

# Balance

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**Title:** Balance

**Author:** MultiMapper

**Categories:** Humor, Romance

**Pairing:** Ares/Joxer

**Rating:** R (Language)

**Author's Note:** This is my 'Solstice Scribbler' challenge response. The 10,000 word limit was a real problem... it sounds like a lot but I had 9,950 words the first time I stopped and checked, and I had just finished the introduction. I had to do some MAJOR trimming but was able to end it right at 10,000 words in the body. I hope ya'll enjoy it. MM

The Challenge is at the end of the story.

[Gods, what a Tartarus of a day.] Ares thought as he settled into a chair.

[Two thousand 'so called' warriors whining 'Give me power, Make me strong, Grant me courage, Assure my victory.'] Ares thought tiredly.

[It used to be enough to know that your god was watching you, and you tried to do your best to make him proud. But now... gimme gimme gimme, I want, I want, I want. Sometimes I wish...] Ares thoughts broke off as he felt something strange wash over him.

Ares looked around the room... something had changed.

The rabble of voices in his head were buzzing around like flies around a bloated carcass.

Ares felt a flash of anger at the voices, then promptly silenced them... except one.

"Great Ares, God of War, Defender of Greece,

I thank you for allowing me to live another day,

As always I offer my service to you... should you ever have use of me,

Yesterday, today and forever, I am loyal only to you."

Without thought or plan, Ares smiled and flashed out to meet the author of the prayer.

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Joxer was kneeling, absorbed in his prayer and didn't notice Ares standing behind him.

"Joxer?" Ares asked, not realizing till now that he had just followed the voice and didn't think about who it belonged to.

Joxer turned around and lost his balance.

From his position laying sprawled on the temple floor Joxer saw his god standing over him.

"Lord... Lord Ares?" Joxer asked in a voice of disbelief and fear.

Ares smiled tenderly and extended a hand to help Joxer up.

Joxer stared at the hand for longer than was proper before cautiously taking hold and standing.

Ares smiled as he looked into Joxer's eyes and didn't let go of his hand when he stood.

"Lord Ares?" Joxer asked in fear, looking at their joined hands.

"You may call me Ares if you like Joxer." Ares said, a bit shyly.

"Okay... thank you... Ares?" Joxer said hesitantly, watching Ares reaction.

Ares gave Joxer a happy smile and pulled him into a hug.

Joxer squeaked at the unexpected movement.

"Come on, I want to show you... everything." Ares said with enthusiasm.

Between one second and the next, they were relocated from the temple in Thebes to an impossibly big room.

"Where... where are we?" Joxer asked in a terrified whisper.

"The Halls of War on Olympus." Ares said as he shifted Joxer from his chest to his side.

"Why?" Joxer asked, wondering if this was to be the last day of his life.

"I wanted to show you my home... but this doesn't feel like home." Ares said with some confusion.

Joxer looked around as Ares coaxed him to walk.

"Wait. I know just the place." Ares said with excitement and suddenly they were in complete darkness.

Joxer instinctively held close to Ares.

"Here." Ares said and created a torch.

Joxer looked around in the dancing firelight to see a cave.

"This feels like home... but it needs a few improvements." Ares said as his eyes darted around the room.

Joxer watched in awe as tapestries and furnishings began to appear all around them.

"Do you like a fire pit or fire place?" Ares asked in a considering voice.

"A pit, I guess." Joxer said uncertainly.

Ares nodded and a large pit, more than a meter across appeared in the middle of the room, then a roaring fire appeared.

"Come, sit with me by the fire." Ares said as a variety of pillows and furs appeared all around the fire pit.

Joxer could only follow as Ares led him to the fires side.

Ares sat with his arm around Joxer, then pulled a fur to cover them both.

"Ares? Why are you doing this?" Joxer asked timidly.

"Because I'm cold, aren't you cold?" Ares asked in confusion.

"No, I mean, yes, I'm cold too, but that's not what I'm asking. Why did you bring me here?" Joxer asked with worry.

"I think this could be our home. No god or mortal could ever find us here. Do you like it?" Ares finished in a desperate voice.

"I..." Joxer began to say, then stopped and looked at the room around him.

"You what?" Ares asked quietly.

"I like it." Joxer said carefully.

Ares smiled and pulled Joxer into a hug again.

Joxer was stiff at first, but finally began to melt into the hug.

"What do you want to do now? Would you like something to eat? You look thin, you need to eat." Ares said quickly.

"Could we talk first?" Joxer asked slowly.

"Sure... what do you want to talk about?" Ares asked and devoted his full attention to Joxer.

"Ares, are you alright?" Joxer asked with concern.

Ares got a considering look, then an expression of realization.

Joxer waited hopefully for Ares explanation.

"Do you know what it's like to be a god?..." Ares began, then got a look of frustration.

"No, of course you don't. Okay Joxer, it's like this. All day, every day, I hear the prayers of my followers. When things are bad, they're asking me for this favor or that favor. When things are good they thank me a few times, then ask for more." Ares said in thought.

Joxer nodded slowly.

"But you're different. I listen to your prayers Joxer. All of them. Before today I listened to all my follower's prayers. You don't ask for anything but to serve me." Ares said and looked into Joxer's eyes with a smile.

"What do you mean 'before today'?" Joxer asked hesitantly.

"I'm tired of it. The constant whining and begging and bitching if they don't get what they want. They all want godly favor and great riches. They've come to expect a reward every time they do anything for me... which means that they are serving me for what I can do for them instead of devotion. My followers are supposed to be warriors, but they act like a bunch of ten year old girls fighting over the prettiest hair bow." Ares said in a tired voice.

"So you stopped listening?" Joxer asked cautiously.

"Why not? They stopped listening years ago." Ares said simply.

"So why am I here?" Joxer asked, feeling less afraid.

"Because you are the type of warrior I'm looking for. You are what I want the others to be." Ares said as he looked deeply into Joxer's eyes.

"But I can't fight. I can barely walk." Joxer said in disbelief.

"In here Joxer." Ares said as he laid a hand on Joxer's chest.

Joxer looked at Ares in confusion.

"You're a warrior in your heart. You haven't had any of the advantages the others had, yet you haven't asked for anything but to serve me. Your tributes were small in comparison to some others, but they were precious to you. And they were given in true devotion." Ares said in nearly a whisper.

"Okay, but why am I here?" Joxer asked again.

