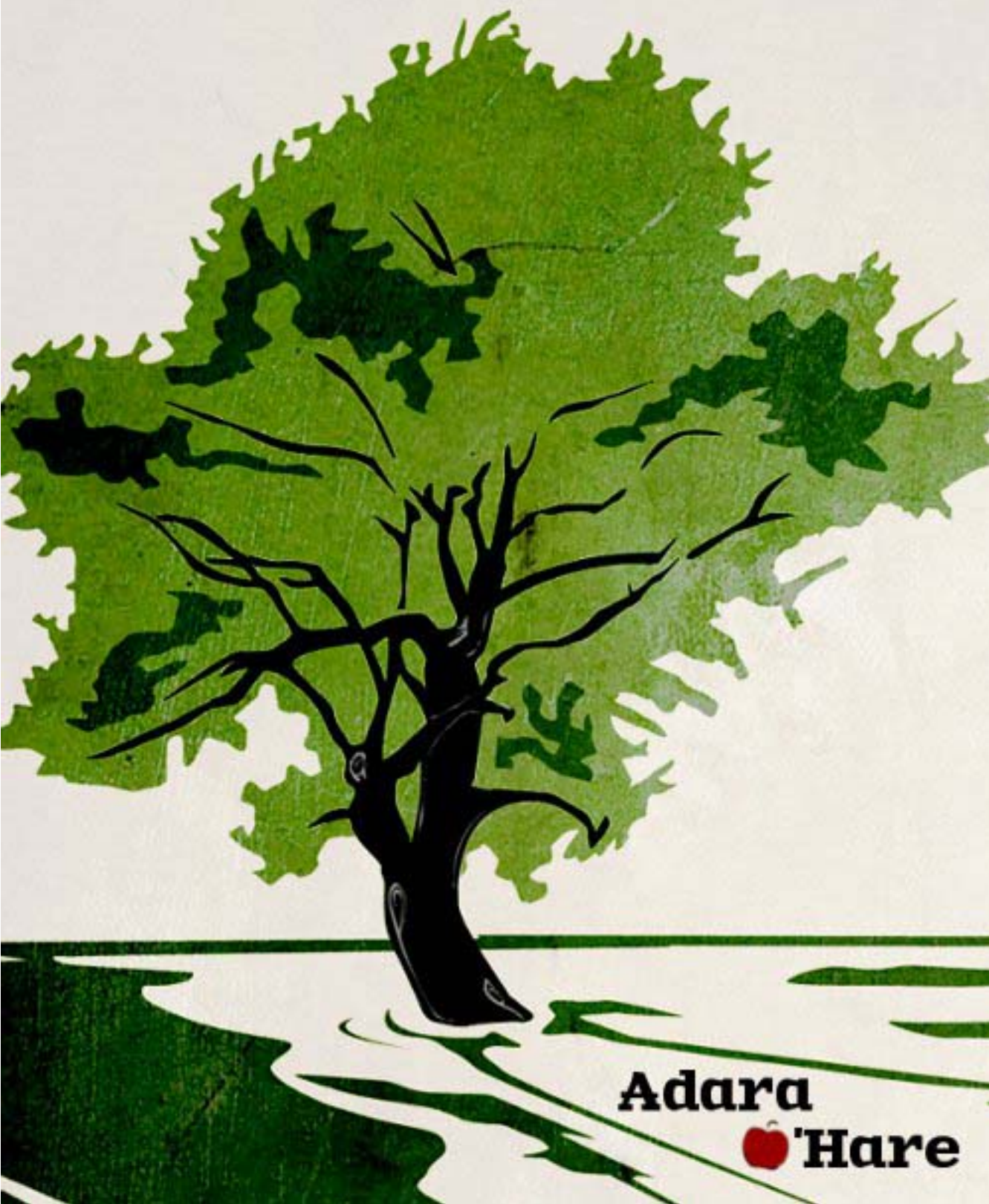


EPIMELIAD



Adara
🍎'Hare

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

EPIMELIAD

By Adara O'Hare

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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EPIMELIAD

By Adara O'Hare

Photo Description

Two young men with brown hair of roughly the same age stare each other in the eyes intently. The slimmer, sweet-looking guy on the left holds the other gently around his ribs. The stockier, protective-looking guy on the right has both hands wrapped around the first's head and neck so his thumbs stroke the other's cheeks in a caress. Something important passes between them in that look.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

We met at the academy, aware of the other by name and reputation but never crossing paths until now. In a place for the best of the best, those talented beyond the norm, I daresay we would stand out if only they knew... We immediately sensed a connection, a pull as if a cable stretched taut between us, made stronger by proximity. At first it was fleeting, a shivering sensation that grew over time until our very thoughts and desires were made known to each other. How is this possible? Is it our nightmare or our blessing?

Please help us find our way...

Alt Uni/UST/HEA or HFN (no insta-love, no GFY please)

Sincerely,

Elizabetta

Story Info

Genre: alternate universe, paranormal

Tags: Greek mythology-based, mythical creatures (warrior nymphs), magic users (elemental powers), bonded, masturbation, age gap

Word count: 23,875

EPIMELIAD

By Adara O'Hare

CHAPTER ONE – CONNECTION

May knew the instant Cyd arrived. He felt the newcomer's energy radiating toward him, even from behind. May only just managed to suppress the shiver that wanted to crawl down his spine. He kept himself from turning around to meet the stare he *knew* Cyd currently leveled at his back. May felt odd *knowing* he was the sole focus of Cyd's attention, and he felt Cyd's confusion as strong as his own.

Cyd's evaluation of the kid standing before him: way too young to be at this "Academy", no matter the reason Mach had called them together. And for some unknown reason, Cyd could feel the kid's emotions, and they distracted him. Cyd hadn't come to be tempted by some sweet young thing though, so he turned back to Mach.

"Promachus."

Cyd's voice was deep and fluid. That single word struck May like rolling thunder. May locked his elbows and dug his fingernails into the wooden fence rail in front of him, but he couldn't contain the shiver any longer. Or the curiosity.

May and Mach both turned to face Cyd at the same time. Mach didn't recognize the tension between the other two men, but May could tell Cyd did sense the strange connection as well. May had no idea how or why he could sense Cyd's emotions. Cyd *knew*, the same as May did, but it made no sense to either of them.

Cyd's eyes bored holes through the kid, who had a pretty face with pale green eyes framed by short, jet black hair. He was Cyd's type: lean but not devoid of muscle. And Cyd could sense the kid's growing interest in getting to know him and the bond connecting them. Cyd knew he needed to get away from the kid soon.

“Cydnos,” Mach replied, inclining his head in greeting.

Cyd turned his intense gaze from May to Mach, offering Mach the slightest of nods in return.

May thought Cyd looked to be in his early twenties, but May *knew* Cyd was much older than he appeared. Cyd was muscular but not bulky. He had veiny arms and tanned skin with short, brown hair. Cyd’s piercing, deep brown eyes truly arrested May.

“Cyd, this is Malaeus. May, this is Cyd.”

“Why have you sent for me, Mach?”

Mach laughed. “Straight to the point as always, Cyd. Let’s gather the others and introduce you all around.”

Cyd spun around, finally noticing the other three men—well, two and a young boy—standing further away. Somehow, against his training and better judgment, Cyd had completely tuned out everyone else around him once he’d become aware of the connection to May. Cyd *never* let his guard down in front of others, so it alarmed him a great deal to realize he just had done so in front of virtual strangers. Though Cyd had a passing familiarity with the two men, he knew nothing of the bored-looking boy who didn’t seem a day over eleven years old.

Cyd could still feel May behind him, confused by the unnatural pull between them but not fighting against it the way Cyd fought it. Experiencing May’s emotions and vague attraction to him caused Cyd strife. He knew such a distraction would get him killed in the field. May, those green eyes, the strange sensations that flowed between them... it was all bad news. Cyd knew he should back out immediately.

“Gentlemen, if you would gather around, please, I’ll tell you why you’ve been asked here.”

The other three joined the two already standing with Promachus. Cyd faced his old friend again to tell Mach he couldn’t stay, but Cyd really wanted to

know why Mach had sent for them all first. Cyd tried to ignore the complication of May's presence beside him. It wasn't easy.

"Thank you for joining me here, in the shadow of Olympus. Introductions first," Mach began. "First up is Kyllini. Call him Kee, not Kyll. He's the Oread of Mount Kyllini in Corinthia, and he has power over the rocks and ground."

Kee nodded his head and smiled in acknowledgment. He was extremely short for a male, not even clearing one hundred fifty centimeters. His blond hair, bright blue eyes, and cheery smile gave the term "sunny disposition" a whole new meaning.

"The tall guy beside Kee is Theri, short for Phlegetherios. He is descended of the Kabeiroi and a Lampad of Hecate. He has power over heat. Theri and Kee have been friends and lovers for more than half a century and know each other very well."

Theri was physically the opposite of Kee in many ways. Where Kee was short, Theri was nearly two hundred centimeters tall. Where Kee was light and sunny, Theri was dark and pensive. May thought his most striking feature was his eyes though; Theri's light grey eyes saw more than anyone meant for them to. One could see the depth of intelligence in both Theri's and Kee's eyes and know they were older than the mid-twenties they appeared to be. May thought the same could be said for Cyd as well.

They were all impressed by Theri's heritage. Though Cyd had heard of Kee and Theri, he'd had no idea that Theri descended from an underworld deity and an underworld nymph. No one trifled with the Lampades unless they wanted to go mad from glimpsing the light of their torches. Cyd suspected Theri would be most dangerous to tangle with if he chose to pick a fight. Fortunately, the man was more rock-like than his mountain nymph lover. Neither Theri nor Kee riled easily. Theri barely spoke most of the time, and never in anger. Kee spoke enough for both of them.

Anyone who knew Kee's full name could guess his heritage. The whole of the world knew Mount Kyllini as the birthplace of the Pleiades and Hermes

himself. In the short time May had known Kee, May had learned Kee had no qualms with what others might think of him as a short male nymph. May envied him the ability to not care about what others thought.

“The young man beside them is Argesterion—”

“Argo,” the kid interrupted.

“Argo. He is Aurai, with power over wind and air,” Mach finished.

“He is a pipsqueak. Why is he here, Mach?”

Cyd had barely finished speaking before he found himself flat on his back, the wind knocked out of him.

“I can pwn your ass any day of the week, old man.”

“Put a sock in it, Argo, and go help Cyd up,” Mach reprimanded.

Cyd leaned up on his elbows and examined Argo. He was a dark-skinned youth who looked to be around ten or eleven years old. His messy, longish blond hair looked like it needed cutting; he kept having to push it out of his blue-grey eyes. Cyd supposed it made sense for a nymph of breezes to sport a “windswept” look. Argo’s hair contrasted significantly with his skin, giving him a very uncommon and eye-catching appearance. And in Cyd’s opinion, he was too young to be here also.

Argo frowned at Mach and stood over Cyd with his hand extended to help him up. Cyd grabbed the hand and allowed Argo to assist him in standing.

“We shall test that theory sometime, Argo.” Cyd left it at that.

“The young man beside me is Malaeus. He goes by May, not Mal.”

“I’m not evil,” May added.

“That you’re not,” Mach agreed. “May is Epimeliad, with power over plants.”

“Sort of,” May muttered under his breath. Cyd heard him though. Or maybe Cyd sensed May’s shame the same way he had become aware of the kid’s confusion earlier. Cyd tried not to be influenced by the muttered comment and the distress he felt from May, but he found it hard not to be.

“I thought Epimeliades had white hair.” Cyd did not phrase it as a question on purpose.

“I’m not... a full Epimeliad. I don’t... I’ve never... seen my tree,” May responded haltingly.

The shame May felt in announcing something he considered a weakness all but knocked Cyd over again. May was a tree nymph who’d never joined with his own tree, and yet he also wasn’t insane. In all of his years, Cyd had never heard of such a thing. As a general rule, nymphs went mad without regular transformation into their natural form. To have avoided insanity all his life, May had to be so much stronger than a normal nymph. Yet May had no idea how special he was.

The others said nothing, unsure what to say to such a confession. However, through the newly forged connection May and Cyd now shared, May caught Cyd’s sense of amazement and the impression of respect for May. After such an announcement, those emotions from a total stranger confused May. Who would be so impressed with a mortal half-nymph?

After a long silence, Mach finally spoke again.

“This is Cydnos, the Potamoi of the river Cydnus in Turkey. He has power over water.”

Cyd nodded and added nothing further to the introduction.

“And finally, I am Promachus, but you may all call me Mach. My mother is Amazon and my father Ares himself, but I am not a demi-god. I am, however, very good with martial arts, swords, and guns. I am here to help train you all.”

“For what?” Kee asked.

“Centuries ago, the gods and goddesses locked themselves away on Mount Olympus and left the mortal world to its own end. As a result, very few in the modern world have the power of the immortals any longer. Though satyrs and nymphs are still numerous and widespread within the world, male nymphs of any kind are still relatively rare. Nymphs or mortals of power such as you each

possess are one in a billion. Most nymphs also need to stay in regular contact with their home, but each of you has the ability to exist away from your home for extended periods. The five of you have the power to help the mortal world.”

“Help it how?”

“However it needs help. Natural disaster recovery efforts, wildfires, diplomacy, immortal intervention. Whatever.”

“Why should we?”

“As a wise man once said: ‘With great power comes great responsibility.’”

Cyd snorted, “Fictional superheroes aside, you suggest we should because we can, is that it? No, thank you. I have no interest in letting someone else exploit me again.”

“Cyd, this isn’t—”

“Do not tell me it is not the same as what happened in the past. You may be my friend, but you do not know my past, Mach. Who put you up to this?”

“I’m not at liberty to say.”

“Then I am not at liberty to stay,” Cyd replied. Cyd would be nobody’s pawn, least of all that of an unknown player. He had been young and naïve once upon a time, centuries ago, and had learned the hard way not to be so trusting of the motives of others. Ever since that first betrayal, that first broken heart, Cyd had been a mercenary—one with standards, perhaps, but a mercenary nonetheless. Life was much simpler that way.

“Cyd. I need you here,” Mach said.

“I trained you. We have fought together side-by-side. There is a lot I would do for you just because it is you who asked it of me, but I will not fight battles for another when I do not know who, or why, or what the stakes are. I have other responsibilities. We all do.”

“I didn’t say anything about battles.”

