Chapter 107: Contest of Champions II: Electric Boogaloo pt.1

Max watched the gods close around him and Nur.

The Skyfathers stood nearest, forming the center of the gathering beneath the immense marble steps leading toward Zeus's palace. Zeus occupied the foremost position, lightning moving lazily across his arms, while Vishnu stood several paces to his right. Around them were Marduk, Ahura Mazda, Altjira, Osiris, Buluku, Hodiak, Itzamna, Hwanin, Izanagi, Tomazooma, Quetzalcoatl, Shou-Hsing, Svarog, Kāne, Ukko, Ulgen, and Viracocha.

Those were only the rulers.

Behind them, around them, and upon the terraces overlooking the courtyard stood gods from pantheons across Earth. Poseidon glared at Max with a hatred that meant Theseus had evidently reached the sea alive. Ares stood beside him with one hand already resting upon his weapon, while Apollo and several other Olympians remained nearby. Max recognized Hermes, Athena, and Artemis almost immediately. Alongside them were Bast,Ogun, Agni, Vayu, Indra, Yama, Nergal, Ishtar, Nanna, Amurru, Isis, Anubis, Sekhmet, Bast, Sobek, Thoth, Amaterasu, Susanoo, Raijin, Inari, Nuada, the Morrigan, Perun, Veles, Dazhbog, Huitzilopochtli, Tlaloc, Mictlantecuhtli, Huracan, Inti, Kanaloa, Māui, Tengri, and dozens more.

Max slowly looked around the courtyard.

Every direction contained another god.

'Ion's hairy balls, they're all here.'

He paused.

Wait.

Ion's hairy balls?

'My hairy balls?'

Max almost frowned at himself. Apparently, spending three hundred million years surrounded by Oans had finally done permanent damage to his vocabulary. Now he was cursing using his own name. What was next…

"Max."

Nur's voice pulled him back.

Max looked sideways.

Nur was staring at him, probably wondering why Max had gone completely silent.

"Right."

Max returned his attention to the Skyfathers and found the one face among them that he was actually pleased to see.

"Vishnu."

The Hindu god smiled.

"Hello, my friend. It gladdens my heart to see you safe and alive once more."

"Yes, it's good to see you too. It's been a while."

"Far too long."

Max's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Don't tell me you're with them."

Vishnu shook his head. "I am not among those who seek the child's death. I am here because the matter before us is grave, and because no decision concerning so many pantheons should be made without care."

"Vishnu," Zeus interrupted, his voice carrying easily across the courtyard. "With all due respect, allow me to speak with the Green Lantern."

Vishnu looked toward the Olympian ruler.

"Very well, Zeus. It was you who called this council."

Max's attention moved briefly through the gathering again.

Khonshu stood among the Ennead and gave him a slight nod. Max returned it. That probably completed the list of gods here whom he could safely call friendly. He had remained on decent terms with much of the Hindu pantheon because of Vishnu and Krishna, and with Khonshu because of the mess involving Kang.

Then Max noticed Bast. The Panther Goddess stood not far from the other Ennead, her narrowed eyes fixed directly on him.

'Okay. only Vishnu and Khonshu.'

The rest were more complicated.

Max had never even met perhaps half of them. As for those he had encountered during his Avengers years, he had occasionally behaved in ways they might have interpreted as disrespectful.

Occasionally.

Perhaps often.

Zeus stepped forward.

"Well, Green Lantern. When last you came to Olympus, did you expect to see it standing again?"

Max looked around at the immaculate marble buildings and golden towers.

"Wasn't exactly my fault it got wrecked."

Thunder rolled overhead.

Zeus's expression darkened. "Your wife burned Olympus."

"Because your wife manipulated your daughter into abducting me."

Aphrodite, standing much farther back among the Olympians, suddenly became very interested in one of the nearby columns.

Max pointed toward Zeus. "Did you forget that part?"

"Hera acted without my command."

"Wonderful. Then we're agreed it wasn't my fault either."