"Because I need you. You've offered to serve me and I've decided to accept your offer." Ares said with a smile.

"Serve you how?" Joxer asked warily.

"I'll leave that up to you. I like you and

thought you liked me... do you?" Ares asked with a furrow of worry in his brow.

Joxer looked into Ares worried eyes and couldn't help but give a smile of assurance.

"I don't really know you..." Joxer began and saw a look of despair begin to fall over Ares face.

"...But I think I'd like to." Joxer finished quickly, not wanting Ares to be hurt.

Ares look changed to a smile in an instant.

"This is nice." Joxer said, searching for something to say.

"Are you ready to eat yet? I can make anything you want." Ares asked hopefully.

"Sure. Make whatever you like Ares, I'm not picky." Joxer said with a small smile.

Ares thought for a moment, then created a large platter covered with chunks of meat, cheese and several types of fruit.

"This looks good." Joxer said as he looked at the food.

"Eat your fill, then we'll get some sleep." Ares said before grabbing a chunk of meat.

"Um, where?" Joxer asked as he looked around the cave.

Ares waved his hand and a large nest of pillows and furs appeared in the corner.

"I'm, um, sleeping with you?" Joxer asked cautiously.

"Sure, why not?" Ares asked innocently.

"I, um, I mean, what do you expect..." Joxer fought to say.

Ares looked at Joxer in confusion, then his eyebrows went up in surprise.

"Joxer, I don't know what stories you've heard about me, but I'd never force myself on you or anyone. I'm asking for your companionship, and if you really want I'll make you a separate sleeping space." Ares said, obviously trying not to look hurt by the suggestion.

Joxer stared at the sincerity in Ares' eyes and couldn't help but say, "I'd be happy to share your bed if you still want me to."

Ares smiled and said, "Of course I do. But it's important that you understand that I want you to be here, but you're not a prisoner. You can ask me to take you back at any time. If I commanded you to be my friend, I'd be no better than my followers that serve me for a reward."

"Thank you Ares. I think I understand." Joxer said in peace.

Ares smiled in return, then picked up a piece of cheese.

"Try this, it's one of my favorites." Ares said with a genuine smile.

Joxer took the cheese and savored the sharp tang.

"It's really good, but I think I need a drink." Joxer said around his mouthful.

Two goblets appeared, filled with red wine.

"To companionship." Ares said as he held his goblet forward.

Joxer smiled and said, "To friendship." And touched glasses with Ares.

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The food had been eaten and both men sat silently watching the fire.

"I'm falling asleep." Ares said in a slow voice.

"Me too... and I think I'm a little drunk." Joxer said with a smile.

"Come to bed." Ares said and stood throwing the fur off them both.

Joxer reluctantly stood and was a little surprised when Ares took his hand to lead him to the bed.

As they stepped onto the furs of the bed, Joxer felt a sudden draft of cool air.

He looked down to see that he was naked.

"Ares!" Joxer said in a very girley scream as he tried to cover himself with his free hand.

Ares rolled his eyes and continued to pull Joxer into the center of the furs and pillows.

"I'm naked." Joxer said with a scarlet blush.

"So am I. It's the best way to sleep." Ares said as he released Joxer's hand and snuggled down in the middle of the pile of pillows.

Joxer looked at Ares and couldn't help but admit that he looked comfortable... and he promised...

Joxer dropped into the pillows and pulled up a fur to hide himself.

"Joxer?" Ares asked hesitantly.

"Hmmm?" Joxer asked in return.

"Do I disgust you? Is that why you don't want me to touch you?" Ares asked in a tone of genuine curiosity.

"No, of course not. It's just... you're a guy. It's kind of... I'm not..." Joxer stammered.

"I already said I wouldn't force myself on you. How about this? Come over here and sleep with me. If you tell me tomorrow that

you don't want to sleep this way again, I'll never ask again." Ares asked hopefully.

Joxer cautiously scooted over to Ares' side.

"Goodnight Joxer." Ares whispered into his ear and pulled Joxer into a loose embrace.

Joxer laid silently, feeling his nakedness, feeling Ares' warmth behind him, feeling Ares' arms around him, feeling Ares' breath on the back of his neck.

Finally he drifted into a peaceful sleep.

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Joxer woke to the feeling of movement behind him.

He turned and looked into Ares' eyes.

"How did you sleep?" Ares asked quietly.

Joxer thought about the question and answered peacefully, "I don't remember when I've ever slept so well."

Ares got a peaceful smile of contentment and said, "I had hoped you'd say that. Last night was the best sleep I've had in centuries. Thank you."

Joxer looked at Ares curiously.

"It was your choice Joxer. I asked, but you always had the right to refuse." Ares said, then propped himself on an elbow.

"What are we going to do now?" Joxer asked in a tone of voice that said he was completely lost.

"I suppose we'll go to the council meeting this morning, then check on some warlords down by Sparta this afternoon... I don't know about this evening... what would you like to do?" Ares asked conversationally.

Joxer was pondering Ares use of the word 'we', then said, "I don't know. I kind of like it here. Maybe we could come back here for dinner and just sit and talk."

Ares smiled warmly and said, "I can't think of anything that I'd rather do tonight."

Joxer responded with a smile.

"I guess we'd better get to it. Let's have a meal, the council meetings tend to be endless." Ares said as he stood.

"Um, where did my clothes go?" Joxer asked as he looked around.

"They ceased to be. Stand up and I'll make something new for you." Ares said as in a flash, he was dressed in his standard black leather pants and vest.

Joxer hesitantly stood.

Ares looked at him in front, then walked half around to see behind.

There was a flash and Joxer looked down to see that he was dressed the same as Ares.

"What do you think?" Ares asked in a considering voice.

"Um, it looks good on you, but I'm too scrawny to wear something like this." Joxer said helplessly.

"Nothing a few meals won't fix, but I see your point. How's this?" Ares asked and Joxer was dressed in the same leather pants and a billowing white shirt.

"It's a little floppy, I mean, it's nice, but I'll probably be catching it on everything." Joxer said in apology.

Ares nodded in thought, then the shirt changed into a deep blood red shirt, tailored to fit.

"I like it." Joxer said as he looked at the shirt.

"Needs something." Ares said, then a vest appeared.

Joxer looked at the vest and smiled.

"Perfect." Ares said and took Joxer's hand to lead him back to the fire pit.

As they sat by the fire, Ares created a platter of food.

