

Goddesses



Love or Fate



Clea Hantman



GODDESSES

4

LOVE OR FATE

CLEA HANTMAN



HarperCollins e-books

Contents

Prologue

The beginning of book four finds our three heroines down... 1

One

My toes were really cold. 3

Two

Back in Athens, Georgia, Apollo—disguised as the mortal Dylan from... 15

Three

After what seemed like hours, the creaky old boat finally... 23

Four

The woman from the park's hair didn't work. Neither did... 33

Five

We followed the Furies. How could we not? They had... 39

Six

Artemis and Apollo appeared with a poof in front of... 49

Seven

We watched and waited as the Furies went on scheming... 57

Eight

Apollo appeared just inside the gates. Except that he didn't... 63

Nine

"Why do we need to wash their clothes by hand?"... 71

Ten

"What is the hottest chili known to god or man?"... 81

Eleven	
At least the door to our prison cell was open.	89
Twelve	
From his hiding space in the laundry pile, Apollo thought...	97
Thirteen	
Upon seeing the Furies—all three of the Furies—my sisters and...	103
Fourteen	
Apollo went back in the direction from which he had...	111
Fifteen	
Polly was finishing up chore number seven: “Make jewelry out...	121
Sixteen	
Polly was the first one to go. She didn’t say...	129
Seventeen	
Apollo just needed to reach the gates of Tartarus to...	141
Eighteen	
I could still hear Polly and Era screaming. Polly was...	145
Nineteen	
Apollo had finally reached the gates, but Cerberus was nowhere...	149
Twenty	
“We’re alive. We’re still alive,” cried Era.	153
Twenty-One	
Dylan was standing before me. It was like a dream...	157

Twenty-Two

The throne room was still just as cold as I... 167

Twenty-Three

Daddy said we'd completed our challenges.

I guess that must... 171

About the Author

Credits

Cover

Copyright

About the Publisher

PROLOGUE

The beginning of book four finds our three heroines down and out. Destitute. Doomed. Banished to the one place they most dread, after a rousing road trip in which the Furies' trickery and Thalia's own stubborn use of her powers have wreaked havoc on the modern world.

Meanwhile back on earth, Apollo is only just beginning to learn the truth: that unless he can do something about it, Thalia and her sisters will be trapped in Hades for all eternity. . . .



One

My toes were *really* cold.

There was a single puddle in the boat, and I was standing in it. The water, if you could call it that, was so frigid, so dastardly cold that I thought my feet might be frozen clear through my purple glitter sneakers.

The past few minutes (or hours? Who really knew?) had been a blur. There was our evil stepmom, Hera, in our living room, the green smoke and evil laughter, then an explosion, the darkness, and the landing. It was the landing that had hurt.

We'd fallen with a thud on the bank of a stream, in a gruesomely gray and dusty cavern covered in deep and pungent moss. And immediately, before

* GODDESSES *

we could really get a good look around, a man with a long white beard and a very large stick had emerged from the shadows in front of us, drifting in on a creaky old rowboat. He had known our names. He had called out, "Thalia, Polly, Era, please come with me," and motioned us into the vessel we were standing in now.

And that was it; here we were, slowly rowing away from shore, on our way to gods knew where, with a creepy old man as our guide. But where *were* we? And what was next?

I looked around, trying to get some idea of the layout. The whole place was three shades darker than night—or at least it felt that way, though we could still see. All around us nothing looked familiar. This was becoming a pattern with us—my sisters and me. We'd found ourselves in unfamiliar surroundings more than once since Daddy had banished us.

But at least before, we'd had a goal—something to strive for. We'd had the challenges Daddy gave us—the ones that were supposed to help us learn our lesson so we could return home. Polly was supposed to get a life of her own, start doing things for herself and stop meddling in other people's business, and Era was supposed to stop being such a pushover (and such a flirt, too) and learn to stand on her own

* LOVE OR FATE *

two feet. And me, well, I was supposed to try and be more selfless. I'd been getting there. Sort of.

Now that might not matter. Because I'd used my forbidden powers. We all had, but mostly me—all because I had kinda fallen for this guy Dylan from Denver and was willing to scour the globe to find him. And Hera—who, apparently, had been just waiting for us to mess up—had caught us. And we'd ended up being sent here, wherever *here* was.

Of course, I had a pretty good idea. And a pretty good idea of who the creepy old man driving the boat was. But I wasn't ready to accept it quite yet. Hera's last words before everything went black had made it pretty clear that we were where she'd been threatening to send us all along, but she couldn't have really succeeded in doing it, could she? I mean, goddesses weren't supposed to go to Hades—it just wasn't done. And even though this place certainly looked like I'd always imagined Hades to look, and our guide certainly looked like he could be the famous Charo himself*, it could be a coincidence. Maybe this was just a back way home to Olympus. Or maybe it was a trick to make us *think* we were in Hades when really we were in our little house in Athens, Georgia, under some sort of spell. There could be lots of explanations.

Maybe my sisters could think of one. We hadn't

* His name's really Charon, but everybody calls him Charo for short. He's the old ferryman who takes the dead into Hades on his boat.

* GODDESSES *

said a word to each other since we'd arrived, and now that I glanced over at them, I could see why. Polly and Era looked exhausted and sickly and incapable of speech. They were still in their clothes from the last leg of our road trip—unwashed and worse for the wear. The humidity of this place was wreaking havoc on their hair. Huge, dark circles were etched under their wide, panicked eyes. I had never seen either of them looking quite so bad.

They were standing in the farthest corner of the boat, their arms around each other, staring at Charo (he was Charo, I was sure of it) like he was some sort of majorly powerful being controlling our destinies. Which he couldn't be, despite how creepy he looked. He was only a servant to the gods, doing what he was told. And we were gods, weren't we?

"Excuse me, sir, but where are we going, exactly?" I demanded, crossing my arms over my chest. "In case you haven't realized it, we're goddesses and our daddy is Zeus, and you probably want to—yeowww!"

Polly had shifted forward and kicked me in the shin. Okay, maybe I could have been a little more polite.

But Charo didn't seem to care either way. Without so much as a look at me, he kept rowing

steadily, his skeletal hands grasping the oars tightly, and only replied, "You will find out soon enough." Then he shut his lips tight.

"Okay, well, I was just asking," I muttered, casting a hurt look at Polly.

"Thalia, can you please try to keep from making things worse than they already are?" she hissed. "Haven't you done enough already?" My older sister crinkled her freckled, turned-up nose at me and then shot it into the sky with contempt.

"Oh, so this is all my fault, right?" I hissed back. "I'm the only one who used my powers and broke Hera's rules, right? And who exactly turned the dogs into alligators, hmmm?" Of course, I knew full well it had been my two sisters and not me.

"Actually, it was the alligators into dogs—the dogs into alligators was an unfortunate side effect," said Era, nervously twirling her blond curls.

"Oh, be quiet!" Polly and I snapped in unison.

Immediately I regretted it, but one look at Era told me she was somewhere else. She was just staring beyond the bow of the boat as we pushed farther out into what seemed to be an endlessly flowing river. The only thing moving on her face was her bottom lip. It was quivering.

"You know, Polly, we've all used magic. We are

* GODDESSES *

all to blame. Or rather, none of us are to blame. It's Hera's fault, really," I said.

Polly sucked in her breath, ready to heap a whole slew of fury upon me. "Why, after all this you still won't take responsibility for what you've done! And I thought—"

Moannnnnn, moan, moan.

Polly stopped in midsentence.

"What was that?" whispered Era, snapping back to reality, her eyes darting back and forth.

"I heard it, too," I said.

Moannnnnn, moan, moan.

"That's *the* moan," said Charo in a slow gothic manner, still staring straight ahead. "This here is Acheron, the River of Moaning."

"It's certain, then—we're in Hades!" cried Polly, who had been holding on to one last shred of hope.

Okay, okay. So we were in Hades. But surely we wouldn't have to stay long—Daddy wouldn't allow it. And the underworld is an awfully big place. Some parts of it are better than others.

"Do you remember where the River of Moaning went?" I asked. "Was it to the Elysian Fields? Or the Castle of King Hades? Or was it to Ta—"

"Don't say it!" snapped Polly*.

