



Hades and Persephone: The Giftless Goddess

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy

Description: he Giftless Goddess – Persephone

All my life, I've had questions, holes—gaps in my mind.

Now, too much is clear.

Everything I thought I knew about the world crumbles around me as a truth I can no longer deny takes its place with a violence that leaves me trembling.

Reality distorts to make room for a fate I wish we didn't have to face.

Grief is a burden that weighs heavy on my heart, but for them—for life—I will fight.

Even if it takes my very last breath.

Even if it costs the final beat of my ravaged heart.

Hades

Sacrifice has always been the name of my game.

But now that I must sacrifice her—them—I'm no longer certain I wish to save the realms.

For once, I consider falling to the monster that myth has painted me.

Instead, I find myself bound by a fate I can't begin to fight.

I may be the God of the Underworld, but I am still a pawn in this game we play, bound by rules far more ancient than me.

The cost is high. It grows every day she is away from me.

Still, I search for a way to break the binds of the ancient deal I struck long ago.

To bring her home, unharmed, from the Gods who keep her—a prisoner of a blood deal—in the dangerous realm of Olympus.

But Persephone has a plan, my cunning little goddess.

A plan to destroy those who sought to ruin us.

It's the last chance to save the realms.

If we fail...

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Chapter

One

Persephone

Fear screams in my mind.

Pressure squeezes my body, threatening to crush me.

Awareness is hazy.

The Hydra pulls me deeper. I am not sure if my eyes are open or closed. Everything is dark. Everything is cold.

The pressure is almost unbearable. Sickness swirls in my belly, bubbling in my chest. I'd scream if I could. Maybe I do, if only in an attempt to release just a fraction of this pressure. Not that it matters. The crushing weight of the inky water swallows any sound I hope to make.

It floods my lungs. The cold is so cold, like the frost of a dark winter night on bare skin. It burns.

When I think this is it, the moment of my end, the pressure changes. I'm no longer being pulled into a depthless deep, but I think we're going sideways now.

Or I've lost awareness.

I've probably lost awareness.

Maybe I'm finally dead. Maybe this is my purgatory. An endless eternity in which I will suffer the torment of being pulled through these dark waters.

The Hydra jerks and my body jerks with her. And then I'm tossed from the water onto the rocky shore of a—cave?

The sound of my cough echoes loudly in the space. Inky water drips from my hair. It splashes drops that roll off my hands to puddle on the dark stone floor. I'm not sure how long I hack water from my lungs, only that when I am done, I want nothing more than to collapse in a heap of boneless girl onto the floor.

I freeze when movement catches my eye. I'm afraid to look but dare a peek anyway. Awe and a touch of terror has my jaw falling.

Hydra stands tall against the far wall, watching me from—gosh, there are so many sets of deep mauve eyes. Sangria scales shimmer under the burning glow of a magenta ceiling. It's as though an eternal storm lives within the stone of the ceiling. It rolls in waves of full-bellied dark doom before emitting flashes of magenta light that catch the prisms of her metallic scales to cast the glittery glow on the wall. She is a beautiful beast. A terrifying monster of exquisite wonder even as she drips with the devastation of a brutal deceit she has carried for too long.

The headless limbs severed by Hercules' cursed blade drift aimlessly where they branch from her torso, dripping inky black blood to the floor. I shift slowly from my hands and knees onto my behind, careful not to tumble into the glass-like black of a pool.

"Wh—where are we?" I feel incredibly silly speaking to—well—to the Hydra. But I know she can speak.

“This is my home.” I realize this time her voice sounds in my head. I’m not sure that it didn’t the first time she spoke. I only know I heard her. Loud and clear.

She takes a slow step toward me. Pebbles of awareness rise on my skin.

She has four legs, a massive torso, and too many heads—or necks? On her back, tucked in close to her large body that shimmers under the flashes of a magenta storm, are wings.

I think the Hydra is a dragon. Perhaps not in the typical sense, what with her many heads. But still a dragon.

New fear swells and I do my best to swallow it down as she closes the distance between us. I don’t move. I’m not sure I even breathe. Finally, with little more than an arm length between me and her closest head, she lowers to her rump.

She is incredibly regal, and I am struck by a kind of sadness I don’t expect as I again take in the sight of her unhealing wounds. The evidence of her ancient sacrifice for a people who never knew or respected that it was made.

To the texts and myth that survive today, she is a monster. Her tormentor is a hero.

My heart clenches in my chest.

“You’re beautiful.” The words are a whisper that fall from between my lips, entirely unexpected. Raw.

She blinks, a slow and lovely motion that catches in the overhead storm. But there is a deep sadness that echoes from within her when she sighs. “Perhaps once. Long ago.” Her heads shift at once to look toward the pool of inky black that swallows even the bright flashes overhead. “Not now.”

I want to touch her. To hug her. To thank her for her sacrifice.

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I want to offer her justice. I am surprised by the thought. I am surprised, for I've never thought of my heart as vengeful. But seeing her now, sensing her ancient pain—I want exactly that. Vengeance.

I want to destroy Hercules.

I ask instead, "Why am I here?"

Her heads drift slowly back to me. Her mauve eyes, so deep and so yearning, pin onto mine. Her voice is an ancient lullaby in my mind. "When you first walked the Underworld, I sensed you. My home stretches deep in the underbelly of the realm." She gestures with her heads to dark pits cast in shadows, tunnels in the walls that I hadn't noticed before. "I guarded The Lernaean Lake, but it was one of the most powerful portals into this realm, of which I moved between frequently. I remember the moment you were pulled between the folds of the realms. The waters of my lake quivered. Pulsed. I was compelled deep below the surface. When I pulled the whole of my lake into the Underworld, into Tartarus, I would pace the length of these twisting halls, swimming the deepest deep of the trenches where the pressure is so great that not even the souls stripped of their flesh can suffer. I have felt you, Persephone. Only you. I have walked with you through your grief, your wonder, your love. And I was there, deep beneath the surface, when you met your tragic end."

I gasp.

Her heads twist back to mine and I swear her entire body sinks into a deep sadness she is helpless to battle.

“I fought to save you.” Her voice, so deep and husky and yet so feminine, rings with vicious strength. “I charged the pitch black of the stone again and again, before I called upon the flames of the pit in which I was born. For the first time in my life, I roared those flames into the ceiling of this prison I sequestered myself to after Hercules—” She breaks off, blinks, and continues, “Those flames spread throughout the entirety of my prison. They burn to this day, a storm of my rage and failed desperation to save you.”

I glance up at the magenta storm in the ceiling, realizing for the first time that the waves aren't stormclouds, but a firestorm trapped in stone. A thunderous rolling rage of flame.

“I am sorry I could not save you. I felt your soul leave your body. The snap of your life band breaking—untethering. And then you were here with me, in the caves where you remained for far, far too long.”

“I was—” Breath rushes from my lungs as I find my feet on shaky legs. “I was here—the whole time—with you?”

Her head nods. “Yes.”

“Why—why didn't you tell Hades?” I'm horrified by the magnitude of this secret. “He looked for my soul for centuries!”

“I brought you to him. Your soul, I mean.” Her head tips to the side in a gesture that feels like a frown. “You were not like the others who come to Tartarus. They have bodies, physical bodies. They are stripped of their skin again and again in a cycle of torment their souls are helpless to escape. You were simply spirit. I could see you, but I could also see through you.”

She scoots a little closer, and my hurt heart softens.

Deep inside the consciousness that makes me who I am, I can't ignore the familiarity that stretches between me and Hydra. My soul knows her. Loves her.

"I don't understand," I admit softly.

Her heads bow before lifting to meet my eyes. "At first, I could not convince you to leave my caves, and I refused to leave you. For hundreds of years, we existed together deep in the underbelly of the Underworld. The need I'd always felt to protect you, to be with you, only grew the more time we spent together. You became my greatest friend, my dearest love. The way I imagine a mother might care for her child."

The truth of her words strums the chords of my heart in the melody of its ancient song. My heart bleeds for her, exposed.

She continues, "When you first arrived to me, it was in the deep of the earth where the secrets of the Lethe are forever kept. A cavern of whispers so devastating, too long spent there could make even me, mad. But above us, the Underworld grieved. I could feel, that, too. Knew it grieved the loss of you."

"I don't remember this..."

"Do you remember your life? Before?"

"Pieces of it, yes," I admit.

"When you first came to me, you were confused. You had little knowledge of the life you'd lived—or even who you were." She settles, a long, thick tail scaled in shades of metallic purple curling around her body.

I meet Hydra's eyes. "You helped me remember, didn't you?"

I don't know how I know. I just know.

"I did my best." She heaves a sigh that warms the chilled air. I realize then that I am shivering. "You were terribly confused in the beginning. With time, you settled into your afterlife with me. But I always knew—always sensed—that one day you would leave me."

"You said you took me to Hades?"

"I did, yes. When I could finally convince you to travel with me to the surface, through the pools. Hades comes to my shores often. But even he cannot converse with me, cannot decipher the words in which I speak, and I have tried. Such an experience appears to be yours alone. To most, I am simply monster. Beast. You, Persephone, understand me."

"But you brought me to him?"

She nods her head in sync, but it clings to a wariness that tells me I won't like this tale.

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“I did. You sat atop my back, between my wings. For the first time since I threw myself and my lake into the Underworld, sealing the portal into Tartarus, I crawled onto the amethyst shore. I was certain Hades would see you, but he couldn’t. He did not even sense you, though you screamed his name. The taste of your grief was like a blade to my own heart, and I dove you back into the deep. We remained there, together, for centuries. We travelled the underground pools and caves, mostly, with you on my back. I had become so accustomed to you there—when you left—I felt as though I lost another head. No.” She shakes her heads. “This loss was greater than a limb. It was as though I’d lost a piece of the very heart in my chest.”

“I am sorry.”

“Do not be. There is a purpose to your life, Persephone. A purpose not even I would dare stand between. You were fated, written into the threads that weave reality. Your story has only just begun. What comes now will test all that has come before, shaping all that will come after. You are the beginning of everything.”

Chapter

Two

Persephone

“All the timemy soul was missing—it was here?”

“Yes.” Hydra’s melodious voice is husky in my mind as she walks alongside me in the tunnels, illuminated by the rolling firestorm above us.

“How was I reborn?”

Magenta light flashes, throwing a collage of shimmering specks on the walls of the cave, reflecting the scales that shift with Hydra’s every move. “Your spirit began to feel a need. It pulled you deeper into the tunnels until we arrived below the Tree of Elysian, the Tree of Life.” Her heads slide sideways to take me in. “Come. There is much I must show you.”

We continue down the maze of halls, side by side. “Has Hades ever been down here?”

“Never.”

“Could he?”

“There is nowhere in the Underworld in which he is prohibited.”

“Why hasn’t he come down here?”

“Hades is a complex God. He not only possesses the ability to feel guilt, but he is haunted by it.” She continues forward, her pace slow to keep with my own. “Many of the other Gods do not suffer as Hades suffers. Perhaps it’s his responsibility to judge the sins of the living, but he has developed a keen sense of right and wrong. A sense the Gods of Olympus have not bothered to sharpen for themselves.”

“You think guilt has kept him from traveling here?”

She nods her heads. “Hades sent me to the living realm to guard the portal into Tartarus. It was he who bestowed upon me the honor of guarding the souls of the living, so that they would never suffer an unjust punishment in death.”

I inhale a sharp breath. “He blames himself for the way Hercules harmed you. For the way you continue to suffer.”

Her eyes snap to mine. “You remember my story?”

I blush. “Hades told me a little.”

She sighs. “I believe he carries the guilt of the pain I bear. He has tried to heal me, and he has failed.”

We enter another cave mouth where another inky pool glistens like still obsidian in the center under a high arched ceiling of rolling shades of magenta.

I watch Hydra move to the edge of the pool, dipping her heads and diving into the deep. I gasp, because she was there one moment and gone the next. In only a second, her massive body is entirely submerged, taking all evidence of her with it. The water doesn’t even ripple.

I wait for long moments, the sound of my heart a drum between my ears. Alone in these twisting caves, my fear returns. The silence is crushing.

I’m spiraling into terror’s quick descent when she crests the surface again. I don’t realize just how far gone I’ve slipped into my fear until I see her, and a little sob escapes between my lips.

She swims to the edge, the splash of her large wings lifting her from the water just as effortlessly as she’d entered. Her nostrils flare as she scents the air. “You are afraid?”

“You can—smell that?”

“I am sensitive to you.”

“I thought you left me,” I croak.

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“I would never leave you.” I think she frowns. “My pain binds me to the waters. The longer I am out of the water, the more unbearable the pain of my wounds.”

“Oh.” Something tugs inside my stomach. An uncomfortable tightening. “The water eases your discomfort?”

She nods, but says, “Come.”

I follow her again as she sets off for yet another tunnel. I can’t begin to know how deeply beneath the Underworld we travel now, or how the pools of inky water have not flooded these tunnels. I suspect, like so much that sustains the Underworld, it has something to do with magic.

I should feel uncomfortable or at the very least nervous for wherever it is I am being led, but I don’t. With Hydra, I feel only security. I feel only safety.

When my bare feet begin to ache and my muscles sing with exhaustion, I ask, “Where are we going?”

Hydra stops to peer at me. Again, she inhales. “You are in pain.”

“My feet are sore.” I brush off the pain with a flippant wave. My pain cannot measure her own, and I feel guilty for feeling it at all.

She lowers her big body to the floor. “Climb on.”

I feel my face singe hotly. “I can’t ride you.”

“Of course, you can.”

“No.” I shake my head. “You’re in pain, too.”

“My pain is centuries old. In all the millennia I’ve lived with this pain, you were the only relief I ever knew.” She lowers her heads. “Please, climb on.”

With nothing for it, I sigh and move closer. My palm connects first with the shimmering scales of what I would call her hip. Her tail is thick and fearsome, tipped at the end with a barbed ball. The barbs split into a divide of two, running the length of her tail to extend slightly outward. If she were to whip her tail to the side, she would easily impale any foe.

Unable to help myself, I stroke my hand down the length of her body to her tail. A rumbling purring sound echoes from deep inside her and I smile. “You sound like a kitten.”

“You once told me you like those.”

“I do. Very much.”

“You should tell Hades you would like one.”

“Do you think I could have one here, in the Underworld?” When I continue to stroke down the length of her tail, coming closer to the barbs that extend outward, they suddenly snap down to blend with the rest of her tail in a ridge rather than the spikes.

I gasp. Hydra laughs a deep and beautiful sound.

She tells me, “Anything your heart desires, Hades would find a way to give it to you. Besides, there are plenty of animals in Asphodel City.”

I'm still stuck on her spikes having shifted like that. "How'd you do that?"

She laughs again. I really love the sound. "I don't want to hurt you. Now, climb on."

I do as she says, climbing slowly onto her back and settling between her wings. There's a slightly translucent quality to her wings. Not transparent, but close. I'm reminded of holding a leaf up to the sun, and the way I could see the veins of life inside the leaf within the green. Her wings are like that. She's so beautiful. So powerful.

"Are you a dragon?"

"Some have called me by that name."

"But are you?"

"I do not know. I am me."

"But you breathe fire?"

"No." She begins to move, and I hold onto the spikes that band around her neck, like a necklace. "I breathe like you. But there is fire inside me, fire I can expel if I wish."

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“Do you wish it often?”

“No.” She continues to move down the tunnel.

“How far underground are we?”

“Very.”

“And I lived down here with you? In these tunnels?”

“Yes.”

“We just roamed down here for thousands of years?”

“You liked to draw. I would bring you stones that you would scratch into the walls. There are thousands of pictures, and over the years, I’ve come to realize they tell a story. A story of what must come.” There is a glow up ahead. It is a volatile shifting of magenta and violet that catches and holds my gaze. Hydra tells me, “It is where I take you now.”

I can’t make myself speak as she lumbers closer to the glowing void. When she finally steps from the tunnel into the largest cave yet, I am speechless. It’s a thing of dreams, a wonder of this realm, surely. The cave is wide and high. Impossibly high. The firestorm within the stone stretches from the ceiling into the cave walls, rumbling like a low boil under sketches that look like runes. They flash, illuminating brightly as the firestorm rolls under the stone in a sequence of prophecy that chills the very marrow in my bones.

“I did this?” I gasp after long minutes. I slide down her back and tail, stepping onto the cool cave floor.

The floor of the stone is a thick coal black, blending almost seamlessly into the pool of obsidian in the center. That black stretches up over the walls of the cave, as it had over the walls of the previous caves. I assume that the ceiling of the caves is crafted of a clear crystalline stone that allows the fire inside to be seen.

It appears I’ve chiselled away enough of the black stone on the walls to craft a story of what is to come that is illuminated by the rolling flame within it all.

And as each image appears bright before fading to bright again, I can feel the memories of a life in between coming to me. They click into place as though they are a story told to me on an ancient tongue, older than time.

I see the rise of Primordial Gods and Titans, and the fall of both.

I see the war of the Gods, and the rule that has lasted an eternity, twisted by an immorality bred of the Gods that has spread unchecked like a toxin to humanity.

I witness the birth of a child prophesied by the Moirai—three from a place beyond this universe. They have settled here to scribe the events of the realms of this world. To guide the spiritual evolution of this realm, so ancient to those who are born to it, and yet still in its infancy to the three who stand sentry.

I see the final war. The Gods who will fall.

I see three Gods who will stand above all, ruling together as one. They are violence and justice and strength. They are love and honor and loyalty. They will be bound by the birth of two. Twins, one born of darkness, and one born of light. One to temper violence and the other to temper impossible strength.

I see the coming together of monster and woman. A mating beneath twin moons.
Fertility.

The sketches come alive, as though animated in the stone by a magic so ancient and timeless it cannot be of this world.

I see a Goddess swell in the arms of her God, and as the firestorm rolls behind the sketch, it brings life to the image, for I see tears roll down her face.

A whisper spills in my mind. It is not my Hydra.

“Love. Grief. Sacrifice.”

I see Olympus, and the crumble of an ancient realm that bleeds malice. I walk the halls of it, Hydra at my back. A figure I do not know bends the knee before me, a face man then woman. Lies play in the eyes. They are beautiful and golden, but their heart is cloaked in gloom and doom.

The image shifts again. My Hydra is close, but wary. She is healed and strong and I am proud and brave. But a blade blessed by lightning swings to cut me in two—I don’t see it. The lives I nurture inside me are vulnerable. His aim is to destroy all that they are, for they are the end of all that has ever been, and the beginning of everything that has yet to be.

Before the blade of lightning can strike me, I am saved by a thing of darkness. A blade that crawls with shadows and bleeds flame.

The image transforms again as a sob catches in my throat.

I trace my finger over the flashing sketches of the twins—over the moons I carved long ago into the chests of daughters not yet born. From the moons in their chests

burst the strings of an unbreakable rope that binds them all. And I know.

I know.

The infants that are of me and Hades—sanctioned by the Moirai and the universes beyond—come alive. They peel from the wall; ghosts I watch pulled on strings from the arms of parents who love them desperately. Those strings never break even as they are placed beneath the tree of life, their skin cold with a blue that will scar the whole of my heart for the rest of eternity.

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Two leaves fall from the tree, and the Underworld contracts as two women in the living realm portal my daughters into this world in a way I can not.

The images float back to the wall where they appear again as sketches that flash under the firestorm, no longer touched by the magical animation of life.

I fall to my knees, sobbing violently.

“Why?” I cry, holding the life I now know is a spark of light inside my belly, already bursting through my heart. “Why do I have to sacrifice them?”

“They are fated to the Gods who will rebuild the realms and save humanity.”

“But I could raise them. I love them.”

Hydra’s eyes spill inky tears as her heads come close, one resting in my lap to look up at me. She nuzzles me before she pulls back. “I’ve thought on this for many, many years, for you grieved their loss even then. And I thought on why you were taken, your soul stripped of its memory as a goddess.”

“And?” I can hardly see her through the blur in my eyes.

“You must sacrifice your daughters to the human world so that their hearts might be soft to the plights of humanity, such is your own heart now as it never could have been—not truly—had you been raised again as a Goddess.” Her words of wisdom are a blade that cuts me to my core. “They will advocate for humanity in the coming war. They will soften the hearts of the Gods who will fall for them. The Gods whose

hearts they will win and hold forever dear. The sacrifice must be made, Persephone, for the good of all the realms. They are your daughters. They will always be your daughters, even if you do not raise them yourself. But they are fated to be Queens.”

Hydra moves again to the wall where a sketch glows brightly. I see two beautiful women. One bright and light, the other dark and elegant. Both carry within them the spirit of Nyx and Eros and me. Chaos. The power is no longer bound to one realm, one Goddess. It surges between all the realms, connected by the most powerful of all the powers. Love.

Chapter

Three

Persephone

I can't say how long I grieve the daughters I've not yet birthed, but I know it's a while. There is a familiar ache to this sorrow. Even more familiar is the loving comfort Hydra gives as she curls her big body around mine, pushing warmth into my body that chatters with the icy cold of a breaking heart that rattles brittle bones.

My soul remembers what my body can't. I've spent days—years—like this with her. Curled up in the warmth of her scales, warmed by the flames of the Pit from which she was birthed. A monster meant to slay the wicked who sacrificed her life to protect the innocent. The unaware.

Realization hits me like a brick. I shift in Hydra's hold, my eyes meeting her many as she peers down at me. “Did you warm me like this before?”

Hydra simply watches me for a long moment. “What you became in the aftermath of your death was not something I'd encountered before, or since you. You were dead,

and you had mostly shed your corporal form. Yet, you hadn't. I could still see you, even as I saw through you. It was as though you'd taken the form of a wraith rather than a soul."

"Did I still have human needs?"

"You did not need nourishment, if that is what you are asking."

"But did I require your warmth?"

"The cold did not hurt you as it seems to now, but you took great comfort in my heat."

"Your heat—it's the same flames that thrive in the Pit, isn't it?"

Hydra dips her head in a nod. She blinks. "I am born of those flames. They live within me."

"You fed that heat to my soul for centuries," I murmur more to myself now.

"I—I comforted you."

I can feel her hurt. She thinks I am blaming her for something, but it's because of her that I am able to withstand the impossible heat that would have killed even a Goddess in my past life. The heat that allowed me to answer the call that has urged me to be with Hades' Gods Form. The form in which I now know he needs to be in to produce life. The life that forms new, even now, inside me.

"In my past life as a Goddess, I'd never been able to touch Hades while he was in his Gods' Form. Now, in this life, even as a human, I can." She blinks, slowly. I tell her, "It's because of you. Because of the centuries my soul spent being warmed by the

heat of the Pit. It's why I can't be burned." My hand touches my belly where that spark of life is just a tiny ember. "Without you, the daughters called by the Fates never could have been born."

Hydra's heads lift, her eyes scanning the centuries of sketches I'd chiselled into the walls of this cave.

"From the moment of my creation, I always felt my purpose was lacking. That a piece was missing. I moved through life, doing the best I could. And when humanity deemed me a monster and called for my destruction, I mourned. When I could fight no more, I cast myself into this pit where I have remained. Where I have mourned. Where I have suffered."

Her eyes slide slowly back to me, and I swear, I see love in the abyss of mauve. "I felt you come to the Underworld that first time. When Hades took you. It was a dark and borderless place. My pit was pitch black. No light. No life. But you came and the Underworld sighed. It came alive. It sought you, hungry. But me—I felt for the first time in my life—what I thought might be hope. I know now that you have always been my purpose."

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“We’re all connected,” I tell as I look to the three sisters of Fate who stand high on the cave walls, looming over it all. “They connected us all.”

“Yes,” Hydra agrees. “They did.”

Something stirs within me at the realization. A similar something I recall from the memory I was fed about the first taking, the claiming. The power that swirled within me, eager to flow and connect with something other. To create.

And I sense now that this bond I share with Hydra holds more meaning than either of us suspects.

I stand within the circle of her body, her warmth. She watches me, but not with wariness. Between us, there is only trust.

“Can I try something?”

“Anything.”

I smile. She doesn’t even ask what I want to try.

“Did I ever try to heal you—before?”

A shutter slams down in her eyes. “I cannot be healed.”

I press closer. “But did I try?”

Slowly, she shakes her heads. “You were confused and chaotic for a long time. Then you were consumed with sketching the prophecies. And when you became aware, you grieved. You were powerless, Persephone, to gather the power that lived within you.”

My shoulders slump. “I never tried, did I?”

When she finally shakes her heads, it’s slow and small. “No.”

She took care of my soul for centuries and I never once tried to heal the wounds of her sacrifice.

I force myself to meet her eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

“I cannot be healed, my Persephone. Hades has tried. The Erinyes have tried.”

I stare at all her bleeding limbs, the wounds grossly open and dripping even now. “I would like to try now, if you’ll let me.”

There is a long pause. I can see how hope flashes in her eyes before it is chased away by fear. Fear that she will be teased with the possibility of healing this pain only to find again, that she can’t be healed. That the curse Zeus bestowed upon the blade Hercules wielded cannot be undone.

And then I see something else play in her eyes. Trust.

She is already laying on the floor, her body curled around my own, but she lowers her heads. All her heads. My intent swirls a power inside me that is familiar even as it is foreign. It’s always been here, I realize, a part of me. It’s always been hidden in the folds of my soul, unknown and unused.

But I know the power I long for now. The power of Chaos.

The power to create. To heal.

It begins in my chest, the swirling warmth of the Mother Goddess. It is ribboned with the light of all life that is the Primordial God of light. Sun.Life.

Together, they dance until that power bursts throughout the whole of me, flooding my limbs until this power is all that I am. All that I feel.

Like the Underworld came alive behind my eyes as Hades took possession of my body, I see Hydra as she was before the manipulation of malicious Gods, and the destruction of Hercules' cursed blade. A beautiful beast of power and elegance with a heart so big in her chest. Her nine heads held high with pride and honor.

And I see her now behind those same lids. Ruined and broken. Hurting. The headless wounds that have wept for centuries, life a slow and agonizing drip from a body offered in sacrifice. I see the dark truth of a history cocooned in lies. The love that poured from the depths of her in every human who dared swim the Lernaean Lake, their ignorance forcing her to slay them swiftly so that they would find peace in life after death. So that they would not be trapped eternally in a Hell they could never escape.

I reach out, my palms connecting with her chest. I can feel the thunder of her heart. The power of an ancient pouring of rage and sorrow that strums a song with every beat. My own soul opens to hers, my heart a crater from which power pours. My hands are the conduit for the surge of chaos and life that moves from me into her. And I rebuild her in my mind as I once built the Underworld so long ago.

Time passes in a flow of color and song, of timeless love. When I open my eyes once again, it is to see a being of ancient times before me, once again proud and full and

strong.

Hydra stands under the shimmering light of the firestorm ceiling, the metallic shimmer of her sangria scales dance as though ignited by the flames of justice that roll overhead, trapped eternally in the stone of this ancient cave. From her body is one thick neck from which eight others branch. Each of her eight necks is adorned with a smaller head than the ninth which is held high in the center and affixed with a crown of ruby daggered points which rise from her very skull.

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I watch in marvel as the eight necks all begin to move, braiding themselves around her main head and settling into place. She has the body of a dragon, full and powerful and winged. Her neck is long and, with her heads all tucked close, each of the smaller heads juts out enough to make the length appear taloned and all-seeing, for all her eyes blink as one up the column of her neck.

A shuddering gasp trembles as it rises from my lungs. Her heads move as one, her main head lowering to connect with my forehead. I feel a puff of hot air wash over my chest as she pulls back again. From her mauve eyes, crystal tears fall.

They are no longer scorched black by the curse of a blade struck by a malicious Gods' power.

I realize in horror that her unhealing body had eternally tried to expunge the curse which festered in her very blood. She is more than healed. Now, she is cleansed.

“Thank you, my Persephone.” Emotion strips her words raw, brandishing for me her very soul. It is a most beautiful soul that I know now my own was always intended to cherish.

Swallowing my own emotion, I ask, “Is there any pain?”

“None.” Her words swim in my mind. “I feel no desire to submerge in the pool for relief as I had for so long. I feel free.”

I smile. “Will you come with me, then?”

She moves closer, her heads lifting higher with pride. In my mind, her words are a vow. “I will follow you always, my Persephone.”

When she lowers again, I don’t wait for her encouragement as I climb onto her back between her wings. “Take us to Hades.”

She moves to the pool’s edge.

I suck in a deep breath.

We dive into the inky abyss.

Chapter

Four

Hades

“She called me from here.” I face the Erinyes who stand together on the shore of Hydra’s sinkhole. They are unaffected by the sweltering breeze that blows down from the high slopes of the fire opal mountains, which stand sentry over their temple.

“She is coming,” Alecto says, sure as one in the living realm might predict the sun’s rise.

“Yes,” Megaera agrees as she peers over the side into the black water. Long black hair falls forward to touch the waters, and she inhales. “I sense Hydra is near.”

Acid bubbles in my stomach. Persephone is human. If she fell into the pool and failed to climb back out...

There is no scenario in which she could have survived Hydra's sinkhole. Not even I am immune to the suction of the sinkhole when I take water for the flames that light the Underworld. If Persephone fell in, the water would have pulled her under.

And if it hadn't been the deadly power of the ancient current, the Hydra...

No.

I won't think it. I refuse.

Surely the beast would have sensed the purity of her soul and ended her life before she could be sucked deeper into the inescapable torment of the inky bowels of Tartarus. That is what she had always done. It is her way, and I could never blame her.

Fuck.

Grief and fear erupt inside my chest.

If her life has once again been cut short for her soul to wander aimlessly and undetectable in the Underworld for centuries—I'm not sure the realm would survive her loss.

"The Underworld has only just begun to heal."

Tisiphone, the Fury who avenges the murdered, moves closer. Her face is a mask of granite that reflects the hard shell that encapsules her soft heart. "Hydra comes, Hades."

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“The Underworld will not survive another loss. And we all know what happens if the Underworld dies.”

“The Underworld will not die.” Alecto stands firm. Her voice is as hard as her sister’s. “All the realms will live.”

“She called to me from here.” Even I can’t miss the desperate ring to my voice. It dies, however, when the Hydra crests the water.

It is not as all the times before, when she would rise from the treacherous depths slowly—so slowly you may not even notice her presence.

This time, she bursts from the waters as a prisoner might flee the restraints in which they’ve been eternally bound. Gone are the many heads that dripped inky black blood. In their place she is a beast as she once was. Whole. Magnificent. A thing of ancient legend and timeless myth.

She spirals into the air, shedding drops of inky water to showcase scales that catch in the prisms of the amethyst daggers that spear from the crystal shore.

And on her back is my mate.

The sight takes my breath away. I am not the only one, for each of the Erinyes stands silent and unmoving. Unblinking. Caught in the magic of the impossible.

The sight is thrilling as it is shocking. From the conception of the flames of the Pit, Hydra had been born. Not a soul dared touch her, not ever. She loved from afar and

slayed those who dared come near.

The Erinyes and I are the only ones who can pull from the waters of the sinkhole without being torn to shreds.

I had touched her once, when I'd asked if I could try to heal her. When I'd failed her, she'd dove back into her inky abyss, and I'd not seen her for nearly a century.

Now, my mate rides on her back between wine red wings. In her dark red gown, with her deep red hair whipping in the wind of Hydra's celebratory spiral, they look as though they were made for one another. Bound by an ancient fate foretold in the whispers of a promise older than time itself.

"There is reason in everything, young God." The tongueless words of the three sisters responds to the thoughts in my mind. I am instantly alert even as I scoff. A young God, I am not.

I think I hear the echoing tails of ageless amusement before Hydra looses a roar that reverberates throughout the Underworld. Flames burst from the deep of her to spear high into the everlasting night before she soars into the flame.

My heart stops in my chest. Beside me, the Erinyes inhale sharp breaths of horror.

Hydra is engulfed in flames born of the Pit. Her wings drenched in the rolling flicker of deadly fire to cast an image reminiscent to the burning phoenix rising—taking Persephone with her.

The seconds they are submerged in the flame stretches before me like an eternity. I'm not sure my heart beats even once. I don't think I breathe. Time simply stops.

Then they burst from the flames as one. Hydra's flames dance on the tips of her

wings, but Persephone rides proud between those deep wine-red wings, impossibly unscathed.

They fly high together, above the tips of the white mountain. I think Hydra aims to touch the very stars that wink in the perpetual night of the sky. Together, they dance a dance of flight and freedom I have no doubt the entirety of the realm watches, for together they glow like fireworks in the sky.

As for me, I am breathless. Enraptured. Caught in the magic of the woman who was born to mother an entire realm. Of a Goddess who was born to correct ancient wrongs.

A Goddess with a soul tethered to my own, and the beast whose heart she won within.

Finally, I smile as Hydra swoops low before bursting high into the stars again. There is another burst of flame, another plunge into the eternal heat of it—and this time I do not fear, but revel. I revel in the magic of this moment. A new era of the Underworld, where ancient curses are lifted, and hope ignites in the stars that have felt so impossibly heavy for so impossibly long.

For the first time in all the centuries I have lived, Alecto sighs a sound of happiness. Tisiphone's hands come together and Megaera smiles!

They, too, feel the same sense of hope that rains down over the land in a shimmer of sparks that die like glitter in the wind.

That's when Hydra soars toward the black mountain in a show this land will not soon forget. Even from here where I stand, I hear the cheers of Asphodel City. And then I hear the prayers of wonder and thanks and hope in my mind from the Isle of the Blessed, where even though I cannot see it live, a vision of Hydra and Persephone plays in my mind.

My smile widens as they soar away again, across the realm in speeds known to none.

Their show lasts for hours.

As for me and the rage I'd felt when I'd woken to find her gone, only to hear her shouted prayer turn silent in my mind, I leave the Erinyes to return to my palace with a sense that everything is about to change.

There is hope in the air, fire in the sky, and cheer in the song that weaves its melody through the land.

But as I near the black mountain from which my palace sprouted so long ago, I cannot ignore the sense of something other—something darker that lurks.

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Yes, there will be change—but at what cost?

Chapter

Five

Persephone

Connected to my mind as she is, Hydra lands on the balcony of mine and Hades' room. I sense that he is close as I slide down her tail between the spikes she flattens. I find him standing in the shadows cast from the flickering hues of falling stars that rain down from the crystal ceiling. He's thrown in a glow of deep violet light, but even still I can see the flames in his eyes.

"That was quite a show." Hades dips his head as I move closer. His pitch lowers. "You made friends with Hydra."

Excitement jitters inside me. I'm still riding the high of riding Hydra! "I have so much to tell you."

Those eyes of flame and shadow connect with mine. "I'm all ears, little goddess."

"I didn't make friends with Hydra. At least not just now. She's been my friend." When his brows furrow, I lift my hands to flatten my palms to his chest. Under the thin material of his shirt, his heart thunders.

He tells me, "I don't understand."

I let my hands drift upward until they're curving around his neck. His skin is so warm and there's a tightness to his expression. Within it, a residue of fear lingers.

I tip my head to the side, studying the dance of flame and shadow in his eyes. "Did you look for me?"

"I did." His skin heats further. I wait for the painful ache that is my constant need for him.

His nostrils flare. He's scenting the air.

He's waiting for that need, too. But it's not there.

I still want him with a desire that is more than typical. But it's not the same desperate need that swelled with discomfort. With pain.

My eyes flick sideways to the black mountains where I know the Moirai reside, and the moons that sit high in the sky, burning bright. I wonder if they're watching even now. Playing the game of life and death with our souls.

Hades speaks and I drag my eyes back to him. "Did you see me standing on the shore of Hydra's sinkhole?"

A shiver coils around my spine. I shake my head. I'd been so caught up in the magic of the moment I'd shared with her—of her finally breaking free from the centuries she'd spent alone in the caves and waters that were once the Lernaean Lake.

"I didn't see you."

"I heard you call out for me in my mind. You were so afraid." His eyes shift to Hydra. I feel her presence in my mind even as she speaks no words. She shifts her big

body on the stone of the balcony, getting comfortable. She has no intention of leaving me.

“I was afraid,” I admit. “At first.”

“At first?”

“Hydra would never hurt me.”

Hades’ eyes narrow, but only for a moment. He shifts closer, his body grazing the front of mine gently as he dips his head, towering over me. “Why, then, were you afraid?”

“Well—” I flash him a coy smile. “When I first arrived at the sinkhole, I put my hand in the water. I wanted to know if it began shallow or instantly dropped off. My hand was in the water when I first saw her. Hydra. She spoke to me, and I think that’s when I called for you.”

His brows rise, before his eyes flick again to Hydra. He asks quietly, “She spoke to you?”

I nod with jittery excitement. “And then she pulled me into the water. Deep, deep below the surface.”

The flames in his eyes brighten, fringed by coal black shadows that speak of an eternity of torment. He’s clearly doesn’t share my excitement.

He asks dangerously, “She pulled you into the water?”

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“Did you know there are caves under the water, Hades? Did you know they snake throughout the whole of the Underworld, deep below the surface?”

He swallows. I watch his throat work around the swell of it. “I did not know that.”

“Well, there are so many caves. She lived there, mostly alone.”

“Mostly alone?” There is death in his voice. A low simmer of darkness that has that shiver coiling tighter around my spine.

My hands shift from his neck to cup his face. “That’s where I was, Hades. After Demeter murdered me in my first life. My soul sought sanctuary with Hydra deep below the surface of the Underworld. I remained there with her?—”

“She was with you?” His eyes cut to Hydra. There is a rage in the deep of them that I’ve never seen. He is a tormentor come to life. His flesh ripples with the temper of the beast he harbours beneath.

I try to catch him as he steps away from me, stepping toward Hydra.

“Hades!”

He roars, “I searched for her! The Underworld searched for her for centuries!”

“Hades!”

“Speak, beast!” He rages at Hydra. “She says you can speak, so speak!”

“She can’t speak to you.” I hurry to position myself between my lover and my friend.
“She’s tried, but you can’t hear her.”

His eyes cut to mine even as his nostrils flare with every hot breath. He growls,
“Explain.”

“She speaks in my mind.”

“That doesn’t answer why she kept you to herself for centuries when the Underworld searched. When it weakened.”

I can feel Hydra moving at my back. I can sense that for me, she would throw down with the God of the Underworld.

How is this my life?Surreal.

I get my head back into the game when I suck in a deep breath that tastes a little like charbroiled, angry God.

Calmly, I explain, “She tried to bring me to you. I wasn’t right when I first arrived to her in the Underworld. I was—confused. For a long time, I think.”

“A very long time.”It’s the first time Hydra speaks since bringing me to Hades. Feeling her sound in my mind, so soothing and ancient and powerful, puts me at ease.

Hades’ eyes flick between the two of us. “She speaks to you now, doesn’t she?”

I nod. “She tried to bring me to you. I screamed for you to hear me. She tried to speak to you as well. You couldn’t hear either of us. You couldn’tseeme. She took me back below the surface to the caves of her home where we stayed together until I felt the pull to the Elysian Tree. Until I felt the pull to live again.”

“And she just let you go?”

I feel incredibly emotional. “It was written.”

“Written?” Hades shakes his head, but I can sense his anger is waning even as his agitation remains high. “Written where? By whom?”

“The walls of the cave,” I answer simply. “And it was written by me, but I think—” My eyes drift once again to the black mountain that plunges high into the sky. “I think they gave me the visions—or whatever it was that inspired me to carve the walls.”

“Carve the walls with what?” Hades asks, wariness dripping from his voice now.

“The future.”

Chapter

Six

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Persephone

“We need to meet the Gods.” Hades curses. “They’re all probably here anyway, after that show the two of you put on.”

I shoot him a cheeky smile. “It was a good show.”

“Perhaps it’s best not to poke the God, my Persephone.”

“You’re probably right.” I try for my first time to speak back to her mind. When she smiles, I smile, too. I add, “He is a bit touchy.”

“You’re talking to her again, aren’t you?” Hades demands low.

“Yes.”

“Do you think you could include me in the conversation?”

I fold my arms over my chest. “She told me not to poke you.”

“Poke me?” His brows rise.

“Yes. Poke you. Piss you off.”

“I’m not pissed off, Persephone.”

“He’s not,” Hydra says. “But he is jealous.”

It's my turn to frown. Hades curses again. "What now?"

"Are you jealous? Of my bond with Hydra?"

Hades' lips thin. They part before closing again. He shakes his head and finally admits, "I don't know, little goddess. I'm—I'm upset that your soul sought sanctuary with hers in your death. That you never tried to find me."

"You did try to be with him. He could not see you. You were cloaked, and only the Moirai can answer why."

I move to him. To my lover, my soul mate, my God. "Of course, I tried to be with you. I already explained that Hydra brought me to you, and you weren't able to see me."

"How many times?" Hades asks softly.

"What?"

"How many times did you try?"

"I—I don't know."

Hades' eyes slide to Hydra, the question in them not to be missed. Her answer is soft in my mind. "Once was painful enough, my Persephone."

I flinch.

Hades waits. He prompts, "Well?"

"Hades..."

“Persephone.”

My voice cracks. I echo Hydra’s words. “Once was painful enough.”

He looses another curse as he hangs his head between his shoulders. Then, clipped, he says, “The Gods are here. They are waiting.” His eyes move again to Hydra. “I don’t suppose you’d be content to wait here?”

Hydra shakes her head, with all the others wrapped snugly around it. Nine sets of eyes focus on him.

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“Very well,” Hades clips. “You won’t fit through the halls of the palace, so you’ll need to enter the front door.”

I slide my hand into Hades’ and squeeze. “I’ll go with her and meet you there.”

Hades watches as I climb effortlessly onto Hydra’s back. Settling between her wine-red wings, I hold on tight to the crown of spiked scales at the base of her neck. I’ve only ridden atop her once in this life, but my soul remembers the centuries where this was my place. Where this is what we did.

I don’t take my eyes off Hades as Hydra moves to the edge of the balcony. Her wings flap once, and we plunge into the sky. I can still feel him watching us as she circles back around the palace, finally out of sight.

Hydra fits easily through the high arch of the palace’s double doors. There is no point on the main floor at which she struggles to move. As we near the dining hall, the doors swing open. Hades had explained it’s the way of the Underworld. That it is sentient, and as it’s mother, it is particularly responsive to me.

A collective gasp greets us as we enter. My eyes find Hades’ instantly, but at the sound of a curse and the grating scrape of chair legs over stone, my gaze shifts to where Hermes has planted himself in front of Thanatos. His eyes are wide and wild, the espresso brown intense as they lock on the beast at my back.

She is close. So close, I can feel the heat of her where she stands like a caress against my back.

“Gods alive,” he breathes. “It’s true.”

Hades slices his eyes to Hermes. He asks dryly, “Did you somehow miss the show?”

Hermes swallows hard. “I was—we were?—”

Thanatos stands. A pale hand curls around Hermes’ shoulder. “We were otherwise occupied.”

Hypnos snickers, as is his way.

I blush.

“He is afraid of me,” Hydra speaks into my mind. I take in Hermes again. This time, I don’t miss the quick rise and fall of his chest. I see the beads of sweat that cling to the hair at his temples. I note the way his hands tremble, only slightly, where they meet the surface of the table.

“Why?”

“I do not know.” Her pause in my mind is long. “Hermes was a complex God. His loyalties were both to the Underworld and to Olympus.”

“They are only to the Underworld now.” My eyes shift from Hermes to Hades. I find his are already on me, and they are dark with knowing. I sigh heavily and tell Hydra, “I hate that we can’t include him in our conversation.”

“Yes,” Hydra agrees.

Hades cuts his eyes from mine. He says to the room, “Hydra will hurt no one.”

“Why so afraid of the beast, anyway, Hermes?” Charon taunts. He swirls a brew in his cup before lifting it to his lips for a long swallow. His murky grey eyes the color of lifeless clay barb into Hermes.

Hermes scowls. “She is the only beast Olympus fears.”

Hades cocks his head only slightly to the side. “This is news.”

Thanatos rubs Hermes’ back. “She breathes the flame of the Pit.”

“And?” Hades sounds bored, but I know better.

“Why do you think Zeus wanted the beast taken care of? Why do you think he sent Hercules, the undefeated slayer of the monsters of Gods? To protect man? To answer the prayers they sent to him?” Hermes dares a peek at Hydra, and shudders. It’s small, but there. “Olympus is untouchable, but nothing can escape the flames of the Pit. Nothing can survive it. Not even Gods.” His eyes connect with Hades’. “We all know what became of the Titans. How they suffer in the flames.”

Hecate snickers now, and it’s joined by another sound. A darker sound. Deeper. Male.

My gaze shifts to the side to find Poseidon is standing against the black stone of the wall. Other than his shock of white hair and piercing blue eyes, he blends right in.

My eyes drop to his lower half, and I quirk a smile he mirrors. The man—God—found pants.

“Pity,” Hydra harrumphs. I can’t help my laugh of surprise.

The room looks to me with raised brows, but it’s Minthe who asks, “What’s so

funny?”

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Hades' chest rises with a deep breath. "Hydra speaks to Persephone."

The entire room gasps again. Hypnos leans back in his chair, kicking his booted feet up onto the table. I ignore the way Hades tenses as Hypnos asks in casual interest, "And what did she say that had you laughing, Persephone?"

I stammer for only a moment. "She's upset Poseidon is wearing pants."

Heat blasts at my back. I peek over my shoulder to find Hydra's scales are a lovely shade of deep ruby. I ask aloud, "Are you blushing?"

Hydra ignores me.

Poseidon winks at her and another flare of heat threatens to smother me. This time, I speak to her in my mind. "Oh, my goodness, you are!"

"Is it hot in here?" Charon throws back a big gulp of whatever is in his cup, slamming the empty goblet on the table.

Leuce smirks as she folds her arms over her chest, stretching the gauzy translucent fabric of her white shirt. Her silver hair is in a high ponytail that stretches long down the length of her back. Her sharp silver-gray eyes tell me she knows exactly why it's hot in here, and she's nothing short of amused.

Leuce's lovely eyes shift from me to Hydra. She says, "It's big and fancy. I don't blame you for wanting a peek."

Minthe nods her agreement. Poseidon's smile grows and Hades curses low.

I giggle. Again. But this time, I feel my own skin heating.

“Oh, are you blushing?” Hydra taunts in my mind.

I snort.

“For the love of Gods, can we get to business.”

“This all sounds like business to me.” Hypnos pulls on a fat cigar. Smoke dances over his face like the dreams that dance in his eyes.

“When Persephone was murdered in the River Lethe,” Hades begins. The entire room falls so silent so quickly, one could hear a pin drop. “Her eternal soul sought sanctuary deep below the Underworld—with Hydra.”

Silence throbs—and then the silence is gone.