"You don't believe in separate plates, do you?" Joxer asked as he took a piece of rabbit from the platter.

"I like sharing with you Jox. It's fun." Ares said and tore a piece off a loaf of bread.

"I guess it is. I'm just not used to it." Joxer said and began looking around.

"Did you need something?" Ares asked with concern.

"Did you make anything to drink?" Joxer asked.

"Forgot. Here." Ares said and handed Joxer a large goblet of cold spring water.

Joxer took a long drink, then said, "Thanks."

Ares held out his hand and Joxer handed the goblet back to him.

Ares took a drink, then sat it between them.

"What are the others going to think about me?" Joxer asked with concern.

"Who cares?" Ares said with a one shouldered shrug.

Joxer got a wide eyed look of surprise.

"I've been doing my job for centuries, living up to their expectations and I'm tired of it. They can either accept my choices or... not." Ares said, then picked up a piece of fruit.

Joxer thought about that answer and continued to eat.

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Ares and Joxer appeared in a huge room with light spilling in through gigantic windows.

"This place is..." Joxer began to say, then realized that he didn't have words grand enough to describe what he was seeing.

"A prison? A torture chamber? A prelude to Tartarus?" Ares said absently as he led the way.

"What? It's beautiful." Joxer said in confusion.

"A beautiful prison, then." Ares conceded.

"I don't understand." Joxer said as he tried to keep up with Ares quick pace.

"Our home is freedom. We can be however we want, we can do whatever we feel. This place... it's the opposite of freedom. I hate it." Ares said as they turned down a hall.

As they walked down the hall they saw several people milling about just outside a huge door.

"Dad, how you doin'?" Cupid asked as he walked up to his father.

"Fine Cupid, how have you been?" Ares

asked with sympathy. Cupid had been very quiet since Psyche left him.

"I still have dark days, but overall I'm good. I'm having trouble finding a sitter for Bliss, but everyone's being real nice." Cupid said, then looked at Joxer and smiled.

"Joxer?" Cupid asked in surprise and moved to hug Joxer.

Ares stopped the hug before it started and stood between Joxer and Cupid, "My Joxer, get your own."

Cupid looked at his father with puzzlement but finally nodded.

Ares took Joxer's hand and continued to the huge door.

Joxer timidly followed Ares into the more dimly lit room, filled with people... gods.

Ares gently squeezed Joxer's hand and said, "Don't worry, we just have to get through this, then we can go to the mortal realm."

Joxer nodded and followed, holding Ares hand tightly.

"Why have you brought a mortal to the council meeting?" Zeus boomed from across the room.

"Because I felt like it. If you'd rather, we can leave." Ares said without emotion.

Zeus was obviously stunned by Ares statement.

"Take your seat... and keep your mortal quiet." Zeus said, not nearly as loud as before.

Ares led Joxer to the table and took the seat to Zeus right.

Joxer looked around and saw a chair appear behind him, identical to Ares'.

Every eye in the room seemed to be focused on Joxer.

"Well, I've called you here to discuss the upcoming war. As it stands, the area of conflict seems to include Athens." Zeus said.

"And I won't allow it." Athena said firmly.

"Then you tell them." Ares said immediately.

"What?" Athena said in stunned disbelief.

"Athens is ripe for the picking. Your insistence on keeping wars away from Athens has allowed them to hoard ungodly amounts of treasure. I'm not doing it anymore. If you want Athens protected, you protect it." Ares said simply as he absently reached over and petted Joxer's hair.

"But it's your job!" Athena protested.

"What was your godhood again? Goddess of... something... and Wisdom. What was it?" Ares asked as he squinted at the ceiling and let his hand come to rest on Joxer's neck.

"War and Wisdom, what's your point?" Athena asked irritably.

"Point? Who says I have a point? I'm not going to encourage or discourage my followers in regards to Athens. Honestly, I couldn't care less. What happens, happens... unless you get off your linen covered ass and protect them yourself." Ares said frankly.

"Father!" Athena snapped as she looked at Zeus.

"Ares, you know that we collectively decide these matters..." Zeus began to say.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You collectively decide to make me do all the work. Well, now you can collectively kiss my ass." Ares said, looking Zeus in the eyes.

Zeus' eyes got big as his son told him off in front of the entire counsel of gods. He couldn't allow it, but what could he do?

Hera looked on in disbelief as her son stood up to his father. Secretly she was delighted. It had been far too long since anyone had stood up to the old goat.

[He's gone mad.] Athena thought with disbelief.

[He's acting strange. Almost as if... no it couldn't be] Apollo thought as he looked at the scene before him with clinical detachment.

Eris' eyes glittered with delight. [The spell is working. I knew it would. He's finally standing up for himself like a War God should. It was worth risking Hecate's wrath to borrow her mirror... But I need to find out about his mortal...]

"I tell you what, if you think the Goddess of Whatever and Wisdom is right and Athens should be spared war, yet again, then why don't you let her handle it?" Ares said and stood pulling Joxer up with him.

"We're not finished!" Zeus said angrily.

"I know, you've got about three hours of pomposity and blustering to get through before your finished. I've heard it, I'll pass. Come on Joxer, I feel like going fishing." Ares said and gave Joxer a gentle kiss on the cheek.

Joxer was so stunned he could only nod in agreement.

Ares held Joxer closely and said, "If you 'collectively' decide anything remotely

interesting, write it down and Hermes can bring it to me... you don't mind do you Herm?"

Hermes sat in shock and finally shook his head slowly.

"Good. Enjoy the rest of your boredom." Ares said and flashed himself and Joxer out.

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[He's gone insane. To speak to the other gods like that... they're going to kill me. They'll find some way to blame me and they'll kill me.]

"Jox, you okay?" Ares asked quietly.

[He seems to care. And I can't help it, I really like him. He's a lot of fun to be around.] Joxer thought in stunned disbelief.

"Um, yeah, just a little worried about their reactions." Joxer said slowly.

"They'll get over it. What do you think, any good fishing here?" Ares asked as he looked around.

Joxer looked around and noticed that they were at the side of a river.

"Um, at this time of morning I think the fishing will probably be better over there where the trees hang out over the water. The insects like the shade and the fish collect to

eat them." Joxer said seriously.

"Race ya." Ares said and began running toward the trees.

Joxer was stunned for a few seconds before he realized what Ares had said.

He ran full out and, of course, didn't catch Ares. But Joxer was really proud of the fact that he didn't fall down even once.