Zeus's jaw tightened.

"Anyway, that's not why we're here. Nur and I came for the pregnant woman you've apparently, surprise, surprise, abducted."

"We abducted no one," Zeus replied. "The woman came willingly to Olympus and requested sanctuary."

Max looked toward Nur.

Nur considered it before giving a reluctant shrug. "It is possible. She was deeply pious and frightened. If she believed the Olympians offered protection, she may have gone willingly."

"Huh."

That complicated things slightly.

Max returned his attention to Zeus. "Fine. Maybe you didn't take her. But I've received some pretty convincing information that a number of gods here intend to kill the child she's carrying."

The reaction was immediate.

Voices rose throughout the courtyard. Some gods protested angrily, others demanded silence, and several began arguing among themselves before Max had even finished speaking. The division was obvious.

This was not every god against the child.

Far from it.

Some wanted the child destroyed. Max could see that clearly enough in Marduk, Nergal, and several others gathered near them. Others appeared disgusted by the suggestion, while a third group seemed more interested in containment, separation, exile, or whatever other compromise they believed might solve the problem.

Enki's reaction interested him most. The Anunnaki god was staring toward Marduk with open hostility. It was his offspring, after all.

Wait.

Wasn't Marduk also Enki's son?

'Oh, fuck. Marduk wants his own half-brother dead. That's fucked up.'

Max reconsidered.

'No, actually, that makes sense. These are gods, after all.'

Max raised his voice. "Can somebody explain why all these supposedly mighty gods are terrified of a baby that hasn't even been born yet?"

The arguments died down.

"I have heard whispers of a prophecy."

Marduk's expression twisted.

"Silence your mouth."

Max blinked and looked toward him as though noticing him for the first time. "Oh, Marduk. Didn't see you there."

The god glared.

Max smiled. "How was the Sahara?"

Several gods reacted with badly concealed amusement. Marduk stepped forward before stopping himself.

Max saw the hesitation.

There it was.

Fear.

Not enough to make Marduk sensible, but enough that he remembered exactly what had happened when Max decided to stop playing around.

Zeus raised one hand.

"Marduk."

The Anunnaki ruler remained where he was.

Zeus looked toward Max. "I do not seek the child's death."

"Good. Then we're halfway there."

"Nor do several among us. Others believe its existence presents a danger too great to tolerate. I summoned the Council of Godheads so that every pantheon might speak and a decision could be reached before this conflict spreads further."

Max stared at him.

"No need."

Zeus frowned.

"I've already decided," Max said as he looked around at them all.

A low murmur spread through the gathering.

"The child lives," Max continued. "So does its mother. You will hand them over to me and Nur, and both will be placed under the protection of the Sorcerer Supreme."

Izanagi's expression hardened.

"Such disrespect."

Max looked toward him.

Before he could answer, Vishnu spoke.

"This council concerns a mortal woman and a child who is half divine, but also half mortal. Yet no mortal voice was invited to speak for either of them."

Marduk scoffed.

Vishnu continued. "Max and En Sabah Nur have involved themselves directly in the matter. They should remain and be permitted to speak."

Nur inclined his head toward him.

Marduk stepped forward.

"No. They should be expelled."

His gaze moved toward Zeus.

"You summoned this council, Zeus. Olympus is your realm, and we stand under your hospitality. As host of this great meeting, I ask that you remove these mortals before they disrupt the proceedings further."

Max almost laughed.

Mortal.

A strange word to hear applied to him now. Since returning from the Source, Max had deliberately begun leaning back toward the part of himself that had once simply been a man. Billions of years spent thinking and living more like a cosmic entity had changed many parts of him, and for a very long time, concerns that had once seemed ordinary, comfort, attraction, desire, even sex, had simply stopped occupying much space in his thoughts.

His loyalty to Firehair had certainly been part of that, but there had also been something more fundamental in the way he had come to exist. Now he wanted to be more like the Max he had once been, mainly because it felt familiar. Human. Comfortable in a way he had almost forgotten.