“You did not need to. One does not gather together a group of elite specialists for much else,” Cyd responded.

“What do I have to do to get you to stay?”

“Tell me for what reason we are here.”

“You’re all here to train your abilities further, to learn from each other, and to become a team. I don’t know any more than that.”

“That is not good enough, Mach. I will not stay and condone being used without knowledge of the reason or at whose hand.”

As Cyd turned to go, May grabbed for Cyd’s hand. The moment they first touched felt like a circuit being completed.

[Don’t leave.]

Hearing May inside his head surprised Cyd so much that he made the mistake of looking into May’s eyes. May begged Cyd not to leave with pale green eyes full of innocence and need. Cyd felt May’s longing for him to stay tug at him through that infernal connection between them.

Cyd realized then that whether they were being used or not, he would stay because May chose to stay, and because May desperately wanted him to stay also. Cyd knew May was as young and naïve as he himself had once been; May still believed in the inherent goodness of everyone, including whoever had brought them all together for some nebulous—more likely nefarious—reason. Cyd had no doubt the kid had never seen a battle. Cyd’s sense of honor—as well as something else he couldn’t pinpoint—would not allow him to walk away when May could end up dead. Cyd had to stick around to train May to stay alive.

And the others too, Cyd supposed, though he knew he could more easily walk away from any of them, leaving them to their chosen fates. Even Argo, who was younger than May, didn’t tempt Cyd to stay as much as the need to protect May did. As Cyd looked around the group, he saw in their faces the silent requests for him to stay because they knew they would be better for his knowledge and experience.

Mach, however, had the good grace to look a touch guilty. Mach knew Cyd's sense of duty and honor would trap him into helping to train these young men, just as Cyd had trained Mach himself several years before.

Cyd sighed and nodded in resignation. "Fine."

"So, who are you, exactly?" Cyd started.

"I don't understand. What do you mean?" May asked.

May and Cyd entered the one-room cabin assigned to them to get settled in before eating dinner with the others. Argo had a room with Mach, and Kee and Theri stayed together, as usual for them.

May sat on his bed as Cyd closed the door behind them.

"You are not just Epimeliad. No simple nymph can live their entire life outside of their tree, as is your case, without going insane or dying young. In my five-hundred-and-some-odd years, I have known a lot of nymphs, and you are far stronger than any nymph I have ever heard of. So, that begs the question: who or what exactly are you?"

"I don't..." May trailed off, uncertain of how to react to Cyd's proclamation and surprised by Cyd's age. May had *known* Cyd was older, but he didn't look even remotely close to five hundred years old.

"How do you not know where your tree is?"

May flashed back momentarily to the torment of his childhood—to the father who had refused to acknowledge him and the sisters who teased and bullied him because he had no tree as they did. Cyd, whom May barely knew, had just asked May the most painful question he could have possibly asked.

"Why's it matter?" May mumbled.

"You asked me to stay to train you, kid. I did. This is part of the price."

Cyd felt as well as saw May flinch. Cyd hated to be so brutally intrusive on what seemed to be a difficult subject for May, but he needed to know what the kid was capable of, and that meant knowing more about May himself.

“Mother is Hamameliad; she can’t leave her tree. She... mated with a Dionysian satyr and had my sisters, all with the beautiful white hair you mentioned they should have. But he wanted a son, even knowing not many nymph males are born. When I was born with jet black hair, he figured I must not be his son. He stole my seed from her and threw it away, hoping to kill both my tree and me. I live, so we assume my tree does too, but that’s why I’ve never seen it. I don’t have any idea where to search. He and my sisters have shunned me all my life, he because I’m not his son, and they because I have no tree and therefore I’m not full Epimeliad.”

“You are better than they are. You have lived your entire life without your tree and you are sane enough to speak of it. They could not boast the same, I guarantee it.”

“You’re a fool. I’m nothing without my tree. I’m not nymph. I’m not mortal. I’m a half-breed. I’m...”

At that, May shut down, the pain too much to speak through. Cyd had no idea how he should react. He rubbed where May’s pain echoed in his own chest. Cyd had been a warrior and alone for too long. He didn’t do comfort.

“You are here, at this academy, or whatever this place is. Someone thinks very highly of you and your ability, May.”

May shrugged noncommittally.

“Nymphs generally do not have any special power beyond the ability to join with their natural form. But you, you have more than that, perhaps much more. That is why you are here.” Cyd squatted in front of May, hesitant to touch him and increase the connection between them further. “How old are you, May?”

“Twenty.”

Cyd couldn’t help but think May was too young. Cyd tried not to let his uneasiness show, but May could feel it through their bond. Cyd’s balking at his age upset May further. Cyd tried changing tack.

“Who is your sire, May?”

“I don’t know. Mother wouldn’t tell me.”

“Did she tell you why not?”

“Only that I’d learn the truth when it was time for me to know. She wouldn’t tell the satyr either. He’s still vexed with her over that.”

Cyd grumbled since May did not have much to go on. His sire could be anyone, and guessing would be pointless.

“Okay. Those were the easy questions.” May gazed at Cyd, upset and perplexed, wondering what harder questions Cyd had to ask. “What is the connection between us? Why does such exist when we have never before met?”

“So you feel it, too?”

“You know I do, and I do not like it. Being tethered to you like this disturbs me. Your emotional turmoil distracts me from where my focus should be. We are going to have to figure out how to get this connection under control or neither one of us is going to be fit to do anything, regardless of what abilities we hone.”

May recoiled as though he’d been slapped. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Cyd sighed in frustration. May did not do well with Cyd’s typical blunt honest approach.

“No, I am sorry. I did not mean to be rude. I do not think this is your fault, May. I do not blame you. But, in all my years, I have never felt anything like this before and I do not know how to handle it. It really is distracting, and to a warrior, distraction means death.”

May eased some with the apology, but Cyd could still feel his hurt.

“You’re a warrior?”

“I have fought in wars that ran longer than you have been alive.”

May looked away. He didn’t like the reminders that Cyd was so much older than he. Why that mattered, May didn’t know. It made him feel *wrong*.

“Ask the Moirai.”

“What?”

“You asked me why there’s a bond between us. I don’t know. Ask the Fates.”

“Not much good that would do. You cannot get a straight answer out of them if you can even get to them to ask the question.”

“That’s the best answer I’ve got. I don’t know why. I’ve never felt anything like this before either. I didn’t think it was so bad, but obviously—”

“I do,” Cyd finished.

May nodded, still not looking at Cyd.

“We will find a way to make it work.”

CHAPTER TWO – THE ACADEMY

Making it work involved touching each other as little as possible. A quick touch would strengthen the connection to the point of hearing each other's thoughts and often cause both Cyd and May to lose focus on whatever they were doing. For teaching hand-to-hand combat, Cyd found it simpler and more expedient to have May practice directly with Argo, who also had little hand-to-hand experience. When he did have to show them something, Cyd demonstrated with Mach or Argo as much as possible unless May had issues with a particular move.

When Cyd did touch him, May did his best to focus on the task at hand and not on the live wire that opened their thoughts to one another. Sometimes May managed to keep his focus, and they could work reasonably well together. But once in a while, May couldn't keep his thoughts from drifting toward how pleasurable it felt to be pinned beneath Cyd.

The time when Cyd had mounted May from behind to help him work on an escape, Cyd had leapt up like his ass was on fire and had walked away from their makeshift training ring while cursing under his breath. Though walking away dampened the intensity of their connection, it didn't keep May from being affected by how horny Cyd had become as a result of experiencing May's desire. Knowing he had aroused Cyd had incited May even further. Ultimately, they both had to call off further training that day. Cyd had gone to a nearby stream to "cool off", Argo had been whiny for the rest of the day because Cyd had stopped for no good reason, and May hadn't been able to stop blushing until he'd locked himself in his room and taken himself in hand. Of course, taking one look at Cyd later that night brought May's blush back full force. Cyd politely ignored the blush and, by unspoken agreement, they never mentioned the undercurrent running between them.

Being several decades more experienced, Kee and Theri already had basic combat training, so Cyd and Mach were more hands-on with them when showing hits, holds, take-downs, escapes, and marksmanship. Kee and Theri would repeatedly fight each other to a standstill, neither having gained the upper hand. They also began using different weapons to increase the difficulty

of their matches: swords and shields, batons, throwing knives and stars. Their battles were impressive to watch. The more difficult maneuvers they pulled off fascinated Argo. May looked—and felt, if Cyd acknowledged their connection—more than a bit uneasy with the intensity of their bouts.

All four were good students and quick studies, picking up the moves and incorporating them in practice matches. Every day they got a bit better. However, increasing the breadth and depth of their special abilities was more difficult. Kee and Theri knew each other well enough for each to push the other. They also wanted to see if they could combine their abilities into something new, so they spent most of their time together while Mach offered advice and suggestions. Much to Cyd's annoyance, Argo mostly sat off to the side, looking bored while he watched everyone else learning to further control their elements. That left Cyd to work directly with May on gaining more control over plants.

Only May did not have an easy time of using or increasing his ability. So far, May had not been able to do anything more than cause vines to grow and curl as he directed them. Cyd would have thought May was Kissiae instead of Epimeliad since his only power seemed to be over the ivy vines.

Cyd explained to May how it felt for his body to turn to water and how he thought through the process of his physical change. After a couple of days, May still had not been able to achieve anything more than opening a few flower blossoms. Cyd eventually had May hold on to his hand to see if May could feel Cyd drawing on his power through their connection. Though May could feel it, he still couldn't force his own change or channel his power into any other ability.

May began to despair of ever being useful as a nymph, much less to the purpose of this special team of theirs. Cyd became angry and frustrated instead, and decided to have it out with Mach. He pulled Mach away from the others and started hissing violently.

“By all that is divine, *why* is he here, Mach? I have done everything I can think of, and more than you know, to help this kid grow. I know he is stronger

than this; he has to be. But he is useless like this. I cannot get around this block he has.”

“He’s here because he’s meant to be here, Cyd. The same as the rest of you.”

“And if he ends up dead because he cannot properly take care of himself...?”

“He has you to defend him,” Mach replied with neither a trace of amusement at Cyd’s expense nor any sarcasm.

“Mach. He has to be able to stand on his own, not rely on—”

“You’re frustrated. You need to blow off some steam.” The abrupt change in direction of the conversation took Cyd by surprise. Mach turned toward the group and yelled, “Play time, Argo.”

Cyd arched an eyebrow at Mach, but Mach didn’t notice. Argo bounced up off the ground.

“Yeah? Who?”

Mach returned his gaze to Cyd. Cyd turned to look at Argo. The boy’s grin settled into a slightly malicious expression.

“Oh yeah, I’m a enjoy this. Show me whatcha got, old man.”

Cyd turned back to Mach, incredulity lacing his voice.

“Really, Mach? You want me to fight the pipsqueak right now?”

“All you have to do is touch him. Lay a single finger on him, and you’re done.”

Cyd pursed his lips until a crease appeared in his brow.

“I do not see how this is going to—”

“You have to train, too, Cyd. So now it’s time to stop being the teacher and be the student for a while. Go catch Argo.”

The note of command in Mach’s voice caught Cyd by surprise. Several years past, Cyd had trained Mach; that was how they knew each other and why

Cyd and Mach had the level of comfort with each other they did. But at this academy Mach was the trainer, and Mach had just given Cyd an order.

Cyd hesitated. He had not used his power to fight someone else or let anyone he fought with see the extent of his abilities since that first time. Not even Mach knew the full extent. Cyd had kept that part of himself hidden so as not to be exploited again. And now someone, a complete unknown who knew all about Cyd and the others, had brought him—them—there expressly for that purpose: to use, refine, and augment those powers. Cyd didn't know if he could trust that unknown entity not to take advantage of him, or if he could he let himself trust the others. Most of all, Cyd didn't know if he could trust himself to be what they needed.

“Cyd.”

Cyd refocused his eyes on Mach. May had noted Cyd's anxiety through their connection. Cyd felt May's concern for him bloom. But Mach knew Cyd well enough without any sort of connection to know something had seized him. Mach had stepped in to rescue Cyd from his doubts without the others catching on. Mach had no doubts.

Cyd trusted Mach, and he trusted Mach's judgment. Decision made, Cyd nodded ever so slightly to Mach in thanks.

Cyd began walking toward Argo. After he'd crossed half the distance between them, he felt the wind pick up. In another few meters, the strong headwind kept Cyd from moving forward at all; it pushed him back with each step he attempted to take. Argo stood a few meters away, looking bored and insolent, not even breaking a sweat.

Cyd waited for Argo to truly become bored. Sure enough, after several minutes where Cyd made no attempt to move forward, Argo changed tactics. As he had done on the day they met, Argo pushed Cyd's feet one direction and his shoulders the other, hoping to catch Cyd off guard and push him into the dirt again. Expecting it, Cyd somersaulted forward with the wind, quickly reaching the space where Argo had stood. Only Argo wasn't there any longer. His clothes lay on the ground, but Argo had disappeared.

“He vanished into thin air,” May said as he turned around and around to see if he could spot Argo.

“Quite literally,” Mach replied.

A breeze swept past Cyd’s face as he pondered how to catch the wind. Argo sought to taunt Cyd, but instead it gave Cyd an idea. A moment later, Cyd vanished as well, his clothes forming another pile on the ground.

“Okay, that’s impressive,” Kee noted.

“How’d he do that? He’s not Aurai,” May wondered.

“Vapor,” Theri answered.

“Or fog, perhaps,” Kee added.

May had sensed Cyd’s reticence to follow Mach’s order, though May had no idea why Cyd should be so concerned when he could pull off feats like that. May could barely feel him now, but their connection still tingled through his body, if only just. It comforted May to know he could still feel Cyd even though Cyd wasn’t visible. May only wished he could get Cyd to stop resisting their bond.

Suddenly, a rush of air formed a whirlwind right before their eyes. Dark clouds twisted angrily as if a cartoon Tasmanian Devil had spun into view. Eventually the small tornado began to slow and solidify into more recognizable shapes. When they came to a stop, Argo knelt on the ground, Cyd’s arms wrapped tightly around his chest to keep him from moving. Both panted heavily from the exertion.

Mach began clapping avidly. “I had no idea. That was spectacular, guys.” He looked them both over, but spent more time on Cyd’s naked form, which irked May. “How do you feel?”

