open.”

Glen glanced between the two men. “What does that mean?” Russell exchanged a look with Sebastian before turning to Glen. “It means it’s an inside job.”

Glen whistled through his teeth. “Shit.”

Russell nodded. “You said it.” He turned to Sebastian. “Did you tell Mom yet?”

Sebastian shook his head. “No. I came straight to you to give you this so we can start getting the mortals back on the right page.”

Russell nodded. “And the passwords ...? Oh, you wrote them here. Yeah, I should be able to do this. I’ll run by and tell mom too, before I start. She’ll be happy to know we can make some progress, though she’ll be pretty upset about the other business.”

All of them turned as Aspen entered the room. “Sebastian, we didn’t come back with that a moment too soon. Rogan told me there was just a school shooting in Lincoln Park.”

Sebastian turned to Russell. “The sooner the better.”

“I’ll see what I can get off of this.”

“Keep it secret,” Sebastian said. “We don’t know who we can trust outside of this room.”

Sebastian Cupid

Russell nodded as he left. Glen turned to leave. "I'm going to go find Alex."

"Is she feeling better?" Sebastian asked.

"I think so. She said she was going to lay down for a nap." He left the room as Sebastian turned to Aspen. "What else did Rogan have to say?"

"Not much. He's very distracted by the state of the Temples. I've been doing some thinking."

"About what?"

"If the attack on your apartment happened while we were out, then Mars and Rogan are innocent. They were still in captivity at that time."

Sebastian nodded. "I already knew Mars was innocent, seeing as how he's just been kidnapped. It's nice to eliminate Rogan from the list though. What about Elaine and Stephan?"

Aspen shook her head. "They were here, having a meeting with Psyche. They didn't leave the Temple again until today."

Sebastian sighed. "I hate to admit it could be one of the Golden Arrows."

"I understand, but I don't think it's safe to trust anyone."

"True enough. We know Russell is innocent, as he was with me. And Alex was dead. Sort of."

"And Glen was with Alex."

Sebastian sighed. "There are hundreds of Arrows, Lead and Gold. We can't do it by process of elimination. We're going to have to find Mars or Auster. Then we'll find who is responsible."

Aspen approached Sebastian, considering. "Do you think we can find him?"

Sebastian looked down at Aspen, who was suddenly much closer than he realized. He could see the depths of her gray eyes. His gut tightened, deliciously. It took a moment before he realized she was still waiting for an answer to her question. "Yeah...I mean, I don't know."

Aspen smiled and cocked her head to one side, completely aware of where his mind had gone. Ever since what had passed between them back at his apartment, she couldn't get him out of her head. She could tell by looking at him now, he had been thinking of her too. She decided Sebastian was pretty cute when he was flustered. She touched

his chest through his black t-shirt on the pretense of removing lint before softly dragging her fingernails across the fabric. She peeked up at Sebastian through her eyelashes and was pleased to see his jaw was clenched.

Sebastian was sure if she continued to touch him, he was going to explode. It was both a relief and a disappointment when she started backing slowly away, toward the door. He had a moment to feel really let down right before Aspen reached behind her back and engaged the lock on the door. Then something sizzled in his brain that made all logic impossible. Aspen smiled slowly and approached him, looking entirely too confident. He was a little irritated she looked so self-possessed while his system was going haywire, but damn! She was gorgeous, and she knew it.

Saying nothing, Aspen approached Sebastian, who was still on the training mat. She lifted herself up on her toes very slowly, licking her lips with her eyes on his. Sebastian saw the flare of confidence in her eyes. She was way too cocky about this. Just as she was only a breath away from touching his lips with hers, Sebastian shocked her by kicking her feet out from under her. She went down on her back on the mat, shock crossing over her face momentarily before delight set in. Sebastian's body fell on top of her as she landed. He fisted her hair in his hand, pinning her head back. She gasped in a breath to recover from the fall before Sebastian reached down with his free hand and unceremoniously ripped open her suit jacket. Black buttons flew across the floor as her white shirt was exposed, minus one button. Sebastian grinned, saucily. "Oh, I remember that now. Was that only this morning?"

Aspen chuckled, looking into Sebastian's eyes from her position on the floor. His leg was in between hers, positioning his body over hers on the mat. His eyes traveled down her torso, hesitating at the place where her white button up shirt was working itself free of her waistband. His hesitation was all she needed.

Aspen thrust her elbow into the crook of Sebastian's arm, making him fall as she hooked her leg around his knee. Using his momentum, she thrust her weight against his, she rolled him and positioned herself on his chest, pinning him beneath her. Sebastian's head bounced off of

Sebastian Cupid

the mat while his body responded violently to the weight of her on his chest. He wanted to reach, touch, tear, conquer, but her legs pinned his arms to his sides. Had she been a normal woman, he would have been able to toss her off to get the upper hand. Aspen, however, was as muscled as he. Her legs held his arms expertly, leaving her hands free to brush over his face. She slipped her fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck, her fingers plunging into the curly masses, which were fanned across the mat. She lowered her face until it was buried in his long tresses. She turned her face slowly until her nose was pressed against the back of his neck. Inhaling, she sighed.

Sebastian's heart rate skyrocketed at the purring sounds coming from Aspen. He felt her tongue marking a trail that started at the hairline on his neck and went down to his Adam's apple. When her teeth pressed in the meaty part of his neck muscles, his body tightened visibly. He felt his groin harden and strain against his pants. Fire shot through his body as he struggled to get free. If he didn't have his hands on her, he was going to go mad.

Aspen, however, only tightened her grip on his arms with her legs. She pulled back from his neck, her full, plump lips curving into a smile as she looked at him, chuckling. She lowered her lashes to look at his mouth. In spite of herself, her throat dried up. Jupiter, was there ever a more perfect mouth on a man? His face was rough with the need to shave, but his mouth looked as soft as a dream. She lowered her mouth and raised her eyes to Sebastian's as she closed her lips on his.

Sebastian couldn't help it. The moment her lips landed on his, it was like fire through his body. He was gasoline. She just lit the match. The ferocity of his response caught her off guard. His lips clamped on to hers, his tongue shooting into her mouth to claim, plunder, take. Aspen groaned deeply, and her legs relaxed enough for Sebastian's arms to yank her compact, hard body to his chest. He thrust one hand into her hair to pull her mouth chastely against his own. His tongue darted against hers, licking her greedily.

Aspen's stomach jittered and lightning coursed through her body, sending a shocking jolt of excitement between her legs. Sebastian rolled, pulling her arms above her head to stretch her out beneath him. She arched greedily as he rubbed his aching groin against hers. He

groaned deeply. She responded by wrapping her legs around his waist and pressing herself against him. Sebastian reached down and ripped her shirt open, revealing a lacy white bra underneath. He barely saw it as he yanked the scrap of fabric down to lick her breast, nibbling her flesh.

Aspen suddenly felt caged in, and she moaned as she ripped the remainder of the shirt and bra from her body. She cried out as Sebastian clenched one hand in her hair while running his other hand over her crotch, rubbing against her. Her hands flew to his shirt, tearing it from his skin. She could feel her nails scratch over his back, but neither of them could care less. The heat between them was blocking out the whole world, and neither one of them could see anything but each other. When Sebastian licked his way from Aspen's breast to her neck, she growled and slithered down under him until she could reach his pants. She clawed them from his hips, and he sprang out of them, hot and pulsing. She moaned deeply as she lapped him up. Sebastian rolled to his side, blind with lust, as she continued to take him all in her mouth. Wet and hot, she slurped him in as he groaned and clutched his hands into her hair. Her hands massaged his thighs, and Sebastian pulled her up to him, kicking off his remaining clothing before hurling himself into removing her pants. He licked as soon as he could reach her, causing Aspen to cry out and arch against him. She was deliciously hot and wet and sweet. Yanking her clothing off, he sank his fingers into her as she clawed at the mat on the floor.

He simply couldn't take it anymore. Climbing over her, he licked and lapped his way to her mouth, where they drank greedily of each other. Aspen looked into his eyes, which were clouded with passion, begging. "Please, please, please..."

Sebastian wrapped his arms around Aspen as he thrust himself into her in total abandon. The cry of satisfaction that rang out came from both of them. They kissed wildly, holding each other as they rocked. Sebastian never remembered feeling so fulfilled and energized in his life. Every movement was like Zen. Aspen's hands massaged his back as Sebastian arched into her, watching as her eyes glazed and her breath hitched. She was, without question, the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

Sebastian Cupid

Racing to the end, they took until they were spent, sighing contently in each other's arms in the light of the setting sun. They fell asleep, intertwined on the mat, oblivious to everything in the world but each other.

TWENTY-TWO

Garrett slid the needle expertly under Sebastian's skin, piercing the vein. Sebastian watched as his blood was collected to be banked. He glanced over his shoulder at Aspen, who was sitting at the medical table behind him, also giving blood. She raised her eyes and grinned at him. He had a momentary flash of the passion of the night before, making his mouth go dry. Sebastian wasn't aware what was showing on his face until Aspen smirked and slowly shook her head from side to side, rolling her eyes. Trying not to chuckle, he looked back at his arm as Garrett removed the needle from his skin, only brushing the surface of the puncture with a dry piece of gauze. The hole in Sebastian's forearm closed over in moments. There was no need for alcohol, biohazard bags, or latex gloves in a world of immortality. They all had the same blood type, and there were no diseases. It was only a matter of collection and distribution.

Garrett placed the labeled vial on the table next to the bed before turning back to Sebastian. "This is fabulous, Sebastian. Russell came to me only hours after you returned with the drive. The work you have done on this is incredible. I think I can also follow some of the recommendations for improvements you made after your last trial."

Sebastian nodded. "I don't think it would take too many alterations."

Garrett shook his head. "It's so simple. I don't know why someone hadn't attempted this before."

"Too busy trying to survive, I guess."

Garrett blinked behind his silver framed glasses. "We live in a world full of distractions."

Sebastian Cupid

“Hopefully, this will help keep us hidden until we can take care of the threat.”

“This should keep mortals in check until the danger passes. Maybe even forever. Who knows?”

Sebastian hopped off the table and walked over to where Victoria was giving blood. “Did Rogan get all of the Lead Arrows in?”

She sighed. “He’s worried. The ones he did get ahold of are in our Temples, but there are still several who are missing. They haven’t checked in. No one has seen or heard from them.”

“Any location in particular?”

Victoria shook her head. “Not at all. It seems random. Most cities are just fine but two Arrows are missing from Rome, one from Sacramento, and three from New York. They were lost in the scuffle out.”

Sebastian didn’t like this information. “Their...bodies were never found?”

“It sounds like they were taken hostage. Like...”

“Like Mars.”

Victoria nodded. “Rogan is deeply disturbed.”

“How well do you know him?”

Victoria seemed a little put off by this question and tried unsuccessfully not to stammer. “I...we...”

Sebastian rolled his eyes. “I don’t care what kind of relationship you guys have.”

Victoria stood as she finished donating blood. “We don’t have a relationship. He doesn’t trust me. Or you.”

Sebastian finished her thought for her. “Or any of us, right?” Victoria nodded. “That upsets you, doesn’t it?”

Victoria shrugged. “It’s not like I don’t understand where it comes from. His life has been hell since he came here. We haven’t managed to do a single thing for him except offer Lead Arrows protection now, after their Temples are crumbling, which is partially our fault.”

“We don’t know if that’s true. I mean, what difference would it have made if Mars, Rogan, and Aspen were at their Temple when all of this happened? We wouldn’t have sent help until the attacks started, which is exactly what we did this time. It’s just bad luck on our part or

good strategy on the behalf of the attacker, depending on how you look at it.”

Victoria sighed as they started toward the first floor, away from the horde of donators, which included just as many Lead Arrows as Golden Arrows. There were many wounded Arrows throughout the Temples that had been attacked, and Lead Arrow blood was in just as high a demand as Golden. Lead Arrows had been pulled off the streets, their service placed on hold. There certainly wasn't a short supply of hate in the mortal world at the moment.

As they approached the ground floor, they turned naturally toward Psyche's office, the hub of all information. They weren't surprised to see Hans there, talking strategy with Cupid, Venus, and Psyche.

“It wouldn't do any good, you see,” Hans was saying as they entered. “We've managed to save about half of the Temples from collapse, but we cannot simply keep our Guardians there and still protect ourselves from attack. Our Temples need the most protection right now, since they now house most of the Arrows, Lead and Golden.”

Psyche frowned as she contemplated this. “Is there no way we can keep Mars's Temples from crumbling?”

Hans shook his head. “Even if we enlisted the help of Jupiter, he'd simply send for Guardians. We're stretched across the globe right now. The only other option would be if we all went to Olympus and left our Temples. Then it might be possible to reduce Guardian coverage since there would be no Arrows to protect. We might be able to save the remaining Temples that way.”

Psyche turned to Cupid, who shook his head. Sebastian and Victoria stood silently in the doorway, simply listening to the exchange. Venus glanced at Sebastian. “You've all donated?”

Sebastian nodded. “We just came from Garrett's offices. There are hundreds of Arrows giving as we speak.”

“It is a huge relief to know at least one part of this whole mess has a solution for the time being. As you can see, we're running out of options.”

Victoria cleared her throat. “Should we not go to Olympus if it means saving all the Temples?”

Sebastian Cupid

Cupid turned to her. "I hate to run. I hate to give up our posts. We were put here as a service to mortals. It's a disgrace to leave our Temples and hide. That's like leaving mortals to fend for themselves. We cannot help them from Olympus. Eventually, we'd have to come back down the mountain anyway. We need to be thinking long term."

Sebastian nodded in agreement as he turned to look at Victoria. "I understand you want to help them. We all do. Unfortunately, running to Olympus would only cause more problems in the long run."

Hans spoke, abruptly. "We really just need to take out the threat."

Cupid shook his head. "We have no idea where they are." He turned to look at Sebastian. "You weren't able to get any information out of Mars when he left? No clues?"

Sebastian glanced at Victoria who shook her head. "Only that we needed to stop 'her'."

"Well, that doesn't narrow it down any," said Hans.

Venus raised an eyebrow. "How did you manage to get any information out of him? You said he was pulled into the air."

Sebastian nodded. "He probably would have been swept off right away, but Alex was with us. She held on to him with her power until she couldn't anymore."

"She just tired out?"

"She spent the whole trip changing stoplights for us so we could get closer to Mars. She was already losing steam, and she didn't get much of a break before shit hit the fan and Mars was getting sucked into the air."

Psyche sighed. "Like I said to her before, she did us a great service. She's a unique individual. She's gone from mortal to demigod ally in a matter of days."

Cupid looked at Sebastian, pensively. "If we were able to catch Mars's captors off guard, would Alex be able to bring Mars back here?"

Sebastian considered briefly. "The problem seems to be she can't move anything she doesn't know the location of. I don't think she has to be looking at it, but she has to know exactly where it is."

Hans cleared his throat. "So she couldn't, for instance, just want a gallon of milk from the store and get it here unless she knew exactly where the specific gallon of milk was she wanted to get."

“Right. And then there’s the whole not-attracting-the-attention-of-the-mortals thing.”

Cupid paced to the window. “We can be fairly certain wherever Mars is being held is out of mortal sight already. Whoever she is, she’s using Auster’s powers on a regular basis, and there are not many places you could do that without it being noticed.” Hans snapped his head up. “Let’s start there. How many places are there that have frequent storms, severe weather?”

Sebastian shrugged. “Are we talking in the world? In the country?”

Hans considered. “For now, let’s talk in the country. Maybe as far out as Canada. Whoever it is also has to know where we are to attack, and I’m certain they wouldn’t be too far away. If we search local and don’t find anything, we’ll expand our search.”

Sebastian nodded. “I’ll find Russell, see if he can’t do a little more research since he’s the computer whiz.”

Cupid nodded. “Good. If we can get a location, we can form a plan of attack. We can’t just sit here and cower, waiting for our turn to get attacked.” He looked over at Psyche, taking her hand. “It won’t be much longer before we’ll be directly in the crosshairs.”

Psyche leaned against Cupid. “It makes sense.”

Sebastian nodded and excused himself, turning to leave the room, Victoria following on his heels. “What do you think?” she said.

“I think Cupid and Hans are right. It’s going to be us next. Everything points to it.”

Victoria pursed her lips. “We’re at war.”

“Yep. What a terrible time to have Mars gone. Now would be a really good time to have the god of war on our side.”

As they ascended the stairs, Victoria broke off to go relay more information to Rogan. Sebastian arrived at Russell’s room on his own. The door was open, showing Russell already at work on his laptop. Sebastian entered saying, “Whatcha up to?”

Russell barely glanced at Sebastian as he entered the room and sat on the bed, watching Russell work. “Typing out those changes for Garrett from the formula you provided. Garrett wants to distribute them to the rest of his staff, get several people making tablets, and get

Sebastian Cupid

them on the streets before lunch. The mortals are getting more violent. Two bus bombs this morning and ten suicides.”

“That’s fast.”