Chapter

Seven

Hades

Being inside her is everything. For millennia, I lived in the prison of my father's stomach. For millennia, the shrapnel of my soul warded off the acrid acid of his belly—but I was not unscathed. My soul had been worn to tatters, bruised and on the cusp of ruin. My formative years stunted under the crushing fear of a Titan's collapse.

Then I emerged into the world in which had fallen into great corruption. I was swiftly

employed to fight alongside my brothers in a battle that would see me no glory.

I roamed, for eons, lost. I had no home or purpose.

And then I was given Tartarus to swallow. From the regurgitation spilled the foundations of the Underworld. It had been a place of desolate pain and sorrow and darkness.

I roamed.

My only company was the screams and the sorrow of the souls who had lived and lost. The souls who had died to find nothing in the life after. Until her.

Until she poured love and life into Tartarus, birthing the Underworld as we know it today. As I hope to always know it.

I have been in many places.

I have lived in many places.

I have fought and warred in many places, and yet, the only place I have felt home in all the realms is inside her.

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The scent of need that had poured from her for months is now gone. In its place is a sweeter scent. It is not the scent of madness and hunger that drives a man to insanity. To possession.

But it is a slow, gentle need. Like quenching a desert thirst with cool water.

With her like this, my mind is my own. My actions are my own.

I do not miss or crave that overwhelming sense of need in which I was helpless to sate, to take.

She moves over me slowly. Her hips roll into mine, her breaths fanning across my lips, promising a kiss that finally comes. It is sweet and soul deep, like all her kisses.

Outside, Hydra casts a shadow over the moons that peer down on the land. Now that her pain does not bind her to the sinkhole, she is free. She is taking advantage of her freedom in the sky, spreading her wine-red wings wide.

Unable to help myself, I rock my hips up to meet Persephone's slow thrust. I watch as her full mouth parts, her eyes fluttering closed. She pulls a breath into her lungs, her chest swelling with it.

She is beautiful.

I will live another millennia with her by my side, and I will never not think that she is the most beautiful creature who has ever lived.

Her slow love making is a wonderful torment, but I am at the end of what I can handle.

I sit up, my mouth connecting with the smooth skin of her neck in a kiss I know burns. And yet she does not wince away from my touch. She never winces away from my touch, not in this life.

In this life, the heat of Tartarus does not touch her as it did even when she was protected by the flesh of a Goddess. She is immune, truly crafted to stand as the lover of the God who lives beneath my skin.

I press an open-mouthed kiss to her neck, traveling to the underside of her jaw and then her cheek. She twists, her lips seeking mine.

She kisses me back, echoing all the love and need that I feel for her.

I drive higher into her, thrusting harder.

I'm edging release, but I can sense she's not there with me.

With my hands curling in her red hair, I flip her onto her back, driving into her body harder. Grinding, sinking, claiming.

She moans.

“Hades.” My name is delicious sin on her lips.

She opens her body to me, spreading her legs wider, pulling me deeper. And still, that thing that she is keeping from me—whatever it is—scratches at the back of my mind.

I know she is keeping secrets. I've known it since she relayed the sketches on the

walls inside Hydra's caves.

I've known it since she told the Gods who stand on our side in this war what she saw—what her ancient soul carved—visions given from the Moirai; visions we've all agreed cannot come to pass.

And yet that terrifies me. Because in all that she relayed, there is something she keeps.

I've seen it in the way Hydra meets her eyes, urging her to speak the truth she fears.

I've seen it in the way Persephone looks away, avoiding the truth she cannot speak. I've seen it in the way she gazes out into nothing.

This past week, I've seen it in the pain that flashes in her eyes, the tears she refused to let fall.

Something is wrong.

My mate is keeping something from me. Something important.

I thrust harder and faster inside her. My tongue tangles with hers, silently urging the secrets she keeps from the depths of her aching soul to the surface where I might uncover them.

Her nails rake into the skin of my back. My fingertips bite into the flesh of her hips.

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I thrust harder, deeper, grazing the womb from which her innocence birthed a realm.

She cries out. I moan.

And then we come undone together, shattering. Pieces of us explode like stars into the sky only to settle like dust in the aftermath of our lovemaking.

I waste no time gathering her into my arms, against my chest. I do not want to let her escape me this time.

For the last week, she loves me and leaves me quickly.

She is grieving, that much I know. I simply do not know what she grieves. I do not know why she doesn't tell me.

Something happened in that cave with Hydra. Something happened that hurt her. The thought sours the afterglow of having her.

My fingers tangle in her hair, and she sighs against my chest.

“I am taking you to see the Moirai.”

She stiffens, and then she peels her face from my chest to look at me.

Her deep green eyes are troubled, and the tiny wrinkle between them tells me she's terrified. But I don't think she's terrified of the Moirai.

I think she's terrified of what they might reveal to me. That they might uncover the secrets she keeps.

She finally responds. Her voice is soft with the undertones of pain. "I don't want to."

"We don't have a choice." I force the words through the blade that cuts me deep. Her pain is mine. It will always be mine. "We need to discuss those carvings on the cave walls."

"I told you everything I saw."

"We both know that's not true." She stiffens. I hold her eyes. "I know there's something you're not telling me."

She snuffles, cutting her eyes from mine.

"Hades, please."

"Persephone, this is important." I know she knows this. "Those carvings foretell that you will return to Olympus. That you will walk the halls with Zeus and Demeter." The very idea is enough to spill fire through me. I know my skin heats. I know she feels it. But somehow, it does not scorch her even as it threatens to incinerate the very bed we lay on.

I force myself to cool as I ask, "Is that not what you saw on the walls of that cave?"

"It is but?—"

"No buts. We don't have time for buts." Tension is growing inside me. "We must take action, and we must take it quickly. The Moirai gave you those visions for a reason."

“Hades.”

“They pulled you to Tartarus—to Hydra—for a reason. So that you would again see those carvings. So that we would be prepared for what is to come.”

“Hades—” There is sorrow in my name on her tongue.

I've never hated the sound of anything more.

I sigh, pleading, “What aren't you telling me, little goddess?”

Her eyes mist, and she pulls her body from mine. Her hands find the sheets crafted of the weeping pines, and she gathers them around her body, hiding herself from me. The God inside me simmers.

I remain still, patient, waiting.

Finally, her voice so small, she whispers, “I'm pregnant.”

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Chapter

Eight

Hades

“I’m pregnant.”

Her words explode in my mind. Happiness ruptures my heart. My soul implodes with bliss.

I am overjoyed the like I have never known. This is all that I have ever wanted. It is all that I have ever dreamed. That this woman—this goddess—would one day carry my child.

And now she is.

She is carrying my child.

I have spent an eternity hoping for this, trying for this.

My seed is not dead, after all.

I grab her face between my hands, kissing her deeply. A sound spills from the depths of me. It is unfamiliar.

It is laughter. Pure joy and hope.

The God of Death inside me quivers with feeling. We have wanted nothing but this, but her, but a family of our own for so long.

I kiss her again, dragging my lips over hers. They tremble, and I realize as sick coils in my gut that she tastes like grief.

I pull back in time to see Hydra land on the balcony, her silhouette large through the sheer curtains.

“You are not happy.” The words nearly get stuck in my throat.

Her blink is heavy. Her words raw. “I was.”

“Was?” I ask.

“I—”

“Persephone, what is wrong?” I’m afraid to ask, but I need to know. The fear is a boulder in my throat I struggle to swallow down. “What did you see on the cave wall?”

“Hades.” She shakes her head. My name is a sob that falls like a curse between us, consuming the happiness of this moment. Tainting it. Poisoning it.

I pull her to me, crushing her body that now trembles against my chest. I inhale the sweet floral scent of her, strong again now that the overwhelming scent of her arousal is less.

“Whatever it is, I’ll make it right,” I vow to her. I vow to our child that is inside her.

She shakes her head, her fingers curling into my chest. “You can’t. It’s written...” She

gulps in air. "It's prophesied, and it will come to pass. I know it will. I know it, Hades."

She's crying now, and I feel as though every tear that leaks from her eyes is the thread that unspools me. I hold her tighter, as though my arms might keep the threads of us together, might keep them from fraying.

"Talk to me, Persephone. Tell me what you saw."

It takes a moment for her to gather herself enough to speak the truth that threatens to ruin us.

"You tried in my past life to make me pregnant, didn't you?" Before I can answer, she presses on. "You wanted it. You've always wanted it. I know that now. I don't know how I know that, but I do. I know." When she looks up at me, those green eyes misted over with grief, I can do nothing but nod.

I am raw.

Outside, I hear Hydra huff. I can hear the heavy emotion in that single sound. I don't know why it frightens me as it does. But it does. So much.

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She knows what is coming and she grieves, too.

I hold my mate tighter.

Persephone swallows hard. “On the cave wall, I carved our joining. The joining of woman and beast—of God. Us.” She shudders. “It came alive for me. The drawings in stone. They all came alive for me, Hades. I saw—” Her words break, voice cracking. “I saw so much.”

“Tell me what you saw.”

“It hurts.” Her voice dips in grief. In fear.

The sound of it chills the heated blood in my veins in a way that I have never been chilled.

The God inside me repels it, rejects it.

She speaks again. “The red moons—the blood moons—they were my fertility. There was a pull from them which called for us to mate. To create.”

As soon as the words are between us, I know they are truth.

“I was never supposed to get pregnant until now. I don't know why. I don't know why the Moirai sanctioned this now, but they did. And the reason is because—well, I don't know the reason, Hades. I just know that we are never going to be able to raise them. We're going to have them, and they're going to die, and we're going to bury them

under the Elysian Tree. Their souls are going to be given to human women, and they will bear our children. They will love and raise our children in a way that we can't."

"No." I shake my head, refusing to believe the words she speaks even as I can taste the truth of them.

"Yes." She nods sadly through her tears. "It is written."

I swallow hard. Emotion burns my throat, but I manage to ask, "There is more than one?"

Tears streak down her face now. Her lips tremble.

Her body trembles.

"We're having twins," she tells me. "Girls. They're so beautiful, Hades."

Her hand falls between us to cradle her stomach, where the lives we made are growing. The lives I already love—that will end too soon.

I cannot bear it.

"I will fix this." I am desperate for her to believe my promise, I think, so I can believe it, too. "We will talk to the Moirai, and I will fix this. We will raise our own children."

She shakes her head. "We can't."

Tartarus, but her eyes are so sad. "Little goddess."

"I understand now that I've taken the time. They're meant for more." Her sad eyes

implore me to understand, too. “They're going to change the world. No, they're going to save the world. But they won't be able to do that if they don't sympathize with humanity.” She touches my face with her trembling hand. “We cannot raise them as Goddesses and expect them to understand what it means to be human.”

Her eyes are daggers into mine. They dig deep into the gutted trenches of my soul, threatening to carve out my very heart.

“This is the sacrifice we must make.” Glistening tears fall in streaks of grief-tainted love down her face. “For all the realms. For life.”

I refuse to believe this truth. “You interpreted the carvings wrong, my love.”

Her eyes soften even as the tears continue to fall. “I think that is why I had to die.” I flinch at her words. “I was always fated to come into this world a Goddess, only to be stripped of everything that was me, down to the barest parts of my soul—to be reborn as a human so that I might sympathize with the world the Gods created and destroyed—so that it could be healed. So that I could help heal it.” She shifts onto her knees. Her eyes never leaving my own. “There's a war brewing, Hades. We're meant to fight in it. We're meant to sacrifice them for the better of all—even if it breaks us.”

She collapses against my chest, and I finally understand.

I understand why I was never able to plant my children inside her womb—to gift her with life.

It is not simply that the Moirai had not sanctioned their birth within her body as a Goddess. I have had her multiple times under the blood of the fertile moons since I brought her to the Underworld, but I had only had her once in my Gods' Form.

And now I understand why she can suffer my heat, because it was that heat that was

needed to craft the souls of those who will one day bear the power to destroy Gods.

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My hand falls to cradle her belly, and behind the lids I squeeze closed, the Moirai bestow up on me a vision that would bring me to my knees—if I wasn't already there.

Tiny infants wrapped in quilts woven by the Moirai. One gold and one onyx. The tongueless sisters, for the first time since the beginning of time, stand outside their black mountain to witness the passing of souls from this realm into another.

Two leaves fall from the Elysian Tree to drift down the spiral of a breeze onto the still chests of my daughters. Persephone falls to her knees at their feet, her sobs echoing throughout the entirety of the realm. A sea of souls stands witness to a time that will change the trajectory of life as it is known within all the realms.

The Elysian Leaves glow, one veined in gold and the other in onyx as the souls of our children—our greatest sacrifice—rise from the bodies of our daughters. The leaves burst into flames hotter than those in the core of the Pit, and they are gone.

The ancient notes of the tongueless Moirai sound strong in my mind. “You will see them again, King of Gods. We thank you for your sacrifice.”

Chapter

Nine

Persephone

I have yet to stand at the base of the black mountain, with intent to climb. From afar, the pathway up the black mountain appeared, although harrowing, stationary. The

steep stone steps fixed in place, as anyone might expect.

Such is not the case.

I gape in horror at the stone that shifts now before my eyes. The pathways winding like a snake to the mouth of a cave so high up the mountain, its toothy upper lip is nearly masked by the rolling doom of a dark cloud that expunges even the glitter of everlasting night.

“It’s so dark.”

I don’t realize I’ve spoken the words until Hades responds beside me. “The black mountains are always under the cover of black clouds.”

“And the pathways shift,” I say, pointing to the slithering of stone over stone. I shiver. “Like snakes.”

“The path to the Moirai is different for everyone.” The displeasure in Hades’ voice is loud.

My head whips to the side to look at him. I’m pretty sure I’m scowling. “What do you mean?”

“Your path to the Moirai and mine will be different, little goddess.” He flashes a wry grin. “Second-guessing this visit yet?”

I steel my spine. Casting my gaze over the snaking trails, I mutter a tense, “No.”

“This is not necessary, my Persephone.” Hydra speaks softly in my mind. Her ancient wisdom gives me pause. “There are those who never return from this climb.”

I straighten my shoulders. “I’ll return from this climb. They need my daughters, remember?”

Silence is the only response I am given. I tip my head back again to glare up at the toothy mouth of the cave that looms in line with the cover of coal black clouds. There is no shine to the clouds that smear their cover across the peak that stretches between the realms.

Since telling Hades about the daughters I carry in my womb—and the other Gods of the Underworld learning of their conception, and fate—it’s become clear to me that I’ve always been a tool crafted by the Moirai in their long game of reformation of the hierarchy of Gods.

I have lived and lost and sacrificed for the plans of Fate. I think I deserve to know now what the end goal is. Now that the ultimate sacrifice is being demanded of me. Of us.

And I deserve a chance to—to speak with the Moirai and plead my case to raise my daughters.

I deserve this. And if it means climbing this damn mountain, then by Gods, I’ll do it.

I take a step onto the stone path that hovers before me and silently thank Hades for handing me the first pair of pants I’ve worn in the Underworld as I swallow a sharp yelp. The stone grinds and groans as it whips to the far left, away from Hades and Hydra. By the time I chance looking in their direction, I’m horror-struck to find that they are tiny pinpricks of life way, way down below.

My heart lurches in my chest and a curse slips from between my lips, dripping of the animosity I feel toward the three sisters that hide away in this protected mountain.

They are the reason for every pain I have suffered, and every pain I will suffer.

The path shifts again—the climb before me growing steeper and steeper until I'm hanging on with fingertips that ache. In my shoes, my toes curl to cling to the lip of a mountain step I am very aware may change and drop me to my death.

“You want my daughters, you crazy bitches,” I gasp, clinging to stone that ripples with life. “If you let me die now, they're gone. What then?”

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It's no surprise, there is no response.

But I know they speak to Hades.

From the flat of the stone, a ridge swells. I reach for it with a hand that is drenched in the sweat of fear and exhaustion. Turmoil rises inside me as anger I've not let myself feel before this moment needles the knowing I hate that I've mostly accepted. The knowing that I will give my daughters to save the world, even as I still try, desperately, to think of a way out.

"It's not right." Tears burn my eyes. "You can't expect me to carry them and not love them. You can't expect me to just let them go."

"We have not asked you to let them go."

I stiffen, never having heard anything so clear and yet disembodied. It consumes my mind, a physical thing that moves beyond the boundaries of sound. It invades.

And yet I recognize it. The Moirai. The voices that predate even the ancient Gods.

Voices that are not of this world, even as they have guided its creation.

Voices that are of the Universes.

A ledge grows beneath my feet, holding me on steady ground as a vision floods my mind, stealing my sight. A memory, I realize. They had once been my guides. Their voices a tender tether tugging me away from the pain of a living end, and into the

care of Hydra. My soul fell through earth, grieving—mourning—and all the while they spoke to me softly. Their voices a cocoon that held me together through the fall, and straight into the care of a beast who would become my bonded protector.

I see that, too. The handing of my spirit from the arms of the three—the keepers of universal law—to the one they entrusted to devote herself to me. To healing. To life.

It has always been intended, me and Hydra. I was always meant to be born a giftless goddess. I was always fated to crave a love Demeter could not give. I was always intended to die in the Lethe, where my soul was fated from the spark of its conception to take refuge with the protector who had always been called monster. It was always intended that I be born to my human parents, that I know their unending love. That I bask in their human protections, so fragile and yet so strong. And they were always intended to grieve me.

A flash of sunlight blinds me before the vision settles into one of Mom. My heart contracts. She's standing at the kitchen sink window that overlooks a barren farm field touched with the first signs of cold weather. Her hand is clutching the cross she wears around her neck for comfort, her eyes misted with a grief I know will cling. Then I see Daddy. His sun-weathered hands pulling her into his plaid covered chest. He drops a shaky kiss to her hair and squeezes her just a little tighter. The scene is sad, but it swiftly changes to one in the future. Mom is happy. She is laughing, sipping wine on a ship deck and Daddy is sitting close, watching the fall of the sun into an endless stretch of water. They're holding hands, at peace.

“Even as there is healing after loss, you live forever in their hearts.” It's those voices again. The Moirai.

Mom and Dad drift away to another vision. A lifetime of pain cuts through me, slicing into limb and organ and hope. Thousands of years of agony stretch inside only a few minutes, and I scream.

I realize, through the terrible pain, that I am being fed Hydra's suffering. Sweat beads my brow and my knees threaten to buckle. My forehead finds reprieve in the cool chill that pours from the black stone as I catch breath in lungs that shudder.

"You were always meant to heal her suffering. And she was always meant for you."

Hades' roar in my mind is deafening. It echoes the one the Moirai pull from memory—the one which finally led me to him. But this time, there is a subtle tugging I can't ignore. A ribbon of something darker, something which led me to obsess with ancient Gods and the smear of paint—a remembering of a life lived that was not yet finished.

I was always intended for him. Bound to him.

"His war is your war, for you are one split in two."

I am internally brutalized when my mind finally quiets. But there is only time for a gasped breath before another swell stretches from the stone. It comes just in time for the one beneath my feet to fall away. I cling, my feet dangling with nothing to catch me. I'm thousands of feet in the air. The fall would be disastrous. Deadly.

Hydra roars.

Her fear and rage sets fire to the blood in my veins, and my fingertips curl into stone, clinging. My muscles burn, and I swear they tear as I hold my weight, my feet scraping the mountainside for anything I might catch.

Sweat trickles toward my eye, and fearing the sting of it, I wipe it on the arm of my shirt. The streak of red I leave behind on the white is alarming. I've cut my forehead on the stone. Or the stone has cut me. I'm not sure which.

This realm is built on the sacrifice of my innocence.

It is fed by the power of my soul.

It will continue to feast on my blood, sweat, and tears. Continue to thrive with every thunderous beat of my heart.

Three voices speak as one. “The Underworld will survive, becoming the Kingdom of Gods and Kings, in the sacrifice of its dearest twin goddesses.”

I whimper. Just as I think I am going to fall, that it’s the end for me, my foot catches on a ledge that wasn’t there before. The mountain shifts beneath my body, the perpendicular slope tilting to a slanted incline in which my body falls heavily into.

My overheated body sinks into cool stone.

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I gasp in breath that tastes of shadows and memories and sacrifice. The emotional toll just as significant as the physical.

My eyes roll back in my head with exhaustion a moment before they snap back open at the sound of Hades' dark roar of rage. I see him to my side, trying to reach me with a frightening desperation even as the mountain fights his attempts, pulling him further away.

He's in his Gods' Form. The rippling black muscle and veins of flowing magma would be terrifying to any other, but they are a comfort to me. A comfort and a pain. A pain because I can't help but think of the last time, I'd seen him like this—the time I first had him like this. The time we conceived the daughters I've not yet felt inside me, but know they are there. A tiny spark of new life crafted entirely of love.

“There is no truer sacrifice than love's sacrifice.”

I whimper again, pleading to the Fates, “Look at him. Look how he loves us.”

There is no answer.

I try again, “He won't survive losing them. We won't survive losing them.”

“The world won't survive you keeping them.”

The mountain shifts again. This time I find myself sliding down at a speed that is terrifying. A scream rips from my lungs. Hades and Hydra roar, but it fades into the darkness I am pulled into.

I see two worlds simultaneously. It is as though they are layered one atop the other. One is elevated. The people are smiling and happy and prospering. The greedy governments have been stripped and cast aside. A new and enlightened ruling in which truly serves not only the people, but the globe as a whole, exists. It is no longer divided, each country having something to offer. Trade and enlightenment and genuine care become the currency at which we prosper. There are countries, but the divide is gone. Differences and culture are respected and celebrated. Learning is the highest wonder and spiritual awakening the highest goal. There is no more hunger or slavery or hatred or racial divide. No need to conquer or eliminate. There is comfort and encouragement and love.

And lurking beneath it in a layer that bleeds torment and anger is a future world in which we never escaped the path we're now on. One in which governments rage wars at the expense of the people to line their coffers, and slavery is still as present as ever in the form of the working class taxed beyond the ability to sustain life. A slavery to big pharma and corporations, their only intention to generate monetary wealth from the souls it feeds into its inescapable prison. Where races are blindly pitched against one another in an effort those in higher power use to throw attention off the crimes they commit. Where people are fed anger, and their only outlet is more crime. A world where the politics of vengeful, dark Gods bleeds into the governing of humanity—a world where, in a future not too far away, utter devastation steeped in hatred and fear spreads like a plague.

In one world, we've given our daughters. In the other, we have kept them for ourselves.

I can make only one decision. There is only one decision to make.

The mountain levels, saving my fall.

I pull heavy breaths of air into my lungs, my raw fingertips clutching at stone.

Tears leak from my eyes, and I swear I feel the saw of grief cut my heart in two.

Daring a look up the black mountain, I see that my path is finally stationary. Gone is the cloud cover that concealed the mouth of the cave. My path is clear.

And my battle is complete.

The path to the Moirai is different for everyone, not because they like to toy with us separately, but because we all have a different mountain within our minds that we must first climb before we can sit before them.

Much like I've always believed we must climb the mountain of life before we can bask in the loving light of God.

I don't know why, but there is a deep comfort in that thought. A comfort that finally offers me the strength to begin the climb that will lead me to face my Fate.

Chapter

Ten

Persephone

Somehow, I crest the mouth of the cave as Hades does. The magma in the veins of his God's Form moves as fast as the fire that flares in his eyes. Impossible heat caresses my skin even as it turns the stone beneath his feet the color of burning coals, leaving his footprints to cool in the wake of every step.

Seeing that mark of his heat now—it's the first time I've truly realized how hot he burns. I don't know how I am able to withstand his heat. It should incinerate me. I am only human.

“You are so much more than human. You are what has never walked before but will walk again.”

I shudder at the power of the voices in my mind and reach out for Hades’ hand. He curls his monstrous fingers around my hand, turning to face me. His heavy breaths are hot on my face as his fiery eyes scan me for injuries, settling on the single cut on my forehead.

“I’m fine,” I promise him.

“You are hurt.”

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“Hades.” I pull my hand from his to reach up to catch his face between my palms. “I’m okay.” I scan the length of him, knowing I will see no injuries even as they are there. The climb isn’t a physical battle so much as it is mental. Still, it is harrowing. And the cuts of the journey are deep. “How are you?”

He shakes his head. Through the fire in his eyes, I read the burning emotion that lies there. My own heart responds, and I fall into his chest.

“Oh, Hades.” He’s so big in this form, I can’t circle my arms around his frame to touch my fingertips. I hold him anyway.

“I’ve always wanted them,” he finally admits to me what he hasn’t been able to admit aloud. “Children.” When I stay quiet, he continues, “I thought my seed was dead.”

Those words strike a place so deep inside me, I can’t help but flinch. “No, Hades.” I tip my head back to peer up at him. “Nothing about you is dead.”

“I am the God of the Dead.”

“You are the God of Afterlife.”

He cracks a sad smile. “Yes, because of you, little goddess.”

“No,” I argue. “You’ve always been the God of Afterlife.” I try to push light into the darkness with a smile and a tease, “But every King needs a Queen.”

A sad sound escapes the confines of his chest. His arms come around me tighter. “We

don't have a choice, little goddess."

I know what he's referring to. I nod through the aching of my heart. "I know."

"They are the final piece of this war."

He saw what I saw. Maybe more to put that look in his flaming eyes.

I blink back tears. "I know."

"I am so sorry."

"Me too." I pull back, because I need for this to be over. I need to be with him. I need—time to lick my wounds. "Which way do we go?"

The cave at the mouth of the black mountain is enormous, and from it multiple arms stretch into the blackness of the deep. There are too many paths to choose from, and I sense that not all of them lead to the Moirai. That if we choose wrong, we will forever be lost to the bones of those who have tried before us and failed.

"The path will become clear when they are ready," Hades confirms my fear. "We must wait until then."

I snort a little huff. "They're a tricky lot, the Moirai."

Hades barks in amusement. "I can't imagine anyone has thought of them like that in all their existence."

I shrug. "It's true, is it not?"

He grows serious. "The Laws of the Universe are not so clear to the living. Not even

to Gods, Persephone.”

“How can that be? You’re a God. All powerful.” Hades studies the pinch of my brow, his own responding in kind.

Finally, he admits, “I don’t know.”

“This is what you have come for. The answers to your questions, to the truth you seek, will be revealed at the end of your journey. But know, King and Queen of Gods, that such knowing is heavy. It is the weight of the Universe, and not all are crafted to carry such burden.”

The sound of the three voices seems to crawl from the very walls, leaching into my mind. I look, wide-eyed at Hades. “Did you hear that?”

He nods gravely.

And then the pathways before us begin to shift and merge until there is only one that remains. Hades pulls in a breath. “This is our path, little goddess.”

I slide my hand into his, and we walk together, side by side, into the darkness.

We are guided by nothing but intuition. There is no light in this darkness. Beside me, Hades glows. The magma in his veins blazes. His eyes are twin flames in the pitch black, but he does not light our way.

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The darkness feasts on him, containing his glow to the presence of him.

I am not sure how long we walk in this darkness, but there is a foreboding that settles in the presence of great power, and this is the greatest power of them all.

I can sense the truth of that just as deeply as I sense that there is more to this place. This universe. This world and the realms that we consist of. There is more.

I have never felt such a sense of knowing as I do here in this black mountain, under the presence of this great power.

Inside my body, my very soul hums. As though it is aware that it is close to that which it comes from.

The heavy weight continues to press on me from every direction with every step that I take. I wonder if Hades has been here. I think that he has. I want to ask, but I cannot force the words to the surface. Silence for this walk is demanded. I sense that, too.

I cannot tell if we walk at an incline or a decline. I do not know if our path winds or is straight. I cannot tell up from down.

I have never felt so small as I feel now. So insignificant, like a speck of dust floating in the wind. I am simply a piece of the puzzle that is the universe in which I live.

We are all but pieces, small and insignificant when alone. But when one is missing, the whole picture is distorted.

We are meant, as souls, to exist together. This, I sense, is truth as well. It comes to me as plainly and honestly as any other thought. I am surprised that I have not had it until now.

I doubt that it is my own, but rather theirs, a thought they feed me in preparation for what is to come.

And that's when it happens. In the distance, there is a flicker. A hue of light. I imagine it's what one might see on the bed of the sea as the moon spills its glow through clear waters. It is not overwhelming or overpowering, and yet it is abundant. It commands that same foreboding that caresses the presence of this great power.

The light grows as we grow nearer, but it does not intensify. It is soft, like the wings of a butterfly or fingertips drifting across naked skin. It is gentle, calling goose flesh to the surface, a whisper of a feather that promises touch and never truly delivers.

Hades' hand tightens around mine. I move closer to him, seeking the comfort of his strength, sensing that we are more powerful together. That we have always been more powerful together, and that is why we are so targeted. Hunted, as power often is.

Our pathway comes to an end as the room before us expands. I gape.

For all that I have seen since travelling to the Underworld, this is beyond my most wild imaginings.

There is a dais in the center of the room, the cave, the hollow of this mountain. It is massive, and in the center of the dais is a cauldron. It is not like any cauldron.

It is not charbroiled or black, or anything that you might imagine.

It is not small or convenient. It is massive.

It looks like the moon plucked from the very sky.

It is white, crystalline, burning bright. Mottling the bright white are chunky shadows and shallow craters.

I do not have to be told to know that it is the place of souls. The beginning of souls. Where they are sourced and plucked and planted. Where they begin. Where they are crafted—spun from the threads of the universe.

This place, this cauldron, is the tether in which our world is bound to universal consciousness.

This, too, comes to my mind unbidden. A thought, not my own. An answer to a question I did not realize I asked.

The cauldron swirls: I suspect it never stops.

The ceiling is a ceiling of crystal mirrors and stars. And from it, I can see inside the cauldron where souls glow, pure, and beautiful, and the softest shade of pink in a sun lit bed. As though they've been touched by just a hint of lifeblood.

Mixed in to these pink souls are those of a pure and beautiful, bright white. They look like feathers, the way they move. Illuminated by moonlight, soft and graceful.

Gods and mankind together, crafted within the same cauldron. We are closer than I ever thought we could be—humans and Gods.

From the sea of souls in the cauldron, one rises to the surface. No, not one. It's two souls. Two bright white feathered souls connected together as though sewn by a thread of gold and ribboned together by the softest pink of humanity.

Our souls. Mine and Hades', bound by Fate.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:09 am

I'm looking at my own soul.

Gooseflesh rises over every inch of my body, prickling my skin. I shiver, my teeth knocking under the shock of it all.

Hades moves closer, enveloping me in his eternal warmth. I sink into the comfort of it, and watch as two more souls, both bright white, rise to the surface of the cauldron. They glow with an ancient presence that demands reverence, and from high above, in the mirrored ceiling of crystals that somehow depict sea and sky—stars of shimmering gold begin to burn in a bed of sun.

The walls of the cave around us quiver with gentle reflections like the soft waves of a sun-lit sea casting tendrils of life on the walls. Beneath our feet, the gentle moon-white of the stone floor begins to crackle and vein with threads of black and gold. I gasp as, from the shadows, the three appear. The Fates. The Moirai.

Air lodges in my lungs as they move, their motions eerily fluid like spilled water or the roll of the waves. They come from three separate corners, and yet they move as one toward the cauldron.

My mind struggles with what I see, for they are not old, and they are not young.

They are a shifting mirage of the beginning, middle, and end.

They are youth and age. They are naivete and wisdom. Wrinkles smooth into fine lines that tighten into an ageless youth, before shifting again into an ancient being beyond the bounds of time and knowledge.

I expected that they would all look the same, but they do not.

Still, I know who each is without having to ask or be told. It is a knowing that is simply engraved in me from the very beginning. I suspect it is the same knowing that one would have if they'd found themselves sitting before the throne of God.

Maybe they are God. Maybe they are the one spirit.

Maybe they are just a piece of that one spirit.

Maybe we all are. Maybe, just maybe, we're not meant to have the answers to those questions.

But Clotho, the spinner—her eyes are entirely white. They swim with the clouds of the blind, and yet I get the sense that she sees everything. She sees lifetimes in the span of seconds as she spins her threads of fate.

Her hair is a crisp, bright white. It is not the wiry white of hair that has lost its color with age. It is alive and youthful. It glows in such a way that and even though it is white, it is a color.

Her shifting age begins to slow as she steps closer to the cauldron, finally settling into a picture of youth. If I had to give her an age, I would say she looks around ten years old.

It is unsettling to see it, for the power that she wields is massive. Such power in one so small, so innocent looking—it's rather terrifying.

And yet I am not afraid of her.

There is a compassion in the threads that she weaves. A love she spins into the fabric

of the lives she oversees.

She settles her hands—her fingers long and thin, nimble—on the lip of the moonlit cauldron. The veins of black and gold jump from the floor to the bowl of the cauldron. Slowly, like lightning dipped in gold and onyx, they climb the cauldron before finally settling under each of her hands.

She bows her head and Lachesis, the allotter, moves.

She is the one who decides the paths that must be traveled, the web in which fate must be woven. She pushes the souls toward their destiny, willing or unwilling. Her eyes are the brightest blue. Unlike Clotho, she is not blind. Her eyes are sharp and clear.

She sees as I see, and yet she sees beyond what I can see.

She can see through the folds of fate and time what must come to pass, and the punishment we will all bear if destiny is ignored.

Like Clotho, her appearance shifts ages until finally settling somewhere in middle age. Gentle lines crease her face, but there is a touch of youth in the depths of her eyes, even as they command a wisdom that is ancient.

And as her hands lift to connect with the cauldron, another thread of onyx races with gold over the glowing symbol of the moon that is the cauldron to settle beneath her palms.

Her hair is long and gray, the strands silver and healthy, for she is not old, but she is age.

She is life and the allotter of it.

I begin to shift, my body stirring against Hades. He quiets me with a single warning, “Persephone.”

I stand straighter, alert once again as the last of the three moves.

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Atropos feels different, moves different. There is a stealthiness to her lithe actions which calls a hum of awareness to the very bones beneath my skin. It banishes the illusion of gentle love I'd felt in the power of presence that poured from Clotho and Lachesis.

Atropos is the inevitable. She is death.

She decides the end and cuts the cord. Her shears have spread tails of fear and devastation throughout myth and legend for eons.

When her shifting age settles, she is an old woman. A crone.

And yet there is still beauty that clings to her, much like the beauty which clings to an ancient gem. It will always sparkle under the light of the moon, even if the gold that surrounds it is tarnished in time.

She has black hair and black eyes.

Together, they are the three Fates. The Moirai.

They are the oracles of the universe. They are law, absolute.

They are stunning and unsettling.

They would look entirely human—humanoid bodies, ears, eyes, and noses—but they're missing their mouths.

Where there would be lips, there is nothing. Simply skin. It is as though no mouth has ever been.

They all look to me and Hades at once. Atropos sets her hands on the cauldron, and onyx and gold race to settle beneath her palms. The floor beneath our feet rattles a violent quake that pushes through the heart of the mountain. From the depths of the cauldron, two souls rise.

They are colorless.

One would think white would be colorless, but it isn't. There is color in white.

These souls are unlike any other in the cauldron. They glow without substance, without being.

They have not yet been formed, I realize, as Clotho raises her hands to the ceiling. Tipping her head back, her blind eyes wide, she begins to spool from the gold of the stars the very Threads of Fate.

She pulls, and pulls, and pulls, and finally, when the last of the thread falls into her hands, she trains those cloudy eyes on me and Hades.

Chapter

Eleven

Persephone

“Your daughters,” three voices, always together, speak as one. They are not separate, the Fates. Though they possess separate bodies, they are one consciousness.

It is a consciousness that, I realize with a chill, is tapped into something far higher than we have dared to tap.

Even as they speak in my mind, there is a projection to their voice that tells me Hades hears them just as clearly.

He stiffens around me, his hands curling into fists at my belly. The black granite of his flesh tightens and the magma that runs in his veins flows faster. A low and ominous sound begins as a rattle in his chest. I sink deeper into him.

The Moirai speak again, all now looking at us even as those threads of gold twist gently through Clotho's lithe fingers. Even as Clotho does not technically see through the turbulent clouds that tumble in her eyes. "The goal is shared consciousness."

What? I thought we were speaking of our daughters.

"The highest power comes not from guarding secrets and assets, but from a collective joining of souls which stems from one consciousness. This is the true path to power."

"Then why are we so divided?"

"This must begin with the bonding of soul mates."

I scoff. "This sounds like a conversation you should be having with Zeus."

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“Reformation is not possible for all. Sometimes, the cord simply must be cut.”

“So cut his cord!” I gesture wildly to Atropos. “Cut it and be done with it. What do my daughters—our daughters—have to do with this?”

“When you cut off one head, another will grow in its place. There are grave consequences to cutting the cord of an eternal life. The power must live on, but where?”

Frustration sparks inside me. They’re talking in riddles.

“This is the way. We have seen it.” I can’t get over the eerie invasion of their voices. “The power of soul mates is the way, and it began, long ago, with you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Without love, the power of the Gods is unchecked and selfish. This world was nearly lost. We were close to giving up, to returning home. Close to allowing the realms of this universe to feast upon themselves until there was nothing left to feast upon. And then—” Their hands lift to the ceiling where I can’t miss the collage of images that play out my life in the crystal. “We saw you.”

“Me?”

“Soul mates are not simply about binding souls. It is far more complex, even as it is simple.”

Again, with the riddles. I bite my tongue.

Hades grinds out, “Zeus split all the souls of the humans he created. He rarely creates new humans today. He is too lazy. Now, they cycle through the Underworld and the living realm, entering new life contracts with the Elysian Tree when they wish to be reborn. When they wish for another chance at life. Rarely does a human soul find its other half. Even if they find it, they are too blind to see it.”

The Moirai turn their eyes on him. “But what happens when those rare souls do find one another?”

“They are complete.”

“Yes, complete. A circle. Conscious of that which binds them.”

“Gods and Goddesses are complete. We are formed complete.”

“You are whole but for the threads you sacrifice to the cauldron. To the essence of life. To consciousness. We had hoped, after the devastating rule of the early Titans, that such a sacrifice would humanize your eternal souls enough that you might lead your people, your realms, with unity and love. We were wrong. Instead of joining the universal connection in which feeds all souls, the divine power of Chaos, the Gods adopted the ways of their sires, entertaining war and hatred and greed and suffering. You spread these toxins through the souls the universe entrusted you to guard and cherish. To teach and love.”

“Why not smite us all then?” Hades spits.

“We nearly did. And then we saw her. A future not yet come to pass. A speck of hope amidst an ocean of desolation, a desert of disgrace.” The Moirai take a moment of pause. “The universe spoke, and as is our way, we listened. The cauldron formed

Persephone's soul. Clotho spun the thread of Persephone's life. Lachesis oversaw destiny in the binding of your eternal souls in the cauldron, and Atropos cut the cord of her life—but not entirely—for we could not risk the consequence of truly cutting the cord of an eternal life. Threads remained so that consciousness would never truly be lost, and today it will be restored, and you will understand, Persephone, what must be done.”

I watch in shock as the bright white souls, bound by threads of gold and woven with the faintest glow of pink rise from the pool of souls, the pool of consciousness, in the cauldron. They hang, suspended in the air. A full-body chill threatens to turn my flesh to ice as I watch our souls quiver above the cauldron, and then the crackling gold and onyx beneath the palms of the Moirai spears one half of the bound souls. My half. My soul.

There is no preparation for what happens next. My past life—all of it—merges with my present in a collision inside my mind that is wrought with such an agony, I am helpless to contain my scream. The sound echoes off the cave wall to dagger back toward me, the splitting shrill of it stabbing deep into my consciousness. Agony spills hot inside me. I am no longer cold as I am assaulted with every memory of my past life as the Giftless Goddess.

Each memory plays out in hues of gold, a living, ancient recollection. I see it all. Every moment. Every betrayal. Every sin and hope and dream and finally, the end.

But it is not done.

I'm on my knees now, Hades' body cocooning mine as he whispers tender words of assurance in my ear.

I can't focus on him. The gold memories are gone, but in their place are memories coated in the soot of death. The black spear surges in my exposed soul, syphoning

hundreds of years in the caves of the Underworld with Hydra.

I see all the visions the Fates fed me in that time. All the pain and suffering of the living realm, both past, present and future. I watch the bond between my soul and Hydra's solidify with time and shared wounds and healing. And I know what is yet to come. What must be done...

The games I must play.

The Gods I must fool.

And the Gods I must win.

"Please," I beg. I think I hear Hades shout a curse of vengeance the Moirai, thankfully, ignore.

"The path forward is yours to choose. Will you choose to sacrifice the youth of your only daughters in the name of eternal love or will you choose the way of the Gods before you? Will you choose to dull the prick of your own pain at the expense of every other life, Persephone, Goddess of Spring and Fertility and New Life?"

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I sob a gut-wrenching sob. It all hurts so much. The gold and onyx blades of my past life and death through my exposed soul. The dangerous games I must play, and the sacrifice I must make to ensure an end in which we all survive.

The choice is mine, even as it isn't a choice at all.

"I choose life," I cry. "I choose love."

All three turn back to the cauldron as Hades gathers me against his chest. My skin is dewy with sweat, and a fierce exhaustion weighs heavy inside my body. Still, I can't allow myself to look away from the three sisters of Fate as they raise their hands high.

The blades of black and gold release my soul, spilling it gracefully back into the cauldron.

In its place, I watch as the translucent souls of our daughters rise. "Behold the freedom of a mother's choice." The three spears of black plunge into one soul as the three spears of gold plunge into the other. The translucent souls begin to burn a bright white, one marbled with veins of gold and the other with veins of onyx. "A daughter bound to darkness and a daughter bound to light. A love promised to the Darkest Depths and the other intended for the City of Gold."

Two more souls rise from the deep of the cauldron, burning bright white. Gods' souls. Immortal souls.

Clotho's nimble fingers begin to dance an ancient dance as the golden threads begin

to weave our daughters' souls to the souls of Gods I can not name. The stitching is tight, knotted in such a way I know there is no undoing this tether. No severing this bind.

Lachesis swirls her hands over the cauldron, and from the deep of it rises two drops of red. One falls onto each soul, spreading pink ribbons as though to caress the eternal souls of our daughters in the warmth of humanity.

“A touch of humanity,” the three speak again. “And it is done.”

I watch, gasping for breath, as the souls of my daughters—bound eternally to their Gods—are gently returned to the cauldron. Fated to a life in which they will know great love and great pain, for I have seen it.

It will come to pass.

It is written.

Chapter

Twelve

Hades

“Zeus is throwing one of his tantrums.” Leuce's hand drifts absently where it rests on Minthe's thigh.

Minthe rolls her eyes, but there's a graveness to her voice that has the room on alert. “We all know what happens when Zeus is pitching a fit.”

Hermes pushes away from the table to lean forward, jaw hard, head bowed. From the

side, I watch as a muscle twitches in his cheek and his hands come together between his knees. Beside him, Thanatos touches a pale hand to his back. He gives his head a tired shake, but asks quietly, “How many fires burn?”

“Too many,” Leuce replies without really answering.

“And the seas?” Hermes dares a peek. “Do they invade the land?”

“The waters dance with Zeus’ wind, called to respond by the howl of the storm in the sky but?—”

“But what?”

“I believe Poseidon is working hard to contain the waves.” Minthe swallows, looking to me. “Is that why he’s not here?”

He’s not here because I didn’t call for him. I’m not sure I can look at him right now, knowing what I know. Knowing that his soul has been bound, eternally, to one of my daughters not yet born.

I still can’t shake the warning the three sisters had spoken into my mind as I lifted Persephone’s limp, exhausted body into my arms. “Speak not of the Gods who have been bound today, even to the Gods themselves. Fate is a fickle thing, and knowing can alter the path in ways that cannot be undone, King of Gods.”

I bristle at the secret I must keep from everyone. Even Persephone.

“How else does Zeus torment the living realm?” I ignore Minthe’s question for one of my own.

“Oh, you know.” Leuce waves a hand with nails dipped in silver. “Cyclones,

tornadoes, quakes. They're striking worldwide. Nowhere is safe from his wrath. Nowhere untouched." She shrugs again, but I can see through the flippancy, the hatred that burns in her eyes. Fear for the people is a fire in her heart, and it blazes. "It's Zeus being Zeus. Again."

"It will only get worse." I can't help but think of the fate Persephone carved into Hydra's cave. I sigh heavily, warily.

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I am exhausted. Worse, I am afraid.

“Zeus has ended entire civilizations while less incensed.” Hermes looks up, his eyes filled with warning none of us can ignore.

Charon pushes off the wall where he stands close to the exit. He’s looking straight at me. I know he senses the secrets I keep when he demands soft and dangerously low, “We’ve watched the rise and fall of civilization, welcomed souls into the Underworld time and again after a season of his wrath. We have been helpless in the past to do anything but watch the destruction, so if we are helpless, why are we discussing it? If we are helpless, what does it matter?” Charon places both hands on the table as he pins his gaze to mine, seeking the truth I keep—the truth I’ve not yet processed. “Can we stop Zeus, Hades? Do we now have a power we’ve never possessed before?”

I do not move for long minutes. My mind races through all that I know, and all that I have not said. Finally, I speak, “Persephone is pregnant.”

The room is so quiet. Too quiet.

I look to the Gods and Nymphs who have been my closest family. Their faces are ashen. Thanatos’ words are little more than a whisper of breath. “What does this mean, Hades?”

“We have been to see the Moirai.”

Hypnos straightens in his chair. “You took her to them?”

“It was necessary.”

“They are?—”

I cut him off. “Not of this world.” When there is complete silence again, I repeat softer, “They are not of this world. The Moirai have a power the like we as Gods do not possess. They can see the path of fate, manipulate it, even.” I frown, thinking yet again of the claim that true power is in a connection of the realms that have always been divided. Connection in the way of consciousness.

We’re so divided, the path to such a future feels impossible.

The battle will be long and hard and wrought with loss, beginning with my own.

Minthe stands, drawing the gazes of those in the room. “I’m sorry. But you just said Persephone is pregnant?”

“She is, yes.”

“But—I meanhow?”

I raise a brow. “Do I really need to explain to you, Minthe, of all nymphs, how babies are made?”

She rolls her eyes and I smile weakly. I need the humor. Without it, I might just crumble under the weight of everything.

“As if.” Folding her arms over her chest, she thrusts a hip to the side in attitude that is pure Minthe. “All joking aside, Hades, you’re a God and she’s human.”

“I am aware.”

“Well, that hasn’t happened in—well, since—” She pauses, considers and exclaims, “It’s been a long time! And it’s not as if Zeus hasn’t tried.”

My gaze slides to Hermes. “Is Zeus still taking to the bed of human women?”

Hermes shakes his head. “He rarely leaves Olympus.”

“And the human women in Olympus?”

Hermes dips his chin. “Much to Hera’s disgrace, he does continue to entertain the women of Olympus.”

“But he has not sired a child with any of them?” I ask.