And with that had come the return of parts of himself he had barely thought about in ages, small instincts and desires that had once been entirely natural to him.

Seeing Aphrodite again had made some of those particularly difficult to ignore.

"There isn't going to be a meeting to decide whether the kid deserves to live," he said. "Like I said, I've already decided."

Ares finally lost whatever patience he possessed.

"Shut your mouth, cur!"

Max turned his head as the God of War drew his weapon and stepped forward.

"You stand within Olympus, surrounded by the gods, yet speak as though you command us."

Max looked around deliberately.

"Have you met me?"

Thunder rolled again.

Zeus's voice became colder. "Enough. Your arrogance has gone too far, Green Lantern."

Max's smile faded.

Zeus looked toward Hermes.

"Hermes, my son. Take the Green Lantern and his companion away. Place them within more comfortable quarters until this council concludes."

Hermes moved.

To everyone else in the courtyard, the god simply vanished.

To Max, he was merely fast.

The world slowed around him. Lightning stopped crawling through Zeus's hands, Ares's cloak hung motionless behind him, and dust disturbed by Hermes's first step floated almost perfectly still in the air. Hermes raced across the courtyard, his eyes fixed on Nur first, probably intending to remove the easier target before dealing with Max.

Max slowly turned his head.

Hermes saw it.

The god's expression changed. Shock replaced confidence as he realized Max was following him.

Max lifted one hand.

Emerald light appeared around Hermes at the same impossible speed, forming a construct hand directly in his path. Hermes tried to change direction, but the construct changed with him, closed around his body, and dragged him across the remaining distance until Max caught the god by the front of his clothing with his actual hand.

To everyone watching, Hermes vanished from Zeus's side and instantly appeared in Max's hand.

A collective gasp moved through the courtyard.

Max threw him.

Hermes shot across Olympus and disappeared through three marble columns before crashing somewhere in the distance.

Silence followed.

Max looked toward where Hermes had landed.

"I've raced the Runner before, kid. You're going to have to do better than that."

Ares roared and charged.

Several other gods moved with him.

Max stepped aside from the first swing and drove one fist into Ares's chest. The Olympian left the ground and flew backward into several of his companions.

Khonshu seized the arm of another member of the Ennead before the god could join the attack. "Do not," he warned.

Max raised his right hand.

Emerald light gathered into a sword. The blade formed long and broad, its surface burning with concentrated Will as Max settled into position beside Nur.

Apollo raised his weapon from the far side of the courtyard.

"Stand down, Green Lantern. Look around you. You are surrounded and hopelessly outmatched."

Max did look around.

More than a hundred gods stood ready.

Divine fire burned along weapons. Lightning gathered overhead. Storms formed around several Skyfathers, while others remained perfectly still, watching the younger gods move toward a fight they had not yet chosen to join.

Max laughed.

"Outmatched?"

His emerald sword brightened.

"All I'm surrounded by is fear and dead gods."

That did it.

Several gods charged simultaneously.

Max shifted his stance as Nur summoned his own power beside him, and for one instant the courtyard balanced on the edge of becoming the largest divine brawl in history.

A voice thundered through Olympus.

"STOP!"

The command did not merely carry through the air.

Max felt it through the stone beneath his feet.

Every god stopped.

The sky itself seemed to respond. The wind died, the clouds above Olympus parted, and green light spread through the courtyard as roots pushed gently between seams in the marble.

Max lowered his sword slightly.

A woman walked toward them.

She was tall, though not unnaturally so, with skin the deep green of living leaves and hair formed from vines, branches, and broad foliage. Her eyes burned orange, not with fire, but with the slow heat of the earth beneath its crust. Flowers opened in the marble wherever her bare feet touched, then vanished again once she passed.

Every culture seemed to have another name for her.

Gaea.

Jord.

Aditi.

Mother Earth.