Russell shrugged. “Well, if you think about the amount of stress in the world, it’s not surprising what the world comes to without ready love.” He turned to glance at Sebastian. “Not that you would know anything about that.”

Sebastian scowled at Russell’s knowing smirk. “I’ve got to learn how to lie.”

Russell laughed outright, leaning back in his desk chair. “You can’t. You never could. Besides, a blind person could have seen the signals. You two were roasting the airwaves over the table at breakfast.”

Sebastian shook his head and looked at the floor. Russell considered his friend for a moment. “That’s not a happy face.”

Sebastian sighed. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Commitment issues already?”

“No! No, nothing like that. Victoria is horribly guilt-ridden over the fall of Mars’s Temples, and I am too. Not just because of Mars, and not just because of the Arrows.”

“Raises the stakes to be in love, doesn’t it?”

Sebastian’s head jerked up at the word “love”. Love? He stood up and walked around the room. Russell didn’t miss a beat. “Oh, come on, Sebastian. It’s as clear as the puppy doggy look on your face. You have been super protective of her every move since she saved you and Alex. It’s not just obligation and guilt anymore, and you know it.”

Did he? Sebastian stared at the trees outside Russell’s window as he thought. True, he’d never really allowed himself to feel this way about another person since he’d become an Arrow. Arrows, as a rule, were too busy falling in love with mortals. Since that never ended well, he’d walled himself in. Was he lonely? Sure. They all were. Was he in love?

Sebastian was so absorbed in his internal debate he didn’t hear Russell approach. He jumped a little when Russell stopped beside him. “It’s okay, buddy. It’s not like she’s a mortal.”

“She doesn’t have to be a mortal to hurt someone, does she?”

Russell considered this. “No. But it’s not like she doesn’t know what it means to be an Arrow. Could be she needs you just as much as you need her.”

Before they could talk about it further, Alex entered the room, coming up short when she saw Sebastian. “Oh, hey,” she said, hesitating.

Sebastian considered it really, really impressive that he managed to keep his face straight at the look on Russell’s. Russell was one to lecture about love and whatnot given the way he changed when Alex came into the room.

Sebastian smiled at Alex. “Hey. Feeling better?”

Alex smiled, dimples popping out in both cheeks. “Yeah. Glen forced me into bed rest all night, even though I insisted I was fine to come down to dinner.”

Russell chuckled, even though it wasn’t really that funny. “You didn’t miss much. It was meatloaf night. But don’t tell Rita I said that.” Rita was the Temple cook. She had the heart of a lion and the mouth of one too.

Sebastian didn’t linger too long in the silence that followed. He obviously wasn’t needed for whatever Alex had come in for. Sebastian turned to Russell. “Russ, Hans needs you to do something.”

Russell snapped into work mode immediately. “Sure, what?”

“He needs you to compile a list of places in the US and Canada that have frequent storms, particularly wind.”

Russell looked confused for a second, then Sebastian could see it click behind his eyes. “Ohhhhhhh,” he said. “Looking for Auster?”

Sebastian nodded. “Cupid figures if we find the storms, we find the captor.”

“Makes sense, I’ll have it before lunch.”

“I’ll let him know. See you guys later.” He walked over to give Alex a hug, which surprised her and made Russell’s teeth grind, which was really what he was going for. “See you later too.”

“Okay...” Alex said, flustered, but pleased. Sebastian grinned as he left in response to Russell’s scowl.

Sebastian headed toward the end of the corridor where Hans’s rooms were. The door was open, though Guardians were stationed

there. Hans turned his head from the map on the wall as Sebastian approached the room. "Sebastian, come in."

Sebastian nodded in greeting to the Guardians as he walked into the room. Hans had a large map of the US on the wall with many pins sticking out of it. Lines of string ran from pin to pin. "What have we here?"

Hans gestured at the red pins. "Attack sites. Right now, there are seventy-eight of them that we know of. Every Auster Temple and twenty-three of Mars's Temples."

Sebastian's eyes widened as he looked. "That's a lot of attacks."

"It's more noticeable when you get it down on paper, isn't it? It always is. The blue ones are demon sightings, called in from all over the country. Rogan, Cupid, and I spent the night calling and talking to people about the sightings. They are more frequent now, and less concerned about being sighted by mortals."

Sebastian grunted. "Someone's getting brave."

Hans looked at Sebastian. "I suppose whoever it is feels they have the upper hand enough to push things. They wouldn't be wrong."

"What about the yellow and green pins?"

"Disappearances. Last known location of missing Arrows."

Sebastian blinked rapidly as he made a quick estimation. "There's got to be fifty pins here."

Hans crossed his arms as he evaluated the map. "Sixty-one."

"The green ones are Lead Arrows?"

"Yes. Many of them were picked up during demon attacks, ones where Temples fell. You can't see the detail on this large map."

"No, but you can see the most disappearances take place where the Temples have fallen." He turned to look at Hans. "You think the point of the attacks was to destroy Temples or collect hostages?"

Hans grunted approval. "You have a good tactical mind. Yes, I suspect, though I have no real proof, the majority of the attacks were launched to create a panic. Lead Arrows were nabbed in the chaos. Many of them weren't discovered missing until later. Mind you, I think if we leave those other Temples unoccupied for any amount of time, they are going to be destroyed. It doesn't seem to be the main focus of the attacker now, because the demon attacks have mostly ceased. They

got what they came for, it seems to me. But I think they'll come back, eventually, and finish the Temples off."

Sebastian held his chin in his hand as he studied the pins in the map, thinking. "You certainly have a way of putting all of this into focus."

"Well, that is my job."

Rogan entered the room. "Hans?"

Hans glanced at the door, all business. "Yes?"

"Cupid asked if you would meet with him."

Hans turned to Sebastian, who was still studying the map. "If you'll excuse me." Hans turned and walked briskly out of the room. Rogan approached the map and stood beside Sebastian.

"So, you've been looking at Hans's map."

"It really puts things in perspective."

"You notice how there are a lot more green pins than yellow pins."

Sebastian turned to look at Rogan, who was staring at him, coldly. "I know you don't like us. I know you have good reason not to. But if you think I'm going to be glad there are more Lead Arrow disappearances than Gold Arrow disappearances, you've misjudged me entirely."

Rogan snorted. "You're telling me if there were more Gold Arrow abductions, you'd be glad the Lead Arrows were spared?"

"I'm telling you I don't think there's a difference. I look at this map, and I see abducted Arrows. You're the one who wants to make it a prejudice issue."

Rogan advanced on Sebastian until they were only inches apart. Sebastian kept his gaze level with Rogan, refusing to back down. Rogan sneered in his face. "Don't think because I'm forced to hide out here that we're buddies."

"That's pretty obvious right now."

"You and your brethren think you're the Golden Children. You have three gods over your Temples. You have the Guardians. You've been handed everything, and your service is love!"

Rogan sneered in Sebastian's face. Sebastian didn't budge, only stared Rogan down. Rogan's face darkened as he continued. "We were given the lovely commodity of hate, and no protection. We create

fighters and turmoil and fear and serve the god of war. Your life is pretty swell, huh?" Rogan laughed without humor. "And now you're going to let our Temples fall."

Sebastian considered, carefully measuring his words. "Better your Temples than your Arrows."

Rogan shook his head. "You don't give a damn about us. You know you can't survive without us, and that's the only reason why we're still alive. You think I don't know why you are suddenly all buddy-buddy with the Lead Arrows' cause?" Rogan snorted. "You hated me just as much as I hated you before you got tangled up with Aspen."

Sebastian's vision started to go red as he responded. "Don't."

Rogan cocked his head to the side. "You got into her pants, and now you're king shit, huh?"

Sebastian grasped the front of Rogan's shirt with both fists, his muscles bulging as he yanked Rogan into his face. "I will end you if you ever say that again."

Rogan snarled, their noses only a breath apart. "Are you worried about breaking her heart, Golden Boy? Or are you worried about your reputation?"

Sebastian was seething and could feel himself losing control. If Rogan said one more thing, Sebastian was going to tear Rogan apart.

"What's going on?" The voice from the door startled Sebastian into dropping his fists, though the rage in him literally made his hands shake as they dropped. He would have given just about anything to be able to smash that smug look off of Rogan's face.

But Aspen was looking at them from the door, her face none too pleased as she assessed the situation. Rogan laughed loudly as he backed away from Sebastian toward the door where Aspen stood with her arms crossed over her chest. Sebastian glowered at Rogan as he walked away.

"Well, Golden Boy. I'll just leave you to it."

The meaning in Rogan's words grated Sebastian's already trumped up anger, making him take a step forward. Rogan timed his exit perfectly, turning and walking past Aspen, leaving Sebastian there to deal with her confused look. He couldn't talk to her now, not while the

anger Rogan had created was pulsing through his system, his accusations still ringing through Sebastian's head.

Sebastian walked to the door, swinging past Aspen, who turned to follow him as he stomped down the hall toward his room. "What was that all about?"

"Nothing."

Aspen exhaled, frustrated. "If Rogan's giving you shit..."

"Rogan's not giving me anything I can't handle."

"It looks like you guys were about to handle it when I walked in."

Sebastian didn't answer her as he shoved open the door to his room and stomped in. Aspen followed him in, closing the door. "What's going on?"

Sebastian turned, irritated. "I told you, nothing is going on."

"Sebastian..."

"Look!" Sebastian yelled, making Aspen jump. "I don't want to talk about it. I'm pissed off and not very good company. I don't need a shrink to straighten out my head. I just need to be left alone. Got it?"

Aspen's face was unreadable as she nodded briskly, once, and turned to the door.

Sebastian had just enough time to feel like an ass for yelling at her. He was about to apologize and go after her when she surprised him by locking the door and turning back around. She started removing her shirt.

"What the...what do you think you're..." He lost his voice entirely as Aspen removed her shirt to expose the black, lacy bra underneath. She pulled her hair loose from the band at the back of her head, and her inky black hair cascaded to the middle of her back, tumbling over her shoulders. "Aspen..."

Aspen unbuttoned her pants and slid them down over equally black lacy underpants. She lifted her eyes as the pants pooled on the floor at her feet. "You don't want to talk? We won't talk."

She stepped gracefully out of her clothing and sauntered up to Sebastian, her skin shimmering in the early afternoon sun from the windows. A breeze drifted in and played with her hair, arranging it over her shoulders as she approached him. Aspen lifted herself up on

Sebastian Cupid

her toes, nipping his lower lip between her teeth, sending a jolt of hot, liquid lust straight to his loins.

Sebastian tried hard to apologize before he forgot why he was feeling like an asshole. "Seriously, Aspen, I didn't mean...."

She grinned and then ran her hands under his shirt, moving across his back as she lowered her head and licked his neck from the base of his throat to his ear. Sebastian's words died away in a groan. Aspen whispered. "I know."

Unable to fight her anymore, Sebastian hastily reached down and lifted Aspen up until her legs circled his waist. He carried her to the bed as his mouth crashed down on hers, purging him of his anger. His heightened senses from his fight with Rogan were transformed into something else; something just as violent and potent, but a great deal more satisfying.

Laying Aspen on the bed, Sebastian slipped his hand into Aspen's panties, plunging inside her, dragging a succulent cry from her lips. He was dizzy with needs, but his own melted away as he watched Aspen respond to his touch. Sebastian watched her head toss back against the covers as her back arched, urging him to go deeper. He took a hand full of the lacy garment she wore and fisted his hand on the flimsy material, tightening the fabric against her legs, making her cry out. Aspen's body was charged with sexual heat, making every sensation a million times more potent than she could ever remember it being.

Sebastian breathed in the heady scent of her as he buried his face in between her legs, licking long, slow, and deep. Aspen shuddered and sighed. Sebastian glanced up at her face, so full of sexual wonder and happiness. He wanted to give her more. He wanted to give her everything. He pulled his shirt over his head and shucked his pants and underwear to the floor in a matter of seconds. He moved up the bed until he was lying by Aspen's side. He wrapped one hand around her silken hair, lifting her mouth to his. Sebastian gazed in her eyes as they pulled apart, and he remembered, angrily, Rogan's words. Rogan had tried to make what was between them into something cheap. Aspen saw Sebastian's eyes change as she watched him. "What is it?"

Sebastian kissed her forehead, her mouth, her throat before he looked back into her eyes, his hands wandering over her body, drinking her in with touch. "You are incredibly important to me."

Aspen's eyes widened a little in surprise and then softened in happiness. "We've been through a lot."

Sebastian nodded. "I don't know where this is going but..." His voice died off and Aspen nodded.

"Our future will always be uncertain. I expect no promises from you." She thought about it for a second. "I've never been with anyone that means this much to me." She tried to keep her eyes dry as she continued. "Our lives are full of so many struggles and burdened with our responsibilities. You bring me peace."

Sebastian nodded. That was the word he was looking for. Peace. There was peace here, with her. He lowered his head to claim her mouth again, and his hand lifted her leg around his hip as he slid into her, savoring every sensation. He felt her breath catching in her throat as she gasped with pleasure at their joining. He groaned as her hands moved along his back while they rocked together. He watched her eyes, drinking her in as they joined.

Aspen turned over him, straddling his waist as she rose above him. One of her straps from her bra had fallen off of her shoulder, and he slipped his hands up her arms, pulling the bra down where he could reach, unhooking it and dropping it to the floor. His hands ran over her stomach, and then gripped her hips, then traveled over her back. Her head dropped back as she moved, her long hair tickling his shins as she arched. Sebastian's breath quickened as she moved against him, and he gasped as his hands reached above his head to grip the headboard. Aspen's hands joined his as they raced to the end, crying out in victory minutes later. Spent and relaxed, Sebastian positioned Aspen against him in bed, cradling her back to his chest. He kissed the back of her neck as he played with her hair.

Aspen smiled as he nibbled her skin. Sighing regretfully, she stretched. "We should probably go back to our duties."

Sebastian groaned. "I quit."

Aspen laughed. "Wouldn't that be nice? If it was just a job you could quit and go out to get a new one?"

Sebastian Cupid

Sebastian laid his head on the pillow, considering as he ran his hands through her hair. "I don't think they'd make you stay at Temple. Not if you really wanted to leave."

Aspen sighed, looking at a stray thread in the blanket, twisting it around her finger, absently. "I can't imagine not being an Arrow."

"Even when it got bad for you?"

Aspen stiffened until she realized he wasn't speaking about anything specific. Sebastian felt the change in her, though. He lifted his head and propped it on his hand, looking down on her. "What is it?"

Aspen swallowed. "It's not really a secret, just a bad part of the job. One of my services went really badly. I was beaten unconscious."

Sebastian's mouth went dry. "By who?"

"Oh, this mortal. He happened to have a lot of friends. After I left him, he brought all his buddies with him, and they beat me. If I had been mortal, I would have died."

Sebastian closed his eyes. "When?"

"Last year."

"So that was what Rogan was talking about, when Mars was taken. Why the solution I was working on would be of more interest to you than others."

Aspen nodded. "It was a rough time for me. I almost abandoned my post."

Sebastian turned her face until he could see the one tear squeezing out of her eyelid to run down her face. "Why didn't you?"

Aspen shrugged. "If we aren't Arrows, who are we?"

Sebastian nodded. He understood exactly. "What's the point of immortality if you haven't got a mission?"

Aspen smiled a little sadly. He leaned down and kissed her. When he straightened back up, he cupped her face in his hands. "You're the strongest woman I have ever met."

He cradled her to his chest, and they took comfort in each other. A few minutes later, they dressed, helping each other into their clothes, kissing bare skin that winked into the light as they moved. It was nice for a few minutes to enjoy life. As Sebastian was belting his pants, the light outside changed, getting darker.

"Must be rain," he said glancing at the windows.

Aspen walked to the windows as she finished twisting her hair at the back of her head. Her hands dropped, her hair tumbling as she yelled. "Sebastian!"

Aspen's voice propelled Sebastian to her side, where he looked out the window at the darkening sky. Sebastian cursed loudly. "Sweet Jupiter!"

Aspen's voice shook as she replied. "There must be hundreds, no, thousands of them."

Sebastian and Aspen looked at each other, once, urgently, before running into the hall where a swell of Arrows from both sides of the family were running, charging into the main lobby. Sebastian ran out the front door of Temple with Aspen. Hans ran by with Cupid, assembling Guardians into formation. In the sky above, a horde of demons glimmered as they blocked out the sun, stretching like a black cloud over the horizon, sinking toward them.

TWENTY-THREE

Sebastian and Aspen ran back inside with the other Arrows toward the arsenal being laid out by the Guardians. Russell and Victoria were there, slipping holsters on, adding ammunition packs to their belts. Alex and Glen joined them, Evans fast on their heels. Sebastian looked at Glen. "You shouldn't be here. You're like a rag doll to them."

Glen shook his head. "I'm not going to hide while my sister fights."

Sebastian didn't bother wasting time with arguing. He threw a pistol to Glen, as well as a shotgun and several boxes of ammunition. "You've been working on weaponry with Russ?"

Glen nodded. "I know about your special bullets."

"Make them count."