“It’s been thousands of years since a demigod was born, Hades.”

“This is going to change everything,” Thanatos mumbles, more to himself.

“It will,” I agree, again calling the eyes of my most trusted confidants to me. “My daughters will change everything.”

“Daughters?” Hecate’s eyes narrow. It’s the first time she’s spoken. She’s always been an observer. “Two?”

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“Two,” I confirm, and now that I have their attention, I reveal the pain we will all soon suffer. “They will be born here in the Underworld, as Goddesses. And they will die shortly after. Atropos has her shears ready, and she will fray their life thread as she frayed Persephone’s. The souls of my daughters—our daughters—daughters of the Underworld—will travel to the living realm where human women will bear them. Like Persephone, their immortal souls will be touched by humanity, and it is because of that they will become the immortal queens of humanity, taking their places at the sides of the Gods to whom their souls have been stitched together by the thread spun by the hand of Clotho. This is the fate of the daughters of the Underworld, which has been seen by Lachesis, and decreed by the three.”

There is silence. And then there is no more silence.

The room erupts in chaos. Everyone speaks at once. Questions fly. Curses are spit. Rage flows on tap at the horror of losing the precious gift we’ve been given. Life in a place where no new life has ever been conceived. Sprung from the ash of the land, such as Hydra and those like her, but never conceived of living seed.

Never before.

My mind quiets as my mate—the mother of my daughters—appears in the door.

And then it comes to me in a wash of cool horror.

The Underworld has conceived life. But only once before.

It conceived her.

And now she is the portal through which life has again been seeded.

My special, lovely little goddess blessed and cursed by the Moirai to heal the realms of the sins of Gods.

“I’m awake.” Her eyes connect with mine as the room falls silent. She has been in and out of sleep since our visit to the Moirai, but never conscious enough to converse with. Now, she is aware. Completely aware. “I remember everything, Hades. Everything.”

For the second time, the room erupts.

Chapter

Thirteen

Persephone

The water is deliciously warm. It turns out spending a week in and out of sleep, just conscious enough to eat before drifting back into the bliss of mental darkness, really takes it out of a girl. My body aches, as though I’ve started lifting weights for the very first time. Or maybe I’m getting a flu.

I hope I’m not getting a flu. I can’t afford to be sick. Not when an immortal war of Gods crackles just under the surface of the reality humanity knows.

Urgh, this kind of stress can’t be good for a pregnant woman.

Goodness, I’m pregnant. I’ve hardly had time to process the fact I’m having a child. Two children.

Hades' voice breaks the silence. "So, you remember?"

My eyes drift from the water that shimmers under the faint glow of flames that flicker within the blue agate chandelier to the God who sits across from me in the warm bathing pool.

He's so handsome. Even though he's mine, and I know he's mine, there's a sense of awe when I look at him. Of wonder.

Even now that I have memories of the past, that I have memories of centuries of loving him, he still sparks a quickening inside me when I look at him.

Even now, I can't look away.

Can't see him and not be drawn closer. Not want more. Everything. Him.

Even now, having seen the magical gold thread that binds our souls in unbreakable stitches, I marvel at the draw I feel toward this man. This God.

I understand the reason that I can't fight it, can't pull away, can't distance myself. Still, I honestly believe without those gold threads binding us tightly together, there would still be a pull. There would still be a draw I would be helpless to deny.

Putting the magic of fate aside, I would still want him because he is more than bound to me.

He is Hades, God of Death and Afterlife. He is compassion wrapped in darkness. He is enchanting and kind and the most loyal of the Gods.

He is the father of my daughters, and he is mine.

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My fingertips are a whisper against my belly. The new lives inside me are little more than a flicker, and yet I am entirely aware that they will change everything.

Hades' hands move through the water in the motion of a breaststroke, but he does not come closer. He does not move to close the space that dares stand between us.

From across the bathing pool, he peers at me through dark eyes that dance with dim flames.

He's been tense since I left him in the night to visit Hydra. He's been uneasy since I burst from the sinkhole on her back, bonded to her in a way that I am bonded to nothing else—not even to Hades.

My bond to Hydra isn't a soul bond: it is a love bond. A bond of friendship tethered by centuries alone together in darkness, unspooling the visions of fate and destiny.

“I remember,” I finally confirm his question.

“And?” he pushes gently for more. I think there's fear in his eyes.

“I thought it would change everything. I thought getting my memories back would be this big reveal...” My words drift off into thoughts I can't make myself voice. They are too much. Too complex.

I'm still processing.

His voice is impossibly deep. It echoes in a low rumble off the walls of the cave,

dripping incredulity. “It wasn't a big reveal?”

“No.” I shake my head. “It wasn't.”

His brows arch. “It felt pretty big to me, Persephone.”

“What do you mean?”

He blows a breath between puffed cheeks before he pulls another one deep. “You screamed like you were dying.” Discomfort edges his words. “I could do nothing to ease your pain. Even my arms around your body, my skin against yours, it seemed to cause you pain.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Don't apologize for what the Moirai have done,” he growls. It is a menacing sound, but I am not afraid. I could never be afraid of him. Of my mate.

“I'm sorry that you felt you weren't able to comfort me,” I say softly, holding his eyes. “But you did. Your arms were the only comfort that I had in that moment. When my past, when the memories came—” I shake my head. “You were my only comfort.”

“Little goddess.”

“They are so ugly, Hades.”

He looks pained to hear it, but I can't deny it. I can't deny that although there was beauty in our love, the foundation it stood on was hideous.

I close my eyes and lean my head back.

I can't look at him, can't see his hurt as I speak my truth. "I remember loving you. I loved you so much, so deeply, but I never felt loved by you. I tried so hard, and I was so foolish."

Hades stands. The water settles around his waist, droplets racing down the carved muscle in rivers. His chest is rising with sharp inhaled breaths he loses just as quickly. His hands curl into fists at his side, but otherwise, he does not move.

Softly, with centuries of rage seeping into his words, he tells me, "That is the way of narcissistic manipulation, little goddess. It is quiet and stealth. As the victim, you can't see it. And anyone who can't see that, who can't find the compassion to understand the abuse you suffered and the impact that had on you and your life, your decisions, is a grossly misguided soul with a deeply cruel heart." He inhales through his nose, releasing through his mouth. "Healing takes time. Many do not heal with a lifetime of time. For many, healing is a journey that is taken after death. I would know."

"Hades..." I close my eyes against the emotion that threatens to fall. I feel so impossibly fragile right now.

"Do you feel changed?" he asks gently.

I open my eyes to find that he is studying me. He's also moved closer, but he's not close enough to touch. Not yet.

"Not really, no." I frown, because I don't know how to express how I feel. "I feel like me, just with more memories. Like they're books I can pick from a shelf. They all have a story, a scene I can call to mind. They're there like any other memory, but I'm still me. I'm still the me I've always been."

Hades knocks his head slightly to the side, still studying me. "But you have

knowledge that you didn't have before.”

I dip my chin and admit hesitantly, “Yes...”

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“Persephone.” I can’t help but smile a little at his exasperation.

“There's a lot of Demeter, a lot of Zeus.” His eyes dip to my lips when I frown. “They were so—they are so ugly. So black inside.” I shiver at the memories of the God and Goddess that rise in my mind. “They make my parents; my real parents seem so beautiful.” Needing something to do, I push my hands through the water. “They weren’t perfect, you know? They had their faults, of course.” I sniffle. “But they loved me fiercely, Hades. They protected me when protecting me was so hard. They wanted me safe and happy. God—” The tears I’ve been fighting to contain finally slip free. A sob hitches my breath. “They loved me, Hades.”

He's no longer on the other side of the pool. I'm in his lap now and his arms are around my body. His scent, so warm and he surrounds me.

He murmurs through a kiss against my temple, “I know, little goddess. I know.”

“I miss them.”

He sighs a weighted sigh; this is yet another thing he can’t give me. They’re stacking up, and I know that’s weighing heavy on him. “I know.”

“Will I ever see them again?” I pull back to catch his eyes.

“Yes,” he vows. “When it is their time. When they have lived.”

“Will they—remember me?”

“Yes.” His voice is so gentle, so full of love.

My aching heart weeps with it. With all that I’ve gained and all that I’ve lost. All that I stand to lose still.

“I feel so tender,” I confess. “I don’t know if it’s because I’m carrying my own girls now, but the love my parents gave to me, the protection and the encouragement, even if it was sometimes pushy…” I laugh. “I appreciate it more now. I see it differently. I wish…”

When my words drift off, Hades prompts, “You wish?”

“I wish that I could be for them what my parents were for me.” Hades’ eyes follow my hand where it rests on my belly. “I wish that we could be for them what my parents were for me. That we could fight in their corner, even if they don’t see it. That we could encourage them, even if they think we’re being pushy. I just wish we could be their parents.”

“We are their parents, Persephone.”

“You know what I mean.”

“We will be their parents.”

I blink back the burn in my eyes. “We won’t, Hades.”

“Yes, we will,” he vows. “We will watch them grow from afar. We will encourage them, again, from afar. And when they are women, I promise you, they will return to us.”

“You can’t know that.” Even as I say it, I’m praying it is true.

“I do. I have seen it.”

I stiffen in his arms. “What do you mean, you've seen it? Did the Moirai show you something they didn't show me?”

Hades sighs. “It is not something I can discuss, but I do know that we will be with them again one day. Please, little goddess, believe me.”

I want to argue. I want to push. But as I search the dim flames that dance in his eyes, I know I can't. I know he won't budge. Can't budge.

I feel my shoulders fall even as I lean forward to press my lips softly to his. “I won't push.” I can taste his relief as I kiss him again. “Thank you for loving me even when loving me is hard.”

His big hands sink into my hair as he cups the back of my head. “Loving you has never been hard.”

He forgets I have my memories, I think, as I sink into his kiss.

I'm not sure that loving me has ever been anything but hard.

Chapter

Fourteen

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Persephone

Aethon won't look at me. His black eyes, wounded with the sting of betrayal, are fixed on the wall, the ceiling—anywhere but me.

My shoulders fall as I sigh, plopping down on a stool as a whisp of black catches my eye. I turn to see Hecate moving in her oddly motionless way across the floor of the stable. There is color in her skin now, although she is still notably pale.

Goosebumps rise over my skin as her eyes settle on me. Her gaze is always deeper than surface, probing beneath the skin.

I no longer cower under it, however.

Still, it's no question Hecate sees more than expected. I wonder what she sees now when she looks into me.

"You've been keeping to yourself." Hecate moves to Aethon, stroking down the long stretch of his muscular neck. When he leans into her touch, I have a hard time not letting my scoff slip loose.

I've been in here for the last hour trying to earn his forgiveness. He's done nothing but snub me.

"I think I'm processing."

"There's a lot to process." Her eyes of swirling grey probe mine. "How long have

you been here?”

“A while.” She strokes Aethon again. Again, he presses into her touch. “I don’t think he’s ever going to forgive me.”

“He was worried about you.” Her voice is smooth. When she shifts to give her gaze to Aethon, her hair moves as though it is floating through water, not air. It’s uncanny, but the longer I am here, the more I’m growing accustomed to all the weird.

“I—I was pulled to Tartarus that night.” I’m not sure if I’m telling her or Aethon. Either way, I’m begging them both to understand. To forgive me. “It was deep inside me, the pull. I couldn’t deny it. And I was afraid that Hades would catch me before I could ease whatever it was that tugged at me.” I shake my head, fixing my gaze on my hands in my lap. “Hades kept warning me away from Tartarus, but it was more than curiosity. It was need that drove me. I can’t explain it—but the pull was bone deep. I couldn’t have ignored it. It would have torn me to shreds.”

There is silence, and then I hear Aethon shuffling closer. He dips his head, his nose bumping against my hands in my lap. I suck in a rattle of breath.

I think my heart weeps. A little sob breaks free, and I lean forward to press my lips to the soft spot between his black eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him honestly. “I’m sorry I betrayed you like I did. I’m sorry I left you.”

Aethon bumps me with his nose, saying so much with that single touch. “Please forgive me?”

I get another bump, and Hecate floats closer. “He forgives you, Persephone.”

Pushing up to stand, I throw my arms around Aethon's strong neck. Against his sleek black fur, I murmur, "Thank you."

Outside, I hear the strength of powerful wings pushing through air. Hydra is soaring high in the night sky, a jewel of sangria glittering under starlight. Flying is her favorite thing to do now that she's not bound by her cursed wounds to the healing waters of her sinkhole.

The sound of sharp wings cutting through the night fades into the distance, and my gaze finds Hecate's. Her deep red lips curl in a smile I am sure she means to be friendly, but it is entirely too sharp to be any such thing.

I'm not confident she is accustomed to having friends. At least not friends who aren't like Hades. Who aren't bursting with power and darkness.

I've seen Hades with the others. He's impossibly serious, even as he's kind. He doesn't give to them the same joy he gives so freely to me.

Hecate stops close to me, her scent of smoke and whipped berries curling around me.

Her sharp red smile widens. "Do you wish to ride with me, Persephone?"

"Ride?" I ask, surprised. I don't know why, but the last place I imagine Hecate is atop a horse.

Her head knocks just slightly to the side. "Now that Aethon has forgiven you, why not?"

Aethon stands taller, as though telling me he'd like to ride. Hecate's smile turns into a laugh. It's a husky sound that fits the rest of her perfectly.

“You've been doing all your riding with Hydra since you returned from the sinkhole. If I was a betting goddess—” Her grey eyes narrow. “Which I'm not—but if I was, I would bet that he is jealous.”

Aethon stiffens.

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To soothe him, I stroke his strong neck. Peering up into his glassy onyx eyes, I ask, “You're not jealous, are you, boy?”

A hot puff of air blows my hair out of my face. I bite back a chuckle. “Okay, maybe you are jealous.” He sighs a horsey sigh of pure drama. I fight the smirk that plays at my lips. “I'm sorry. I haven't replaced you; you know?”

Another hot puff, and this time I don't bother restraining my laugh. My heavy heart feels just a little lighter.

I look to Hecate. “I'd love a ride. Will you ride Alastor?”

Hecate's pale face pales. “Absolutely not. I'll ride Nycteus.”

“Oh...”

At my frown, Hecate explains, “Alastor is Hades' horse. The only other soul he would ever allow on his back is you.”

My eyes flick to Alastor to see that Hecate is not at all wrong.

There is no reception in his eyes that tells either of us that he would welcome Hecate on his back. Me however...

I think I could convince him.

I won't, though. There's something about his relationship with Hades that feels

sacred. I don't wish to come between them. I am perfectly happy with Aethon—unless I'm riding with Hades, of course.

I ride Aethon beside Hecate and Nycteus along the shore of the Marsh. The water is harrowing, of that much I'm aware. It's not a lake any soul would dare swim. Even the Gods who call the Underworld home don't venture into the waters of the Marsh. Apart from Charon, the waters of the Marsh are entirely avoided. But there is no denying that even though they are treacherous, they are beautiful.

The Marsh is so still, the surface looks like inky green glass. Surrounding the entirety of the Marsh is the inky blue surge of the River Styx. In the center, reachable only by Charon's blackboat is a patch of land inhabited by him alone. The midnight green grass surrounding the home with its bone white columns faces the direction of the sea. It is partially concealed by the tall trees drenched in midnight blue that tower over the small abode. And stretching into the still waters is a wooden dock in which Charon's boat will rest.

The boat is not currently resting. It cuts through the waters with a lethal grace, carrying souls between the shallow walls of the boat as Charon stands, cloaked in reaper black at the bow. The vision is a picture worthy of paint. The shallow walls of the boat swooping elegantly into the high curled stempost that matches the sternpost. It reminds me of something plucked straight out of Viking lore as it sails in the direction opposite the sea in which we travel.

Aethon's strong body carries my weight, settling me to the core. There is a sweet stability to riding him. Especially now that my memories are restored, and I can call upon the bond of the past. There had been many nights I'd taken to riding with him along the paths that curled throughout the Underworld. He'd ridden hard, my heart galloping in time with the pounding of his hooves into the earth as I loosed the pain of my broken heart into the ether of the Underworld.

Riding had once, long ago, been therapy for me.

And I've been unsettled for weeks now. Since the sinkhole. Since the carvings in the stone. Since finding out I am pregnant.

I can't escape the feeling that something is coming for me. Hunting me. A future I cannot hide from, no matter how I might try.

I feel like a sitting duck in dark water. I am helpless to swim away from what reaches up from the depths. I am helpless to flee the teeth that will cut into flesh and bone, dragging me beneath to a fate I will inevitably be forced to soon face.

But right now, for the first time since all that, I feel safe. I feel stable.

I pull in a deep breath that swells my lungs before releasing it in a long, audible sigh that draws Hecate's attention. I don't miss the curl of her lips, small as that sharp twitch of her lips is.

She clucks her tongue and Nycteus slows his pace. Aethon follows suit and we're soon strolling the shore of the Marsh at a pace that is leisurely and peaceful.

Hecate asks softly, "How have you been feeling?"

I don't look at her. "Fine. Why?"

"I know human women often struggle with pregnancy."

I arch a brow. "Have you had much experience with pregnant human women?"

Hecate shakes her head. "I can't say that I have." Her eyes slide sideways to me. "But I can say that I am a very powerful witch. One of the first, in fact. But I cannot sense

the life—the lives—that live in you.”

Her eyes study the frown that pinches between my brow. “Should you feel them?”

She nods soberly. “I should.”

My hand moves from where I’d been toying with Aethon’s deep black mane, something I recall from my ancient, new-to-me memories, that he adores—to cradle my belly. “What does it mean then, that you can't feel them?”

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She lifts a shoulder. "I can't say for sure, but I think the Moirai have cloaked this pregnancy. I'm not the only one who will be incapable of sensing them, Persephone."

The peace in my heart quickly vanishes to be replaced with something ugly and tense. "Okay...?"

"I've been thinking about the drawings on the walls of Hydra's sinkhole that you spoke of," Hecate tells me. "I've been thinking much about the future you predicted while your soul lived in the deep of the Underworld. I believe there is a reason your daughters are now cloaked. A reason your pregnancy is cloaked."

I don't realize I've been holding my breath until silence sits between us. My lungs ache when I release it, gasping, "What do you think the reason could be?"

Hecate's swirling grey eyes lock on mine. There is grave warning in the depths, warning I know I must heed.

"I think you should be careful who you entrust this secret to." Shivers erupt across my skin. Aethon whinnies, sensing my distress. "There will be those who would happily destroy them before they ever have a chance to be. If what you saw on the walls is correct, and I suspect it is, then you will be in grave danger very soon, my sweet friend."

Aethon stiffens beneath me. Under Hecate, Nycteus' muscles coil tightly beneath his sleek black hair.

"You think I am in danger?"

“I think you will soon be in danger. That you must be careful who you trust.”

“But...”

“I think you need to be prepared for this danger, Persephone.” Her eyes close slowly before reopening just as slowly. As though she, too, has been bestowed a vision. Tension seeps from her as she says, “I think you need to be prepared, for this danger you will soon face is not a danger that Hades, as much as he will try, will be able to protect you from.”

Chapter

Fifteen

Persephone

Convincing Linus to hand over his kitchen was no small feat. But a night off for Maya and Linus to visit Asphodel City wasn't something either could deny once I dangled the carrot.

Now, I've got the castle kitchen to myself. After familiarizing myself with the layout, which is huge, and scoping out all the goodies stored in all the places, I've got a saucy lasagna with extra cheese sprinkled with crispy bits of ham cooking in one of the ovens.

That's right, there is more than one oven in this kitchen, which is why I'm cracking eggs into a bowl of ingredients that already smells mouth-wateringly sweet.

I'm whipping up those ingredients when the air shifts. A hot heaviness settles in the massive space, and yet goosebumps rise on my skin. A quickening in my chest dances with a flutter in my belly. My breath hitches on a sharp inhale.

I don't dare look over my shoulder, trying my best to pretend that I don't feel him as he stalks me.

I fail, breath shuddering from my lungs as that hot heat teases a touch that doesn't come at my back. His hands find the counter on either side of my body, and the deep pitch of his murmured words trails hot against the bare skin of my shoulder.

"I've been looking for you."

I fight the smile that threatens to reveal just how much I love that he found me. "Oh?"

"For a moment, I worried I would have to hunt Tartarus for you." Needles of awareness prick my skin at the darkness in his words. "Hydra convinced me that you'd not left the palace."

"Mmm."

He lifts his hands from the counter to gather my hair before pushing it over one shoulder. Then his hands settle on the counter again, bracketing me there in the circle of his arms.

He dips his face into the nook of my neck that is now exposed for him. I feel the blade of his nose run the column of my neck. I shiver under the featherlight scratch of his scruff on tender skin.

"It smells good in here."

I suck in a rattle of breath at the feel of his hot lips pressing into my skin.

I can't speak.

I don't have to. Hades has plenty to say, apparently. "Are you cooking for me, little goddess?"

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My throat feels tight, but I push past it. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“I feel like I need to get back to the basics.” I clear my throat. “This is what you initially wanted me for, right? A home-cooked meal?”

His chuckle is dark. “I wanted you for far more sensual things, little goddess.”

“Oh?”

One hand swoops from the counter to settle on my belly. He pushes just enough to drag my back into his hot chest. The feel of him there behind me, so big and powerful is nearly enough to make me moan.

God, I missed this. Just being us.

These last weeks have been hard.

“Hades.”

His tongue lashes at the flutter of my pulse in my throat. My hands leave the bowl of batter to flatten against the counter.

I’m trying to steady myself, if only a little.

“What are you making me?”

“Lasagna.” I drop my head into the cradle of his shoulder, nearly moaning as he sucks at the skin of my throat. There is fire in my veins. It’s spreading quickly to my blood. The smoky haze of it is filling my thoughts.

“This doesn’t look like lasagna.” Hades pauses his kisses to peer into the bowl, but his hand at my belly is slowly drifting down to the slits in my gown.

His fingertips graze the flesh of my hip.

I laugh, but I can hardly manage my thoughts much less an entire sentence. “Cookies.”

“Mmm,” he rumbles a moan.

His fingertips drift over smooth skin, hot with want.

My belly is in knots, twisted up with need.

His touch is whisper soft as it moves from my hip to my thigh. I spread my legs eagerly as he palms my inner thigh with a borderline rough grip that sets off sparks of violent need inside me. I whimper. He groans. Then I feel the pad of his thumb sliding over my panties. I can already feel I am wet, and by the hum of pleasure that rumbles from the deep of him, I’d say he likes that.

“You’re so warm,” he praises. “So wet for me.”

“Yes,” I agree, pressing my core into his touch. “Always, Hades.”

I whimper when he pulls his hand away, spinning me around and lifting me onto the counter. His eyes are filled with flames and God—he’s so beautiful.

“I need to taste you.” His hands are already sliding up my thighs to hook the band of my panties, and then he’s pulling. My panties fall to the floor seconds before his hands press firmly into my inner thighs, spreading me for him.

And then his hot mouth is on me.

My head falls back as heat swoops throughout the entirety of my body. My palms are slick against the smooth stone of the counter, and I fall to my back. Sensation rockets inside me, spearing deep as Hades’ tongue swirls around my clit. He sucks and licks and pulls until madness swims inside my mind.

I’m a moaning mess as pleasure begins to crest inside me, and then he pulls his tongue away.

“No!” I cry out, sitting up enough to see the mischievous darkness that dances with those enchanting flames.

His fingers bite into my thighs as he spreads me even wider for him. Then he strokes all of me with his thumb.

A squeal rips from between my lips, but he holds me in place against the counter where I am helpless to escape the sensation.Him.

“Hades,” I cry.

He finds my entrance and spears me with his tongue. Stars of the universe wink behind my eyes as I thrust my fingers into his hair. I think I’m trying to hold him in place against me, inside me. But he’s too strong. He thrusts his tongue inside me again and again, swooping up to stroke that maddening bundle of nerves inside me before thrusting again. I’m lost to sensation as he fucks me with his tongue, holding tight to the tie that knots his hair at his nape.

“Oh, God,” I gasp. “Oh, God!”

His thrusts quicken inside me until that pressure he built finally detonates.

I fall back limply against the counter, eyeing him through the haze of a red-hot orgasm as he stands proudly. His full mouth is wet with the shine of my pleasure, his jaw hard and square. He has never looked more like the God of the Underworld than he does in this moment. And I have never felt so much the sacrifice than I do spilled out in orgasmic bliss on the stone of his counter.

His hands, thick and veined make quick work of the buckle of his belt. He sinks one hand into the black of his boxers before pulling out his length. It’s impossibly hard and thick, long and dripping need from an angry red tip.

The knot in my core tightens painfully as Hades lines his tip with my entrance, and sinks in to the hilt in one hard thrust.

I watch, breathlessly entranced as he throws his head back in pleasure. Veins rise in

the column of his neck and a sound of vicious pleasure tears from between his lips.

He's so beautiful, lost to this need. Lost inside me.

My body responds to the thought, clenching around him. And that's when his control snaps. His hands find my hips, gripping me tight as he pulls me to the edge of the counter, and he fucks me like a God lost to his Goddess.

Chapter

Sixteen

Hades

Her green eyes are filled with light as I hook the leg of her chair with my foot, dragging her closer. Not looking away from her eyes that dance with those shimmering veins of malachite, I bend, hook her feet, and lift them into my lap.

I delight in the little sound of surprise that falls from between her lips. Settling back in my own chair, with my woman closer to where I want her, I run the pad of my thumb over the arch of her foot with just enough pressure to pull a full body response.

During one of the many times Persephone had devoted herself to gaining Aethon's forgiveness for abandoning him on the white mountain, I'd visited Asphodel city.

Pregnancy is not something I have ever had the pleasure of witnessing up close. Being the God of the Underworld, it can't be surprising that I'm not experienced in the welcoming of new life. Such an event is for the living realm.

Still, most of the souls I care for in the Underworld remember their living lives. I'd sat for hours listening to the women speak of their pregnancies. Their ailments and

their joys. The pleasures in which dulled the discomforts. In resounding agreement, foot rubs were mentioned again and again.

Rolling the pad of my thumb over the ball of her foot, Persephone lets her head fall back as a tiny little sigh of pleasure slips free.

I make a mental note to visit again soon. Clearly, the advice I've received is invaluable.

"Who would have thought I'd be getting a foot rub by the God of the Underworld?" She moans, sinking her teeth into her lip to fight a sigh she loses the battle to contain just seconds later. Her eyes flutter open to half mast, her gaze sliding over the mess of the table. I deepen the pressure just slightly on her foot and she moans again. "God, that's so good."

I am helpless to fight my smile. Bringing this woman pleasure brings me pleasure. "You enjoy this, then?"

"Sooo much." She groans. "I think I'd agree to sell my soul to you in exchange for these on a daily."

The God inside rises to attention, ready as always, to make a deal. I swallow hard, but my words still sound guttural when I speak. "That could be arranged."

Persephone laughs, not realizing just how serious I am. How ready I am to take her soul and ensure that she will forever be mine. Here. In the Underworld. Safe.

She reaches for a cookie, sliding it off the plate and taking a nibble. I bite back an amused smile. It's clear the little ladies in her womb have a liking for sweets. I don't think I've ever seen Persephone indulge in so much dessert as I've seen her indulge this last week.

There is also a small swell in her lower belly. It's hardly noticeable, but I would notice any change in her. She doesn't know it yet, but Gods and Goddesses arrive at mature term sooner than human gestation, developing quicker. Matings between God and human that result in a child can go either way, depending on if the child is more God or human. It appears our daughters are more God, as they are clearly developing faster than the average human baby. If I had to guess, I would say they will arrive full term in about seven or eight months.

They will be spring babies. May or June birthdays. If I had to bet, I'd bet on them being Gemini's.

The realization brings with it a sharp nip of awareness. Pain.

It comes too soon.

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I switch to her other foot and am awarded with a new moan of pleasure that lights a match in the magma of my blood.

“What inspired dinner tonight?” I ask, doing all I can do to take my mind off the pain of the loss we will soon suffer, stilling the urge the God under my skin has to strike a deal for her soul.

“I just—” she sighs heavily. “I just wanted to go back.”

“Back?”

“To when it was simple.” Her smile is sheepish. “Just you and me. Man and woman. Normal.”

“We have never been normal, Persephone.”

She narrows her eyes on me. “You know what I mean.”

“We have always been us, even when you didn’t know who you were. Who we were together.”

“I know, but—I guess I just wanted to go back to the basics. I wanted to remember what it felt like to just be a woman falling in love with a man.”

Inside my chest, my heart burns. I ask softly, slowly, “Are you falling out of love with me, little goddess?”

“God, no.” There is only truth ringing in the words that sink deep inside the God I harbor.

She pulls her feet from my lap, straightening in her chair. Her gown is a lovely shade of lilac that only makes the deep red of her hair appear richer. She pushes the fall of waves over her shoulder as she wiggles to the edge of the chair, her eyes never leaving mine.

“I’m in love with you, Hades. I’m all the way in love with you.” She reaches for my hands, and I curl them around hers. “I just want it to sometimes be just me and you. No one else.” There’s a bloom of color rising into her cheeks when her eyes cut to the side. “I want time to know you, because I don’t, not fully. Not the way I want to know you.”

“Persephone,” I begin, but she stands.

I watch, unable to take my eyes off her as she shimmies closer. Her hands hike the soft material of her dress up to expose shapely legs my body instantly responds to. Inside my veins, the magma flows hotter. Faster.

She lifts one knee to slide it around my waist, pulling the other up until she’s straddling my lap. My hands respond with her nearness, settling on the curve of her hips.

Her eyes, so lovely, fix on mine. “I feel like the future is so ominous.” Her hands drift up the column of my neck to cup my face. “But I want to dream with you, Hades.”

My fingertips pulse against her hips. She scoots closer until I can feel the warmth of her sex against the swollen shaft of my cock.

Her breath, sugar sweet, drifts over my lips. “I want to look into the future with you

and dream about us. About the love we will always share. I want to flirt and tease and fall more and more in love with you every day. I never want to fall out of love with you. I never want to stop feeling all the things that I feel for you.” Her lips touch mine now. It’s not quite a kiss, and still my blood surges through my veins. “I just want you. I want to know, in the end when all is said and done, that it’s still going to be me and you.”

“It’ll always be us, little goddess,” I promise her. “Always.”

Emotion rattles her breath. “I love you.”

“I’ve always loved you, Persephone. I will always love you.” I kiss her now, claiming her lips and tasting her soul.

My hands drift over gauze until I find the hot skin of her thighs. I push under the material of her dress, palming her naked ass. She never returned the panties I tore off her before I fucked her on the counter.

Even now I can smell the seed I spilled inside her mixing with the scent of new arousal. It only turns me on more.

I growl into the kiss, nipping at her swollen bottom lip.

She whimpers a sound that nearly strips me of control.

“I need to be inside you,” I say against her throat when she throws her head back on a sigh.

“Yes.” Her hands sink into my hair as I kiss a burning trail down her chest, tugging at the material that covers her breast with my teeth before I pull her into my mouth. Her moan is music.

I am so in love with this woman. She is the family I've never had and always longed for. The soul who was always meant to stand against the test of time with mine. She is my mate, my other half. It matters not the terror we will face, for we will face it together always.

I move to her other breast and suck. Her cry is sharp and decadent and so fucking sweet.

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I want more. Need more. Licking a trail up the length of her chest, her throat, I take the lobe of her ear between my teeth and revel in the sharp gasp that escapes from between kiss-swollen lips.

“Fuck,” I hiss when she rocks against me. “I can’t wait. I need to be inside you. Now.”

“Please,” she gasps as I shove at my pants, pulling my dick free. Already, I’m seeping with need. The tip is red and angry, starving. “Hades.”

I line up as she sinks down, taking every inch of me deep inside her. A shuddering moan spills from her lips as I palm her ass once more to keep her there. Madness swirls inside me, urging for movement as she begins to beg for the same.

I don’t move. I stay rooted where I am, home.

Taking her lips, I kiss her deeply before I pull back to vow, “It’ll always be me and you. There will be pain and there will be war, but we will end our days like this. Me inside you. Connected as one. Like we were always meant to be.” I kiss her again and rasp, “Always.”

“Yes,” she accepts my vow hungrily. “Yes, Hades.”

With her hips in my hands, I begin to move her over my shaft. Slowly at first. Up and down. I want to drive her mad with need. Shaking with desire. Quivering with hunger.

Her lips part and her bright eyes are heavy with lust as they search my face. I tell her, “You’re so beautiful.”

“So are you.”

I grin against her lips, helpless against the quickening of my thrusts. Soon, her body is tightening around me again, and I am spilling into the deep of her. I think she takes more than my seed. If I didn’t know better, if it didn’t need to be the other way around, I’d think she’s stealing pieces of my very soul.

Chapter

Seventeen

Persephone

Hades’ arm is wound protectively around my waist even though Alastor moves at a less than dangerous pace. The Underworld drifts slowly around us, but I take it all in. It’s all so beautiful. Magical. Like a dream cast in the glow of midnight and summer.

Rolling hills of asphodel flowers with their long, strong stems swaying gently in a warm breeze that hardly has the power to lift my hair, blankets my vision for as far as I can see. Miles and miles of meadows stretch in a sea of white petals that glow with the faintest ember of soft white from the very heart of each flower. It looks like a fairy field, if ever one were to exist.

There are no words for the gentle beauty of these meadows of legend and myth.

In the distance, I hear the melody of feminine laughter. Searching the fields, I see a young woman in a simple off-white dress. Glowing flowers stretch to caress her as she runs through the field from a man who chases. Her laughter increases as he

catches her around her waist, hauling her back against his chest before spinning her around and around. I watch as they fall together in the meadow, entirely unaware of our nearing presence.

Laughter turns to moans, and I feel a hot sting in my cheeks as I turn away. I've never witnessed such beautiful affection so publicly. A couple so consumed by one another that they fail to see the world around them.

"Soul mates," Hades tells me as Alastor leaves the couple behind. "The point of all life, of every soul who has lived and decides to seek out the Elysian Tree. They all take the leaves of new life in the hopes that they will find their other half in their next life."

I twist to peer back at him. His face is filled with so much emotion.

The way he loves the souls who find themselves here in the Underworld. The souls who brave the pain of the living realm in the unlikely hope that they might find their truest purpose. Their other half. Their soul mates.

"How many souls find what they are looking for?" I ask. "How many souls find their other half?"

"It is a rare experience." Tension lines his jaw. "Those who do find their other half very rarely choose to be born again, rather spending eternity here, happy, together."

"Can they find one another here in the Underworld?"

"Only the souls who recognize one another as theirs in the living realm will know one another here in the Underworld. This is yet another curse of Zeus."

"So, once they find each other in the living realm, they will recognize each other here

in the Underworld?”

“Yes.”

“And they never choose to live again?”

“Why would they? The point of life is to find the one who holds the other half of your soul. Connection and love. There is little that drives humanity like the promise of true love.” Hades presses a kiss to my temple that quickens the pitter of my heart. “Those who find it have it here for eternity. It never fades, never quiets. True love between souls that were made to exist together is a love that never dies or weakens.”

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We are too far to hear the lovers now as I ponder Hades' words. It's a devastating thought to know how many souls live time and time again in search of their other half. In search of a completion that many fail to find in centuries of trying.

"I think I hate Zeus." I don't mean for the words to escape audibly. They were a thought that I meant to keep as such. I cool with dread now that they are between us. I amend, "I don't know how, if he's so evil, that people don't see him for what he is. How can he still be the God who is worshiped as King of Gods even in myth when he's the one at the root of all pain?" I huff. "It's infuriating."

"Zeus has been King of Gods for millennia. Homo Sapiens were made in Zeus' image. I explained before, the other species of people in which your scientists have found, were crafted by Prometheus. Homo sapiens, made in Zeus' image, first must see these evils within themselves before they can amend them and recognize them in others. In rulers. In Gods."

Hades continues, "Take the desire for riches, for example. Zeus commands a realm of gold. The stone of Olympus, closer to the sun, is forged into gold; a conduit of power that feeds the whole of the city. He is showered daily with wealth and luxury and envy, of which much of humanity in the living realm inherently craves." Hades pauses. "It is not that these cravings are wrong, because they aren't. They are simply much harder to see to fruition while taking a morally correct path, for the morally correct path is also the path in which the seeker must suffer the most to grow. One must first recognize that there is an easier path to these cravings, paved in evil, and choose to take the longer, more difficult path to greatness. They must recognize the evil that exists within them—for it exists in us all—and choose good. This is how evil is recognized and fought, for one cannot recognize what does not exist within

themselves. One cannot fight what threatens them if they do not see it.”

“But if evil lives in us all, shouldn’t we be able to see it? Shouldn’t we be able to fight it?”

“Therein lies the problem. Humanity must accept that evil exists, they must see it for what it is, and choose good. If they ignore evil, ignore a very clear wrong being perpetuated in the name of greed or to ensure an easier life for one at the cost of the pain of many, that is evil. If humanity continues to allow governments to push laws in which favor only some and harm others, that is evil. If humanity ignores the suffering of the innocent for the rights of the man, that is evil. That is what perpetuates the wicked. That is what continues the cycle. And that is how Gods such as Zeus remain in power.” Hades tightens his hold around my waist. “Revolution comes with great sacrifice. A mental shift in which suffering is inevitable. Humanity does not like to suffer.”

“But they are suffering already.”

“Yes, they are. And the time will come eventually when the suffering is so great, its continuation becomes more feared than the cost that will be paid in the shift for good. For right. For fair and equal.” Hades tightens his hold around my waist, closing the small gap between us. “I believe with your return to me—to the realms—that we are on the cusp of this great change.”

Despite my dry throat, I swallow. Staring forward, my attention is caught by the burning glow of Asphodel City. It is a city surrounded by rolling meadows of white blossoms with tiny glowing hearts. Bordering the city of ancient stone are massive trees with twisted limbs that stretch in every direction, adorned with round green leaves that twitter softly in the warm breeze. The sound is similar to crickets.

Despite the ominous lingering of our previous conversation, the chirping melody of

the leaves that dance on the gnarled limbs of the ancient trees is relaxing.

I let my head fall back against Hades' broad chest, sighing into the everlasting night. Asphodel City is truly stunning. It is ringed by a cobbled path that branches between buildings into the city heart. Buildings and homes are assembled with plaster and stone and adorned with wrought iron balconies and hand-crafted shutters of wood and iron, some stained, some painted in bright colors that glow under the flame.

It doesn't take long to realize that the city is built on a city that is built on a city. The sounds of life are abundant within this home of the dead. Laughter and banter, children playing freely and lovers loving. As we travel deeper into the heart, I can't help but note the ceiling. It shimmers with the same stars that illuminate the Underworld, illuminating the deeper parts of the city in the same glow of night that paints the rest of the realm.

"How is this possible?"

"It is as it's always been." Alastor moves easily through the wide streets of the city, deeper into the heart. We pass markets where people gather whipped butter and breads into little woven baskets beside fresh fruits.

As we pass a stand of little cakes, my stomach makes itself embarrassingly known.

Amusement hitches Hades' voice. "Would you like one?"

"No."

"Persephone."

"I'm not lying. I don't want one." I huff. "Your daughters do, though."

He laughs, low and rich. Alastor stops and Hades swings himself down before reaching up to pull me from the horse. People—souls pause to watch as Hades pulls me closer to the stand of cakes where an old man with ruddy red cheeks and happy blue eyes practically bounces with excitement.

Hades nods. “Good to see you again, Elio.”

“Si! Salve. Vuoi una torta?”

My jaw drops. I don’t speak Italian, but I somehow know what he said.

Hades looks to me, one brow raised. I stutter, but only for a moment. Then I point to the lemony yellow cake with the buttery yellow icing piped to look like a dream. “I would love that one, please.”

“Si!” Elio gathers the cake, handing it to me in a little box.

I thank him, and with treat in hand, Hades lifts me back onto Alastor. I twist to glance back at Hades. “He was speaking Italian.”

“He was.”

“I understood him.”

Hades’ lips twitch. “The Underworld translates.”

“Wow.”

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Opening the box, I swipe my finger through creamy icing before sucking it clean. I moan.

“Good?” There’s unmistakeable heat in Hades’ voice as he drops his head to murmur the word against my neck.

My blood warms. Arousal tightens my belly. There is a vision—a memory—of teeth and blood and sex.

I shiver. Hades tightens his hold on me.

Closing my box, I dare asking, “Why don’t you bite me?”

Behind me, Hades stiffens. Darkly, he asks, “What?”

“I remember, Hades. I remember before.” I pull in breath as Alastor continues deeper into the heart of the city. “I remember you biting me when we would—when we would have sex.”

There is a long moment of silence before Hades clears his throat. “My Gods’ Form demands blood for many things, Persephone.”

“Demands?”

“Yes, demands.”

“But you don’t demand it from me...”

“No.” Another pause. “Blood must be given. Offered. Willing. If it is not, it is rancid.”

“But—” I frown, remembering the first moment we were together. When he stole me from the garden of flowers in which Demeter had planted me, knowing that he would scent me. Knowing his soul would crave mine. Knowing the madness would strike him, and he would take me. “But you didn’t ask me that first time. I remember the way you bit me. The pain and then the—well, the pleasure.”

“You felt pleasure when I bit you that first time?” His surprise is hesitant.

“I—I think I did,” I admit as I sift through the memories that are so distant. So ancient. Even as they are my own, they are draped in the haze of a far away past. “It hurt but it was...I don’t know. I can’t explain.”

“Your blood should have been rancid. It should have spoiled inside my belly, but it didn’t. It never turned rancid, even in all the years that followed.”

“Why do you drink blood?” I ask. “Is it purely sexual?”

“No, it’s not usually sexual at all.”

“It isn’t?” I twist again to peer up at him.

He shakes his head. “No. Blood is how I seal deals of the soul.”

“Deals of the soul?”

“When a soul makes a deal with me, I demand it be done in blood. Blood binds both sides of the contract. It holds me and the soul who dares make a deal with me accountable.”

“What happens if they break a deal?”

“If a God breaks a deal, they will slowly drain of blood. Withering away but never dying. Their power will wane.”

“And a human?”

“If a human breaks a deal, they will die.”

I hesitate, but ask, “And if you break the deals you make?”

“I am careful in how I word my deals such that I will not break them. But if I did, the blood I consumed would turn rancid. It would become poison inside me in which I would struggle to expunge, if I could purge it at all.”

I nibble my lip in thought. “But you drank from me without making a deal.”

“My Gods’ Form craves blood, Persephone. It is a decadent,” he pauses. “Treat. The blood of a God offers a surge of power inside me. The blood of a human or nymph is more an aphrodisiac.”

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“But I was a Goddess when you drank from me.”

“Your blood was always different. I was always compelled to drink from you.”

“But you’re not anymore?” I frown, oddly stung by the thought that he might not desire to drink from me.

There is a pause and then, “Does that make you unhappy?”

“I don’t know,” I lie, and then I admit, “Yes...?”

Hades’ chuckle is dark. “I have wanted to taste your blood more than once. Every time I am inside you, I long to sink my teeth deep into your skin and drink. But you are human. As much as you might dislike to admit it, you are fragile.”

We pass another statue in the likeness of Hades, carved in stone. There have been many. In the upper parts of the city, he was alone. Wandering. Lost. As Alastor continues lower and lower more and more statues appear, dotting the streets, sitting before temples. I stiffen, because this is the first statue I’ve seen that is not of Hades, God of the Underworld. It’s of me.

A girl in a field of flowers. Sweet. Innocent. Unaware.

I can’t look away, twisting as Alastor passes the lantern lit statue.

“Was that—was that me?”

“Yes.” Hades’ voice is stone cold sober.

We continue, and I am alarmed when, yet another statue comes into view. This one is of Hades bursting up from the earth, four horses drenched in black pulling an onyx chariot tear into a garden. The girl goddess is struck with terror as Hades reaches for her.

Words abandon me as we pass the statue only to come to another. The statue comes alive as the memory plays in my mind. Hades holds me high in his arms. There is madness in his eyes as grief leaks from my own. I’m stretching for escape—for the living realm in which I was stolen. His fingertips dig into my flesh, wild hunger a threat to all that I’d ever been.

“Hades...” Alastor fumbles his step at the pain in my voice.

“Continue, Alastor,” Hades commands.

I swallow the lump of emotion that burns in my throat. And we finally come to it. The statue at the end. The one where Hades drinks from me deeply. He is in his Gods’ Form, cradling my lifeless body in his arms. The contrast between the two stones that were used to craft this image is shocking. Obsidian black and opal white. Hades and me.

But in the center, thin ribbons of white spill from my chest to feather into the black of Hades’ chest. My soul.

“What is this?” I gasp as Alastor stops, giving us time to study the foretelling of a future I am terrified to face. For I know this has not yet come to pass.

“This is me taking your soul.”

I shiver, frowning. “Why would you do that?”

“To protect you. To bind you to the Underworld.” Hades’ pitch lowers. “To make you immortal.”

“But my soul is immortal.”

“Your body is human.” Hades holds me tenderly. “Vulnerable. You are alive, Persephone, in the Underworld.”

“I don’t understand.”

“This must come to pass, if you are to remain my queen. If you are to remain safe.” His voice lowers. “I need you to agree. For you to be willing.”

“What—what happens if I agree?” I search his eyes. “What happens if I give you my soul?”

“You will forever live with me in the Underworld.”

I relax, smiling. “That doesn’t seem so bad.”

His eyes darken. “You will be bound, eternally, to the Underworld.”

“Okay...”

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“Persephone, when you give me your soul, you will never again leave this realm. Never visit earth. Never?—”

“I understand,” I cut him off. Quieter, I repeat, “I understand.”

“This is the only way I can keep you with me. The only way I can ensure your safety.”

I look back to the statue, frowning as I consider the art. “When was this statue carved?”

“It rose from the earth the day you were murdered. I’ve had many centuries to ponder its meaning.”

“But my soul is already connected to yours.”

“It is.” He nods. “But you are still human. The only way I can make you a Goddess, make you immortal with me, is if you give me your soul to protect for eternity. To bind it not only to the Underworld, but to my own.”

“I was a goddess before, Hades,” I say gently. “And I was still murdered.”

“You were.” Hades nods. “But like Atropos said, she did not completely cut the cord of your life. As a Goddess, fraying the cord was possible, and it was that fraying that allowed you to be born again. The same way our daughters’ cords will be frayed. If you die again as a human, I’m not certain what will happen to you.”

“I—I need to think about this.”

His eyes shutter slowly before opening again. “I understand, little goddess. But please, don’t take too long.”