Of course we'd never been here before, but every

* The thing Polly didn't want me to say was Tartarus. It is the worst, deepest, darkest part of Hades, and Hera has threatened to send us there more than once. It's where the wicked spend all eternity, and it's filled with the worst offenders—the vilest, trickiest gods and mortals. That, and the overflow from Hades central.

young god knows all about Hades. It's the underworld, deep beneath the earth—the world where the souls of the dead go. But it isn't all bad. Some folks go to Elysium, which is supposed to be quite delightful, with soft green meadows and lovely orange groves. And then there is the Castle of King Hades, which is lively, or so I'm told. There are rules, though I couldn't remember them right then, about who goes where and why and for how long.

Then there are the awful places—the ones we didn't want to think about. The different rivers all lead to different areas. I couldn't remember where the River of Moaning led to.

"*Who* is moaning, exactly?" asked Era bravely, casting a glance in Charo's direction.

Charo's eyes got all big and wide. "The souls of those who have come before you," he breathed.

"Oh, stop, you're creeping us out," I replied. "He's just saying it like that, in that scary voice, to upset you, Era. Don't pay any heed." But Era's complexion had paled considerably, and my own flesh was crawling.

"So these people, these moaners, they're, um, dead?" asked Era.

"This is obviously his shtick, Era—you know, scare the new arrivals," I said defiantly. "It's probably not even real."

"That sounds very real, Thalia," said Polly as she looked high and low. Her shoulders were hunched over, and she was shivering.

"Hey, I know, let's moan back. C'mon," I tried. "Moannnn. Moannnnn." I was trying to make a bad situation better. Really, I was.

"It's not wise to poke fun at the dead, Miss Thalia," said Charo in a haunted creepy way, his head finally swiveling on his wrinkly old neck to look at me. His eyes were absolutely black, like the blackest Olympian night.

"I'm not poking fun—it's just . . . it's just, well . . ." Polly and Era and even Charo were staring at me, waiting for an explanation. "Um . . ."

I gave up. I knew I *couldn't* explain it. It was just that I thought if I acted like all of this wasn't so bad, it might make us all feel better. But inside, I felt awful. I felt doomed. I felt serious guilt, no matter what I'd said to Polly. More than anything, I felt like something terrible was on the way.

Just then a shadow appeared above us. It swooped across the sky, and then it was gone.

"Did you guys see that?" I whispered. Polly and Era just gave me questioning looks. Maybe I was going crazy. Maybe the stress had been too much for me. Maybe it was my imagination.

I turned toward the sky again, straining my eyes for

* LOVE OR FATE *

another glimpse. Nothing. I looked all around us. Nothing. Only I noticed the moaning that had started so suddenly a few moments before had suddenly stopped again. Everything had gone very still. And very quiet.

Until Era's bloodcurdling scream pierced the air.

"Ahhhhhhhhh!"

I whipped around. And could hardly believe my eyes. Above us—just above our heads—was a giant winged monster with a hideous, long-pointed beak. And its claws were claspng a thick wad of my sister's golden hair!

"Squawk! Mine! Squawk!" it shrieked.

Its beak looked like it could drill a hole deep in Era's precious, beautiful head. It dug its sharpened talons into her shoulder. A droplet of red seeped through her lacy camisole.

"Help meeeeeeeee!" she shrieked.

Polly stood up, leaping toward Era, and the whole boat rocked violently, almost capsizing the vessel and sending us into the water. Polly fell with a thud at our feet.

"Squawk! Mine! Squawk!"

Era swung wildly at the creature, which only made it angrier. It clutched her shoulder with its claws and began to lift her up and out of the boat!

I had to do something. "*Theresius propidorious releasius!*" I yelled, wagglng my nose extra fast. But nothing.

* GODDESSES *

I did it again. Nada. Our powers—were they gone?

Era's feet were now a full foot off the boat, but Polly had managed to grab her toes and was pulling down with all her might.

I took a step forward to help, but I, too, was thrown off balance, falling backward against the bow. So I did the only thing I could think of to do. Yanking hard at my sneaker, so hard, I practically pulled off my foot, I arched my arm back behind my shoulder and hurled the shoe at the *thing*.

"Owww!" The creature yanked a few of Era's golden strands from her head and then dropped her hard on the filthy seat. The boat continued to rock crazily as the creature hung over the boat. Era cowered, crying in the corner, rubbing her head. Polly, too, was sobbing hysterically.

I, on the other hand, was ready for action. I pulled off my other sneaker and got ready to throw it because the creature was still above us and clearly ready for more. But just as it gathered itself for another swoop, Charo threw his skinny gray arm into the air, palm facing out.

"Stop!" he bellowed, in a voice that seemed like it couldn't have come from his tiny, ancient body. The river seemed to ripple with the sound.

And amazingly, for some reason, the creature froze in midair, its wings flapping only to keep it aloft.

* LOVE OR FATE *

“Not this one, Harpy,” Charo said, his voice going back to a monotone. “This one is a goddess. Off-limits. Be on your way.”

“Yeah, we’re goddesses,” I said, recovering my balance now but still keeping my sneaker poised to throw.

The thing, the Harpy, continued to hover. Its face, now that I could see it better, looked almost human, except for the beak.

“Go away,” said Charo again, slowly and, if you ask me, not forcefully enough.

I put my free arm around Era to reassure her. “Yeah. Did you hear him? We’re goddesses. You can’t hurt us. And we’re only visiting.”

With that the Harpy let out another squawk, only this one sounded more like a laugh—a sound that sent chills to the very tips of my toes. But still, it actually turned and flew away, melting into the darkness as we watched.

It was only after the Harpy was out of sight that I noticed Charo was staring at me, an odd, almost satisfied look on his face. “No, Miss Thalia. You’re wrong about that. No one just visits. Once you’ve passed a full day and a full night in Hades, you have come to stay.”

I forgot about the Harpy. I forgot about pretending this all wasn’t as bad as it seemed. I just stared back. It couldn’t be true. I knew about that old

* GODDESSES *

twenty-four-hour rule—everybody knows about that—but like he'd said, we were *goddesses*. It was different for us. Wasn't it?

Polly's head was down turned, and her long straight hair was covering her face, but I could see from her posture that what Charo had just said had sent her into utter despair. Era started rocking back and forth, rubbing her curls and muttering gibberish.

"C'mon, now. Get real. There's been a mistake. Daddy wouldn't allow it. Daddy wouldn't stand for it. Daddy will get us out of here." I was yelling now, I'm sure, but I couldn't stop. How could it be possible that we'd never see our sisters or our home or our dad again? And then there was Apollo. What if I never got to talk with him and tell him how sorry I was, and how much I cared for him after all?

Charo just sort of, well . . . he actually . . . I think he may have . . . smiled.

No. It simply couldn't be true. A day or two, a week, or a month, and Daddy would realize what had happened. Somebody—Hermes or somebody else—would notice we were missing from our little house in Athens (surely Hera wasn't talking) and inform him of what our stepmom had done. And surely he'd save us then. Surely.

He had to.



Two

Back in Athens, Georgia, Apollo—disguised as the mortal Dylan from Denver—wandered aimlessly through the streets, wondering what to do next. He found himself at the statue of Athena where he and Thalia had enjoyed some serious flirting while plotting the movie they’d done for class. The sight of the statue practically caused Apollo to hyperventilate. He knew the girls were in danger; he knew Hera had to have come for them. Apollo had seen the telltale signs of her presence when he’d gone into their empty house. He knew she must have sent them to Hades.

“But Zeus would at least try and stop it, wouldn’t he?” Apollo asked no one in particular, and no one answered. Some odd-looking fellow with long

* GODDESSES *

greasy hair was walking by and did look curiously at Apollo's football uniform, part of his Dylan disguise. But he kept moving, maybe even faster than before.

Apollo sat for a moment at Athena's feet and racked his brain. He needed a way to get into Hades. It would be no small feat. Living, breathing people, even gods, rarely entered Hades and returned to the world of the living again. And without his powers, which Zeus had taken away from him before he'd come to earth, Apollo wasn't even sure how to return to the godly world at all—much less get to the underworld.