Alex glanced at the pistols and walked empty handed to the front doors where Hans stood. She had a quick conversation with him that Sebastian couldn't hear over the sounds of Arrows readying for attack. A moment later, they were running off together.

"Where's she going?" Glen demanded.

Sebastian jerked out a hand to stop him. "Listen! You cannot worry about Alex right now. She's a demigod. You're not. If you're distracted from fighting you're of no use, and you might as well go find something to hide behind."

Resolve set in Glen's eyes as he stared Sebastian down. "I'm fighting."

"Then fight." Sebastian handed him a sheathed dagger before running back to the entrance to stand beside Venus, Cupid, and Psyche. The cloud of demons was starting to descend. Sebastian glanced

nervously at Cupid, who simply stood there, not moving. "Shouldn't we be taking cover?"

Cupid shook his head. "Watch."

The demons, with their blazing eyes and black bodies flew toward Temple, Sebastian couldn't help backing slowly toward the door. About two-hundred feet from the roof, the demons stopped abruptly, crashing into an invisible barrier. Russell's mouth dropped open as he came to stand next to them. "How?"

Cupid smiled. "Alex."

Sebastian and Russell exchanged glances of surprise. "I didn't know she could do force fields!"

Glen approached them from the back. "Neither did she, until yesterday when we were fighting. I was beating her and all of a sudden I was on my back. I bounced right off one. She's been practicing it all night."

Sebastian considered this. "She's got to be exhausted."

Glen shook his head. "She's been sleeping for a while, but I don't know how long she can keep up something this big. Her endurance is getting better, but she still gets tired."

Cupid glanced to his side as Hans approached. "Good?"

Hans nodded. "Excellent. This will give us more time to get people in the right places, defensively." He glanced at all the Arrows, Golden and Lead, who were standing in the courtyard, watching the demons as they hissed and spit at them from behind the force field. "We need to let Alex take it down so we can fire."

Sebastian looked shocked. "You mean let them in?"

Hans nodded. "We can't fire through it, she says, and if she keeps this up, she'll be completely exhausted and of no use to us later if things get out of control."

Cupid considered. "Hans, we can't take it down."

Hans turned. "You're not listening. It's coming down. One way or another. If we take it down now, we might have a plan B for later, get me?"

Cupid considered Hans for a while, unsure. Hans sighed. "Trust me."

Cupid nodded, once. He glanced up at the windows of the Temple, where hundreds of Guardians stood ready with automatic weaponry poised at the demon activity. On the roof stood Alex, her strawberry hair pinpointing her location, her hands raised to the sky. Around her stood a ring of Guardians with their Swords of Light raised, waiting. Hans reached into his waistband for his radio. Lifting it to his lips, he yelled. "Tell Alex to take it down!"

Then he turned to Cupid and the others who stood there waiting. Guardians lined up in front of the Arrows who all stood with their guns pointed at the sky. The Guardians on the ground pulled their long Swords of Light from their scabbards. Swords raised, the light reflected in a wide semi-circle around the front of the building.

Hans took in a mighty breath and bellowed, "Ready!"

All of the Arrows waited, weapons poised. They watched as the mighty demons clawed silently against the invisible shield, growling and roaring silently, hurling themselves into the field again and again, willing it to break. Their cruel eyes flashed as they struggled to get at the immortals waiting below. Silence was heavy as everyone waited.

Then, quite suddenly, the field broke, and the waiting wall of demons fell toward the Temple. The roars of demons were monstrous as the noise of guns. Arrows and Guardians alike unloaded clip after clip of ammunition into the advancing line. Sebastian's teeth rattled in his head to the beat of gunfire. The smell of sulfur rose up, and the rhythm of the tower guns punctuated his racing heartbeats. Russell glanced over his shoulder, watching as Guardians shot demons out of the sky before they could descend on the Temple roof. Alex raised her hands and tossed demon after demon off the roof, where they were shot during their fall to the ground.

Hans yelled at the Guardians. "Hold the front line!"

The demons were falling from the sky, landing in the courtyard. They crashed into the grass, ripping the turf open like a giant wound on the earth, dirt raining down as they skidded forward and ran toward the Temple. Victoria jumped out of the way as a demon body crashed into the concrete from where a Guardian shot it down. The demons ran toward the Temple over the grass, crying their inhuman growls that pierced the air, sending shivers down Aspen's back. She

and Rogan stood, back to back, shooting into the sky, bringing down demons that were trying to breach the Temple by air.

The horrible mass of demons came closer and closer. Finally, Hans yelled, "Fall back into the Temple!"

The Arrows and Guardians turned and ran through the Temple doors. They bolted the doors and ran to take up places beside the Guardians that were positioned at each window. Sebastian stood beside Seth, the Guardian that had gone with them to save Aspen. He was on the second floor, shooting down the demons that were advancing to the entrance of the Temple. Often a demon would fall off the roof as a Guardian shot it down from the sky or Alex hurled it into the air. Sebastian watched as Cupid unfurled his mighty wings and flew up through the air, wielding a Sword of Light. He sliced through advancing demons, his movements so fast Sebastian couldn't focus on him. Sebastian emptied another clip, and loaded his last one into his gun. "I'm going to have to get more clips in a minute," he yelled to Seth, who nodded.

"I'll be okay here for a while yet."

Russell stood in a window on the third floor, picking off demons that were trying to get in the doors and windows on the bottom floor. The wind ruffled his hair as he shot demons back from entering Temple. The very ground seemed to be a moving, black, hideous blanket of filth, stink, and evil. The pile of demon bodies was stacking up, and demons were crawling on top of the stacks. It was beneficial in one way because their bodies covered up the first floor windows, blocking the demons from entering. They blocked the door too. However, they were now able to climb higher, with access to windows on the second floor. It was getting harder to pick them off as they ascended. Russell shot a demon just as its grimy hands closed over a window sill. Russell didn't dare turn toward the commotion behind him, but he heard running feet and shouts advancing. Next thing he knew, Alex stood by his side. She waved an arm and all of the demons climbing the pile to the second floor fell back. Russell glanced over to thank her, but his words died in his throat as he saw that her fiery hair had turned damp and dark with her sweat, which was running down her face. She was pale and breathing heavily.

Sebastian Cupid

Russell grabbed her arm and a Guardian ran to his window to cover while he pulled Alex away. "Alex!" He yelled. "You have to stop. You have to take a break!"

Alex shook her head, wearily. "The demons aren't going to take a break, Russ."

Russell pulled her back, which didn't take too much effort. "Well, you're going to have to, or you'll be useless to us soon anyway. Take a break. Here."

Russell ran into a room, pulling her with him and, placed her on a guest bed. He then turned to throw her a bottle of water from the fridge. Guardians were stationed at both of the windows in the room, shooting demons. "Here, drink."

Alex untwisted the cap from the water and gulped, thirstily. When she was done, she found she had a hard time sitting up. Russell pushed her down on the bed. "Rest. I mean it."

Alex found she couldn't argue. She nodded silently, nearly passing out from exhaustion despite the noise, commotion, and chaos that ensued all around her. Russell ran back out into the hall and glanced over the railing to the first floor where Arrows were bracing heavy objects against the door.

Russell spotted Sebastian shooting demons that were peeling bodies of other demons away from the first story windows so they could get in. Russell ran down the staircase to help him. "How many more are there?"

Sebastian glanced over. Seeing Russell he swore. "I have no idea. They just keep coming. There is more here than we saw at any of the attacks on the other Temples. This is madness." Sebastian raised his gun and blew off the arm of a demon that had succeeded in getting half his upper body through the window. Sebastian and Russell both jumped back as its poisonous blood hit the floor. The beast lifted its face and bellowed in pain as Russell put a bullet in its head, silencing the creature.

Looking down, Russell noticed the ground was shaking. Dirt and gravel jumped off of the marble floor, bumping against his boots. Sebastian looked up as dust began to fall from the ceiling. Wind gusted

through the open windows, throwing papers and whipping clothing against their bodies.

“Oh, no,” Sebastian muttered.

Russell and Sebastian ran to the second floor and thrust their heads out of a window, looking towards the sky. A huge, boiling black cloud festered there, throwing lightning at the ground. Huge gusts of wind tore across the acreage surrounding the Temple, bending some trees so hard they cracked in half as large branches scattered the ground. Sebastian cursed. “She’s using both of Mars’s powers at once.”

Russell turned. “Both?”

Sebastian nodded. “There’s no god that could call that many demons at the same time other than the war god himself. And now this.”

Russell turned to look out the window again, watching as a huge tree was ripped from the ground. It scraped along until it collided with the onslaught of demons, crushing many of them as it hurled into the Temple. The piercing sound of the cracking wood echoed up to the windows as the Guardians and Arrows looked on. Hans approached the window. “Mars.”

“Yes, his powers. And that of Auster’s.”

A horrific rumble sounded from above and a large piece of the ceiling caved in, falling to the first floor below where Arrows and Guardians alike dove out of the way of the wreckage. “It’s going to take us apart!” yelled Russell.

Hans shook his head. “No it’s not.” He turned to yell at those still fighting. “Everyone, to the graveyard!”

Alex thrust her head out of the room she had been resting in, her eyes panicky. Russell yelled, “Come on!”

Sebastian, Russell, and Alex joined the crowd rushing through the chapel to get to the graveyard. Sebastian had not seen the chapel since the start of the attack, and it was fortunate he was too busy surviving to fully survey the damage of their sacred gathering place. The altar had been smashed with bodies of demons that had been hurled through the windows. Pews were overturned. Jupiter’s statue had crashed through the ornate pillars on one side, causing the heavy oak woodwork to fall. It was destroyed.

Sebastian Cupid

Guardians led the crowd into the graveyard, slicing through demons with their Swords of Light. Arrows continued to fire at stray demons that were fighting against the gusts of wind tearing through the Temple grounds, almost as strong as tornado winds. The only good thing about the sudden storm was that the demons couldn't fight in the weather either, and most of them were forced, like the Arrows and Guardians, to cling to something or be swept away.

"Look out!" yelled Russell as a large tree flew their way. Seth ran forward with his Sword of Light and severed the tree in half with one mighty blow. The two pieces flew and landed against the side of the building as people dove out of the way. Rogan emerged from the building to join the fray, supporting a wounded Lead Arrow Sebastian didn't know. Cupid descended from the sky to land in front of Alex. "Are you ready?"

Alex nodded, looking around. "But where is my brother?"

Cupid nodded behind her, and she turned to see Glen fleeing the Temple with Evans, Psyche, and Hans. Motioning with his hands, all of the Arrows and Guardians trudged their way through wind, rain, and hail until they were nearly a hundred yards away from the building. Demons were crawling all over it now. There were gaping holes where the windows once were, displaying demons as they ripped apart the Arrows' home, tossing other dead Demons across the space. The huge glass window that had once been the back wall of the chapel was gone. Demons climbed over the roof of the Temple. Cries rang out from the crowd as Arrows watched the demons destroy their sanctuary.

Sebastian watched as Aspen approached, a long cut running from her temple to her chin, healing on its own as she approached. He took her into his arms when she arrived, swallowing back his own tears as he watched the Temple crumble. In the wake of the battle, demons now covered every surface. Hans approached and looked at Alex. He nodded once, and Alex lifted her hands to the sky. A huge force field erected itself around the Temple. The world now sounded eerie without the cries from the demons mixing with the sounds of the storm. Russell blinked. "What...?"

But he didn't wonder for long. Hans touched his belt, and a few seconds later, an enormous explosion detonated inside the bubble,

blasting away all of the demons and sending the Arrows' home into a blazing inferno. Cries rang out as the explosion ripped everything in the force field to shreds. Arrows and Guardians alike clung to each other in the storm as they watched everything burn. Hans turned to Alex again and nodded. She lowered her arms and the heat and noise of the explosion rushed out to them as the force field fell. Smoke spiraled toward the sky. The cries and shrieks of the demons could be heard over the rush of the blaze, but the demons were destroyed and the Arrows were safe. Hans placed a hand on Alex's shoulder. She looked over, shaking and tired, but triumphant. "That'll do," said Hans.

Suddenly the wind increased and the crowd began to cry out in surprise as a massive finger reached down from a funnel cloud. A tornado. Guardians grabbed Arrows and ran to low lands to wait out the storm, but the crowd was so large not everyone could get out of the way in time. Shouts were heard as Arrows and Guardians were lifted off of their feet. Alex turned, determination etched on her face, as she lifted her hands and used her powers to pull those Arrows back from the wind, flinging them to safety in a nearby ditch. She continued to pull people away from the destructive funnel of wind and into safety as Russell ran to her side, seeing her go pale. "Alex!" he yelled.

She nodded. "I know. I haven't got much longer."

Sebastian and Aspen ran toward the ditch as the tornado reached for them. The crowd was panicking. It was hard to move. The wind pulled at Aspen, and she couldn't take another step forward. The wind screamed in her ears as she started to lift. "Sebastian!" she screamed as the wind lifted her off of the ground, pulling her through the air.

Sebastian turned and yelled. "Alex! Aspen!"

Alex turned her head and saw Aspen and three other Arrows get sucked into the sky. She lifted her hands and threw her power at them. Russell watched as she became dangerously pale, sweat coursing down her back, her shirt sticking to her skin. Tears streamed down her cheeks from the effort of holding on. Russell yelled her name, but it was too late. Alex fell unconscious, collapsing to the ground, and the Arrows flew into the heart of the tornado.

"No!" Yelled Sebastian, running toward the base of the tornado. Glen leapt forward to pull him back.

Sebastian Cupid

“Sebastian, no! You can’t save her now. It’ll pull you up too!” Glen pulled Sebastian back into the ditch while Russell joined them, carrying an unconscious Alex. Several more Arrows were sucked into the sky. Then, under the watchful eye of the crowd, the storm died away. The air went eerily still and the storm clouds dissolved into nothingness.

Sebastian jumped to his feet and looked at the sky with the others, but the Arrows were gone. Hans walked into the crowd. “Everyone! We need to find out who’s missing. Get a count! Guardians, contain the fire.”

Many Guardians ran to the burning Temple and began putting out the fires around the building. Others ran to get fire hoses from the outbuildings and utility sheds.

Sebastian stared at the sky, then the ground. Russell stood by, watching his friend. “I’m sorry, Sebastian.”

“No!” Sebastian marched into the graveyard, stomping toward the place where Aspen had been sucked into the sky. “We can’t let her! We can’t let...” He stopped suddenly, his voice refusing to work. Evans and Glen approached. Sebastian turned to them. “We have to...” Tears run down his cheeks.

Evans turned her face into Glen’s shirt, unable to watch Sebastian’s pain. Russell looked at Sebastian and placed a hand on his brother’s shoulder. Sebastian choked and wrapped his arms around Russell, clinging to him while his tears took over. After a few minutes, Sebastian stepped back and took a look around, watching as Guardians hosed down the Temple, and Arrows clung to each other, crying. Guardians gathered around injured Arrows and other Guardians in the grass, treating wounds. Garrett stood a few feet away, barking orders into a cell phone. It seemed to Sebastian the world was falling apart.

Cupid approached, and everyone turned. Sebastian looked up into the face of his father. “Dad.”

Cupid nodded, placing his hand on Sebastian’s shoulder. “I know.” He watched his son for a few seconds before turning to the rest of the group. “Relief helicopters are coming now. The mortal authorities are attempting to get in at the gates. We need to evacuate. Russell?”

Russell stepped forward. “Yes?”

“Your research. How is it coming?”

Russell brightened. “I think I’ve found it! The Colorado plains have a lot of thunderstorms, but over the last several weeks they’ve been drifting further to the west than normal, close to the dunes. This anomaly ended up on the mortals’ news stations.”

“Good. Then we’ll relocate to Denver and start looking there.”

Psyche ran up to Cupid, panicked, tears coursing down her cheeks as she cried loudly. “Psyche?” Cupid asked, appalled. “Dear Jupiter, what is it?”

Psyche wrapped her arms around her husband, his great wings encompassing her in comfort. “It’s Venus.” She said. “They’ve taken Venus.”

TWENTY-FOUR

It took a little over an hour before the Arrows and Guardians were lifted off the graveyard of the Chicago Temple, which was now in ruins. They were taken to an airport where other Guardians from Denver were waiting in jets to fly them to their Temple. The faces in the jets were all filled with the same two expressions: shock and grief. The only exception was Rogan, who sat staring resolutely forward, his face carefully guarded. Russell sat by Sebastian on the trip, not trusting his brother enough to leave him alone in his anger. While Sebastian sat there, watching the puffy clouds in the skies below him, his mind kept replaying the moment when Aspen had been sucked out of his reach by the tornado. His heart twisted in his chest as he thought of how, just hours before, they had been peacefully curled in each other's arms. Now he'd let her get taken a second time. Guilt was boiling inside him, mixing with his rage over the attack.

Sebastian glanced up when Cupid entered the cabin, making his way to where Hans sat before the two of them moved towards the cockpit. Jumping up, Sebastian followed with Russell close behind.

In the front of the jet, Psyche, Hans, and Cupid were gathered together, looking over a map of Colorado and talking.