The Elder Goddess from whom countless divine bloodlines ultimately descended, directly or indirectly. Even Odin had had a fling with her during their time on Earth all those years ago.

Max let his construct sword dissolve.

"Gaea."

Her glowing eyes settled upon him.

"Green Lantern."

Her tone contained neither hostility nor warmth.

Then she looked across the gods who had been preparing to attack.

"I ask you not to bring battle into this place."

The authority in her voice changed the entire courtyard.

Even Zeus said nothing.

Gaea's gaze passed across Ares, Marduk, Hermes, and the others before returning to Max.

"And I ask the same of you."

Max looked around at the gathered gods, then toward Nur.

Nur slowly lowered his hands.

Max sighed.

"Fine. Only because you asked nicely, Gaea."

Gaea turned first toward Zeus.

“You and I agreed that this matter would be handled peacefully.”

The words were quiet, yet they carried farther than the thunder Zeus had summoned moments before. Max watched the Olympian ruler’s jaw tighten. Zeus looked as though he wanted to argue, but even he seemed unwilling to challenge her.

“These two were not invited, Grandmother,” Zeus said.

Max raised a hand.

“Actually, about that.”

Zeus looked toward him.

“Your daughter told me you asked her to bring us here.”

For the first time since Max arrived, Zeus looked genuinely caught off guard.

His eyes moved slowly toward Aphrodite. She stood among the Olympians with an expression of perfect innocence, though the smile playing across her mouth ruined the effect. More distracting was the way her eyes remained fixed upon Max instead of her father.

Zeus drew in a long breath.

Gaea followed his gaze. “Is this true?”

Zeus remained silent.

Gaea regarded Aphrodite for another moment before turning back toward the gathered gods.

“Whether by invitation, deception, or the designs of Fate, the Green Lantern and En Sabah Nur have been brought here. Their presence is now bound to what is to come, and they will remain.”

A murmur traveled through the council.

Gaea ignored it.

“The Council of Godheads will convene formally in four days. Until then, no blood will be spilled upon Olympus over this matter. Each of you gave me your word that this gathering would proceed without war.”

Her orange eyes passed over the Skyfathers one after another.

No one challenged her.

“The Great Mother speaks truly,” Vishnu said. “I suggest we honor that agreement and allow Max and En Sabah Nur to remain. They have already involved themselves in the child’s fate, and a council meant to decide that fate will be poorer for excluding those willing to speak in its defense.”

Vishnu looked across the assembled rulers.

“What say you?”

Max felt his irritation rising again. He had no interest in spending four days waiting for gods to debate whether an innocent had to die. He was already preparing to reject the entire arrangement when Nur spoke beside him.

“We accept.”

Max turned so sharply that Nur almost smiled.

“What?”

Nur kept his eyes on the gathered gods. “We accept.”

“What are you doing, Nur?”

Nur finally looked at him. “Because it is the best option available, Max.”

Max gave him a flat stare.

“Then it is decided,” Gaea said.

She turned toward Zeus.

“My grandson, will you extend to them the same hospitality you have granted the rest of us?”

Zeus looked as though Gaea had asked him to invite a plague into his bedchamber.

His teeth clenched.

“Fine. As you say, Grandmother.”

Max smiled pleasantly. “You’re too kind.”

Zeus ignored him.

The gathering began breaking apart soon afterward. Some gods vanished, others walked toward the palaces and temples scattered throughout Olympus, while several groups immediately resumed arguments that Gaea’s arrival had interrupted.

Max watched them go.

His attention found Aphrodite almost without meaning to.

Or maybe he had meant to.

She stood some distance away beneath a line of marble columns.

For one brief instant, Max felt something.

Something familiar.

He frowned.

The sensation vanished before he could examine it. Aphrodite only smiled at him. Then pink light surrounded her body, and she disappeared.

Max’s gaze shifted toward a distant temple.

Aphrodite’s temple.

“Hmmm.”