Worst of all, he had no time to waste figuring it out. If a god or goddess stayed in Hades for more than a full day and night, they could not, would not get out, no matter who their father was, *ever*.

And this was why he was panicking now. Did the girls even know this? Thalia had done a lot of hooky playing in her younger days. Had she missed class that day? Was she frightened? The thought made him swell with anger at Hera and those three witches, Alek, Meg, and Tizzie. He had allowed them to fool even him, a great and once powerful god, when Meg posed as Thalia and tricked him into deserting the girls when they needed him most. Now look at him. Practically mortal and stuck

* LOVE OR FATE *

in the future. A vein in his forehead was throbbing.

Then Apollo had a thought. He knew of a spell, a magic spell that could be cast by witches back in ancient Athens. It was a communication spell. He didn't need godly powers per se to do it. Just regular old witch magic. Perhaps he could use the spell to talk to someone back home and then they could help him get into Hades. It was worth a try, for he had nothing else to go on. He had no powers of his own, nowhere to stay, knew no one on earth, really. Except Thalia's friend Claire, who'd already helped him more than once where Thalia was concerned. And he would need her help again if this spell was to work.

So he hotfooted it over to Claire's house with this in mind. Three pounds of his fist against her oversized door later, she appeared.

"Dylan! Did you find Thalia? Are they back?" asked Claire without even a hello. She looked happy to see him but a little worried.

"No, I'm afraid I haven't seen her. I believe, well, I know that her mother, or rather her stepmother, has summoned them, um, home."

"What? No! Back to Europe? Without a good-bye?" Claire's big brown eyes got even bigger. "What happened? You said they were in danger! Has something bad happened to Thalia?"

* GODDESSES *

"No, no, she's fine. But you know Thalia, always on the move, not good with the good-byes," Apollo said nervously. He couldn't possibly explain what had really happened. As far as Claire knew, Thalia, Era, and Polly were exchange students from Europe, not goddesses from the heavens. "Anyway, um, I've come for a favor."

"Wait a minute. Thalia's really gone?" Claire looked devastated.

"Well, she may be back," Apollo said unconvincingly. But it was just to cheer Claire up. If he did get Thalia out of Hades (and that was a big *if*), he knew he'd never allow her to be banished again, to here or anywhere else. "So, my favor."

"Another favor? How can you tell me this kind of news and then ask for a favor just like that? You haven't even thanked me for the last favor—the car, remember? And—"

"Yes, thank you, Claire, thank you so much, um, that was so kind of you, but that didn't work. So now I need another favor."

"Jeez Louise. Are people this rude in Denver? And you know, while we're on the subject of your quirks, it's also pretty darn weird that you're still wearing that ridiculous uniform. I like freaks, but you're beyond, way beyond."

Apollo just stood in front of Claire humbly,

waiting his turn to speak. But she didn't give it to him. "I don't care if Thalia does—for some crazy reason—like you. *I'm* done with you," and with that Claire tried to shut the door. *Tried*. Because Apollo stuck his big old football cleat in the way, stopping the door several inches shy of closing.

"Please, Claire, this favor is really much smaller. It will only take a moment, and it won't involve any of your relatives or their earthly possessions."

"What?" she said abruptly.

"A strand of your hair. I need a strand of your hair. No, wait!" This time Apollo's arm stopped the door from slamming. And it hurt. He let out a small yelp but tried to contain himself. Next time, he thought, he should stick his head in the door. At least it would be protected by his helmet. "It may sound weird, but it's really important."

"Really—so what's it for?" Claire asked suspiciously.

"Um, well, you see . . ." Apollo had walked the whole way from the Athena statue and hadn't come up with a reasonable-sounding answer to this question. All he had was a very unreasonable one.

"My collection," he blurted. "Yes, my collection. Of strands of beautiful girls' hair. From around the world."

"CREEP!" yelled Claire. "Cretin!" And with that she attempted to slam the door a third time. And Apollo, thanks to that forethought about the helmet,

managed to shove his head into the doorway, stopping the action once again. This time Claire used all her strength to shut him out. She pushed with both hands, her feet firmly planted on the ground. He reached up, grabbed her by the hair, and pulled, all the while screaming a very genuine, "Sooorryyyyy!" He then backed up, removed his head from the doorway, and ran. It was two and a half blocks later before he looked down to see if he had gotten what he came for.

Yep. Entwined among his fingers were four strands of mortal hair.

He walked, very seriously, over to the park, and sat under a tree. Now for the spell. He tried desperately to recall how it went, but somehow actually doing it turned out to be a lot harder than just thinking about doing it. He wrapped Claire's hair tightly around his right index finger, blew on it three times, and then stuck it in his ear. He called out, "Hello? Anyone there?"

But nothing.

He quickly stuck his finger in the other ear. "Hello?" Nothing. He unwrapped the hair and rewrapped it around his left index finger and stuck it in his ear. "Hello?" he now yelled frantically. In the other ear. On another finger. Back in his ears. And still nothing.

* LOVE OR FATE *

Apollo slumped against the tree. He looked at the hair, now broken and stuck to his sweaty fingers. It was pink. Hot pink. That couldn't be natural, could it? He hadn't thought about the fact that Claire's hair was always a new, bright, and unnatural shade. He wondered if that was messing up the spell.

Yes, it had to be that, he thought. He wondered if he should go back to Claire's and ask for her aunt's or grandmother's or mother's hair. But he had no time to waste. And he doubted that request would go over well. He leapt up with renewed energy and looked around.

That's when he saw her. A woman with long, thick, flowing tresses was walking through the park with her dog. She had a lot of hair. She wouldn't miss a few strands, he thought. And then he really didn't think. He ran. Up behind her, and grabbed a small handful, and then kept running. She let out a yowl, and the tiny white dog barked a terrible high-pitched "yap."

Apollo took off like the wind.



THREE

After what seemed like hours, the creaky old boat finally docked at the edge of what looked like an overgrown cavern. It was dark and it dripped with dark green gunk and it smelled faintly of cheese. Yes, cheese. That smelly old kind that gets all blue. Only it was like there were huge mounds of it nearby. It was *that* smelly.

Charo motioned for us to get out of the boat. He didn't say anything at all.

"Where are we supposed to go?" I asked.

He just moved his head slowly toward an eerie light that glowed from somewhere deep inside the tunnel.

"Yes, but where is . . ." and I moved *my* head toward that same light.

* GODDESSES *

"Miss Thalia, you are too full of questions. You may leave my boat now."

"Well, maybe I don't wanna," I said. I had absolutely no interest in abandoning old man Charo, as creepy as he was, for whatever waited at the end of that tunnel. But before we could have a face-off, Polly was dragging me out of the boat by the sleeve of my orange sweatshirt.

As soon as our feet hit the ground, there was a strange zapping sound. Suddenly my wrist felt heavy. I looked down to see a tiny hourglass, like a watch, fastened to a strap around my wrist. Polly and Era had identical ones on *their* wrists.

"A full day and a full night," Charo then repeated. And we realized what these strange time-pieces were for. They were to show us our doom. To rub it in our faces. So we knew that after twenty-four hours not even Daddy would be able to rescue us from this place.

"Let's just get on with this," Polly said.

"What is *this*?" whined Era.

"You mean *where* is this," I corrected her.

"I dare say we'll find out soon enough," said Polly, leading us toward the light. I looked over my shoulder to see Charo already floating away behind us.

We walked into the depths of the cavern, against my wishes, away from the moaning river and toward

the cheese smell, toward the light. Bits of gunk dripped all around us as we huddled together, making our way farther and farther inward. The cave looked like it would go on forever. But it was only a few steps later that, amazingly, we found ourselves completely through the cavern and out on the other side. Immediately I wished we hadn't.

What I noticed first was the wind. It was whipping around us, and it was absolutely freezing. But that was nothing compared to the gates. They were tall and thick, easily eight stories high, and made of black steel with sharp points sticking all about, and they were hanging open . . . as if waiting for us to walk right in.

And that's what we did. It was like an invisible hand was pulling us along, like we couldn't turn around if we tried. Anyway, if we did, where would we run to? We had nowhere to go.