Chapter

Eighteen

Persephone

Wine red wingscrack thunder in the sky as Hydra soars high, so high I feel as though I am moments from touching the stars. I know I’m not, know it is an illusion. But it feels like magic. The magic feels like an overwhelm of happiness building inside me as Hydra dives headfirst for the glittering sandstone mountains that bracket the entrance into the starlit sea. In the last moments, when life should flash before my eyes, she swoops up in a graceful arc that has us racing again for the stars.

Laughter sings from my lungs, tailing a shriek of delight. Happiness, not my own, is a wordless explosion in my mind that bleeds into my heart. Hydra is happy. She is so happy she is unable to contain it, feeding it to me through our bond. I accept it as the honor it is, knowing how deeply she suffered, lonely and misunderstood in the caves below the sinkhole.

Emotion leaks from my eyes even as laughter spills from my lips. Love is so rich and full inside my heart; I feel as though I may burst with it.

Hydra charges for the stars in blinding speed before she suddenly stops her charge, letting the momentum slow her advance on the sky. Around her neck, the coils of the necks of her other heads unwind to spear the darkness in every direction as, in a seamless act, every mouth releases a burst of Tartarus flame that rains down in

thousands of tiny sparks around us.

We must look like fireworks in the sky.

Far, far below I think I hear the cheers of Asphodel City.

Hydra coils her heads back into place so that each one is a smaller flare around her primary, much larger head. She reminds me a little of the frilled lizard, only her frill is all her other heads. I am sure to others it's a terrifying sight, but to me she is simply beautiful.

An image flashes in my mind, shared by Hydra. Usually, she speaks in words, so I'm momentarily alarmed.

"The black mountain is open."

She angles her body, giving me a view of the black mountain and the mouth of the cave that yawns, now large enough to welcome Hydra. A shiver snakes down my spine, because the invitation isn't one we can ignore.

"I think we're meant to go."

"Hades would have my heads if I took you to the Moirai without him."

I recoil. "Don't joke about your heads." Hydra laughs in my mind. I cringe. "It's not funny."

"The story of my heads is so tragic, my Persephone, if I don't find humor I will always grieve."

The cave mouth yawns wider. The invitation is clear.

No, not an invitation. A summons.

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I feel the tug of it as I felt the tug in my core to mate with Hades in his Gods' Form. I felt a similar tug to sneak away to the sinkhole, to Hydra. And now, I feel it pulling me to the black mountain. To the Moirai. Without Hades.

"We can't ignore them," I say, though the words tremble.

"Yes, we can." She tries to shift away from the mountain, but instead soars in a circle not far now from the mouth that beckons us closer.

"Hydra." I stroke her scales. "You will be with me."

"I fear I will not be able to protect you from them, my Persephone."

"No one can. If Atropos wanted to cut the thread of my life, she has the shears to do it whether I am standing in her presence or not."

My words must make sense, because Hydra stops fighting the pull I know tugs at her, too. We're no longer soaring down toward the Palace where I know Hades waits, where I know he watches.

Now, we soar straight for the black mountain and the mouth of the cave that only widens further to accept us.

As we land on the stone, I hear Hades' roar from his Gods' Form. "No!"

And then the stone behind us simply closes, sealing us in thick darkness.

“Don’t move,” Hydra’s command is a whisper even in my mind. “Don’t breathe.”

“They won’t hurt us.” I soothe her with another stroke.

“They wanted you without Hades.”

“They must have a good reason.” With wide eyes, I try to search the darkness for any source of light. Anything to direct us to where we are supposed to go. “Can you see?”

“Only shadows.”

“Better than me. I can’t see a thing.”

Hydra huffs, but the stone around us begins to sing with the grinding of movement. It’s chilling, calling gooseflesh to the surface of my skin. I make to slide from Hydra’s back, but her voice in my mind is firm. “Stay.”

Settling in for the ride, we begin to move through the tunnel of shifting black stone. There is caution in every step Hydra takes.

Inside me, fear and curiosity stand in equal measure.

But the darkness doesn’t last long, and both the fear and curiosity are quickly fed as the stone begins to pull back to expose the same room in which I stood with Hades. Only a few weeks have passed, and it’s not like the memory of this place has faded, and yet I can’t deny the awe that climbs inside me.

The three Moirai already stand at the cauldron of souls, gripping the edge. A collage of ages and appearances move through their bodies before they finally settle. One youthful, one middle age, and one who has lived a long life.

Together, they speak into our minds. “The Dark Prince of Golden Gods comes. He brings with him a dark storm of rage and war. The rage and war bound to him by the hatred from which he was birthed.” All three heads twist to face us. I manage not to cringe at the absence of their mouths nor under the eerie sharpness of their knowing eyes. “You will go with him, Persephone.”

Hydra stiffens beneath me.

I’m about to refuse, when the Moirai speak again. “He holds the power of an ancient deal not yet broken.”

“You speak in riddles,” I say as Hydra gasps in my mind, “The deal of the seasons.”

The Moirai speak again inside our minds. Only, it’s not just inside our minds now. Their voices are everywhere, echoing inside my mind and out as though their words are spilled from between the shimmering veins that surge power inside this ancient black mountain.

The cauldron of souls quivers, as though the souls inside feel the power that is this trio of ancient, otherworldly beings.

“The ancient deal between Gods stands true. The soul of the Goddess Persephone lives inside you, but it is the same soul tethered to the bargain of the past. A blood bargain.”

“A blood bargain?”

“The deal stands as the blood of the bound lives in the God of the Underworld. The deal to avoid a war of Gods that would see the end of humanity, to share your soul with those he believed loved you too much to lose you. The deal that became known as the deal of the seasons.” The Moirai pause as I shiver where I stand close to

Hydra's chest. "It is the deal in which you would move between the realms. Now, the Dark Prince of Golden Gods comes to collect that which, rightfully, is owed them."

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“Me?” I demand. “He’s coming to collect me?”

“He comes for you, Persephone.”

“Who? Who is the Dark Prince of Golden Gods?”

There is a hum of energy, wild and live. It crackles over every inch of my skin, calling hairs to rise and my heart to race. “Ares, God of War and Courage.”

My gasp lodges in my throat even as Hydra shudders behind me. I gather myself enough to lift my chin in an act of bravery I’m certain each of the three sisters of fate can see through. “And if I refuse?”

“If you refuse, it will be seen as a break in the deal by the God of the Underworld. If you refuse, the blood that binds the deal will turn rancid in his belly. Toxic. It will be a swift and agonizing poison that will drain him of power, not of life. The Underworld will suffer.”

“Is there a way to break the deal?”

The cauldron trembles. A song of souls bleeds a harrowing melody into the cave, igniting the veins of cool light that ribbon through black stone.

“The deal will break when your soul is no longer your own but tethered irrevocably to the Underworld.”

The vision of the statue in the deep of Asphodel City flashes in my mind. A

foretelling of what would one day come to be, called up from the deep by the Moirai and carved with their merciless blades of fate.

I steel myself. “Then I’ll give Hades my soul.”

“It is not the time.”

Frustration threatens hopelessness inside me. I don’t mean to raise my voice, but I do.

“What does the time matter?”

“Ares, God of War, the Dark Prince of Golden Gods faces two paths. You are the fork in his path.”

“What does that even mean?”

“Without you in his life, he will fail to see the path of right. The dark hatred inside him will grow teeth and claws that nothing and no one will ever pull free. He will become a great and powerful God of War whom the darkness will absorb wholly and completely until that darkness spills from him like a plague to infect all who dare live.”

“And if I enter his life?”

“He will see the path of right. In your presence, for the first time in his existence, he will glimpse love. It is from you his salvation will be born.”

Hydra shuffles closer. So close, I can feel the heat of her body seeping into my back.

“Why am I here?”

“We have called you here to explain that you, Persephone, have a choice to make.” Three sets of eyes, one cloudy and blind, one vivid and blue, and one black as

obsidian land on me. “Your choice will set the trajectory of the future of the realms.”

“So, I don’t have a choice?”

“There is always a choice. And to every choice, there is a reaction.” The stone behind us begins to shift, and I know our invitation here is coming to an end. “The Dark Prince comes for you, Persephone.”

Chapter

Nineteen

Persephone

It appears Hades assembled everyone when I entered the black mountain. Or maybe everyone just gathered. I can’t imagine the entirety of the Underworld didn’t hear Hades’ roar as the black mountain closed behind me and Hydra, sealing me off from Hades in a way I hadn’t been since I returned in his life.

The fear and rage I’d heard in his voice...

Simply replaying it in my mind makes me shiver.

The palace is chaos. Everyone is tense. Even Cerberus is here in his beastly state. He stands, a massive and formidable force, beside the fire that rages in the hearth.

Outside the windows that scale high into the walls of the obsidian stone, through the dagger pointed peaks that stretch for the high arcs of the ceiling, I can’t miss the darkness of the sky. The way the ever-present stars are now concealed by vicious clouds thick with sinister foreboding.

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Never, not once since my return to the Underworld, have I seen the sky like this. Even sifting through the memories of my past life, I can't find a time where the Underworld concealed the glitter of its everlasting stars.

Is the sky at the mercy of Hades' moods? Or it is something darker that conceals the light of the Underworld? Is it the Moirai warning the realm of the dark times we face ahead?

As soon as the black mountain opened, releasing me and Hydra from the summons of the Moirai, wind had whipped at my skin. For the first time in all memory of the Underworld, that wind had been cool. Ominous.

Dark waves nearly void of the bioluminescence I'm so used to seeing ignite them stretched high as though reaching for the angry sky. They slammed down on the beach with fury, pummeling the sandstone cliffs. Violence scented the air as Hydra raced for the safety of the palace.

Now, I stand in the palace sitting room with everyone who has a stake in this realm. Everyone who I've come to realize loves this realm enough to sacrifice pieces of themselves to it. For when I first came to the Underworld, life was not so vivid as it is now. There was a bone deep hunger here. I hadn't known it then—did not possess the knowledge I now hold to have understood—that in my absence the realm had feasted on the souls of those who love it most.

Everyone, save Poseidon, looks different. Fuller. Healthier. Now that I am home. Now that the realm feeds on me.

I can't explain why I don't wither away like they did. Why my soul powers the realm that gives sanctuary to the dead. That gives them life after death. It is simply the way it has always been. Perhaps it is because I possess the soul of Chaos, fed to me by the monster who stripped her of it with the intent to manipulate her vast power for himself. Perhaps I do not wither away in the feasting of the realm for she'd crafted all the realms. For her, they were her children. As such, she suckled them with the very life that lived inside her as any mother nurtures her child.

My eyes move over the room and those who occupy it. There is not one face that doesn't wear a grave expression, and that only makes the unease inside me swell.

I take comfort in Hydra's close presence, even though I know I would never be harmed here. No one in this room would betray anyone, of that I am certain. Still, I tuck in closer to her chest as she sits, eyeing the room over my head. She isn't so big that she doesn't fit easily in this room, with its high arched ceiling. And shockingly, in his beast form, Cerberus is bigger than Hydra.

He is a sight to behold. Terrifying, even. If I didn't know he loved me, I think even I would be cowed.

He is massive. Each of his paws are easily larger than a dinner plate. His legs are thick, and his body is so muscular that it ripples under his sleek fur with every deep breath he breathes. His body is enormous, merging with three thickly muscular necks that each carry a ginormous head. If he wanted, I'm confident he could easily snap the head clean off a bear with his blade-sharp teeth.

But even as he is beastly in form, he is firmly contained by conscious thought and awareness. It is there in his dark eyes, set aflame like his masters' with the fires of Tartarus.

There is judgment and empathy. There is understanding and consequence.

There is love and justice.

He is human emotion under the House of Judgment, overseen by the Crown of Souls.

He is balance, and right now, all three sets of Cerberus' eyes are on me. I get the sense that he is waiting, like everyone else, for an explanation.

“The Moirai do not seek the company of Gods often. They have now sought the company of you twice,” Thanatos says, his arms folded, his dark eyes slamming into my own.

He is seeking answers that I don't have, not really. For even as I consider telling them all the conversation, I'd had with the Moirai, I know that I can't.

Something stays my tongue. Something I can attribute only to the power that surges from the black mountain, playing us like the puppets we are in a game of Gods and men.

Behind me, Hydra shifts closer.

Hades paces, but even he remains close. He is tense in his Gods' Form.

Beneath his dark skin, charred with the soot of centuries of torment, tense muscles ripple.

Even as he is massive, his steps are light. Lethal. Harrowingly quiet for a beast of his stature. Yet I am not afraid. I want only to comfort him. I just don't know how to do that here in front of everyone. Under the weight of secrets, I know I must keep.

“We all know there's a war brewing,” Leuce says from where she leans into the arm of the sofa. She is the only one in the room, save for Hypnos, who looks relaxed.

I have a feeling her ease is an act.

Leuce continues, “And we all know that Persephone is a pawn in this war that the Moirai planted centuries ago. It is our job to figure out how we are supposed to use this pawn.”

“She is not a pawn,” Hades snaps.

“She is a pawn, Hades,” Leuce argues firmly. “She is a pawn in this war, but she is our Queen. And we will not allow her to fall. Still, we must play this game, and we must play it carefully.” She scans the room with her unique gray-green eyes, challenging anyone who means to refute her claims. “It is foretold by the fates, this much we already know and?—”

The door crashes open on the other side of the room, and every set of eyes snap to Minthe. She’s breathing hard, and there’s a wild fear to the frantic sweep of her eyes that instantly sets me on alert. Behind me, Hydra stiffens.

Hades growls, “You should be in the living realm. What are you doing here?”

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“Ares,” she gasps, catching her breath.

When her lip quivers, I think my heart does, too.

“What?” Hypnos rises from where he’s been sitting on the sofa next to the arm Leuce occupies.

“Ares,” she gasps again. “He’s in the club. He’s demanding—demanding to see you.”

Hades moves closer. “Who did you leave him with?”

Hermes stands, his hands moving to knot together. There’s very real fear in his eyes at the mention of Ares. It is fear that is certainly owed if myth has any truth to it.

Ares is heartless.

And he’s come for me.

When Hermes shoves his trembling hands into his pockets, I recall that he spent years, centuries in Olympus as the messenger boy for Zeus.

Surely, he’s seen the destruction, the darkness, that is the God of War. A darkness, a destruction that I can only imagine.

I shiver and hug myself. Hades doesn’t miss it, and I don’t miss the frown that tugs between his brows.

“I left him with Rhadamanthus,” Minthe speaks again. “You must come quick, Hades.”

Hades looses a sigh. “Rhadamanthus can handle Ares.”

Minthe scoffs and I bite back my own as she says, “No one can handle Ares, Hades.”

In his veins, magma surges faster. In his eyes, flames burn hotter. Every inch of him is coiled tight, ready to strike.

“Did he say what he wants?” Hades asks low.

I swallow the burn in my throat as I speak quietly. “He wants me.”

Hades’ head whips to me. Poseidon pushes off the wall.

Hermes makes a noise of distressed fear that Thanatos is quick to comfort, and Hypnos, for the first time, speaks without an ounce of humor. “He can’t have you.”

I pull in breath and straighten my shoulders. “He's here to see that the deal of the seasons is honored.”

Hades does not tear his gaze from me. Now he knows why the Moirai summoned me. They all do. Or they know part of it.

“No.” Hades shakes his head.

“The deal stands, Hades. It was not broken with my death.”

“No, little goddess. You won't go.” His hands curl into dangerous fists. “I can’t allow it. You are too vulnerable.”

“You must let me go.”

For the first time, horror ices the flames in his eyes.

“That's why they took you,” Poseidon says, understanding finally settling over the entirety of the room.

Cerberus makes a noise, part whine, part growl. A warning and grief knotted into one.

I nod soberly.

“If I don't go with Ares, the blood that binds the deal will turn rancid.”

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All around the room, the Gods and Goddesses who have become my friends, my family, gasp in horror.

“Let it,” Hades growls.

“Hades...” I shake my head. “This has to be.”

“He will take you to Olympus,” Hermes says softly. His eyes are a little wild. A little hopeless. “You will be at the mercy of Demeter and Zeus.”

“I know, but I must go.”

“What did the Fates tell you?” Poseidon asks darkly. He’s been leaning against the wall, large arms folded over a large chest, nearly this entire time. Now, he’s claiming the space between us, coming closer. “What did they tell you to make you so certain that you needed to go with him? With the God of War?”

“I—” I look to my feet before casting my gaze to the room. “Simply that when he comes for me, I must go.” I harden my voice, filling it with a determination I fear even as I know it’s right. “I am going.”

Hades bows his big, horned head between his shoulders. “You can’t go alone.”

“I come!” The words are loud in my mind.

“Hydra will come with me.”

Hermes looses a sharp laugh. “Zeus will never allow her in Olympus.”

“We make it a condition of my going,” I say. “Surely, we have some pull. They want me there—I’ll go with protection.”

Hades scrubs his hands down his face. “I don’t like this, Persephone. You are human. Vulnerable.”

“I know.” I’m really beginning to wish I wasn’t human. “I know what I am. But they still want me for the powers inside my soul. I don’t know why, but I know they need me alive.”

“You will be unprotected!”

“Hydra—”

“Won’t fit everywhere!” he roars.

I can’t make my tongue tell Hades that I suspect Ares will be on my side. That he will stand with me, protect me. He’s not in a state of reasoning around what he believes is the impossible.

I flinch. Softly, inside my mind, Hydra speaks, “This is true, my Persephone.”

“Olympus is a complicated place, Persephone,” Hermes tells me. “It is full of secrets and politics. There is darkness in its beauty and blood in the wine. You must always watch your back. Friend and foe will be after you. You will be, entirely alone. I would go with you but?—”

We all know he can’t. That he bound himself to the Underworld forever more when he gave Hades his soul.

Thanatos bows his head, but I don't miss the tight set to his hard jaw.

"I'll go," Leuce volunteers. "I'm strong, trained, and I know the games those Gods play."

Memories accost me. Visions so vividly gruesome play in my mind, stealing my breath. I'd just saved Minthe from being transformed into a mint plant when, in Demeter's ire that they'd joined me and Hades in our bed, she'd aimed to end Minthe tragically by binding her irrevocably inside a plant.

I'd invited them into our bed because they were beautiful, and they loved me. I loved them. Perhaps not sexually, but still—I'd loved them and trusted them. And I thought, perhaps, they could help me seduce my husband. Make him love me more.

I'd been wrong. Hades hadn't even looked at them. He'd watched me as they?—

I can't. The memory cranks to a stop in my mind and I hear Minthe scream that she took Leuce. That Leuce was missing.

Fear twists a blade in my heart now as it did that day when I searched on horseback for my friend. Aethon had ran faster and harder than ever before, but by the time I found Leuce where Demeter had planted her beyond the Elysian Fields, on the pale mountains adorned with white poplar trees, the rooting had already taken place.

The curse was slow and agonizingly painful.

Her feet were entirely rooted. The skin that covered her legs, once smoothly dark and beautiful was split as bark tore, as though from the depths of her, to settle in place of skin on her legs. Ribbons of blood streaked the flesh of her legs as shimmering streams fell from her eyes to streak her face.

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And the way she screamed.

The memory of it nearly brings me to my knees.

The bark spread like a poison on her body, cutting into calf and thigh before I finally reached her. As I had with Minthe, I called on the powers of spring and birth, healing and love. I reversed the curse my mother had put on my friend, releasing her from the roots that held her in their eternal prison. But I'd never been able to heal her.

Like Minthe bore the tattooed vines of the mint plant over her feet and calves, Leuce bore the scars of the bark that had split her skin. Her hair, once silky black had turned the color of silvery bark. And her eyes, once rich brown had faded to the gray green of the underside of a white poplar's leaves.

I realize now that I've never seen Leuce in a gown. Never seen her show her legs. She's always worn flashy pantsuits.

Now, I suspect I know why.

My gaze shifts to Minthe to see that she's turned ashen with fear. The thought of setting Leuce, her lover of centuries, in the path of Demeter's ire once again strikes a fear inside her she can't hide. Still, she says nothing.

I shake my head. "I can't let you do that."

"You go with protection, or you don't go at all," Hades says firmly, but it takes only one look into my eyes for him to sigh. "Little goddess, please. Don't fight me on this."

I can't lose you." There is true fear in his eyes. "I won't survive it. The Underworld won't survive it."

I can't help myself as I move into the circle of Hades' arms. They close around me tight, and when I hear the vicious pounding of his heart, I know he's nearing the end of his control. He loves me. It's not easy to stand back and watch the one you love walk willingly into harm's arms.

I understand his short temper. I want only to soothe him.

"I'm not weak as I once was, Persephone," Leuce says. "I've trained every day since that day."

"Demeter is a Goddess, Leuce. And she hates you."

"I am an immortal nymph, thanks to you. I'm powerful, too." She smiles a confident smile. "I will keep you safe."

"Let her come, my Persephone. She loves you."

I smile a small smile at Hydra's words. Then, resigned, I nod. "We'll keep each other safe."

Chapter

Twenty

Hades

I sent Leuce and Minthe to tell Ares that Persephone would be ready tomorrow. If I have no choice but to give her to them as per the deal of the seasons, and I can't

convince her to stay at my peril, then I will at least have one final night with her.

It may very well be my last.

No. No, I will not think such thoughts. They are poison.

But Ares is dangerous. He is a ruthless God with little compassion and diabolical interests. I can't see a future in which he becomes good.

He is a monster. He's always been a monster, hungry for blood and death and destruction. One only has to look into the wars of human history to see the truth of such claims. Ares was there at the heart of them all.

And yet, when the Moirai pulled the souls of the Gods from the cauldron to bind to my daughters' souls, I'd recognized one of them as Ares' God of War. One of my daughters had been bound in a soul bond, a bond stronger than the bond of soul mates, to the God of War.

I'm not sure I've had a moment of true peace since.

Persephone lets loose a sigh that tightens the knots of unease around my heart. I watch as she wastes no time loosening the ties of her dress. The material falls to the floor around her feet, leaving her entirely bare. There is the slightest swell to her lower belly. A swell that infuses my heart with too much emotion. So much, I fear it may very well burst.

She steps from the pool of fabric to the warmth of the bathing pool, sinking her body into the water. Her eyes, so lovely and green, never leave mine.

The veins of magma surge faster as heat rises from the core of me. My cock begins to harden, lengthening for her.

My muscles coil with desire. Every part of her calls to me, calls to the want inside me. To the man, the beast, the God. All of me is addicted to her, craves her. Aches to possess her, to be possessed by her.

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She is everything—mine. And I am hers.

Her eyes roam over my Gods' Form, igniting with need I ache to satisfy. But tonight, I want her as a man. Skin to skin, soft and slow.

I want to make love to my wife.

She's always been my wife from her very first life, the vows stand true still.

I inhale deeply through my nose and scent her.

She smells of spring and life and sweetness. Under it all, there is a musky scent of warm desire I do not have the strength to deny. It's not the same need that spilled from her body to tease and taunt me. The need that drove me to take her as a beast.

This is natural. Her desire is not a desire woven by fate, manipulated by higher powers for a future in which we are pawns for the crafting of a new world.

This desire is inherently hers. It is warm and nurturing and soft.

It is everything that I want to sink into and lose myself in. It is her, love. My soul mate.

My fingers curl into fists as my beast form hums with need. I try again to center myself. Try again to soothe the raging flame that roars inside me.

I will not go to her in this form, not tonight.

When Hydra had flown with her on her back into the black mountain, fear unlike anything I'd ever known had expunged every ounce of rational thought.

Never in all my centuries had I transformed from man to God so quickly, so viciously.

I've tried multiple times to change back and failed.

I'd been so agitated, so afraid, I'd been unable to take the form of a man.

Now, finally, I feel that agitation soothing as I stare at my woman, my little goddess. My wife.

Finally, the tendrils of black smoke that curl around my body drift inward as though feasted upon by the magma in my veins. It's not long after that I feel the morphing, the change. The lessening.

Hard, rock-like black muscle softens to the flesh of man. The raging beat of my heart soothes to the symphony of humanity.

She smiles a slow smile that calls to me.

She invites softly, "Come to me, Hades."

Her eyes never leave me, the hunger never fading. If I could look at one thing for eternity, it would be her just like this. With need and hunger for me burning in the depths of her eyes. With love and surrender and trust.

She is everything.

She is my everything.

She is centuries of dreams and wants wrapped up in the fragility of one small human woman.

The thought is terrifying.

I want to fall to my knees and beg for her soul, but something stays me. Something other.

It is not the time.

I am not sure if the thought is my own or planted there. I simply know it is true, even as I wish to deny it.

I bid her request as I begin to move slowly into the pool. Again, her eyes stay fixed on mine.

She is so beautiful, so sweet, and so mine.

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I cradle her head in my hands, marveling at how delicate she is. How fragile and yet how strong. Her soul is iron encased in velvet.

Somehow, she is the one who will save us all.

I pray. I'm not even sure who or what I pray to, but I pray that in the end, she will not be forced to sacrifice all of herself for all of life.

Her full lips, stained a decadent deep red, part. She whispers a shaky whisper that strokes my very soul. "Kiss me."

Who am I to deny?

I have spent my life as a God, but she somehow strips me down until I am only man. Bent to her beautiful will.

Lowering my head, I cover her mouth with my own. She sighs a sigh I am helpless not to swallow, and the warmth of it curls around my soul.

She is kindling to the everlasting fire that burns inside me, feeding the realm we both love so deeply. I lift her into my arms and water splashes between our bodies as she locks her legs around my waist. Her arms tighten around my shoulders and my head tips back as she deepens the kiss, taking from me all that she desires. All that she needs.

All that she demands.

I want to be her everything, as she is mine.

Words climb from the depths of my being to pour past my lips into her. “I love you, little goddess. I am so in love with you, I cannot imagine—cannot fathom a life in which you do not exist. If I lost you again, I’m not sure I would have the strength to carry the realm. To carry myself.” I kiss her again. “If I lost you, I fear I would allow the flames of Tartarus engulf me from the inside. Engulf everything, because living without you is no life. I have done it, for centuries, and I know this to be true.”

Her hands move to cup my face. Her lovely eyes search mine. There is a little frown between her brow that drives a blade of emotion between my ribs. I’ve displeased her, and I do not like to displease her.

“Don’t think of losing me. You’ll never lose me.”

“I’ve already lost you once.” I am so desperate to keep her here with me, safe, even though I know she will leave. She will travel to Olympus where I cannot go. Where I cannot protect her.

She shakes her head. “No. I wasn’t gone. I wasn’t lost. I was traveling a path I needed to travel so that I could become who I am today. So that I could love you and you could love me freely. So that the binds of our past could no longer hold us locked in the prison of torment we called love.”

“I’ve always loved you.”

“It was a prison.” There’s a sheen in her eyes now that threatens to spill over. “It was a prison we were both trapped in, and when I died, we were set free. We were set free from everything Demeter and Zeus did to us. Free to truly love and be loved the way we were always intended to love.”

Never, not once, have I looked at the tragedy of our past through this lens.

“You are so beautiful.” My eyes roam over her, but I’m speaking of more than her external beauty. I marvel at the wonder of her exquisite mind. The softness in which her thoughts take form. “I am so in love with you.”

Persephone touches her lips to mine. They are so soft against my much rougher lips. She is so small in my arms, and yet there is immeasurable strength living inside her.

She doesn’t pull away from my kiss. “I love you, Hades. All the dark and wonderful parts of you.”

She deepens the kiss, opening to me and stroking her tongue against mine. That fire that lives inside me, present both in man and beast, floods every inch of me. It leaches from my flesh to invade hers and she moans, always so eager for my flame. So untouched by the harm it bestows to every other soul.

When her hips rock into mine, searching for a connection only I can give her, another surge of blood rushes to the already hard, already engorged piece of me that was crafted to fit exclusively inside her. The piece that was intended to connect two as one.

Breath shudders from my lungs as need hums under my skin, rippling, alive. I kiss a path from her lips, down the line of her jaw, to her neck.

Her head falls back, and her body lowers just enough to graze my sensitive tip with the swell of her ass. I jerk my hips, stroking my needy tip in the crack of her ass. She moans and the scent of her arousal nearly steals my control.

I watch as she shoves her hands between our bodies, angling her hips so her core is in line with my tip. Then I watch as the hard length of me sinks inside her.

Sofucking beautiful.Sofucking perfect.

She moans. The sound of it is music that feeds the ravenous hunger for her that yawns in my soul. Pleasure grips me and my control slips, as I pull out and sink inside her tight warmth once again.

Gathering her in my arms, chest to chest, I kiss her as I rock a rhythm of love that has survived centuries into her body. She takes every thrust, meeting me in this place of blissful insanity that only true lovers can know. There is clarity in this insanity, hope that all will work out as it should. That all we have sacrificed and all we will sacrifice will be worth it in the end. That in the end, true good will win. That in the end, the world—Gods and humanity alike—will see through the forgery of good to the evil that lurks beneath. That love will prevail.

I bow my face into the nook of her neck, sealing a sob against her smooth flesh as I thrust long and slow into her body. I lose myself tonight inside her. I let myself, for the first time in as long as I can remember, shed every ounce of armor I cling to. I let myself be vulnerable with her, because with my very heart and soul wrapped up in her, I've never been more vulnerable. Not even in the belly of the monster who sired me.

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I make love to her over and over until her body can take no more, and she falls into sleep. Even then, I yearn for her.

Even as I pull her close, and she sighs warmly against my chest in sleep, I can't ignore the cool swell of dread that rises inside me. Can't ignore the blooming fear I feel in the face of the future I cannot flee from.

I press my lips to her forehead, a palm to her belly where the souls of my daughters grow. And again, I pray to the Fates for mercy.

Chapter

Twenty-One

Persephone

"I don't have a good feeling about this." Hesitation twists Maya's expression as her fingers knot in front of her belly. "I don't think you should go."

"I don't have a choice." I sigh, pulling a gown from a hanger and tossing it onto the bench in the middle of the closet.

If the Moirai are right, Ares' future and the continuation of humanity as we know it, depends on me travelling to Olympus.

Just the thought has a chill snaking down my spine. It erupts over my flesh in goosebumps that are more than visible. They're a beacon of my discomfort. My fear.

The Moirai say that Ares is at a fork in his path. That I am the thing that will pull him away from the darkness and into the light. Not just the facade of light, as is the way of the games Zeus plays, but the true light that lives inside us. It's not a light that needs to shine and shimmer, on display for all to see. It's a quiet light. It's doing the right thing even though the right thing is cloaked in shadows and seeping chaos. For change is never simple or easy. Peace does not sprout from earth that has not been upturned. One cannot protect another without first tarnishing his armour. I only have to look at Hades for proof of that.

There is no reward without work. And when one is working for anything that matters—truly matters—work is often hard.

Maya lowers to the bench. "There's always a choice."

I roll my eyes at the row of gowns. I don't know what to pack. "Do you know anything about Olympus?"

Maya's frown twists into a look of horror. "Why would I know anything about Olympus?"

"Sorry." I sigh. "It was a silly question."

Maya harrumphs, but she manages a grumble, "Olympus is an ugly, evil place. It is filled with ugly and evil Gods."

"Funny." I finger a pretty, light blue gown.

"What's funny?" Maya doesn't sound impressed. "There's nothing funny about Olympus."

I swear, I can hear her shiver. I explain, "When I imagine Olympus, I think of it as

light and bright. I don't foresee black clothing being in the height of fashion.”

Maya snorts. “It’s not.”

I twist with the pretty, light blue dress. “So, they’d wear something like this?”

“Sure.” She scowls at the gown. “Though I think Zeus favors white and gold.”

I drop the pretty blue dress in favor of an ebony number with a scandalous slit clean to the hip. Then I pluck the dark green one next to it.

I carry the gowns to the suitcase Maya sits beside on the bench. She’s supposed to be helping me pack. She’s not.

I lay the gowns inside and tell her, “When I lived in the human world, before I knew the Gods were real, when I thought of them as myth, I always imagined Olympus was just another way to imagine Heaven. I thought of it as a bright and beautiful place, harmonious music—” I laugh at myself. At my innocence. My ignorance. “I pictured angels, warmth, and sunlight.”

“There will be sunlight,” Maya admits. “And I suppose what you picture as angels.”

My eyes cut to hers. “What do you mean?”

“I think the angel’s humanity often paints are mostly in Zeus’ image. Hera’s, too.” Her scowl is back, but deeper this time. “And Hercules. Can’t forget about the golden boy with his golden wings.”

“Huh.” I nibble my lip as I consider, bobbing my head to my thoughts. “There’s a lot of crossover to creatures of myth and the Gods.”

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Maya laughs, short and sweet. “Sweetie, the Gods are creatures of myth.”

“Interesting.” Maya’s eyes watch my finger as I tap my lips, frowning. “So, where did the perception of Heaven and Hell originate, then?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say Zeus. Very few human souls ever make it to Olympus. He’s just despicable enough to rejoice in the constant fear humanity lives in as they strive to one day enter the golden gates of his beloved realm. To let them think that’s where the good souls end up. When almost all souls end up here.” Emotions blaze in her eyes. “I would choose Tartarus over the emotional torment that living in Olympus would be.”

My brows snap high. “It’s that bad?”

“Everything you think of the Underworld and Olympus should be flipped. Except the darkness and light part. There’s a lot of darkness here, but it’s the good kind of darkness.” She tucks a stray strand of hair behind a pointed ear. “Olympus is, well, it’s light and bright, but it’s filled with manipulation. It’s chocked full of backstabbing, self-serving, hideous Gods.”

“There are people there, though, right? Human souls, I mean?”

Maya gives me a frown. “I’ve never been to Olympus.”

“But you know, don’t you?”

A deeper, husky, but still feminine voice answers my question, and I turn to the door

of the closet to see Hecate. “There are human souls in Olympus Persephone, but they are not cared for the way the souls in the Underworld are cared for.”

“What does that mean?”

“They are slaves,” she says simply. “In every sense of the word.”

“Slaves?” My belly tightens. Sickness churns.

“They are used to serve and pleasure the Gods. Olympus is not a fair and beautiful place.” She steps into the room, her presence far bigger than mine and Maya’s. “You must guard your back.”

Clearly, Hydra is no longer snoozing on the balcony after her fly, because there is a low growl that echoes in my mind before her voice sounds, “I will guard your back.”

I nod, ignoring Hydra and replying to Hecate. “I will be careful.”

She dips her chin and moves deeper into the room, floating in that way she does. My eyes drop to the canvas she carries. It is painted, though not in Hades’ style.

It is darker than anything I’ve seen Hades paint, and he can paint some dark stuff.

She sets the canvas down on the bench beside my suitcase, tapping it with a black painted nail.

“I don’t paint,” Hecate begins. Maya shifts, looking disturbed by the hideousness that is this artwork of crushed bones.

The center is a shattered skull, the fragments of bone rupturing outward. Blood flies in the way of the skull fractures, and snakes slither from shadows that feel all too real,

coiling around bone and peering from broken eye sockets. Spiders crawl.

The painting looks alive and that is horrifying.

“Please excuse the mess of it.” Hecate’s lips curl into a small, slow smile.

I stutter, “Wh-what am I supposed to do with it?”

“Take it with you.”

“Take it with me?” I think my voice just raised at least two entire octaves. I feel my brows climbing even as I try to keep my face neutral. But—well, I just can’t hide my shock.

It’s not my fault. This is a truly horrifying painting.

“Hecate,” I begin cautiously. “I appreciate the gesture, but I don’t think this is going to fit in with the ambience of Olympus.”

“It won’t.” Her smile stretches cat-like. “Just as your dresses won’t.”

Understanding settles inside me as she fingers the dark gowns I’ve chosen for my stay in Olympus.

“You don’t want me to fit in.” It’s not a question.

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“You don’t want to fit in, Persephone. Trust me.”

“I do,” I say honestly. “Trust you, I mean.”

Hecate’s eyes come to mine, and there’s something there in the depths. Something that says not a lot of people—souls—truly trust in Hecate.

Her chest swells with the breath she pulls in. “This isn’t just a painting. I’ve enchanted it as I’ve enchanted all the canvasses for Hades.” My breath catches in my lungs, already burning. My heart pounds. “The paint is infused with Gods’ bone and the blood of Hades. This canvas, like all the rest, is a prison.” Her eyes never leave mine. “Do you understand what I am saying to you, Persephone?”

“I—do you want me to imprison Demeter?”

“If you can. And Zeus, too.”

“I—” A cool shiver rocks me to my core. “I don’t know how I would do that.”

“The canvas is enchanted to take them. All you need to do is push them in.”

“Like, physically push them in?”

“Get them close, and push.” Hecate nods soberly. “The canvas will do the rest. It will pull them in, sealing them inside.” She lifts her hands to the chain she’s always worn around her neck. She tugs, pulling an inky black and dark purple stone from the gauzy black material of her gown. It is caged by an ancient looking melted silver the

color of starlight that drips down the crystal. She places the chain around my throat, fastening it in place before stroking the stone lovingly with one long black nail.

“I may have been birthed by Asteria, but I am a blessed daughter of Nyx, and as such I’ve worn this stone under the protection of her power since my conception. Her blood is my blood. It lives in my veins as she lives in my heart.” Hecate’s eyes lift to mine, and there’s a blooming of color in her pale cheeks. “I give her power now to you, Persephone. My friend and my Queen.” She releases the stone. “Save us all, and then save yourself. Shatter this stone, and once free, the power inside will bring you back here to my home in the Underworld. It is a portal that can appear anywhere, only once. Use it only when you must.”

Chapter

Twenty-Two

Persephone

Hades holds onto my suitcase as we ride the elevator that will portal us from the Underworld into the Living Realm. It is one of the few portals that remain between the realms, most having been sealed after my murder in ancient times.

Inside my chest, my heart is a quickened mess of panicked beats. It thunders to a tune of fear and uncertainty even as I try my best to persuade it to calm. At least until I am no longer standing with Hades.

Every time my heart leaps, triggered by a new fear, the muscle in his jaw pops.

He doesn’t like this. I don’t like it much, either. If it weren’t for the devastating predictions for the future world cast by the Moirai, I wouldn’t be here.

Alas.

My gaze flicks to the suitcase where the enchanted canvas is tucked beneath my gowns, and then to Hades before I cast my gaze back to Hydra.

The scent of tangy whipped berries and darkness permeates the air. Hecate is not with us, but the scent of her magic is strong as it works to both conceal Hydra from the eye of humanity and has made her size more accommodating for travel.

“I thought Hydra was supposed to be invisible to the human eye.” Hades’ eyes slide to me when I speak.

I watch his throat bob with a hard swallow before he says, “She is.”

“I’m human.” I peer behind me as though to check that I can, in fact, see her. Yep. Sangria colored dragon-beast no one can miss.

“You know she is here. Your mind won’t be tricked by the illusion for that fact alone.” Hades shifts closer, the scent of him—of sin and smoke and flames warring with the scent of Hecate’s magic for dominance. “Your humanity is not something that can be argued, however, you are a human who is in the possession of a goddesses magic. Whether you have experienced, used, or honed this magic bears no weight on the fact that it lives inside you, Persephone. Therefore, had you not known she was here, you still would have possessed the ability to peer through the magic that glammers her.”

I like that he’s talking. He’s been so quiet today.

I want to keep him talking.

“Are there other humans who possess magic? Humans who aren’t gods and

goddesses?”

“Yes.” No hesitation. I don’t know why I’m surprised, but I am.

“Really?”

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“Really, Persephone.” Hades’ lips twitch with just the faintest smile.

Hydra huffs a hot breath that warms my skin.

“There are very powerful human bloodlines connected to the powers of the Gods, bloodlines in which are in possession of the gift of magic. There are times when they see through the glammers cast by Gods. When they catch glimpses of the world in which lives alongside their own.” His voice deepens even as it quiets. “More often than not they are persecuted for the things they see. Called crazy. Schizophrenic. Those who process the things they see quietly call themselves clairvoyant.”

“My goodness.” I had no idea.

The elevator doors roll open and we step out into the tower where I first met Hades. The tower where everything changed.

I sense now that everything is about to change again.

Hair rises over every inch of my skin and gooseflesh needles my skin. I feel as though I’ve just stepped into a pit of vipers cast in darkness. I can’t see from which angle they come at me. I only sense that they will strike.

Hades curses low and viciously, pivoting quickly. His bulk blocks any view I may have hoped to have of the space beyond him, and I feel his hand connect gently with my belly, pushing me into the wall at my back. He crowds me, thick shadows leaching from him to curl around us both until I can see nothing beyond them.

His eyes blaze with the flames of Tartarus, lit from the core of him. “Don’t go with him.”

My stomach knots, twisting violently. My heart riots. I want to do the thing that cleanses him of his fear.

“Hades...”

“We can go to war. All of the Underworld would be happy to go to war for you.” Hot breath spills from his lips. It should burn my own, but it doesn’t. “The flames of Tartarus would burn for you.”

“I—I can’t.”

“We can tell them it’s not their time. They get you in the spring. Fall is for me.”

“You tried. Demeter argued that I should have been hers over the summer when I arrived.” I cup his strong neck, pulling his face closer to mine. Poor Minthe had been back and forth all night, trying everything she could try to keep me from this fate. Ares had not been swayed. “Hades, we’ve tried everything. If I don’t go, we know what will happen. I won’t let you pay that price.”

“Little goddess.” I hate the break in his voice. It threatens to break me. “Please. I don’t know that I can watch you walk away with him.”

“Don’t watch.” I cover his mouth with my own, tasting his fear and grief. “Just know I’ll come back to you. I promise, I will come back to you.”

“I can’t save you from Olympus. Anywhere on earth, any other realm, but not Olympus.”

“I won’t need saving.” I press my forehead to his. “I’ll have Hydra and Leuce and—and I won’t need saving.” He inhales my shuddering breath and my heart squeezes. “I have to do this, Hades.” My hands lower from where I’ve cupped his neck, down his chest to my own belly where our girls grow. “I have to do this for them. For life.”

His eyes shutter before slowly reopening. “I wish I knew what the Moirai told you. I wish you would tell me.”

My lips part and close. Now is not the time. It’s a thought that is both my own and not.

Hades sighs a sigh that is weighted far heavier than any man, woman, soul, or God should ever have to carry. He dips his head and takes my lips in a kiss that is soft and loving and tainted with desperation.

I pour my whole heart and soul into the kiss. I don’t do it because I fear I may not return to him. I know in my heart of hearts that I will. I pour everything into this kiss because I need to leave him with all of me, even if I’m gone. I need to leave him with the thing he has lacked all of his existence. Hope.

He pulls away from the kiss far too soon, and yet I know it’s time. Softly, so softly, he tells me, “I love you, little goddess. With all that I am and all I have ever been, I love you. You are the only future I want, the only future I crave.” He presses his lips once more to my own. “Come home to me.”

“I will,” I vow a moment before the shadows begin to pull back and the room around us comes back into view.

That’s when I see Ares for the first time. And that’s when dread and fear unlike any I’ve ever experienced before settles like an anchor in the sea of my belly.

I drown the urge to flee and instead take a single step toward the God of War.

Chapter

Twenty-Three

Persephone

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:10 am

Hades is a big man, lithe and lethal. Ares, however, is just lethal.

The man is a mountain with muscle stacked on muscle stacked on more muscle. His hair is black as a charred battlefield, and a touch too long to be called short. Every part of him is sharp lines and hard angles and deadly muscle honed into a murderous weapon. If his eyes weren't a golden brown and there wasn't that endearingly unexpected curl to his hair, I'd say he looked more beast than man.

The suit he wears hides nothing. The man is a weapon, honed to kill. When he shifts on the stool at the bar, and pushes to stand, the low growl of warning from Hydra isn't in my mind.

Ares is unaffected. He takes lethal steps toward us. Toward me.

My heart knocks loudly in my chest and Hades takes my hand in his.

Ares' lips curl into a smile that could cut through bone, it's so sharp. "This is the infamous Persephone reborn." His eyes never leave mine as he jokes—or I think it's a joke. "I thought there'd be an upgrade, but she looks just like the last model." I realize he's not teasing when he mutters a smooth, "Disappointing."

"Ares," Hades clips.

Ares laughs. The sound is deep and low and dripping danger. It's all I can do not to shiver.

"You need not worry, Hades. Your little pet is not my type." His eyes scan me again,

lingering on my hair with eyes that dance with dark intent. “I prefer blondes.”

Every part of Hades tenses. We all know that as soon as the sun touches my skin, blonde is what I will be. My first take on Ares is that he’s an asshole.

As far as I’m concerned, maybe he deserves to take the wrong path at whatever fork he’s standing at. Screw the future is on the tip of my tongue, but it is stayed by the thought of my daughters. By the idea that if I were to do exactly that, Hades would suffer eternally. He would waste away from the poison of a broken deal.

I don’t know where it comes from, but sass is the name of this game and I’m suddenly full of it. Sliding into Hades’ chest, I touch my fingertips over the place where his thundering heart lays and murmur, “He’s right, Hades. You have no need to worry. I prefer real men, not little boys who never learned how to be their own man.” My eyes slide back to Ares, sweeping slowly up and then down and back again. “I like a man who knows the man he is outside of daddy.”

For a moment, I think I made a mistake. A big mistake. A scent erupts in the space between us, metallic and earthy and sickeningly warm, like blood on a battlefield.

Red bleeds into the gold of Ares’ eyes, and everyone in the room stiffens. They all know something I don’t know, but I’ve been around Gods long enough to suspect that Ares has a Gods’ Form like all the others. And right now, the tether his human form has on the beast within is frayed. Loose.

A muscle in his hard jaw tics and the scent of bloody earth grows stronger. I’m not sure how I manage it, but I peel myself from Hades to face off with Ares. When I lift my chin, daring the anger in him to rise, to break this ancient deal that stands between Olympus and the Underworld and harm me, a crackle of hot electricity snaps between us.

Ares finally smiles, but it's ice cold and lacking feeling. "Brave for a human. So little and defenceless." His golden eyes speared with daggers of blood red lift to pin Hades. "She just might survive Olympus."

Lethal steadiness fills Hades' dark response. "If she is harmed, the deal is broken on Olympus' side. The consequence will not be easily borne."

"If the deal is broken, she will be dead."

Heavy silence fills the room like a blanket of dread. But I can't pull my eyes from Ares, from the ticking in his jaw that tells me he doesn't like this, either. That he came here as he was instructed to collect me, but that he's disappointed in Hades for releasing me now.

If only he knew my true reasons for going with him to Olympus were more than to keep the toxins of a broken Gods' deal from ruining Hades eternally. But to save him from whatever darkness tries to shackle him to a fate of pain and torment.

I'm about to speak when Hades moves closer to Ares, his eyes locked on the God of War and seeing far more than I'm sure he likes. He doesn't shift under the scrutiny, though. There is a strength in Ares I suspect has been born of terrible things.

Hades cocks his head just so, eyes narrowing. "You won't let her die, Ares."

"Don't pretend you know me. It's been centuries."