Nur followed his gaze, then looked back at Max. Max ignored him and turned toward Gaea instead.

“Before everybody disappears, what the fuck is this prophecy?”

Gaea regarded him patiently. “All will be revealed when the council meets.”

“That is four days from now, Gaea. You know how much I don’t like waiting.”

Gaea’s expression softened slightly.

“Use the time well. Learn what you can, Green Lantern, and enjoy the hospitality Zeus has so reluctantly extended to you.”

Max looked toward where Khonshu had been standing.

Gone.

He had hoped to corner the god and extract something useful from him, but Khonshu had learned enough from dealing with Max in the past to leave before the questions started.

Max sighed.

“Come on, Nur.”

They walked away from the main courtyard until the crowds of gods thinned and the palace grounds opened into quieter gardens. Marble paths wound between fountains, flowering trees, and pools so clear that Max could see fish moving beneath the surface from several dozen feet away.

Once they were alone, Max looked toward Nur.

“Why did you agree?”

“Even you could not have fought every god there, Max, especially the Skyfathers.”

Max almost corrected him.

In his current base form, yes.

But as Ion, fully drawing upon the Source, that was an entirely different question.

“You are the one who taught me not to fight battles I cannot win,” Nur continued. “And that victory does not always come from throwing the first punch. Sometimes patience is the better weapon. We lose nothing by giving them four days.”

Max was stumped for a moment because Nur was right. He had taught him that.

“So the student has become the master,” Max said with a smile.

“ I am over four hundred years old now, Max.”

Max began walking again.

“Now we’re stuck here for four days.”

Nur followed. “Four days gives us time to find the woman.”

Max considered that.

Nur continued. “If she is truly here willingly, then we speak with her. If she wishes to leave, we take her and the child to Agamotto without the gods knowing.”

“That’s not a bad plan.”

Nur looked smug.

Max glanced toward the temples above them. “First, we need to figure out what this prophecy is.”

“Look into it,” he told Nur.

Nur frowned. “Why me?”

“Because I have another investigation.”

Nur followed Max’s gaze toward the distant temple of Aphrodite.

His expression changed immediately.

“Does this investigation begin in Aphrodite’s temple?”

Max looked at him.

“She invited me, and there is something strange about her. I don’t know what. I need to…”

Nur nodded slowly with exaggerated seriousness.

“I am certain there is.”

“I mean it. Something is up with her.”

Max tried to put the feeling into words.

“When she was standing there, I felt something familiar. I can’t explain it to you. It’s…”

Nur looked thoroughly unconvinced.

“Sure, Max. Whatever you say.”

Max narrowed his eyes.

“Go ‘investigate’.”

“ I am going to.”

Nur turned toward the opposite side of the pond.

His expression brightened.

Max followed his gaze. Six or seven nymphs had gathered along the far bank. Some wore almost nothing, while others had apparently decided clothing was entirely optional. Several were already waving toward them.

Nur waved back.

“And I shall begin my ‘investigation’ over there.”

Max stared at him.

“Wait. That’s not what I meant.”

“Do not ‘investigate’ too hard,” Nur called as he jogged toward the nymphs.

Max shook his head as he began walking away. A moment later, he heard laughter, a splash, and Nur shouting something while all the nymphs laughed.

Max kept walking.

Jade finally spoke inside his mind.

“You should take his advice, Max.”

Max stopped.

“Oh, now you decide to speak.”

“I have been busy.”

“Where were you?”

“Oa. Where else?”

Max resumed walking.

“Doing what?”

“Important work, Max. Turgon is overworked and experiencing considerable stress.”

Max winced. He probably should have expected that.

“Help him, then. I’ll be fine.”

“Oh, I will. I had no intention of remaining connected to you throughout this so-called investigation. Try to be careful, Max, and remember, you can make anything with that ring of yours.”

Then Jade went silent.

Max could only stand there with his mouth open.

“I’m just going to talk,” he muttered.

He flew toward the temple and finally landed on the path leading to Aphrodite’s domain.