As we walked, I took in the steel goblins and winged monsters that lined the posts on either side of us. The bars of the gates were wrapped in oversized metal chains that made a deep noise as they clinked together slowly in the wind.

I looked as far up as I could and made out four giant letters on the top of one side. They spelled *Tart*. "Tart," I read out loud.

"Tart?" asked Era, her eyes widening in surprise.

A hopeful smile played at the corners of her lips.
“Well, I do love tarts.”

Screech!

We leaped out of the way just as the gate swung past us, spinning around to watch the two sides come together with a *clunk* behind us.

“No!” we screeched all at once. Polly actually grabbed onto the bars. Through them we could see that the cave we’d just come through was gone. Another, wider river, more like an ocean, stood in its place. One that clearly wasn’t meant to be crossed. And there, somewhere out in the middle, was an island. A strange black blob was swimming above it.

“Hey, isn’t that weir—”

“No,” Polly interrupted. She had her head thrown back, and she was looking up at the sky; her face was frozen. She backed up a few paces as Era and I followed her gaze.

Towering above us, where the two halves of the gate had joined together, were the four letters we’d just seen, now joined with another four. The letters spelled one hideous word.

The only one who said it aloud was Era. “*Tart. Arus*. Oh.”

“Okay. You know, I think we could fit in between those posts over there. Let’s make a run for it.”

* LOVE OR FATE *

"To where? Where shall we run to?" cried Polly. "We have no boat. We have no map. There's no longer any cavern, so we can't even go back the way we came. Oh, we're doomed!"

I didn't give an answer. I didn't have one, and I didn't have time. Because at that moment, as if things could get any worse, a soul-shaking growl filled the air, and the scariest, beastliest animal came charging at us out of nowhere. It snarled and it barked and it slobbered a green gook. It leaped toward us, herding us against the fence, under the giant *U*. It had three heads. Three humongous evil dog heads!

"Your powers! Use your powers!" I said, trying to do the same. But like before, my powers wouldn't work.

Era was at my feet, her eyes closed tight. She was gripping my pant leg so fiercely, it was beginning to rip. She chanted a spell, the one for changing dogs into alligators (which I guess was better than nothing), but it was no use. Same with Polly. We didn't have our powers.

Dust was swirling around us; the wind was whistling an ugly off-key tune. I couldn't stop shivering. And the three-headed dog-beast before us was drooling. "This can't be our fate, this can't be our fate," I kept saying over and over again. We

hadn't come this far through earth, and high school, and everything else only to become doggy dinner. Where was Daddy?

The thing, the three-headed thing, had three sets of fangs, and each set looked sharper than the next. Its eyes were bright red like white-hot fire poker. It lumbered toward us.

I closed my own eyes tight and thought about how much I loved my sisters and how I really wasn't always so nice and how if I survived this, I should, no, I *would* be a better person. I thought about Apollo's sweet smile and his funny laugh and about all our childhood adventures. And although it was probably wrong, I thought about that silly mortal Dylan and that goofy uniform he wore and his sparkling eyes.

And then, just like that, I realized the growling had stopped. It had been replaced by a wet, panting sound. Slowly I opened my eyes. Era was still clinging to my pants. But Polly . . . Polly was—was—was . . . *petting it*.

"His name is Cerberus," she said. "It says so here on his tags." She was rattling these giant metal charms under his middle chin. The beast seemed to be almost smiling.

"What? I don't care what its name is," I said. "I'm just glad it's not going to devour us. It's not

going to devour us, right?" I ventured a hopeful look in Polly's direction.

"No, silly. He never was. He's just a little lonely." Polly was nuzzling him under two of his chins. "They put him here all alone—I suppose to guard these gates so that no one escapes. The poor thing doesn't have any company. He doesn't get any love; I can see it in his eyes."

"Well, no wonder. I'd say he hasn't had a bath in decades," said Era as she picked herself off the ground and wrinkled her nose. She was one to talk. That Harpy on the boat had picked and teased her wild hair something awful. Her camisole was ripped and muddy, her face covered in dust. I suspected I looked only a touch better.

Era took a few steps toward "Cerberus" and tentatively rubbed him behind one of his six giant ears. His single tail, which looked far more like a dragon's than a puppy's, wagged frantically. It was so large and powerful, it kicked up another dust storm, which whirled around us, getting thicker and thicker. I could no longer see my sisters or Cerberus, even—the air was too dark with dirt.

And then the wind just died in an instant and everything fell to the ground, calm and still. The dust began to clear. And when it did, I saw three figures in front of us. Three slender figures, their

* GODDESSES *

hands on their hips, their chins held high. And I smelled a scent worse than the stinky cheese cavern. It was the scent of evil.

It was Alek, Tizzie, and Meg. It was the Furies.

They started to laugh that piercing evil laugh, the one they do in unison, the one that could puncture a dog's eardrum. Sure enough, Cerberus went howling into a corner near the gates, his thunderous spiny tail between his legs.

Welcome, oh, welcome to our humble abode.
This is of course Tartarus, as the gates have told.
We're delighted and gleeful to now take you in.
In fact, we're so happy, let's start the violin.

A violin appeared out of nowhere, hanging effortlessly in the air. The bow slammed across the strings, pulling and yanking them every which way, causing a wrenching, screeching noise. Polly, Era, and I covered our ears, but it was no use; the "music" only got louder. It was as if the hideous noise was playing inside our heads.

This is your home for the rest of eternity.
Say farewell to your days of fun and modernity.
You will be our slaves, you're flat out of luck.
There is no one to help you! You're eternally stuck!

* LOVE OR FATE *

The three evil ones were dressed head to toe in black. They looked like their old selves, the girls we'd known back home on Olympus. They were no longer sheathed in the modern mortal costumes of the Backroom Betties, or the band Beautiful Omen, or the colonial workers we had met on our disastrous road trip. The only modern touches that remained were three black berets perched perfectly atop their wild heads of hair. I don't think I had ever seen them look so happy. I don't think they had ever seen me look so afraid.

You'll be quite amazed at how mean we can be,
And your daddy is not here to shelter you three.
You're alone, you're washed up, you're totally done for!
We don't think you can imagine the horrors in store.
Now follow us; don't lollygag or you'll pay.
It's off to your new home, where you always will stay.

With these last words and a wave of their hands,
they summoned us, deep into the dark depths of the
one and only Tartarus.



Four

The woman from the park's hair didn't work. Neither did the hair of the six other people Apollo accosted. He tried a woman with black hair and a man with brown. There was a large woman with tons of white hair piled high on her head; he actually asked her first before yanking a few strands. But no matter whose hair he got, no matter how he wrapped the hair around his fingers, no matter which ear he thrust it into, the results were still the same. A big fat nothing.

After the last try when, out of desperation, he performed the spell with the hair of a sullen-looking teenager who actually chased him after he stole a few strands, Apollo became so frustrated, so utterly distraught, so feverishly upset that he let out the

* GODDESSES *

most horrifying scream ever known to mortal or God. It was chaotic and uneven and loud, tremendously loud. It echoed for miles; it echoed for centuries. It knocked him off his own feet.

Apollo angrily brushed himself off and had started to stand up when a cloud of smoke appeared just inches from his face, which startled him so much that it knocked him over again. He looked up to see the shocked face of his twin sister, Artemis*, gazing down at him.

“What, what is the matter? I heard your screams halfway around the world, from centuries away. And why are you dressed so oddly and in this mortal form?” She of course recognized her brother, despite the funny clothes and unfamiliar body. They were twins, after all.

“Artemis! I love you!” Apollo was so happy to see her, he couldn’t even begin to answer her questions till he’d grabbed her and spun her around and around, her feet inches off the ground.

“But are you okay? That scream?” Artemis wondered. She didn’t have time for sappy nonsense.

“No, or rather yes, now that you’re here, I am okay. My word, I’m glad to see your somber face. I didn’t think I could reach you with just a scream.”

“That wasn’t just a scream,” said Artemis.

* She’s known as The Lady of Wild Things, a hunter and an adventurer. She has the same gorgeous features Apollo has—the golden skin, the straight nose, the rosy lips, and the long fluttering eyelashes. She also, like her twin, has traveled the world in search of excitement and wonder—but she is far more serious than her wisecracking brother.

