

TWO



A single word blazed through her mind. *Run.*

But her instincts demanded something else, and her body listened. She slid into a defensive stance, tasting blood as she bit the inside of her mouth. Every part of her seemed to vibrate, electrified by fear and fervor.

You are an idiot, Lore told herself. She would have to kill him in front of all these people, or find a way to take the fight outside and do it there. Those were the only options she allowed herself to consider. Lore was not about to die on booze-soaked mats in the basement of a Chinese restaurant that didn't even serve mapo tofu.

Her opponent towered over Lore in a way she tried to pretend she didn't find alarming. He had at least a six-inch advantage despite her own tall frame. His simple gray shirt and sweatpants were too small, stretching over his athletic form. Every muscle of his body was as perfectly defined as those men she'd seen on her father's ancient vases. The mask he wore was one of a man's raging expression as he released a war cry.

The House of Achilles.

Well, Lore thought faintly. *Shit.*

"I don't fight cowards who won't show their faces," she said coldly.

The answer was warm, rumbling with suppressed laughter. "I figured as much."

He lifted the mask and dropped it at the edge of the ring. The rest of the world burned away.

You're dead.

The words caught in her throat, choking her. The crowd jostled Lore forward on the mats, even as she fell back a step, even as she fought for air that

wouldn't seem to come to her. The faces around her blurred to darkness at the edge of her vision.

You're supposed to be dead, Lore thought. *You died.*

"Surprised?" There was a hopeful note in his voice, but his eyes were searching. Anxious.

Castor.

All the promise in his features had sharpened and set as the fullness of youth left his face. It was startling how much his voice had deepened.

For one horrible moment, Lore was convinced that she was in a lucid dream. That this would only end the way it always did when she dreamed her parents and sisters were still alive. She wasn't sure if she would be sick or start sobbing. The pressure built in her skull, immobilizing her, suffocating whatever joy might have bled through her shock.

But Castor Achilleos didn't vanish. The aches from Lore's earlier fights were still there, throbbing. The smell of booze and fried food was everywhere. She felt every drop of sweat clinging to her skin, racing down her face and back. This was real.

But Lore still couldn't move. Couldn't look away from his face.

He's real.

He's alive.

When a feeling finally broke through the numbness, it wasn't what she expected. It was anger. Not wild and consuming, but as sharp and ruthless as their practice blades had once been.

Castor was alive, and he'd let her grieve him for seven years.

Lore swiped a glove across her face, trying to refocus herself, even as her body felt like it might dissolve. This was a fight. He'd landed the first blow, but this was the person who had once been her best friend, and she knew the best way to hit him back.

"Why would I be surprised?" Lore managed to get out. "I have no idea who you are."

A flicker of uncertainty passed over Castor's face, but it vanished as he raised an eyebrow and gave her a small, knowing smile. Beside her, several men and women in the audience trilled and began to whisper.

There was no way to send him out without making a scene, and there was no way she was letting him out of this basement completely unscathed after

everything that had happened. Lore turned to give the signal to Frankie, hoping that no one could see her heart trying to pound its way out of her chest.

The bell rang. The crowd cheered. She lowered into a fighting stance.

Go away, she thought, staring at Castor over the tops of her gloves. Leave me alone.

He hadn't cared enough to try to find her in the last seven years, so what was the point of this? To mock her? To try to force her to come back?

Like hell he would.

"Please be gentle." Castor raised his hands, glancing down at a split in one of his borrowed gloves. "I haven't sparred in a while."

Not only was he alive, he'd finished his training as a healer instead of a fighter, as planned. His life had played out exactly as it was meant to, without her there to interrupt it.

And he had never come to find her. Not even when she'd needed him most.

Lore stayed light on her feet, circling around him. Seven years stretched between them like the wine-dark sea.

"Don't worry," she said coldly. "It'll be over quick."

"Not too quick, I hope," he said, another grin tugging at his lips.

His dark eyes caught the light of the bulbs swinging overhead, and the irises seemed to throw sparks. He had a long, straight nose despite the number of times he'd broken it sparring, a jaw cut at perfect angles, and cheekbones like blades.

Lore threw the first punch. He leaned to the side to avoid it. He was faster than she remembered, but his movements lurched. As strong as his body appeared, Castor *was* out of practice. It made her think of a rusted machine struggling to find its usual flow. As if to confirm Lore's suspicions, he leaned a little too far and had to balance check to keep himself from stumbling.

"Are you here to fight or not?" she growled. "I get paid by the match, so stop wasting my time."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Castor said. "By the way, you're still dropping your right shoulder."

Lore scowled, resisting the urge to correct her stance. They were already losing their audience. The basement floor shuddered as the crowd stomped their feet into a driving beat, trying to force a change in the tempo of the fight.

Castor seemed to read the room correctly, or he'd gotten splattered by

enough drinks, because his face set with a newfound focus. The lightbulbs kept swinging on their chains, throwing shadows. He wove in and out of them, as if he knew the secret to becoming darkness itself.

He fainted right and launched a halfhearted punch at her shoulder.