The temple stood on a terrace overlooking much of Olympus.

It was beautiful without being overwhelming. White marble columns supported a broad, open roof, their surfaces carved with vines, doves, seashells, roses, and figures intertwined in embraces. Statues lined the entrance, almost all depicting men and women in various states of undress.

Unlike the heroic statues scattered elsewhere through Olympus, these did not celebrate battle or conquest. They showed affection, longing, desire, and everything else people had apparently associated with Aphrodite over the ages.

Max slowed near one sculpture of two lovers embracing. He studied it for a moment, then continued toward the temple.

The air smelled faintly of roses and sea salt. Shallow pools reflected golden light across the ceiling, while curtains of thin white fabric moved gently between the columns.

No one waited for him. Aphrodite had cleared the place of everyone else.

Max walked straight inside.

Farther ahead, the temple opened toward a broad balcony overlooking Olympus. Beyond it lay a private garden filled with flowering trees, fountains, and paths disappearing between tall hedges. From there, nearly the entire divine realm seemed visible.

“I knew you would come.”

Aphrodite’s voice came from somewhere deeper inside.

Max continued forward.

“You invited me. I figured this might be the best place to get answers to a few questions everyone else seems determined not to answer.”

The curtains covering the enormous windows began closing one by one.

Max looked around.

The outer doors shut behind him with a heavy click.

Braziers along the walls ignited, filling the interior with warm golden light as the last view of Olympus disappeared behind white fabric.

“I hope you do not mind,” Aphrodite said. “The view can be distracting.”

Max looked toward the closed curtains. “I hadn’t noticed.”

He reached one of the klinai arranged near the center of the chamber and sat, leaning back against the cushioned frame.

Several seconds passed.

Max looked around.

“You know, for a goddess of love, you’re doing a poor job of welcoming your guest.”

Two arms wrapped around him from behind.

Max stiffened.

He had sensed nothing.

How had she managed to sneak up on him? That bothered him more than the embrace itself.

Aphrodite leaned against his back, her arms settling around his chest while her hair brushed his shoulder.

“Shh,” she whispered. “Don’t move.”

Max turned his head slightly.

“What are you doing?”

“Just let me hold you for a little while.”

“And here I thought you said you weren’t a naive little godling anymore.”

Aphrodite laughed softly beside his ear.

“I am not.”

Her head settled against his shoulder as her fingers moved lightly against the front of his coat.

“I like the beard. It suits you.”

She rested more comfortably against him.

“It makes you look regal. Like a true ruler.”

“Careful,” Max said. “Keep talking like that and your father will think I’ve come for his throne.”

Aphrodite laughed against his shoulder, her fingers resting just beneath the open collar of his coat.
“Must we talk about my father?”

“I’m only reminding you how paranoid he can be.”

She laughed again, though the sound faded more quickly this time. For a few moments, she remained behind him with her arms around his chest, and Max felt the strange pressure inside him continue to ease. It was subtle enough that he might have missed it if he had not spent so long carrying that weight. The grief was still there, but it no longer seemed to press against every thought at once.

Aphrodite’s voice softened.

“I am sorry, Max.”

He frowned slightly.

“For what happened to you. For Firehair. For your daughter. For all that you…”

“It’s fine.”

Aphrodite lifted her head from his shoulder.

“No. It isn’t.”

Max said nothing.

“I can feel it,” she continued. “The grief you carry. The loss.” Her arms tightened around him slightly. “It is suffocating you.”

Max's first instinct was to make a joke, to deflect it like he always had since returning.

None came.

The worst part was that she was not entirely wrong. He had become better since Parallax, better since returning to Oa, but better did not mean whole. There were still moments when his thoughts drifted back toward that old darkness Parallax had left him in.

Yet sitting here, with Aphrodite holding him, those things felt farther away.

Not gone, but lighter.

Max turned his head slightly. "What are you doing?"

"Shh."