"It must be some sort of twin radar. I thought I was stuck here on earth, in the future, forever. Oh, I love you so!"

Artemis was wearing a suede loincloth and a flowing silk shirt, classic ancient warrior wear. An old woman in the park couldn't help but gawk at the striking pair. Besides her funky clothes, Artemis was casually carrying the head of a wild pig in her left hand.

But Artemis didn't notice the woman's stare. And she didn't mince words. "So this outfit. This facade. This place. Explain."

"It's Thalia. This is the place Zeus banished them to after the"—and here Apollo blushed slightly—"the engagement debacle. Athens, only it's Athens, Georgia, in a country called the United States and in the future. I came down here to protect Thalia and her sisters from Hera's tricks. Oh, and the Furies are here, too."

At the mention of the Furies, Artemis shivered and winced.

"Exactly. So everything was going fine, well, relatively so; Thalia was even falling for me, well, Dylan, this mortal body I'm in. And then she told me she knew it was me and was ready to marry and that she'd meet me back home. I went home and was crushed when she didn't appear."

Artemis furrowed her brow and shook her head as if to say what a fool her brother could be.

"No, but it wasn't Thalia. It was a Fury in disguise!" Artemis gasped in surprise.

"I'm shocked you didn't hear about this—it was all over Olympus, and the gossip rags were having a field day with my love life, or lack thereof."

"I've been hunting wild boar in Babylonia. And I manned a giant fleet of ships into Troy for the war effort—we faced three shiploads of pirates! But wait, I digress. Please continue."

"Yes, well, Thalia doesn't know that Dylan is me, or at least I don't think she does. Then I found out that Hera was giving her and Polly and Era one last chance before sending them to Tartarus. I had to come back here and warn the girls not to use magic because that was the rule, no magic. Only I was too late. They were off on a road trip with a mortal boy named Pocky."

Artemis raised an eyebrow.

"They're just friends. Anyway. The girls used magic, all right. I followed them, but I had no powers of my own to stop them because Zeus stripped me of my powers when I came back to earth. When I finally caught up to the girls, it was back here at their 'home,' and Hera had gotten to them first. I'm positive Hera has sent them to Hades. Tartarus for sure!"

Now Artemis gasped loudly.

"I can't bear the thought of Thalia facing those witches on their own turf. She must be so frightened."

* LOVE OR FATE *

Artemis thought quickly in her practical way. "I don't know quite what has happened to the girls. But I do know that Zeus and Hera are on a second honeymoon of sorts. I ran into Hermes on the moon. He said that Hera had whisked Zeus away on some god-awful Club Mediterranean vacation in quite a hurry. Perhaps she did it to distract him. But I don't believe Zeus could save them even if he were aware. If Hera created this rule about the magic, she has the supreme right to punish them for breaking it. It's Gods' Laws."

"I fully understand that, really I do," Apollo gushed. "But come now, Zeus would never let this happen. All eternity in Tartarus? Their punishment has gotten out of hand. Surely he must have the ultimate power to step in . . . if he knew."

"I don't believe he does have the power, especially not beyond the twenty-four-hour limit—"

"Yes!" Apollo interrupted. "That's just it, Artemis! If there *is* anything I can do, I haven't much time to do it!"

Artemis considered, but only briefly. Then she spoke. "I don't know what I can do for Thalia, but I do know I can get you out of this"—she looked around at the green lawns and quaint houses and finished—"this wretchedly boring place. Hang on."

Apollo squeezed his sister tight, and poof, they were gone.



We followed the Furies. How could we not? They had us surrounded. There were three paths leading away from the gates; we took the one on the right. Down a long maze that wound and wound around dark and dusty corners and fire pits and deep, dark holes that appeared to go nowhere . . . or somewhere really evil. We passed gory masks on the walls that cackled and hissed and several vats of fat and slimy slithering snakes. Everywhere we went, a ceremonious trumpet played as if to announce Their Highnesses' presence*.

"I thought there were giants in Tartarus," I whispered to Era. "And where are all the souls of the dead?" She just glared at me with a pouty lip.

* The Furies pretty much have control over Tartarus. It's their own little corner of Hades, and they get to rule it as they see fit.

* GODDESSES *

You're following us down our own secret way.

You will not be seeing any others this day.

Ugh, they were speaking in unison again. How annoying. What was it about this place that brought out the Furies' most annoying qualities? Note to self: Never, ever speak in unison with Polly and Era.

In fact, you will not see the others at all.

There'll be no one to talk to or answer your call.

Oh, be careful to step over that puddle of blood,

Or you may slip and fall and be covered in crud.

But they told us this too late, after we had already put our feet down in the slippery red slime that suddenly, mysteriously appeared in front of us. I'm not sure it was really blood, but Era was thoroughly freaked out. We picked ourselves up only to slip and fall down again on top of each other.

The Furies just cackled.

My every muscle, my every tendon ached. My sisters and I were physically and emotionally exhausted.

"Nice place you got here," I said, trying to sound as insulting as possible. Polly kicked me.

* LOVE OR FATE *

"Don't taunt them," she said in a whisper.

Taunt all you want—it only makes us smile.

Oh, look out, here comes the bile!

And with that a huge rush of thick smelly gunk came flooding down from out of nowhere. It covered us from head to toe in slime. Era was crying now, hard and loud. Her *wahhhs* echoed against the walls. We were drenched with smelly goo. Our clothes were stuck to our skin. The Furies pressed us forward.

It was difficult to walk. The slime added, easily, an extra fifteen pounds to every step. I just tried to pretend like it didn't bother me. I couldn't stand the idea of the Furies thinking they were getting the better of me.

Bile, bile, smile, smile, hee, hee, hee, hee.

We came upon a hallway with yet another three doors. The Furies were behind us, so I picked one and opened it myself, just to see. But there was nothing *to* see, just darkness.

"*Close that door, walk no more!*" I slammed the door shut, not willing to get slimed again. And waited.

* GODDESSES *

The Furies then chanted in unison, three times: “Ugly, evil, smelly people,” and the same door opened. This time a bright light streamed out. It was hard to see, what with all the goop in our eyes. But after we’d entered, they opened wide all on their own.

It was our home.

We were back home, in Olympus! There was our gilded three-story-high staircase with engraved banisters. There was our vivid red carpet, six inches deep and as soft as a lamb’s coat. There were our sitting chairs covered in the finest turquoise silk and our piano made entirely of gold. And there, over the marble fireplace and behind the diamond chandelier, was the portrait of our mother, Mnemosyne. Daddy had painted it from his own memory, and while I had never forgotten it, it was as if I were seeing it for the very first time. When Hera had come into our lives, she had taken the painting down and hid it from us.

Despite wanting to be strong in front of the Furies, my eyes welled up with tears.

“Home! Home!” cried Era. “It was all just a trick; we’ve come home!” She twirled and twirled around and around till she ran straight into Tizzie, and then she grabbed her and hugged her tight. Tizzie shrieked. Not only did she abhor hugs, but Era had covered her in stinky bile.

Meg and Alek laughed. And laughed.

We each just walked around in circles where we stood, absorbing it all. Home. I hadn't realized how very much I'd missed it until now. I bit my lower lip to stop myself from crying.

Era wandered about the room, touching our things. The marble clock. The solid gold statue of Gaia. Polly plopped down on the ground and began to stroke the carpet.

Now all three Furies were laughing. Like they were enjoying some hilarious inside joke.

I thought about Apollo, that if we were home, he must be near, but then I had another thought. Something was wrong. It was so cold. It wasn't cold like this at home. I could hear Polly's teeth chattering.

I didn't *feel* like this was home.

Before I knew what I was doing, I ran to the front door and threw it open. Only to find a solid layer of darkness. I slammed the door shut and ran to a window, drawing back the curtain. Again, darkness. Polly and I exchanged alarmed looks. At home, throwing open a door or a window would have revealed fields and gardens and mountains and palaces. Not darkness. Polly's teeth continued to chatter.

And I knew it then. Even before they said it—before they erupted into the loudest gale of laughter yet—I knew.