After a moment to catch his breath, Cyd released his hold on Argo and stood up. He swayed ever so slightly before walking over to his clothes. May noticed the impressive cut of Cyd’s naked body before he knelt down to rifle through the pile. May’s overt interest in Cyd charged through their bond, followed shortly thereafter by Cyd’s irritation.

May thought Cyd intended to dress even though nymphs commonly accepted nudity amongst themselves, but instead he fished a vial hanging from a cord out of the pile, unstoppered it, and guzzled the contents. Only then did he begin to dress.

“I will need to go home tonight,” Cyd replied. May’s surprise and disappointment shot through Cyd. May thought Cyd wanted to leave to escape his interest and their connection. Though those ideas appealed to Cyd, the truth was Cyd needed to heal. Cyd’s nakedness had distracted May and kept him from noticing Cyd’s fatigue, as well as other, more personal demons Cyd would rather remain hidden.

“Of course,” Mach agreed. “Argo, what did you learn?”

“Grandpa’s got some sick skills.”

Cyd snorted in amusement at the pipsqueak’s choice of words. Argo was a very modern youth for a nymph. The dichotomy interested Cyd. Most nymphs persisted in the old ways because they were over a couple of millennia old; rarely did nymphs die, therefore the world and the old gods seldom bore new nymphs any longer. Cyd and Kee were both exceptional in that respect: each had taken over his duties from a predecessor who had gone to the Underworld for some reason.

“I’m sure ‘grandpa’ is thrilled with your appreciation, but what did you learn?” Mach repeated.

“Being incorporeal doesn’t mean I can’t be caught.”

“Or necessarily give you an advantage, either, that’s right. Cyd, would you please explain how you caught Argo?”

“He has a tell,” Cyd smirked as he glanced at Argo.

“Scuse me?”

“A tell, or something I could use to find you. You are a nymph of the breeze. You cannot exist for long as still air; it is not in your nature. When I realized I could locate you by the breeze, I spread myself thin, tall, and wide. You had to pass through me eventually, and when you did, I would not let you

go. The tornado was a nice touch, but I have dealt with waterspouts and whirlpools in the past. That is why you did not shake me as you thought you would. The tornado actually helped me in that it centralized your body to where I could encompass you completely and force you back into solid form.”

Argo nodded, absorbing the information.

“And you, Cyd? What did you learn?” Mach asked.

Cyd pondered Argo, who continued to frown in deep thought, and replied, “The pipsqueak is not as useless as he looks and acts. He can contribute something to this group if he wants to.”

Argo started to protest but Mach cut him off. “And...,” Mach prompted.

“And the contribution one can make might not be initially apparent. It is best not to judge prematurely.”

Mach nodded, seemingly satisfied. They both knew they were speaking of May, not Argo.

May did not catch their drift though. Cyd’s desire for imminent departure dismayed May, who thought it to be his fault. May’s distraction proved Cyd’s point about the disastrous consequences of their connection, in fact.

“And I forgot how well you knew me,” Cyd added with a quirk of his lips.

At that, Mach actually smiled in return. Cyd had paid him a very high compliment indeed.

The unexpected spike of May’s jealousy resonated through the connection. Cyd needed to get away from the kid before things got truly out of hand. He knew dealing with May’s hurt would be infinitely worse.

After Cyd had left them that night to return home, May sat alone at one of the lodge tables, picking at his food. May couldn’t feel Cyd any longer. He guessed Cyd was too far away for the bond to work. The emptiness where the connection used to exist troubled May. He had quickly become accustomed to

their bond and detested its absence. May didn't feel complete now without Cyd around.

May began to think Cyd might be right about their bond being a curse, not a blessing. He wanted to believe Cyd's absence could be a good thing because now they had an opportunity to return to normal, but he didn't feel well at all. He certainly didn't feel like he had returned to "normal".

Mach watched May stew for several minutes before he decided to intervene.

"Care to talk about it, May?"

May shrugged and continued stirring potatoes and apples with his fork.

"What's on your mind?" Mach tried again.

"Why can't I progress?"

May truly wanted to know why Cyd refused to accept their bond, but he and Cyd had agreed not to share their unique situation with the others yet. Cyd hoped that maybe the connection would go away or they could learn to control it instead of it controlling them, and therefore they wouldn't need to share its existence with the others at all. May only wanted to make Cyd happy, so since Cyd didn't trust the others with such "delicate information", May didn't share.

"I don't know the answer for certain, but I suspect it's because you've never touched your tree. It's your body's way of preventing you from hurting yourself."

"I don't understand."

"Right. Erm, this explanation might be better coming from Kee, since I've never felt it myself."

Mach caught Kee's attention and waved him over. Kee excused himself from the other conversation and slid onto the bench beside May, swinging his feet beneath him because they didn't reach the ground. May often found it hard to remember Kee was a few years older than Mach. Kee looked like a young kid as he swung his legs that way, though May knew him to be in his sixties.

“What’s up, Teach?” Kee smiled at Mach.

“Would you please tell May what it’s like to be separated from your home and overextend your power?”

“Oh! Sure. I never thought about you not knowing what it feels like. Um, where to start though?” Kee pondered for a few moments, “Being home is sort of like recharging your battery when you’re low on energy. Using your power too much will drain you, potentially to the point it could kill you. It’ll make you really sick and unable to move. Drawing on your element will help for small bursts of power, but you have to return to your true home for real healing to occur.”

“Then that’s why Cyd left?”

“Uh huh,” Kee nodded. “You saw him drink from the bottle he carries around his neck, right? That was water from his river. It kept him from falling over comatose, but he expended a lot more power than he usually does, so he needed more to heal. He’ll be back tomorrow.”

“So soon? But Turkey is well over a thousand kilometers from here.”

“He travels by water. He takes the stream to the river to the Aegean Sea, and swims back to his own river that way. And he travels faster than any of us would by car or boat. He won’t need to heal for long before he’ll be on his way back here.”

The tightness in May’s chest eased, though the worry remained. May didn’t understand why he cared so much about Cyd when he barely knew the man. The bond had confused things between them considerably. If it had never existed, May knew he wouldn’t have had such feelings for Cyd so soon. But just because May knew he wouldn’t have felt that way under other circumstances didn’t mean he could just pretend it hadn’t happened the way it did. He felt how he felt, and that’s what he had to deal with.

“Are you worried, May? He’ll be fine. He knows how to take care of himself.”

The thought comforted May, and yet it didn't. May knew he wouldn't feel whole until Cyd stood in front of him again, their bond restored.

“So, Cyd has to travel back to the Cydnus River. Does that mean you have to go back to Mount Kyllini?”

“No, it's not the same for me and Theri. We keep a piece of our home with us, the same as Cyd does.” Kee pulled a stone medallion on a cord out from under his shirt. “When I need to recharge, I pull the energy straight from my mountain via this medallion, so I don't need to travel there. It's the same for Theri, who keeps a medallion of volcanic glass with him. Argo only has to turn into a breeze again to recharge, the lucky sod.”

“You're the sod,” Argo called over from the other table. “I'm the air. Get it right.”

Kee rolled his eyes at Argo's bad joke.

“Anyway, Cyd being a river-god, he has to keep his river with him, like we do, but he ingests the water to draw its energy, which means he has to go replenish his supply whenever he uses a lot of power, like he did today.”

May nodded his understanding but said nothing further. Kee realized May didn't want to talk any longer and gave him an empathetic look before he went back to the other table.

“May, you will find your tree one day. Have faith, okay?” Mach smiled gently and patted May's hand before he left May alone with his thoughts.

May didn't feel up to socializing, so he turned in early for the night. The empty room didn't help May's mood either. He missed Cyd. He missed his bond with Cyd a lot.

May thought back through all of his interactions with Cyd, from the moment their bond snapped into place. The whole sequence felt so right to him—meant to be—but Cyd always fought against it in every interaction, as though May was a leper to be avoided. May wondered what it would feel like for Cyd to stop fighting it just once, to let it happen and feel what May felt.

And though he knew he shouldn't, May let himself drown in Cyd's fictional acceptance, just for the one night while Cyd wasn't there and couldn't complain about experiencing May's emotions. May remembered his desire and Cyd's arousal, only instead of Cyd walking away and shutting it down, May imagined Cyd feeding his own desire back to May through their bond. May's erection stood tall and leaking as he imagined Cyd stripping them of clothing and then jacking May with one hand as he pulled May's hair with the other, exposing his throat.

With a sharp cry, May came all over his chest. He settled in to sleep, trying to ignore the hollowness he felt in the wake of false happiness.

May woke up as Cyd entered their cabin the next morning. Energized by the mere sight of him and thrilled by the return of their bond, May hopped out of bed and threw himself at Cyd.

“You're back! Thank the gods and goddesses. Last night was awful without you.”

Cyd awkwardly hugged May in return, and though Cyd wouldn't say it, May felt his relief at the restoration of their bond as well. Cyd took a step back and looked at May, and then looked away hurriedly.

“You seem to be in need of a shower.”

May glanced down to his morning erection and the dried come flaking off his chest and turned red with embarrassment. Cyd felt May's mortification as May ran into the bathroom and closed the door. Only slightly fazed, Cyd set down May's breakfast and left quickly.

When May opened the bathroom door fifteen minutes later, Cyd was gone. May breathed a sigh of relief. He wanted more time to think. May had felt *something* from Cyd when Cyd had noted the remains of the night's activities. Cyd's feeling of unsettlement had replaced one of... *interest*. It hadn't been outright desire, but Cyd had definitely expressed a spark of interest after noting May's indecent state. May bit his lip to keep from smiling, but his eyes

lit up and his elation radiated through their bond. He soon felt Cyd's answering confusion over May's suddenly chipper mood.

As May went to put on a T-shirt, he noticed a red apple sitting on the dresser. Beside it rested a brief note that read, "For you".

May smiled and bit into the apple and then moaned with its sweetness. Its flesh was crisp and juicy. May savored the juice and licked his lips after each bite, trying to keep the nectar on his tongue. He nibbled every bit of flesh he possibly could and would have given anything for more. Never before had May tasted any apple so delicious.

May saved the seeds and took them with him. Around the side of the compound, a little ways away from their small garden, May dug five small holes and planted and watered the seeds. May thought that maybe, if he did ever get his powers to work, he might be able to help those seeds grow. He *really* wanted more of those apples.

CHAPTER THREE – POWERS AND PENALTIES

After giving Cyd a couple of days to rest, Mach called the group together again for another exercise.

“I like the idea Kee and Theri have been working on to combine their powers together. They’ve had some success with it, so I want the four of you to work on it some more today. Kee and Cyd versus Argo and Theri.”

Mach produced a matchstick from his back pocket.

“The goal for Argo and Theri is to work together to light this match. Kee and Cyd want to keep it from being lit. Ground rules: No one goes incorporeal.” Cyd looked at Argo while saying this. Argo rolled his eyes. “No one can touch the match with their hands. Powers only. And no one can go to the match. But you can bring the match to you. All agreed?”

The four of them nodded their heads. Cyd moved outside the dirt arena and May sat down in the grass to watch.

“Okay, go.”

Kee raised some fist-sized rocks around the match to keep it from being pushed by the gust of wind Argo sent toward it.

“Dirt and water makes mud. And that helps us,” Kee said.

Cyd pulled some water up from the water table, soaking the match to keep it from igniting. Then the two of them worked together to break up the ground and saturate the chunks until they were malleable enough to mash together into mud. As they worked Kee quickly explained his thinking.

“Theri doesn’t have very good point control over heat unless he’s touching whatever it is, so that rule works in our favor. If we can keep the match coated in mud, he’ll have a harder time igniting it until he can get it closer to him and dry it out.”

Theri glared at Kee. Kee stuck his tongue out at Theri in good humor and then grinned like a maniac.

Since the mud made things more difficult for Argo and Theri, they discussed their strategy also. They had tried to set some old wood on fire and then push the lit kindling toward the match, but by the time Argo built up enough force to push the wood, the wind was so strong it smothered the flames. Argo then tried creating a small whirlwind to dig the match out from the rocks and mud, but Argo's point control was also poor. The tip of the whorl skipped from rock to rock and couldn't get in between to dig out the match.

Cyd wiped his brow. Though turning his body into water drained his power the fastest, pulling on water constantly drained Cyd nearly as quickly, particularly when he wasn't around much water to begin with. Cyd had used quite a bit of power already and didn't have much more to give. It made Cyd angry because he felt so ineffectual. Cyd didn't know how he would be of use to the team if he had to run off in the middle of a fight to regain his power. He felt useless.

May picked up on Cyd's contempt and it puzzled him. Cyd shut off that line of thought to keep from passing on more than he wanted May to know and focused again on the match.

Argo had thought up some way to push around a wall of moving flame.

"Smart kid. He's extracted gas particles from the air so the fire would have something to consume and still be mobile," Kee deduced.

The wall of flame headed for Cyd and Kee, who each dove for cover in opposite directions. To counter, Kee started flinging rocks at Theri. Argo used the wind to knock the rocks aside.

Argo and Theri turned and nodded at each other, and suddenly the wall of flame became a large firestorm, flinging woodchip cinders in all directions. It whirled over the puddle, beginning to dry up the mud.

Cyd tried to keep the mud wet, but he had depleted his power and couldn't maintain his draw on the water any longer. Just as he released the water to give up, May started yelling across the arena, hands over his ears.

"Stop it! Stop it! Theri, Argo, *stop!*"

The firestorm vanished and everyone stopped to look at May. He had hunched over and held his head in his hands.

“Can’t you hear them? The trees? The shrubs? The grass? They’re all in pain from fire and the lack of water. Please, make it *stop*.”

Theri concentrated and tried to pull in the heat from the woodchips which the firestorm had flung, but they were too small and spread out over too large an area. He couldn’t pinpoint them well enough to draw their heat. Theri shook his head in failure.

May looked at Cyd imploringly. And though Cyd knew he shouldn’t for his own safety, he did what he had to for May’s sake. He turned into a cloud and rained over the arena, the cabins, the garden, and the surrounding trees, shrubs, and grass until all of the cinders were out.

May put his forehead and hands on the grass and took several deep breaths. When the plants had ceased calling out to him, May sat up and looked around for Cyd to thank him. But Cyd hadn’t reappeared in the arena, and May couldn’t feel their bond any longer.

“Where’s Cyd?” May called out anxiously.

“He hasn’t come back after he got us all wet,” Argo complained.