Fury painted Lore's world a scalding white. That was how little he respected her now. He didn't see her as a worthy opponent. He saw her as a joke.

Lore slammed a fist into his kidney, and as his body curled, her left hand clubbed his ear. He staggered, eventually dropping to a knee when he couldn't regain his footing.

She threw another punch, this one directly at his face, but he had enough sense left to block it. The impact reverberated up her arm.

"Keep toying with me," she warned him. "See how that ends for you."

Castor stared at her through the dark, unruly hair that had fallen into his eyes, his ivory skin flushed. She stared back. Sweat dripped off Lore's chin, and her body was still pulsating with the force of the storm inside her. The swinging lights danced in his dark irises again, almost hypnotically. The last traces of humor left his face as if she'd clawed them off herself.

He shot forward, locking an arm behind her knees and pulling them out from under her. One moment, Lore was standing, the next, she was flat on her back, gasping for air. The audience cheered.

She raised her leg to knock him back away from her, only to hear Frankie's pleasant voice call out, "No kicking!"

Right.

Lore rolled hard to her left, coming to the edge of the mat and onto her feet again. This time, when she launched a volley at Castor, he was ready, meeting her blow for blow. She ducked and bobbed, sinking into the current of the fight. Her lips curled into an involuntary smile.

There was movement at the top of the basement stairs as someone came down. That one look cost Lore—Castor reeled his arm back and launched a powerful blow into her gut.

She wheezed, trying to resist folding at the waist. Castor's eyes widened, almost in fear.

"Are you o—?" he began.

Lore lowered her head and drove it straight into his chest. It was like ramming into a cement wall. Every joint in her body suffered, and her vision was

dotted with black, but he went down, and she went down with him.

Castor rolled them so he was on top, careful not to crush her with his weight as he pinned her to the mat. Lore was gratified to hear him breathing as hard as she was.

“You died,” she managed to choke out as she struggled against the hold.

“I don’t have much time,” he said. Then he switched into the ancient tongue. “I need your help.”

Her blood cooled at his words, spoken in the language she’d tried to force herself to forget.

“Something is happening,” he said. The fight had warmed his body until it was almost burning to the touch. “I don’t know who I can trust.”

Lore turned her face away. “And that’s my problem how? I’m *out*.”

“I know, but I also need to warn you— Damn,” Castor breathed, then swore again in the ancient tongue for good measure. He shifted their positions so that Lore rolled on top of him. She was distantly aware of the audience chanting the mandatory eight count. Too late, she realized he was letting her win.

“You jackass,” she began.

His gaze was fixed on the staircase, on the figure she’d glimpsed before. Evander—Castor’s cousin, and occasional playmate to them both when they were kids.

Van wore a simple black hunter’s robe, with a glint of something gold pinned just above his heart. His dark skin gleamed with the steam rolling down behind him from the kitchen, the undertone as cool as a pearl. He’d cropped his hair close, which only better served to highlight how devastatingly handsome he was. His eyes were sharp as he signaled something to Castor.

“Time’s up,” Castor said. Lore wasn’t certain if he was talking about the match or something else.

“Wait,” Lore began, though she didn’t know why. But Castor had already lifted her off him. His hands lingered at her waist a second longer than either of them seemed to realize.

“He’s looking for something, and I don’t know if it’s you,” Castor told her.

Lore’s head went light as his words sank in. There was only one *he* that would matter. She fought for her next breath. She fought against the static growing in her ears.

“You may be done with the Agon, but I don’t think it’s done with you. Be

careful.” His gaze became intent as he ducked low and whispered in her ear. “You still fight like a Fury.”

Castor pulled back, taking his bow, accepting boos from the crowd and a red Solo cup that was offered to him. He pushed through the audience, heading straight for the stairs. As Castor reached him, Evander gripped his arm, and, together, they disappeared into the sweltering kitchen.

Someone grabbed Lore’s wrist, trying to tug her arm up into the air, but Lore was already moving, shouldering her way through the crowd.

What are you even doing? her mind screamed at her. *Let them go!*

She collided with someone near the stairs, hard enough that he was sent stumbling back against the nearby wall. Lore whirled around, half an apology already escaping her lips, when she saw who it was.

Shit.

His skin was white as bone, his dark eyes almost comically wide as they met hers. Edgy, vaguely hipster buzz cut. Skinny frame and skinnier jeans. Necklace made of braided horse hair.

Miles.

Unbelievable, she thought. How the hell had this night managed to get worse?

“Wait here!” she ordered.

At his stunned nod, Lore ran up into the kitchen, weaving through the irritated cooks and the veil of steam until she found the disabled emergency door and burst onto the dark street.

The air glowed red from the tail lights of the SUV speeding away. A single red Solo cup rolled toward her feet, something dark smeared across the side of it.

Ink.

She turned it toward the dim security light above the door, trying to parse the uneven strokes of each letter. Her pulse beat wildly at her temples.

Apodidraskinda.

A child’s game. Hide-and-seek.

A challenge. *Come find me.*

Lore dropped the cup into a nearby trashcan and walked away.