"You fought with me once, long ago. Alongside me." There is a softness that only shared history can offer to the words Hades speaks. "Once, you had my back and I had yours."

"Once is long ago."

“I didn’t leave you.” Leuce shifts uncomfortably, her eyes finding the floor as Hades steps closer to Ares. “The Underworld was not my choice. I was banished.”

“It is your choice now, though, isn’t it?” Ares’ lip curls. “I fought alongside you for centuries at my father’s decree. You said I had a place beside you, always. That we would fight together, always.”

Tension tightens Hades’ expression. “The Underworld was not as it is now.”

“I would have chosen Tartarus over the Golden City of Olympus.” When no one speaks again, Ares says quietly, “I will guard her with my life, though it will do little good. Without war, my life is worth very little to Zeus.”

Hades sighs, but his eyes come to mine. “Two months, little goddess. They get you for two months only.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:10 am

The two months over the summer when I lived with Hades in the tower essentially belonged to Olympus. To Demeter as per the ancient deal that somehow stands even though I am no longer Goddess, but human. Even though my ancient memories had to be fed to me via the mercy of the Moirai. For some reason, they kept this deadly deal intact when they took so much else away.

Another glance at Ares, and I can't help but think they did it for him. To save him.

"I'm ready." I break the heavy silence, feeling Hades stiffen beside me as Ares' eyes come to mine again. The spears of red are gone in his golden eyes, but the tension lingers as he sweeps his hand in a gesture to come to him.

With my heart in my throat, I cross the short distance between the Gods, settling myself beside the God of War even as I long to run to the God of the Underworld. There is pain in his expression that he doesn't bother to hide, even from the God who stands at my side. Once a friend and now an enemy, or perhaps a tether of friendship remains between the two? Perhaps I can stitch knots into the frayed strings that surround the last tether between the two, and that is why the Moirai have sent me on this dangerous mission to Olympus.

I feel Ares' hand high on my back, the pressure gentle as he urges me toward the door. When Leuce and Hydra follow, Ares pauses.

He looks at them and says simply, "No."

"They go with her, or she doesn't go at all." Hades' hands are in his pockets, surely curled into fists.

“You would suffer the toxin?” Ares asks.

“For her, I would suffer anything.”

“Then why are you letting her go at all?”

Hades’ eyes shift to me, and I feel Ares’ do the same. “This is her choice.”

Chapter

Twenty-Four

Persephone

“A cathedral? Really?”

Ares shifts in the back seat of the car beside me. “It is where the portal to Olympus is.”

“I thought it was on Mount Olympus.”

He sits back in the seat to study me with cool, curious eyes. “There is one there as well. Unless you feel like hiking, we’ll use this one.”

I peer out the window to see Hydra soaring in the sky over the ancient cathedral. The history this building must have born witness to. Like the temples that stand in ruins today. I can only imagine.

“Why a church?”

“Zeus has always been an arrogant God.” Ares opens the door to shove his big body

from the car. Somehow, even though the man is beastly in size, he moves with a fluidity that should not be possible.

Leuce exits from the front seat and my door opens as I reach for the handle, finding Ares standing there. He offers me a hand I consider ignoring, but that's not the point of this trip to Olympus, I remind myself.

The point is an alliance with Ares. Why, I can't be sure.

The Moirai, frustrating as they are wrapped up in their secrets, had kept their reasons to themselves.

When I slide my hand into Ares' surprise he can't hide ignites his eyes. He closes his fingers gently around my palm, staring down at the connection in marvel.

There is nothing sexual about this connection, but it is intimate.

I exit the car with his help, and it's my turn to watch in curiosity as Ares keeps hold of my hand for a long moment. He stares down at where we connect with an expression of hope and sadness that falls against my raw heart like the talon of a whip.

I can't begin to decipher the meaning of his expression. To decode the collage of feelings that flash in his wounded eyes. But each emotion falls against my heart like the pins in an abused cushion.

There is more to Ares than what appears to the naked eye.

I fear none of it is good.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:10 am

As though coming to himself, Ares slowly opens the curl of his fingers to reveal my much smaller hand in the center of his palm. I am in no hurry to pull my hand from his. I sense, deep inside me, that gentle touch is not something that comes to him freely or often.

Standing close but off to the side, Leuce watches the wordless exchange with brows that are pulled in close together. Something swirls in her gray green eyes. Turbulent emotions she does her best to shove down deep inside as Hydra lowers to settle on the stone entrance of the cathedral.

Ares clears his throat, but his words sound coarse. "Come. Olympus waits."

The portal to Olympus is in the highest point of the cathedral. I hadn't even known the tower was something that could be accessed. I'm not sure many know this point can be accessed. Clearly, it is for the Gods alone and the few whom they entrust with the information.

"Tartarus," Leuce hisses as we finally arrive at the top. "It reeks up here."

"You are going to struggle in Olympus," Ares says.

Hydra huffs a hot breath and I inhale deeply the scent of...well, it smells of the sun. Of hot baked stone and salt on the skin. There is the scent of something sweet and gone, like flowers on a breeze. It is chased by another sensation that is so real to me, I can't help but feel the spray of mist as though I am standing at the foot of a waterfall, just within reach of the mist it emits.

“I think it smells nice.”

Leuce’s brows snap high in incredulity as Hydra growls low in her throat. “It smells like acrid deceit.”

Ares turns to me with red spearing the gold of his eyes once again. “Olympus is a place of trickery. Perhaps, long ago it was a realm of wonder and bliss. It has been tainted by the greed of Gods. Painted with the horrors of their amusement.” Dark warning crawls from his words to slither over my skin. “Keep in mind that beneath the beauty you see lurks a bloodthirsty realm that feeds on the suffering Zeus demands.” Ares moves until little more than a breath of space stands between us. “Trust no one.”

I lift my chin. “That won’t be hard.”

Ares’ lip curls. “Good.”

I don’t release my breath until Ares turns away from me, severing the contact of his heavy gaze on my skin.

I’m so overstimulated I feel as though I could collapse here and now, and I haven’t even entered Olympus yet.

Still, my nerves are strung raw. I feel fragile in a way I don’t like.

Tuned into my emotions, Hydra strokes me with her nose. I can feel all nine sets of her eyes on me, studying me. But she says nothing into my mind, and I lean into her strength.

“Are you ready for this?” I whisper aloud to her.

“I will protect you, my Persephone.”

My heart softens as it always softens for her. “I mean to see Hercules after—after what he did to you.”

“I am ready to protect you, my Persephone,” she repeats, steadfast.

“I will protect you, too.”

“I know.” Her voice is soothing in my mind. “I love you for it, my Persephone.”

“I love you.”

Ares turns, scowling at me. “Are you coming?”

“Oh, we’re ready now?” I move closer to the dais that stands beneath where I think a bell hung long ago. There is a shimmer in the air now, as though it senses us. It is the color of a thousand rainbows, like a splash of light through stained glass. It is nothing like the faded shadows that curl from the corners of the elevator in Hades’ Tower that portals us into the Underworld.

This is beautiful, but I can’t ignore the warning Ares gave. That beneath beauty lurks danger.

And I see it for what it is. How that deception has spread like poison into the living realm. How evil so often wears the mask of good. How the most beautiful places often conceal the most terrible horrors. How riches and bounty breed dark minds with depraved cravings.

The living realm is a lesser forgery of Olympus, cast in the hideous image of Zeus.

How deeply do the filthy roots of Olympus dive into the living realm? Can we ever hope to uproot the toxicity of powerful Gods who endorse corrupt governments and kingdoms at the expense of all the other souls? Is there even a point to this war or has hope already been lost?

The shimmer grows and Leuce moves closer to me and Hydra. Every shred of gold is blasted from Ares' eyes and replaced with a bloody red. My world changes.

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I am no longer in the living realm.

I am in Olympus.

Chapter

Twenty-Five

Persephone

The Underworld is darkly exquisite. Nothing and no one can deny such a claim.

But Olympus is the other side of that darkly seductive coin. And it is exquisite in an entirely different way. Bright, light, and gilded gold.

Disappointingly, we have arrived in a room.

No—room is not the right word for this space. I've never seen anything quite like it. It is huge—Coliseum huge and castle grand. It is far grander a space than I've ever stood. Words escape the enormity of it.

I feel like a speck on the floor of white marble that gleams with veins of glittering gold. High white marble walls arch into a single peak in the center from which a starburst is cut into the stone. It is aligned perfectly to pull the golden sun that sits high in a blue cloudless sky into the room.

Chiseled into the white marble are scenes of cherub angels and tender hands, horse

drawn carriages and soft gazes. Carved into the walls is a feeling of love that leaches into the room, permeating the very air.

This realm was carved of love, of that I am certain. There is a familiarity in me that I can't ignore as ancient memories rise to the surface of my mind. I've been here before, but I've never felt for this space, this realm, what I feel now.

I don't want to love it, but there is something deep inside me, rooted into the pit of my belly that is bursting with love.

It bleeds into every part of me, for there is beauty in this realm that even the evil that hides, wearing a mask of love, slips through.

But evil was never meant to thrive here. It was not invited, and the takeover has not been kind. It has been hostile, and the price has been a world of pain. The overtaking of this realm sprung wounds that bleeds into the living realm, infecting the souls meant to live there as it infected the Gods and Goddesses who sought a life here.

Chaos created this realm as she created all the others, and she outdid herself. Twisting vines of gilded gold shimmer in the rays of sunlight that peek through the starburst in the ceiling.

They dance like tiny fireflies glimmering across the white marble floor. Specks of dust high in the air hover golden, like fairy dust sprinkled on magic.

Everything in Olympus was crafted to radiate warmth.

But trapped beneath all the warmth and all the wonder is a love and a purity that should have never been contained by the evil it has been trapped by for centuries. The evil of a hungry and devious God. A false God.

For no true God wishes ill upon the people he crafts. No true God injects such pain in his subjects, as Zeus has injected in mankind.

Humanity has been deceived.

We have been tricked into worshiping a terrible God who feasts on energy and thrives on pain. He is a harvester of hope.

My heart quickens with a need to decimate Zeus, the God who stands clothed in shimmering robes of gold that sweep the floor around his sandaled feet.

There is no denying he is breathtaking. I shouldn't be surprised, really. He is, after all, Hades' brother.

His hair is long and curled and stark white. His skin smooth, his eyes blue and flawless.

He radiates the perception of good and purity, but his heart is cracked and bleeding black.

Hatred oozes inside me, and I have to look away for fear he might see it.

Still, his image is burned behind my eyes.

There is no question as to why Zeus is worshiped as God. There is no confusion as to how his image is the one that paints the picture of the Heavenly Father in the minds of so many.

There is no question as to how he has deceived those who kneel to the practice of religion, time and again throughout history.

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His image is entirely ethereal.

Where Hades' God's Form is a thing of nightmares, a form I sense that he is ashamed of, that he hides—a form of torment he cages away lest someone might fear him, Zeus is a mask of wonder.

He wears his God's Form proudly, and I think constantly.

Massive white feathered wings rise high above his head, standing—goodness! The tip of his wings must stand around ten feet high. The feathered tips graze the floor at his feet.

I can only imagine the breadth they would span if he pushed them outward, stretched them far. It would be hard not to fall to my knees. To not succumb to a lifetime of biblical conditioning. To believe that I was in the presence of something truly wondrous, truly ethereal. Truly heavenly.

But I am not. Deep down in my heart of hearts, wrapped in the intuition the Moirai planted deep within my soul, I know.

I know that I am in the presence of nothing more than pretty falsity.

Zeus spreads his arms wide, as though to welcome me into the circle of a loving embrace. As if.

When I don't move, don't run to him, a smile I am sure he means to look genuine overcomes his handsome face. I see evil through the crack of it, and beside me, Ares

stiffens.

“Daughter,” Zeus’ voice booms, echoing off the vaulted walls that surround us.

The word crawls over my skin, the title cooling my blood.

I am not his daughter.

I want to spit that fact at him. To drive the blade of it into his ego, but I force myself instead to smile softly and calmly. Placatingly. Like the little human he thinks I am.

He doesn't know that I know the truth behind their dirty lies.

He doesn't know that I know Demeter schemed with Uranus to create me. That together they abused Hyperion’s body and mind to steal the seed from which my soul was able to sprout.

That they gave the credit of all that I am to Zeus.

They don't know that the Underworld knows what they've done. They think they have the upper hand. They think they're winning.

“Come closer,” Zeus urges, that sickeningly sweet smile never wavering from his face. “Let me look at you.”

I only take one step, before I feel Leuce’s hand on my arm, staying me.

At my back, Hydra is no longer small. No longer drenched in the scent of Hecate’s magic.

She is a formidable beast, and even as Zeus pretends that he can't see her, that she is

not here, that she is of no worry to him—the fact he won't look at her tells the truth of the discomfort that plagues him.

Demeter takes a single step forward at the sight of Leuce's hand on my body. Her lip is curled, and she can't hide the disgust in her eyes. "Persephone, you are the daughter of a Goddess. You do not let a nymph touch you in such a way."

Leuce's hand spasms on my arm, and I lift my other hand to touch hers lovingly for all to see.

"This nymph is named Leuce. You will call her by her name. I am here as your guest, honoring an ancient deal between the Underworld and Olympus. Leuce is my friend, and my guard, and my guest. She goes where I go, and she has every right to touch me."

Demeter's jaw pops as her teeth snap together.

There is a vicious glare in Zeus' eyes as they connect with Demeter, but it is gone as quick as it came.

His laughter is boisterous and entirely out of place.

"There is no need to be tense. Demeter has unpleasant history with the nymph, is all."

"Leuce," I correct him.

His jaw hardens, but he nods. "Yes, yes. Leuce." Zeus clears his throat. "As I was saying, Demeter, your mother, has history?—"

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“She tried to turn me into a tree,” Leuce interrupts him. By the ice that fractures the blue in his eyes, and the way Ares tenses, I don’t think that happens often.

Demeter’s fists curl into tight balls. “You welcomed yourself into my daughter's marriage bed, you whore.”

I pat Leuce’s hand twice before shrugging from her hold. The hypocrisy of Gods is astounding.

I step closer to Demeter. One step, two steps. My heart is a thunderous roar in my chest. I lift my chin and tell the woman who birthed my soul, who crafted it and schemed to mold it into something she thought she could control eternally, “She never invited herself to my marriage bed. I did that all by myself.”

Demeter cringes away from me. Horror and disgust flash in her wheat-colored eyes. “You?—”

“Oh, yes. I am very close to Leuce and Minthe. I will remain close to them.” I smile sweetly, driving the blade of my point home in her hideous, scarred heart. “Forever.”

Zeus shuffles between the two of us. He laughs, but there's tension to it now that he can't hide. “Mothers and daughters.” He chuckles again. “Daughters are always testing mothers, aren't they, dear?”

For the first time, my eyes drift to the woman who stands in the corner of the room.

She is beautiful, draped in the same gold from which covers Zeus’ body. Her hair is a

shocking fall of white, braided thickly over one shoulder. Weaved into the twist of it are threads of gold decorated in crystals that radiate all the colors of a peacock. The delicate gold crown on her head twists into the shape of a lion's face, the mane a flare of sharply cut peacock-colored crystals that burst in the cut of a lily. The light spilling in through the ceiling catches the prisms of peacock colors, casting it like a halo over her white hair and toga.

Her eyes are a blue that rivals the cloudless sky, and her lips are stained a soft rose petal pink.

Her skin is not pale, but tinted with the golden hues of one that has lived an eternity under the sun, unweathered even as it is stained by the shine of its golden rays.

I don't need to be introduced to the Goddess to know that she is Hera, Zeus' wife and Ares' mother.

Slowly, regally, she lifts her chin and nods once. "Yes, daughters have a way of challenging their mothers."

It's hard not to scowl at the lot of them.

"Well, she tried to kill me not long ago." My eyes cut to Demeter. "Didn't you, Demeter?"

"Don't be dramatic, Persephone." Demeter rolls her eyes. "You have a power inside you, and I simply wanted to unlock it."

My heart skips in my chest. The memory of Addison on the floor of the ancient ruins... "You killed my friend."

She rolls her eyes again and folds her arms over her chest, but she's vibrating with

emotion she can't conceal. I can't say that I'm not happy I've poked at her sore spot.

Now that I found it, I want to dig my finger in it and twist.

Really, I don't know when I became so vicious. So angry and hateful. Maybe it's a collision of an ancient life and the revelations of this life I currently live.

I am about to speak again, to cut into the hateful Goddess when Hera speaks. "Ares, why don't you take our guest to her rooms? Instruct her on the ways of our golden realm." She moves closer, her hands folded pleasantly at her belly. "You have most assuredly come into yourself, Persephone. But there is a time and place to loose your tongue. Now," she clucks hers, "is not that time." She straightens her shoulders, hitting me with a smile that is so bright, it's chilling. "I look forward to seeing you at dinner. Until then, welcome to Olympus."

Chapter

Twenty-Six

Persephone

The hallsof the golden castle are plenty large enough for Hydra to lumber as Ares guides us to the rooms we will occupy while we are here. The halls are long, and the walls are a white marble that widens into yawning lookouts with overhead rooftops crafted of the same white marble from which images of ancient history have been painted. It is held up by massive white marble pillars that are gilded at the base and crown with intricate mouldings of gold.

The balcony's rails are the same gleaming white and gold that bakes in the high warmth of the sun.

I want to move closer, to peer over the rails into the realm beyond the castle, but Ares moves quickly through the halls, allowing little time for curiosity.

He clearly wants to be rid of us.

Hydra's smooth voice echoes in my mind. "It is too bright here."

I don't tell her I think it's beautiful here. When her nostrils flare on a loud sigh, I can't help but flash her a small smile.

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“Thank you for being with me.”

“I will always be with you, my Persephone.”

I turn back to face forward, glimpsing the hard set of Leuce’s eyes on Ares’ broad back. Every step she takes is tense, firm, assertive. Leuce naturally exudes a more dominant air than most, but she’s taken it to a whole new level since we arrived in Olympus.

It’s no secret she wants to be feared, but she is a nymph in a house of monstrous Gods. I have an unsettling feeling that the games played within these walls are treacherous.

Aries stops at a set of high double doors crowned by a thick border of ancient script. I don't think I've seen anything but white marble and gold since I arrived, so the towering wood doors stand out. As do the curling décor of the gold handles.

Everything here is so bright and shining, it’s almost blinding.

I’d thought after a time in the Underworld, cocooned by the darkness, that I would crave the sun. The Underworld is warm, but I always thought nothing would compare to the feel of the warmth of the sun on my skin.

Here, in Olympus, I crave nothing but Hades and the darkness of the realm he commands.

Ares’ gold eyes pin to mine, his large hand settling on the gilded knob. “These are

your rooms.” He points to another door down the hall. “That door also accesses your suite.” His eyes flick to Leuce and back to me. His lip curls, but it’s not in a smile. “Your bodyguard will occupy that room.”

Leuce grunts, I nod, and Aries opens the room. It's a little hard not to gape at what greets us.

The opulence is loud. It is nothing like the quiet luxuries of the Underworld.

Olympus is just wealth.

Everything is bright and shining and abundant to a point it’s over the top.

Even as I am overstimulated, I can’t deny that it is beautiful.

As soon as I have the thought, a tug pulls deep inside me. It’s shockingly unexpected, and I lift my hand to cover my belly where the sensation of warmth is now spreading. A feeling of home shudders through me that is not my own, and yet it’s strong enough to bring tears to my eyes.

Tears I quickly blink away when I catch Ares studying me quietly, his curiosity darkly unsettling in this place of light.

My eyes cut to Hydra as she lumbers past me to the far side of the room, which is lacking a wall and instead boasts a massive balcony that looks at a view of a pearl-ish gray mountain so massive, its peak so high, the tip of it punctures the blue of the sky that blankets the realm, fading into the misted glow of the sun that spills over it all.

There is a solid moment where I can’t breathe. It’s so...

It’s breathtaking. Beautiful. Exquisite.

And that sensation of warmth deep inside me grows. There is recognition and adoration for this place that lives inside the soul I carry, the soul I grow. Even as her sister shudders a cool abhorrence for this place, she is warm.

And I feel like falling to my knees in grief, for I now know that one of my daughters is fated to find herself in this realm of dark dealings masked by light and love. She is fated in such a way by the Moirai that there will be no escaping it, no changing it. No unravelling the threads that bind her.

A burning tightness constricts my throat as Hydra lets out a noise that is more growl than anything else as she peers over the side of the railing. "Come, my Persephone. See this."

I leave Leuce and Ares standing stiffly in place as I join Hydra, moving slowly across the room. It's hard not to take it all in. There is so much to see.

Nothing is simply done.

Even the lamp bases are carved of stone into scenes of battle and sex. A hot blush stings my cheeks as I pass a statue of a couple. A mortal woman with a God, I realize. Her head is thrown back, limbs wrapped around a God with wings that burst from his back. His eyes are fixed on her face. I find my own eyes drawn to her expression, riveted there by horror and curiosity.

She looks lost to passion, her lips parted in what I'm sure would spill a moan if the statue came to life. Her eyes are half-mast, lashes fanning low. But there's something about her expression that tightens my stomach, twisting the beauty into something other. Something wrong.

I look closer and from the corner of one eye, I see the smallest bulb of a tear. It clings to stone lashes so intricately carved; I can't help the awe that rises despite her grief.

My gaze shifts back to the God who holds her captive in his arms. At first, his arm around her much smaller frame seems loose, his hand on her hip a tender caress. But upon deeper inspection, I note the nip of his fingertips into her stone flesh, the slight angle of her head as though to escape the taste of his hungry lips on hers. My eyes snap back to the God, who I now recognize as Zeus, although he is much, much younger. There is a ravenous violence that lurks under the stone surface of his eyes, imprisoned in time by the chisel which carved the masterpiece.

I realize in horror that I am looking upon an ancient rape captured in stone.

Cutting my study of the statue, I am no longer flushed. I feel pale with horror. Sick with sadness.

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I'm no innocent to the ancient ways. I spent every moment I could studying the ancient history of the Greek Gods, enthralled by the mythology. I am wholly aware that in that time so long ago, Gods and men took women without thought or concern for her wants and desires. Rape is a part of history, but it is not a history I wish to look upon.

Turning back to Ares, I ask, "Can this be removed?"

I don't miss the slight cocking of his head. "No. Hera placed this piece here when it appeared."

I frown. "Appeared?"

"Yes. Millennia ago, now." Golden eyes speared with red light on the statue. "Born of the same power that birthed the realms."

"You mean Chaos' power?"

His eyes sharpen, for a moment the red wholly claiming the gold. "You know of Chaos?"

"Everyone knows of Chaos."

"She is a lost Goddess. No one speaks of her, nor have they spoken of her in so long even the history books fail to teach of her." He steps into the room, moving slowly. Dangerously.

I flinch when the door falls closed with a loud clang.

Leuce tenses, as though ready to sacrifice her life for my own in the event Ares, God of War, decides to ruin me.

Hydra looses a low growl of warning, but Ares pays none of it any mind as he demands quietly, lethally, “You are human, raised human. Tell me again, little human, how do you know of Chaos?”

An icy shiver slithers over my flesh, but I lift my chin. “I might be human, but I’m not stupid. I don’t know you, Ares, and I don’t trust you.” Something twists violently in my belly as he stops close, so close I can scent him. Under the hot metallic scent of bloody earth is something else. Something I know is owed to the soul I carry inside me. The soul who belongs here in Olympus, perhaps with him.

The musk of flames licking at a darkening sky, of hot stone and sweet citrus. Of bergamot.

It’s entirely too pleasant, and that is alarming.

I clear my throat and take a quick step back. Ares cocks his head in response, sharp eyes narrowing as his brow furrows.

A low noise sounds in the back of his throat, and he rises to his full height. It’s rather intimidating, but I don’t allow myself to squirm even as the soul inside me titters in recognition I can’t begin to explain.

“The statue remains. Everything Hera abhors is hidden away in this wing of the palace.” His eyes flick to the statue before sliding back to me, though now he wears a disgusted curl to his lips that gives me pause. “If you don’t like it, throw a sheet over it.”

“I can always toss it over the balcony for you, my Persephone,” Hydra says.

I cough to swallow back my surprised laugh, my gaze cutting to my friend. Slowly, I give my head a quick shake.

I’d hoped for it to be imperceptible, but when I look back to Ares, I know for a fact he caught it.

His eyes are still dangerously narrowed on me as he slowly begins to move back toward the door. “Nothing and no one are as they seem here in Olympus. Watch your back.”

Hydra growls again and Leuce says, “I will guard her back.”

Ares’ eyes don’t leave me. I can’t ignore the scent of bloody earth with its now fainter undertones of bergamot. Ares opens the door but pauses mid-escape. “My rooms are across the hall from yours.”

He doesn’t wait for my response before he leaves, letting the door fall shut behind him.

In my mind, I hear his words on repeat, “Everything Hera abhors is hidden away in this wing of the castle.”

I don’t know why, but that twisting in my belly cinches painfully tight. Grief is the gasoline that splashes the flickering match inside my heart, erupting centuries of sorrow that does not belong to me.

My gaze shifts from the closed door to Leuce, whose dark skin shines with discomfort. I whisper, “Is Hera not his mother?”

“She is.”

I touch my fingertips to that burning place inside my chest. “But he said—but his rooms are?—”

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Leuce bows her head. “The Gods can be ugly, Persephone.”

“So ugly that a mother does not love her child? So ugly that she would banish him to the wing of the palace where all that she hates is left to gather dust? To rot?”

Leuce’s beautiful eyes connect with mine. “You only have to look at Demeter to answer that question, my friend.”

My fingers curl where my heart thunders. I feel as though I’m trying to contain it inside me, for I cannot imagine carrying my daughters, nurturing them with my body, and not loving them more than anything else. Certainly, more than myself.

And now I am certain that Hera does not love Ares.

Chapter

Twenty-Seven

Hades

“She doesn’t sleep.” Hypnos sighs tiredly, leaning back in the chair as I swing my legs over the side of the couch to rise.

“What do you mean she doesn’t sleep? It’s been three days.”

“I cannot connect to her if she does not sleep.” He scrubs his face, the silver rings that bind his fingers catching in the light of the flames dancing in the hearth.

“She cannot go three days without sleep, Hypnos. She is human.” I stand, pacing.
“She is—she is vulnerable. She carries our children.”

“She sleeps,” Hypnos assures me. “But not long enough to fall into anything deep. It is possible I might have time to slip into her mind, to meet her. But she does not give us the time to connect your mind to hers.”

“Then meet her and tell her to fucking sleep.”

His brows rise slowly, and he settles back in the chair again. “I can sense that she is alive, Hades. She is as well as she can be, being in that place.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him his words do nothing to ease the worry that has only built with every day she has been gone, but I don’t. It wouldn’t be true.

Hypnos lifts an ankle over his knee, getting comfortable. He clearly plans to stay a while. It’s a good thing. I’m not sure I’d let him leave.

He speaks, “Her sleep is broken. She is not plagued by nightmares, but by whatever it is she sees in Olympus during her day. I can feel the edges of her mind and sense the distress. She is not happy, and she does not feel secure. But no harm has yet befallen her.”

There is movement at the entrance, and my eyes land on Minthe. She looks put together as always, her green velvet gown clinging to her lean body. The high slit shows off the green vines that ink her skin as an eternal reminder that she’d experienced the wrath of a Goddess, nearly having been turned into a mint plant. Most would think it a tattoo, but if one looked closely, they would see the slight raise of the vines. If one touched, they would feel the hardness of scars.

“I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation.” Her eyes flicker between us,

apology dancing with a fear my own recognizes.

“When did you return from the living realm?”

“A few hours ago.” She lifts the wine she carries to her lips. “I—I couldn’t?”

“Rhadamanthus can handle the tower.” She nods but says nothing more.

“Have you been sleeping, Minthe?” Hypnos asks, and it’s then I see the dark circles under her eyes.

She sips her wine again. “Have you tried Leuce?”

“Her mind is guarded.”

“Fucking nymph.” Emotion cracks her words, shimmering in her eyes.

Hypnos nods. “Indeed.”

Those shining eyes land like spears on Hypnos. He doesn’t even flinch. “And what about Hydra?”

“She does not dream as Gods and humans dream.”

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“But you’ve tried?”

Hypnos nods again. “I’ve tried.”

Minthe takes another sip, holding the wine in her mouth as she bobs her head. She swallows. In the same breath she says, “It’s only been three days. Persephone can’t stay awake forever.”

“This is true. As a human, there is only so long she can go before her body forces her to sleep.”

“And whenever that time comes, you will be ready,” I say.

“We will be ready, Hades.”

I sink into a chair. “There is so much she doesn’t know about Olympus. I failed to prepare her.”

“You have not visited Olympus since the fall of the Titans, Hades. It’s been millennia.” Minthe lowers close to Hypnos on the couch, seeking a comfort he does not deny as he slides his arm around her body, tucking her close.

Leuce and Minthe have been lovers for as far back as I can remember, their devotion to one another absolute even as they both take other partners and bring others into their bed to share between them. It is their relationship that I once attempted to model my own with Persephone. To convince myself that there could be love between sharing.

I had loved her. I'd also loathed every moment I'd been forced to share her.

Now, knowing her every sigh of pleasure had been an act—it made rage boil in my blood. Demeter needed to be stopped, stripped of her power and made to pay for all the suffering she'd dealt. Not only to me and Persephone, but to the world. To all of humanity, for her schemes had touched many.

Her hatred leached from the very earth in which her harvests sprouted, poisoning like toxins while humanity expected nutrients.

My fists clench as I think of the modern food industry in the living realm. The Gods have infiltrated the minds of those in power, encouraging them to package disease and addiction for profit. To build wealth while treating side effects, never offering the cure.

The realms of the Gods have spiraled for far too long. There is only so much humanity can sustain before they meet their end. I've seen it before. The death of entire civilizations wiped out because of the Gods' manipulations.

"Zeus' reign as king must come to an end."

Hypnos' eyes flash. "How do you intend to do something like that?"

"I don't know. But the living realm can't sustain his rule much longer." I cast my gaze to the flames in the hearth, reveling in the burn. "The living realm is nothing more than one giant amphitheatre to Zeus. He's always loved to watch blood spill."

Dark vengeance stews inside me as Minthe stands. I pay her no mind as she moves around the room, appearing at my side with a tumbler of whiskey.

I take it from her with a nod of thanks, tossing the whole thing back in a single

swallow. I revel in the burn. The God inside me revels in the burn.

And the burn becomes a need for vengeance I can no longer ignore. “The day will come when the world watches as Zeus’ blood spills, washing away centuries of a tyrannical rule.” The whiskey ignites a flame in my gut. “I vow it.”

Chapter

Twenty-Eight

Persephone

I am forced to sit through another dinner, and another horror.

Nothing is as it seems here. Olympus might possess exquisite beauty, but it houses truly terrible monsters. The kind that even nightmares make quiver, pleading for reprieve.

My dinner threatens to rise as it has every night since my arrival, and Leuce’s hand grips my thigh under the table as though to hold me in place. Her touch is the only thing that grounds me. That keeps me steady.

But tonight is especially hard.

Tonight, a young girl, no more than seventeen, screams for the man she calls ‘daddy’, as he fights for his life against another much larger, much stronger man. A man who looks like a gladiator of old, adorned in bloodstained leather and armed with a short, fat sword.

The first night in Olympus, I’d received dinner in my rooms. The first night I witnessed Zeus’ idea of entertainment, on only my second night in the realm, I’d

vomited in my soup bowl. My third night in Olympus, I'd been so sick with horror I'd been incapable of sleep though I'd managed to keep the contents of my stomach harrowingly put. Honestly, it's a feat I didn't vomit then, too, considering the horror I'd been forced to listen to. I say listen, because I hadn't been able to make myself watch.

Tonight, though, I can't look away. Looking away somehow feels disrespectful to the young woman who screams, begging for mercy from Gods who have none.

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But I feel none of the bloodlust that surges through the sea of onlookers. Hundreds—no, thousands of bodies fill the stands of the coliseum. This is clearly an event the realm looks most forward to, as everyone is dressed in their finest togas, bodies adorned in gems and gold that glitter in the hot sun that spills over the arena, inspiring a thirst for blood the sand-packed floor eagerly drinks.

How are there so many people? They can't all be Gods. Can they?

Another scream captures my attention as the hairs on my body stand with a shiver so violent, the little food I'd eaten threatens to rocket back up. I swallow it back, feeling a prickly heat at the base of my spine as I do. Far below in the arena, the gladiator lumbers toward the man as the girl sobs a prayer no one bothers to hear.

I shift in my seat, ignoring the way Leuce's fingertips now dig into my thigh. I can feel Hydra's agitation growing—a response to my own.

"Don't," Leuce hisses through her teeth. "You can't save them."

"How can you say that?"

"Look at them." Her eyes break from mine to do a swift sweep of the stands, and the spectators who fill them. "This is their normal."

"This is not normal. It's wrong."

"It's Zeus. And he is their king." The words grind from between her teeth. "Oppose him and I am not certain I can save you from his wrath."

“They—they’re human, Leuce.”

A flash of pain lights her eyes before it’s pulled back behind the shutters. Her jaw steels. “Humans who find themselves in Olympus never leave, Persephone. Even when they die, they remain here at the mercy of Zeus.”

“But—” I flinch as the girl charges into the center of the arena as the gladiator cuts yet another slide into the man’s flesh. Blood pours in a hundred rivers from his wounds, feeding the ravenous arena.

The man falls to his knees, and his head tips to the side. His eyes lock on his daughter, and I swear even though no sound escapes his lips, I can hear him plead, ‘No.’

The girl doesn’t listen, running harder as tears and horror streak her face. Her dress isn’t anything I’ve seen in Olympus. It’s simple, falling to mid-thigh and a pale, delicate pink. Her blonde hair is dusted with the blow of hot sand and sprinkle of tears, bangs pasted to her forehead.

As she runs for her father, her dress lifts to show more of her thighs. The gladiator grins a hungry grin that turns my stomach violently. When the girl is only a few steps away, he swings his blade down across the man’s throat. Blood sprays across the girl’s dress and the scream that spills from her is something that will haunt my nightmares until I take my last breath. There is a moment where time hangs suspended. Noise flatlines in my ears as silence rings so loud it feasts on the cheers of the crowd.

The man’s lifeless body falls to the sand and the girl falls to her knees with him. She throws her body onto his, her arms winding around his form as though she can hold the broken pieces of him together. Her body shudders with her sobs.

The gladiator punches his fists high into the air and the noise returns with a violence that nearly deafens me permanently. Tears burn in my eyes and sick rolls in my belly. Violence riots inside my heart and something dark births inside my soul. I cut my gaze to Zeus, hatred and grief the like I've never experienced burning into him.

His eyes dance on mine as he sucks the flesh from a bone, letting it drop to his plate with a 'clink' that nearly makes me flinch. "Always so quiet, my dear child. Do you not like the live performance?"

I hate him. Settling a blank stare on him, I ask, "It's not live for long, is it?"

Throwing his head back, he laughs. As though I've made the joke of the century. While the scene below continues to play.

Bile rises, the acid stinging my throat and making my eyes water.

"I suppose it's not." He gives a last chuckle, clearing his throat. His eyes pin to mine, as though boring deep. "But it is enchanting to watch, is it not?"

Leuce's hand pulses on my thigh. In my mind, Hydra tries to soothe me. "Now is not the time, my Persephone."

"Not at all." I refuse to tell him that I think what he does, nightly, is despicable.

Zeus raises a white brow. "Bored, are you?"

"I don't find joy in watching humans, innocent people, be slaughtered." The sound of the girl's screams root themselves like barbs in the dungeon of my memory where I know I'll never be able to expunge them. Never be able to set them free.

Her father is dead. His victor, painted red in the blood of the man who gave her life,

stands over her, chest heaving, eyes wild. His bloody hand stains her blonde hair as he fists it in a greedy grip. He yanks her violently to her feet.

My heart lurches.

Feminine instinct has fear burning like the flames of Tartarus in my gut.No...

“What is he doing?” I demand, furious when Zeus plucks another fleshy bone from his plate.

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His lips gleam with the sticky sauce as he sucks the flesh clean, finally responding around the meat in his mouth. “He is claiming his prize.”

Pinpricks of horror needle my flesh. This time, when I lurch to stand, not even Leuce’s hand on my thigh can keep me down.

“What do you mean?”

“He defeated his opponent, and now he will claim his prize.”

My head whips to the scene below as the girl tries to absolutely no avail to free herself from the tangle of the gladiator’s arms. She is so small compared to him. So delicate and?—

“Free her.”

“Oh.” Zeus laughs like I’m a silly little thing. “Now, I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

He licks the sauce that glistens from his lips. “The man deserves his prize.”

“He deserves nothing! It wasn’t even a fair fight. A mortal against a monster!”

Zeus’ smile spreads wider. Ice chases the flame inside me, and I fight my flinch, so vicious it threatens to split me into pieces. Beside him, Hera watches me curiously with her cool blue eyes and beside her, Hercules’ attention is riveted on the scene

below. A scene I can no longer stomach.

Despicable. They're all?—

“You think the match unfair?” Zeus asks, and the way he does makes me think he’s backing me into a trap.

Across the table, I see Ares’ stiff form watching closely. Darkness radiates from him, but I don’t know him well enough to know which side he stands. If he stands with his father and mother or if there could be something more, something decent lurking under the stoic exterior.

“Absolutely.” As soon as the word is between us, I regret it.

I regret it because Zeus’ eyes alight with something ugly. Something I very much know I am not going to like.

“Perhaps there is more to you after all, my daughter.” I hate how he insists on claiming me as his. But I refuse to say that I’m anything else. I can’t let him know I know of Uranus. And I refuse to draw attention to my very vulnerable human parents, lest Zeus gets a mind to harm them.

I grind my teeth and wait for him to continue.

He laughs again. The pompous ass.

“I’m elated to tell you that soon, there will be a dinner very much to your liking, then.” A pulsing thrum of something surges around the table, but I can’t tear my eyes from the depths of pure evil that are the twin pools of brilliant blue.

Zeus truly looks like an angel. A thing of beauty and light, practically radiating glory.

I realize, chilled to the marrow of my bone, that it is the perfect disguise for the most tragic of evils. I realize how very led astray humanity has been pulled. For the truest evil is smart enough to bathe in the light.

Chapter

Twenty-Nine

Persephone

I don't know how Leuce can sleep after everything we've seen. Perhaps she's seen her fair share of it throughout history. I can't imagine.

The last three days have been a nightmare. I am uncertain if the screams I can hear are echoes of the torment of earlier or if they're real now.

Rolling onto my side, I pull the pillow around my head and do my best to sleep despite the torment that plays in my mind. I fail.

I miss the Underworld. I miss Hades.

When I can no longer suffer the ache for home, no longer remain in bed to the sounds of a woman screaming, I slide from the covers. With a glance at Leuce, my heart in my throat, I creep to the door. Hydra snuffs a sigh and I freeze, halfway to escape.

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If either of them wakes, I won't be slipping out that's for certain.

I hold my breath so long it burns before I dare another step, then another. At the door, I realize that not only am I about to slip from the protection of my room in little more than a nightdress, but I have no weapon.

My shoulders fall and I am about to turn back to the bed, my moment of foolish heroics at its end when another scream threatens to peel the flesh from my bones. It's loud somehow, echoing in the chambers of my mind rather than the room around me.

I don't understand what is happening.

I grab a small marble statue that is surprisingly heavy. A quick glance tells me it's another of Zeus claiming a victim. I don't have to see her face to know she cries. They all cry. There are so many of these statues in this room. Versions of the God claiming women who don't wish to be claimed. Raping.

The way I feel for Zeus is far beyond hatred. I'm not even sure how I would describe the feelings I have for him. I'm not sure what I would do to him, given the opportunity. I loathe the fact history paints him as a good, benevolent God. Mercy is not something he is capable of.

Pushing thoughts of the terrible God from my mind, I grip the statue hard and turn to the door. My hand trembles as it lifts to the lock. I slide it over slowly, holding my breath at the little click and the sound of Leuce rolling over in the bed we've shared since we arrived.

The hall flickers under the same low golden light that illuminates the darkness in my room. Burning stones, reminiscent to lava rock in the wake of freshly spilled magma, shimmer in little bowled plates that have been fastened to the white marble walls by curling arms of bronze, the plate suspended by the clawed paw of a carved lion.

I've seen servant girls—I hate calling them that—collecting the stones and leaving them to charge in the sun.

Now, under the burning light, images hidden under the bright light of day come alive in the polished white stone. Secrets carved into the walls of a history long since forgotten, even by Gods.

A chill whispers across my flesh, fine hairs rising. My hand connects with the wall, and I feel it. I feel the slight groove of chiselled stone, so smooth it shouldn't be possible.

The image, a God of light and a Goddess of night, are two points that connect to one in the center, lower. A Goddess unlike all those who have come after, the first of her kind. Neither good nor evil, neither light nor dark. She was everything.

She was Chaos.

A delta triangle or upside-down triangle of Primordial Gods, blending power. Inside the triangle, a realm my ancient soul recognizes as Olympus is formed. But outside, connected by a thread of lightning that surges from Chaos' bare feet is another realm. It is surrounded by the carved waves of the sea, surging power through Chaos into Olympus, feeding the ancient realm crafted for the Gods.

Atlantis. It is fed exclusively by Chaos. I can't tell whether Atlantis is the beginning of everything, or if it is a product of everything. Only that it is connected to everything. For there is a thicker vein that pulses from Atlantis to a realm I recognize

deep inside my soul, where darkness and wonder and eternal love live. The Underworld.

Three veins connect the Underworld to the triangle, one from Atlantis, one from Chaos, and one from Olympus. Only, the vein from Olympus is faded and thin. Perhaps even broken, I think, as I run my fingertips over the stone and momentarily lose the vein before connecting again. The carving glows in the same vein of the burning coals.

Surrounding it all, its carving in the stone not as deep, is what I recognize as earth. Dull. Not alive.

The realms are sentient, intended to thrive in sync, like the powers of the Gods to feed the life it was always intended to sustain.

The thought is not mine. It's also not the tongueless trifecta of voices I've come to know as the Moirai—another three, I realize. This voice is deeper. I think, perhaps, it is the sound of my own intuition. An awakening of a part of me that has long since been asleep.

Or maybe it's not me at all, but the Goddess whose ancient soul I harbour.

My gaze flicks down the length of hall and I fight a shiver as the engraving in stone repeats again and again as far as my eyes can see.

The hum in my ears I hadn't realized was there suddenly abandons me with a pop, my auditory senses clearing fast as a rush of sound invades me. My reprieve from the screaming is no longer and I spin in the hall, racing in the direction of the sound.

It comes from an area of the castle I've not yet explored, but I continue down the winding halls toward the sound of the screams. She'd been quiet after the horrors of

dinner, when her father had been massacred. But now she screams for help no one bothers to hear.

I bother.

I run harder; not certain I'm going to find my way back to my room.

What am I going to do with her when I get to her?

The statue is heavy in my hand as I race from one hall to the next. Castle Olympus is a labyrinth.

Will I be successful in defeating the massive man I'd watched slay the young woman's father with this little, but solid, statue?

I have no idea, but I'm going to give it my best shot.

At the sound of another scream, this one harrowingly loud, I know I'm close. Just a few more doors. Just beyond the lookout that spills into a night that glows with stars.

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“Oomph,” I cry as a band of iron snaps around my waist, yanking me from the hall into a shadowy darkness that is most definitely not owed to the glittering blanket of night.

My back connects a little too hard with the solid wall and my grip on the statue slips. It connects with the floor hard, the sound a vicious bite in the silence otherwise cut by the terror of the girl’s screams.

I feel my own scream rise to the surface, but a hard hand slaps over my mouth to contain it. My eyes snap up to see rings of gold otherwise blasted with blood red. Dark curls fall into the man’s forehead, threatening to sweep into those eerie eyes that threaten bloodlust, if not contained by those thin threads of shimmering gold.

“Ares,” I gasp his name. Inside my chest that heaves with deep, fear-infused breaths, my heart thunders.

A low sound climbs from the deep of his chest. It’s terribly harrowing, like a tiger in the night.

“What are you doing out of your room?” He slides his hand from my lips to wrap precariously around the column of my throat. There’s anger in his eyes.

I gasp in gulps of air. “I’m—I’m?—”

“You’re what?” He presses when I fail to push a lie between us.

I can’t possibly tell him the truth.

“I’m going for a walk.”

“Funny,” he deadpans. “Looked like you were running to me.” Ares dips his head, those red eyes drilling mercilessly into my own. “Looked like you were running toward danger.”

Well, crap. There’s obviously no fooling him.

“I can’t leave her like that.” My voice shakes, but I steel myself against the mocking incredulity that has blades of gold spearing from the rings into the pools of red.

He wets his lips, the scent of bloodstained earth submitting to fresh citrus. He laughs, low and mocking. “Tell me, little princess, how you plan to save her.”

I bare my teeth and he laughs again. When my fingers curl into my fists, his tighten around my throat. Just enough to quicken the thunderous beating of my heart.

My eyes flick desperately to the statue I’d dropped. Ares’ eyes follow and his lips hitch up again, but this time no sound escapes. That mocking lilt to his lips squeezes the air from my lungs.

“Oh, you think a little marble would stop him?” His brows hitch with incredulity, but he spits, “Foolish human.”

The girl screams again. I think I see Ares flinch at the sound, but I can’t be certain because my own flinch had been so vicious.

“Stop this,” I beg desperately. “Save her.”

“There is no saving her from this fate.”

“This is cruel.” My entire body trembles against the wall. My nerves are shot, frayed.

My hearthurts.

Ares’ voice is a low and dangerous cadence that wraps around one of the souls the powers of the Moirai conceal with their magic. “The true cruelty would be to prolong the inevitable.”

“How can you say that?” I loathe the way one of my daughters warms inside me at the sound of his voice. At his nearness. The other, I think, recoils.

For a moment, I’m certain he isn’t going to answer me. His frightening eyes drift over my face, missing nothing. He sighs an impossibly weighted sigh. “I’ve tried.”

Wait, what? He’s tried?

My body sags against the stone he’s pinned me to. Around my throat, his hand loosens. The tears I’ve somehow kept inside break from their restraints to flee shamefully down my face.

Ares looses another sigh. I flinch as he lifts his hand from my throat to wipe away the grief that spills from my eyes. It’s a tender gesture that seems to surprise even him, because he shakes his head and drops his hand. But he doesn’t step away from me.

“He never releases them.” Goodness, his voice is so deep and rough. As though he harbours deep inside him the wrath of all pain and suffering. “When a human soul dies here, they are trapped. Forever.”

“Who won’t release them?”

“Zeus.”