“But I can’t—” May stopped himself before he mentioned the missing connection to Cyd. “Why isn’t he back? Is he okay? Where *is* he?”

“Check the stream,” Mach said.

Kee ran off in the direction of the stream but returned a few minutes later, shaking his head.

“Not there either.”

“Dammit. He probably already left for home then. Idiot. Stupid son-of-a-bitch,” Mach cursed.

“What?” May asked, now more alarmed.

“He drained himself too low, used too much power in combat.”

“And then I made him become a cloud,” May whispered, horrified.

“You didn’t make him do anything,” Theri commented. “Cyd made a decision. He knew what it would cost.”

“But he—”

“Don’t,” Kee said, putting a hand on May’s shoulder. “Don’t blame yourself. Theri’s right. Cyd knew what you were asking.”

“But I didn’t,” May lamented.

Kee looked over at Theri, who scowled in the direction of the stream as he rubbed the medallion around his neck.

“Don’t you start either, Theri. Next time, okay?”

Theri turned his scowl on Kee. Kee raised an eyebrow at Theri. Theri’s eyes softened and he nodded.

“Come on, then. We all need some rest. Cyd will be fine and he’ll be back tomorrow.”

Kee helped May up from the ground and the five of them trudged toward the cabins, but May didn’t feel like being cooped up inside their empty cabin. Instead, he sat in the garden near the apple seeds he had planted. In the wake of the brief rainstorm, three of the seeds had just sprouted. May could just barely hear their new voices asking for more water, so he watered the seeds until they babbled happily along with the grass.

May smiled somewhat though he still felt melancholy. He thought he would enjoy having some apple trees around, particularly since they wouldn’t be his sisters’ trees.

“May?”

May looked up from where he sat on the ground.

“How long have you been hearing the plants talk to you?” Mach asked.

May thought about it and frowned. It had felt so natural that May hadn’t considered the fact it had never happened before.

“I don’t know. I don’t remember it happening before.”

“Do you still hear them now?”

“Not as loud now that everything is peaceful again. Most of them barely whisper to me. Some of the trees are a bit bigger and louder, but it’s mostly background noise I filter out.”

Mach nodded, “Let me know if that changes, would you? And don’t forget to eat.”

May nodded, “Sure.”

But May wasn’t hungry. He lay on the grass until the sky turned to starry night. May located Cygnus easily as it moved overhead. Looking beneath it, he saw Vulpecula, a lesser known constellation. She seemed to want his attention tonight, so he watched her run across the sky for a while before he finally entered the silent cabin to sleep.

That night, May dreamed of swimming, but not in a pool or lake. He swam against the current of a strong river toward a small island. May would never remember if he made it to the island in his dream or not.

Cyd sat down on his bed the next morning and looked at May as he slept. May’s hair had changed color slightly; it was no longer jet black, but rather a very, very dark brown. Cyd ate an apple while he waited.

When May opened his eyes, Cyd nodded to him.

“Morning. I brought you breakfast again. It is good you do not consider eating apples an act of cannibalism. Catch.”

May wasn’t really awake, but Cyd tossed an apple at him anyway, and before May could think better of it, he caught it. May’s eyes widened in shock, and the shockwave reverberated through their bond, which had returned again along with Cyd’s proximity.

“What? It is only an apple. You do not truly consider it cannibalism, do you? I did not even pick it from the tree. It fell in my lap.”

May thought Cyd must not understand the significance of tossing an apple—or catching one. May felt only his amusement.

“I thought you knew all the old stories. Tossing me an apple is tantamount to saying you love me... and... and... and I caught it. I caught the apple you tossed.”

“You love me as well, then? Is that it?” Cyd asked. May couldn’t speak around the catch in his throat, though. “You grew up around too many Epimeliades and not enough mortals. Tossing an apple has not meant that for a very long time, since before even I was born. I think you are safe from Aphrodite’s wrath.”

“I grew up in Aphrodite’s sacred grove on Cyprus.”

“You have met her, then?”

“Well, no. She’s been gone for centuries.”

“Then she will not know what you have done. Eat and let us join the others.”

May squeezed the apple gently and closed his eyes as he bit into it, moaning once again as the sweet flavor burst on his tongue.

“Gods and goddesses, May, turn down the erotic thoughts. It is an apple, not an orgasm.”

Cyd shuddered and forced away the rush of intense pleasure from May. May did pick up on it, but he wanted the apple more than Cyd.

“Says you. Where do you get these apples? They taste divine.”

“From a tree near home. I have never seen the tree in bloom before, but it has been recently. And it is a good place to rest, so I stop there. After a nap I saw the apples, so I grabbed them. I did not even need to ask the tree for permission; they just fell into my hands. I do not recall the apples I ate tasting especially different from any other apple I have eaten, though.”

“I grew up eating apples, but none that tasted like this,” May replied, taking another bite.

Cyd shook his head as they wandered outside to join the others for their morning routines.

After another few days of rest, Mach called them all together once again.

“I want to test May’s power with plants today,” Mach announced.

The announcement stunned everyone.

“You can’t be serious—” May started.

“He is not ready—” Cyd said at the same time.

Mach cut them both off, “We have to keep trying, and if May has to learn to deal with a handicap instead of his power, so be it. Argo, you’re up again. No tornados, though. Got it?”

Argo nodded and prepared to fight.

Cyd seethed through their bond. Though the target of Cyd’s anger was Mach and not May, May still found it exceptionally difficult to focus on Argo. May now understood what Cyd meant by distraction could cause death for a warrior. May agreed and wished Cyd would stop being angry on his behalf. His anger would do neither of them any good.

Cyd stopped. May didn’t take the time to figure out the significance of Cyd’s calm, though. May was finally able to shift his focus to Argo.

Argo started with the same headwind he’d used against Cyd. It was a simple but effective action to keep others from touching him, and May wouldn’t be harmed by it. As May attempted to move toward Argo, the headwind prevented May’s forward progress and began to push him back slowly. As his feet started to slide back, May dug into the ground with his toes, halting the push backward.

Without conscious thought, May reached forward with his right hand and extended his index finger into a thin, whip-like branch. He slashed Argo across the cheek before Argo knew what happened. The wind died as Argo held a hand up to his face.

“Damn, man, that shit hurts.”

“Argo,” Mach warned.

“Stuff,” Argo corrected, “that stuff hurts.”

“I’m—I’m sorry.” The fact May had touched Argo so easily dumbfounded nearly everyone. May held up his right hand and looked at his index finger. It looked completely normal again.

“May, your shoes,” said Theri.

May’s tennis shoes were now trash. Each shoe had five large holes in front and one large hole in the heel where his foot had begun to take root in the ground.

“May, how do you feel?” Mach had rushed over to his side as soon as the wind had died down.

“I think I need to lie down.”

Mach nodded and helped May lie down on the grass.

“How’d you do it?” Mach wanted to know.

“I don’t know. I just did. I wanted to reach out and touch him, so I did.”

The others sat down on the ground in a circle around May. May gazed at Cyd, who frowned ever so slightly. Cyd’s concern washed over May. May wanted to hold Cyd’s hand in reassurance, but didn’t ask for it. Cyd hesitated, but he did rest his hand on May’s leg after a few moments. The sense of concern for May significantly intensified with Cyd’s touch. May felt Cyd’s emotions tumbling erratically.

“Argo,” Mach continued, “what did you learn?”

“Not to assume my opponent doesn’t have a new trick up his sleeve since the last time I fought him.”

“Works for me. May, what about you?”

“I can do more than curl vines and open blossoms. I might not be useless to you all anymore.”

“You were never useless, May.”

The group began to argue over the validity of May’s assumption of uselessness, but Cyd remained quiet. The change in May’s powers was a problem. Without knowing where May’s tree grew, using that power could kill him. Before, May had been relatively safe because no matter how hard he had tried, he hadn’t been able to tap into that power. Now that he could, May was in serious danger.

“You cannot use that power yet, May. Without knowing where your tree is, you could harm yourself.”

“Cyd’s right,” Mach agreed. “You may feel well enough for now, May, but you need to take it easy for the rest of today and see how you feel tomorrow.”

The news dampened May’s ebullient mood.

“We’ve been working on trying to develop May’s powers for weeks. Why did this happen now?” Argo wondered.

But no one knew the answer to the question.

CHAPTER FOUR – HEALING TOUCH

The next day, Argo suddenly stopped in the middle of a fight with Theri to listen to something none of the others could hear. His sisters had brought word of a disturbance in Anaypazari. Argo told Mach what they'd told him.

“There’s been a landslide or avalanche across the surrounding plains, but it isn’t naturally occurring from the Taurus Mountains, as one would expect. It appears to come from the coastline near Seleucia on the Calycadnus.”

“Beautiful countryside in that area,” Cyd commented.

“We need to go check this out. This is the sort of thing that you’re all being trained to assist with. Argo, you scout ahead and report back.”

“I never considered the possibility of making him a scout,” Cyd thought aloud as Argo vanished.

“Indeed. He’s an excellent scout, both for speed and for his network of spies—I mean, sisters,” Mach chuckled. “I can also trust that he won’t try to take things on by himself. He’ll report back first.”

“You are certain of that?” Cyd sounded doubtful.

Mach nodded as he picked up Argo’s clothing, “I’ve been training Argo since he learned to transform into a mortal body. He knows exactly what I expect of him, most of which he’s learned the hard way in the past.”

“Why did you not tell me that before now?”

“Because you needed to get to know Argo based on his own merits, not because he’s my protégé,” Mach answered.

Cyd pondered the amount of truth in that statement. He would have assumed a great deal about Argo just from knowing the young man was Mach’s protégé. Cyd sighed to himself; he may have trained Mach, but Mach still had things to teach him also.

Cyd turned to look at May, whose hair had lightened some more since the day before. Instead of the deep mahogany brown it had become, it was now a slightly lighter chestnut brown. Cyd had also begun to hear stray thoughts of

May's when they were not touching. Cyd had not yet brought up with May the change in their bond, but he surmised if he could hear May's thoughts, almost certainly May could hear his thoughts as well. May had definitely become stronger.

May had also taken to sitting in the grass every chance he got. May said he felt better while sitting on the grass. Given that May could draw some power from the grass and nearby trees to heal, it made sense. May had exercised with them today, but he'd needed to take more breaks than usual. He still had not recovered from the brief burst of power he'd used the day before.

May's inability to heal quickly troubled all of them. Yesterday's outburst had been too instinctual on May's part to hope that he could keep his power in check when pushed.

"When do we leave?" Cyd asked.

"If we leave now, it'll be nearly this time tomorrow before we get there by car, assuming we drive all night. The boat has already left for today," Mach answered.

"Will Argo be able to find us along the way?"

"He'll be fine."

"Should we leave May here?" Cyd asked.

Cyd felt May's heartbreak through their bond. Cyd honestly didn't want to leave May, but May would almost certainly be safer staying at the compound.

"No, I meant what I said about May learning to work around a handicap. It's just a different one than I thought he'd be working on at the time I said it," Mach replied.

Cyd nodded, "We should go then. We will eat in the car on the way."

Cyd itched to get into the water to get there faster, but he forced himself to sleep early so he could take over the night shift driving since he had more familiarity with the roads in Turkey than Mach. Mach had left one of the

minivan's windows open as he drove, and at some point while Cyd slept in the passenger seat, Argo rejoined them, reforming on the seat right next to May. May jumped in alarm at the unexpected arrival.

"How does it look?" Mach asked as Argo grabbed some shorts and slipped them on.

"The countryside is completely destroyed. There's nothing left up to the city. Then the line stops. The strange thing is the landslide has completely receded and is nowhere to be seen."

"That is strange. Nothing dangerous now, then?"

"Not that I saw. No deaths reported among the mortals. RegCon and PolCon haven't finished their investigations, though. It'll take them a while based on what I saw."

The International Bureau of Registration and Construction, or RegCon as many referred to it, kept lists of all known nymphs and the locations of their homes, especially those unable to relocate, like May's mother. All construction permits had to be vetted and approved by RegCon before any construction could take place anywhere in the world. Nymph homes had to be relocated or built around whenever possible.

RegCon's sister agency, the International Bureau of Pollutants and Contaminants, or PolCon, kept governments', businesses', and individuals' waste management in check to keep from poisoning the environment and thus the nymphs. Most countries had outlawed poison usage except by regulated federal agencies because poisoning a nymph's home could kill a nymph.

"That's good news. Thanks, Argo. Cyd will take over driving in three or four hours. We should be there around mid-afternoon tomorrow. Everyone might as well try to get as much sleep as you can."

Around midnight, Cyd took over the driving. Mach filled Cyd in on Argo's report before he fell asleep against the passenger-side window. Argo slept on the bench beside May. Kee slept in Theri's arms in the back.

Things would change once they reached Anaypazari. Cyd worried about May's reaction to the scene they would find. Though no dead bodies would litter a battlefield, it would still be devastation of a sort May had never before experienced. Cyd feared May's youthful innocence would not remain intact.

Cyd glanced up often in the rearview mirror to look at May, who slept on a pillow up against the side of the minivan. The connection between them was tranquil as May slept. Cyd found the lack of input from the bond both soothing and frustrating.

Cyd had become accustomed to May's emotions running in the background of his mind—and to interpreting their meaning when they struck heavily. When Cyd had gone home and slowly put distance between them, it had disconcerted him to sense their connection slip away. He'd found leaving the second time difficult for that very reason. Being without that link had felt incredibly unpleasant even though it should have meant finally feeling normal once again. After the first trip, Cyd had stopped looking for ways to break their bond, though he hadn't made May aware of that fact.

Once the sun rose, they stopped for breakfast. Afterward, Mach took over driving duties again so Cyd could sleep for a few hours before they arrived.

As they neared Anaypazari, May shook Cyd to wake him. Cyd came awake, instantly alert for trouble. Mach put a steadying hand on Cyd's arm, an old response between warriors who had fought together years ago and sometimes hadn't needed to wake ready for battle. Cyd calmed instantly.

May's jealousy flared to life again. In his post-adrenaline state, Cyd found the situation annoying at first, but then he was charmed. Though Cyd and Mach shared history, they had never and would never share a bed. May didn't know Mach had an Amazon lover or a grown Amazon daughter. Cyd had met them both.

Cyd arched an eyebrow at May, his amusement at May's jealousy and the reason it was unnecessary lacing their bond. May blushed a furious red and turned away, incensed with Cyd for being diverted at his expense, but also no longer jealous.