Cupid looked up as they approached. "Oh, good. Russell, where are those rainstorms you were talking about?"

Russell indicated with his hands an area in the south eastern part of the state. "They are normally here. This part of the country gets more thunderstorms than anywhere else in America, and that's normal out here in the plains. However, the area to the west of this, by the

dunes..." he swept his hands to the west, "...has been getting more action than normal. What's good about this is it would have been easy to ignore frequent thunderstorms in the plains, but when it travels west, it raises eyebrows. It looks very similar to the wind and rain storms we just faced, minus the tornado."

Hans turned to Cupid. "The tornado had a purpose. Whoever is in charge of this is watching us. The tornado didn't come until it was obvious we were taking out the demons, that they weren't going to be returning with any of us. The attacker wanted Arrows."

Cupid nodded. "The attacker wanted Venus."

Sebastian glanced over. "Was she taken like Aspen and the others?"

"It seems so. She was there before the funnel cloud developed. Another Arrow said she was standing right next to him, and then the wind picked up and several people were thrust into the sky, Venus included. She called out, but it was too late by then."

Sebastian frowned. Cupid noticed his expression. "What is it?"

"The problem I have is capturing Venus doesn't make much sense to me. The attacker has Auster, and that's how the demons are getting around. Then she took Mars, and has the powers of war on her side. But to take Venus, the goddess of fertility? It doesn't quite go together."

Psyche turned. "You forget, Venus is part of our Temple now. She has a hand in the Arrows, and whoever is behind this obviously wants to sink the Arrows."

Hans looked at Cupid and Psyche. "Which means the two of you are on the hit list as well. You have to stay protected. If they make our Temples fall and capture the two of you, we are all in grave danger. The attacker would then have control over love, hate, and war. There are no three bigger commodities on Earth."

Several silent seconds passed before Russell cleared his throat. "What is the attack plan?"

Hans pointed to the map. "We are coordinating with the Denver Temple, and Guardians are already making sweeps across the state. Just before you two walked up, I received a call that three of the Guardians that went out an hour ago haven't checked back in."

Russell's head jerked up. "Where were they going?"

Sebastian Cupid

Hans smiled. "The dunes."

Sebastian nodded. "We go there."

"Agreed," Hans said. "Now that we are all going to be in one Temple, we will have twice the Guardians. It's a sizable army. Plus, we called in reinforcements that were out helping to evacuate Mars's Temples."

"So you're going to leave them abandoned?" Everyone turned to see Rogan standing at the doorway.

Hans cleared his throat. "There's no one to abandon now. All the Arrows are in our Temples."

Rogan sneered. "To what? Await another attack like the one we just left?"

Sebastian's anger spiked as he spat out at Rogan, "We are going to extinguish the problem. No one asked for your input."

Psyche made a sound of displeasure at Sebastian's tone, but it was cut off by Rogan's next statement. "Going to save your girlfriend, Sebastian?"

The phrase was hardly out of his mouth before Sebastian charged him, grabbing the front of his shirt and slamming him into the thin aircraft wall. Heads turned throughout the cabin as people craned their necks to see what the disturbance was. Russell ran forward to try to pull Sebastian off of Rogan. "You piss ant!" growled Sebastian. "We've opened our Temples to you, lost dozens of our Guardians trying to protect you, and it's still not enough. You thankless bastard! If you dare say one more word, one, about Aspen, I promise you it will be the last word you ever say."

Sebastian abruptly dropped his hands and turned back to the map, breathing heavily. The room had gone completely silent as everyone glanced between Sebastian and Rogan. Rogan straightened up off of the wall before saying, "I want to go with you."

Sebastian turned slightly. "No."

Psyche started to speak, but Cupid stopped her, placing a hand on her arm. Rogan growled. "Why?"

"Because you'd just find something else at fault. If we win, it was to save our asses, and if we lose, it was because we could get rid of you." Sebastian turned to stare Rogan down, anger simmering in his eyes.

“Your prejudice against the Golden Arrows has clouded your judgment. You’re not trustworthy enough to fight with.”

“I’m not...?” Rogan began.

“No!” yelled Sebastian. “The way you are now? No! You’d just as soon turn the gun on me as a demon, and you and I both know it.”

Several seconds passed before any sound was made. Then, Rogan spoke quietly. “My problem isn’t with Golden Arrows.”

Sebastian exhaled before he spoke. “No?”

Rogan shook his head. For the first time in Sebastian’s memory, he looked uncomfortable. “My problem is with you.”

Sebastian flinched, startled and confused. Then he looked in Rogan’s face and he knew. Awareness dawned on him as he rocked back on his heels. He nodded. “Does she know?”

Rogan shook his head. “But you can see why I have to go. I can’t sit here and know I could be doing something to save her.”

Sebastian turned and pressed his fingers to his eyes. He exhaled, slowly, shakily. “I love her,” he whispered.

“I know,” Rogan said.

No one dared move while Sebastian leaned his hands on the table with the map, thinking.

Rogan crossed his arms, waiting.

A short while later, the jet prepared to land, and the shift brought them all back to the task at hand. Sebastian looked at Hans. “How soon can we get assembled?”

“They’re ready for us when we get to the airport.”

Sebastian nodded and looked over his shoulder at Rogan. He saw Victoria had also slipped into the cabin during the exchange. He softened immediately at the heartbreak on her face when he realized she had heard everything Rogan had said. Rogan followed Sebastian’s gaze, his face turning a shocking gray color before he looked at the floor, horrified by the situation and the audience that was there to witness it.

Victoria swallowed and composed herself quickly, turning toward Sebastian, once again the warrior he had come to know and love. She spoke clearly and harshly as she said, “They’re all depending on us.”

Sebastian Cupid

There was so much Sebastian wanted to say, but he didn't know where to begin. He gazed at Victoria, who held her head high. Sebastian gave her one nod before looking at the others. "Well, let's go get them back."

Psyche smiled at Sebastian when he turned around to face her. She nodded quietly. Cupid cleared his throat. "We're the last jet in. The rest of the able-bodied Arrows and Guardians are already assembled, just awaiting instruction."

Sebastian nodded. "We'll be ready."

The group dispersed back to their seats to prepare for landing. Sebastian laid a hand on Victoria's arm as he passed. She turned curtly before Rogan could speak to her and went back to her seat. Rogan looked completely appalled at the turn of events.

Now that there was a plan, it seemed to Sebastian it took forever for the plane to land. He tapped the armrest of the seat until Russell looked at him in a way that made him stop. As soon as the wheels of the landing gear hit the tarmac, Sebastian was out of his seat and down the aisle, waiting in front of the hatch with Russell right by his side. Rogan and Victoria soon joined them. Victoria tapped Russell's shoulder. "Where is Alex? Her brother?"

Russell glanced over his shoulder. "We put Alex on the first plane out. We wanted to make sure she got as much rest as possible after she collapsed."

"Is she okay?"

Russell remembered the horrible moment when she had passed out. Repressing a shudder, he nodded. "Garrett said she was fine. She'd just tapped all of her power for the time being, and her body shut down completely. She fought as hard as she knows how."

The conversation stopped abruptly as the hatch lowered and everyone began to disembark, Cupid and Psyche leading them all. As they exited the plane, they saw a group of Arrows and Guardians preparing for combat, and most of the people disembarking from the plane were heading straight there. Hans marched directly to the group and began speaking earnestly with a tall, gray-haired man who looked like he'd seen the bad side of many battles. His face was scarred, like etchings in stone, and his eyes were dark as night on his face.

“Who is that?” asked Sebastian.

Cupid grinned. “That’s Ethan. He’s the head Guardian.”

Sebastian whistled between his teeth as everyone else raised their eyebrows. “That’s Ethan?” Ethan’s name was spoken with reverence throughout all Arrow Temples. “I’ve never had a chance to meet him before.”

“I’ve only seen him fight once,” said Russell.

“He’s never been made head of a mission before, but Venus and at least two other gods are at stake. We are putting the best of everything into this attack,” said Cupid.

A few moments later, Ethan turned to look at the newcomers. “Welcome. For all of you fighting with us on this mission, we’ll be dividing you into operatives of twenty or so per unit. We are going to be moving in compact groups to divert attention away from our approach. The storms have been occurring daily in the dunes region, and we hope to be able to slip in, undetected, and evaluate the situation before unclocking the brunt of our forces. Hans knows you all best, so he’ll be arranging groups.”

Hans began walking throughout the crowd and assigning each person their group, but Russell looked over and saw Alex sitting by herself a few feet away on an overturned crate. Russell excused himself quickly and ran over to where she sat. “Alex!”

She jolted at the sound of her name, and blushed a little at the sight of Russell. He knelt in front of her. “Hey! How are you feeling?”

Alex shrugged. “I’m okay.”

Something in her voice alerted Russell she wasn’t being at all truthful with him. There were shadows under her eyes, and her red hair was stringy and sagging from a ponytail pulled low at the back of her head. “I don’t buy it. Where’s Glen?”

Alex pointed a distance away to where Glen stood with a group, collecting ammunition and weapons.

“Ah,” Russell said. “He’s doing pretty good, isn’t he?”

Alex nodded. “This is the most dedicated I’ve ever seen him about anything. He’s been a drifter his whole life. I think being here gives him a purpose, something he’s willing to fight for.”

“Well, that’s not surprising. That’s why we’re all here.”

Alex blinked. "But don't you get assigned to your job?"

"Well, sure! But no one makes us do what we do. We could stop at any time."

The expression on Alex's face would have been comical had she not looked so exhausted. "You can? Why don't you?"

"The same reason Glen is here now. For us it's more. I guess it doesn't matter if you're alive for a hundred years or a thousand years if your life has no purpose. Being an Arrow has purpose and meaning. That's what most mortals spend their whole lives trying to find."

Alex sniffed. Russell had been so wrapped up in his own consideration of his work he didn't notice the tears swimming in Alex's eyes until he stopped speaking. "Oh, hey! I'm sorry! What did I do? I take it all back."

Alex shook her head. "It's not you. It's nothing you said or did." Her lips trembled as she bit down to keep the dam from breaking behind her eyes.

Russell shuffled. "Whatever it is, I assure you it's fixable."

Alex shook her head, a few tears squeezing over the rims of her eyelids. "No. No, it's not. If I hadn't passed out, if I had held on a little longer..."

Russell exhaled, seeing the trouble. "Listen, you fought amazingly, understand? We'd have lost a lot more people had you not been there to help us. Hell, we might have all been demon bait without that force field trick in the beginning. I had no idea you could do that!"

Alex wiped her eyes, saying nothing.

Russell took her hands, forcing her to look up. "Alex, you've not even been a demigod for a week, and you've already had your first major battle. I wasn't involved in any kind of scuffle until I had been an Arrow for over fifty years, and that was minor." He pulled down his sleeves, which he curled against his palms and used to wipe the tears from Alex's face. "This is the biggest battle we've seen since the Fall, when the world was falling apart around us. You were..." for a second, words escaped him as he recalled the way she had looked, hands raised to the sky, eyes flashing, mind focused on willing objects around her to move. He blinked and looked into her face now. "You were the most brilliant thing I have ever seen."

Russell's hand stopped wiping Alex's face as his palm circled and cupped her cheek. He couldn't stop himself from noticing her hazel eyes and her peach-hued skin. Alex's eyes slid out of focus as she realized Russell was caressing her cheek. He was near enough for her to smell the heady, masculine scent of him. His long, brown hair hung to his shoulders, billowing in the wind from the jet engines. She found herself wondering if his chest would feel as hard as it looked, if his face, shadowed with a day's growth of beard, would feel rough against her cheek. He'd managed to properly distract her from her crying. She shuddered with awareness, and her movement snapped Russell from like-minded thoughts. He jerked his hand back and stood, chastising himself for allowing his mind to wander places it had no right wandering. Again.

"Are you..." he had to stop to clear his throat and reform his words. "Are you in a group already?"

Alex shook her head. "Garrett wants me to stay here. He's worried I've seen enough action, but..."

Russell shook his head. "Garrett's right."

"I need to help!"

"No. You didn't see yourself at the end. I was there. You were..." Russell remembered Alex going gray, passing out in his arms. She'd looked worse than dead, barely breathing. "You just can't let yourself get to that state again. You're still mortal."

"What's the point of having super powers if you're just going to lose them all the time?" Alex felt like her internal battery life was limited, like those stupid RC cars in the mall.

"You just haven't time to build them up is all. This all happened so fast." A shout rose up from behind Russell, and he turned to see Sebastian waving him over. "I have to go. I'll see you when we get back. Rest up!"

Alex watched as Russell ran to join the others that were going to fight, including her mortal brother. Alex tried not to feel dejected as she watched the others run to help save the world. Russell glanced back over his shoulder to wave as they left, running headlong into war.

TWENTY-FIVE

In small groups they stood silently, awaiting direction from their leaders. Sebastian had been paired up with five Lead Arrows, including Rogan, five Golden Arrows, eight Guardians, and Hans. The idea was to try to have almost one Guardian for each Arrow. There were over a hundred groups, nearly two-thousand people, and they would still be outnumbered by demons. Yet Ethan's plan was a good one.

As they hoped, when they reached the dunes there was a thunderstorm in full swing. They left from the town of Alamosa by car, and then left those cars with a contact at Great Sand Dunes National Park and started on foot, heading east, further into the storm. The storm served as fabulous cover for their mission, even if it made travel inconvenient and uncomfortable. The thunder rumbled over their heads and covered the sounds of their approach. The only downside was Cupid didn't dare fly out over the plateaus next to the dunes in such weather, so they continued forward on foot, looking for signs of demon activity.

Ethan directed them all toward the center of the storm, and when he estimated they were about a mile out, each of the groups broke off, navigating their way to the center of the storm. A Guardian within each group had a radio to communicate with the other groups. Everyone carried fire arms at the ready, keeping their eyes peeled for activity. The storm seemed to be in the middle of one particular mountain range, about ten miles east of the dunes. The groups trekked along until they were in a ten mile long circle around the storm. The wind was gone, which made the storm very eerie. Rain fell straight down as

they walked toward the center of the mountain range. It was like someone had turned on a great shower head over them all and was hosing them down. Sebastian was soaked to the skin, like the other people in his unit. Spread around the mountain, the groups were spaced apart, getting closer as they all walked toward the center. All the time they were each looking for some indication of a hiding place, demon activity, a call for help, or anything that would signify the area was occupied. Sebastian and Rogan didn't talk as they walked, but Sebastian was ever aware of his presence. Rogan seemed as anti-social as ever, though Sebastian did catch Rogan glancing at him once or twice. Sebastian suspected he was a little embarrassed about their altercation earlier and wisely said nothing.

A few minutes later, Hans's hand shot into the air, bringing their unit to a stop. Sebastian went on full alert as he watched Hans lift the radio to his ear, rain bouncing off of the plastic case as he listened. Hans said something into the radio Sebastian didn't catch over the storm. Hans turned a moment later, lowering the radio. "Alright, everyone, Ethan's group encountered a couple of lower demons about a half a mile away. I expect the demons were put there as guard dogs, more or less. Be on the lookout. We're in the right spot."

Sebastian and Rogan glanced at each other as they carried on. It wasn't fifty steps later before a handful of demons crawled out from behind rock surfaces, snarling. All the Arrows raised their weapons, but Hans raised his arm. "Hold fire!" Sebastian realized gunfire would give away their position, so the Arrows watched as the Guardians lifted their Swords of Light and attacked the demons with the kind of flawless grace only a Guardian possesses. Lower demons were not much of a match for a team of eight skilled Guardians. The demons were soon in pieces on the rocky terrain. Rogan caught Sebastian's eye and motioned to the east where another group of Arrows and Guardians had come into sight. They, too, were battling down demons. Hans picked up his radio again. A few seconds later, he spoke to the group. "It looks like the groups on this side of the storm are the only ones getting any action. It started about a mile to the northwest and whips around about two miles east of us. That could mean if we find

Sebastian Cupid

the source of this, there may be more than one entrance. That's an awfully wide radius for there to be only one source."

Rogan caught up to Sebastian and grumbled. "The villain in the cave. Did you ever hear of anything so typical?"

Sebastian nearly smiled as he replied. "I guess there aren't too many options if you decide to hide up in a mountain range."

"I feel like we're gonna turn the corner and Lex Luther is going to be standing there with Lois Lane."

"Lex was a wimp. All he had was kryptonite, and that's not going to be any good against us."

"Well, we've traded in kryptonite for demons, thunderstorms, and war. I get dibs on Lois."

Sebastian chuckled and met Rogan's eye as they climbed the next plateau. The olive branch had been offered and accepted.

The terrain was getting harder to maneuver now, especially in the weather. There was also danger of falling rocks now that they were further into the mountain range. The rock surfaces they stood on were getting slippery, and Sebastian didn't fancy the image of what would happen if lightning struck the ground they were standing on. It wasn't the most conductive of materials, but it wasn't an insulator either.