"Okay. Here's a rod and some bait. If you'll start fishing, I'll get a fire going." Ares said when they found their spot.

"A fire?" Joxer asked curiously.

"To cook what we catch." Ares said as he began to gather wood.

"Can't you just 'think up' cooked fish?" Joxer asked as he baited his hook.

"I could, but what fun is that?" Ares asked from a few meters away.

"Fun?" Joxer asked unsurely.

"Yeah. I can 'think up' the perfect fish. But the fish you catch, we don't even know what kind of fish it will be. When we cook it, we don't know how good or bad it will turn out to be. It's the spice of life, \*this\* is living. Being indoors, thinking up food, going to meetings, planning all the randomness out of life... that's not living. That's like being dead,

all that's left to do is lay down and stop moving." Ares said as he returned with an armload of wood.

"I guess I can see that." Joxer said as he cast his line into the water.

Joxer heard a whoosh and turned to see the fire burning brightly then cast a questioning look at Ares.

"Well, I'm not a fanatic about it." Ares said with a shy smile.

Joxer laughed, then felt a tug on his line.

Whatever he'd caught had a lot of fight in it.

Joxer was careful not to pull too hard, he'd lost enough poles and snapped more than a few lines doing that.

Finally he was able to pull his catch up to the shore.

"It looks like I have our first catch." Joxer said happily.

"You're really good at fishing, you'll have to show me how you do it." Ares said in an impressed voice.

"Anytime." Joxer said as he saw Ares taking the fish from the hook.

"You caught it, so I'll clean and cook it." Ares said and walked back to the fire.

"I'll see if I can get another one. That way we can both get full." Joxer said and baited his hook again.

"Okay, and while you're doing that, I'll be cooking... any suggestions?" Ares asked as he looked at the fish and the fire.

"Can you read my mind?" Joxer asked as he cast his line again.

"I can, but I won't. I wouldn't ever violate you like that." Ares said as a firm vow.

"I just mean to see how to cook the fish. I'm not sure I can describe it." Joxer said with a smile.

"Okay, but just so you know, I'll never do this without your permission." Ares said as he walked to Joxer's side.

"I trust you. Go ahead." Joxer said as he thought, [I really do trust him... more than anyone... ever.]

"I've got it... thank you Joxer." Ares said shyly.

Joxer nodded as he watched Ares walk back to the fire.

Silence fell between the two as Joxer watched Ares prepare their lunch by hand.

Ares used a little godly magic, but that was just to produce a frying pan and the

seasonings that he needed. [If we'd really been traveling the mortal way, we would have had those things packed with us, so it isn't really cheating.] Joxer thought as he gently pulled his fishing line.

As Joxer lazily listened to the sizzle of the fish frying, he felt a tug on his line.

"I think I've got another one." Joxer said loudly.

"Now you *\*have\** to show me how you do it. I've never had that kind of luck at fishing." Ares said from by the fire.

Joxer struggled and fought the fish, but finally ended up victorious.

He walked to the fire carrying the second fish for Ares inspection.

"It looks great, would you mind cleaning it while I finish cooking this one?" Ares asked hopefully.

"Sure, um, do you have a knife?" Joxer asked, looking around.

Ares reached into his boot and pulled out a slim, dangerous looking knife.

"Thanks." Joxer said and walked to the side of the river.

They each worked on their own tasks for a few minutes in silence until Joxer sat the cleaned fish by the fire.

Ares looked up and noticed Joxer walking into the trees.

"Where are you going?" Ares asked in a desperate voice, verging on panic.

"I need to go behind a tree for a minute. I'll be right back." Joxer said quickly and continued.

Ares nodded but kept more of his attention on the trees than the cooking fish.

Joxer walked to the river and washed his hands... and something else.

"What's that you've got?" Ares asked curiously.

"I picked this leaf for us to use as a plate. It's big enough and fairly stiff." Joxer said as he handed the leaf to Ares.

"Just in time." Ares said as he maneuvered the cooked fish from the frying pan.

"That looks good." Joxer said as he looked at the fish.

"Take it so I can get the next one cooking." Ares said as he offered the leaf to Joxer.

Joxer promptly took the leaf, then squatted by the fire to watch Ares cook.

"Are you feeling more comfortable now Joxer?" Ares asked as he kept his attention focused on the fish.

Joxer thought about the question and finally answered, "Yes. The meeting was a little scary, but this... is nice."

Ares smiled at the statement.

"Why didn't you answer my prayers before?" Joxer asked hesitantly.

"Because you didn't fit into any of my scenarios for war." Ares said simply.

Joxer got a hurt look on his face and Ares noticed.

"Honestly, I'm not in the habit of intervening in my follower's lives unless it serves a purpose for the greater good of Greece. Tell me something honestly Joxer. If I would have made you a fantastic warrior, let's say, five years ago, what would you be like today?" Ares asked, then carefully turned the fish over in the frying pan.

Joxer thought about the question and finally said, "I guess I probably wouldn't have met Xena, or at least become her... sometimes traveling companion. I probably would be on

some quest trying to become the biggest and best warlord in the country."

"And what type of person would you be? Would you be willing to go fishing with me or share a friendly meal?" Ares asked carefully.

"I don't know... I'd like to think I'd still be me... but I can't be sure." Joxer said hesitantly.

"I'd like to think that too, but I've seen so many 'good men' corrupted by power and greed... It's really best to let things take their own course and time." Ares said seriously.

"I guess so..." Joxer said with a distant look.

"Joxer, I like the person that you are. I wouldn't want you to be one bit different." Ares said as he put the second fish on the leaf.

"Thanks Ares, I like you too." Joxer said shyly.

"Are you ready to eat?" Ares asked and moved to sit beside Joxer.

"Yeah. It smells great." Joxer said happily.

"Excuse me." A female voice said from nearby.

"Athena?" Ares asked in surprise but didn't stand.

"Mind if I join you for a minute?" Athena asked hesitantly.

"Sure Thee, have a seat." Ares said in an inviting tone.

Athena slowly took a seat beside Ares, the other side from Joxer.

"I've had some time to think about what you said, and you're right... but I need some advice." Athena said humbly.

"Of course, have some fish." Ares said and sat the leaf in the grass in front of him.

Athena reached down and broke off a small piece of fish. Ares and Joxer each did the same and waited for her to speak.

"I really care about Athens, I've been watching out for them for centuries and I want what's best for them." Athena said slowly.