Their bond was definitely stronger than it had been before.

They drove straight to the far side of town where the landslide had stopped before reaching the majority of the buildings. Someone had placed sawhorses across the road to prevent traffic from driving onto the broken pavement; the landslide had crumbled it like a cracker and pushed it aside. They pulled the van off to the side and walked past the sawhorses to the ravaged countryside.

They were not the only onlookers. Though the Bureaus were nowhere to be seen, other people—presumably locals, since the town was in the middle of nowhere within the mountains—stood around taking pictures and talking amongst themselves. None of the locals set foot onto the overturned soil where trees had once abundantly grown. Only the five nymphs and their trainer crossed the threshold to further examine the damage and discern its cause.

The wide path of destruction extended as far as the eye could see down the valley. The land had been mostly hilly pine forest, but now all life beyond some lucky bugs had perished. The landslide had churned the soil, stripping the layer of grass atop it, and had easily snapped all the trees in half with its progress. Broken branches and tree trunks stuck up from the ground everywhere. Rocks cluttered the soil; their momentum had demolished the vineyards. The locals would need months to clear the ground before it would again sustain growth beyond tufts of grass, and without the viniculture, the nearby town and villages would starve without assistance.

May looked on in utter horror, unable to speak. Before Cyd could stop him, May ran forward and placed his hand to the soil, and then snatched it back quickly, crying out in anguish. He wasn't quick enough, though. He had instinctively opened himself to the voices of the dying plant life surrounding him.

The chunks of grass and wildflowers faintly wailed in thirst after being ripped out by their roots and shredded. They knew they might live if they could just find water. But the torturously slow suffering of the dying trees struck May in the heart. He couldn't unhear those voices, the tree trunks screaming in agony, exposed at their cores but still struggling to cut off nutrient supplies to exposed areas or missing extremities, all in the vain hope

they might survive their mortal wounds. Once he'd heard their screams, May couldn't turn them off; they resounded in his head over and over again until tears ran freely down May's face.

Gone. It was all gone. No animals, no plants that would live, no other nymphs as there should have been, not for kilometers. Nothing but death.

For Cyd, living through May's first "battlefield" felt like reliving his own first brush with the carnage of war and the helplessness of death. After all the years between then and now, Cyd had thought himself a hardened warrior—the one who could make the necessary decisions without the burden of emotion cluttering his judgment—but he was so very wrong. Feeling May's grief struck Cyd like a spear to the chest. Reliving those painful emotions caused him to hesitate when May took off again, headed further into the rocky debris.

May ran over to a pulverized laurel tree and knelt beside it.

[No, no, no!]

Tears still streaming from his eyes so fast he could scarcely see, May soothed a hand over the severed trunk and a disfigured young woman appeared.

[Come back, Daphnaeae. Come back! No, no, no!]

Cyd and Kee both ran toward May.

[HELP ME!] May shrieked through the bond to Cyd.

Cyd and Kee both dropped to their knees just behind May, each touching a hand to one of May's shoulders to offer comfort and to pull him away from the body. Instead of taking comfort, May channeled their energies and sent forth a burst of power across the overturned dirt and rock. What moments before had been the agitated remains of plant, rock, and soil suddenly became a verdant green meadow dotted with tall trees.

"May! No! You *can't!*"

Cyd whipped May around and held his face in both hands. May stared into Cyd's eyes, but his mind stayed on the young nymph beside him. May began

to glance down at her, but Cyd shook May's head until May looked back at him again. May's hair had already drained to a light brown color, lighter than Cyd's. If the changing of May's hair color somehow indicated how much power he had used...

“STOP, Malaeus! You must stop! She is gone. She is already with the ferryman in the Underworld. You cannot bring her back. You will die trying.”

“She was...” May hiccupped, “Hamadaphnaeae. She couldn't leave.” May burst into tears again as he told her story, “She was stuck there watching as the rocks and ice and dirt came toward her tree, crushing her branches, uprooting her, breaking her spine. She wanted... she couldn't...”

Cyd pulled May into his arms and held him as May sobbed out his soul for the dead nymph he hadn't known. Then Cyd began to feel faint, nausea hitting him hard. Cyd looked up at Kee, who rubbed his medallion, the one that connected him to Mount Kyllini, the one that recharged him after he used his power. May had drawn too much power. They didn't have long before—

May slumped in Cyd's arms.

“May. May! *NO!*”

“He needs his tree,” Theri stated calmly, as if Cyd hadn't already realized that fact. Cyd had no idea when the others had caught up to them.

“I do not know its location.”

“Drink your water and think,” Kee ordered. “Apples. Apple trees. Apple blossoms. Apple bark. He must have come into contact with his tree at some point. It is the only explanation. But when?”

“But May's been with us all along,” Argo argued.

“But I have not,” Cyd realized. The apples from home. The sweetest ones May had ever tasted. It all began after those apples. “I know.”

The nausea cranked up another notch, so Cyd drank his bottle of water quickly. He needed to return home, only this time May would accompany him. He stood up, cradling May in his arms and walked quickly back to the edge of town, the others trailing behind him.

More people gathered at the edge of town as news of the miraculous event had spread. Cyd walked up to the oldest man he saw.

“Potamoi.” The old man examined May. “Epimeliad.”

“He healed your land. Now he needs to heal. Where is the nearest stream?” Cyd asked in Turkish.

The old man pointed. Cyd hoisted May into a fireman’s carry and took off running in the indicated direction, doing his best not to trip over rocks and roots. When he reached the stream, Cyd set May down and began to strip them both naked. The others ran up behind him.

“What are you doing?” Argo asked in confusion.

“Taking him with me to his tree.”

“Naked?”

“Easier and faster to carry him without the wet clothing dragging us down.”

When they were naked, Cyd tossed their clothing into the river.

“Why—”

“The Naiads and Nereids will make sure they get to us. We have to go now,” Cyd cut him off, answering what he thought Argo wanted to know, unconcerned whether he had guessed correctly or not.

Cyd picked up May and carried him to the water, laying him on his back. As soon as he let May go, he melted into the water himself, directly underneath May, buoying him. Cyd took off as fast as he could swim without May falling off his back.

Cyd felt so slow compared to his usual speed. He knew how much the extra time mattered to May’s recovery. The way he normally swam, their destination up the coast of the Mediterranean Sea was only a couple of hours away, but with May on his back Cyd had to keep to the surface instead of going under the waves. By car the route would have taken at least three and a

half hours on partial toll roads, and that assumed no traffic issues of any kind. They might have run across more broken roads if they had taken a car.

As Cyd focused on keeping May on his back, he couldn't shut off the "what ifs" ricocheting through his mind. If Cyd had come to the wrong conclusion, May would die without question. May might still die if Cyd didn't swim fast enough to the tree he thought was May's. And Cyd didn't know if he could live with that on his conscience.

Somehow, no matter how Cyd had fought against the general attraction—and the bond in specific—May's sweet, gentle nature had gotten under Cyd's guard. Even though May had been shunned by most of his family, he had remained optimistic and kind. Even though May hadn't been able to use his power until eating those apples, he had still gotten up and tried his hardest every day to improve himself in some way because someone believed in him. May genuinely wanted to help everyone. He was good. He was smart. He was beautiful inside and out. And he was far too young to die.

The silent bond disturbed Cyd as he swam. He didn't know whether May's unconsciousness caused the silence or whether their link had weakened. Cyd hoped for the former. No matter what, it couldn't end now; Cyd couldn't imagine going back to a life without May in it.

And in that moment, Cyd finally admitted that somewhere in the middle of it all, he had fallen in love with May. He also finally understood why they shared a bond, and he wanted May to know why as well.

Cyd spread word about their clothes as he passed other nymphs on his way to the Cydnus, but he didn't slow down. The downstream current parted in front of Cyd, and he speed upstream toward the apple tree standing in the middle of his river. Normally the island it stood on was visible, but the river was high right now. The high water suited Cyd just fine.

Cyd swam straight at the apple tree, splitting himself into two surges that zipped around it at the last moment and met again on the far side. Instead of slamming up against the tree's trunk, May vanished into the tree as soon as he touched it.

Cyd heaved a sigh of relief that he had been correct about the apples and May's tree. As the adrenaline slipped away in exhaustion, Cyd circled the tree and stopped on the side where the downstream current pushed him into the trunk. Then he slept.

The next day, the river had calmed considerably. The small island where May's tree grew had appeared within the middle of the river. May emerged from his tree onto the island and turned his face up to the sun.

[It feels so different in this form.]

A slosh of water caused May to look to the river. Cyd rose up from the surface of the river and hovered as if suspended in mid-air. His body, made of water, sparkled in the sunlight.

"You're beautiful," May said, meaning to compliment the beauty of Cyd's true river-god form.

Cyd, unsure of where to begin between all of the things he wanted and needed to say to May, said the first thought that came to mind.

[Your hair is white.]

"You're—wait. What?"

Though Cyd's features in this form were indistinct, May swore Cyd's mouth crooked up a touch before Cyd spread his body out flat like a pane of glass, becoming almost vitreous, so May could see his own reflection and the dazzlingly white hair all over his body, not just on his head. May reached a hand out to the reflection before bringing it back to touch his hair. May looked down his body to the thatch of white pubic hair at his groin.

"I'm a real Epimeliad."

[You always were.]

As May reached for the glassy reflection a second time, Cyd's fingers emerged from the flat surface and meshed with May's. And though Cyd was the one made of water, May melted into Cyd's still-solidifying body as he

stepped onto the island and became flesh once more. Cyd wrapped his muscular arms around May and held him tight.

“My tree. How did you know?” May asked with his head resting against Cyd’s shoulder.

“I remembered the best apples you had ever tasted. Do you recall?”

“They were from this tree. That’s when it all began, wasn’t it?”

“When your hair started to lighten, when your powers increased, when our bond strengthened. It all began with that first apple.”

May took a moment to consider their bond. Cyd had stopped holding back. He had finally accepted May and their bond. May could feel Cyd’s whirling emotions running end over end: fear, apprehension, uncertainty, joy, desire, trust, and love.

[Love. You love me.]

[That I do. I still fear for you—I nearly lost you—but I do not deny loving you any longer.]

Cyd pushed back gently against May’s shoulders so he would stand upright. Once May had looked into Cyd’s dark eyes and saw the truth of those words in them, Cyd cupped May’s head and pulled him into a possessive kiss. Cyd grabbed a fistful of May’s white hair and drove his tongue into May’s mouth, taking ownership of the kiss and the nymph. May whimpered and a flower blossomed on the tree as he gave all of himself to Cyd in that moment. And Cyd took from May everything May offered him.

[Zeus himself will not take you from me. You are mine, Malaeus.]

Cyd used May’s full name to give the statement more authority, but May needed no convincing on the matter. Cyd broke the kiss to trail his lips along May’s jaw, nibbling toward a sensitive spot behind May’s right ear. He pushed May up against the rough bark of the apple tree and inserted a leg between May’s, rubbing against May’s heated body.

The edges of the bark were slightly uncomfortable so May smoothed them with a quick thought to his tree. *His tree.*

“This? No. This is *my* tree, May. I found this seed floating in my river, ready to sprout if only it could. I caught that seed. I made this island. I planted that seed here. I watered it from my own body. I nurtured it from sprout to seedling to sapling to tree. You may belong to this tree, but this tree belongs to *me*.”

May held still, wondering if Cyd really considered the tree his to do with as he saw fit, regardless of May’s wishes. Cyd heaved a great sigh and backed away from May, perturbed. May knew better than to believe Cyd was so callous, and he groaned in realization. He had offended Cyd by even believing in the possibility. Cyd’s annoyance buzzed through May.

“I’m sorry.”

Cyd nodded. He hadn’t used the right approach, again. Cyd directed his annoyance at himself more than at May, though. May had taken Cyd’s words of possession literally, not figuratively. Cyd wasn’t sure he’d ever learn how to speak to May without putting his foot in his mouth.

“I mean to claim your heart, May, not your freedom. The reason we have this bond is because we have fed from each other all of these years without knowing it. Your tree has resided in my waters all this time. I gave to you as it gave to me. And now you sustain me directly, May, bond or no.”

Cyd stepped in toward May again, putting his hand against May’s hip and rubbing in a circle until May lifted his leg and hooked it around Cyd’s body, giving Cyd better access to draw his fingernails down the underside of May’s thigh. Cyd’s other hand ran over May’s pectoral muscle, thumbnail flicking a nipple as it stroked past. May looked up into the branches of his tree. Cyd followed his gaze as another apple blossom burst open.

May was achingly hard; Cyd could feel May’s erection pressing into his hip, but he felt May’s aching need in his chest. Fully erect also, Cyd sought relief from the torture of experiencing May’s desire and trying to abstain from it. Cyd spun May around so May’s back touched his chest. Cyd slid his left hand up May’s torso to his throat, pushing his head back against Cyd’s

shoulder. Cyd's right hand held May's hip for the moment. Cyd's dripping cock brushed between May's legs.

"You want to watch your tree, Epimeliad? Then watch what happens when your lover pleasures you."

Cyd slid his right hand down to May's erection and gave it a firm stroke. May bucked but Cyd's hands on his jaw and cock kept him firmly in place. When May began to squirm in impatience, Cyd gave him several more firm strokes. Flowers blossomed all over the tree as May began to breathe heavily. May's bliss crackled through their bond, straining Cyd's patience.

"I don't want to come until you're inside me, Cyd."

"You will come more than once, love."

And with that, Cyd proceeded to stroke May eagerly, relishing every wiggle of his hips. With each moan that reverberated from May's throat through Cyd's hand, Cyd wanted more and more to bury his cock inside May and take him with abandon. Knowing what Cyd wanted from him aroused May even further because he wanted it too. At some point May closed his eyes while apple blossoms sprouted constantly along every branch until white cloaked the entire tree.

Bonded as they were, Cyd knew as May reached the brink of orgasm and slowed his pace to almost nothing. May groaned.

"Cyd... Please, Cyd... I need..."

"Open your eyes, love."

May forced his eyes open and gasped at the beauty of his tree.

Cyd whispered in his head, *[Ready?]*

May practically howled as Cyd sped up, working May's cock to teasingly tip him over the edge of orgasm. May closed his eyes; all he could see was white. When he opened his eyes once again, several of the blooms had dropped away and the bud of an apple had already appeared in their place.

Cyd brought his hand up to his lips to taste May's seed.