The group came to a halt as Hans stopped, signaling two of the Guardians to go ahead and search the perimeter. It was more miserable waiting than it was climbing or walking. Sebastian's stomach twisted when he thought about how much time passed since Aspen had been taken. He remembered the way he and Russell found her last time, and his breath shortened, wondering if he would be too late this time. Unbidden, an image of Jeremy as he'd been found in death flittered through Sebastian's mind, only now he pictured Aspen in that alley, drained and lifeless.

About twenty minutes later, the two Guardians returned. They'd found several holes in the rocks and several more demons, whom they had skirted without being noticed. Hans considered his options silently before radioing Ethan. Nodding several times, he lowered the radio and turned to the group.

"It looks like we've found the source of our troubles. Heavy demon activity awaits us up ahead. It's not likely to be something we can

handle without back up; at least not without giving ourselves away with gunfire. We need to wait for a few of the groups to join up with us before we proceed and take care of the demons. So far, they are just standing guard, which is good. That means whoever's in there doesn't know we're here or they'd be readying themselves for battle. We're going to catch them off guard."

No sooner than Hans finished speaking, a dozen demons came up over the hill, pouncing on them all. Hans turned, no surprise showing on his face as he attempted to throw himself out of the way. The demon was too close, however, and managed to rip into Hans's side with a claw, throwing the Guardian back several yards. Instantly, all the Guardians in the group were battling the demons while Sebastian ran to Hans. He lay on the ground motionless while blood seeped from his wounds to the rock underneath his unconscious body. Sebastian's heart skipped a beat when he saw how gray Hans looked. "Oh, man." Sebastian rolled him over and grimaced. The claw marks ran from Hans's hip to the center of his rib cage and huge pieces of flesh had been torn out by the demon's claws. Guardians also had regenerative abilities though, and the cuts were attempting to heal themselves. It was the blood loss that worried Sebastian. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure the demons were still being kept at bay by the Guardians before he ripped off his black t-shirt, tying it tightly around Hans's wound. It wouldn't be near enough, but he'd be able to make it until help arrived. Hans was unconscious, but his breathing was steady. There was just a lot of blood loss and probably some damaged organs, but it wasn't as bad as it could be. This demon didn't seem to be poisonous and the wound looked clean. Garrett would be able to fix him up when the relief chopper came.

Sebastian heard running footsteps approaching and glanced up as Rogan arrived at his side. "Two more groups just showed up, but the demons are on to us now. There are more of them coming. Where's the radio?"

Sebastian looked at Hans's side where the belt for the radio was, but it had been destroyed by the slicing claws of the demon. "We'll have to use the other unit's."

Sebastian Cupid

Rogan ran to talk to one of the other leading Guardians. Hans groaned, and Sebastian took a bottle of water from his small pack, lifting it to Hans's lips. "Hey, there, buddy."

Hans blinked as he tried to sip the water. "Damn, that hurts."

"Yeah, he got deep, but it wasn't poison. Some stitches and blood and you'll heal up alright."

Already the stream of blood was slowing as Hans's body started to heal. "What's going on over there?"

Sebastian glanced over his shoulder. "More demons. We've got more backup now too, and I can see even more coming." It was actually getting a little busy behind them, and Sebastian knew he wouldn't be able to stay in the dirt with Hans for long. "I've got to get over there."

Hans grabbed Sebastian's arm, making him bend down where he could be more easily heard over the sounds of fighting and the rain. "Listen, cover all the entrances in. It's probably a cave with a lot of different paths through the rock. Divide up, but make sure there's an even ratio of Guardians and Arrows. Go as long as you can before using gunfire. When you have to, you have to, but all hell is going to break loose when they figure out where we are. Auster and Mars's power together in a cave would be immense."

Sebastian nodded. He waved another Guardian over to stand guard over Hans until help arrived. Then he grasped Hans's hand once and ran to where groups were gathering, fighting demons who were rising out of the holes in the rock. Rogan turned to him when he approached. "They know we're here now."

"The demons do, but I don't think whoever's in charge down there does. If they did, we'd have Auster's wind, and Mars's storms and war efforts to deal with. Hans wants us to go in groups, covering every entrance." The crowd was mounting as he spoke.

Rogan nodded. "We better do it now. We can't afford to waste time, waiting for them to figure out what's going on."

Sebastian approached another group with a radio, and spoke with Ethan on the radio, dictating Hans's plan over the airwaves. "Is someone with Hans?" asked Ethan.

"Yes," replied Sebastian. "I've got a Guardian standing with him."

“Make it two and then the groups need to split off and go in. Try to stay hidden.”

Sebastian handed the radio back then ran to carry out Ethan’s instructions. The units began pushing back groups of demons, though it was hard and slow-moving in the weather. Also, half the group, the Arrow half, was completely useless until they were allowed to use their guns. It slowed everything down because The Guardians spent a lot of time protecting Arrows. Sebastian became impatient to use his gun, get his hands dirty. As he advanced, his fears and anger for Aspen came that much closer to boiling over. The demons were slowly pushed back and eliminated until the groups reached the entrances. There were four Sebastian could see, spaced out among the rock surfaces. They were easy to spot because demons came out of them occasionally. Then Guardians would chop their heads off. After a while, another would come out. While watching, Sebastian had to agree with Hans. Whoever was in charge didn’t know they were here. The demons came out intermittently and were taken completely off guard by the Guardians. There wasn’t any time for a disturbance because the deed was done before the beast could manage to make a single sound.

In this manner, the groups made their way into the caves slowly, letting their eyes adjust to the darkness. Though the weather outside was dark, it was nothing compared to the inside of the tunnel. Sebastian wondered if maybe they were wrong. There was no way to navigate the inside of the caves. There was no light, no signs of anything other than demon life. It was only by following the light of the Guardians’ weapons that they could navigate the caves. The bluish-white glow of the Swords of Light filled the cave with an eerie, other-worldly glow. The sounds of the storm faded behind them as they trudged further into the tunnel. The problem now was the tunnels were so small and the lights from the Swords so bright, the demons came to them, roaring as they ran into them.

Rogan looked at Sebastian in the low light. “There goes our cover.”

Sebastian had to agree. A few seconds later the wind started, blowing in from the caves, bringing a metallic scent that reminded Sebastian of blood. The demons could be heard now, crying from deep

Sebastian Cupid

within the caves, roaring to find the Guardians and Arrows that had invaded the tunnels.

Rogan shook his head and pulled a dagger from his ankle holster. "We can't shoot in here."

Sebastian agreed. There was too big of a risk in hitting one of their own in a space this small. If the demons could fit in here, though, that meant that this passage led to something larger. "We need to get in quick, before they flood us out!"

The group murmured their agreement, and they all began moving quickly into the cave. A few more demons met them before the tunnel started to widen. Sebastian noticed an offshoot and pointed to it, yelling at the group. "We need to cover these."

A Guardian and a Lead Arrow immediately headed through the smaller tunnel as the rest of the group pressed on. They continued in this fashion, sending members of the group to investigate offshoots as they came to them. The demons were in a frenzy now, and their growls could be heard. "We got lucky," said Rogan. "Ours must not be a main tunnel or we'd be covered in them by now."

Sebastian nodded. "I'm surprised we haven't seen more. They seem loud enough."

The walls of the tunnel stretched farther and farther apart. They could now walk five in a row, shoulder to shoulder, and they still only encountered one other demon for the next hundred feet or so. Sebastian stopped, suddenly.

Rogan turned to look at him. "What's up?"

Sebastian shook his head in the wind rushing through the caves. "This isn't right. No demon activity to speak of, the wind in the tunnels, and we haven't run into anything. We're being herded."

Rogan looked around. "Do we have a choice?"

Sebastian stood there frowning, considering as the group moved on without them and the tunnel started to get dark. "I guess not."

Rogan and Sebastian turned to continue toward the fading lights of the Guardians' swords into the cave. All of a sudden, the wind and the growls stopped. Sebastian grabbed Rogan's arm. "Wait!" he hissed. They scuffled back against the wall as the light in front of them continued on, leaving them in darkness. Rogan didn't ask what they

were waiting for, but he wondered plenty what was going on ahead and why everything suddenly got so quiet. Several minutes passed before Sebastian pulled a small flashlight out of his pack and turned it on. The light was dim in the oppressive darkness of the tunnel. Sebastian's crazy hair threw wild shadows on the wall behind him as his face crinkled in concentration. Rogan stayed motionless, listening. There was no sound at all. No breeze. No demons.

Sebastian glanced at Rogan, considering. "What do you suppose?"

"The reinforcements must have gone in another entrance."

"Probably a bigger one." He looked around. "Well?..."

"Nothing else to do, is there?"

Sebastian stood there, considering. Was there? Should they turn around and go back out, look for their reinforcements? Should they press on, see what was wrong? "Okay. Let's go on in, see if there's a problem. If it's out of our depths, we'll go back out, tell them what we've found."

Rogan looked over at Sebastian, his face speaking as clearly as Sebastian's mind, saying, If there's anyone left out there.

Sebastian turned his flashlight so that the ray of light fell between his legs and to the rear. He only wanted enough light to see the next step. Light materializing up ahead would be the ultimate giveaway, and Sebastian wanted to go undetected in the event there was something waiting for them up ahead. The tunnel continued to widen, and he was sure the temperature was rising as they went deeper into the cave. It was so out of place Sebastian felt even more on edge. Even if there was a water source in this cave, it would be spring fed. Spring water stays in the low fifties year round, and it was summer outside. It should have felt like refrigeration to them. Instead, the air felt as warm as a spring day. After about five minutes of carefully navigating the tunnel, walking softly and not talking, Sebastian saw an off-shoot of the tunnel to the left. He stopped, pointing his light into it. Rogan looked into it. "Chances are the group kept going straight because this one isn't big enough to fit through comfortably."

Sebastian nodded. "I'm also thinking, though, whatever they walked into might be avoided by going this way."

Sebastian Cupid

The two men exchanged glances. Then Sebastian turned into the offshoot, and Rogan followed him. The light threw shadows on the wall, which started playing with Sebastian's imagination. He felt jumpy as his eyes darted to every shadow. Everything was so quiet the sound of his own breathing seemed monstrous. A few minutes later, the tunnel narrowed, forcing the two men to walk in a straight line behind each other. Rogan reached forward to grasp Sebastian's arm. Sebastian glanced behind him, and, at the look on Rogan's face, pulled his gun from his holster, looking ahead of them. Both of them were completely silent. Rogan was right. There was something up there making noise, and it wasn't them. Sebastian swiveled his light in front of him, looking carefully. He flashed his light over a large boulder jutting out from the cave wall. He was certain something was moving back there. "You have five seconds to come out. After that, we shoot," Sebastian said, evenly.

"Don't shoot!" came a harsh whisper. Then Sebastian and Rogan watched in shock as Alex appeared from behind the boulder.

"Alex?" Sebastian gasped. "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be in Denver!"

Alex said nothing, and it suddenly dawned on Sebastian that Alex was in shock. He rushed forward as he handed the light to Rogan. Sebastian took Alex's face in his hands and looked into her eyes. "Alex? It's Sebastian. Hey, talk to me okay?"

Her eyes were completely dilated, even in the bright light of the flashlight. Her breath was whistling between her teeth, her face as white as death. "Sebastian?"

Sebastian cursed and sat her on the boulder she'd been hiding behind. Rogan approached them from the back. "She's in a bad shape."

Sebastian nodded. "Alex? Where are the others?"

Alex whimpered and shook her head. "Gone! Everyone's gone. The demons carried them off..." Then she dissolved in tears. "I couldn't stop them. I was too weak, and there were too many. The force field wouldn't work in here...." Then she started muttering to herself.

Sebastian turned to look at Rogan. Rogan shrugged. "You think she's right?" He swallowed. "Could they all be...?" He drifted off, not wanting to finish the sentence.

Sebastian turned back to Alex. "She needs medical attention. She's in bad shock. I bet she doesn't remember a single thing since whatever happened."

Rogan thought for a moment. "We can't possibly walk her all the way back to Alamosa on foot. That's a good ten miles or more."

Sebastian considered. "We can't call for a chopper to come in here. That would completely give us away. If whatever's going on here wiped out that many Arrows and Guardians, it would wipe us out in a second."

"Well, we can't leave her."

Alex was now hysterically sobbing. Sebastian knelt in front of her face. "Alex. How did you get away?"

Alex stopped a moment and looked into Sebastian's eyes. "I persuaded the demon to leave me."

Rogan frowned. "Persuaded? Sebastian, she's still out of it. You can't reason with demons. They respond to the order of their sire only."

Alex shook her head. "No, I mean, I can make them do things. That's how I convinced the troupe to let me come. I ...think what I want and look into someone's eyes, and they do it."

Sebastian exhaled. "So, Psyche was right about you being able to develop more powers of persuasion. You realize what an enormous risk you took coming here?"

Alex shrugged, her tears glistening on her cheeks. "I figured if I came, I'd be able to help. I'd be able to get Aspen back, since I let her go."

Sebastian swore and shook his head, looking at the ground. "So you...persuaded the demon to let you go, then you ran in here and hid?"

Alex nodded. "They all went down there." She pointed at the long twist of tunnel behind her.

"Have you seen any other demons or people since then?" Rogan asked. Alex shook her head. He looked at Sebastian. "Well, we can go out and radio now, start walking..." He didn't look convinced.

Sebastian turned. "You can leave. Take Alex. I'm not leaving until I find out what's going on. I'm not leaving Aspen."

Sebastian Cupid

"I'm not leaving you on your own," Rogan said.

Sebastian knew they were both stuck for as long as it took. He turned back to Alex, who was looking a little more lucid now that she was talking. "Alex, can you show us the way you ran out here?"

Alex swallowed and threw a glance over her shoulder. Her breath shuddered as she exhaled. She felt incredibly weak and guilty she was the only one that survived. She had to do something. She looked back at Sebastian and nodded. Sebastian held out a hand, and Alex grasped it, wiping off her hands on her tattered shorts, which had blood on one side. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

Sebastian took her arm in his hand. "Alex, we don't blame you. You tried. If there were enough demons to carry off every single Arrow and Guardian, even as the Guardians were cutting them down, it must have been massive."

Alex lifted her hazel eyes, and nodded. "It was like a sea of demons pouring out of the tunnels. They even came from behind us. I tried throwing them off, but there were more to replace them before I could even get started. Then I tried the force field, but there was no room at all. I was thinking over and over, drop me, drop me, and suddenly he did! Then I ran back to get help until...I couldn't run any more. I was lost. I felt like I was going in circles. I had no light, no one to tell me which way was out, and I was afraid I was running right back into them again."

Sebastian nodded. "We'll go on together, then."

They all stood and started walking back into the depths of the cave. They walked very quietly for a long time. Sebastian felt maybe fifteen minutes passed before the air became very warm, almost hot. He stopped suddenly and glanced at Rogan. "Feel that?"

Rogan nodded. "That's not normal heat. Something is generating heat in here."

Sebastian turned off his light. He could see, very faintly, a light ahead. He felt Alex trembling beside him. "Alex, stay back here. Hide behind this rock. We're going to get an idea of what we're dealing with so we can go back to tell the others what's going on here."

Alex sat watching the pulsing faint blue light ahead. Rogan and Sebastian carefully inched their way ahead, toward the light, taking

great care not to make noise as they stepped through the echoing tunnel. The closer they got, the easier the way became as the light grew brighter. The air was very hot now, and both men were sweating. The tunnel widened enough to where they could walk side by side comfortably with some space between them. Sebastian cautiously turned a corner and could see the entrance into a great room, which was the source of the light. Rogan and Sebastian clung to the walls of the tunnel as they crept up on the entrance. The light came from many sources throughout the room, which was a sight that stopped Sebastian's breath in his throat. Rogan nearly gasped before he stopped himself, staring ahead in disbelief. The room was enormous. The cavern they peered into could have housed the entire Temple, it was so vast. The light came from hundreds of individual circles of light that had been created on the floor, identical to the one Hans had built to contain Mars and Rogan when they were under arrest. In each circle was an Arrow or a Guardian. Each one looked as though he or she were hanging from an invisible thread that suspended them from under their armpits. Their limbs and heads dangled motionless from the trunks of their bodies. It was impossible to tell if they were living or dead. Sebastian's mouth fell open as he tried to count them and failed. There must have been hundreds, thousands? The bodies were all situated inside the circles, which ran in rings around the center of the room. In the center there was a large open area, maybe fifty feet in diameter. In it stood a large stone slab, much like the altar piece Sebastian had taken Aspen from in Seattle. His mind jumped back to that horrible day as he looked at the slab, though it was empty. To the sides of the slab were circles which housed the missing gods. Sebastian recognized Auster. Mars was to his right. And now, joining them, were Psyche and Cupid. Sebastian looked for Venus, but didn't see her. There were some empty circles in the room, though. Two of them were there beside the gods, and Sebastian wondered who else had been taken besides Venus.