"I know that, but you aren't doing them any favors by protecting them from war. Athens has become stagnant and bloated with wealth. The current generation of the Athenian army haven't even been in a real battle. Their equipment is outdated, their tactics are stale and predictable and their generals have never been tried in battle." Ares said, then popped a chunk of fish into his mouth.

"I guess I didn't see that before... but it's so peaceful there. A perfect life. I hate to change that." Athena said distantly.

"Look at the art in Athens, it's all from somewhere else. Look at the new inventions, those few that they have. They all come from other towns. It is human nature to do as little as possible to survive. Mortals need hardships to overcome to challenge them, otherwise their existence is nothing but a repetition of days. They don't have to improve themselves." Ares said with concern.

Athena nodded.

Joxer listened and considered what Ares was saying. He'd never had such thoughts before, but it made perfect sense.

"How can I help them?" Athena asked in a small voice.

"I think they need a small defeat. As kind of a wake up call. The war that is approaching Athens should serve that purpose... if I were to direct one warlord... someone with about sixty or a hundred men, to attack Athens' north border... and collapse it. Then the Athenian army could repel them before they could reach the city proper." Ares said in thought.

"Then Athens wouldn't be gutted, but would realize that they aren't invulnerable." Athena said speculatively.

"We should be able to do it tomorrow. I have a warlord in the area who would benefit from the experience." Ares said in thought.

"Which one?" Athena asked and grabbed another piece of fish.

"Janus, Joxer's father." Ares said and sent a smile and glance to Joxer.

Joxer's eyes went wide at the thought.

"You promise that they won't take the city?" Athena asked carefully.

"Well, once the northern border has fallen, word should spread to the Athenian army. By the time the invaders reach the city, the army should have had time to set up a defense line to block progress. If Janus has a thimble full of sense, he'll retreat with whatever spoils he's been able to gain. If not... well, we'll just have to see how it plays out." Ares finished with a shrug.

Athena nodded as Joxer asked, "How will you get him to attack Athens?"

"Actually, I was hoping you could help me with that." Ares said with a smile directed at Joxer.

"He won't listen to me." Joxer said sadly.

"But if you were to tell Jett, and Jett told your father..." Ares said in a leading tone.

"That could work. Jett's always been willing to listen to me... what should I tell him?" Joxer asked with concern.

"Tell him the truth as it relates to him and your father. Tell him that you heard that the Northern border of Athens is weak and should be able to be easily taken. Even the small farming communities at the border have considerable wealth and should be worth his efforts." Ares said simply.

"Thank you Ares. Even though it hurts me to see this happen, I can see the logic in it." Athena said quietly as she stood.

"You're welcomed Thee, all you ever have to do is ask and I'm here to help you." Ares said as he also stood.

"And thanks for the fish, it was very good." Athena said as an afterthought.

"It's Joxer's recipe." Ares said proudly.

"Oh yeah, Zeus is really torqued up about the meeting today. You might want to steer clear for a while." Athena said with an apologetic look.

"It was time for me to take a stand. War wasn't meant to be planned down to the individual participants actions. He needs to back off and let me do my job." Ares said simply.

"I'll try suggesting that to him. I'm going to go check on my armies now... I've got to be ready for battle whenever it comes." Athena said with a smile.

"I'll see to sending Janus your way, but after that, this war is all yours. I'll be attending to things in Sparta, just call if you need me for anything." Ares said and gave Athena a gentle hug.

Athena got a surprised look, then quickly covered it and said, "I'll do that. And... thanks for letting me do it myself."

"You're a Goddess of War, I have complete confidence in you." Ares said with pride.

Athena gave a sincere smile before glancing at Joxer, then flashing out.

---

"Why are you using my dad?" Joxer asked carefully.

"Mainly because I think he'll perform the job adequately. He's a little bloodthirsty, but I think facing the 'Untouchable' Athens should

humble even him." Ares said as he sat beside Joxer again.

"This could gain him respect from even the most vicious warlords." Joxer said in thought as he absently took another bite of fish.

"That it could. He's had a long and unremarkable career. This could be his crowning glory." Ares said speculatively.

"Thank you Ares. He and I don't get along, but I think it would be good if he could have at least one moment of triumph." Joxer said with a warm smile.

"He's earned it Joxer. Even though he's a heartless bastard, he's worked hard and raised three fine sons, one of which turned out to be an incredible warrior. This is his chance." Ares said contentedly.

"Jett?" Joxer asked in confusion.

"You Joxer. Jett is an assassin. He's good at covert, sneaky work. In a straightforward battle, I think you could take him." Ares said as he looked into Joxer's eyes.

"Me? I can't fight worth anything." Joxer said helplessly.

Ares eyes became unfocused for a moment, then he said, "You just have a little problem with your balance. All the training that you've done and all the practice are with you, but

you aren't able to put them to good use because you can't maintain your center... stand up." Ares finished forcefully.

Joxer immediately stood.

There was a flash and Joxer was dressed in leather armor that looked like a series of leather scales. Each of the plates were solid, but the armor allowed him free movement.

"Spar with me Joxer. This armor should be more suited to your body type than what you've been wearing... and here." Ares said as he handed out a wristband.

"What's this?" Joxer asked as he took the gauntlet.

"It's enchanted to improve your balance. Use it for a while to get used to proper balance, and... I'd guess within a month that you won't need it anymore." Ares said in thought.

Joxer put on the gauntlet and felt like the world shifted slightly around him.

"Here, a weapon for you." Ares said and handed Joxer a wooden sword.

"Wood?" Joxer asked with raised eyebrows.

"I don't fancy getting my arms chopped off. Get in your stance now." Ares said and produced a wooden sword for himself.

Ares moved to attack, but Joxer gracefully flowed out of the path of Ares' blow and was able to catch a glancing blow below his arm as he passed.

"Nice counter." Ares said as he turned and swung in a wide arch to attack Joxer's belly.

Joxer immediately blocked the attack and deflected the blow away from himself, then with his other hand, he was able to punch Ares in the ribs, just under his left arm.

Ares swiveled and caught Joxer with a good amount of force in the hip with his sword.

Joxer turned his stinging hip away from Ares quickly and brought his sword up, underhanded into Ares' gut.

Ares staggered back a step and said with a laugh, "I think you won that one, but we still have room for improvement... both of us."

Joxer looked at Ares with wide eyes.

"Your blow would have gutted me and meant my death, but if you'd lived, it would be with one leg." Ares said with a smile.