Her cheek rested against his shoulder again.

"Let me help you."

His suspicion returned immediately.

"Are you planning to repeat what you did last time?"

Aphrodite went still, and her hold on him tightened.

"No."

"I told you already. I was different then. Young. Arrogant. I thought wanting you was reason enough to have you."

That was considerably more honest than he had expected.

"And now?"

Aphrodite's smile returned, slower this time. "Now you have walked into my temple of your own accord." Her gaze briefly dropped to his mouth. "I find I prefer it."

"You locked the doors."

"To keep the others out, especially Ares." She glanced toward the entrance before returning her attention to him. "He has an unfortunate habit of appearing whenever I am enjoying myself."

Max laughed, and she seemed thoroughly pleased with the result. When he shifted to face her properly, her arms slipped from his chest without resistance. Aphrodite came around the end of the klinē and sat beside him, folding one leg beneath herself.

Only then, seeing her properly from the front, did Max notice that her hair had changed color. It was a soft, light pink rather than the blonde he had seen before, while her eyes were a much darker shade of pink. For a moment, as the firelight caught them, he could have sworn there was a faint violet tint beneath the color.

Her movement drew his attention to her almost exposed chest, the thin chiton so sheer that it was nearly see-through. He looked back up to find her watching him, her smile suggesting she had noticed exactly where his eyes had wandered. She settled against the cushions, leaving a little space between them as Max rested an arm along the back of the couch.

“I came to learn more about this prophecy everyone keeps mentioning,” Max said, changing the subject.

“Please, can we speak of something else?” she asked. “I have spent much of the week listening to gods argue, threaten one another, and repeat themselves. You must forgive me for wanting to enjoy better company and a better conversation.”

“Not enjoying the family gathering?”

“I enjoyed watching you interrupt it.” Her gaze moved over his face, and her smile changed as she leaned a little closer. “Standing before all of them, telling them exactly what you intended to do…” She drew her lower lip briefly between her teeth, her expression settling into something much less restrained. “You were...” She stopped there, though her expression finished the thought for her.

Max grinned. “Annoying gods used to be my favorite pastime.”

“Used to be?” Aphrodite laughed with him. “You seem to have returned to it quite comfortably.”

“It’s coming back to me.”

She reached up and brushed her fingertips along his jaw, her amusement softening into something more intent as she stroked his beard.

“I really do like the beard,” she murmured.

Max caught her hand and held it loosely between them, running his thumb over her knuckles. Her fingers curled slightly around his, and he watched her smile soften as she moved closer.

“What do you want, Max?”

He met her eyes, his thumb continuing its slow movement over her hand. With her knee now resting against his thigh, he was finding it difficult to think about anything beyond her closeness and the warmth of her fingers.

Aphrodite placed her free hand against his chest.

“Will you deny me this time too?” she asked softly.

His gaze dropped to her lips. He wanted to feel them against his, wanted to draw her closer and stop pretending that his questions were the only reason he had come. When he looked back into her eyes, the hunger there was unmistakable.

“I can feel your desire,” she whispered, her fingers moving lightly over his chest. “You don’t have to hide it from me.”

Max released her hand and settled his own against her waist. She drew a quiet breath as he pulled her closer, her fingers curling into the front of his coat. For a moment, she simply looked at him, close enough now that her hair brushed his cheek.

“Will you let me?” she asked.

He lifted a hand to her face, brushing his thumb along her cheek as he leaned toward her. Aphrodite closed the remaining distance and kissed him, softly at first, her lips lingering against his while her hand slid up to the side of his neck.

Max kissed her back, drawing her firmly against him. Her fingers slipped into his hair as she tilted her head, and the careful first touch became a deeper, lingering kiss. He felt her relax into his embrace, her body warm against his as his hand moved from her cheek into the soft fall of her hair.

She eased back just enough to take a breath, her lips still brushing his. Max followed her, and Aphrodite met him eagerly, her arm settling around his neck as he kissed her again.