I want to scream at the name. Instead, I ask, “What will happen to her?”

“If she dies tonight, and I pray she does, then her soul will be sent to a lesser house where she will serve her eternity as a slave.”

“You—you hope she dies?”

“I hope for the end of her living suffering.” Ares winces, and his next words sound like a confession. “There is no death worse than the murder of innocence in the hands of bloodlust.”

I shiver, and Ares doesn’t miss it. I’m momentarily surprised when more blades of gold thread the blood red in his eyes. I think he’s surprised, too.

Ares tips his head, as though studying me. I’m afraid that he’s going to look too deep and discover the secrets I keep.

I swallow hard and his eyes bounce back to mine. I say, “She is human.”

“Yes.”

“Why, then, doesn’t her soul arrive in the Underworld when she dies?”

“Olympus is,” he pauses. “Think of it as a prison of sorts. It’s impossible for human souls to escape Olympus. And when they die here, they don’t truly die. Their bodies

are not as they are in the Underworld.”

“What do you mean?”

He seems to cringe. “They come back in a sort. They don’t age, but they can suffer death again, though such a thing is rare. The more they die, the less they fear death and the less appeal the killing holds.”

I am horror-struck. “That’s?—”

“The girl’s soul will serve Olympus for eternity. To die in this realm is binding,” Ares interrupts. “That is the will of Zeus. Th will of Olympus.”

“Fuck Zeus and his will,” I spit.

Ares cocks that carefully amused grin. “Careful,human. Your soul is very alive in a place where being alive is most dangerous.”

I ignore his very blatant threat as the screaming lowers to a pained whimper and ask, “The house she is given to...will they...”

“Harm her?” he finishes. “Some would. Most, though.” He pauses. “I believe most weary of Zeus’ lust for pain.”

The whimper finally dies and I fear the girl has, too. Grief, hot and aching, erupts inside me.

My lips part as I gasp in a breath I know will split the air with a sob I can contain no more than I can wrap the wreckage of my rupturing heart. Ares hooks me around the back of my neck, pulling me hard into the wall of his chest. All traces of blood-soaked earth are gone, leaving only the scent of citrus and a deeper, darker, earthy

spice.

His chest absorbs the cry I let spill as his iron arms keep the rest of me from coming apart at the seams.

Finally, when there are no more tears left to cry, Ares releases me. He looks uncomfortable by the contact, as though it's unusual for him. When he steps back and clears his throat, he commands roughly, "Go. Return to your rooms and stay there."

I frown. "What will you do?"

His hard jaw hardens. "I will escort her body to a house. One—" He bows his head. "One I know will do the best they can by her soul."

"I'm coming."

"No."

I repeat, more firmly this time, "I'm coming."

Really, I think I'm ready to go to battle over this with the God of War.

Ares sighs as he appraises me. Then, oddly, he murmurs, "I can see why he loves you." His eyes watch my frown deepen. His voice lowers, but it does nothing to soften the deep roughness of it. "There is very little that is truly good in all the realms. You, Persephone, are truly good."

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I'm about to respond when he says more firmly, "I will go retrieve her. Stay here."

"Ares—"

He cuts off my protest. "I'm serious, Persephone. There are some things a good soul should never see, for there are darkneses which hold the power to taint even the purest of souls. That darkness can and will spread like poison until the good that once lived is slowly, completely eroded." He holds his hand, palm out. "Stay."

I want to argue, but I can't. He's right. I'm not prepared to see that and I'm not sure the wreckage of my heart could survive it.

I promise. "I'll wait."

Chapter

Thirty

Persephone

The sound that comes from the room is terrifying. The screams, this time from a man, is nearly enough to peel the flesh from my bones. The only thing that keeps me in place is the fact that I'm certain those screams are being pulled from the gladiator who'd slain the girl's father, only to claim her innocence and life in the terrible hours following as his reward.

My knees quake, my body trembling with a violence that rattles my bones. Unable to

manage standing on my own, I sink against the wall for support. I'm not certain that I would even hear someone approaching through the wild thundering of my pulse between my ears and the battle on the other side of the door.

A loud crash, like a body being thrown into metal, sounds a moment before all is harrowingly quiet.

My palms are slick with nervous sweat as I wring them into knots.

I'm so focused on the door that my heart leaps into my chest when, for a moment, my vision of it doubles. Then Ares slips from the room, and I realize it hadn't been doubling at all, simply opening.

The breath of relief that began its escape stalls as my eyes drop to the lifeless girl in his arms. She is devastatingly battered, her body bruised beyond recognition.

My soul weeps and hot tears spring yet again to my eyes. I refuse to let them fall as I hurry closer. "Wh—what happened in there?"

Ares' eyes slide to mine, the shift filled with lethal danger. They are almost completely red. Bloodlust, I realize.

There is a moment where I honestly don't know if he recognizes me through the haze of it. My heart pauses its beats, as though it senses even it must stand silent amidst this lethal predator. My muscles seize, burning hotly.

He steps toward me and the fear that burns in my muscles seeps into my blood. His nostrils flare, as though catching the scent of prey.

I'm moments from running when there is a quiver deep in my belly, a soothing warmth.

Ares cocks his head to the side, dark brows slanting sharply inward. The menacing scowl smooths from his lips and he gives his head a single shake, as though to shake off the rage that clings to him, anchoring him to the dark rage that swirls inside him.

I watch curiously as the warming in my belly grows hotter, and the blast of red in his eyes is threaded with veins of gold. The scent of a bloody battlefield dulls to a fresh citrus.

Ares speaks around the gravel in his throat. “I killed him.”

“But—” I frown.

“He will rise again, and I will kill him again.” Ares’ eyes drift down the length of me, snagging on my stomach before rising again to my eyes.

I gesture to the girl in his arms, wanting to draw attention away from the life inside me. One in which he seems far too aware of. “When will she—um—rise again?”

He frowns, as though just remembering that he holds her in his arms. And that’s when I flinch, noting the blood that stains the flesh of his hands, deeper around the bed of his nails where it has dried. He’s splattered with it.

“Her soul will wander for a time, but the realm will call it back to her body.” He begins to move down the hall, and I hurry to follow.

“How long?”

“It depends on the death,” he grunts. “Some souls fight the return.”

“And her death?” The man has long legs and for every one of his steps, I have to take two, sometimes three of my own.

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“She won’t return to her body willingly.”

His answer says everything. More, the bruises and cuts on her body speak all the words she can’t. Her death had been horrific. Her screams had been a nightmare, and yet I found myself foolishly clinging to the hope that it hadn’t been quite as bad as I’d imagined.

Turns out, it’d been worse.

My emotionally bludgeoned soul aches. “Where are we taking her to now?”

“Somewhere—” he pauses. “Safe.”

“Outside the castle?” I press as I hurry after him, down a flight of stairs.

“Shhh,” he bites out the command. Instantly, my teeth snap together.

We’re no longer in the wing of Castle Olympus where Hera shoves all that she does not wish to see. Somehow, we’ve made it to the ground level, but we didn’t take the wide sweeping stairs that would have brought us to the grand entrance.

Instead, Ares led me through darkened tunnels of stone entirely void of the grand lookouts that even the shunned wing of the castle displays. We took narrow, spiraled sets of stairs that curled around pillars of marble, scuffed and not shining quite like the marble that glistened in the main passageways.

We’d taken the servants’ tunnels, I realize.

And now, we race to a weathered wooden door in an area of the castle that, I assumed considering I could hear the clattering of ceramic and steel, and the clucking of feminine tongues, was close to the kitchen.

Ares pushes through the door into air that reminded me of a summer night by a lake in British Columbia. Crisp and cool, but not cold. If Olympus had anything on the Underworld, it was this. The fresh nip in the kiss of clean air that tasted of morning dew and smelled like the mist before rain.

“Keep up,” Ares growls, and I hurry to do just that. I hadn’t realized I’d stopped to smell the air, hadn’t noticed the space that now loomed between us.

Ignoring the magic of the land I’d not been permitted to explore; I race after Ares. I nearly bump into his broad back when he stops suddenly.

His head tips back and he lets out a piercing whistle to the blanket of night that illuminates the vibrant cut of the land in shades of night. It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before, entirely otherworldly. It is beautiful. And yet, there is a dullness to it that can’t be ignored.

It’s like looking at a canvas of astonishing art and realizing that the colors are all wrong, diluted with white, gray, and black. It’s like the very realm wants to glow, aches to shine. And yet there is a hazy film that covers it all.

It’s wrong.

From the night, something appears. It’s dark, but not for long. A blaze of flames that singe the haze just long enough I catch a glimpse of a radiant glow that snaps shut a moment later, leaving me to question if I saw it at all. From the flames, four horses emerge towing a black chariot. Each of the horses is a different color, red-brown, grey, black, and white. All of them have manes and wings of gold.

“Are they—” I stutter.

“Pegasuses.”

The horses swoop to land in front of us, and Ares climbs into the chariot with the girl still in his arms. I don’t hesitate to climb onto the seat beside him, even as the horse, Pegasus!—closest to me, the red-brown one, noses at me curiously.

I can’t believe this is my life.

Just last year, I was an average girl doing average girl things. Well, maybe not entirely average. I was hearing a voice in my head, after all. A voice that turned out to be the God of the Underworld, my soul mate. Regardless, I had no idea any of this existed outside mythology texts.

The fact that I’m here now, pregnant with Hades’ babies and sitting in a Pegasuses flown chariot next to Ares with a dead girl who will reawaken, bound to the prison realm that is Olympus, is surreal.

Ares says one word, a name, “Hephaestus,” and the beasts take running flight.

We burst high into the sky, into the haze that seems to blanket all of Olympus. I can’t help but ask, “What is this?”

“It’s particularly bad tonight.” Ares shifts the girl in his arms. My stomach turns at the bruises on her flesh. I avert my gaze to give her privacy. “It mostly burns off in the day, though some days it is heavier than others.”

“But what is it?”

“Consequence.”

My head turns to him. It's impossible not to see her when I look at him.
"Consequence of what?"

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“The greed for Atlantis.” Ice is a growing crawl inside me as he continues, “The fall of it.”

“What does Atlantis have to do with Olympus?”

His mostly golden eyes come to me. “Olympus, Atlantis, and the Underworld were conjoined for a long time. Zeus likes to deny it, but I believe the realms were all powered by one source. A source that first fed Atlantis, and from Atlantis the other realms were nursed.” Ares laughs. “It’s just a theory. One I’ve been punished for.”

“Punished?”

“When Atlantis fell, when she sank into the depths of the ocean, Olympus dimmed. In the centuries after, the haze only grows worse. Most hardly notice it anymore, the dulling of what once was. Like I said, tonight it’s particularly bad.”

My eyes fall again to the girl, and I have to knot my hands in my lap to keep from reaching out to touch her. To caress her hurt skin. To touch her in a way that is not evil, so that perhaps her flesh will remember when her soul returns to her body that not all touch promises pain.

Emotion is a burning brick in my throat I force myself to swallow. I croak, “Will she remember?”

Ares doesn’t give me his eyes. “Yes.”

“Everything?”

“Yes.”

“How cruel.”

Ares says nothing, and the Pegasuses massive gold wings carve into the misty sky, arching our direction rather sharply to the right. Through the haze, I see that we’re flying through a valley of impossibly high mountains. The high cut of the stone is dagger sharp and veined in blue that should shimmer, if it weren’t covered in the layer of haze that dulls the shine like dust on a shelf of ancient trinkets.

Without lifting the trinket and wiping away the dust, one can’t truly assess the value of the piece. I feel the same about the realm which currently holds so many prisoner.

“What were you doing in the hall?” When Ares doesn’t answer, I ask again, “Were you waiting for me?”

“I was waiting for her to die,” he says. Coolly, calmly, like he does it all the time. “You were...unexpected.”

I can’t help but study him. Can’t help but assess the way he holds the girl so easily when, in the short time I’ve been in Olympus, I’ve come to realize that Ares does not find physical touch easy. He’s always withdrawn from everyone and everything. An outlier. An outsider.

“You do this a lot, don’t you?” He doesn’t have to answer for me to know the truth. “Why does Zeus do this?”

“Sacrifice has always been the way of the Gods, as it was the way of the Titans before him.”

“That was not sacrifice.”

“Sacrifice happens in many ways.”

“That was murder, plain and simple.”

“Blood was spilled. The power of her soul was pulled for the realm to feast, and that power feeds the power Zeus wields. Without it, he would wither to dust.” Ares’ eyes pin mine. “Zeus will never wither.”

A shiver has me hugging my arms around my middle. Ares notices, his lips thinning. “We’ll be there soon.”

“Where is there, exactly?”

“Hephaestus’ home.”

“Isn’t he the...” I frown, mentally flipping through the catalogue of Gods I’d memorized in my readings.

“The God of Artisans,” Ares supplies dryly.

I snap my finger in anahamoment. “I knew that.”

“Of course, you did.”

My belly flutters as the Pegasuses dip. “Why are we taking her to the God of Artisans?”

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“Because he has little to do with Castle Olympus,” Ares grunts, clearly tiring of my inquisition.

“You mean he doesn’t attend the nightly slaying of innocent humans?” I can’t contain the bitterness, so rather than try, I let it all spill free.

“He’s somewhat of a recluse.”

“Interesting.”

Ares’ brows pinch together. “Is it?”

I nod. “Yes.”

Ares sighs. “The slaying isn’t a nightly occurrence, Persephone. It happens, and far more often than most like, but it isn’t nightly.”

“Oh?”

“Your return to the world is, it can be a blessing or a curse. Zeus hasn’t yet decided which you will be to Olympus. He is both gauging your power and how you respond to the ways in which he feeds his own. He is asserting dominance over you. I advise you to abstain from reacting in future.” The gold in his eyes spear with sudden daggers of red. “It will get worse.”

A sharp inhale snags in my lungs. “Worse?”

Could it get worse?

Ares dips his head as the Pegasuses swoop down and land smoothly on rough ground. I think I see a flash of shame before it's cleared away under the mask of Ares.

Ares stands with the girl. "We're here."

Chapter

Thirty-One

Persephone

A giant wooddoor the size of at least three normal doors wide and two high, clad in strips of metal held in place by fist-sized bolts, swings open. My heart bobs in my chest at the sight of the God that greets us, and the clearly unwelcoming look that paints his face.

He takes a few lumbering steps from the abode he's crafted into the side of a mountain, tucked away into the crevices of a realm I very much doubt looks kindly on those of a more reclusive nature. He folds his arms over a wide chest, metal making muscles strain against the white shirt he wears.

His eyes glide over us, the assessment dangerous. They are dark and blasted with shards of silver, as though the very metal he shapes has imbedded itself in his very eyes like splinters under skin.

They shimmer in the muted light of the moon as he cocks his head only slightly to the side, eyes dropping to the girl Ares carries before flicking up to meet Ares' eyes.

"Ares."

“Hephaestus.” Ares walks himself and the girl closer. Ribbons of bloodstained hair, once golden, fall over his arm as though stretching for the ground. Her head is tipped back, and no one can miss the very obvious handprints that stain her throat black and blue.

I do my best to swallow my bobbing heart as I move with Ares, closer to the unimpressed God barring the entrance to his home.

“Why are you here?” Hephaestus grunts, voice rough and unwelcome.

“She needs somewhere safe.”

“And you thought to yourself that that somewhere was with me?” The dark incredulity in Hephaestus’ question has me wanting to tuck tail and run.

The girl has already suffered enough. She doesn’t need to be left somewhere she is very clearly not wanted.

“Eileithyia is full,” Ares says simply.

Hephaestus sighs. He hangs his head between his shoulders for a long moment before he sighs again. “What am I to do with her?”

“Give her space and time to heal,” I tell him, fighting not to shrink when those metal blasted eyes land heavily on me. “She has been so hurt, her innocence torn from her without mercy, her heart shattered beforehand.” When Hephaestus doesn’t take his eyes from me, I press on. “She was forced to watch her father’s murder in the arena before—before his killer was gifted her in celebration of his,” I swallow the acid that threatens to spill between my lips. Quietly, I finish, “His victory.”

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“There is no victory in the arena,” Hephaestus growls. “Only suffering.”

“She needs someone who can be soft with her. Someone kind and patient.”

“Someone like Eileithyia,” Hephaestus grunts.

“Eileithyia’s house is full of girls like her. Girls Zeus has destroyed.”

Hephaestus’ eyes flash almost entirely silver. In just a blink, it’s gone. His jaw hardens as he grinds his molars. “I will take this one. But no more, Ares.”

Ares passes the girl into Hephaestus’ arms. She looks so small there. So delicate and impossibly breakable.

I can no longer fight the tears that spring to my eyes any more than I can help the quick steps I take toward her. Hephaestus stands stone still as I lean in close to her, pressing my lips to the cool skin of her forehead. I whisper, “You didn’t deserve a single moment of the pain you suffered. Please don’t let your end be the thing to destroy all the beauty and love you carry inside you. You can overcome this. Your soul can live a beautiful life of love and peace.”

When I step away from the girl, the silver in his eyes has eaten through his pupil to blast through the dark of his iris. Those eyes lift over my head to glare at the God at my back. “She has a soft heart. It has no business being in that castle.” He begins to move for the door but pauses. Over his shoulder, silver eyes pinned to Ares, he says low, “Neither do you, brother.”

Ares says nothing as Hephaestus disappears with the body of the broken girl into his mountain home, the heavy armed door falling closed behind him with a sealing bang that rattles my already shook soul.

Chapter

Thirty-Two

Persephone

“Up you get!” A sharp hand falls on my thigh, and my heavy eyes pop open to see Leuce glaring down at me. Her hands, the assaulting one included, are plopped on her hips. She’s wearing the same scowl she had on when I slinked back into the room after my night out with Ares.

“Leuce,” I protest her name on a whine. “I’m exhausted.”

“Oh, and whose fault is that?”

“Argh,” I groan. “I already told you why I couldn’t sleep. I could hear her suffering and I had to do something.”

She narrows her eyes on me. “You didn’t have to do something alone.”

“I wasn’t alone. I had Ares.”

“You didn’t start out with Ares. You started out by wandering the halls of this diabolical place by yourself.” She heaves a sigh as she falls heavily onto the bed next to me. “Do you know how afraid I was when I woke, and you were gone? How afraid Hydra was?”

“I’m sorry.”

Leuce pins her eyes on me. “Don’t do that again, Persephone.”

I nod. “I won’t.”

“I’m serious. If something happened to you, if we lost you to this place—” She shakes her head. “I never would have forgiven myself.”

I sit up in the bed even though I swear I just fell asleep. It’s been days of very little, broken sleep. It won’t be long, and my body will no longer give me the choice of whether I want to sleep. I feel like I’m moments from slipping unwillingly into a catatonic state.

I say the only thing I can say, “I’m sorry.”

Leuce folds her lips in, releasing them on a slow roll. She sighs again. “I know. Me too. I’m so on edge here.”

“I get it.”

Her eyes drift over my face, surely seeing the darkening circles around my eyes. “You’re not sleeping much, are you?”

I shake my head. “I’m not coping with the ways of Olympus well.”

“You must sleep, my Persephone,” Hydra speaks into my mind, and my eyes flick to where she sits on the balcony. The high golden sun shines brightly in the clear blue sky. In the light of it, her sangria scales cast shimmering purple orbs over the white marble like the prisms scattered by a disco ball.

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I give her a soft, but tired smile and promise them both. “I’ll do my best to sleep tonight.” I yawn. “But perhaps a nap now will do me good.”

I begin to sink in the bed, pausing when Leuce shakes her head. “You’ve been summoned to brunch with Hera.”

My body shoots upright, the hairs rising over every inch of my skin. Sleep has been entirely chased away. “What?”

“Why do you think I woke you?”

“Why would she want to have brunch with me?”

Leuce’s eyes are troubled. “I have no idea.” She rolls her lips again before she stands. “But that doesn’t matter. You can’t refuse her.”

Hera’s lipspull into a tight line as her blue eyes fall heavily on me with displeasure. “Black again, I see.”

“I like black.”

Her lips pinch into the pucker of a forced smile and she waves a hand to the blue satin settee. The border of it is a carved wood, painted gold. The pergola that keeps the rays of the sun from touching our skin is crafted of gleaming white marble and carved pillars. It is adorned with wispy white fabric that hangs in the stillness of a day with no breeze.

I lower to the settee, beads of nervous sweat sliding down the line of my spine, not helped by the stifling heat of the day.

“Wine?” Hera asks.

“Just water, please.”

Hera scoffs and flicks her fingers. A girl I hadn’t noticed appears from between the curtains, holding a sweating pitcher of water. At the sight of deliciously large squares of crystal-clear ice bobbing in the pitcher, my mouth waters.

The girl bends carefully at the waist, pouring me a glass before rising. “Thank you.”

At my gratitude, her eyes flash with fear she quickly conceals as she tucks her chin into her chest, fading into the curtains once again.

Shook, I can’t hide the glare I slice to Hera. She smiles a cat-like curl of her lips as she hooks her finger around a glass of sparkling white wine. “Tell me, Persephone, how are you liking Olympus?”

I lift my glass and take a sip, letting the cool water quench the heat of my anger. The fire of injustice that ignites in my veins.

She knows exactly what I think of Olympus.

“Why am I here, Hera?”

Her brow arcs and she takes another slow sip of her wine. I watch as she holds the liquid in her mouth before swallowing. She wets her lips with her pink tongue. She is exquisitely beautiful, yet all I see is a snake.

“I’m just curious if my husband’s bastard daughter is enjoying herself in my realm.”

“Your realm?”

Hera leans forward, her eyes locking on me with unbreakable study. “Myrealm,” she purrs. “Tell me, Persephone, is the Underworld not yours? Does it not bow to you, bending to your every will?” She wets her lips again, and I can’t ignore the seduction that radiates from the motion. “Do mountains not rise for you? Do stars not fall for you? Are you not the Queen of the Dead?”

“What are you saying, Hera?”

“I only say that we are the same.”

If my spine weren’t already plank straight, it would have snapped to iron. “We are nothing alike.”

“Oh.” She smiles again. Again, there is a lethal danger to it that strikes at something inside me. “But we are the same. I began just like you, you know. The single obsession of an almighty God.”

Ancient intuition has gooseflesh raising on my skin despite the heat.

I suspect that Hera might be the one to truly fear here in Olympus. That her claws are sharper than Zeus’. That the poison she leaches is not only impossibly lethal, but that it is quiet. So quiet, one may not realize they’ve been attacked until they are gasping their very last breath.

“That doesn’t make us the same.”

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She continues, as if I haven't spoken at all. "Like Hades had to have you, Zeus was compelled to possess me. All of me. I held his obsession in the palm of my hands for centuries until—" She shrugs. "Until something else, something younger and new caught his attention. He shattered my heart when he strayed," she admits. "He demanded my loyalty, my faithfulness, without giving me his in return. I loved him, completely. I gave him all of me, but I wasn't enough. He took another lover, and another, and another." She takes another long sip of her wine, her sharp eyes never straying from mine. "But he'd already made me his Queen, you see. He'd already pledged me to Olympus, and the realm accepted me as its own. He could take other lovers. He could spread his seed far and wide, siring bastard after bastard. But he could never take my crown from me."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I tell you Goddess to Goddess, woman to woman, that love never lasts. The loyalty of man is impossible, and we must face it, sweet Persephone. The Gods are simply men with a little more power. Like Zeus, Hades will stray, and you will be left like me, shattered. Like me, you will need to pick up the pieces of yourself, to stand strong under the weight of the shame of his straying." She lifts her chin high. "To bear the weight of the crown he will never be able to take and wear it through the centuries of faithlessness."

Hera stands, moving around the table that sits between us to lower herself next to me on the settee. "I advise you now, Persephone, to consider long and hard the crown you choose to wear."

Unease spreads inside me as I fight the urge to jump to my feet and flee. "I don't

know what you are saying.”

“There is great power inside you.” She inhales, as though she can taste the power she speaks of, savouring it on her tongue. Ribbons of fear coil around my spine, squeezing like a snake about to devour me whole.

I recall in this moment that Hera is considered a Patron Goddess, overseeing both peace and war. She can call upon both clear skies and harrowingly vicious storms. She is a contradiction of great and terrifying power, rumored to shapeshift. But the most fearsome power of the Goddess is her divine connection to the feminine. Her ability to influence fertility and labor. Her ability to sense the innermost strength of a woman.

“I’m human,” the words sound on a breath.

“Your body is human, but there is immortal power inside you.” She slides her hand into mine, weaving her fingers with mine as she peers deep into my eyes. “I can offer you immortality in which you will be able to explore your great power. I want you to consider your future as a woman. As a great and powerful Goddess.” Her eyes sweep my face, before lifting slowly back to my own. “Hades may be a God, but he is still a man, and men are weak. He may love you now, but love fades with time and lust makes a liar of loyalty. I am offering you the choice to wear the crown that will never again bow to the kingdom of men.”

“You want me to rule Olympus?”

“Oh, no.” She laughs. “I am offering you the chance to push your power where your power will not be wasted. You will be the princess of the greatest realm in the kingdom of realms, ruling with me. Beside me.”

“I thought you hated me?” I breathe, sensing that I should not deny her. That to do so

would be far more dangerous than denying Zeus.

“I was under the impression you had no memory of your past life.” Her eyes narrow on me, studying me carefully. “Do you remember your past life, Persephone?”

“I—” Lie. The word is a shout in my mind. “I kept journals—in the Underworld. I’ve been reading them.”

Hera dips her chin, satisfied. “I did not like you. As the bastard daughter of my straying husband, a giftless goddess, you were a shame. A stain I am ashamed to say I preferred not to wear.”

“But now?”

“Now, you are far more powerful than you ever were before.” She inhales again, and I don’t miss the little shiver that pulses through her body. Like pleasure. “There was a time long ago,” she tells me softly. “A time when great power surged from the core of Olympus. When power poured from the land into the Gods. When the very realm nourished us. Now, we are forced to pull that power in slivers from the blood we spill, from the life we let drain into the sand of the arena. The realm is ravenous, and the powers that live within the Gods it feeds have been on the brink of starvation for thousands of years.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

She leans in again, her eyes shuttering before blinking open, heavy lidded and hungry with need that has nervous needles of fear pricking at the base of my neck. “The power inside you is everything it has ever been rumored to be. I didn’t believe it before. I didn’t believe the whispers of how you alone fed the Underworld. How the realm sustained you, powering the Gods who call the realm home.”

“And now?” I hate to admit I’m afraid of her answer.

“Now I sense that power inside you. Can practically taste it.” Her eyes drift over me with the hunger of one who has been denied sustenance far too long. “You are everything Olympus has needed since—since the vein to Atlantis—the realm in which suckled our own sank.”

I steal a shuddering breath. “Atlantis powered Olympus?”

I already know this, but I hadn’t been aware she knew it.

“Oh, yes. Atlantis is the heart of all realms.” She studies me again. “Or it was once upon a time.” Her lips curl in that dangerous smile once more. “I believe I’ve found a new heart now, though.”

I gulp when she leans in closer, wetting her lips and sighing as though tasting my very essence on them.

I think she can sense the powers of my unborn daughters. I pray they remain cloaked well enough that even a Goddess with the calibre of power Hera possesses will not sense them.

I stutter, “Y-you mean m-me?”

Hera purrs, “I would be foolish to ignore the power you hold.”

“You say you hated me before.” I need to bring this back to her. Bring something negative, the blame of it entirely owed to her to the table. “You want me now for the power I possess? I’m no good without something to offer, then?”

“Is anyone worth anything if they have nothing to offer?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:10 am

“Is that why you hate Ares?” I’m still trying to stall, but the question is an honest one. I truly can’t understand how a mother can feel the way Hera feels about her own son.

“Ares is weak.” Not even a shred of emotion appears in her face. She leans back to appraise me with the cool disconnect of someone I imagine lacks any form of conscience. “Did you know that Hercules is not of my womb?”

I frown, brows pitching down. It’s probably silly, but I can’t unsee the children’s movie Hercules playing in my mind. As a child, the movie had fascinated me endlessly, even as I’d always sensed deep inside that the picture painted of the Gods was off.

Hera laughs, as though reading my mind. “You’re thinking of the human movie for children.”

My eyes snap wide, and her laugh grows as I whisper, “Can you read minds?”

“No.”

I don’t know if I believe her.

Hera shifts forward to swipe her glass of wine from the table before settling back beside me. Even settled, though, she never relinquishes the threatening air of a venomous snake moments from striking.

“Human records of the Gods have been deeply manipulated in Zeus’ favor,” she admits carelessly. “Hercules is yet another of Zeus’ bastards. I rejected him, too, you

know. Before he proved his power.”

“How did he do that?” The words nearly get stuck in my throat.

“I decreed he was to overcome twelve obstacles. Trials.” She looses a low, husky laugh. “To be frank, they should have killed him. In fact, it was my intent to kill him. To rid the world of the proof of my husband’s lack of control over the cock that swings in his pants.” She waves her fingers, and the servant girl appears again. “We’re ready to be served.”

The girl dips her chin and scurries away.

Hera locks her attention back on me. “Hercules bested all twelve trials, and I saw him for the power he was. I accepted him then as my son, as I wish to accept you as my daughter now.”

The servant girl appears with two covered trays, placing both on the table. The scent of spiced chicken and steamed veggies turns my stomach, given the conversation.

“And if I love Hades?”

Hera scoffs. “If a man is what you want, I am more than happy to offer you my son.”

I frown. “Hercules?”

She nods demurely. “He’s willing to court you. He wishes it, in fact.”

I fail to hide my scowl in time, and her brow arcs. Her blue eyes narrow as she tips her head to the side. Then she asks, “I have another son who interests you, don’t I?”

“No,” I say, but a soul deep in my womb stirs. A warmth swells inside me that I can’t

hide, and Hera inhales deeply yet again.

And that is when I know without doubt that she can sense my daughters' power. She can feel them, even if she can't discern them from me.

What would she do to us if she learned that they weren't me, and we were three?

"You lie," she accuses softly. "You are attracted to Ares." The warmth grows and shame heats my cheeks as I claim the affection my unborn daughter's soul holds for Ares, God of War, as my own.

I force myself to admit, "Yes."

"Well, well, well." She clucks her tongue. "You have a taste for dark Gods. I prefer the golden Gods, myself. At least we won't be competing."

Goodness, I can't believe this is happening.

Hera forks a chunk of chicken, sliding it between white teeth. "If Ares is the one you desire, then he is the one you shall have." She chews, studying me. "Provided you decide to stay, pledging your soul and power to Olympus, that is."

I want to tell her to screw herself. Instead, I force myself to nod. "I'll consider it."

Hera smiles like a lioness over a bloody kill.

Chapter

Thirty-Three

Hades

She's troubled, I sense her unease as Hypnos wades us through the mess of her dreams. Tendrils of darkness creep along bright whips of light, as though fearful the lash it may bring, cowed by the glow. From every direction, a horrified sound slaps back at her. Screams, sharp and flooded with fear. Her eyes are wide, her head whipping side to side.

She is restless in sleep.

I ache to comfort her even as something darker, something violent, surges inside me. I have half a mind to tear through the wards that keep me from entering the realm in which was once, so long ago and for such a short while, my home.

If I could get my hands on Zeus now, I would take my time peeling the flesh from his meat, unspooling muscle and tendon to the black of his Gods' bone. I would revel in the symphony of his agony and encapsule his vicious soul so that he could watch as all the world forgot his name. As all memory of him was wiped from history.

I would watch him fall into the despair of madness; his starved soul wrapped in isolation for all of eternity.

I would revel in every moment of his suffering, for the pain he's caused Persephone. My mate.

Beside me, Hypnos touches his ghostly hand to my wrist. A tether of braided white and black, like vines of smoke and fog push from his fingertips to clasp my wrist.

“I will leave you now,” he tells me. “Follow the threads of my soul back.”

I look at my friend, nodding once. And then I watch as the form of him begins to fade and shrink, as though he’s moving backwards through a tunnel without any end or light in sight.

When I can no longer see or feel Hypnos, I turn back to Persephone. She lays in a bed that isn’t mine, and the sight alone has another surge of anger rising.

She doesn’t belong here, in this bed. In this realm.

She whimpers, her cry small and pained. I take a step closer but stop, sickness swelling, as the blankets beside her shift. A hand snakes out to touch her back and a possession unlike any I’ve ever felt before in all my centuries flares red-hot and blinding inside me. Jealous rage has flames edging my vision, and I hear a familiar voice whisper softly, “Just a dream, Persephone. You’re safe.”

The hand on her back comes into focus as Persephone settles under the comforting touch blended with the soothing sound of Leuce’s tired words.

My gaze shifts from Persephone to Leuce in the bed beside her. I don’t think I’ve ever seen the nymph look so tired as she flops onto her back, her hand sliding from Persephone as she slides back into troubled sleep.

For them, Olympus is clearly a place of torment.

But we don’t have much time. Hypnos had tried for hours to connect me to Persephone. For hours, she’d fallen in and out of sleep. Pulled from the peace of her

dreams into the terror of her nightmares only to wake and shove us both from her mind.

I'd nearly lost my mind and Hypnos had nearly lost hope in his ability to connect to her, something I didn't think the God of Dreams' ego took kindly to.

Persephone whimpers again, but this time I waste no time in touching my own hands to her skin. I curse low at the feel of her icy flesh under my burning touch. Why is she so cold?

Lifting her into my arms, I envision our bed in our room. I envision the glowing ceiling of amethyst and the fall of stars that rain to the daggered points of the crystal.

In the weeks since Persephone has been gone, Hypnos has schooled me more than once on the workings of a dream. Particularly, how to guide a dream in a specific direction.

All I want now is to guide us home. Away from Olympus. Away from everything that causes her lovely soul distress.

It doesn't take long for my desires to form around us, and as I lower her to the comfort of our bed her beautiful eyes finally flutter open. Her hair is a golden blonde, and I ache for the familiar red that is the color of her hair while at home in the Underworld. The sight of the blonde now reminds me that we aren't truly in our bed in our room. That she is not truly here with me in my arms.

That she is not truly safe.

"Hades?" Her brows pull in as she shoves up onto her elbows. Her eyes drift over the room and she stutters, "Wh-what's happening? Am I—am I home?"

Fuck, home.

“You’re dreaming.”

“What?” Her brows slant in confusion.

“Hypnos connected us.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:10 am

“Hypnos,” she repeats, soft and slow. “Connected us?”

“You haven’t been sleeping, have you?”

Her eyes narrow, and I can’t entirely fight the smile that hitches my lips as she demands, “How do you know I’ve not been sleeping?”

“Because I’ve been trying to connect with you in your dreams for weeks.”

She sighs, falling back against the pillows. I follow, crawling up her body on the bed so that I can continue to look down into her face.

Hell, but I’ve missed her face.

The last couple weeks have been torture. I don’t know how I survived without her for centuries.

“Olympus isn’t a nice place, Hades. It’s—there is evil lurking within all the light.” She shivers, and a low growl climbs my throat in response. Her eyes snap to mine when the sound crawls between us.

I can no longer resist tasting her, and I’m thankful that when I cover her mouth with my own, she opens for me as she always opens for me.

And she tastes as she always tastes. Sweet with those floral undertones that drive me wild.

The sound of her moan shoots blood straight to my cock. When she lifts her hands to grip me around my neck, tugging me closer, I'm helpless against the groan I bury into the soft skin of her throat. We may be dreaming, but this feels entirely real and so, so fucking good.

"Hades." The sound of my name on her lips now, after the days and days of torture—it's almost more than I can bear. "Oh, God."

"Yes, little goddess." I nip at her skin, reveling in the little gasp that freefalls from her lips into the space between us. "I'm your God."

"Yes," she vows. "Only you. Only ever you for as long as I live."

"You will live for eternity," I promise. My hands hook the hem of her night dress and I push it up and over her head, baring her to me.

Her flesh is more tanned than it is when she is home in the Underworld, her hair golden, her eyes a brighter, lighter green as she looks up at me with kiss swollen lips a softer shade of rose than the darker stain of night-kissed red that paints her lips under the glow of everlasting night.

Still, she is no less lovely.

"I could look at you for the rest of eternity," I rasp, emotion threatening to seal my throat. "These last weeks—it's like I'm walking around with no air. The beat of my heart is dull, an echo of the life I feel when you are home with me." My lips drift over hers, whisper soft. "I do not wish to live, to suffer the burn of breathing, without you."

Her fingertips sink into my hair. She holds my face between her hands, her eyes capturing my own. I could drown in their pools of endless green if it meant I would

forever be surrounded by her loving warmth.

“I love you, Hades.” Her words are a vow I entomb in the deepest depths of my heart.

“I’ve always loved you. I will always love you.”

The swell of emotion, like the surging wave of an uncontrolled sea, takes me by surprise. Never in my life have I been so swiftly cut to the quick by an overload of affection for anyone. Not even for her. It’s new, this overwhelm. This complete sensation of absolute need to be one with her.

“I need to be inside you.” The words rush to fall between us. “I need?—”

“Me too.” She spreads her legs around me, her hands no longer in my hair but pushing at the pants I wear. My cock springs free, instantly finding the slick wet of her sweet heat.

I sink inside in one quick thrust, rooting myself deep inside her and reveling in the little cry she lets loose.

I groan at the feel of her, taking her lips in a deep kiss as I stay buried, unmoving inside her. She is heaven. Being inside her, above her, around her, with her—is heaven.

I’m pulled back from the brink of bliss when her body rocks with a sharp sob that splits from the deep of her. My head notches up and my eyes search hers in the seconds before she pulls me to her, sealing us together chest to chest as she buries her face in the crook of my throat. Another sharp sob, her body tightening around and beneath mine.

“Little goddess?”

“I just miss you so much,” she gasps. “I want—I wish this was real.”

“This is real.” I press a kiss into her golden hair, swallowing the burning ache for the red. “I’m here with you right now.”

“In my dream,” she cries. “You’re here in my dream, but all I want is to be home with you.”

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“I’ll find a way to storm Olympus,” I vow. “Even if I have to burn the realm to the ground with the flames of Tartarus, I will find a way to destroy the deal that stands between us. I’ll bring you home.”

She shakes her head. “You can’t.”

“I can.”

“No.” Her palm in my chest pushes me back so that her eyes can find mine. “There is something here that is meant to be—meant to live.” She shakes her head. “But right now, I need you. I need you to make love to me, Hades. Remind me that I’m not alone.”

She doesn’t have to ask me twice. I pull back and sink in, growling low, “You will never be alone, little goddess. You will always have me.”

“Always,” she gasps as I pull back and sink in again. “I love you.”

“I’ve always loved you.” I press a kiss to her forehead, her lips, her chin and down the line of her throat. I kiss her chest, between her breasts and listen to the roar of her heart that soothes the rage in my own like a balm crafted solely for me. I make love to my wife, the eternal keeper of my soul. My bonded mate. My Goddess.

When we come, we come together. It’s not with the crashing waves of a violent sea or even the blazing flames of that which ends everything for the path of all that is new. It’s quiet and gentle like stars that rain from the night sky. Like burning embers of hope in an otherwise eternal darkness.

She is the star that burns bright for me. She is the ember of hope that fell for me when I feared all was lost. When darkness and suffering was my eternity.

She is the hope for the future of the realms, I realize with an icy chill that strokes the very core of my soul. She is the portal through which that hope will travel, will come into the world and change everything. She is the mother Goddess.

And she is mine.

Emotion builds inside me, a crescendo I loose in a sound that edges on a sob.

Her arms tighten around me, clinging to me as though she fears this will soon be over. That this dream will soon end.

I sense it, too.

“What is this?” She strokes her hand over the braided ropes of black mist and white fog.

“The tether back to the Underworld. To Hypnos.”

“Oh.” Sadness paints every inch of her, wreaking havoc on my heart.

I nudge the tip of her nose with my own. “What did you mean when you said there was something meant to live in Olympus?”

“It’s—there’s so much evil here, Hades.”

I’m afraid to ask, but before I can she tells me, “There are sacrifices here. But not in the way I thought they would happen. Not that it would be any better to have some poor soul laid out on a stone to have their throat cut but?”

“But what?”

“But the way Zeus demands the blood be spilled is—God, Hades. It’s awful. He’s awful.”

Her eyes watch my frown. “I didn’t realize Zeus was still demanding sacrifices.”

“I think he’s—I think he abducts people from the living realm.”

Everything inside me stiffens. “What?”

“Every night I’ve been here, I’ve watched someone innocent die.”

I pull away from her, fearing the rage I feel building inside me. “Tell me more.”

She pulls the sheet up to cover her body, her hands trembling in a way that I loathe.

“He makes them fight gladiators in the arena. They have no chance of winning. No chance of living.”

“And once they die in Olympus, they remain in Olympus for eternity.”

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Her words are a whisper. “There are so many souls trapped in the realm.”

“What happens to them when they die?” I already sense I know her answer, but I fear it all the same. Need to hear it even as I wish I didn’t have to.

“Ares saves the young women, the children. He gives them a home where they can hopefully heal.”

My head whips to her. “Zeus takes children?”

Her hands tremble so violently, she twists them in the sheets to still them. “Yes.”

“How young?”

“The youngest I’ve seen was six. A boy.”

The fucking bastard always did prefer the young boys be the ones sacrificed on his altars, when Gods demanded the blood of the innocent, a practice from the Titans before. A practice I’d thought long since abandoned.

I can’t swallow the curse that splits from between my lips. I ask roughly, “And the men?”

“He makes them fight again and again. Every night as gladiators in the arena,” she says brokenly. “It’s terrible, Hades. So terrible. They die and die again until?—”

She cuts off, but I don’t need her to finish.

They die again and again until they no longer die and become the gladiator Zeus craves.

I need to speak with Hermes. I need to know everything he knows of Olympus, though I'm not certain how much he knows. When I'd banished him from the Underworld for the part he played in Persephone's murder, he'd made a place for himself in the living realm, avoiding Olympus for the most part.

But the evidence is lining up, and it's undeniable.

Quietly, I tell her, "He's building an army of souls."

Her head snaps up, her wide eyes leak fear as they search mine. "But I thought that was why Demeter wanted the Underworld."

"It is."

"So, what do they want to take over then?"

"Everything."

Heavy silence falls between us. A suffocating silence that sucks life from the very air we breathe.

I don't miss the way her hands cradle her belly, where the lives our love created grow inside her. I think she's worrying for them, for our daughters, until she says softly, "I think one of them belongs in Olympus."

Every part of my body stiffens. "Explain."

"One of them feels," she pauses, continues, "a pull to Ares."

My mind flashes back to the Moirai's cave, and the vision of my daughters' souls bound to the souls of Gods. One of those souls had been Poseidon's. The other had been Ares'.

I hesitate to ask, "And?"

"Ares is good, Hades."

"He's always been better than the rest," I admit.

"History paints him as a war hungry monster."

"Ares is the God of War," I say, but tell her even as I remind myself, "He is also the God of Courage."

Her hand caresses her belly. My eyes follow the movement until, softly, she whispers, "I think he's meant to save Olympus, with one of our girls at his side. As his Queen."

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No sooner than the words have left her lips, the image of her flickers. A moment of fear so vicious strikes me, and I flinch at the whip of it.

She flickers again.

“What’s happening?” Her eyes are wild with panic.

“You’re waking up.”

“No. I don’t want to.” She shakes her head, rejecting the fate neither of us can fight.

“Listen to me.” I grip the sides of her face, even as her form feels less solid. “You need to sleep. When you sleep, I’ll be here.”

Tears well in her eyes, like blades to my heart. She promises, “I’ll sle?—”

She doesn’t finish because she is gone.

I follow the thread of Hypnos back to the Underworld.

Chapter

Thirty-Four

Persephone

Where the Underworld is like a fantasy, Olympus feels like a dream. There is a beauty

here that is unspeakable but blurred somehow. It's not crisp, like reality should be. The haze that blankets the realm plays over the scene like a vivid dream in the first waking moments. There, but not entirely clear. It's been three weeks, though the days and nights feel impossibly long.

Hydra suffers burning heat, so different from the heat of the Underworld. She is flying less and less. Leuce is on edge, always looking over her shoulder.

And the machinations of this realm are deadly. Every day, another conspiracy is laid bare. Every day, a new horror revealed.

Every day I watch innocence die.

"You will do it, boy!" Zeus' palm falls heavy on the table, rattling the dishes. "Your purpose is war."

Ares simply glares through golden eyes speared red with daggers of blood as he cuts into the meat that oozes red onto his plate. He places a square into his mouth, chewing boredly before he swallows. "No."

"Waste of power," Hercules hisses, glaring at his half-brother.

Hera places her hand over her adoptive son's, her blue eyes flicking once to me. "Perhaps he needs motivation."

Leuce tenses beside me, but no one asks what she means, even though I'm certain she meant to propose that I could be his motivation for whatever atrocity Zeus wants Ares to commit.

What do they want from him?

Hercules stands fast, knocking his chair back as he leans into the table, glaring his hatred at Ares who doesn't even flinch. "We need this. It's been too long since there was a war."

Attached to his back, Hercules' much smaller, golden wings quiver. As a demigod, the fact he has wings is impressive. It's no surprise, however, that they are mostly useless. No surprise that he keeps his Pegasus close.

"There are plenty of wars." Ares leans back in his chair casually, though there is nothing casual about the danger that leaks from him.

"Do you not see the realm?" Hercules spits, throwing an arm wide. "It's dying."

Ares smirks, taunting the golden demigod with his golden boy charm now spitting ugly rage. He drawls, "Oh, I know."

Hercules draws his sword and I gasp in horror, but Ares only laughs.

"Enough!" Zeus roars, his face burning red with anger. "Enough."

In the arena below, a man no older than thirty and clearly in his physical prime deflects another deathblow from the gladiator. Though he's holding his own now, the time will come when he inevitably tires. Then, like all the rest, he will die.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:11 am

“What is this?” he screams from the bowl as he flees the gladiator. “What the fuck is this?”

The crowd leans forward in sickening rapture. The fish I’d eaten for lunch spoils in my stomach, threatening to soil the meat on my plate now.

I push my plate away discretely, but when I lift my eyes, I find Hera is watching me. And Demeter is watching her.

My skin crawls as I tear my eyes from Demeter. I’ve avoided her mercilessly since I arrived in Olympus, not able to stomach the sight of her now that the memories of my past life are accessible in the shelf of my mind.

Zeus lifts a goblet of wine, swallowing deeply. When it is empty, he places it on the table with a deafening thud. A servant girl with downcast eyes scurries to fill it to the rim. Zeus doesn’t seem to see her, but Hera’s hot glare possesses the power to cleave the poor girl in two.

There is an undeniable beauty to the girl, even if it’s broken. I get the sickening sense that Zeus was the cause of her breaking. That she may be one of the crying statues that litter my rooms and haunt my nightmares.