* GODDESSES *

Alek spoke now, between giggles.

You silly girls, this is not where you live.

Did you really expect us to forget and forgive?

It may look like your place, but you see you've been fooled.

Your new living quarters are not this bejeweled.

"But—but that's our mother," said Polly, indignant.

Indeed, your mother is hanging on our wall.

We quite like her looks—too bad her brain was so small!

"How dare you!" I screamed, and lunged for Alek, who effortlessly pushed me away, hurling me back onto my butt. I landed on the marble entranceway and slid at least six feet thanks to my goo-covered jeans. The Evil Ones just laughed.

"No. It's real. It has to be," Era whispered, but her eyes showed her doubt. "Why would you fake it? Our house, our mother—why?"

To remind you of all you once had,

To remind you of your once glorious pad.

For Olympus's sake, stop your leaking,

And while you're at it, please stop your reeking! P-U!

My heart felt like it was breaking. I moved closer to my sisters and linked my arm through Polly's.

* LOVE OR FATE *

She was now fully quaking from the cold.

Poor Polly. She was the most susceptible to illness and to drastic temperatures. If I was aching with such a chill down to my bones, I couldn't imagine what she was feeling. I realized with a sudden sharp pang that she was here because of me.

Oh, so sorry, you look very cold.

Let us fix that for you . . . behold!

And they waved their arms like they were showing us the prizes on some game show we'd seen on TV in Georgia. Poof!

A ring of fire, flames as tall as the ceilings, appeared. But no heat was coming from it. In fact, it made the room even colder! The flames cackled and wheezed.

A cold blazing fire, we have such wit!

Now off to your room, lickety-split.

"Okay, you *halfwit* and you . . . you . . . *nitwit*. *Misfits!*" I yelled. I can rhyme, too.

I couldn't bear to leave our home, cold or not, unreal or not. Era grabbed hold of a golden column and wouldn't let go. But Meg pried her frigid fingers loose and forced us all out through what was

* GODDESSES *

supposed to be the front door. We slowly plodded down the stairs that now appeared—the cold, steel stairs that left the facade of our old home.

There was a small space at the bottom of these stairs. We crowded there in front of a very heavy door, which I could only assume was the entrance to our bedroom. The Furies paused dramatically for a moment, then pushed it open with glee. Inside was a scant square of a room, not big enough for us to lie down in end to end. There was no banister, no piano, no picture of Mom. In fact, there were no beds. No sheets. No mirrors or clothes. There was no shower. No shower.

The floor was gray and concrete and cold. And we were still damp from the crud and the bile, which made it worse. The walls were short and squatty, and the only light was coming from a bare lightbulb that dangled from an exposed wire in the ceiling.

“Where do we sleep?” asked Polly very matter-of-factly, her feelings totally gone from her voice as if she’d given up.

Dear, dear . . . here, here!

“And where do we wash?” asked Era.

The Furies just laughed.

“You’re kidding, right? We have no bath? No

* LOVE OR FATE *

shower? No clean clothes? We'll catch cold, we'll get ill, we could die." Era was yelling now. They just laughed louder.

Tizzie and Alek, come huddle in tight.
Let's decide what their first task should be tonight.

The girls circled near the doorway, whispering and chattering, but we couldn't hear a thing.

"This can't be real; this can't be," I said in a whisper.

"Of course it is. It's over; our lives are over," said Polly.

"Daddy, Daddy, can't he save us?" cried Era quietly. But apparently not quietly enough.

Your daddy's gone; he got an international visa.

Now he and Hera are sunbathing in Ibiza!

I looked down at the timepiece on my wrist. The sand was trickling through with sickening speed; it looked like at least two hours had passed already. That settled it. Daddy had no idea we were here. And in a matter of hours he wouldn't be able to do anything about it, anyway.



Artemis and Apollo appeared with a poof in front of Hades, king of the underworld. He was in the middle of a lavish feast. Sitting at the head of his thirty-foot-long wooden table, he was shoving food into his mouth as quickly as a starved piglet in a giant trough of soupy slop. Spittle and food particles were flying in every direction. Grease was dripping off the table, off his fingers, off his long white beard.

When he saw that Artemis and a “friend” were before him, he quickly extended a greasy hand to Apollo, who reluctantly shook it and tried to “introduce” himself (since he clearly didn’t look like Apollo). But Hades was too busy to pay attention. He was eyeing Artemis fondly. The king went in for a kiss from the goddess, but she took one quick step backward and bowed instead.

* GODDESSES *

"Nicely done," whispered Apollo, who noticed her fast moves.

"Sir," addressed Artemis, "this is in fact Apollo, my dear brother, in mortal form."

"Oh, Apollo! Well, come here, my good boy," and with that Hades grabbed Apollo by the shoulders and pulled him in close. Apollo could feel the grease on his thick neck and behind his ears. He wanted to wipe it off his hands and face, but he didn't want to appear rude, so he refrained.

"So nice of you two to drop in. Please, join me in my midafternoon snack. I've got loads of goodies here." He placed a hand to the side of his mouth and yelled, "Cook, bring out the deep-fried bat's wings!" Then he turned back to the twins. "You'll love these—she makes a delightful dipping sauce that's to die for!"

"No, we didn't come for food, but—" Apollo was interrupted.

"Nonsense! You must eat something. Why, that mortal body looks all skin and bones. How about some dragon eggs—they've been fried in butter, but they're not too greasy! Oh, I have this new delicacy; it was flown in from the Orient—it's mosquito knees. They're so tiny, but oh, so delicious! Try them, please." Hades shoved a tremendous silver platter under Apollo's nose. Apollo could only see microscopic specks on the plate.

"Um, okay, how do I eat them?"

"Scoop them up with a fingernail like this," and Hades pointed his pinkie down at the platter. His nail was sharp and at least three inches long. Apollo looked at his own nails. They were so short, they couldn't have picked up a mosquito knee if he'd attached beeswax to them.

"Right, so, Hades, I come with a favor to ask."

"Oh, sorry, no favors today. I never grant favors on Tuesday, so how about trying one of these cyclops chips? They're made from the toenails of a cyclops. Cook soaks them for days and then—"

"Sir, it's Wednesday. Not Tuesday. It's Wednesday," said Apollo, careful not to offend but impatient nonetheless.

"Nonsense. It's Tuesday; I'm sure of it. So after they soak for three weeks and a day, then Cook fries them up in a vat of oil made from the sacred blue olive tree. It makes for a delightful—"

"Sir," interrupted Artemis, who heretofore had kept quiet, "it's actually Wednesday, I assure you. Won't you please hear my brother out? He has a favor to ask, one of dire consequences."

"Huh, Wednesday. Hmmm, so it is. Well, sorry, no favors on Wednesday, either."

"Please," begged Artemis. "Hera has done—"

But the king interrupted her. "Hera? Ohhh, I hate her. What'd she do?"

* GODDESSES *

"Well, Hera has done something very underhanded and terribly evil—you must help my brother, Apollo, please," and this last part she said in her sweetest voice, a tone she rarely used for anyone. "Please . . . for me."

"Well, I do despise Hera . . . but I love evil! What a conundrum! Hmmm, okay, do tell, but I make no guarantees that I can help," said the king.

"Thank you, Your Highness," said Apollo, and he began to tell his story. "As you may or may not know, some time ago Hera had three of the Muses—Era, Polly, and my beloved Thalia—banished to earth. Well, Zeus actually sent them, but he never intended for them to stay long. And, well, he accidentally sent them into the future . . . and to the United States of America."

"That Zeus," whispered Hades with a raised eyebrow, "you know, I think he may be losing it, just a weeeeeee bit."

"Well, perhaps. Now, Hera had other plans. She and Zeus made the girls' using their powers against the rules. And then she sent the Furies down to watch the girls, or rather to trick them into using their magic."

"Oh, and those Furies are good, aren't they," said Hades, "good and *evil*—how I adore them. I let them have free run of the place, you know."

"Yes, so I've heard. In any case, the Muses did use their powers, and now Hera has whisked Zeus off to an island vacation and secretly banished the girls to Tartarus."