Sebastian glanced around but saw no demons. The room seemed to be devoid of all movement. The heat coming from all the magic circles was incredible, and Sebastian was surprised to see none of the captives seemed to be sweating, even in their unconscious state. He

Sebastian Cupid

wondered if they were even alive. The walls of the cavern were riddled with holes. It seemed all the tunnels circled around back to this room. That would explain Alex's fear that she was going in circles. She likely had been. Sebastian looked around at all of the faces of the bodies, which he recognized, even though their state made them seem alien to him. His heart stopped as he located Aspen, and, right next to her, Russell.

Sebastian turned, as if in a daze, and noticed Rogan's face was a portrait of the same twisted shock he felt. Rogan turned to Sebastian, wide-eyed, and mouthed, They're ALL here? Sebastian looked back at the room for a moment and nodded. It appeared so. All of their reinforcements, their gods. The entire contents of more than two Temples were in this room with room for more. This mountain was huge. For all Sebastian knew, there was even more space in here, in another room. His eyes darted back to the two empty circles. The demons and those two missing captives had to be somewhere.

Sebastian and Rogan heard footsteps. They slipped back out of sight as a few demons slithered into the room from a tunnel on the far side of the cavern. They carried Hans and Ethan in their scaly arms. Ethan appeared to be unconscious, but Sebastian thought he saw Hans move. The demons carried them to the two empty circles next to the captured gods. One demon knelt to the ground, doing something on the floor Sebastian couldn't see. The light walls of the circle fell, and the demons placed their captives both in the air, as if on invisible hooks. As the demons stepped back, bright lights shimmered up to hold the captives within the circles' confines. Hans's head lolled to the side as he attempted to speak, but could make no noise. He looked like a cancer patient in the final stages of life, and it was a horrific sight for Sebastian; to see this warrior that had defended them all, helpless. The demons turned back to the tunnels, passing the first person Sebastian and Rogan had set eyes on in the room that wasn't captive. When they saw her, both of them started as if from electric shock, their eyes bugging out of their heads. Sebastian grasped Rogan's arm as his disbelieving eyes passed over the woman who entered the room. Both men jumped back and pressed themselves against the wall of the tunnel they had entered from. Their eyes met, shock passing over their

J.J. Martin

faces. The goddess who had just passed into the room, looking for all the world like she owned the place, was Venus.

TWENTY-SIX

Venus approached the first circle in front of her, which housed Hans. He acknowledged her presence by attempting to lift his head from his shoulder, with little result. It was obvious the Guardian was completely drained of his resources. Sebastian and Rogan couldn't see his expression from where they stood, but they could see Venus's smug portrait of superiority as she looked on. "Oh, stop looking at me like that, Hans. You know that all of this was mine originally anyway. If Psyche had kept her nose out of what didn't belong to her to begin with..." she glanced coldly at Psyche, "...you'd all still be working for me. It would have been the kingdom I had originally owned. Let's not forget, Psyche was made into a goddess from a mortal. She's not a true goddess."

Hans must have tried to say something then, because Venus leaned closer to him. "What's that?" She paused as Hans repeated whatever he had said. Venus only laughed, throwing her head back as if he was extremely funny. "There is no 'fair' in this, Hans. There is simply power and the struggle for it. Taking back what was always mine does not make me a thief. It makes me resourceful." She took a step closer to where Psyche was suspended. "And patient." She took another step, her eyes narrowing. "And clever." She stopped in front of Psyche, gazing intently into Psyche's unconscious face. Venus stood in front of Psyche, motionless, considering. She stood there for so long Sebastian became aware of the sweat dripping off of his brow. His heart beat rapidly as he waited. Venus finally spoke, and Sebastian had to strain to hear the words she spoke quietly to Psyche's unconscious form.

Sebastian Cupid

“You are beautiful. There’s no question about that. You were so beautiful Auster, Mars, and Cupid all moved heaven and earth to make you one of them. Without their help, you would have perished centuries upon centuries ago. You would have grown old. Your beauty would have faded. You would have had children and changed diapers. You would have grown saggy and old, as mortals do. You would have turned wrinkled and sickly and eventually died.” She stopped there, lost in the train of her own thoughts. “You have everything that was mine because of your looks. You didn’t deserve it. You didn’t earn it. You didn’t sweat over it as I did.” Her beautiful voice dropped into a sing-song as she said, “Look at the beautiful mortal! Let’s make her a goddess and give her power over love and beauty. LOVE AND BEAUTY!” Sebastian and Rogan both jumped. “And WHO was the goddess of love and beauty, Psyche? WHO?” Venus’s face reddened, her flawless demeanor in pieces for the first time Sebastian had ever seen. Her anger made her face ugly, contorted. Venus leaned into Psyche’s unconscious face. “It was MINE! And because my idiot boy fell in love with you, I lost everything.”

Venus straightened. She looked over at the limp form of Cupid, her son, hanging in the air. “My boy.” She shook her head. “Do you remember how you punished me for that? Do you remember locking yourself in your room and only using your lead arrows for weeks on end so my kingdom would fall? Of course you do. You threw a temper tantrum, proving all of my followers would suffer without your good will. I never forgot it.”

Venus took a cloth from the pocket of her suit skirt, her professional attire looking ridiculously out of place in the cavern. She wiped her face, delicately, before slipping the hankie back into her pocket and looking at Cupid again. “This time there will be no Fall from grace. All the mortals are still praying for love, revenge, and war. Their prayers now come to me.”

She turned to look at the two demons still standing at the tunnel entrance. “We’re done here for today. Send the others back to their posts. I don’t expect much activity. The demons have descended on most of the Arrow Temples by now. Arrow and Guardian numbers are

so depleted there isn't anyone else to send. They will all have to retreat to Olympus."

Venus turned and left the room, the demons on her tail.

Sebastian and Rogan waited until several minutes had passed. Sebastian was thinking so intently he jumped when Rogan whispered in his ear. "We have to get Hans."

Sebastian turned to look at him. "Hans?"

"He's still conscious...or he was. We need to find out how to take down the circles."

Sebastian shook his head. "Even if we did, every one of them are unconscious. What the hell would we do with almost two thousand unconscious people? We'd never get out of here!"

"I can wake them." Rogan and Sebastian both jumped out of their skins as Alex materialized behind them. Sebastian gripped her arm while he found his voice. "NEVER do that again."

Alex blinked. "Sorry. I can wake them up."

Rogan shook his head. "But look at them. They are obviously exhausted beyond being able to handle anything."

Sebastian shrugged. "One step at a time. Let's talk to Hans."

Rogan turned to Alex. "You better come with us. In case someone interrupts us."

Alex nodded and the three of them descended the rock wall into the room. The way was easy now. The tunnels had been cut for easy access to this room. As the three of them walked, Sebastian felt strange passing between the bodies of his peers, their forms hanging in the air, their eyes closed as if they were dead. Sebastian, Rogan, and Alex crept quietly to the middle of the room. Sebastian hated walking in the open, the dozens of tunnels in the walls feeling like eyes watching their every move. At last, they reached the circle that held Hans. His eyes were closed, his face relaxed behind the glow of the circle walls. Sebastian spoke to him quietly, as Alex and Rogan kept a watch on the many tunnel entrances. "Hans!" His voice was a harsh whisper. Still, Hans remained as before. Sebastian knew better than to touch the lighted walls of the circle. He'd seen people thrown back a good hundred feet before depending on the voltage of the magically power-charged walls. He wasn't going to take a chance.

Sebastian Cupid

Sebastian leaned as close as he could to keep his voice low. "Hans! Wake up!" This time, Hans flinched, his eyes fluttering. "Hans, come on. It's Sebastian."

Sebastian thought he saw Hans mouth his name, groggily. His head swiveled over to the other shoulder, his eyes still closed. Alex stood next to Sebastian's shoulder. She looked at Hans and spoke clearly. "Wake up."

Sebastian could feel the power radiate off of Alex. He even felt a little more alert, just standing next to her while she gave the command. Hans's eyes popped open, his head snapping to attention, his eyes roving. For a brief moment, Sebastian was afraid he would speak or call out in fright, so he placed his finger in front of his lips, shushing Hans as they made eye contact. When Hans saw who was there, he glanced quickly around, looking at the tunnels. "Where's Venus?"

"She left only moments ago."

Hans shook his head. "It seems like days."

Sebastian raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Are you all drugged?"

Hans nodded. "And depleted of blood, even the gods. She's got all of your research, Sebastian. She's been draining our blood, taking over the task of the Arrows for herself, taking in all the prayer and power. That's why we're all here and alive. She needs our blood."

"Why does she need Guardians' blood?"

Hans smiled humorlessly. "You wouldn't know this, but that's how circles are made. We draw the circle and press our blood into crevices on the floor. When it's filled, it glows and no one can pass out of it again until our blood makes contact with it again."

Sebastian nodded as he recalled the demon kneeling in front of the circle before placing Hans inside. "Can you do it from inside?"

Hans shook his head. "We can't even touch the etching on the floor from in here. And touching the walls of the circles also sets off an alarm. One of the Arrows woke up when I was brought in here earlier. As soon as she moved and hit the wall, the demons came to carry her off and drain her until she was unconscious again."

"Do us a favor and don't move. How can we get the walls down?"

"All of the blood is pulled in another room. There are demons everywhere."

“How far up do these walls go on the circles? Can we lift you out of this?”

Hans glanced at Alex, considering. “I’ve never put something that could fly into these, but I did have a demigod in one back in 516 B.C. He had super human strength and could jump amazingly high. He jumped one hundred feet and still got zapped.”

Sebastian grinned. “That wasn’t Hercules, was it?”

Hans smiled. “That’s classified.”

Alex glanced at Sebastian in awe. “The Hercules? Wow.”

Rogan walked up to Sebastian. “We’ve got to move. This place crawls.”

Sebastian nodded. “Where do we get blood if we can’t get it from you?”

Hans nodded toward the entrance Venus had come through earlier. “In there. Follow that passage around and stay to the right, but pay attention. Everything looks different on the way back. You won’t be able to just stay left, because you’ll end up somewhere else. Also, there are demons patrolling the tunnel.”

Sebastian looked at Alex. “You’ll have to lead the way, then.” Alex nodded, while Hans just looked confused.

“Why her?”

“Because she compelled the demons to leave her behind.”

Hans looked over, quickly. “Compelled them? Psyche was right?”

Alex nodded. “That’s how I escaped the demons when the rest of you were taken. I couldn’t get them to leave everyone, but they left me.”

Sebastian noticed the drop in her mood again. “And it’s a good thing too, because we’re going to need you. Put Hans back to sleep.”

Hans’s head jerked up. “What? Why?”

“Because if you’re awake, you’ll give us away. You were out cold. That and we can’t afford for you to bump the walls and be taken away again.”

Hans looked like he wanted to argue, but eventually nodded. Sebastian glanced at Alex. She turned to Hans and a moment later he was asleep. Sebastian turned to her in amazement. “You don’t have to speak?”

Alex shrugged. "I guess not. I was going to say something, but I didn't have to. He was already asleep."

"Nice." Sebastian turned to Rogan and they looked toward the tunnel Hans had indicated. "We're going to have to go weapon-less. We can't afford to fire weapons in here. Alex is our only weapon."

Alex looked at them, swallowing. "No, pressure, huh?"

"I don't think there is a no-pressure escape plan available."

Alex took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay. Let's go."

The three of them turned to the tunnel they'd seen Venus leave through and started walking, staying to the right. Alex led the way in the hope that her influence would disarm any opposition they encountered before making a ruckus. It got dark fast, and Sebastian cursed, whispering, "We can't afford to use the light. It'd give us away before Alex could do her thing."

"It's okay," said Alex. "The demons have lights so they can see. We'll see them before they see us. It will actually make my job easier. I can compel the demon to simply turn around or go a different way."

So they pressed on, holding their hands against the wall to their right. Whenever a tunnel opened up they turned right, and Sebastian placed a coin from his pocket at the corner of the tunnel so they would know to take a left at every coin on the way back. They went along for almost five minutes, moving slowly to stay silent, before the first light appeared in a tunnel. Sebastian and Rogan stayed back while Alex stared straight ahead, pushing her thoughts to the light. Like magic, the demon turned, heading back where it came from. "Quick!" said Alex. "Follow it!"

Rogan whispered next to her as she moved forward, "How do you know where it's going?"

"Because I told it where to go."

The three of them silently followed their only light source while Sebastian continued to mark their path. The tunnel came to a sudden end, and the group held back as the demon entered a room that was about half the size of the previous one. Garrett would have loved this room. It was a major medical facility. There were multiple gurneys next to workstations. Demons moved around the room, carrying coolers, which Sebastian saw contained blood. Venus wasn't visible in

the room. Sebastian looked at the coolers lying on the floor, considering. "How do we know which ones have Guardian blood? We can't start lifting the lids of all the coolers."

Alex looked back at the demon that had entered the room ahead of her. She looked focused, like she was trying to read invisible words off of the back of its head. The demon stopped suddenly, lifting a cooler next to his feet and placing it on a gurney. He took the lid off, placing a bag of blood on the hard plastic of the gurney. Under Alex's watchful stare, he placed two more there and then closed the lid and carried the cooler away, leaving the blood.

"Nice trick," Sebastian said. "But how are we going to get that blood without anyone noticing?"

Alex considered this. "I don't know. I didn't even know I could do this until a couple hours ago. I don't know if I can compel more than one at a time." She focused her attention on the three demons closest to the table. Simultaneously, they all turned away, looking at a tunnel on the opposite side of the room. A few other demons that were working stopped to stare. Quickly, Alex stopped what she was doing, and they shook their heads as if they were confused and went about their business.

Sebastian whispered in her ear. "We won't be able to get that blood out of there. Someone's going to notice it and put it away again."

Alex shook her head. "Hold on." She focused again on the demons, and every head turned toward the tunnel on the other side of the room. Simultaneously, the bags of blood flew across the room, straight into Sebastian's hands. Alex released her hold on the demons, nearly passing out with the effort. Shaky, she fell back onto Rogan, who held her up.

"Man, that really drains you, doesn't it?"

Alex shook her head. "I'm weak from earlier. I tried as hard as I could to compel them all to drop the Arrows and Guardians when I got away, but there were hundreds of them. I tried and tried until I nearly passed out. I saved myself as a last resort."

Sebastian patted her arm. "You've done real well. You've got to save some though. We have a lot to do, and we can't have you passing out on us."

Sebastian Cupid

Alex nodded, her face pale. "I'll be okay. Let's go."

The three of them headed back the way they had come. They were forced to use the flashlight whenever they came to a turn to check and make sure they were still on the right path back. Alex looked pale, but she was keeping up with the guys just fine. Sebastian kept glancing at her whenever they turned the light on. On the way back, they never ran into a demon. Sebastian assumed, from what they had just seen, most of them were collecting and storing the blood donations. He hoped that would keep them at bay for a little while longer.

When they arrived at the entrance to the large room where everyone was held captive, Sebastian lifted his hand, signaling for them to take caution as he peered around the corner. He didn't like how little he could see from his vantage point. The tunnel they had originally entered from had been higher up in the cave wall. Now they were on ground level to the room, and Sebastian felt conspicuous with all the other entrances on higher ground than they were. They entered the room carefully, and Rogan and Alex immediately went around the room to check the other tunnels and make sure they were alone. After a quick evaluation, they nodded at Sebastian, who approached Hans again. Alex rushed to his side. When he nodded at her, she looked at Hans, who woke instantly.

Sebastian said, "Careful!" He didn't want Hans to forget about the walls.

Hans blinked a couple times, and then looked at Sebastian. "You have the blood?"

Sebastian lifted the pouches. "I have to fill the groves in the circle?"

"Good Jupiter, no. It would be nuts if we have to do that every time we wanted to take down the walls. No, we only do that when we create them. To take down the walls, you need only to press a bit of it to the circle."

Sebastian carefully opened the first pouch, taking great care not to spill any blood. He knelt and dribbled a little on the circle. The wall came down instantly, and Hans fell a couple feet to the floor, where he kneeled. He was shaky, but he eventually stood. Sebastian watched, his expression anything but pleased. "Tell me how we are going to get

hundreds of people in your condition back to the dunes and the choppers?"

Hans shook his head. "We won't be able too. Not all of us at once, anyway. We'll need to wake small groups, smuggle them out. The demons took our weapons too."

Rogan cursed and looked to the tunnels in the walls. "What the hell are we supposed to do with that? We're going to get to the outside, and there are going to be demons there, waiting for us. We're weaponless and weak. Sebastian and I can't take out all of them with our guns. Even if we could, we wouldn't. It'd give away our position."

Hans turned to look at Rogan. "We're not weaponless." He turned to look at Alex.

Her mouth dropped open as she got his meaning. "Oh, no. No, Hans."

Sebastian shook his head. "You don't get it. She almost passed out just a few minutes ago, turning all the demons' heads so she could get the blood to do this. She can't take on hundreds of demons by herself. Not right now, anyway."

Hans crossed his arms. "What if you only had to do it once? What if we were all assembled and you only have to make them all vacate a spot for a short time while we all slip away?"

Rogan shook his head. "Before or after she goes around and wakes everyone up? And smuggles them out past demons to the outer tunnels?"

Hans turned to glare at Rogan. "You want to leave them here?"