The girl scampers back to her place behind Zeus. “You will honor your part in this family by bowing to the gifts of your God, Ares.”

When Ares doesn’t respond, the blue of the sky begins to darken so fast, it’s like someone pushed a button to change the screen of the sky. Angry clouds in dark

shades of blue, purple, and gray crackle with white-hot light as though electrified. The taste of heat in the air submits to an ominously cool wind that whistles harrowingly between the ancient columns of the coliseum.

In the arena below, both man and gladiator pause. Heads tipped back toward the sky, unmasked fear burning bright in their eyes.

Unease grows inside me, the urge to flee tightening my muscles.

“Do not move, my Persephone.” Hydra’s words are loud in my mind. So loud, I flinch. “If you move, the lightning in the air will strike you.”

Beside me, Leuce is so still it doesn’t even appear that she breathes.

The table—the whole amphitheatre—has suddenly turned to living, breathing stone.

Slowly, my eyes tip up to see that even Hydra sits stone still on her perch high in the sky. But her eyes are locked on me.

Zeus rises, the electricity in the clouds zapping audibly with a danger that threatens to smite us all.

“You will do your duty to this realm, Ares. If I must strip the flesh from your God to invoke the bloodlust, I will.”

The threat chills me to my bone, and I fail to keep my horror hidden from Hera’s too-seeing eyes.

Inside my stomach, the soul that grows aches.

Ares slices the meat on his plate, the only one aside from Zeus willing to move

beneath the crackling violence of the sky. He pops the meat into his mouth and says darkly, “Do your worst.” He spits the last word, “Father.”

Lightning spears from the sky, shattering the plate in front of Ares, leaving the meat in a pile of charred dust.

“Out of respect for your mother—” Anger curls dangerously around Zeus’ words. “You have been spared the arena.”

“It has nothing to do with respect, old man,” Ares taunts bravely. “If you respected her at all, your seed wouldn’t be spread all over Olympus. And if she respected herself, she wouldn’t be spreading her?—”

Lightning spears down from the sky to connect with Ares’ chest, cutting off his words. This time, I do scream. Inside my stomach, the soul of my daughter weeps.

But Ares shocks us all when his hand whips out to grip the bolt that surges deadly power into his violently shaking form. Teeth gritted, he pulls the blade of the bolt from his chest, and I scream again when blood pours from the wound. Sweat trickles at his temples, and the gold of his eyes is entirely gone to make room for the bloodlust.

When he tosses the bolt, it lands in the arena with a deadly blast before winking out of existence. My eyes snap back to Ares to see that there is no longer tan human flesh on his hand. Instead, the claw that sits in its place is three times the size and dark gray, like the stone of a rain-soaked mountain. Between the cracks in his flesh, thin rivers of red run.

The scent of Zeus’ storm is overpowered by the smell of blood-soaked earth and battle. It’s so strong, I can’t help but cover my mouth. Inside, the soul of my daughter is restless.

“Take him!” Zeus demands, and lesser gods with wings the color of the sandy floor of the arena swoop down to grip Ares as he looses a terrifying roar.

More skin splits to reveal the God beneath the human flesh he wears, and as he swipes a clawed hand up at the Gods who carry him, they release him over the arena, and I gasp in horror as he begins to fall.

A human likely wouldn’t survive the fall, but Ares lands on lethal feet that are no longer human at all. He looks like a demon. The personification of battle born in bloodlust.

The human man in the arena stumbles back, jaw hanging open in shock and horror. His hands lift to his temples, and he shakes his head. I can’t hear him over the screaming in my own mind, but I can see the forming of his lips. The denial.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:11 am

Ares looses a roar as doors open and gladiators storm into the arena. Each one is armed with weapons that could crush the bones of a man with a single swing. There is easily a hundred men now locked in the arena with Ares. The only three without a weapon are the human man, the gladiator meant to kill him with his bare hands, and Ares.

Zeus laughs a maniacal sound that draws my sharp gaze. I find his is already on me. “Hera thought to spare you this scene.” He shrugs, like it simply couldn’t be helped. “But I did promise you a show, did I not?” Another maniacal laugh that slithers like snakes over my bones. “This, dear daughter, will be a show the like you’ve never seen.”

At the sound of a battle cry of men, I am unable to do anything but look back at the scene in the arena. The armed gladiators charge Ares from all sides, and I wait for him to do something to deflect the attack. But he doesn’t. He doesn’t lift a single claw as he bows his head between his shoulders and braces for the deadly onslaught.

The first gladiator to connect with his flesh is one who carries a weapon that looks like a big hook. He grips him around the neck and pulls violently down on the handle as the others connect with his back. Long metal weapons with unbreakable clubs bursting with smaller blade-like points connect again and again with Ares’ back, splitting the human flesh he wears to ribbons to showcase the flesh of the God beneath. Blood sprays as whips lash, and Ares hits his knees in the sand.

The first sound that tears from his lips is one of agony so extreme, so brokenly pained, my womb contracts under the stress of it. This exposure is too much for the soul inside me that already loves him, and I grip my belly with shaking arms as

though to hold the piece of me that aches to break free, to save him, safe inside me where I can keep her for just a little longer.

Still, I can't tear my eyes from the horror of the scene below. I don't miss the way the gladiators shred the last of the flesh Ares wears, exposing the granite flesh of the beast beneath.

Gray stone flesh seeping with hot-red blood falls to the sun-baked sand with a sizzle as vicious clouds roll overhead. Gladiators roar and rage, lashing at the broken mountain that is the God of War and Courage, now crumpled in the center of the amphitheatre.

Gods stand in their seats, human servants hovering close. I've been here long enough now to see the difference. Even the lesser Gods possess a glow about them that the broken souls of the humans in Olympus do not carry.

At the table I share with the worst of the Gods and Goddesses, bile rises at the unrestrained excitement that burns bright in each of their expressions.

Even Hera wears a look of delight as she holds her wine, watching her son on his knees being beat by the human souls turned trained gladiators. Beside Hera, Hercules' blue eyes are bright with delight. The kind of delight that only one whose soul has been woven with threads of malice can wear while watching such a scene. It is as though they hunger for the torment of the God they should love.

Hunger for the destruction of all that he is.

A grunt of raw agony echoes up from the arena. I look back to find Ares has spilled forward to hold himself up with his hands planted in the sand. Blood rains from the weapons that land again and again over the dark stone of his back. The drops sizzling as they fall to the earth, as though acid leaks from the very blood he bleeds.

It goes on for so long that even the stone of his Gods' flesh begins to tear open over his back. Blood-soaked obsidian bone protrudes from split flesh and muscle, and still, Ares does not stand. He does not fight.

His clawed hands are fisted in the sand and his thick thighs, now gaping with wounds, quiver as though he is moments away from complete collapse.

A skip in my heart is the match that ignites a true fear inside my heart that he may very well be killed today. But can a God be killed?

I thought it impossible, thought the consequences too great. Now...

"I don't think he is going to succumb to the bloodlust today, Father." My head snaps around to see a woman I've not yet seen. She's beautiful, as all Gods are, but there is something about her that feels off. Something other lurking behind her dark brown eyes.

"Something is missing. The place where the soul should lay is empty, barren."

I flinch at the voice of three that are not of me, and the new arrival smirks as though delighted by my discomfort, those oddly dim brown eyes sparking with interest that quickly dulls again.

"Athena." Zeus pushes back from the table and pats his knee with one big hand, adorned in rings of gold that glitter with diamonds.

A slither of sick slides through me when Athena pushes a mass of dark curls over her shoulder to plop down on Zeus' knee. My eyes shoot to Hera. Her gaze forced toward the arena as though ambivalent to the display of—well, I'm not sure what is being displayed.

I've come to realize that most of what I know about the Gods is a lie that is twisted around the truth. Sure, I know Athena is the Goddess of Wisdom and Warfare. She is beloved among mythology, but I've learned enough to know that the most loved are the truly evil. The truth humanity knows today of the Gods is steeped in lies disguised to demand the affections of the foolish.

Athena shimmies on Zeus' knee, her smile dark and twisted with depravity. There's no other word for it. Everything in her, of her, is ugly.

Zeus's big hand falls on her bare thigh with a slap that makes both me and Leuce flinch. Unlike everyone else at the table, heck, unlike everyone else in the amphitheatre, Athena is dressed in a short dress of armour. Splits in the armor of the skirt display a pair of white panties that has a sickening discomfort warring inside me to mingle with the fear for Ares.

In front of everyone, Zeus lets his big hand slide too far up her thigh to be appropriate.

Leuce leans close to whisper, "Fucking disgusting."

"I agree," Hydra says in my mind. She is always close, always listening and watching.

Hera's jaw tightens and Hercules' blue eyes watch the path his father's hand takes on Athena's thigh with a hunger that can't be mistaken as anything but vile.

Athena leans her back into Zeus' chest, pushing her own breast, plated in armor, out toward the table. Her eyes dance for a moment on Hera, as though trying to taunt her wrath, before she sighs. "You don't need him. I can start the wars for you, father."

"When did you return?" Zeus ignores her words to ask his own question.

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“Just now. I came right to you.” She looses a hideous little giggle when Zeus lets out a pleased grunt, squeezing her thigh. “The Middle East is burning with wars. The devastation will spread, slowly but surely to the West who can’t leave well enough alone.”

“You are a brilliant little war strategist, my love,” Zeus praises.

“That is why you don’t need him.”

“You may be able to start the wars, but Aresiswar. He is the bloodlust that stains the earth. He is the weapon to end it all. The weapon we must use if we wish to begin again, to show ourselves in all the power of ancient times, to command the worship weare due,” Zeus says loud enough for all the table to hear. “He will submit.”

Athena harrumphs, and Zeus’ hand slides higher. So high...

I can’t watch any more. It’s the worst kind of wrong.

Everything here in Olympus is wrong.

And the wrongness is leaching into the societies of man. The sins of the Gods overwhelming the minds of humanity.

Mom always preached about the evil of the world showing itself for all that it was. That the wrong would become right and right would become wrong. That in the end it would all be revealed.

I think we're close to that revelation now. Close to understanding that that which cloaks itself in light is truly the darkest of dark. And sometimes within the dark, in the silence of the shadows, is where the good hides. Where good bides its time and builds its strength for a revelation that will win the final war.

In the arena below, Ares falls from his hands to his elbows. My heart falls with him into the deepest pit of my belly.

"If you wish to break him, you must show him that there is something worth breathing for." Hera's smooth voice is filled with shards of ice.

Her cold eyes cut to me, and Zeus makes a noise in the back of his throat.

"Run!" Hydra's voice is loud in my mind. So loud, I hardly hear the snap of gun metal silver wings that burst from Athena's back as she stands.

I don't take more than two steps before Athena snatches me into the air with hands that bite into my flesh like the taloned claws of a bird of prey. Below, I see Leuce fighting the guards that have descended on her. She slices the throat of one with a steak knife before burying the blade into the chest of another. And then another is on her.

My eyes snap up to Hydra when she roars a roar of rage and fear. Around the perch she's made her own each night while we dine is an orb of crackling electricity.

"Don't fight it!" I scream to her, begging her not to die to save me. "Please."

Hydra stops her frantic movements, and through the crackling glow of electrified lightning, I see the flash of her eyes. My soul aches and fear burns like acid inside my veins as Leuce is beaten and restrained. Vicious words spill from her lips, the threats deadly even as Zeus orders for her to be taken away.

Taken away to where? What is happening?

Athena cackles diabolically as she flies us high into the angry sky over the bloody arena. Her taloned fingers bite into my flesh as she growls low in my ear, “Scream.”

I shake my head, but I’m too afraid to speak. If she drops me from this height...

My gaze falls on the human man who is looking up at me from where he’s plastered himself against the wall of the amphitheatre. His face is an open book of dread as he watches me from far below, held by the diabolical creature that is Athena.

“Scream!” she yells over the wind that now whips at us.

“Why?”

“Because when he hears his little pet scream, he won’t be able to fight the bloodlust.”

“What bloodlust?”

“The bloodlust that will end it all.”

I shake my head, refusing even if it means—God, Hades, I love you.

I send the prayer into the ether of time and space, believing with all of me that it will find him. That he will hear it. That he will hear my love and the apology in it.

Tears of grief and fear prick my eyes, and Athena laughs over my shoulder. And then she lets me go.

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Even as I promised myself I wouldn't, I scream.

Chapter

Thirty-Five

Persephone

The ground rushes toward me. Wind screams as it whips by, lashing at sun stung skin.

Black dots dance in my vision.

Just when I think they'll claim all my vision, I see Ares' head snap up as though pulled by the string of my scream. From the blown red of his pupilless eyes, a misty aura of red and black leaks into the air. In seconds, that aura is bleeding ominous ribbons into the space around him.

A massive hand whips out to hook one of the gladiators around the ankle, dragging him close. Athena snaps her arms around me, halting my fall in time for me to see Ares rip the man in two, right down the middle. Entrails burst from within his body to begin a scene of utter horror.

Ares grabs hold of another body. The man screams as his arm is ripped from him and tossed to the other side of the arena. A leg follows. A head rolls.

Bile rises.

Athena squeezes me around the middle as she holds us hovering above the devastating scene and I taste the bubbling acid of my bile on the back of my tongue.

Gladiators, grown men trained to maim, scream as Ares finds his feet.

He no longer looks human at all. His change is nothing like when Hades changed for me, cleanly and of his will. This had been forced, the flesh stripped from him in ribbons. Some still hangs in tatters from the stone flesh of his Gods' Form. The loose flesh slaps against his body as he moves, forcing one foot in front of the other.

I'm not even sure he feels the pain of the beating he suffered any longer. He's consumed by the bloodlust they forced him into. I realize with a kind of devastation that bludgeons the soul inside me that bleeds for Ares, that this is normal for him. This is something he suffers often.

Like so many others, he suffers in silence the atrocities of Zeus.

I didn't think I could hate the Golden God any more than I did before. But I do. I hate him with every piece that crafts the soul that feeds my body. I hate him with every breath I breathe, every dream I dream.

And I vow now to see his destruction, after he pays penance.

Chaos whirls inside me now. The spirit of the House of Judgement, from which the blood of my innocence birthed it from the depths of an ancient primordial God born of the first mother, hums with the hunger to bestow her eternal judgement on the God of Thunder. It is a hunger that will not die, will grow in demand until it is sated.

It is a hunger I will see filled if it is the last thing I do. Because I know that if I don't, there will be no safe world for my daughters to live in. No safe world for the children who already are or who will come.

A battle cry rips from Ares as he charges the men who beat him with whips and chains, toothy hooks and war hammers. A sword arcs high as Ares lifts one of the gladiators by his throat, squeezing until the man's eyes burst red and finally pop. Blood pours from his nostrils and between his lips, running in rivers from his ears to pour over Ares' hand that squeezes his throat even tighter.

I gasp in shocked horror when the man's head simply pops off. His head bobs in the sand as his limp body drops to a heap of flesh and bones at Ares' feet.

The sword, having landed in the sand blade tip down is pulled from the earth by the man who'd been fighting for his life in the arena. The man who, until now, was pinned to the stone wall as he watched the impossibility of the scene play out before him.

And now, I watch another impossibility as the man lifts the blade and drives it cleanly through the gladiator charging Ares with a hammer swung high over his head, ready to connect with Ares' spine.

Ares spins at the sound of a blade slicing through flesh to find the man gasping in shock as he yanks the blade from the belly of the gladiator, watching as he falls to his knees in the sand.

"I don't know what the fuck is going on." The man's voice shakes. "Don't know what the fuck you are—but after that, I'll help you."

Ares growls one word, "Name?"

"Gideon."

"You will die here today, Gideon," Ares tells him matter of fact as he swings down to grip the fallen war hammer. "But my soul will owe yours a blood debt."

“I don’t know what that means.” Gideon’s voice—hell, all of him—trembles.

Ares’ beastly face morphs into what I’m certain is meant to be a smile as he swings the hammer over Gideon’s head, narrowly missing him and instead connecting with the gladiator Gideon has been initially fighting.

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The body with the now shattered head thuds to the ground in the same moment Gideon lets out a girlishly high scream that would have been funny, if it all weren't so grotesque.

Ares tips his head back once more, swirling mist of red and black concealing the features of his face as he frees a high whistle that pierces the sky.

And then he refocuses on the battle, dropping one hundred men in less than five minutes with Gideon fighting at his back. From the arena doors in the amphitheatre, more men spill. Overhead, I see four spots of burning color with wings of blazing gold. Lightning strikes at them, but it's met with a flame that devours the bolts one after the other as they charge toward the battle. Men scream as Ares' four Pegasus land in the sand, breathing hot flames into the amphitheatre. The flames chase the gladiators, melting flesh from bone as screams tear into the darkening sky.

Ares says something I can't begin to understand as the white horse—Phobos, I remember from my last introduction pauses in front of Gideon. I'm not sure the man has ever ridden a horse in his life, but he still climbs atop the winged beast. His fingers dig deep into the golden mane as the Pegasus shoots up into the sky.

The three other Pegasus soar high to where Hydra growls and roars inside her lightning cage. Together, the three release flames of gold that devour the lightning prison as Hydra looses her own flames, rich with the screams of the darkest Pits of Tartarus.

Hell is well and truly unleashed then as the Gods and Goddesses, and souls of the dead trapped within the hijacked realm that is the Golden City of Gods descends into

chaos. Screams tear through the stands and gladiators turn on one another. Inky shadows come to life in the black smoke that survives the dying of Hydra's flame.

"I am coming, my Persephone!" Hydra roars in my mind, but even I can hear the surprise that taints her voice when she speaks.

"What is this?" Athena hisses in my ear, and I think I feel the sharp slide of her canine against the lobe. When I don't answer, she screams again, "What is this, you witch!"

She's too busy looking at the inky spill of shadows that wreak havoc on the crowd now fighting to escape to notice Ares stop fighting. His head tips back, blood red eyes lusting for battle as they lock on me and Athena. He roars a savage roar of pain as a spray of blood bursts from his back where the black obsidian of his bone shines with the blood he'd allowed the gladiators to spill.

A black bone skeleton of sharply pointed wings unfolds from his spine, spilling acidic blood that rains on the ground as he throws his head back once again and screams a scream of male rage and agony as the space between the bones begins to fill with a leathery flesh. Between the two wings, a leathery pouch forms—and black spears of Gods' bone, I realise—pokes out the top. The whole thing takes only seconds, and then Ares bursts from the arena where flames lick at him—keeping him from the violence of the gladiators that continue to spill from the now open arena doors.

He soars straight for me and Athena, one massive arm swinging back to connect with the pointed spears that sit in the pouch between his wings. Teeth gnash in pain as he yanks a spear free, releasing another vicious spray of blood as he arcs his hand and, reaching for me with one, he shoves the Gods' bone spear down through Athena's open mouth. She'd let me go, her gun metal wings fluttering fast as she tried to surge herself up and away from Ares' attack. She only served to thrust herself into his attack.

I can't say I'm sorry when I see the tip of Ares' spear appear from the base of her belly. Her dark eyes snap wide and her wings give a quick flutter before she is falling to the arena, unmoving.

Zeus roars, but I pay it no mind as Ares grunts, locking his arms around me. I realize they tremble with exhaustion, not fear when he shoves us higher into the sky. Still, I can't take my eyes off the scene below as the gladiators descend on Athena. It's then I realize as she screams that she wasn't dead.

They tear into her, ripping flesh in ribbons and scattering her bones. Her screams have ended, but they seem to echo in the amphitheatre alongside Zeus' cries until Ares flies me too far for the sound of any of the chaos to reach.

I say nothing, too shocked and afraid to speak as Ares clings to me with a strength that quickly weakens. I don't have the faintest idea where he is taking me until we land outside the massive wood door adorned with metal in the side of the mountain. The landing is so rough, that I spill painfully against the gravel, shards digging deep into my palms and knees.

Ares simply collapses, his open wounds collecting debris in his fall.

Pain bites my hands and knees as I crawl toward him, screaming his name. "Ares!" I reach him, afraid to touch him as I cry. "Wake up. Wake up!"

When he doesn't open his stone covered eyes, I scramble to my feet. My knees quake, threatening to give out with every step I take. Adrenaline is in overdrive, but I manage to get myself to the door.

I throw my entire body into the wood, uncertain that I can summon the energy to beat it with my fists. Blackness hovers at the edge of my vision. It doesn't seem to matter how many breaths I gasp into the deep of my lungs, I can't seem to fill them. Can't

satisfy their craving for more.

“Help,” I think I scream.

The blackness creeps over my vision until there is little more than a pinprick. My body lurches forward. Something hard connects with the side of my face. Maybe my face connects with something hard.

In the pinhole that remains of my vision, I see a girl.

Everything turns black.

Chapter

Thirty-Six

Persephone

“Oh, you’re awake.”

I wasn’t, not really, but I certainly am now. I’m not sure I’ve ever slept so deeply in all my life. My body is heavy with the weight that clings to it. Shallow breaths stretch my lungs, and I cough a raspy sound. I feel as though I haven’t used my lungs in days.

What happened?

I try to sit and the heavy ache spreads from my torso into my limbs. I groan.

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The feminine voice I'd heard before sounds suddenly closer. "It's worse if you rush it."

"Rush—" I croak, cough, try again. "What?"

"Waking up after—after the arena."

I groan again, letting myself fall back to the bed. Memories of the arena come rushing back one after another. I see the table of monsters, watch Ares be tossed into the pit of death. I see his transformation, and the way he refused to fight the souls of the gladiators, eternally captive for the pleasures of Zeus and his diabolical cabinet of monsters just like him.

I see Ares break, snap, submit to the bloodlust.

"A-A-res?" I croak.

There is a rustling and I fight to open my heavy eyes in time to see the girl I'd first seen in the arena. The one who lost her father to the prison of gladiators.

The one I'd gone with Ares to give to Hephaestus.

That's when I remember shooting through the air, clinging to Ares as he flew, trembling and weak and bloody, to the mountain shelter. I remember gravel cutting into skin. Ares wasn't moving.

Was he breathing?

I remember the door, falling against it. Nothing.

“Ares is fine. Hephaestus is good at putting broken things back together.” She sets a cup down beside the bed before tugging gently at my shoulders, puffing my pillows. “Here.” Cool glass touches my lips, cooler water sliding over my dry tongue. “Slow, now.” She pulls the glass back and I cough again.

“Where is he?”

“Let’s focus on you.” She pulls a chair closer to the bed. “How are you feeling?”

“How long was I asleep?”

“Only two days.” She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, and I note that her bruising is mostly gone. The blood crusted in her hair washed away.

She looks healthy.

“Two days,” I breathe. I try to recall if I’d dreamed with Hades at all, but there is only black.

“You were beyond exhausted.” She swipes a mug from the table and brings it to her lips. I smell the familiar scent of coffee and nearly groan. She laughs. “Do you want some?”

“You’re the girl we brought here.”

Her smile softens. “Yeah. Hephaestus told me.”

I nod. “You wouldn’t remember me. You were...”

“Dead?” I’m pretty sure I pale because she laughs lightly. “It’s terrible what happened. But I’m okay. Or I’m getting there.” She looks down into her mug. “Sleep is hard.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Her eyes lift to mine. “You have nothing to be sorry for. In fact, you saved me.” When I frown, she adds, “I know I would have become another slave in that awful castle if you and Ares hadn’t brought me here to Hephaestus.” When she says his name, a delicate bloom of pink flushes her cheeks. “He’s putting me back together, too.” She leans in just a bit. “But I kind of think I’m finding pieces of him, as well.”

“How did it—how did you?”

“How did I end up here?” she finishes for me. She answers before I can do so much as nod. “I graduated from school to be a vet tech. I’ve always wanted to work with animals, always loved them. My dad,” her voice breaks. “We lost my mom when I was young. It’s always just been the two of us, and it’s kind of always been hard. He works a lot. As a cop, he’s always worked long hours.” She waves her hand. “I’m getting off topic. Anyway, Dad always promised he’d take me anywhere I wanted to go when I graduated.” She shrugs. “I’ve always wanted to see Italy. And I’ve always been interested in the Roman Gods. Jupiter, the Roman God of the sky, thunder and lightning, has always been a fascination of mine. We were in a church in Rome when it happened—” Her face scrunches in concentration. “Everything around us got blurry and I swore I saw Jupiter.”

“It was Zeus.”

She nods sadly. “I know that now.”

“Then what happened?”

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“We were taken to a cell, me and Dad. Then the guards came in dressed like they were from some ancient movie. No one would talk to us, tell us what was happening. Dad tried to fight them, but he couldn’t. We were taken to the arena where...”

“I saw that part,” I tell her softly.

Her chin quivers with emotion. “The winner took me back to his room and—and that was it.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Me too.”

God, her eyes are so sad for a moment. She blinks it away and smiles a breakable smile. “My name is Melody, by the way.”

“Persephone.”

“I can’t believe you’re the Persephone. I mean, I was always more interested in the Roman version of the Gods, but now that I know they’re all the same. Gosh, your story isn’t a whole lot better than mine. You were abducted young and, and...”

She can’t say it. Can’t speak the terrible word that was done to her by the gladiator who took the life of her father. Who stole her innocence before stealing her life and fating her to an eternity in this hideous realm.

I clear my throat. “My story isn’t what people think it is.”

Her brows drift together, and she takes another sip of her coffee. “I suppose it isn’t.” She blows a breath from between her cheeks. “I never imagined Zeus was the cruel God. The one we should truly fear.”

“Hades is—” I cough, and Melody jumps up with my water again. I take a drink, longer this time. “Hades is loving, Melody. He’s loving to me and he’s loving to the souls he cares for in the Underworld. He’s nothing like the myths paint him.”

“So, there is more than this to the afterlife, then?”

I give her a slow, hesitant nod. “For those who die in the living realm, yes.”

She dips her chin to her chest. “I know I’m trapped here for eternity. But I’m happy to know that most of us—that we go somewhere where we are loved.”

“Yeah.”

We fall into heavy silence until my belly rumbles.

Melody jumps to her feet, and I flinch. “Of course, you must be starving. I’ll get you food.”

I push up in the bed. “Can I come with you?”

Her eyes narrow, then soften. “If you’re sure you can manage?”

“I wasn’t hurt in the arena.”

“Just because your body wasn’t hurt doesn’t mean your soul was left untouched,” she says matter of fact, but takes my hand in hers anyway.

Chapter

Thirty-Seven

Persephone

Hephaestus' mountain house is a grotto on steroids. Instantly, I know it's my favorite place in Olympus. The rough stone walls and oversized, handcrafted furniture in the dim light create an ambiance that feels comforting and safe.

With my belly full of warm soup, I'm snuggled under a heavy blanket on a couch that is far larger than normal with Melody tucked close. A fire warms the space, and opposite us on another massive couch, sit Gideon and an unimpressed looking Hephaestus.

Ares stands beside the fireplace mantle, arms crossed over his chest. Raised red welts I've been assured will fade in time, line his skin. Pockets of the stonelike flesh beneath peek through wounds that have not yet fully healed.

"Let the realm die." Hephaestus' gaze flicks, not for the first time, to Melody. His pitch drops lower, a rough timbre of anger and resentment spilling into the quiet space. "We've lost our way as Gods."

"Have we ever known the way?" Ares grinds out.

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“I don’t understand.” I shift closer to the edge of the couch. “Why would the realm die if there was no war?”

“The realms are sentient.” Ares sighs. “Like all living things, if it is not fed, death is inevitable.”

“But—” My conversation with Hera returns to me. I have the power to feed the realm.

“What does Olympus feed on?”

“The Gods,” Hephaestus answers without explanation.

I frown, wondering why, then, Hera wanted me.

“Okay—so why does Zeus want war?” It doesn’t make sense. If Olympus feeds on the Gods, why would the Gods want war?

Hephaestus stands, pacing in long strides. His jaw works with emotion before he grinds out, “There is no time so abundant in prayer, as there is during times of war.” His metal flecked eyes shift again to Melody, before he forces them to me. “There is no greater source of nourishment to the Gods than prayer. It is second only to the lifeforce of the soul which leaches into the spilled blood of the living.”

Gideon makes a strangled noise, shaking his head viciously. “That’s why you have the arena. Why you kidnap people from earth.”

“We do none of that,” Ares growls low and dangerously. “My father...”

“And that’s Zeus, right? Your father, I mean?”

“I see someone doesn’t know much about their Gods.”

“Man.” Gideon’s hands fly up in surrender. “I was raised with no religion. My only church was the jiu-jitsu studio.”

“That’s how you were able to survive in the ring so long?” Every pair of eyes snap to me at my words.

Gideon nods. “Yeah.”

“All right.” I scoot closer to the flames, tucking the blanket tighter around myself. “So, the Gods harvest the energy of prayer, then? But wouldn’t they need the prayers to be directed at them?”

Hephaestus shakes his head. “Not exactly. If you want a God to hear a prayer directly from you, you must be praying directly to that God. Say his name. Pray in his temple. Offer him a gift, a sacrifice.”

I flinch at the word sacrifice. So does Melody beside me. At the small, barely imperceptible movement, Hephaestus’ eyes snap to her. Darkness floods his eyes a moment before they are completely blasted with metal.

Melody shifts under the intensity of his stare.

Ares cocks a brow, a small grin forming not long after.

Gideon looks concerned for Melody, but does little as he waits, watching.

I speak again, breaking the silence. “You’re saying the Gods can hear prayer that is meant for another God, then? That they feed on it?”

“Yes.” Hephaestus’ eyes don’t shift from Melody. “All Gods today are an extension somehow of the original Gods. The history represented in religious texts today leans heavily on the events from which we lived and were worshiped as Deities long ago. Great temples were crafted, a direct vein for prayer to travel to the Gods. An umbilical cord, if you will.” His massive hands clap together between his knees. Hephaestus is a giant of a man. “Prayer is the sustenance that travels through the Gods into Olympus.”

“Has it always been like that?” I hesitate to ask but need the answer. Need to hear it from the Gods who live here in Olympus now. For it is from them that Olympus feeds.

“Why do you ask that?” There is a quiet kind of danger to Ares’ voice that lifts the hair on my arms.

I shift to look at him, finding his eyes already on me. “Um—I—” I tuck my hair nervously behind my ear. Ares doesn’t tear his eyes from mine. I press on. “Well, I spoke with Poseidon not long ago and?—”

“Poseidon?” Gideon interrupts, shocked. “The God of the Sea?”

I nod. “Yes.”

“Holy shit. I mean cool.” He bobs his head. “I know that God. I mean I know of that God.”

Ares lets a low rumble from the prison of his chest, and Gideon snaps his mouth shut. To save Gideon from the wrath of the war God who saved him and is now looking at

him like he might regret doing such a thing. Like he might rectify his mistake.

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I hurry to explain, “He explained that Atlantis once fed Olympus. That a vein connected it to all the realms before it sank.”

“It did,” Hephaestus admits. He straightens, less metal in his eyes as he asks, “Where did you see Poseidon?”

“Um—”

“He comes to the Underworld, doesn’t he?” Hephaestus presses.

“I—” I shift uncomfortably. Why do I feel as though I’m spilling my friend’s secrets by telling them this?

“It’s no matter.” Hephaestus stands. “All that matters now is Atlantis took her power from Olympus and left Olympus with only the Gods who inhabit her to feed her.”

I frown again as the room descends into silence, my mind working to set the pieces of the puzzle before me into place.

Long ago, the three realms were crafted. Atlantis, Olympus, and the Underworld. A direct vein of life—an umbilical cord, to honor Hephaestus’ explanation—surged from Chaos to Atlantis. It was the realm of power so great; it could feed the other two realms by a vein connecting it to Olympus and again to the Underworld. But this power that fed the realms had been pulled from the source Goddess. From Chaos.

When Atlantis sank into the sea, she severed her vein to Olympus, leaving the realm to either starve or feed from the Gods whose greed forced her to seek refuge in the

sea. She maintained her connection to the Underworld, but the power in her reserves was limited, and the vein shrank, growing weak.

I know now that this happened because of Uranus' betrayal. When he ravaged Chaos, consuming her and claiming her power for himself, there was no more source power to pull. The gift of Chaos should have been lost forever, but the Fates had intervened, I know now, with my creation.

Uranus' inability to temper the wild of Chaos' power for himself led him to house it inside my Goddesses spirit, inside me. I am his daughter by spirit even though I am the daughter of Hyperion by seed and Demeter by womb. The power I possess, stolen from Chaos and Aether and Hyperion in his unawareness of self during the possession of Uranus, to use his bodily form to create me, is massive.

But it comes down to the fact that inside me lives the power to sustain the realms. Not simply the Underworld as we all thought. But all the realms. The three. The triangle of power that was always of Chaos.

If only I knew what to do with that power.

Or what to do now that I know I possess it.

Chapter

Thirty-Eight

Persephone

I can't sleep. The room is too quiet, the shadows cast by the low flames in the hearth too dark. Still, I long to fall into dreams. To see Hades.

I ache for him in a way that has salty tears stinging my eyes. I ache for the comfort of Leuce and Hydra.

Hydra made it out mostly unscathed, thanks to the rescue of Ares' war horses—or Pegasuses. But Leuce was taken away by the gladiator guards she'd fought in valiant effort to save me from Athena and lost.

Ares spoke candidly about Leuce's fate, and I've been distraught ever since. Knowing that she is suffering because of me is too much to bear.

Negative thoughts are a whirl of wind in my thorny mind. The thorns keep catching them, one after the other, feeding them to me until my breaths are shallow and my tears are hot. As soon as I overcome one, another snags.

The cycle is vicious.

A sharp sob cuts the silence as I roll onto my side, wishing Hydra could be with me now. Instead, she is with Ares' horses, guarding Hephaestus' mountain abode from any who, most assuredly, are searching the realm for us.

Snagging a pillow, I yank it into my chest. It makes me feel just a little less alone and for a moment, my body sags into the mattress. The fire gives another little pop, the sound somehow soothing in the silence. My eyes flutter closed as, for a single moment, there is blissful silence.

I dream that I am hanging over the arena. Ares is no longer fighting, no longer moving. Athena laughs in my ear before she drops me.

A scream rips from my throat and my body jolts as the dream begins to fade. Only, warm strong arms and the scent of woodsmoke and earth pull me back in. Hades.

A sob wrangles my scream, and he shushes me gently, soothingly. “Shhh. I’ve got you. Shhh.”

“You’re here.”

“I’m here.” His lips are on my ear where the icy burn of Athena’s lips still stings. I shudder in his arms that tighten around me. “I’m here, little goddess.”

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Everything is dark until it isn't. My bedroom in Hephaestus' home comes into view, and Hades releases me slowly. I twist to find his eyes are taking in the room, brows furrowed.

"Well, this is nicer than where I found you."

A sound between a bark, laugh, and a sob escapes me. Hades' furrowed brows arc up.

I clear my throat. "Are you trying to be funny?"

"I'd be anything to make you smile right now."

The words do the trick. I smile.

Hades rumbles, "That's better."

I don't deny the pull of his arms as he tugs me onto his lap. The nip of his beard against the soft skin of my neck calls an explosion of tingles to the surface of my flesh. I shiver, and Hades nabs my blanket. He wraps it tightly around me before lifting me and carrying me to the massive Hephaestus-size chair that sits beside the fireplace.

He settles us in before asking, "Want to tell me where you are, little goddess?"

I twist to look at him. "I'm in Olympus."

Hades shakes his head. "You're not in the castle."

“Oh.” I shake my head. “No. This is Hephaestus’ house.”

A single brow lifts. “Hephaestus’ house? Why?”

At the memory of the events that preceded me being carried by a very wounded Ares to this stone sanctuary, I bury myself deeper into his chest. The comfort of him is massive, even if it’s only in my dream. Even if that rope of misty black and foggy white cuffs his wrist, threatening to pull him away from me at any moment.

“I—” I shudder. “Hades, it was awful.”

Hades is quiet, until he whispers, “You prayed to me, Persephone. It sounded like,” he cuts off, continues, “like a goodbye.”

I tuck my head under his chin. “I’m sorry.”

His arms pulse around me. “Tell me what happened.”

Pulling in a deep breath, I begin the story I know I won’t soon forget. Honestly, I think I could live a million years, and I would still be able to smell the blood-soaked sand of the arena, the feel of the air whipping around me as I fell fast to a death that blessedly did not come. A death that would have bound me eternally to the prison of Olympus.

I finish, “And now me and Hydra are safe here, but Leuce is—” I cut off with a cry. I shake my head as another swell of tears forms. “She’s being tortured in the castle prison, Hades.”

“Leuce is strong,” Hades assures me.

“They’re going to kill her, Hades. What if they kill her here and?—”

“They won’t kill her.”

“They will!” I cry. “I know it.”

“They won’t, because they know as soon as they kill Leuce, they will lose her.”

I stiffen, pulling away to look at him. “What?”

“Her soul belongs to the Underworld, Persephone. If she dies outside the Underworld, she will reform again in the Underworld.” Hades winces. “The process is excruciatingly painful, but possible. Leuce knew the risk when she decided to accompany you to Olympus. She knew there would be a very real possibility that the only way she would return to the Underworld would be in death. She took great pains to ensure her soul was protected before she left with you, Persephone.” Hades sighs a heavy sigh that tastes of exhaustion. “The only reason she has not ended her own life, is because she doesn’t know where you are. That you are safe.”

“Oh, God.” My mind searches desperately for a way to communicate with her. “Can you connect with her in her dreams?”

“I can’t.” Hades winces. “I have tried. This is how I learned just how seriously she took guarding herself. There are wards she’s placed around her mind and soul. Wards even I can’t shatter.”

“But what about Hecate?”

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Again, Hades shakes his head.

“What am I supposed to do? How do we save her?”

“Is there anyone Ares trusts in the castle to get word to her?” Hades asks.

Hades’ eyes lift to mine as I blink rapidly. I’m on the edge of panic. “I don’t know.”

“Either way, we need to get you back to the Underworld.” When horror invades my expression, Hades assures, “Olympus breached the contract of our deal when Athena dropped you, intending to drop you to your death. I will suffer no consequence for your return to the Underworld.”

The breath of relief I breathe is massive. The thought of returning home is...goodness, I want it so desperately.

But something dark and ugly holds me back from celebrating. “What about Zeus? He’s a monster, Hades. He steals innocent people and forces them to their death where they will be eternally trapped here in Olympus. Eternally prisoner.”

Flames burn in Hades’ eyes. Vengeance threatens to swallow him whole.

I add, “He is calling for a world war, Hades.”

“Without Ares, war of such calibre is unlikely.”

“Seemed to me Athena was doing just fine with starting little fires of hatred and

distrust between nations.” I shift on his lap so that I can better see him. “Before I left for the Underworld, tensions between the people were high. Countries were already at war, others choosing sides.”

“Athena can light as many fires as she wishes, she will do little more than Aphrodite did when she submitted to Zeus’ demand she spark war between Troy and Sparta.”

I gasp, my jaw falling open. “Wait, what? Are you saying Aphrodite is the reason for the war between Troy and Sparta? For the Trojan Horse?”

“At Zeus’ command, Aphrodite blessed Helen of Troy with great beauty. Both Agamemnon and Paris fell madly in love with her under the spell of Aphrodite. Zeus knew that under Aphrodite’s spell, Paris would not be able to deny his affections for Helen, and those affections would drive him to take Helen for his own, forsaking the good standing that had been promised between the lands.”

“He knew it would spark a war.”

Hades nods. “He did.”

“Where is Aphrodite now?”

“She took to the sea. She sought refuge in Atlantis, plagued by the guilt she carried for her part in the death of thousands when her gifts were to inspire love and beauty, not war.” Hades pauses. “She has not been seen since. It is why there is so little love, so little true love, in the living realm. Aphrodite has not blessed humanity in a long while, and humanity is now lost.”

“Atlantis had already fallen, then?”

Again, Hades nods. “Atlantis fell thousands of years before the Trojan war. Such is

the reason the Gods hungered for devastation. Prayer always follows bloodshed.”

“Why didn’t Zeus want a world war then?”

“Too many world wars would simply end the world. Little wars feed the Gods, Persephone.”

“But Zeus wants a world war now.”

Hades dips his chin. “Yes. And Ares will not give him one.”

“If Zeus doesn’t have Ares or Athena, and Aphrodite is gone where he cannot get to her, he has nothing, right? No way of starting a war.”

“He has Athena. She may have been torn apart, but ending a God is no simple thing. She will live.” Hades sighs a heavy sigh. “It is why the Gods and Titans of before are imprisoned, not dead. The death of a God is not only impossibly difficult but bears consequences no realm or land can face.”

“But Zeus was distraught at her death.” I frown. “Why would he care if she wasn’t truly gone?”

“Athena is—myth speaks that she was created of Zeus alone,” Hades tells me. “It’s not wrong. Athena was crafted much the same way that Zeus crafts his humans, only she is whole, her soul unsplit. It is similar to the souls of Gods and Goddesses, and he blessed her with immeasurable power and immortality, making her a Goddess in her own right.”

“She is his daughter?”

“I believe his emotions for her are as close as Zeus is capable of feeling love.”

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I scowl. “He didn’t touch her as a father would touch his daughter.”

“Relations between Gods have always been complicated.” Hades winces. “We are far from perfect. One only has to scan a mythology text to understand that.”

I don’t have the headspace for that. Not now. “What is the point of a world war?”

“World wars, true world wars of the calibre Ares commands, end civilizations. Civilization always begins anew, with an awareness of the Gods such that Zeus desires it. It is over time and in the absence of Gods in which other religions form. That humanity in power, those with blood blessed by Zeus to stand in his image—think royalty and those who are driven to positions of power within the government—manipulate the masses. They cause tragedy and despair of the kind that never allows prayer to die. Hope lingers on the brink of eternal death, never falling even as it teeters on that edge.”

“So, what is his end goal, then?”

Hades’ brows furrow and he rolls his lips. A long silence stretches between us before he admits, “I do not know.”

We sit in the silence of our thoughts for far too long. Long enough that I come up with a plan. A plan that isn’t entirely my own, I’m certain. A plan whispered by three tongueless voices in which weave their threads into my fate.

“I can’t come home,” I whisper finally. “Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“I can’t let Zeus stay here in power. I can’t let him continue doing all that he is doing.”

Hades searches my eyes, dropping to my hand as I reach into the bust of my dress. I pull the dark pendant of swirling dark magic from the fabric and hold it for Hades to see. He stares at it for long moments, before understanding settles in his eyes.

“Hecate gave you this?”

“She did.”

“The amulet is blessed with the power of Nyx.”

“It is.” I tell him what Hecate told me. “It will craft a portal anywhere it is broken. A portal to the Underworld. To Hecate’s home.”

Understanding registers in Hades’ eyes. Flames, dangerous and violent, erupt to devour iris and pupil. “No.”

“I can do this, Hades.”

“It’s too dangerous.”

“You’ll be there. You’ll be ready to take over when we pass through.”

“Persephone—” He shakes his head. “No.”

My vision blurs and Hades curses, his arms tightening around me. I recognize the pull as the same as the times before, when I’d been physically tugged from the dreams we

shared. “Be ready, Hades.”

“Fuck,” I hear him curse.

My eyes drift open, and I see Ares standing above me, golden eyes narrowed. “You have some explaining to do, Persephone.”

“I—I do?” I try to scoot higher on the bed, to escape the way Ares’ big body hovers over mine. I can still feel the grip of my dream, and struggle to shove it off.

“Oh, most definitely.” When I try again to sit, Ares plants a massive hand between my ribs. The soul inside me flutters, as though called by his nearness.

I swallow hard, freezing under his touch. “What are you doing?”

Ares’ nostrils flare as though he is scenting the air. “I am the God of War,” he tells me bizarrely. “I’ve never missed the scent of blood, not once.”

What the heck is he on about?

“Do you know what I find peculiar, Persephone?”

I shake my head quickly, just once. “N—no.”

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“You are human, and you have been here in Olympus for over a month.”

I frown, confused by his words. “Okay?”

“I’ve not once scented the spilling of your blood.” He inhales deeply again. His chest expanding and deflating with it. “But there is something else I don’t smell.”

“Wh—what?”

“The child you carry.”

All of me turns to ice. Fear unlike any I’ve ever felt erupts inside me, threatening to destroy me. The acrid acid of it violates any feeling of safety I’d felt in knowing the Moirai had cloaked my daughters from the Gods that would harm them.

“Get away from me.”

Ares cocks his head, but I don’t miss the daggers of blood that spear the gold in his eyes. “I’m right.”

“I said get off me.” This time, I make to kick at the God of War. The God who, I know deep down, there is a man of courage and honor. But deeper still, there is the bloodlust that rules him.

I saw it for my own eyes. The switch from man to beast. From God to demon.

He catches me around the ankle, his grip like iron even though I’m aware he’s taking

pains not to harm me. “Enough.”

I still at the command, spoken so darkly. A war general. A being of bloodlust and devastation. But lingering in the blood that endlessly needles his calm is an honor I can't deny exists. I can't look at Ares and only see what everyone else sees. The monster of war.

I will my body to relax into the mattress, watching in wonder as those spears of red pull back to make way for the gold in his eyes.

“You're right. I'm pregnant.”

“Hades?” He frowns. I nod, and Ares mumbles, “I didn't think him capable.”

“He's not—in his human form.”

Ares' eyes snap to mine so fast, I flinch. “You—” Horror touched with undeniable interest alights his eyes as he takes me in, slowly tracking the length of my body. “You—in his Gods' Form you?—”

“We had sex, yes,” I cut him off.

Again, his eyes drift over my body before returning to my own. He breathes. “You're so small.”

“We fit.”

“But you are human. Alive.” His eyes narrow. “How were you able to withstand the heat of him?”

I soften my voice. “I was made for him, Ares.”

Something flashes across his expression. Pain, I think, but before I can study it, it's gone. "You love him."

I'm not sure if it's a question, but I say, "Yes."

Ares frowns. "I feel?—"

He pulls back to pace the room. Frustration leaks from him, scenting the air with darkness.

I stand, hugging myself as I press gently, "You feel?"

Ares sighs. "I am confused. I feel drawn to you." His brows furrow before he scrubs a big hand down his face. "I thought perhaps you were meant for me, then I realized you were with child. His child."

"Ares," I call softly. When his eyes come to mine, I can see the play of confusion in the depths. "There is a soul meant for yours." As soon as I speak the words, I see the vision of the souls threaded together by the Moirai. A fate none of us can fight. And I know that attached to the beautiful soul of one of my daughters is the pure white soul of the God of War and Courage. Ares.

I touch my hand to his arm and try not to let it hurt when he flinches. I tell him again, "There is a soul meant for yours, Ares. Bound to yours by the threads of fate. I've seen it with my own eyes."