"Did you really? Did I just beat you?" Joxer asked with wide eyes.

"Yes. I told you that you had it in you. Couldn't you feel it? All the moves that you tried to use before that didn't work, do work

now. It's all about balance." Ares said as he walked around, feeling the adrenaline.

"But I thought, you're the God of War, how could a mortal beat you?" Joxer asked in confusion.

"I'm out of practice. If this were an important battle, I would have used my godly powers to augment my speed and agility. But in a spar, I'll fight like a mortal and take the chance of being defeated... you don't learn anything if you win all the time." Ares said with a smile.

"I must have learned a lot then." Joxer said absently as he noticed Ares moving back into his fighting stance.

"Let's find out." Ares said as he moved in to attack.

---

The sparring matches continued until the sun reached its zenith.

Ares won the majority of the matches, but Joxer fought well and both enjoyed the practice.

"We need to get going soon. We're needed near Sparta, and we still have to take care of your father." Ares said through heavy breathing.

"I hate to stop. I'm really enjoying this." Joxer said through his panting breaths.

"We can spar again later. I've really missed this." Ares said as he made their swords vanish.

"Why haven't you been sparring?" Joxer asked as he wiped sweat from his face.

"The only reason I can think of is that I haven't taken the time. I guess I was so consumed by my duties, I let the smaller pleasures of life fall to the way side." Ares said, then took in a deep cleansing breath.

"Could we, I mean, do we have time for a quick swim? I'm really hot." Joxer said as he looked longingly at the water.

Ares followed Joxer's gaze and said, "Sure."

Joxer felt a sudden rush of cold air as his armor vanished.

"I wish you'd warn me before you do that." Joxer said in frustration.

Ares laughed as he ran into the water of the river.

Joxer quickly followed and was shocked by the coolness of the water.

"It's freezing!" Joxer screamed as he came up for air.

"It's wonderful... Gods, it's been centuries... thank you Joxer." Ares said as he radiated peace and joy.

Joxer forgot his shivering as he looked with wonder at Ares.

"Lets swim to the other side." Ares said happily.

Joxer didn't respond except to arch his body around and begin swimming with all his strength.

---

Joxer and Ares appeared in a clearing very different from the one they were just in.

This place was gray and seemed much less hospitable.

"Where are we?" Joxer asked in a whisper.

"Outside Sparta. I don't like appearing inside a warlord's tent unless I'm dealing with a time sensitive matter." Ares said as he led the way from their arrival point.

Joxer looked down at himself and noticed that he was wearing his armor again... and a sword.

"Are we going to be fighting?" Joxer asked curiously as he kept up with Ares hurried pace.

"You can never tell. It's best to be prepared." Ares said as he led their way to a group of three men standing in the path ahead.

"Halt. This area is claimed by the warlord Hestius. Return the way you came." The smallest of the three men said forcefully.

"Conduct us to Lord Hestius." Ares said firmly.

"Who do you think you are?" The smallest of the men asked insultingly.

"Ares, God of War." Ares said without inflection.

All three men laughed derisively.

"And... and who is this? Aphrodite?" The largest, an oaf of a man, asked through his laughter.

"Why? Does he encapsulate your idea of love and beauty?" Ares asked with a teasing smile at Joxer.

The big man was apparently too stupid to understand the question, but the smaller man immediately drew his sword.

"Do you want him?" Ares asked casually.

Joxer looked at Ares with question, then realized that Ares was offering to let him fight the man.

"For your glory." Joxer said as he drew his slender short sword.

Joxer's opponent was angry, aggressive and very sloppy in his fighting.

Joxer toyed with the man, easily deflecting his slashes until he left an opening too big to ignore.

Joxer backed the man against a tree and put the sword to the man's throat, letting the tip bite in just a centimeter.

"What is your command Lord Ares?" Joxer asked as he held the helpless man at the tip of his sword.

"That depends on his companions." Ares said then turned to address the other two.

"Would you rather see your companion die at the end of a sword, or conduct us to Hestius?" Ares asked casually.

"I don't know if you're who you say you are, but Armus dieing won't prove it either way. I'll lead you to Hestius." The middle sized man said in a deep voice.

Joxer glanced at Ares and received a nod.

Joxer took a step back and sheathed his sword.

The smaller man, Armus, immediately put a hand to his throat and felt to evaluate the damage.

The middle sized man started walking down the path, obviously expecting Ares and Joxer to follow.

"Why didn't we just appear in the camp?" Joxer asked as they walked up a small hill.

"Because it's good to see what type of defenses he has in place from a mortal perspective. Like those three guards for example. They would be three specks on a map, lacking personality from a godly perspective. But now... tell me what you saw... how would you describe them?" Ares finished curiously.

Joxer considered the question and said, "The smallest was scrappy, looking for a fight, probably a good match for an untrained fighter. The largest was the muscle. He was brute force if that should be needed. This one was the brains, probably the most skilled fighter of the three and most likely the one in charge."

"Exactly right. That tells me that Hestius, or at least someone under his command, knows how to form their guard parties. Those three together would be the most versatile fighting

force you could construct with three men." Ares said as they crested the hill.

"Lord Ares, if it please you to say, who is your companion?" Their guide asked carefully.

"This is Joxer the Mighty, son of the Warlord Janus and brother to the King of Assassins, Jett." Ares said with pride.

The man got a vacant look and started walking again.

"I'm sorry my Lord, I've never heard of him." The man mumbled.

"You will." Ares said with certainty.

Joxer felt such a swell of pride, to be compared with his father and brother like that... it was like a dream.

---

As Joxer and Ares walked away from Hestius' camp, Joxer was amazed by his own understanding.

Growing up in a warlord's household, he'd always been around talk of strategy and tactics. They were just part of life.

For the first time he saw that he had an understanding that many others didn't.

During the time that Ares and Hestius were

talking, Joxer understood all of what they were talking about, and when Ares had asked his opinion... he had one.

"What are you thinking about Joxer?" Ares asked quietly.

"I was just thinking... I felt smart. While we were talking back there, I really felt like I knew what I was doing." Joxer said in amazement.

"I thought you would. You've always had a quick mind." Ares said simply as they approached the sentry post again.

"Gentlemen." Ares said in greeting as the two men noticed them.

"Well?" The big one asked his companion by Ares and Joxer's sides.

The man nodded.

Both the sentries knelt before Ares.