Rogan and Hans stared each other down as they both stood on their own sides of the issue. They barely heard Alex when she spoke again. "We're not going to need all that blood, are we?"

Sebastian turned to her, distracted. "What do you mean?"

"Can we spare a pouch of it?"

Hans glanced over. "You mean for you?"

Alex nodded. "The transfusions made me stronger. They would have healed me entirely if it hadn't been for the blood mix up."

"But this is Guardian blood."

Sebastian Cupid

“It doesn’t matter anymore. I’m a demigod. Garrett said all blood works with me now. I can also donate to anyone, mortal or immortal. I’m a universal donor.”

Hans’s forehead wrinkled. “Your blood mix up wasn’t a mix up.”

Sebastian nodded. “Psyche said as much. I guess we’ll have to figure out what Venus’s plan was behind having a demigod later. For now, we can spare a packet of blood, but I don’t have IV tubing or anything.”

Alex swallowed, visibly. “I don’t need it.”

Rogan’s shocked face matched those of the other men. “You’d drink it?”

Alex turned to Rogan, snappish. “Yes, Rogan. I would if it means the salvation of the entire Temple.” Rogan jumped at her expression.

Sebastian stepped forward and handed her a packet of blood. “You are a real Arrow, you know?”

Alex flushed a little with pleasure as she took the packet. Looking at their watchful eyes, she stilled, glaring. “Do you mind?”

Glancing at each other, they all turned away. Sebastian tried not to grimace as he heard the packet rip open, followed by slurping sounds. He glanced at Rogan’s face, noticing he didn’t look too comfortable either. Sebastian grinned as he looked back at his feet. Apparently, Rogan wasn’t so tough after all.

Alex cleared her throat. “Okay.”

They all turned back to her. She’d placed the packet somewhere out of sight. Sebastian noticed instantly she looked almost like her normal self. “Wow,” he said. “That really works for you, doesn’t it?”

“I guess so. It makes sense. Food is good, but it takes time for my body to convert into energy. This is kind of like an energy drink or something.”

Rogan shook his head. “I appreciate it. Truly, I do!” he said defensively, in response to her reproachful look. “You’ve got to admit, though, it’s a little weird.”

“Yeah, well,” Alex scoffed. “My ‘weird’ is going to save your ass. We’d better hurry.”

“Right,” Sebastian said, wisely masking his grin at seeing Rogan taken down a notch by a little red-head. “What’s the best way to do this, Hans?”

Hans nodded toward the captives. “I say wake the gods first. As they wake, press blood to the circle. I can do one while you do the other. Rogan can even do some with the other packet of blood. Alex, can you wake three at once?”

“I can wake all of them at once.”

“Well, don’t do that,” Hans said. “We’d run the risk of someone bumping a wall. We’ll wake only as many circles as we can open at a time.”

Sebastian nodded. “Remember the boulder you were hiding behind, Alex?” She nodded. “We’ll take each group there, have them wait. We won’t be able to fit a thousand people there, though.”

Alex shook her head. “It’s okay. I can do this a few times.”

“You’re sure?”

Alex nodded. “I’m much better now.”

Sebastian turned to Rogan. “In that case, take care with the blood, Rogan. We can give our leftovers to Alex if she starts getting weak.”

For the first time, Sebastian felt hope that they would get everyone out. They rushed to the gods, waking Cupid, Psyche, and Mars as they lowered the walls. They shushed them, leaving them to gain their bearings and strength as they moved on to Ethan and Auster. They soon cleared the inner circle. The small group headed out to the boulder in the tunnel Alex had hidden behind. Alex gave them directions and Sebastian’s light. Alex couldn’t afford to go with them during their limited time, but the gods were not completely without power. They’d be able to hold their own, were trouble encountered. Ethan promised to make radio contact as soon as he could to assemble another army, a more informed one, to take out the whole mountain.

Ethan led the group into the tunnels. Sebastian ran over to Aspen, who was hardly recognizable in the state she was in. He had never seen her looking so weak and defenseless, not even at the Seattle Temple. Alex ran with him, waking Aspen as Sebastian pressed the blood into the circle. Aspen woke, crumbling into Sebastian’s waiting arms. “Oh!” she exclaimed as she fell into him.

Sebastian Cupid

Sebastian brushed her hair out of her eyes. “Shhh,” he whispered. “It’s me.”

“Sebastian?” Aspen whispered. Tears glimmered in her eyes. “Thank the gods. I thought we were finished.”

Sebastian held her face in his hands, kissing every available surface. She shivered in his grasp, and he promised to see her to safety himself. “Stay with me. I’m not letting you out of my sight. Just sit and rest a while.”

Aspen nodded. Sebastian turned and noticed Rogan looking resolutely away from them. Sebastian’s gut quivered as he turned back to the task at hand. Soon, another circle was freed, including Russell. The air whooshed out of his lungs as he landed on the ground. When he looked up and saw who had released him, he chuckled. “I should have known.”

“What can I say, I’m a glutton for punishment,” Sebastian smiled. He helped his brother to his feet. Looking over Sebastian’s shoulder, Russell’s face registered shock at the sight of Alex.

“I know, I know,” Alex said. “But if I hadn’t broken the rules, this would be a lot harder.”

Russell smiled as he approached Alex, enveloping her in a big hug. “I’m glad you did.” He pulled back to look into her eyes. She blushed, prettily, as his eyes drifted over her face. Russell chuckled and went to help Aspen to her feet as the three moved around the room to finish releasing that circle.

They were getting close to the first hundred now, and Alex knew she needed to let them out. She cleared her throat. “They’ve got to be filling that tunnel now.”

Sebastian looked around. “There are still so many to go.”

Alex thought for a moment and held out her hand. “Give me the blood.”

“Are you weak?”

“No,” Aspen said. “I’m going to release everyone.”

Sebastian made a strangled sound. “You can’t do that. The noise!”

Ignoring him, Alex lifted herself about ten feet into the air, looking down on all the captives. She lifted her hands up, enclosing them all in a force field. Then the blood pouch floated up from her uplifted hand.

Sebastian and the others watched as little glimmering drops of blood, spilled out, hovering in the air. It separated into rows around her, like rings around the planet of Saturn. She moved her hands gently and the drops landed on the circles. Simultaneously, she woke all of the captives. Sebastian had been right. There was a lot of noise and exclamations of surprise as they woke, but the force field kept them in silence. Alex spoke, loudly. "Please, everyone, remain calm."

Every head turned to look up at her in awe. "The demons are still here. We are weaponless. We have to sneak out, undetected. I know you are too weak to fight as well. Please, follow Rogan toward the exit. I will be working to divert the demons away from your escape route."

When everyone was silent, Alex let down the force field and lowered to the ground. She was sweating when Sebastian handed her the other packet of blood, which she rapidly drank. Russell, to his credit, didn't gape for too long before turning his attention to Victoria and Evans, who joined them. "Hey, guys."

Victoria grinned in relief, but Evans only looked around. "Where is Glen?"

Alex stopped suddenly. "He's not with you?"

Evans turned to her, shaking her head. "No. I mean, he doesn't have immortal blood..." she faded off, her face struggling not to break down as her meaning was implied.

Sebastian stepped forward before Alex could start to panic. "When was the last time you saw him, Evans?"

She looked up. "The last time I saw anyone was when they captured us and separated us from our weapons."

Hans shook his head. "You wouldn't remember anything. The only ones who were allowed to be awake through the process were myself, the gods, and Ethan. Venus seemed to enjoy torturing us with the vision of our army, helpless."

Victoria's head jerked up. "Venus?"

Sebastian shook his head. "Not now, there's no time." He thought carefully. He turned to look at Alex, whose tears were glimmering in her eyes.

"I can't leave him, Sebastian. I can't."

Sebastian nodded. "We have to get the others to safety."

Sebastian Cupid

"I can't just..." Tears spilled over as Alex struggled to contain her sudden fright over her brother's safety.

Rogan turned to Sebastian suddenly. "We can leave without her."

"What?"

"No, I mean, we can get to safety if she wants to stay behind and look for Glen. We've got Auster, Cupid, Psyche, Mars, Ethan, and Hans. That means Venus doesn't have control over their powers anymore. The only reason she's been able to stop us before was because she had Auster and Mars's powers. If the demons show up, we'll use Mars and Auster to get out."

Sebastian considered this before turning to Hans. "Well?"

Hans nodded. "We have enough gods on our side now to make a getaway. Go get Glen, but if you get caught..." His voice trailed off, and he didn't need to finish. Sebastian knew enough about Venus's temper to know if they were caught, they wouldn't survive.

Alex nodded and started back into the main tunnel, but Sebastian caught her arm. "What?" she demanded. "I can't waste any more time."

Sebastian nodded. "I know. I'm going with you."

"Me too," said Russell. Victoria, Evans, and Aspen also lined up next to him. Alex's chin wobbled as she realized they were all going to help her. "Thank you," she whispered.

Sebastian turned to nod at Hans and Rogan who left immediately to lead the others to safety. Alex's face was one big vision of hope as she turned, the others following. This time, she used her powers of compulsion as soon as she entered the caves. She didn't attempt to be quiet or sneak around corners. She held the flashlight in front of her, marching straight into the medical room, which was empty.

Sebastian came up short. "Where did they all go?"

"I gave them the idea it's dinner time. They're all off to get a bite to eat."

Sebastian glanced around. "No one is here. How do we find Glen?"

Alex considered for a second and then looked toward one of the tunnels, where a demon entered the room, looking right at them. Sebastian started and brought up his gun immediately, but Aspen raised an arm, warning him off. Alex stood there quiet and fearless, watching the demon approach. He stopped right in front of her. Power

radiated off of her as she looked into his hideous face and stated. "Is there a mortal here?"

The demon nodded and, after a moment of looking in Alex's eyes, turned and marched off down a tunnel. The others quickly followed him as he marched further into the cave. The air was growing cooler, the ease of it making them all more comfortable. Suddenly, Alex didn't feel as tired as she had. The blood she'd consumed was helping already, and the cool air was easier to work in. Sebastian stayed by her side, wielding the only gun in the group.

The demon walked into an opening in the tunnel while the others held back, cautiously peering into the room. It was full of computers and medical equipment. It looked like a laboratory of sorts. There were many temperature-controlled refrigerators that held blood, which Sebastian assumed was from the blood draw earlier. There were vials lining several countertops, and a small man stood hunched over the computer until the demon entered the room. Sebastian's face was frozen in shock as he saw the man rise up asking, "What are you doing in here? Go back to patrol!"

The demon seemed confused for a moment and started to turn, but Alex strode into the room, walking right up to the man. His face changed into shock as Alex said, "Hello, Garrett."

TWENTY-SEVEN

Garrett didn't waste any time running for the door, but it did him little good. Alex lifted her hand, throwing a force field up, which he bounced off of. He grunted as he hit the floor. In moments, Sebastian and Russell drug him to his feet, Sebastian's gun pointed to his head. "You can't fire that in here!" Garrett spat. "You'll give yourselves away."

Sebastian looked coldly into Garrett's eyes. "I'd risk it."

The aging doctor flushed as he looked from face to face. "Oh, thank Jupiter you guys found me."

"I don't think so," said Aspen. "That story isn't going to work."

Garrett sputtered in desperation. "Well, what would you have done?" asked Garrett. "I'm only a mortal. I couldn't back out of this with Venus watching my every move for the last three weeks."

Alex got right in Garrett's face. "It was you. You did this to me." Garrett shook his head. "Garrett," Alex said, looking into his eyes. His face started to relax in an odd kind of way. "Tell me everything."

Garrett's voice slid between his lips, but there was little expression to go with it. It was like Garrett was talking in his sleep, even though he was awake. "It was Venus's idea to kill you. When you were brought in, she knew you might recognize her from that day of the demon attack in the alley with Sebastian and Aspen because she had seen you. Venus had asked Mars to meet her there to get him to join her cause, fully intending to let him take the fall for the demon attack. She was only feet away from you when you saw Mars running toward the coffee shop. If you recognized her, all would be lost. She had me switch

your blood with that of an Arrow for the second transfusion. She expected it to kill you. She didn't know it would make you a demigod. No one has ever made a demigod that way before."

Garrett stopped, and seemed to want to go to sleep. Alex jerked her head and his head shot back up, sweat dripping down his face despite the coolness of the room. Russell glanced at Alex, but her eyes never left Garrett's face. "Go on."

"When you were created a demigod, Venus thought it might work in her favor. If Jupiter punished Psyche and Cupid for creating a demigod in their Temple, she might get some of her power back. Instead, Cupid took his case to Jupiter and was pardoned. She was furious." Garrett shuddered at this. His eyes started to droop. Alex took a threatening step forward. "What have you done with my brother?"

Garrett's eyes bulged in his head and blood began to run out of one nostril. Sweat was running freely down his face now. "Tell me!" yelled Alex.

Sebastian laid a hand on Alex's arm, which she shook off, watching Garrett. Garrett swallowed. "He was killed."

"No!" screamed Alex as Garrett collapsed on the floor. Suddenly, everything in the room began to float. Sebastian and the others watching jumped back as everything that wasn't bolted to the floor defied gravity. Vials crashed to the floor and doors of the refrigeration units opened, spilling blood. Alex screamed, throwing her hands to her head, her rage letting her powers run crazy. Computers exploded, glass shattered.

Russell rushed to Alex's side, stepping into her line of sight. "Alex, sweetheart, please stop."

Alex's eyes focused on Russell, and she began to cry, tears running from her eyes, sweat running from her brow. "How could they, Russell? He was just a mortal! He was just here because of me." She began to cry in earnest, her red rimmed eyes closing. Russell stepped forward and took her face into his hands. Turning it to his, he pressed her cheek to his chest, enveloping her in his arms. Russell looked over her head to see Evans with her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking. All of the objects that had been floating crashed back onto the ground. It created such an incredible ruckus that the demon snapped

out of his trance and roared. Alex turned, lifting a hand, but it was too late. They could hear answering roars in the tunnels.

Alex was shaking. The episode with Garrett had drained a lot of her energy. Sebastian ran to an open refrigeration unit and grabbed a handful of packets of blood and turned toward the tunnel that went back the way they had come.

“We need to go, now.” The others ran, Russell helping Alex as they went. Sebastian handed her a packet of blood, which she tried messily to eat, dripping most of it on herself as they ran. Sebastian could hear the demons coming behind them. He hoped beyond all hope the others had made it out safely before the commotion had started.

They reached the medical room, the heat starting to build again as they pressed into the tunnel to take them back to the large room where the now empty circles stood. Alex was able to run well on her own after a couple minutes, rejuvenated from the blood in the packet, but Sebastian noticed she looked worse off than before. Alex had reached her limit.

Running full out, they stumbled into the main room, which looked incredibly empty with all the captives released. As a matter of a fact, there was only one person in the room.

“Well, well,” said Venus. She said as the group slammed to a halt. She looked at Alex. “Garrett told me I wouldn’t have to be worried about you being here today. It’s not the first thing he was wrong about.”

Sebastian’s breath caught in his throat as his heart sank. He had no hope for their escape now. Venus was a powerful god, thousands of years old. They were all going to die down here. He looked over Alex’s head to Russell and saw that his brother was thinking the same thing. Resignation covered his face. Aspen turned her head to Sebastian. She swallowed so slowly, he watched it happen as if in slow motion.

“Sebastian.” Sebastian looked at Venus, hardly daring to blink. Venus approached him slowly, her eyes starting to glow. He could hardly bear to keep his eyes on hers as she approached. Despite the temperature in the room being well over eighty degrees, his sweat had the chill of fear. Venus stopped a few feet away. “I figured you’d find a way to get in here when I saw you weren’t among the ones in the

circles. ‘He giveth, and he taketh away.’” She quipped. “It was your research that got me this far.”

“You’re the one who took the notebooks.”

Venus nodded. “You were...detained in Aspen’s room for a while before the meeting that morning. I simply slipped in and liberated them from you, letting Mars take the blame. I was prepared to face you again if I had to.” Venus turned to glare coldly at Alex. What I didn’t count on was you.”

Alex shivered as she watched Venus approach. “You have been the hang up in my plans all along, girly. First you recognized Mars. Then you didn’t die. Then you became a demigod. Now you have liberated me of my captives. Tell me,” Venus said sweetly, approaching Alex until they were face to face, only inches apart. “How am I supposed to get my kingdom back without followers?”

Alex was silent, her eyes glowing faintly as she tried her newest weapon. “You don’t want to hurt us. You want to let us go.”

Venus threw her head back, laughing. Alex’s face went white as Venus’s laugh cackled, echoing throughout the room. “It’s so amusing. You think you can compel ME?” Venus yelled the last word, making them all jump. “I’m a GODDESS. You are MORTAL!” She reached down, grabbing Alex around the throat. Before anyone could react, Venus tossed Alex across the room, where she thudded against the stone wall. Russell started to run to her aid, but Sebastian grabbed his arm, holding him there. Russell stopped, but did not look away from Alex until Venus’s voice snapped him back.