"Fabulous!" cried the king. "So we have a few Muses living among us; how delightful! Maybe I can have them over for some supper one night. Cook makes a mean battered and fried gnome. They're so tender!"

Apollo cringed. "No, see, I would like to get the girls *out* of Tartarus."

"But why?" asked the king, who was earnestly dumbstruck why anyone wouldn't want to live underground, in the underworld.

"You know perfectly well that the Furies have it in for the Muses. I'm sure they plan on making them their slaves. These girls, Era, Polly, Thalia—they did nothing seriously wrong. They aren't dead, yet they live within your world. It isn't right."

"Yes, perhaps, but this is a lovely place to spend eternity. You do not dare to criticize my kingdom?"

"No, of course not. It's just that, well . . ."

"I cannot disobey Hera's command. Besides, the laws state that kings may not trump queens, and queens may not trump kings. It's a rule. Sorry."

"But sorry isn't good enough!" yelled Apollo. He shouldn't have been so brash, but his emotions were getting the better of him.

"King," Artemis interrupted, throwing Apollo a look. "Your Royal Highness, maybe you cannot over-ride her decree, but you could anger her sufficiently and succinctly by undermining her plans a bit."

"Hmmm, I like the sound of that. Go on."

"Well, if you just let us into Tartarus, that would infuriate Hera."

"Is that so?"

"It would be quite the practical joke to frustrate Hera's efforts by aiding my brother in finding the girls. Don't you think?"

"Yes, that does sound amusing!"

"And you could even further aid Apollo by giving him his powers back and turning him back into his godlike form. That would be the best joke of all!"

"No, we wouldn't want to do that. He looks so funny in that costume. It's a delight, really."

"Yes, but . . ." Artemis was getting impatient with Hades' nonsense. She couldn't help wondering how this man had become a king. "Hades, Your Highness, what about his powers?"

"No, no, can't do anything about those, either. I don't want to push it too far with Zeus and Hera. But I would love to get that old bat in a tizzy—you know, pull one over on her—so I will allow you, Apollo, to enter Tartarus. But Artemis, you may not join him. He must go it alone."

* LOVE OR FATE *

"With no powers?" asked Apollo.

"With no powers," said the king. "That's the best I'll offer."

"Is there nothing you can give Apollo to help in his quest—anything at all, sir?" begged Artemis. "Trust me when I say, I am sure any small token of help will be quite frustrating to Hera. She will be disastrously depressed and maniacally morose!"

"Hmmm, morose? Depressed? Well, okay." Hades rubbed his greasy fingers together, and *poof*, a helmet appeared in a puff of smoke. "This is my magic helmet. It will make the wearer invisible. It will help you navigate your way through the maze of Tartarus."

"Oh, thank you, sir, thank you." Apollo began to bow furiously.

"This will at least conceal your identity—not that anyone would recognize you in that silly getup—and it will get you past the guards, even the Furies themselves. But I must warn you, the helmet will not protect you from the gatekeepers."

"The gatekeepers?"

"They are the keepers of the riddles and are here to stop intruders from lollygagging and loitering. They can stop you at any time, anywhere. And when they do, you must answer their infinitely frustrating riddles to move on or POOF, you're gone!"

Apollo gulped. He wasn't so great at tests, especially not without his powers to help him.

"And remember, I'm strict about my rules. Once you've been here for twenty-four hours, you're mine, got that? It's just the way it is. You'll have to find your own way out before that time is up." Hades placed the tips of his fingers together. "Oh, such fun, what a game. I may have to grab a tub of these mosquito knees and watch the action!"

"Thank you, sir, thank you, indeed," and Apollo nervously grabbed the magic helmet. "I guess this is good-bye, Artemis. Thank you for all your help—you are the best sister a god could ever ask for."

"You are a fine brother, too." Artemis wasn't good with emotional good-byes. "Good luck. I am sure you will do adequately." Apollo kissed her on her cheek and hugged her tight, and she disappeared.

"Now," said Hades, "I will count to six, and you will appear just inside the gates of Tartarus. You must find your own way to the lair of the Furies. I assume that's where your precious girls are."

"Again, thank you. I'm sure Hera will feel sufficiently put out by all this."

"Yes, yes, okay. One, two, three, four, five . . . oh, here, take this"—Hades shoved a gigantic deep-fried boar leg under Apollo's arm—"you may get hungry . . . six!"



We watched and waited as the Furies went on scheming in hushed voices. They went on so long that I got bored, so I distracted myself by staring at the zit on the tip of Tizzie's nose, which bobbed up and down as she spoke. It was one of those beet red ones. You couldn't help but stare at it.

"Stop!" Tizzie yelled, looking up from the huddle and rubbing self-consciously at her nose.

"What?" I said.

"You're staring—stop!" she replied.

"Well, it's just so huge!"

"Thalia!" yelled Polly. "Don't stoop to their level. We're ladies. Even if they aren't."

"But it is—it's enormous. Gigantic. Tremendous. Humongous!"

* GODDESSES *

Now, this was fun. I didn't see what keeping my mouth shut was going to do for us, anyway. They already had it in for us. They weren't going to spare us because all of a sudden we happened to be lady-like and charming. We were doomed. At the very least, I should have the pleasure of being snotty.

Tizzie began to shake with anger.

"Maybe we'll get lucky, Pol," I said through the corner of my mouth. "Maybe we can drive them so insane, they'll *want* to let us go."

Insane? Well, perhaps. Now bring out the Venus fly-traps!

It took a moment, but our bare concrete room became crowded with Venus flytraps. Snapping Venus flytraps, the kind the cyclops of North Cyprus are famous for growing. One snapped at Polly and got a piece of her skirt. She jumped away with a gasp.

The Furies cackled and then cleared their throats.

Now that you're our slaves,
we'll list all your chores.

Here are the tasks that you now have in store.
Toilets must be scrubbed at least ten times a day,
And the floors need your attention,
in a most particular way.

* LOVE OR FATE *

There are dishes and pots and clothes to be washed
And slimy house lizards that need to be squashed.

Now, on to the cooking, meals must be gourmet.

We expect fancy food, an entire buffet.

Gratiné, crudité, consommé, flageolet!

Cassoulet, canapé, pâté, and flambé!

“Oh . . .” Era was crying. “Thalia . . . can . . . cook.” How uncharacteristic of Era to find sarcasm in the midst of a crisis. And at my expense, too.

We enjoy it very much when our feet are massaged,
And our boils must be lanced and then camouflaged.

Make sure to remove all the gook

twixt our toes,

Then rub your noses in it like Eskimos.

“The Eskimo people kiss with their noses; they do not rub noses to feet,” said Polly very matter-of-factly, a single tear falling from her eye. But the Furies just laughed.

I was actually finding the whole thing slightly comical, but my sisters were not. The idea that Era would clean anyone’s feet—even her own—was enough to make her go into a fit of hysterics. And while Polly would have gladly cleaned up after people she thought

* GODDESSES *

were deserving and good, she couldn't bear the idea of making life prettier for the Horrible Ones.

There's something green growing
at the Tartarus trash heap.

We'll have it carted in since the smell
will make you weep.

Then you must deflea our tigers and
groom our pet moth.

(He's special—he has fangs and
a loud, hacking cough).

If you get thirsty, we'll kindly oblige
with water from the Acheron, gathered at low tide.
The smelly moaning wet stuff is yours to guzzle,
And if you act out, we'll put you all in a muzzle!

Now they'd gone too far—we had to drink that cruddy water? My two sisters were even more devastated than I was. Their tears had gotten the better of them, and they had fallen to their knees and were sobbing. I swelled with anger. Not just at the Furies, but at myself. This was all my fault.

You've got your list, you know what to do.
Don't look so sad, ladies, don't look so blue.
You only have to wait on us hand and foot

* LOVE OR FATE *

Forever and eternity . . . your lives are kaput!

I looked at Polly and Era, and Polly looked at Era and me, and then Era looked at me and Polly. Then she looked back at the Furies. And then she let out one heck of a scream.

“DADDDYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY!!!!!!”