"My Lord, I'm sorry." The big man said with fear as the small man remained silent.

"You were doing your job, and doing it well. Hestius is fortunate to have men such as yourselves in his service." Ares said firmly.

All three men looked at Ares in wonder.

With a grand gesture, Ares relocated himself and Joxer to a village near Athens.

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"Did you see the looks on their faces?" Joxer laughed.

Ares smiled and said, "It's always more satisfying to prove it after they've started to believe. It's like a reward for their faith instead of me proving my claim."

"What are we doing here?" Joxer asked, looking around the unfamiliar town, obviously still in the mortal realm.

"We're here for your brother, he's having a late lunch in that tavern." Ares said as he led the way.

Joxer caught up to Ares and casually put an arm around his waist.

Ares smiled to himself as they entered the tavern.

There were very few patrons at this in-between time of day and Joxer spotted Jett easily.

"Joxer? You're looking good!" Jett said with surprise.

Joxer looked down and saw that he was wearing the red shirt and vest again.

"Um, you too." Joxer said and sat beside his brother at the table.

Ares took the seat next to Joxer and listened.

"What are you doing in this part of Greece?" Jett asked, then took a bite of his food.

"I heard something that might interest you." Joxer said, glancing around.

"What's that?" Jett asked around a mouthful of food.

"The Northern border of Athens is weak, a small army of sixty to a hundred men should be able to take it down without a problem." Joxer said quietly.

Jett got a look of surprise.

"Dad's stab and hook maneuver would probably be able to take it down before the main army knew what happened." Joxer continued.

Jett got a distant look, then came back to himself and asked, "How dependable is this information?"

"No doubt. But it has to be done fast, before they figure it out and fix it." Joxer said quickly.

Jett nodded, then thought to ask, "Why are you telling me this? I thought you were being all heroic and stuff."

"I am, but this isn't a bunch of widows and orphans, this is the Athenian army... and I

hear that they've got a pretty good hoard of treasure." Joxer said and glanced at Ares again.

"Okay, let's say I believe you. What do you expect me to do about it?" Jett asked suspiciously.

"Tell dad. If he decides to go for it, it could make his name... the first Warlord in a hundred years to successfully attack Athens." Joxer said with excitement.

"How does that help you?" Jett asked curiously.

"We're his sons, if he accomplishes something great, it reflects on us." Joxer said with an imploring look.

Jett nodded in thought.

"The time is now. We're headed south or I'd do it myself... besides, dad would be more likely to believe it from you." Joxer said as he began to stand.

"Why'd you bring this guy?" Jett asked curiously.

"Because I was there with Joxer. I heard every word. They're ripe for the picking, someone just has to have the courage to pluck the jewel from the crown of Athens." Ares said with a crafty smile.

"I've got to go now. I'll see you again soon." Joxer said and hurried out of the tavern, followed closely by Ares.

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"How'd I do?" Joxer asked as they walked away from the tavern.

"Perfect. I hope this works out. Athena is out of practice." Ares said, then looked around.

As soon as he was assured that they were out of sight, he moved them to Olympus.

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"There you are!" Apollo said as he stood.

"What's up 'Pol?" Ares asked curiously.

"That's what I want to find out." Apollo said seriously and raised his hand.

"What is it?" Ares asked in suspicion.

"Just what I thought, you're under an enchantment." Apollo said with a shake of his head.

"A... Who would dare?" Ares asked in disbelief.

"Let's find out." Apollo said, then his eyes became defocused.

Hecate appeared in a dark blur of power and the room seemed to get darker and colder.

"Someone's put a spell on Ares, it looks like one of yours." Apollo said in a no nonsense tone.

Hecate's eyebrows went up in surprise and she looked carefully at Ares.

Joxer looked back and forth between Hecate and Ares with question.

"Someone's put a mind altering spell on you Ares, give me a second and I'll fix you right up." Hecate said and summoned a mirror.

Hecate pointed one finger at the mirror and commanded, "Reverse the spell."

Apollo looked at her curiously.

"I'm not some novice that needs all that flowery poetic nonsense. The spell was made so it couldn't be broken, so it still exists, I just sent it back to whoever cast it." Hecate said as she made the mirror vanish with a thought.

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Ares looked around the room with wonder. His gaze finally settled on Joxer.

"You can stay..." Ares said uncertainly.

Tears were welling up in Joxer's eyes as he said, "Could you... send me to Xena and Gabrielle? They're probably worried about me."

Ares looked at Joxer and slowly nodded.

There was a flash of light and Joxer was gone.

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Joxer appeared in a wooded area, and could just make out firelight through the trees.

He walked toward the light and could hear Gabrielle's voice.

"Joxer? Where have you been? You said you were going to pray, then we didn't see you for a day." Gabrielle asked with concern.

"Do you mind if we not talk about it? I'm back and I'm fine." Joxer said in a voice so low it was nearly a whisper.

Gabrielle was surprised and nodded as she walked to the other side of the fire to sit beside Xena.

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"What kind of spell was on me?" Ares asked Hecate quietly.

"It was a little number to bring out your true feelings. It just peeled back your formality and duty." Hecate said simply.

"So it didn't change my feelings?" Ares asked carefully.

"No, it made you so you could acknowledge and express your feelings more easily." Hecate said as she looked curiously at Ares.

After a moment of thought, Ares asked, "Could you put it back on me?"

"Why?" Hecate asked with surprise.

"Because for the first time in... ever... I was happy. I felt peace and freedom like I've never known before. Please Aunt Cat, can you put it back?" Ares asked in a pleading whisper.

"No little one. I'd be doing you no favors by doing that to you. If you really want to feel that way again, then do. Everything you felt was within you already. You just have to let down your formality and indulge your feelings." Hecate said in a tender voice.

"But I don't know how." Ares said helplessly.

"Sure you do. Whatever you've been living the past twenty-four hours is an example you can follow. Someone gave you a great gift, though I suspect their motives were less than benevolent." Hecate finished with a speculative look.

"Thanks Aunt Cat. I've got some thinking to do. And thanks 'Pol." Ares said as he walked toward the door.

Hecate and Apollo watched with worry as Ares walked slowly out of the room.

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"Where'd you get the new clothes?" Gabrielle finally asked.

"A friend gave them to me." Joxer said with pain.

"Is it someone I know?" Gabrielle asked, trying to get Joxer to open up.

"I don't think you ever knew him... and he's gone now." Joxer said despondently and stood to leave.