Venus laughed. “Dear Russell. You’ve been such a sucker for her from the start, haven’t you? And what good would that do? She’ll die on you. There’s a reason why demigods are forbidden. Yes, FORBIDDEN!” Venus yelled, her face reddening. “Jupiter himself made the very rule he allowed Cupid to break, silly child. He’s been spoiled his whole life, and that’s the problem. I let him throw his little temper tantrum all those years ago. That was my mistake. I should have just killed Psyche myself instead of indulging myself with the game of cat and mouse. I always assumed Cupid would become bored by her when he saw how weak she was.” She shook her head. “I know how stubborn

Sebastian Cupid

he can be, but he's gotten away with everything his whole life, including giving what is mine to his wife."

Sebastian waited, trying to think of what to say. It was Aspen that spoke, making them all jump. "But you let him, didn't you?"

"Let him what, silly girl?"

"You let him have her. Why did you do that?"

Venus stopped to consider. "Good point." She sighed. "I guess I looked at my own history with Jupiter. I knew, even though he was my father, he would never love me. I could only watch Cupid pine for so long before I started to see myself in him, the way I wanted my father's approval. Cupid was furious with me." She paused briefly before she picked up her speech again, walking while she talked. "I figured once the mortal Psyche failed at the tasks she was sent on, he'd see the folly of falling for a mortal. But then Jupiter granted her immortality." Venus's face was now a portrait of nastiness, her anger causing a dull red light to glow from her eyes. "He did it only to upset me, and I knew it then as I know it now. He wanted me to have less power. Mine was starting to rival his own. I went from the goddess of love, to the goddess of heartbreak, for that was the only emotion I felt after that day."

She stopped in her pacing and looked at them. "And now you have taken my revenge from me." She looked over their shoulders, and Sebastian turned to see demons standing there, blocking the exit. A glance at the other tunnels in the room revealed demons standing there too. He'd been so absorbed in watching Venus, he hadn't seen or heard them approach. Venus lifted her hands, and all of the demons started approaching as she spoke. "You all will be the donors to replace the blood that was lost. Unless you struggle. Then you die."

Venus's voice was cold, and Sebastian knew she meant every word, but he contemplated what he could say to delay her. "They all know where you are."

Venus laughed. "Obviously. I'm not stupid. None of us will be here when they return. We have other plans."

The demons were almost upon them. Sebastian laid his hand on his gun, preparing to fight to the death protecting his brethren. He shot a look over at Russell, Victoria, Evans, and, lastly, Aspen. Her eyes

clashed with his, full of fear and resignation. He took a deep breath and turned, raising his gun, prepared to fight to the death.

Suddenly, the demons all stopped. Venus's eyes popped open in shock, anger crossing over her face like a jolt of electricity. The demons were all halted mid-step. Sebastian shot a glance at the floor where Alex had been tossed. She was raised up on one arm, her other hand extended out in front of her. Venus turned and saw Alex. Roaring, she threw her hands toward Alex, but was surprised when the power she threw ricocheted a few feet from her, forcing her to duck as it bounced back. "What the...?"

Sebastian suddenly understood and shoved the group toward the exit, yelling, "Go! Go!" They all ran past the frozen demons to the opening of the tunnel that would take them out. Sebastian turned to see Venus's power bouncing inside of the force field Alex had constructed around her, adding to her fury. Her hair stood on end, her eyes crazed, as she attempted to break through and reach Alex. Russell dodged away from the group and turned to run to Alex's aid, but she flicked her power at him, turning him back toward the exit. "Leave, now!" Russell watched in shock as Alex's nose started bleeding. The cave started vibrating and pieces of rock fell from the ceiling. Alex focused her power at the top of the cavern, trying with all her might to crumble the cave on top of Venus. The rock bounced off of the force field. Venus could easily withstand a falling boulder....but a whole cave? He didn't know. While he drank all of this in, Alex growled at him, her eyes bleeding now as well. "GO!" With that word, Russell was flung into the exit tunnel and a shower of rock fell behind him, blocking the way back in. The others were only a little way ahead, looking uncertainly behind them.

"Alex!" yelled Russell, struggling to break through the wall of stones she had created.

Sebastian grabbed his brother, pushing him the other direction as the tunnel started to collapse. "Run!" yelled Sebastian. "She's going to bring down the cave!"

The group ran toward the exit, fumbling without a flashlight, but it mattered little. This way had no real turns. They ran through the main, large tunnel until they could make out a faint light. Sebastian hadn't

Sebastian Cupid

realized so much time had passed, but as they approached the exit, they saw it was night. Sebastian and the others ran toward the opening, jumping back as large rocks began to fall. About twenty feet from freedom, a boulder fell on Sebastian pinning him to the ground. He yelled out as the rock broke his leg. Aspen turned, seeing Sebastian pinned, and ran back. "Sebastian!"

He groaned, looking up as Aspen reached him. The boulder was bigger around than she was, and he was pinned under it by one leg. "Sebastian! No!" She pushed and shoved on the rock, but it was a useless attempt.

Sebastian yelled at the incredible pain of his shattered leg, cursing. "Run. Get out of here!"

Aspen turned instead and yelled for help. The others came back to try to help her, but the rock was too large and more were falling every moment, forming a pile that was pinning Sebastian to the ground. Russell yelled for help, but Aspen could only cry as horrific sounds erupted from the inside of the cave. "It's coming down!" yelled Sebastian. "Go!"

Russell looked grimly at his best friend and brother before hauling Aspen back. She fought him every step of the way, tears running down her face as she struggled. Victoria and Evans hugged each other and cried. Finally, Evans couldn't bear to watch as the cave gave a massive growl of collapse. She turned her head in time to see Mars running into the tunnel with three Guardians. Their Swords of Light came slashing out of their scabbards. They hacked the stones to pieces, pulling Sebastian out of the wreckage while the cave collapsed around them.

Mars hauled Sebastian out and over his shoulder, and the group ran away from the cave as if Venus herself were on their heels. Sebastian wasn't conscious to see the cave collapsing inward or the Guardians and Arrows plunging into the wreckage. He wasn't awake to see the helicopters that landed, laden with reinforcements. He wasn't able to watch as Auster used his powers to lift the worst of the wreckage from the caverns to begin the massive search for Venus. He slept all the way back to the Denver Temple in the helicopter with Aspen by his side, begging him to answer her, tears running down her cheeks.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Sebastian wasn't sure if it was the noise or the light that woke him. He couldn't focus on either as he clawed himself out of a drugged sleep. The near window was the first thing to come into focus. There, a curtain was billowing in a mid-afternoon breeze, the bright sun landing on the foot of his bed, trailing over the lumps he assumed were his legs. One lump was much larger than the other.

The noise was the second thing he focused on. He turned his head the other direction to look at his room, in which four chairs were assembled. The noise was coming from Russell, who was snoring in one of them. The other chairs held Victoria and Evans. In the closest chair, Aspen slept, her head lying on her arms which were crossed on the covers of his bed. Sebastian stopped moving because it hurt. Instead he watched Aspen while she slept. His fingers touched a tendril of hair that snaked over the comforter. Her face was shadowed and tense, even in sleep. Sebastian marveled at the fact that they were all there. He watched Aspen sleep, thinking of how certain he'd been that he'd lost her, especially those final minutes in the cave.

His hand reached forward to touch her cheek, making her jump as she whipped her head up to see Sebastian studying her. Their eyes spoke a greeting, a promise, and a vow all in a moment. Aspen's words halted just short of her lips, and she found the only thing she was capable of producing was tears. They spilled over her cheeks as she stood, reaching for Sebastian. Words were completely unnecessary as they touched, hand to hand, hand to face. Aspen's hands ran over his bare chest, which was uncovered by the sheet that ran from his waist to the foot of the bed. She shifted until she was sitting by his side, the

top half of her body lying across his chest. Her kisses covered his face, neck, chest, and anything else she could reach. He shushed her quietly as he ran his thumbs over the soft half moons that were her lips. Aspen sighed and slipped her hands around the back of his neck and lowered her lips to his before she leaned close to his ear to whisper, "I love you."

Sebastian exhaled softly, wrapping his hands in her hair so he could pull her ear to his mouth and whisper his love. Their lips met as they tried to give everything at once, kiss everywhere, stare into each other's eyes enough to make up for lost moments.

Russell cleared his throat and had Aspen jumping and blushing before guilty shifting back. Sebastian looked over to see everyone was awake and watching them. Russell chuckled. "Oh, I think he's feeling better, guys. I don't want to see what happens next, do you?"

Sebastian groaned. "Nothing that involves moving the lower half of my body, I assure you."

Russell laughed. "Good to see your sense of humor is back."

Evans stood to smooth her skirt. "How do you feel?"

Sebastian lifted himself off of the bed on his elbows, carefully. "Sore, miserable, alive." He paused before he looked up. "What does my leg look like?"

Victoria stood and walked over, lifted the sheet. She revealed a cast which ran from hip to toe. "It's actually going to be okay. If you had been mortal, you would have lost it and died from the internal bleeding, plain and simple. As it was, we were able to graft the skin back together and put in pins while you regenerated from the blood Aspen gave you."

Sebastian lifted Aspen's hand to kiss it. She smiled. "Your healing was a long process. You've been out for two days. I was starting to get worried."

"Wow, really?" He looked around. "What else happened?"

Evans turned suddenly, facing the window. Russell's voice cracked when he attempted to speak, so he stopped. Victoria sighed. "The Guardians took the cave back apart, with help from Auster. This kind of thing would normally take weeks, but Auster used the wind to lift up

huge pieces of wreckage. The demons were all crushed in the cave, with the exception of maybe a hundred the Guardians exterminated.”

Here she paused. Sebastian glanced from face to face, afraid to ask. “Venus?”

Victoria shook her head. “There was no sign of her. She escaped.”

Sebastian exhaled heavily, lying back on the bed to ease the pain in his limbs. “She got away.”

“They are still looking. She was in the middle of a mountain range, for Jupiter’s sake. She’ll turn up eventually.”

The room was eerily silent while Sebastian wondered whether he should even ask. “And the others...?”

Victoria shook her head, her resolve breaking as she turned her head. Aspen took Sebastian’s hand. “No sign of Alex or Glen. They were buried in the rubble, though we’re still working on retrieving their bodies.”

The room was silent for a while as Sebastian swallowed this difficult news. Sebastian thought about losing the mortals, who had become like family to him in the previous weeks. He watched Evans sniff from the window. After a few moments, Russell walked to the bed. “Glad to see you’re on the mend. I’ll leave you to continue your rehabilitation exercises.”

Sebastian chuckled as Victoria and Evans kissed him goodbye. He held onto Evans for a few seconds, wishing he could remove her grief. Evans was already fragile emotionally. Getting attached to a mortal would be really hard on her. Sebastian looked over her head to Russell. He knew Russell was going through the same thing because of his attachment to Alex. Sebastian didn’t know what to say, but it didn’t matter. Russell quickly turned to go before the tears in his eyes could fall. Evans pulled back and made her way out of the room with the others, closing the door behind her. That left Sebastian alone with Aspen, who sat at the side of his bed. She sighed. “I thought I had lost you again.”

“I’m like a bad penny,” he grinned, but it was a sobering kind of smile as the two of them remembered the lives that had been lost.

“What now?” Aspen asked.

“Now you marry me.”

Sebastian Cupid

Aspen's heart stopped in her chest. "What?"

"Unless you've had a better offer." Sebastian grinned. "I'm crazy for you, you know."

Aspen's smile spread over her face like the dawn spreading over the horizon. "You'd have to be to come get me out of that cave."

Sebastian lifted her left hand, bringing it to his lips, and kissed her bare ring finger. "That will have to do until I can get up and get you something better. Will that work?"

Aspen leaned down to brush her lips over his. "It's perfect."

When she leaned back, she realized Sebastian had unbuttoned the first three buttons of her blouse. "Well!"

"I heard there was going to be rehabilitation involved."

Aspen chuckled, shaking her head. "I thought you couldn't move your lower body."

Sebastian grinned wickedly, exposing her bra while pushing back her blouse. "No, but you can, right?"

Aspen laughed, throatily. "I suppose I could make a sacrifice if it means helping you heal."

Sebastian ran his hand over her rib cage. "Oh, love, you've already healed me." He pulled her hand to his chest, where he placed it over his heart. Sebastian kissed the tip of her nose. "I'm never leaving you again, for all eternity. There's just one more thing I need."

Aspen snuggled into his hair, sighing contentedly before she lifted her head to kiss him gently on the lips. "Anything."

He flicked his eyes at the door. "Lock that, will you?"

EPILOGUE

A nicotine haze swirled around Russell's hair as he pulled his eyes from yet another redhead. Another mortal. Another tall girl with pale skin. Does it stop? Did the longing ever fucking stop? He supposed he had the rest of eternity to figure it out.

Leaning back in his chair outside of the Gin Mill, Russ rubbed his hands over his face. He didn't need to be here. He didn't need to see mortals anymore. He was no longer an integral part of mortal society. Oh, he mattered, alright. He was a blood donor. Still a bringer of balance. But why did he torture himself day in and day out, haunt the mortals' streets at night, turning in panic and cursing himself at the sight of every leggy redhead?

Russell snorted into his gin and tonic. The last place a demigod would make her reappearance would be at some college dive in the middle of Chicago.

Lunging to his feet, Russell swayed into the sidewalk, leaving a twenty on the iron patio table beside his discarded drink. He was a little surprised at how intoxicated he was. Then again, he couldn't rightly remember the last time he'd been stone sober. A month? Two? When did the hunt for Alex's body begin? When did the initiative to find Venus and bring her to justice span the globe and the heavens, even the pits of the Underworld? Long, dark hair swung into his face as Russell watched his feet clump heavily from concrete section to concrete section of sidewalk.

Three months, six days, and almost two hours. He was kidding no one, least of all himself.

Sebastian Cupid

Time was a vacuum, and, long before he was expecting it, Russell arrived at the gates of the Temple. Seth lifted his hand in greeting, looking as though he might speak. Hurriedly, Russell shoved past him through the gates, barely catching the way Seth swallowed his words. No words. Russell couldn't take anymore words.

It was dark night when Russell eased open the side entrance to Temple, knowing it would be empty. The lights were all off, the swirling patterns of moonlight made by the newly constructed Chicago Temple windows splashing the floor in color. Russell lifted his head and observed the most notable change in the new Temple forged by their gods: the Kross.

It was a beautiful and awesome sight. The height of three men, the Lead Arrow and Golden Arrow insignias intertwined together, their points swooping out at both sides to make the short arms of the Kross. A symbol of the new order of Arrows. Psyche had gotten her wish. At least someone had.

Going on alert, Russell recognized a new scent and swung around only to come face to face with Sebastian. Exhaling heavily, Russell prepared himself for the third lecture in as many days. "You're up late."

"Or you're up early," Sebastian muttered.

Russell shrugged. "Does it matter?"

"Not when you have an eternity to feel sorry for yourself, I suppose."

Chuckling, Russell turned back to the Kross. "Does it really matter? It's not like Arrows are really Arrows anymore. We're just donors. Venus was right about that."

Sebastian cursed. "We all have to adjust to this, Russell. It's new to all of us."

"Your idea."

"So it's my fault too, is that it?"

Russell shrugged. "I don't think fault matters anymore."

"I didn't kill her, Russell."

Russell whipped his head around to glare at Sebastian. "Don't worry, my memory's clear there." Russell marched away and stomped

off before Sebastian had a chance to apologize for his ill-chosen words. "I'm going to bed."

Sebastian stood there, feeling like a fool and failure until he felt Aspen touch his bare arm. Turning his face slightly toward her, he only sighed as his eyes met hers. Pressing her lips to his shoulder, Aspen turned her face into his back, her heart crying for them both.

Russell slammed into his room, not caring the echoing thump of the door probably made over a dozen Arrows turn in their beds. He felt like he had rocket fuel in his blood. He wanted to be able to set the walls, floor, curtains on fire just by touching them. He wanted to burn the world to the ground, and he wanted to go down with it. Breathing heavily, he stomped around the room, certain his rage was going to pull him apart. He threw the nearest thing he could touch, only understanding it was glass when he heard it shatter against the wall. Instead of purging, it festered, and his hands gripped everything in sight, tossing it into whatever would cause the most damage. Windows shattered and plaster crumbled. Somewhere in the haze of his rage, he heard the footfalls of Guardians running to his room.

As he turned to order them back, a desperate, severe pain ripped through his head, and he fell to his knees. As the door was ripped open, Russell looked up and met Hans's gaze before he disappeared without warning.

J.J. Martin strives to present her audiences with tantalizing impossibilities made possible through love. A Meisner trained actor, J.J. uses her skill base of research and acting to create characters of considerable depth and complexity. She lives in Indiana with her daughter and their cats, Pugsley and Isabelle.

Her novel, Sebastian Cupid, is her second published book. She has also published Porter House, a paranormal romance. Her short story, Whales Call, was selected for publication in the 2011 Spring Edition of Shadowbox Magazine.

The second novel in the Arrows series is scheduled to release in the Fall of 2012.

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