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“You’ve seen the cauldron?” Ares asks hoarsely.

“I have. And I saw your soul.” I touch my belly. “Bound to another.”

His eyes drop, and I know he knows what I’m saying. Horror and disbelief paint his expression as he takes a step away from me. “The child?”

An uncomfortable heat builds inside me. Ares’ eyes flood with red as he looks into mine. My vision turns white at the edges with a heat I can’t explain, and when I open my mouth, the voices of three sound. “Fate will come to pass as it is meant to pass, Ares, God of War and Courage. Kings and Gods will fall for new Kings and Gods to rise. The divide between humanity and Gods will narrow, and collective consciousness will grow. Evil will wither and new life will flourish. It has been seen and it will come to pass.”

The white-hot heat fades like mist and I gasp in a breath. Ares looks rather pale as he runs a big hand through his dark curls, never taking those blood-blasted eyes from mine.

I gasp. “I need to return home to the Underworld. And I need you to help me.”

“Anything.” Ares’ voice is impossibly rough. “Anything, Persephone.”

Chapter

Thirty-Nine

Persephone

On my knees at the side of my bed, my hands come together in front of my chest, and I dip my head. Old habits die hard, clearly.

Inhaling through my nose, I breathe out through my mouth. “Zeus, God, hear my prayer.” I swallow the taste of bitter acid that swells when I add, “Father, I wish to come home.”

Outside, wind whips against the stone that crafts the dome of this room. There is a window, large enough for Hephaestus to climb through, with mud-colored curtains pushed open, welcoming. Through the glass, stars wink in a dark sky. In the fireplace, the dancing flames have died to leave only the waving burn of hot coals to illuminate the space.

Shadows linger in every corner of the room. The narrow bed sits on a freshly laid carpet over the dusty stone floor. It is the only furniture in the room, moved in just for me. Just for tonight.

“Zeus,” I pray again. “King of Gods, find me in the mountains.”

A flash of golden-white light floods the room, and the window shatters into a thousand shards that shower the stone in a spray of tiny chimes.

Lightning. I smile to myself where I kneel at the side of the bed, my back to the window.

“You called, daughter.” At the sound of Zeus’ overconfident voice, my smile withers.

I stand and turn to face the evil God masked in the ethereal glow of an angel. Revulsion twists inside my belly, the acid of it threatening to spill from between my

lips.

Zeus is—I hate to admit that he is a sight to behold. Now, under the dark spill of night in the low light of the burning coals that ignite the small fireplace in my room, Zeus paints a biblical picture.

White wings full with soft feathers span a massive length, sweeping the dusty floor and stretching over his head. His white hair and the gold crown he wears on his head glow with the same iridescent glow that leaches from his tan skin. His eyes are the blue of a sky promising a storm, cut with bolts of white-gold.

There is an undeniable attraction to Zeus that has surely seen many women throughout the span of history falling to their knees in prayer and submission.

But it's not prayer or submission that excites Zeus. It's taking that which isn't willingly given. Life. Innocence. Servitude.

He gets off on the tears. The fear. The taking.

I swallow the burn of my hatred and force a smile. “Are you always in your Gods’ Form?”

“Unlike others I am not ashamed of what I am.”

I don't let myself bristle at the dig on Ares and Hades. I simply say, “Why do some Gods change into something so frightening while others, like you, appear so,” I shrug. “Soft?”

Those hot bolts of light in his eyes flash. His cocky smile turns brittle. “I am not soft, I assure you, Persephone.”

“My apologies.” I cover my smile with a cough. “I meant delicate.”

Zeus takes a step toward me. I will my pulse to remain steady.

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“Careful, dear daughter.”

“But I’m not your daughter, am I?” I cock my head, playing at curiosity.

I’m not curious, though. I already know that this scum-god isn’t my father. And I’m thankful for it.

His eyes narrow and he reaches out to catch hold of my upper arm, dragging me into his chest. At the contact, my skin crawls with a sickening need to escape him. To flee the beast who means to harm me, because I am certain he didn’t come here with good intentions even though I called him.

“I am your father, little girl. And you are mine.” The way he presses his body into mine is not the way of a father, and I fight to swallow another surge of bile. My hate for this scum-god is so great, it’s almost impossible to contain.

“I belong to no one.”

Zeus chuckles. “I think Hades would have something to say about that claim.”

“You don’t know him at all.”

“Oh, don’t I?” He presses closer, if such a thing is possible. Visions of the statues locked away in the rooms I’d been given flash in my mind. The way Zeus held the women he took captive in his arms as he pillaged their bodies plays in my mind like snapshots from a movie reel. He’d forced pleasure upon them, which only served to break their minds.

I hate him.

“You never bothered to know him. You used him to defeat the Titans and took the glory for yourself.”

“I deserve the glory, girl.”

“You deserve hellfire.”

I don't see it happen, fail to prepare for it. The slap of his hand across my face is brutal and vicious. My head doesn't simply whip to the side with the strike of it. My entire body flies to the side and I connect with the floor with a heavy thud. The cry I release is sharp.

Fear, hot and quick, consumes me. If they think I'm being hurt, they'll burst in as planned to rescue me. But I'm not ready for that.

I force a laugh into the space between us as I find my knees. Blood is a metallic tang that floods my mouth. “You have a bad habit of doing that, don't you, Zeus?”

“Putting mouthy little girls in their place?” He shrugs uncaringly. “It is necessary.”

Glaring up at him, I taunt, “We all know you like to slap around those who are smaller than you. Gods forbid you take on someone your own size, we'd all realize far too fast just how weak the king of Gods is now, wouldn't we?” When he doesn't reply, grinding his teeth instead, I taunt again, “But that's not the bad habit I'm talking about.”

His lip curls. “What bad habit are you talking about?”

“The one of you consistently taking credit for things you not only didn't do, but

aren't even remotely capable of doing." It's my turn to curl my lip in disgust. "Like taking credit for birthing me, for example."

Zeus curls his fingers into his palm, lightning crackling over the ball of his fist.

In my chest, my heart lurches with fear. But I force myself to my feet as I taunt one last time. "Careful, Zeus. You don't want to destroy me."

It's almost funny, because he really looks like he wants to destroy me. To blast me with so much lightning that I turn to dust here and now.

He arcs a brow. "I don't?"

"I possess the powers of Chaos." I swing my arms wide as an unhinged laugh I don't recognize spills from between my lips at the surprise that brightens the bolts of light in his eyes. "Oh, did my dear mother not tell you that?"

"You were born giftless. A failure."

I cluck my tongue. "Has no one ever told you it pays to be patient?" I laugh again. "I was never giftless, Zeus. It was from me, from the blood of my innocence that the Underworld formed the realm it is now. It was the powers of Chaos that live in me, that complemented my own powers of fertility and spring, of growth, that birthed life into a realm that had only known death and despair."

I take a brave step toward him. His eyes track me like the hunter who doesn't know he's the prey.

The predator I never knew dwelt inside me unfurls from the cocoon of her metamorphosis. She can scent the blood of the deserving, demands it be spilled in the quest for vengeance. For justice.

She is me. And I am power.

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“I possess the power of Chaos,” I tell him again, firmer this time. “With that power, I alone possess the ability to feed the realms, to sustain their ravenous hunger in a way no other God or Goddess can. I am the sustenance that has been missing, the nectar of life. I am the power that was stolen when Uranus consumed the soul of the Mother Goddess. I am the essence of her, the only one alive today capable of wielding the violent power of her soul, of nourishing her realms and the children of those realms.” I laugh at the dark rage that lines his dimming features. “Your despicable sacrifices in the arena are little more than a Band-Aid on the gaping wound that bleeds an ocean of hunger into Olympus. It feeds you just enough to power the fading stars in the night sky.” I take another brave step. “Because you and the Gods your sacrifices feed aren’t powerful enough to sustain a realm of this calibre or any calibre for that matter.”

“Is that so?” Zeus asks, his tone filled with a deadly kind of calm that should rattle me.

It doesn’t, because he’s still mistaking me for the little human prey that I’ve never been for even a second of my short human life. Because wrapped up in the flesh of a girl, I’ve always possessed the soul of a Goddess.

“Oh yes.” I nod. “I’m everything and more that you and Demeter conspired me to be.”

The lightning that surges around the ball of his fist brightens as he calls upon his power. “Then I guess it’s a good thing I have no intention of ever letting you leave Olympus. You’ll do as Hera planned, and you’ll wed my son. Perhaps you’ll make a God out of him after all, when he watches me rip the power from your soul again and again, for eternity.”

I know what's coming when he raises his fist, crackling with deadly power. He aims to kill me now. To bind my human soul eternally to Olympus, where I will eternally be at his vicious mercy.

"Now!" I scream as I reach up for Hecate's pendant. Since my arrival in Olympus, I've never taken it off. Not even to bathe.

I tug violently and the chain around my neck snaps. Under the hot heat of fear that bleeds from my palm, the stone begins to glow and shift. As though it is coming alive with the spill of a night sky touched by just the faintest white that radiates from a sliver of moon.

The door bursts open as the ceiling caves in with a violent crash. Stone rains in the room as the fading light of a dying realm's night winks overhead. Hydra is a wrecking ball of devastation in glittering sangria scales as she dives toward Zeus, her nine heads loose from the coil of her neck and snapping at the Gods' flesh.

The roar of pain as sharp teeth bite into him is a sound I'll never forget. The fear that ribbons in the sharp sting of his vow to see us all through an eternity of pain is an orchestra of devastating beauty, for never has there been one responsible for so much suffering and deserving of so much pain than the King of Gods.

Finally, it looks like his reign of terror is over.

There will be a world worthy of the daughters I will sacrifice to the living realm.

A world worth saving.

Hydra yelps as Zeus strikes back with a burning bolt of lightning. In the sky overhead, thunder rolls a sound of anger.

“Now, Persephone!” Ares yells as he charges his father in the beast form of his bloodthirsty God. The collision of thunder and stone as Ares connects with Zeus is violent. The scent of scorched earth and flesh taint the air, smothering the scent of anything else with its cloying aroma of despair.

Zeus throws a fist of lightning that connects with Ares’ blood-seeping stone stomach with the clap of thunder. Ares must be beyond pain, finally given the opportunity to stand up against the father who has spent lifetimes repressing him.

I fall to my knees as Hephaestus joins the fight with a battle ax that looks crafted for giants. He swings, connecting with Zeus’ shoulder, severing an arm that Hydra, my beautifully vicious beast, catches in one of her maws. Zeus screams, a high, delicious sound of true pain and fear.

I focus on the pendant, impossibly bright now and swirling with the colors of dawn. It is slick in my hands as I lift it high over my head, before crashing it down on the stone floor.

A burst of night swirling with the colors of dawn and electrified by the white surging power of a cool moon climbs the columns of power that border an eternal night. The branches of power connect high in an arch to contain an endless spill of darkness split only by stars that shoot in the deep dark of the magic of Nyx.

“It’s time!” I scream over my shoulder. “We need to move fast now.”

Ares throws a bone splintering fist of stone into Zeus’ face, knocking the gold crown from his head where it clangs against the stone floor before rolling away. White teeth fly in the direction of the crown as the bone of his cheek punctures his flesh with spears of bloody obsidian.

Hydra growls low in her throat as she snaps her jaw around Zeus’ throat, bursting

through the portal with the King of Gods.

A shooting star snaps in the darkness, and I sense the portal is closing as I hover in the entrance. My heart is beating messily in my chest, my breaths racing with fear and longing to return home.

“Ares!” I call, reaching for the God I know is intended for my daughter. “Come with me.”

His bloodshot eyes land hotly on me. He shakes his head. “I can’t abandon Olympus now. I must stay, for her.”

“No!” I try, but there is no warning before I feel the rough shove of stone hands on my shoulders, throwing me into the portal. It instantly snaps closed behind me.

The last thing I see is a vision of Ares and Hephaestus standing bloody in the aftermath of our battle.

The last thing I hear is the echo of my scream playing the harp strings of everlasting night.

Chapter

Forty

Hades

My little goddess, my wife, is an extraordinary creature.

Her red hair falls down her back in rich waves that shine like embers under the burning glow of the river Phlegethon. Beneath her shoeless feet, the flickering heat of hot coals do not dare scorch her flesh. The hem of the black dress she wears has been burned away by the heat of Tartarus, dancing in the hot breeze against her legs. The seared hem burns like the ash of a pulled-on cigarette.

On her head, she wears the Crown of Souls. On my head, it had been a daggerlike piece, ominous and menacing. On hers, it had transformed to something completely other. Vines of gold and thorns hold delicate rose-gold roses. Dagger blades spear upward amid the vines and flowers, their blades carved with stars and moons and flames.

With the crown atop her head, she is the picture of justice. She is both soft and understanding, and yet ruthless.

Her sight into the core of a soul is unprecedented. Her patience is unmeasured. Her love is undying.

And her vengeance is merciless.

Her eyes burn with the light of the universe, a galaxy of stars a sweeping arc of color that pulls from nothing to craft an entirely new orb, a portal of light into a realm that mimics earth and all its pleasures.

After I'd tossed Zeus into the painting, I'd been keeping Uranus prisoner in for centuries—we'd held meetings about how we were going to fulfil our end of the bargain to Uranus.

I'd wanted to craft him a fiery realm of torment, a realm inspired by the hell of Tartarus in which the screams of the tormented crafted a symphony of agony that would bring humanity to their knees if ever it echoed into the land of the living.

Persephone, my brilliant little goddess, had other plans.

Her realm mimicked the earth and all its pleasures. But this new realm in which Uranus had been given the reins to control had a caveat. He could not create what did not already exist and neither he nor the souls placed there could escape it. And it needed sustenance, as all realms need sustenance.

As the realm's King, all sustenance would flow through Uranus. But it was from the internal suffering of his subjects that he would be fed.

"It is done." The galaxy in her eyes fades to the green I am familiar with. The green I love.

"Tell me again the system of suffering."

"The souls incapable of reformation, the souls undesiring of change and remorse, have been divided and placed into physical echoes of those that they harmed in their earthly lives. They will reenact the atrocities they committed against the innocence in which they encountered in their living lives, and they will feel every ounce of pain they commit as though that pain has been committed directly upon themselves. They will know the suffering they have caused, and they will endure it. The man who murdered the family, forcing the father to watch as he claimed the innocence and lives of children and mother, of wife—he will feel every pain he committed to every

soul he committed the pain to. He will live as child, mother, and father. And he will feel the pain and desperation as though it were his own. He will suffer a perfect mirror of the agony and thoughts of his victims. All of them. He will experience this, while knowing in the back of his mind that he is the cause of it all. And he will suffer this on a loop for the eternal life of the realm.”

She bows her head before lifting it once again to the portal that shimmers, a galaxy for which only she, bearing the Crown of Souls, can access.

“It is the same for all the others who are incapable or ignorant of remorse. The rapists, child molesters, stalkers, murderers. Again, the same for those whose crimes are more discrete, but no less harmful. Those who place money above the health and well-being of others. Who craft narcotics, and trade in flesh. It is for the truly evil, and it is from their suffering that Uranus will grow stronger, but as he grows stronger, his realm grows hungrier. He will soon realize that the truest form of reprieve from the appetite of his ravenous realm is the blood of the Gods spilled over the altar of sacrifice. Again and again, the Gods will die as they demanded the death of those they were meant to love. Again and again, they will wake. It is an infinite loop of suffering, of death and regeneration. It is the truest personification of a prison realm in which the souls never find escape.”

“You are brilliant.”

She smiles, but it's soft and pained. “I've always wondered about the devil. About hell. How he could be so evil, if evil was what he punished. I think now, that was the echo of you in my soul. The modern collision that is the myth of Hades and the Hell I was taught to fear.” She laughs softly. “I remember once telling Dad that if I was the devil, I'd make those who hurt others live the lives of those they made suffer. That I'd have some piece of the attacker live in the minds of his victims, knowing that they were causing the pain and begging for it to stop even as they knew the result, for it was a horror done at their own hand.”

“I told Dad I’d make the abuser live the life of the family members who were left behind. I told him, that if I was the devil, he’d be born in hell as every member of the family touched by the pain of his act. That he’d remember every moment of his sins, while simultaneously experiencing his victims’ life, their dreams and love and memories. That he would know their agony and understand that he was the source of it. That when he begged for mercy as his victims begged, he would be ignored, and he would know why.” She shakes her head, a soft chuff killing the last of her laugh. “He told me my mind was different from the minds of others. That it was best to keep some things between us.” Her eyes flick up to mine. “I never told my mom, but Dad never made me feel guilty for my thoughts.”

“They helped craft your soul into the beauty it is now, little goddess.”

“I wish I could see them.” Her hand falls to rub her swollen belly. “I wish I could tell them who I am, that they’re having granddaughters.”

“You will, one day soon,” I promise her.

“Not too soon, I hope.”

“The lives of humans are incredibly fleeting, and so very full.” I pull her into my arms to press a kiss to the hot skin of her forehead. Pulling back, I frown. “Your skin is hot, burning hot. Even to my lips.”

Her eyes flick over the face of my God, burning with veins of magma. I am certain she sees the worry in my gaze as it falls to her belly.

“They are fine, Hades.”

“Are you certain?”

She takes my massive paw in her small hand, placing it claw and all on her belly. I feel the girls moving inside. They've been restless as of late.

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Her eyes hold mine, and she smiles softly into the flame. “They will be ready soon.”

The closer we come to this moment, the moment of their birth, the more my heart aches. She aches, too. I can scent the dew of sorrow on her skin.

We won’t have long with them.

Persephone sighs, her eyes drifting to the portal. “I hate that Demeter is not in there.”

“She will be,” I vow it.

“She was so distant in Olympus. I thought she would try to talk to me, to know me.”

“Demeter has always been a highly intelligent Goddess. Her manipulations are intricate, and her sense of self-preservation far exceeds that which most Gods and Goddesses possess.” I catch her small face between my big palms, lifting her green eyes to mine. “Her intuition is unmeasured, little goddess. It is how she played us against each other for centuries.”

“But I’m her daughter.”

“Mythology aside, Demeter has never been a loving mother,” I say as gently as I can. “She loves only what serves her. And you, my Queen, no longer serve her.”

“I just—” Her shoulders fall. “I just wanted her to pay for the ways she hurt me. Hurt us.” She closes her eyes and shakes her head, as though she can shake away the memories that haunt her. “I can still see the way she used to starve people, watching

as they withered to nothing, feeding on their prayers for her mercy before she again let wheat grow, crops thrive—only to take it away again. And still, today, she has no mercy. The food scarcity in the living realm is devastating.”

“The day will come when she answers for the pains she has caused.”

Persephone casts her gaze to the portal. “I will not rest, not truly, until she is in there with them all. Until she is somewhere I know she can’t hurt another soul.”

“Until then, little goddess—” I turn her toward the portal. “You must seal the realm.”

She nods, but the weight of her acceptance is heavy. I ache to carry it for her, but this is not something I possess the power to do. The gift of creation has never been mine. Before my daughters, I did not create at all. Everything I have and all that I am is because of the woman, the little goddess in human form, who stands before me.

I watch again, marveling at the power of Chaos that surges from her freely and without hesitation. Sweat does not bead her skin; exhaustion does not paint her features. There is peace as she calls upon the gifts of the Mother Goddess.

From the palms of her hands, a ribbon of color shining with the stars and threaded with the light of a full moon stretches toward the portal. A galaxy of color, like looking at a condensed thread of the milky way, weaves over the face of the portal. The threads tug the border closed as though sewing the very realm shut. When the final stitch is tightened and knotted, the threads simply stop flowing from her palms to wrap their final tendrils tightly around the portal that will stand in the center of the burning lands of Tartarus.

When she rises again, the peace vanishes as fear flashes in her eyes. Her hands fall to her belly and her lips part in horror. She gasps, “It’s time.”

For a moment, I hear nothing but the magma rushing between my ears. She keels over as a cry falls from her lips, and I gather her in my arms, ready to run for the border when the sound of wings in the hot air pull my gaze upward.

Hydra lands before us, her eyes on Persephone. There is worry in those mauve eyes as she takes in the scene. How she'd known Persephone needed her, I will never know even as I will forever be grateful for their bond.

“Take her back.” I lift Persephone, who moans again in pain, onto Hydra’s back.

When Hydra growls low, snapping vicious teeth at me, I feel my brows pinch tight together. Persephone flops against Hydra’s back, her hand stretching out to try and grip her neck.

“Go!” I roar.

Hydra hisses a snakelike sound, one of her heads unwinding from the others to stretch for me. Between sharp hisses, her teeth snap.

Persephone groans. “She wants you—” Another cry pulls both mine and Hydra’s gaze back to Persephone. “Ahh! Get on, Hades.”

My eyes snap to Hydra. I’ve never, not once been permitted on her back as Persephone is permitted. I’ve never even tried.

Hydra snaps her teeth again, and I take a cautious step forward. At the roll of her slitted eyes, I take it she does want me on her back with Persephone and do as I am told.

Beneath me, her scales are hot. I waste no time gathering Persephone in my arms, holding tight to her as she cries out again. “Oh God, hurry.”

I find the ridge between Hydra's shoulders and grip tight with my other hand as her wings flap violently beside us, and we rise into the night.

Chapter

Forty-One

Persephone

“They are so beautiful.” Emotion cracks in my throat as I stroke my daughter’s little nose. Her eyes are open and bright with life as she looks up at me with the love and trust of a pure soul. “My little Sophia Dawn Pluto.”

Beside me on the bed, Hades holds her twin against the bare flesh of his chest. They both have curly red hair, and more than I would have expected from a newly born baby. Rosy cheeks flushed with life and adorably plump with little pink lips I could kiss a thousand times over.

My heart has never been so full of love or so full of grief.

“Lilith Angelos Pluto,” Hades bestows the name with the pride of a father, sealing it with a kiss to her forehead. She tilts her head back, mouth open at the feel of his lips on her skin, searching.

Hades chuckles, his dark eyes alight with warm flames finding mine. “Is Sophia satisfied?”

“I think she’s eaten enough for now.” We trade babies, and I smile as Lilith latches quickly, drinking deep from my breast.

Against Hades’ chest, skin to skin, Sophia takes a deep breath of contentment. Love ruptures my heart, leaking into all of me. I hate that pain follows close on the heel of it.

I hate that I know I don't have long with them. I hate that I don't know when the short time we do have will run dry.

I hate that I can't allow myself to spend this time simply loving them, because I can't ignore the shadow that is the fear of losing them. The shadow of loss that dulls the beauty of this moment.

"I never thought I would be a father," Hades speaks the words softly to Sophia. "I never could have imagined someone so small could bring me so much joy. So much love."

Little fingers curl around Hades' big thumb, and emotion squeezes the air from my lungs. We sit together, a little family of four in the silence of our room with only the sounds of Sophia's little breaths and Lilith's suckling.

They've both fed multiple times now, and I pray that there will be a thousand more even as the vision of them still with death under the Elysian Tree haunts me. They'd been so small.

Give us time. I beg to whatever spirit cares to hear. Please, give us time.

Lilith pulls from my breast, satiated for now. Her little baby sounds lull me into the warmth of Hades' chest where I snuggle close enough to feel the little puffs of Sophia's breath that whisper across my face.

I inhale the scent of her. The taste of her life deep into my lungs where I pray it will brand me for all time.

Warm air surges in from the balcony, caressing the naked skin of our daughters as though even the realm wishes to be their comfort. Tears prick my eyes as Lilith settles on my chest, her little lids fluttering closed. Together, our girls fall into a calm

and secure sleep. Their bellies are full, their skin warm, their hearts rich with love.

I press my lips to the fuzzy red hair atop Lilith's head as Hades presses another to Sophia's. Then his lips linger on my forehead for long moments.

His voice is rough when he urges, "Sleep, little goddess."

I smile up at him with all the dreams of a new mother. With all the hope of a new beginning. "Wake me when they are hungry."

Hades dips his chin but says nothing as I snuggle deeper into this moment of bliss that will forever live imprinted on the fabric of my soul. Tiny but strong breaths lull me into the peace of sleep, and I dream.

I see my daughters in my dream. A daughter of light and a daughter of darkness.

One is fated to the sky.

The other is destined for the sea.

Chapter

Forty-Two

Hades

On their thirteenth hour, the number of the divine feminine, of Chaos, my daughters took their final breath together.

My own breath stalled in my lungs, the burn unlike anything I've suffered in all my millennia. I feared for a long moment, perhaps minutes, that they took my final breath

with them when they took theirs.

That I would never breathe again.

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Never speak again.

And then a sob cut the silence that was too silent.

I still am not certain if was mine or hers. Persephone's.

So in tuned to the daughters she birthed thirteen hours prior, the absence of the little breaths ripped her from the peace of sleep with the violence of a terrible grief.

She screamed. And she screamed again and again. She screamed until Hydra came and the Underworld fell painfully silent in the echoing quakes of her grief.

I later learned that the sea rioted against sand and cliff. The land tremored as though sobbing, shaking the Marsh and nearly toppling Charon for the first time in the history of his sailing the dark water. In the Grove of Persephone, the weeping pines wept, and in the Elm of False Dreams, the whispering leaves bowed to silence.

The black mountain where the Moirai reside shook with the grief of our loss.

The realm grieved with us then, and the realm hadn't stopped grieving since.

Now our girls lay in a basket woven by the threads of the weeping pines on a bed of asphodel petals. Their skin, not long ago flushed pink with the color of new birth is now pale with death.

I can close my eyes and feel the echo of their hearts beating in my own. As though the realm will forever remember, and my ties to the sentient land endeavor never to

let me forget.

Beside me, her delicate hand trembling in mine, Persephone stands. Surrounding us are those who have stood beside us in this war that is not yet complete, even as our story has mostly come to an end, our battle passed onto the innocence we birthed. The innocence we are forced to sacrifice.

Behind them, blanketing the Elysian Fields and stretching over the meadows of Asphodel, are the souls of the Underworld. They stand in grief, offering their strength and support in the wreckage of these despairing times.

Waves of love pulse along the meadows and fields, surging into the loss we suffer in a collision so fierce, the tree of life trembles. The Elysian Tree in which my daughters have been placed in their basket quivers, the branches trembling, leaves fluttering.

But it is the collective gasp that draws our attention from our daughters to the three that soar in the sky. Fear and reverence prickle my flesh, and Persephone's hand pulses in mine.

In the history of the realms, never once have the Moirai left their cauldron of souls and the black mountain from which the cauldron was birthed. The source which ties our galaxy to that which they hail in a dimension that vibrates far higher than our own.

I realise then that perhaps they were once sacrificed as we now sacrifice our beloved daughters. Perhaps they were called to this duty, to guide a galaxy of realms in which otherwise would collapse under the misguided whims of Gods and men.

The Moirai hover in the void above the Elysian tree. From them, an ethereal light I've only ever seen thread the souls inside the cauldron expands to caress the tree. And moments later the leaves glow a bright and yet subtle teal. The color is calming even

as it's enchanting, and Persephone looses a sharp sob beside me as she falls to her knees before the basket that holds our girls.

I think only once about pulling her into my arms before I drop to my own knees behind her. I cage her body with my own, wishing I could pull every ounce of her grief into me, suffer every moment of pain, even though I know she would not wish it. She would not wish it because she needs to feel it. She needs to feel it so that she can heal.

But Tartarus, watching her break apart is killing me.

I wrap her in my arms and hold the pieces of her together as she shatters, her arms outstretched, fingers curled around the silken fabric of the basket.

The sound of three voices I've only ever heard in my mind resounds from the Tree of Life, echoing into the ether of the Underworld for all to hear. "The prophecy of the twins of death and fleeting life, the daughters of the Underworld and the fragility of human life, was scribed onto the cauldron of souls from the dawn of time. The fate of them is sewn into the threads of all souls that have ever been or will ever be. They are the promise of unity and growth."

The Moirai continue speaking through the tree. "True power has never been in the worshiping of Gods, but in the God's ability to nourish the souls they create. To guide humanity to a higher vibration, a point of unity that can come only when the divide between man and God is abolished. For this to occur, the sacrifice of the twins that prophecy has seen connect the Gods of the realms, is necessary. This connection will lead to the ultimate power, a connection in consciousness that will finally see the realms come alive. The power of Chaos, the Mother Goddess, will unite within the three. And the three will sustain the realms that sustain the universe."

They raise their hands high above their heads, the blue light arching into the

everlasting night and the skytears.

It's as though the sky is opened, torn at the seams to display a galaxy beyond. From the abyss of stars and color woven with the powers of the universe emerge two orbs. One impossibly dark, alight with the embers of the night. One burning bright in all the colors of the heart.

As they lower, the orbs take physical form. A woman and a man. Dark and the Light of Love. Nyx and Eros.

A sea of shocked gasps plays a symphony of breathless awe as the two primordial deities who have not been seen in all the time I've been alive, lower to the ground on either side of the basket. They are close enough to touch, and yet we remain perilously still as the ancient deities focus on our daughters.

Eros, a Primordial Deity of so much light, exuding love in its purest form, cups his hands beneath the Elysian Tree. A single glowing teal leaf flutters into his palm. The veins ignite with the light of love—a pure pink—that he carries tenderly to lay on Sophia's chest. The leaf molds to her cool flesh until it is one with her, burning bright before it is gone.

Persephone gasps a sob that wracks her body as Sophia's lovely red curls fade to a golden strawberry blonde tinged pink.

Eros says nothing as he presses a blessed kiss to her little forehead and stands.

From the tree a glowing teal leaf falls into Nyx's cupped hands. The veins in the leaf transform under the tendrils of an obsidian night that she carries tenderly, with all the mystery and quiet of an eternal night, to Lilith's chest. The leaf absorbs itself into her chest and just as the sweet red curls that colored Sophia's head changed, Lilith's curls darken until they are a black that is so black, it's almost blue.

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A kiss from black painted lips on Lilith's forehead, before Nyx stands as Eros stands beside the basket.

And the three voices spill once again from the Tree of Life. "The daughters of the Underworld and humanity possess the gifts of their mother, from which the essence of Chaos and Aether have now been divided into three, no less powerful than when whole. Sophia, daughter of the Underworld and humanity has been blessed by Eros, God of Love. She is destined to heal with affection the one who carries the weight of the fallen. Lilith, daughter of the Underworld and humanity has been blessed by Nyx, Goddess of Night. She is destined to walk in the light while offering the understanding of night to the one who carries shadows in his soul, for only darkness can welcome darkness."

The Moirai are silent as the tear in the sky widens. From it spills the sounds of birth pains. Two women crying out together until the cries turn to the sounds of tiny, familiar cries.

Persephone shudders in my arms, her head tipped back, face to the sky. For the first time, I am thankful that I am on my knees. I do not know that I would have had the strength to keep my feet.

A soft laugh, filled with a mother's love whispers a familiar name, "Sophia."

Persephone sobs. And from another place far away, another couple coos over the daughter that is theirs and ours. "She's beautiful," a man whispers. "Just like you." The sound of a tender kiss shreds me as he says softly, "Lilith."

I didn't see it happen, but Eros and Nyx disappear through the tear in the moments before it closes, and we are cut off from the sounds of our daughters entering the living realm.

"No." Persephone shakes her head, her hands clawing at the roots of the tree which devour the basket, and our daughters, until there is nothing but grass where they once lay.

Persephone stiffens in my arms, turning to face me with those tears shimmering in glasslike lines down her cheeks.

"Do you hear them?"

I nod soberly. The Moirai no longer speak from the Tree, but within our minds. The tongueless cadence of their timeless voices eerie as it is beautiful.

She wipes at her face. "It's time, Hades."

Finally, I understand why it had to be now. Why I ever felt the desire to take her soul for my own. It's not about keeping her safe, as I'd always thought. It's not about keeping her in the Underworld, where she could never be taken from me.

It's about unity. The connecting of God and humanity. The abolishing of the division that dirtied the lands of the living realm in the beginning of a ritual that would take place over the grave of our daughters. The place of their sacrifice.

"The echo of this union will live in the spirit of the twins, and when it is their time to offer their souls in connection to their Gods, they will do so with love that will unite the realms and all consciousness for eternity."

Chapter

Forty-Three

Hades

Even as she wipes away her tears, more fall. I can taste her grief with every breath she expels. It permeates the air, feeding my own.

But even as I ache for all I have lost; my body responds to the situation. Behind my lips, my fangs lengthen.

Overhead, the Moirai depart, but they leave behind their magic which ignites the Tree of Life in the everlasting glow of the power that pulses inside the cauldron of souls. The tree shimmers so brightly under the teal light, it's almost as though it now burns in blue flames that feed rather than destroy.

“The power of the twins’ sacrifice will forever feed the quenching flames that burn life into the Elysian Tree. Their bodies will never decay, but instead become one with the roots the Tree of Life. It is connected and fed deep underground by a spring which suckles from the cauldron of souls. They knew their fate, their sacrifice, before they took their first breaths. Like all souls, the contract was written and signed on the soul. This is their choice. Their great sacrifice, and it is the beginning of unity.”

I know without asking that the words sound in Persephone’s mind as they do mine. Sharp pain scores into the beauty of her face where grief I wish I could carry for her already lives.

“I can feel it, Hades.” She moves closer to me, close enough that I don’t hesitate to pull her into the circle of my arms. “My soul feels it.”

“As does mine.” I don’t tell her I’ve felt this need, this ache to pull the part of her that has always been missing from me into myself. To fuse myself so completely to her

that there is no end of me and beginning of her. That we become one as we were always intended to be.

Her eyes flick to the crowd, and red climbs in her face. I can feel the Gods and Goddesses who have devoted their gifts and eternal life to the workings of the Underworld, calling this realm home, standing close. I can feel their eyes on us. And beyond them I sense the souls of the realm waiting as this moment of monumental history is made.

Somewhere deep in Asphodel City, I can feel the ground break as another statue in the colors of a bright dawn-touched galaxy is birthed from the realm. Us. Together. As one. Soul bound.

Persephone's eyes tip upward a moment before her hands rise overhead. Following the path of her hands in the arc from her sides to the sky is that same color of a dawn-touched galaxy. I realise then that it's the same colors that overtook her eyes when she created the realm in which was promised to Uranus. It is the power of her. Of Chaos inside her.

The haze of it deepens until it's just us and the glowing blue tree inside the dome of a star struck sky with brushstrokes of mauve touched by the dawn. All sound of the realm is cut off, and we are left alone to this moment in which our souls have forever been guiding us.

I touch her face gently, my heart squeezing as she leans into my palm.

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She whispers, “My heart hurts so much.”

I wish I could make it better. “I know.”

Her hand comes to my chest, and she lays her palm on my heart. Her eyes flick up to mine, glassy with emotion and the ocean of tears I know she could cry. “You’re hurting, too.”

I can’t speak, so I just tug her closer. She settles into my chest and together we stand solid in our grief.

The longer we stand like this, the deeper the need to have all of her connected to me burns. My fangs lengthen, aching. My blood burns in my veins.

Persephone’s hands curl in my shirt as she tips her head to the side, offering me her throat. Hot venom drips onto my tongue.

She whispers, “Make it better. Give me something other than the pain in my heart.”

I don’t deny her. I don’t have the power to deny her.

I never have.

Holding her gently, I lick the skin of her throat with my tongue, spreading the venom. She gasps, lovely lips parting. “It burns.”

“Is it too much?” My voice is so rough, struck with longing and pain. It’s an odd

combination I am unsure how to cope with.

She nods, breathes. “In a good way. I think I need the pain right now.”

A shudder of longing pulses through my body as I pull her closer, crushing her to me. Desire heats my blood, but she is human and has just given birth. And the desire that pulses inside me isn't that of a sexual nature, but instead it is a desire of a soul connection. My soul—my entity—aches to sink inside hers. To wrap myself so completely up in her that there is truly no unthreading the strings of fate which weave us.

I don't hesitate as I lower my lips to the quickening flutter of her pulse in her throat. She inhales sharp and quick. I sink my fangs deep and her breath stutters and stalls. The sensation of sheathing my venom coated fangs deep in the warmth of her skin is akin to thrusting my cock into the warmth of her womb. Waves of pleasure erupt in an overload of sensation.

Her head lolls back on a moan that is both pained and bursting with pleasure. I cradle her head in the palm of my hand, angling her for a deeper invasion.

Blood, sticky and sweet like the nectar that is the source of all life, floods my tongue. I drink deep, so deep. With every swallow, I seal the deal that is the binding of our souls. It is an ancient contract drawn from the essence of the stars. Whispers of her soul taunt the venom which seeks it for its own. A dance of push and pull, of submission and binding takes place in the moments before her soul is bound to the venom I pull from her blood and into my belly.

When I am so full of pleasure, of her, I pull my fangs from her throat on a groan that rips into the folds of time and space and consciousness. The pleasure is more than an orgasm. It crashes in wave after wave through my body and mind and spirit. Pleasure turns me inside out, sewing sense into the pain of loss as I see a glimpse into a future

that must be.

I don't think it takes long to come down from my high. My vision sharpens on the tiny woman in my arms. She gasps on the brink of death, chest heaving with breaths that burn.

I steal this selfish moment to glimpse the woman as she will never be again. My tiny human. So soft and vulnerable.

So alive.

When her eyes flutter closed, the last threads of her life unable to hold them open a moment longer, I shred the flesh of my wrist with my fangs and press the wound to her pale pink lips. Blood trickles between her lips onto her tongue.

"Swallow for me, little goddess," I urge, and sigh in relief when she does.

She swallows once and then again and again. The weakness fades for a strength she has never before possessed as that dance of venom and soul battle again with my own. There is submission and binding between me and her until we are no longer two, but one.

Now, the threads of my life are entirely bound to her life as hers is bound to me. Her suffering will be mine. My pleasure will be hers. Our fate is linked eternally.

She pulls her mouth from my wrist on a moan of pleasure that I feel deep inside me. Wave after wave of it rolls through all of me again and again until I am to overcome to stand. I lay her down where the bodies of our daughters will forever rest, and my heart feels a little less sore as I pull their mother into the circle of my arms. She lays, panted breaths spilling from her bloodstained lips.

And she is no longer human. She is Goddess. Immortal.

She is so incredibly beautiful.

Her eyes tip up to mine and all breath rushes from my lungs. In the galaxy of her eyes flames dance.

“I saw them, Hades.” She breathes. “Did you?”

I nod, but I can’t speak. I’m enraptured by the devastating beauty that is the aweing power of her. Of us.

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Her hand connects with my cheek, the flames in her eyes dulling to the galaxy of her Goddess' eyes, dawn-touched in a realm of night.

She smiles a soft and pained smile as she touches her palm to the earth where our babies forever lay. An arc of pain lashes quick inside my chest. I'm not sure if it is hers or my own. I only know that there is a quiet but strong peace that follows.

"They're happy and so, so loved."

Through the emotion that threatens to suffocate me, I nod. "Yes."

"And they'll know us, Hades. One day." Her eyes shine with a universe of emotion, but through it dawn breaks like hope. "One day, our girls will know us."

"Yes," I confirm again.

I place my palm on hers over the grave of our daughters, and at the contact, the earth splits.

Shallow creeks cut the land like arteries stemming from the heart. Their stone beds glitter under the shimmer of night. The veins all colored in differing hues, brightnesses, and colors. Blue, galaxy purple, night black and veined in deepest blue, pure pink, and sun gold. The colors of the blessed twins of us.

The colors of consciousness.

They stem from the Tree of Life as arteries from the heart of all that live, spreading

through the entirety of the Underworld.

The urge to drink deep from the streams is so strong, I am unable to deny the pull to cup my hands and drink. Beside me, Persephone does the same.

Instantly, I know what this is. The elusive stream of consciousness and everlasting life. The life of the soul. The memory of the soul.

The beginning of everything.

Epilogue - Part One

Hera

Blood beads on his golden chest as I ride him, taking from him all that has ever been taken from me under the vicious rule of his father, my brother. My husband.

For the first time in centuries, I don't have to hide my attraction to my adopted son. Hercules is inside me, and the doors are thrown wide for all the realm to hear my moans of pleasure. My cries of desire finally unmuffled after millennia of pain and tears shed for the public to consume.

Finally, without Zeus, I can demand the power I am owed. The power that has always been rightfully mine.

I pull out and roll my hips around his tip. My lips curl to the sharp hiss of pleasure that splits from between Hercules' straight white teeth. His gold wings, so much like his father's wings are bound with gold rope I have curled around my fists.

I like the sound of his pain when I tug, revel in the feeling of power that blooms in the wake of his submission.

I sink over him again, feeling the tip of him in my womb that has been barren for centuries, just the way I like it.

A soft click and the door breezes open. There is only one who would dare interrupt me now, and as I look over my shoulder to see my sister strolling closer, I ride the demigod harder.

He groans and I moan, wetter now that she is here. Demeter. The heart in my chest that I've kept eternally hidden.

Her hand sinks in my hair and she tugs my face to the side, kissing me deeply. I ride Hercules harder, tugging on the ropes that bind his wings and reveling in his cry of pain as I clench around his cock, my core filling with hot seed that will forever remain dead in my cold womb.

Demeter pulls back, her wheat-colored eyes and scent of sun scorched earth invading the air in my lungs. Her hand is still tangled in my hair when she speaks. "We did it, sister. We finally did it."

My lips curl. "Zeus is gone."

"And now it's our time to rule."

Excitement is a match that strikes the spill of oil inside me. Dark and violent and decadently delicious.

"But it's not over," I breathe. New need spilling in the deep of me.

"It won't be over until we possess all the realms." Demeter replaces Hercules' cock with three fingers—and 'ahhh, so good'.

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“We will,” I vow it on a sharp moan.

“Fuck, yes,” Hercules growls growing hard once again. I watch in excitement as Demeter hikes up her dress, lowering herself on Hercules’ cock. She gives him her back as she faces me, pushing me back onto the bed between his legs and pumping me as she’s always known I like with her fingers. All while she rides him in reverse.

We come together, and in the aftermath, we lay in a mess of limbs on our bed.

Demeter tells us, “I saw Ares before I came to you.”

I hiss. “You went to him first?”

“He loved her.” There is delicious malice that curls her lips. “I never expected such a thing, considering the fucking Moirai curated her soul specifically for Hades, but Ares was drawn to her deeply.”

“I know. It is why I tried to sway her to our side.”

Demeter rolls her eyes. “I told you she would not be swayed. She’s always been a stupid girl.”

“I even offered her Hercules.”

“I was more than willing to fuck her for you.” Hercules grins, pressing his lips to my shoulder.

I ignore him. “What was my useless son doing?”

“Drowning in his sorrows.” Demeter laughs a wicked, evil laugh. It is utterly delightful. “Everything she left behind is in his room. He even has that hideous painting she brought hung above his bed.”

I feel my lip curl. “I don’t know how I birthed such a shame.”

Demeter flips onto her belly. “That shame has been feeding Olympus for centuries. But she’s growing hungry for more than blood. I can feel it.”

I laugh, delighted by the memory of the horror that had struck the innocent little human at the nightly revelries in the arena. Of course, she could have fed the realm. And of course I’d wanted her for that power. But to lose the high that came with a sacrifice, I would never allow such a thing no matter how sated Olympus was.

There will always be room for dessert.

“Now that Zeus is gone, we no longer have to abide by his rules. We no longer have to hide our existence to the humans. We no longer have to suffer being discrete when we were always intended for worship.”

Hercules rolls onto his back again. “But we still don’t have the Crown of Souls.”

“No.” Demeter shakes her head. “But we might have something better.”

“What?” both me and Hercules ask.

Demeter smiles a dark smile that ignites another swell of need inside me. Clearly, Hercules feels the same, because I can’t ignore the way he grips his cock.

“A little bird told me a tale.”

“A little bird?”

“Oh, yes. Someone who is very, very exhausted with taking Hades’ orders.” She snorts. “And we all know how easily men of all species are swayed by matters of the cock, now, don’t we?”

“Hey.” Hercules pouts.

I rise onto my knees. “What are you saying?”

“The reason you sensed such massive power within Persephone was not because she is powerful. It wasn’t her that Ares was drawn to. It was the child inside her. The daughter,” Demeter grins wickedly. “One of the daughters.”

“She is pregnant?”

“Was.” Demeter smiles that cat-like smile again. “They’ve been born.”

A trill of anticipation surges my spine. Understanding settles inside the core of me as my gifts alight. “One of them is meant for Ares.”

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Demeter nods. "I believe so."

"We will break him to our will," I vow. "And when the time comes, he will break her."

Epilogue - Part Two

Persephone

Thirteen years. Our daughters are thirteen today.

We visit the Moirai once a month on the first day of the full moons. In the cauldron, we see our girls grow in real time.

They are beautiful and healthy and happy. Sophia's life is perhaps more luxurious than Lilith's, who suffered the loss of her father last year. Financially, her mother suffers, and she feels it. But despite the struggles, both girls are deeply loved. Both girls are developing a deep sense of affection for humanity that, every day seems to be a little more lost.

The world is falling apart, slowly but steadily. I keep reminding myself that the day will come when it will all be better.

My heart is always so incredibly heavy today, even though the Underworld celebrates. Outside the balcony, I can see the fireworks Hydra launches in the sky.

The party is always grand, but after our visit to the Moirai, I never stay long. Still, we

always make an appearance to celebrate their life. Only Hades and I know who our daughters are in the Living Realm. Their identities are shaded from the realm of Gods, who would see to their destruction if they learned of their existence.

Leuce and Minthe work diligently in the Living Realm, cloaked under the protections of the Moirai, to ensure their safety from afar. After Leuce's sacrifice for me in Olympus, there is no one I would trust more with the honor of guarding the two most important souls in the path to guiding us all to unity.

The warmth of Hades at my back in the moments before he tugs me into the circle of his arms raises the hairs on the back of my neck. Sparks of fire rain from the sky as Hydra soars overhead and the cheers of the realm rise from below.

"They are loved," Hades reminds me as he reminds me every year.

"Lilith is hurting."

He sighs. "Her hurt now will make her stronger."

"I have a terrible feeling that she is going to need to be far too strong. Stronger than anyone should ever have to be."

"Yes." Hades sighs. "I fear this as well."

"But we'll be there to help them, when they need us. Won't we?"

He turns me in his arms. "When they need us, yes."

Circling my arms around his neck, I stretch up to press my lips to his. "Thank you for loving me, Hades. Thank you for never giving up on me. For always searching for me."

“Always, little goddess.”

I feel the flames burst warm in the galaxy of my Goddesses’ eyes. “Thank you for letting our story be told. The true story of us.”

He kisses me deep, lighting the fire that always simmers for him deep inside me. “Our story may be finished for now, but it’s not over.”

“No, I suppose it’s not over, is it.”

He shakes his head, flames dancing in his eyes, too. “Our story will last until the end of eternity.”

“And beyond.”

The End.

For now.