"Are you going to be okay?" Gabrielle asked with worry.

Joxer thought about the question and finally got a determined look on his face.

"Yeah, one way or another, I'll be fine." Joxer said as he walked away.

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Ares looked around the cave, but it felt like he'd never seen it before.

Whatever he was looking for, wasn't there.

Ares stared sadly at the nest, the pile of pillows and furs, and knew within him that he wouldn't sleep nearly so well there alone.

---

As the full moon rose, Joxer made his way into Ares temple.

A priest looked at him disapprovingly and blocked his way.

"It is my right as a follower of Ares to be allowed to pray in his temple. Stand aside or face me in combat." Joxer said with determination.

The priest got a wide eyed look of shock that turned to chuckles, then tried to force the smile from his face as he said, "Is death what you desire? There are less painful ways to meet your end."

"What I desire is to be allowed to pray to my god in his temple. I would gladly fight, and if need be, die, for the privilege of praying to my God." Joxer said with conviction.

The priest sobered at the words and said in a respectful voice, "You honor our Lord Ares with your devotion. Please enter and pray."

Joxer gave a quick nod and walked to Ares alter with purpose.

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The alter was sitting before an onyx throne. Joxer went to his knees, bent his head and spoke in his most reverent voice.

"Great Ares, God of War, Defender, Protector,

If it pleases you, hear the prayer of one insignificant mortal follower.

You have given me so much, more than any mortal has a right to wish for,

but I promise that for the rest of my mortal life, I'll only ask for one last thing.

If it be your will, let me serve you.

My time in your company has been the happiest in my life and I'll do anything... clean weapons, wash clothes, baby-sit Bliss... anything.

If it be your will, I will spend the remainder of my life in service to you."

Joxer kept his head bowed and knelt in silence.

Ares appeared in a blur of dark red power and took a seat in the throne before Joxer.

"If you truly wish to serve me, there is one task that you can perform for me." Ares said seriously.

"Anything." Joxer said with his eyes cast down.

"Drink this." Ares said, and sat an earthen pot on the alter before Joxer.

Joxer immediately took the pot into his hands and drank the thick, perfumey substance down.

Ares smiled at Joxer's willingness to trust him without question.

"Do you understand why I took you to Olympus to begin with?" Ares asked quietly.

"Because someone put a spell on you." Joxer said in a mumble.

"The spell was supposed to let my basic emotions overrule my higher reasoning." Ares said in explanation.

Joxer nodded but kept his eyes down.

"My basic emotions, the primal part of me, was attracted to you... is attracted to you." Ares finished in a whisper.

Joxer looked up in surprise.

"The spell didn't make me feel anything unreal. It only made me unable to explain away or suppress my desire... Joxer, I love you. I loved you then, and I love you now." Ares said in a smooth voice.

Joxer was speechless. He just stared at Ares with disbelief.

"Each of Zeus and Hera's children were given the same gift on their thousand year birthday. An earthen pot filled with ambrosia. We have

the ability to create ambrosia at any time, but are forbidden by Olympian law to give it to a mortal... except this one time. Each of us are allowed to choose one mortal, in all our lifetime, to elevate. I have given you godhood Joxer, and I would like for you to be my mate... but that is your choice to make." Ares finished in a whisper.

"My choice?" Joxer said in confusion.

"You're a god. It is my gift to you and cannot be undone. You can choose to do anything you want. I will not try to dictate your decision, only offer you my love." Ares said with worried eyes.

"Ares, I came here today to devote myself completely to you. That hasn't changed. The godhood doesn't matter, I love you and I'll try to be whatever you need me to be." Joxer said with tear-filled eyes.

"Just be Joxer the Mighty, keeper of my heart, holder of my love... my mate." Ares finished with hope.

"I will. Let's go home." Joxer said in a whisper as he stood and walked around the alter.

Ares pulled Joxer into a full kiss and finally felt at peace as he relocated them to their cave.

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"Mistress, are you ready to go to bed?" Autolycus asked cautiously.

"Only if you go with me." Eris said with a suggestive leer.

"Of course Mistress, I'll be right beside you for as long as you want me." Autolycus said with a sad smile.

"I love you Auto. You're my pookey bear. I'll want you forever." Eris said as she threw herself into his arms.

Autolycus held her tightly as misery welled up in him. He loved her deeply but she always kept him at arms length. Now he had her love, but knew that it was artificial, from the mirror he had 'borrowed' for her. One day she might get better, then she'd keep him away again.

He felt such self loathing at the idea... he didn't want her to get better.

"Come on Auto." Eris said playfully and pulled him to the bedroom.

Once the doors closed, her voice could be heard happily singing,

"He's Joxer the Mighty,

He's very tidy..."

**The End**

## ***The Challenge***

*Wish List -*

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*Categories: Humor, Romance*

*Couple: Ares/Joxer*

*Desired Ratings: R or NC-17*

*Squick(s): Non-Con/Rape*

*Brief Summary of Desired Plot:*

*Ares gets a bit addled (simplistic/  
feral thought but NOT child like)*

*he sees*

*Joxer in his temple or something*

*and decides he wants to keep*

*him. Ares is*

*very affectionate to his new*

*friend, petting him and giving*

*him hugs and*

*kisses and holding his hand when*

*they go places. Makes a 'nest'*

*out of*

*sleeping furs and pillows for*

*them to sleep in. Ares is very*

*possessive and*

*won't let Joxer out of his sight*

*and doesn't like other people*

*touching him.*

*Ares takes good care of Jox;*

*getting him cleaned up and new*

*clothes, feeing*

*him 'cause he's too thin. Proudly*

*showing him around his temple  
on Olympus,  
taking Jox with him when he goes  
to meetings or whatever.*

*Eventually someone notices that  
there is something off about Ares  
and he  
gets healed. Ares wants Jox to  
stay with him. They go down to  
let Xena and  
Gabby (Herc and Io too if you  
want) know he's fine and where  
he's been.*

*(I'll let you decided how that  
goes. Also weather or not Joxer  
is turned  
into a god or immortal.)*

*End it there or add more (more is  
better ~\_^) Add in Gods'  
reactions if you  
want and something from Jox's  
POV is a must.*

*Bonus Challenge(s): Someone  
other than Joxer singing his  
song. (major bonus if it's a god -  
not Ares)*

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*We hope you enjoy yourself!*  
*Druid and Carrie*