“It tastes as sweet as your apples,” Cyd confirmed.

May sagged a bit in Cyd’s embrace, prompting them both to kneel on the wet soil. May leaned forward to rest his forehead on his tree. He smiled, unbearably happy for the first time in his life.

“You said they didn’t taste any different than other apples,” May accused.

“I lied. They are better than ambrosia.”

“You’ve never had ambrosia.” Only the immortals ate ambrosia. Mortals who ate it became immortal so the immortals guarded it jealously.

“And why would I when I have tasted the sweetest fruit on the planet?”

Cyd leaned forward and covered May with his body, smearing his pre-come between May’s thighs. May squeezed his thighs together and Cyd groaned with the friction.

“The interesting thing about sex with a river-god is he can make his cock whatever size he wants, and it will always be slick with water.” Cyd rumbled in May’s ear, “I hope you have recovered enough. I need inside you.”

May’s body still tingled from his orgasm, but he spread his legs further apart to give Cyd better access. Cyd didn’t bother with any sort of preparation. His cock was thin and slick as it plunged inside May’s body. May barely felt his entry until Cyd began to thrust. With each thrust Cyd’s cock became fuller and opened May wider. Soon May writhed in pleasure once again, thrusting back into Cyd as Cyd drove forward into him.

Ripening quickly, the apple buds grew plump and purplish-red like May’s cock. The branches began to bow lower with the weight of the apples. Cyd reached up and held his hand below one of the ripe apples. It fell immediately into his hand.

Cyd panted too heavily to speak aloud, holding his own orgasm at bay just a few moments longer. Through their fully-formed, now permanent bond, Cyd whispered, *[Ready?]*

Cyd held the apple up to May’s lips. May’s eyes widened at Cyd’s intent.

May bit into the apple made of their love, tasting its nectar-sweet flavor upon his tongue, and came instantly, flooding them both with his pure ecstasy. Cyd hadn't even touched May's cock. Cyd grunted and groaned in May's ear as May clenched and wrung a truly spectacular orgasm from him. He thrust a few more times to spread his own seed inside May's body.

“Gods and goddesses,” May heaved, breathless and sated to exhaustion. “I may need my tree again just to recover from making love to you.”

Cyd chuffed in May's ear as he helped May lie down on the damp ground before lying down next to him. May immediately curled into Cyd's arms, head on Cyd's shoulder, and fell asleep with his lover under the shade of his tree.

CHAPTER FIVE – ILLUMINATION

They awoke late in the afternoon. Cyd leaned over and kissed May awake. As much as Cyd wanted to take his time enjoying May, he knew they needed to return to the others. May stretched and smiled up at Cyd.

“Are they worried?”

“I doubt it. I expect they know everything since we left, including that which we consider rather personal. That is the drawback of expressing your love in the open where every invisible nymph can watch.”

“They would...”

“Nymphs are libidinous, as you well know,” Cyd gazed archly at May, who blushed faintly and nodded.

“So, what’s next?”

“First, you need to find a way to take a piece of your tree with you.”

“Oh! Um...”

May looked at his tree, wondering how he could take a piece of it with him. Roots were too delicate. The tips of branches he could easily remove would be too brittle once dried out. May couldn’t bear to cut into the bark. Then May spied the knothole in the trunk. May placed a hand on his tree and asked it to give him a piece of itself. May helped his tree heal itself internally as it slowly shriveled around the knothole until the bulbous piece broke off into May’s hand. May smoothed his fingers over the bark, feeling the power of his tree crackling within it.

May looked up in wonder at Cyd. He had a piece of his tree he could always take with him. Life would be so much easier now. He could train properly with the others.

But Cyd couldn’t. Cyd still needed to ingest his river’s water to heal, and he couldn’t bring that much with him. The thought bothered May.

“But now Cydnos has you and your tree, Child.”

Cyd and May whipped around to discover the owner of the voice. No one stood there. Cyd stepped in front of May, pushing him back toward his tree.

“Show yourself.”

“I am everywhere, Child. I am the world mother.”

“Grandmother Gaia. It is an honor,” Cyd said with reverence.

On the closest bank of the river across from the island where May and Cyd stood, the dirt, twigs, vines, roots, and leaves rose in a heap to form a vaguely feminine shape. She was unlike any nymph May had ever seen. May emitted a strangled whimper and clutched at Cyd from behind.

“Be not afraid, Epimeliad.” Gaia’s voice sounded in their ears as if she stood in front of them. The sense of detachment from her “body” across the river caused May discomfort. “You are of my line, as are all, Child. Your mother is my great-granddaughter, descended of Oxylos and Hamadryas, children of my Oreios.”

“Grandmother, what did you mean I have May and his tree now?”

“As you are his and he is yours, so your river is his and his tree is yours, Child.”

“I can use his tree?”

Gaia indicated the wood talisman May held.

[May I?]

Cyd took the small piece of bark as May offered it and felt his own power flowing through the wood. Cyd’s eyes widened in surprise. May smiled softly at his incredulous lover.

[I can feel it, the power from my river.]

[I know. Would you like one of your own?]

[Would your tree be willing to give me a piece of its self?]

[My tree would do anything for you. As would I.]

May touched his tree once more and a few minutes later another wooden talisman dropped into his hand. May gave it to Cyd, who looked at it in fascination. Cyd rejoiced he could finally be a useful member of the team. He would no longer have to return home to his river every time he used a significant amount of power.

[I never knew you were worried about that.]

[I labored to keep my insecurities to myself.]

[It would've helped to know.]

[Helped who?] Cyd asked with a quirk of an eyebrow.

[Helped me feel less insecure to know that even you were worried. Helped you to have someone else to share with.]

[I have not shared myself like that with anyone in a very long time. I—]

“There is more to say, Children.”

Cyd and May focused their attention on the representation of Gaia once more. She had turned her “face” toward the sky but now turned it back to them. A gentle afternoon breeze ruffled the leaves of the trees, including those embedded in Gaia’s current form.

“Cydnos, you have concern over your conscription into service.”

Cyd nodded. May noted suspicion through their bond, but he didn’t know what to make of it.

“I chose the five,” Gaia revealed.

May looked at her in surprise. She had confirmed at least one of Cyd’s suspicions.

“Why, Grandmother? What do you require of us?”

“Whatever needs done, Child. The world is full of mortals now, but the immortal still exists. You have seen as much.”

“The landslide?” May asked?

“Correct, Child. The cause was not natural. Neither was it malicious.”

May furrowed his brows in confusion.

“How is such an attack not malicious?”

“There was no attack, Child.”

“If it was not natural and not an attack, then what was it?” May asked.

“My grandson, Adamastos.”

Cyd felt puzzlement from May, but May felt significant apprehension from Cyd.

“You have many grandsons, Grandmother. What type is he?” Cyd asked.

“He is the youngest son of Typhon and Echidna.”

“He is a *monster*?!” May jerked at Cyd’s unexpected eruption.

“You assume much, Child.”

“He is born of the Father and Mother of All Monsters. What else are we to think?”

“Evaluate from knowledge, not conjecture, Child.”

“Yes, Grandmother.”

May felt Cyd’s shame at the censure.

“Adamastos is not like his brothers and sisters, Child. He has a simpler mind. His father shunned him all his life for this reason. He lived at home with his mother, his only friend his sister, the fox of Teumessoss. They would play Tag, only he could never catch her; such was her nature until Zeus turned her to stone and placed her among the stars. After Adamastos watched the death of my daughter in Arima, he waited for his sister to return, though she never would. When he becomes lonely of waiting, he sometimes ventures out in search of a new playmate, as he did recently. He has always returned alone.”

The sun slowly descended across the sky. A brief gust of wind caused May to shiver in the chilly evening air, and he rubbed absently at the goose bumps on his arms. He really wanted to get his clothes soon. Cyd turned and wrapped his arms around May to help keep him warm.

[She means to use us to catch him.] Cyd speculated.

“And he caused the landslide?” May asked.

“No, Child. He *was* the landslide. Such is his body, when he chooses.”

“When he chooses?” May asked.

“Do you not adopt other forms when it suits you, Children?” Gaia remarked, making her point plain.

May’s heartache shot through Cyd, so Cyd tightened his hold around May to give him strength. In his life, May had yet to actively choose to become part of his tree. Gaia’s statement distressed May, but Cyd’s vexation with Gaia’s callousness distressed May further.

[Don’t, Cyd.] May moved his hand up to Cyd’s arm to stay his outburst. “Grandmother, why didn’t you tell us when we first arrived at the academy that you brought us together?” May asked.

“The two of you had to find yourselves in each other first, Child.”

“I don’t understand.”

“If I had known it was Grandmother, I would not have stayed to abet the scheming of immortals,” Cyd explained. Gaia did not bat even a fern-made eyelash at his accusation. “To fully become the team she covets, we each had to remedy the deficiencies of the other. If she had not put us together and I had not brought back an apple from your tree, your powers would have never manifested and I would have been severely handicapped. We had to be whole before Gaia could exploit us.”

“Have care, Child. Do not exhaust my patience with your umbrage. I do not suffer impertinence.”

“And I do not care for pretense, Grandmother. State what you want.”

“Your first task is to help my grandson live in a mortal world.”

Cyd wanted to refuse, but May overrode him.

“Of course, Grandmother. We accept.”

Gaia nodded her gratitude to May. Cyd scowled intensely but said nothing to contradict May's statement.

“Argesterion?”

Argo manifested next to Gaia's form, surprising May. Cyd, on the other hand, expressed no surprise at all.

[You knew he was here?]

[He has been for a while. You did not take note of the breeze?]

[I didn't assume it was Argo. I thought it was an Aurai wanting a closer look at the two naked men.]

[Perhaps it is because I previously caught him that I knew him when he blew past us. He always carries with him the unique scent of white tea.]

Cyd and May had briefly ignored the exchange between Gaia and Argo. Gaia touched Argo's face gently as she spoke quietly to him directly. Argo nodded once. Gaia looked up at May and Cyd, then she vanished. The leaves, twigs, vines, and dirt which had formed her body dropped to the ground in a small heap.

Argo gathered up the clothing which Cyd had hung to dry by the side of the river while May healed. Argo then dissipated, but instead of falling to the ground, their clothing remained suspended in mid-air, slowly floating toward them. When the clothing floated over the tiny island where Cyd and May stood, Argo reappeared, holding it.

“You have been practicing since I left?” Cyd asked as Argo handed them their clothes. May began putting his clothes on, while Cyd did not.

“Every chance I got! That was mad loco, y'know. I didn't know that shit was possible!”

“Mach would not like your use of that word, Argo. How far do you think you can travel while carrying May?”

“I sorta practiced on Kee once, but we didn't go far.”

“Why not begin by going from here to the riverbank? May, would you please hold my clothes and my bark?”

May took the requested items and held them close, the tree bark especially so. Cyd disappeared before May’s eyes, but May could sense Cyd all around him.

[I will be a cloud while Argo transports us.]

[You don’t need Argo to get across the river.]

[This time, no, but Argo travels faster over straighter distances than I can travel. We will reach the others faster if he can carry us.]

“Where’s the old man? He coming?”

“Yes. Don’t worry about him,” May replied.

“Whatevs.”

Argo dissipated once again and May felt the wind push his legs up from behind, causing him to tip backwards. May stopped falling a couple of meters above the ground. He wobbled a moment and then fell the rest of the way to the ground, just inches from becoming very wet.

Argo and Cyd both reappeared.

“He’s too heavy,” Argo complained.

“No, you have yet to master the ability; that is all. Are you trying to move and lift or lift and move?”

“Lift and move.”

“If you are not harnessing your power first and foremost, you will squander your energy. You will be able to lift more and go longer distances with less expenditure if you focus primarily on drawing your power from the wind.”

Cyd worked with Argo for another fifteen minutes before Argo got the hang of it and landed May gently along the bank of the river. Cyd reformed from his misty cloud and reached for his talisman from May’s tree to test its gift. He felt the connection to his river restore his energy almost instantly.

Relief rushed through Cyd and May both, though Cyd held his composure while May smiled.

“How do you feel now, Argo?”

“Amazeballs. I think I’m ready.”

“Then let us find the others. We have much to do.”

CHAPTER SIX – EXCAVATING A MONSTER

Cyd had Argo stop a couple of times along the way to check that Argo hadn't overexerted himself, but Argo promised he was able to continue each time, so they made it to Seleucia on the Calycadnus in a little over an hour. Cyd made a point of praising Argo for his quick mastery of the new ability, as well as thanking him for the ride. May agreed it had been a smooth journey.

They found the others drinking in front of a hostel, waiting for their return. Argo ran up to Mach to tell him about his improvement and the trip. Cyd and May approached more slowly. Though May wanted to grab Cyd's hand as they walked, Cyd warned him off through their bond. May didn't understand why, but he respected the decision.

When they neared the group, Mach handed Cyd two leather thongs and his pocket knife. It grated on Cyd to find out that Mach had known they would both be coming back with talismans. How much had Mach been privy to about Cyd's life before Cyd himself had discovered it? He bristled silently with May as the only witness to his ill humor.

Through their connection, May offered comfort Cyd didn't want or need. Cyd had to stop himself before he lashed out at May instead of the person most deserving. May was not the trigger, so Cyd ensured May knew his ire lay elsewhere. May hesitantly pulled back some, and that made Cyd feel guilty. Navigating their linked emotions hadn't suddenly become easier just because they had chosen to be lovers.

Cyd immediately set to work cutting a small hole through the center of his talisman. May put his hand on Cyd's arm and shook his head silently. The knotholes didn't have much green life left in them, but May used his power to tell the still living wood to form a small hole through the center, just big enough to string the leather thong through it. Cyd then threaded the holes, knotted the thong, and hung the cords around their necks, first May's and then his own.

“You both have one,” Kee said with a knowing smile. Cyd nodded. It appeared Kee, Theri, and Mach needed no other confirmation on the significance of his talisman, so Cyd offered none. Argo didn’t ask.

“We were visited by Grandmother Gaia. She enlightened us on a great many things,” Cyd said instead.

Cyd retold the majority of what happened from when he and May had awoken the second time until their arrival in Seleucia, leaving out the personal details and any mention of the bond between them. Cyd consciously avoided eye contact with Mach as he relayed to Kee and Theri the details Gaia had presented and her request.

“Arima will be difficult to navigate,” Theri noted.

Kee pretended to be affronted, “You have an all-powerful Oread at your disposal and you’re worried about getting into a cave?”

Theri smirked and patted Kee on the head. Kee huffed and crossed his arms as if put out, and then he grinned in good humor.

“Perhaps we can get Adamastos to come out,” May replied.

“Can we sleep first? I’m beat,” Argo asked.

“Yes. We should sleep. We’ll make plans in the morning. Arima is only a twenty to thirty minute drive from here,” Mach responded.

Mach handed a room key to Cyd. Cyd accepted it without looking Mach in the eyes and turned to go inside. Mach knew he would not win Cyd’s trust back easily, but he also knew he would be forgiven sooner rather than later.

May followed Cyd to their room. It was very small, meant only for one person though two would be staying in it that night. Cyd undressed quietly and lay down on the narrow bed on his side. Cyd held back the blanket until May undressed and climbed into the bed next to him. They both wanted to touch—to get carried away in each other until they forgot the world—but Cyd ignored their erections and kissed May only briefly to confirm his love before he shifted May to face the other direction. Cyd draped an arm over May’s torso to keep him securely against his body on the tiny bed.

Cyd was not the most demonstrative person May had ever met... but Cyd had his moments.

In the morning, after a quiet breakfast at a local café, the six hopped into the minivan to begin the drive to Arima. This time, Argo sat in the passenger seat and Cyd sat next to May.

May wanted to reach for Cyd's hand again and looked at Cyd questioningly. Cyd sighed inwardly. It made him supremely uncomfortable to demonstrate affection, even amongst those he could potentially consider friends. May looked down in his lap and wrung his hands to have something to do with them instead. He didn't want to push Cyd into doing something uncomfortable, but May didn't know what to do with himself now either. He wanted to shout to the world how he felt about Cyd. Cyd seemed to want to hide how he felt.

[I do not want to wear my emotions for you openly because I want to hide my weaknesses. You make me weak as you give me strength.]

May's confusion and hurt rolled between them. Cyd had to quickly turn his head away so he could roll his eyes at himself. Cyd had put his foot in his mouth again. May misinterpreted Cyd's annoyance, so Cyd had to backtrack quickly.

[I will never figure out how to not upset you.]

Cyd bit the bullet and took May's hand in his own.

[Someone could use my love for you against me, or against you. That is how you are my weakness. The fewer people who know I love you or you love me, the safer you are, May.]

[You mean 'we are'?]

[No, I meant 'you'. I care for your safety before my own.]

Cyd felt the confusion turn to chagrin for jumping to the wrong conclusion.

[I'm sorry, Cyd.]

[I know. What is happening between us is not like a normal relationship. Normally you would not have known about my annoyance with myself so you could not have mistaken it for annoyance with you. This is unusual. We are both learning as we go.]

[But our friends already know.]

[I do not consider them friends. All but Mach are acquaintances at most. And Mach... He and I will have words before he will again be a friend to me. He has abused my trust, and he knows it.]

[But without him, we would not have found each other. I would never have left Cyprus. I can never pay him back for that.]

[And your tree?] It astounded Cyd to think that May valued finding him more than finding his own apple tree and coming into his full power as an Epimeliad. May blushed.

[That too.] Cyd noted May's hesitation before asking the next question. [Am I your friend?]

[You are gentility and sweetness and innocence, traits I lost long ago. You believe the best in everyone and everything, something I have been unable to do for centuries because I have seen too much. You are the reason I stay with this group, because I will die before I see anything bad happen to you. You are my heart and my home, and I love you.]

May desperately wanted to be kissed, so Cyd leaned over, cupped May's face in his hand, and kissed him with passion. Again, it wasn't as long or as preliminary to other events as either wanted it to be, particularly not once they heard retching sounds from in front of them. Cyd pulled away slowly, smirking ever so slightly at Argo's distress as much as to show May he meant every word he'd said. Cyd stroked his thumb across May's cheek just once before he dropped his hand.

"I am happy for you, old friend," Mach said as he looked at Cyd through the rearview mirror. Cyd's small smile vanished, as did Mach's. Cyd didn't invite further commentary on his life.

“You have a plan, then?” Cyd asked.

“Straight to the point as always, Cyd,” Mach replied, trying for his usual lightheartedness. Cyd saw the strain in Mach’s eyes and heard it in his voice. “I’m just your trainer. You guys are the team. This is your mission, not mine.”

“I’m sure they will value your opinion,” Cyd responded.

[Cyd...]

[Do not interfere between me and Mach.]

[Don’t punish him, Cyd. He’s sorry. Can’t you see that?]

Cyd sighed. May was a gentler soul than he. Cyd didn’t give back trust easily once lost.

[I will think about it.]

May nodded. He squeezed Cyd’s hand in understanding.

In the meantime, the others had been silent. Cyd rubbed his eyes and the bridge of his nose before looking up at Mach’s eyes in the mirror.

“I do not have any ideas. I would be glad to hear if you have any.”

Cyd did not feel ready to offer more of an olive branch than that.

“Honestly, no. All we know is that our first impression is wrong, according to Gaia. What that means, I don’t know.”

“Doesn’t that mean that our anger is wrong?” Argo wondered.

“How do you figure that, Argo?” Kee asked.

“Cyd was angry when Gaia told him about Adamastos being a monster. That was his initial reaction. That’s when she said not to assume. Most people would fear a monster. Maybe we shouldn’t fear him? If it wasn’t an intentional attack, then we shouldn’t be angry with him.”

“That is simple logic,” Theri said.

“But is it the right answer?” Cyd asked.

“It feels right,” May said.

Argo looked at May in surprise. “You think so?”

May nodded at Argo. “I wanted to believe the worst of whatever would kill innocent nymphs. But Gaia said it wasn’t intentional. What if he didn’t realize it would happen? What if he didn’t know any better? A misunderstanding? If we approach in anger, he might become scared and lash out. So why not try being nice and just talking?”

“Walk up to his front door and knock?” Kee suggested, tongue-in-cheek.

“Why not? Maybe we want to make a mountain out of a mole hill. We understand the consequences of his actions, but if he doesn’t, we have to get him to understand. Perhaps all we need to do is talk to him,” May said.

“And if it’s not that easy?” Argo asked.

“We must figure out how to contain him some other way. He cannot be allowed to continue terrorizing the countryside, intentional or not,” Cyd said.

After a few moments of silence following Cyd’s unpleasant declaration—which they all agreed with though none wanted to admit it—Mach said, “It’s as good a plan as any. We’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Arima had changed over time. It currently existed as two large sinkholes. One had a trail leading down to the bottom of it. The other had a concave opening, making it extremely difficult to reach the bottom. They assumed that the harder to approach of the two sinkholes would more likely be Adamastos’s home. Kee altered the ground to create steps leading down under the overhanging ceiling and they began the trek downward. Theri and Kee led the way, followed by May, Cyd, Argo and Mach bringing up the rear.

As they got closer to the bottom, the darkness enveloped them and the air became more frigid. May rubbed his arms to keep warm. Theri generated a small ball of fire to light the steps ahead. When they reached what they thought was the bottom of the cave, May called out.

“Hello? Adamastos?”

A quake rumbled around the cave. They could not tell by sound which direction it came from, but Kee pointed out the way based on the vibrations through the ground.

“It came from over there.”

May turned to speak in the direction Kee pointed.

“Adamastos? Hi, we are...” May hesitated, uncertain how to introduce them.

“Cousins,” Cyd suggested.

“We are your cousins,” May called out to the darkness. “We heard about you from your Grandmother Gaia and wanted to meet you. Can you come out and talk to us?”

A long, animalistic, screeching roar reverberated from the back of the cave. The ground beneath them shook, only a little at first and then stronger, until May, Cyd, Argo, and Mach had difficulty standing. Only Kee and Theri weathered the tremors without difficulty.

“He’s coming, and he’s big. We need to move out of his way fast. Everyone hold on to me, quick,” Kee commanded.

They grabbed on to each other to steady themselves just before a tidal wave of dirt surged toward them. Kee formed a boat of clay beneath their feet. They rode in the boat above the excess ice and rock as it filled the cave and lifted them toward the exit. May clutched at Cyd. Argo had vanished, leaving only his clothes. Mach picked them up once they surfaced from the cave and their ride stopped moving.

Dirt, rock, and ice spewed from the top of the sinkhole, overflowing the edges and spreading out around them. Kee and Cyd gripped each other’s forearms and focused intently on the rushing rubble to keep it from crushing the team. They forced it to split into two paths going around them, as water flows around a rock, but the rubble kept trying to collapse back in.

“He’s really strong. We need help,” Kee said.

May stepped toward Cyd, and Theri toward Kee. Though they had never consciously attempted it before, Kee and Cyd concentrated again upon separating the dirt and ice, this time channeling May's and Theri's powers along with their own, as May had done accidentally in Anaypazari. When the rubble stopped moving, the five stood in a bubble of flat land with a meter to a meter and a half of dirt and rock surrounding them on all sides.

The ear-piercing screech sounded again, this time rolling like thunder across the countryside. Kee put his hand to the clay.

"That's his voice. He's in there somewhere, but I can't tell where. This is all his body."

"Gaia said he takes on this rubble form that appears as a landslide. I think we should try to get him to shed this body and show us another form," May suggested, "but I don't know how."

"Kee can show him," Theri replied. "First, we must get out of this hole."

Kee concentrated on separating the rubble of rock and ice within Adamastos's body to form a passage for them to safety. The passage opened and held. They began moving forward as quick as possible without losing contact with each other. They walked roughly another two hundred meters before they reached the edge of the rubble field.

Mach had ridden out on Argo's back. He stood a short distance away waiting for them. Except for Kee, they retreated to what they believed to be a safe distance. Kee gathered rock around him until he looked like a walking slag heap with a vaguely human shape. He walked up to the edge of the rubble line and stepped on top of it. Seconds later, Kee melted into Adamastos's body.

May cried out in alarm, but Theri put a hand on his arm to stay him.

"He's fine."

"How do you know?" May had to know for certain.

Theri pointed to his temple a couple of times but said nothing else in response.

It dawned on Cyd and May at the same time that Kee and Theri had the same special bond they did. Cyd further realized that they must have figured out May and Cyd shared a similar bond some time ago, or Theri couldn't have counted on them to understand his meaning just now. Cyd also noted Mach neither seemed surprised at Theri's lack of worry nor puzzled at what should have been a cryptic response to May's question. Yet more for which Mach needed to answer.

Argo joined them in waiting for Kee to reappear. After the first few tense minutes, Kee rose naked from the rubble and knelt down to listen to Adamastos. Theri told the group Kee still searched for a way to get Adamastos to understand they wanted him to shed this form for another, as Kee had tried to demonstrate by showing his human form.

May looked up at the sky and tried to think up another plan. He remembered the previous time he had watched the sky, the second time Cyd had gone home. He remembered watching the fox constellation running.

Suddenly May had an idea.

"Tag. He liked to play Tag with his sister."

Argo looked at May in puzzlement. "Yeah, so?"

"From what I can gather, Gaia isn't known for giving information randomly. What do you want to bet he didn't play Tag in this form? It would have been too clumsy to catch the uncatchable fox. Let's try playing Tag with him."

"Might as well," Mach responded.

"Argo, you're as close as we have to the uncatchable fox. You up for it? You'll have to get his attention and give him time to figure out what you're doing. We're not exactly sure how they played with each other, and he might take a while to catch on that we're playing like he used to. The only difference is this time he gets to catch you, Argo."

Argo nodded and vanished. He materialized over the pile of rubble, landing lightly for only a moment before he vanished once again. Argo teased

Adamastos by touching down upon his back repeatedly, but Argo chose to follow a vague pattern. After a half dozen or so touches by Argo, a silver hand rose up from the rubble to grab for Argo's ankle.

Argo danced away from the hand and vanished again, reappearing once more a bit further away, still following his pattern upon Adamastos's back. This time, a forearm rose from the rubble to grab for Argo. Argo hovered over the spot where he should have touched down, but instead of placing his feet together on that spot, he spread his feet apart to land around the location instead of where the arm would catch him. The arm swung around to where Argo had touched down, but Argo had dematerialized once more.

The final time Argo appeared, a silver head and torso burst up from the ground and pounced on Argo's legs, wrapping around him. Argo could have dematerialized and vanished once again, but as they wanted Adamastos to catch him and come out of the rubble, Argo let himself be caught.

Argo didn't realize Adamastos would be so cold, though.

"Okay, okay, you caught me!" Argo laughed. "Not so tight. I won't go anywhere."

The arms wrapped around Argo's naked body were freezing cold, like iced metal. Argo shivered as he looked into a face unlike any he'd ever seen before. Adamastos had a hairless body made of silver. His eyes were diamonds—not like diamonds, but real raw diamonds, smooth and opaque. He appeared to be about Argo's age, but as the youngest son of Typhon and Echidna, he was centuries older than Cyd, closer to Gaia's age. He smiled from ear to ear, about to burst with joy.

Adamastos let loose a horrific shrieking roar. Argo clapped his hands over his ears and frowned at him until he stopped screeching. Argo removed his hands from his ears and shook his head.

"Can you speak like this? Without roaring?"

Adamastos cocked his head to the side like a puppy trying to puzzle out a new command. Argo tried a different approach. He made a roar-like sound

then shook his head no, and then he re-asked the question and nodded his head yes. Adamastos seemed to think about this but said nothing.

Argo waved the others over to him. Adamastos turned to look and released Argo immediately, shrinking away into himself. Argo grabbed his arm before Adamastos disappeared and smiled at him, then looked up and smiled at his friends. He tried to say “friends” to Adamastos, but Adamastos shook his head and yanked his wrist from Argo’s grip. He had melted back into his other body before the rest of the team arrived.

“I couldn’t tell him you were friends so he wouldn’t leave.”

“It’s fine, Argo. I might be able to communicate with him through vibrations in the ground. We’ll give it another shot.”

Kee and the others walked gently across Adamastos’s body, trusting the monster would not wish to hurt Argo, who walked with them. As Argo made to step off of the rubble to the ground, a silver hand reached out and grabbed his ankle to keep him from leaving.

Argo smiled and sat down cross-legged just inside the edge of the rubble so the hand could continue to hold him, even though his foot chilled rapidly. “I’ll be fine. Go ahead.”

Kee knelt to the ground and put his hand on it. Though he appeared to do nothing, Kee sent vibrations through the ground localized toward where the silver hand clung to Argo’s ankle. He tried to express the sentiment of friends to Adamastos, but the medium of clay didn’t offer much in the way of expressive communication.

After several attempts, Kee shook his head. Adamastos either didn’t understand, or he did but didn’t want to surface again. The only good sign was the lingering silver hand, which continued to hold Argo’s foot. Adamastos apparently did not want Argo to leave. As long as Adamastos wanted Argo there, they knew they still had a chance to talk to him and convince him not to leave Arima in the rubble form again.

Argo curled his fingers around the toes of his foot to try to warm them.

“He’s so cold. My foot is freezing.”

Theri pulled heat from his medallion and placed his hand near Argo’s foot. Heat radiated from Theri’s hand to warm Argo.

Quick as lightning, Adamastos’s hand shot up and gripped Theri by the wrist. The ice-cold grip around Theri’s heated wrist created a searing burn, but Theri endured it. Adamastos did not grip tightly; he was curious. The pain subsided as Adamastos changed his temperature to match that of Theri.

When Adamastos’s silver hand grabbed Argo’s foot again, Argo vanished, his screams of agony lost into the wind. Moments later, Argo reappeared on Mach’s back, arms around Mach’s neck, crying in pain. A nasty burn blistered Argo’s foot where Adamastos had touched him. Cyd ran over and held a bubble of cold water over the burn to numb it.

“Don’t be upset, Argo. He didn’t know it would hurt you,” May said.

Argo nodded and stifled his tears as quickly as possible once he could bear the injury.

“Did he just learn Theri’s power from having seen him use it once?” May asked.

“That’s a good question. If that is what happened, we have to be careful what we show him until we can trust he won’t accidentally use his abilities destructively,” Kee mused.

The pile of rubble moved, taking the whole team by surprise. It moved forward to touch their feet and then retreated.

“I think he’s looking for Argo,” Kee supplied.

Mach looked over his shoulder at Argo, still piggyback riding. “Argo?”

Argo gulped and nodded slowly. As Argo shifted to climb down, Theri stopped him. Theri concentrated on pushing and pulling heat within Argo’s body until Argo began to adapt to Theri’s modulations, redistributing the heat to keep from being cold.

“Change only part of your body to dissipate any extra heat.”

Theri pushed more external heat into Argo little by little until Argo had figured out how to adjust only part of his body to become wind instead of the whole. It allowed him to dissipate the extra heat instead of it burning his skin. As a final test, Theri unexpectedly grabbed Argo's neck. Argo had no problem dispersing the heat from the sudden attack.

The pile of rubble shuddered and moved forward again.

"You are ready," Theri acknowledged.

And so Argo vanished and a new game of Tag began. Argo alighted gently and more randomly this time, making it harder for Adamastos to guess where to catch him. To compensate, Adamastos raised multiple silver hands across his body to catch Argo. Watching from the sidelines, Mach thought it looked like a game of Whac-A-Mole in reverse: the moles popped up trying to catch the hammer.

Eventually one of Adamastos's hands wrapped around Argo's good ankle. Argo concentrated on venting the heat and kept himself from being burned again as he sank to the ground.

Adamastos's torso rose from the rubble and he pointed to Argo's blisters. Argo pulled his foot away to keep Adamastos from touching and making it worse.

« Hurts. »

Argo spoke in Ancient Greek, very simply, thinking Adamastos might be more likely to recognize it given his age. Adamastos canted his head to the side again. He worked his jaw and throat, making strange noises while working muscles he hadn't used in centuries. Argo watched and waited, trying not to be nervous.

« Why... hurts? »

« You did it. »

Adamastos looked up from the burn to Argo's face. It surprised Argo how expressive his eyes were; he appeared sad, almost ashamed.

« Apology. »

Argo had only a limited grasp of the ancient language, but he thought with reasonable certainty Adamastos had just apologized to him. He laid a hand on Adamastos's shoulder and noticed it was no longer hot to the touch.

“It's okay, Adam.”

Adamastos smiled wide again. He pointed to himself. “Adam!”

Argo smiled and pointed to himself. “Argo.”

Once Argo realized they should speak in Ancient Greek, Cyd took over communication with Adam since he had the most fluency in the language. Cyd had difficulty deciphering Adam's broken speech though. Adam had never had any formal education and hadn't actually spoken in anything but roars for a very long time. Adam's limited understanding tested Cyd's vocabulary, but they managed to find out more about Adam.

Adam's father had been ashamed of him and insisted he leave the cave only in his other form and communicate with the roar. Adam was happy to not carry around the bulk of his other form whenever he wanted to leave. Getting Adam to understand that his other form was dangerous to the mortal world was a more difficult task. The world had changed a lot since Adam had seen it.

Ultimately, the team decided they needed to keep an eye on Adam and help him understand the new world he would discover, and make sure the world would understand him. Nymphs and satyrs were one thing, but the world might not be too happy about meeting an honest to goodness monster, even one as sweet-tempered—and pretty—as Adam. They planned to take it one day at a time. First on the list, they needed to teach Adam modern language.

However, Adam didn't want to sleep away from his home. He had always lived in Arima and there he wanted to stay. After some debate, Argo suggested maybe he could fly Adam to their compound each day, if they moved it closer to Arima. Flying back and forth to Olympus each day would take too long if they wanted to see Adam daily. After riding around on Argo briefly, Adam agreed to go with Argo to see his new friends each day. Mach suggested Rhodes might work as a location and he would look into it upon their return.

Since they had no other pressing business to attend to, May decided to visit his mother and share his good news with her. They were relatively near the island of Cyprus and Cyd could easily swim the distance with May riding along. Mach agreed they could wait a couple of days before heading back to Olympus.

Adam feared his new friends wouldn't come back for him. He tugged on Argo's hand and asked him to stay. Argo promised him they would see each other the next day. Adam made a mournful little sound and released Argo's hand. With plans made, they said good-bye to Adam.

CHAPTER SEVEN – EPIMELIADES

The next morning, Cyd swam May over to the island of Cyprus. This time, they sealed their clothing in a plastic bag and May held onto it for the not quite two hour journey. Though much of the island was full of nymphs and they could have remained nude, May was much happier to keep Cyd clothed around his sisters.

As they walked through the sacred apple grove, May's sisters approached them in droves, wondering who the two cute guys were, particularly the male Epimeliad with the gorgeous white hair and pale green eyes. Not a single one recognized May as her brother, the one they had always shunned. The nymphs fawned over them, trying to engage them in conversation and more. The more it continued, the more May boiled with anger at their fickle acceptance. Apparently white hair made him acceptable.

Cyd had to grab May's hand from behind before May noted how substantial his anger had become. May stopped so Cyd could stand next to him. Cyd had never been one for public displays of affection, but in that moment, Cyd ignored the existence of the rest of the world because May needed him. Cyd stroked his thumbs across May's cheeks and leaned in to kiss him soundly.

The nymphs around them chattered, wondering if any of them might be lucky enough to join the men.

“Leave us alone, girls. I only have eyes for your brother.”

The chattering ceased. Every nymph stared at May, now discerning their own brother. Where previously they had looked on with lust and hope, now they looked on with a mixture of astonishment, revulsion, disgust, and bitter disappointment.

[Better?]

May nodded and they left the silent women behind. They continued toward May's mother, the largest tree in the center of the grove. As old as she was, her trunk was very thick. A long grapevine snaked up her trunk, complementing a

theory Cyd had formed a while back regarding May's parentage. Her branches reached tall and wide, and beautiful white blossoms covered her. As they walked toward her, she half appeared from within her tree, clapping joyfully.

"Malaeus! You've found your tree, dear boy. You look simply radiant," she said as she pulled him into a hug. "And who is this?"

"Mother, this is Cydnos."

"The Potamoi? This is most unexpected. I have heard many tales of you."

"Probably of my predecessor, my lady. I am not that old."

"Old enough to have stories of your own, young warrior. And how did you come to know each other? And what of the tree, my dear? You must tell me."

So May told his mother of the team, of meeting Cyd and their strange connection, and of the apples that led to his power fully manifesting. Finally, he described his tree.

"And has it blossomed, dear?"

May blushed and nodded.

"And borne fruit?"

May nodded again, as red as the apples from his tree.

"Wonderful. You must love him very much." She hugged May again and looked at Cyd. "And you must love him much in return to have pollinated the flowers. Thank you for helping my youngest. Well, my youngest but for one."

"You're pregnant, mother?"

"With your sister. Her name will be Thysa."

"You mean half-sister," May said half-heartedly.

"No, dear. I mean your sister, of the same father."

"But I don't know who that is. Who is my father? Our father?"

“A question I would also have answered, wife,” a new voice responded. May and Cyd turned and saw May’s stepfather, a fat old satyr with a long, horse-like tail, approaching the tree.

“He is rather dense to have not answered the riddle himself before now,” Cyd said to May’s mother. She smiled back at Cyd approvingly.

“The stories are true, I see. You are very observant, unlike that one,” she said, indicating her erstwhile husband, her tone changing to become more scathing. “Of course, that would require he actually care about the one he made vows to instead of the ones conveniently at hand once he has been in his cups.” To the satyr, she added, “As you were, so I became. Once you were no longer mine, I stopped being yours. Who I take up with now is none of your concern, Ineunus.”

“I will burn you down where you stand for breaking faith with me again, wife,” Ineunus threatened.

“If you touch my mother, I will kill you,” May responded.

“You and what army, useless whelp?”

The grapevines from the trunk of her tree suddenly wrapped around the satyr’s entire body. May tightened the vines around his ex-stepfather’s throat and made sure he could see the whites of the satyr’s frightened eyes as he spoke.

“I need no army to strangle the life from your body, you vile waste of flesh. You’re no father to me and I have no love for you. If any harm comes to my mother or this grove, I guarantee they’ll find you dead the next morning.”

[May, this is not you.]

[He will not threaten to kill my mother. He will NOT. Not the one person who loved me.]

“Malaeus,” his mother called to him, “I am quite capable of defending myself. He will not harm me. He is neither worth your anger nor your incarceration.”

May released Ineunus, who rubbed his throat as he backed away from the young Epimeliad.

“You are no Epimeliad. You are a monster.”

“You are an idiot. Go back to your thiasos and leave these trees to their lives or you will find your way to the Underworld without a coin to your name. Understand?” Cyd warned.

The satyr nodded vigorously and left without another word.

“I don’t understand, Cyd. Who is my father?” May asked again.

“Dionysos,” Cyd answered.

“That’s not possible. Dionysos has been on Olympus with the rest of the gods for centuries. He can’t be my father.”

“As Ares cannot be sire to Mach? Dionysos is your sire. Have you never questioned why you had control over vines before you ever found your tree?” May shook his head in response to Cyd’s question. “What does that one,” Cyd said, indicating the departing satyr, “do on the full moon?”

“Dances in the Bacchanal.”

“Presided over by...?”

“Silenus.”

“Companion of...?” Cyd huffed.

“Dionysos, but that doesn’t mean—”

“Who is the god of...?”

“Wine, ecstasy, fertility...”

“Symbolized by...?” Cyd prompted, annoyed with May’s stubbornness.

“Lots of things: bulls, the thyrsus, wine, the grapevine—”

“Like the one clinging to your mother’s tree right now? The one you wrapped around his throat?”

May stopped and frowned. He looked over at his mother's tree where the thick grapevine embraced her trunk once again. May touched the vine and felt it hum with power similar to his. He looked up at his mother.

"How is it possible?"

"Long ago, he drunkenly followed Ineunus one night and witnessed our union. I saw him watch us. Sometime after Ineunus began taking up with others, your father began to visit me."

"Why did he never come to see me or say anything to me?"

"He may visit only on the full moon, when you stay away."

"I had always hoped you might close the rift between... you know."

"I never wanted to, dear," she replied. "But enough of that business. You are whole and blessed now with your own mate. Will you have children?"

"Mother, we are both men. We cannot have children together."

"Not the mortal way. But you are Epimeliad. I'm sure if you think on it, the seed of an idea will come to you."

Cyd snorted in amusement. He rather liked May's mother.

"We have not discussed such. Perhaps one day. Now is not the time for us," Cyd responded.

"Now may be all the time you have, Cydnos."

Cyd nodded his understanding.

"Mother, when will you have my sister?"

"Not for another two months. She will be born on the full moon, as you were."

"Will he be here for you?"

"Your father? Yes, dear."

"Why didn't you tell me?" May wondered.

“Because you were not ready to know who you were, dear boy. You needed your tree first. And now you have it and much more.” She turned to address Cyd, “Please take care of him. He is very special.”

Cyd nodded. That much he had already realized. Gaia was far more cunning than most gave her credit for. She was probably the only other being who knew the secret of May’s sire, though perhaps she had shared that information with Mach as well. Gaia had plans for their team, and Cyd would soon see to it Mach fully disclosed everything he knew.

Cyd would not risk losing May to Gaia’s whims. If Gaia thought she could control him, she had another thing coming. Cyd was now much more dangerous than he had ever been before. Now he had someone to live and die for.

May heard Cyd’s concerns and sentiments through their bond and looked over at him with love. But something niggled at the back of his mind... something he needed to remember.

Seeds.

Seeds May had planted a week ago.

Seeds from an apple from his tree, sometime after his lover had been beneath it.

Seeds May knew had already sprouted...

Cyd looked at May in concern and then narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

“What did you do, May?”

“Cyd, I’m going to ask a question and I need you to be completely honest. When you went home to heal the first time and brought me back the apple from my tree, did you masturbate under my tree while it was flowering?”

Cyd looked down, but May could feel his guilt through their bond.

“Gods and goddesses, you did,” May said, amazed. May smacked his hand to his forehead. “And you knew about tossing the apple too, didn’t you?”

Cyd's guilt spiked higher. "You loved me then and you let me think it was nothing!"

"I was still trying to protect you. And myself."

"Augh! You and your protection. Well, Mr. Protector, just keep in mind that, at the time, I only planted the seeds intending to grow more of those delicious apples like the ones you gave me."

May waited for Cyd to connect the dots.

It didn't take long at all.

THE END

Author Bio

Adara O'Hare is a geek in writer's clothing—a mild-mannered website designer by day and a wife, mother, reader, and sometimes writer by night. Adara is an avid reader who writes on occasion, mostly for her own enjoyment.

Contact Info

[Website](#) | [Goodreads](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#)