Apollo appeared just inside the gates. Except that he didn't truly "appear"—because he couldn't see himself, nor could anyone else thanks to Hades' invisibility helmet. This, he thought, was going to be a breeze . . . despite the fact that there were three paths in front of him to choose from. He turned up his invisible nose and attempted to smell out the Furies' lair. *Left*, he thought, *the smell of evil is definitely coming from the east*. So he lifted his invisible legs and started to walk.

The path he'd chosen was the darkest of the three. The ground was almost mushy. Not quite as soft as pudding, but definitely softer than, say, a tightly pulled trampoline. And it was thick with the scent of aging dung beetles. Apollo knew that his

sense of smell would help him find the Furies and therefore Thalia and her sisters, but he still couldn't help wishing at this moment that his nose wasn't so highly sensitive.

On top of his nasal discomfort, Apollo was very worried about running into the Furies. He knew all too well their ability to seamlessly transform themselves into other beings. Who was to say they wouldn't confront him here in Tartarus, in unrecognizable form? He resolved to stay on his toes. But not literally, because the path was getting slimmer and slimmer and shorter and shorter, and he had to start walking crouched down and hunched over.

The path also got darker as he descended downward. The ground was covered in slime, and Apollo kept slipping, grabbing the sides of the cavelike walls with his invisible hands to balance himself. Whenever he did, he managed to grab a handful of goop. He didn't want to know what it was; he just wiped it on his invisible football jersey. Only the goop wasn't invisible, so now it appeared that a floating piece of goop was walking down the dark corridor all on its own.

Apollo panicked and tried to scrape it off, rubbing against the other wall. That just made it worse. Now he was a walking pile of goop *and* grime.

Despite his fear and his inability to see much around him, he hoped upon hope that it would stay dark all the way to the Furies' lair.

It stayed dark, all right. So dark that Apollo didn't see the end of the tunnel coming. Still hunched over, he walked right into a craggy rock wall. "Ow!" he yelped, and then swallowed deep. He turned to his left and walked right into another wall, although this one wasn't rocky. It was itchy. It was covered in a dried-grass-like material, spiky and scratchy. Apollo turned around quick and tried the third and final direction.

SMACK!

"Owww," said the wall.

"Yowww, whoa!" said Apollo, not just out of pain, but out of confusion—he had never encountered a talking wall before. And really, who has?

"Please, sir, watch where you're going," said the wall.

"So, you can see me?" asked Apollo.

"Of course, I see all. For I am the wall."

"Rhyming? No! Are you a Fury? Show yourself, Tizzie. Or is it Alek? Meg!" screamed Apollo.

"Quiet, quiet. I'm not a Fury. Do I look like a Fury? No. The rhyming was just a coincidence. Now, do you want to get through or not?"

Apollo nodded, still confused.

* GODDESSES *

"Well, all right, then. But before I let you through, you must first answer a question."

"Fine, but how is it that you can see me? Is it the goop?" asked a worried Apollo.

"I told you, I'm the wall, I see all—oops, I mean I see everything. No rhyming. I am a gatekeeper. So riddle me this. Recite the Greek alphabet . . . backward. You have twenty-five seconds."

"You're kidding—that's the question? I thought it would be harder than—"

"Quick, you now have but eighteen seconds!" warned the wall.

"Right, then." And Apollo recited all twenty-four letters without taking another breath. "Omega, psi, chi, phi, upsilon, tau, sigma, rho, pi, omicron, xi, nu, mu, lambda, kappa, iota, theta, eta, zeta, epsilon, delta, gamma, beta, and alpha. Whew!"

"Well done. Just nine seconds. Could be a record."

"So that's all? That was it, I can be on my way?"

"No, no. That wasn't really the riddle. I just love to torture you dead souls."

Apollo's invisible shoulders drooped.

"No, now here is your real riddle. And it's a hard one. Oh, you'll never know this one, it's so very obscure, very hard. I'd say it's practically impossible."

Sweat dripped from Apollo's invisible hands.

"I mean, I don't know how in Tartarus you'll ever

* LOVE OR FATE *

know this. Ha! Oh, this will be fun. I mean, have you ever even heard of this being, I wonder? Doubtful!" and the wall laughed and laughed.

"Get on with it, please!" Apollo snapped.

"Oh, back to the gates you'll go! Okay, then. What is . . . are you listening? What is the favorite color of the Muse, the middle one, the most rambunctious of the nine Muse sisters, Thalia? Hee, hee."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Nope. That's your question. Get it wrong and you are bounced out of Tartarus to the Gates of Cerberus. Tee hee. Go on now, take your hapless guess."

"Easy. It's purple," Apollo said, relieved.

"I'm sorry, that is . . . what? Why, that's . . . CORRECT!"

The wall sounded aghast and very disappointed.

"Yes, yes, so I can move on, right?" Apollo eagerly asked, amazed at his luck.

"Well, yes. I guess you've won . . . why, a brand-new path. Have fun cruising the halls. And thank you for playing the game!" With these last words the wall disappeared and became a very narrow entranceway into another corridor.

This new corridor was well lit and filled with strange creatures that had, at one time or another, belonged to the land of the living but were now killing time in Tartarus for the rest of eternity. There were tiny little

* GODDESSES *

devils, the size of large mice, running every which way underfoot. Angry gnomes stomped around, pushing each other. An ugly and disturbed baby dragon came barreling down the hall and just missed Apollo by a mere foot. A dust storm kicked up, and particles clung to Apollo's goopy yet invisible frame. Three insanely tall, thin men, pale as the brightest clouds, walked toward him, grimaces on their faces. But they apparently didn't see him. Nor did they see the shapely dust cloud he had become. No one did. They just brushed on by.

There were doors, maybe hundreds of doors, lining this hallway. Apollo didn't know where to go next. He lifted his nose and expanded his nostrils, but there were far too many things, too many smells. Even the Furies' atrociously stinky breath was masked by the various scents emanating from all these different creatures.

Should he keep walking down this endless hallway? Try this door or that one? He looked around for clues but found nothing.

Then he heard a loud, clear whistle. It was coming from a small haystack piled in front of one of the doors. He walked over, knelt in front of it, and listened again. And again, there was the whistle. This time the noise attracted Apollo's attention to a thin, shiny needle gleaming among the strands of hay. He shoved his hand in and pulled it out.

"Hello!" said the needle in a very high voice.

"You can see me?" asked Apollo. He wasn't amazed that the needle could *see*. Or whistle. Apollo had seen a lot of strange things in his time. But then he remembered, gatekeepers could see all.

"You betcha," the needle replied. "Now, if you can answer this question, you can go through this door. And yes, it's the door that you've been looking for."

"Argh! More rhyming! Are you a Fury? Oh, this is so confusing!"

"A Fury? Nonsense. It's often boring down here in Tartarus, especially when you have to spend all your time in a bale of hay. We rhyme to pass the time. Besides, the Blessed Ones copied me—I rhymed first. I rhymed all the time till they started imitating me and then, well, now I just do it occasionally for fun."

"I see." Apollo looked around impatiently. He didn't know how much time the Muses had left—there was no way to tell time in a place like this. But he knew every second was valuable. "So you have a riddle for me? Thalia's favorite food used to be blackberry and elderberry jam on toast. But since she moved to earth, it's probably nacho-flavored corn chips. Her lucky number is nine; her favorite hobbies are star hopping and skateboarding. Are any of these the answers you're looking for?"

"I do indeed have a question for you, but no, it

has nothing to do with anything like that. No, no. Your question is this: What pair runs over fields and woods all day, sits by your bed at night, and has two long tongues that simply hang out and about?"

"I don't see what this has to do with finding Thalia!" said Apollo, just a bit bothered. This needle was wasting valuable time.

"I'll ask you again. What pair runs over fields and woods all day, sits by your bed at night, and has two long tongues that simply hang out and about?"

Apollo thought about it. "A pair of dogs is too easy," he muttered to himself.

He thought about the Muses and their pet, Pegasus. Pegasus ran over fields all day, but there was only one of him. No, that wasn't it.

The needle rocked back and forth expectantly. "I'm thinking," said Apollo.

He looked around, up and down. And then he spotted it. Yes, this pair did run all over fields. It did sit by his bed at night. It indeed did have two long tongues that hung about!

"My shoes!" Apollo exclaimed. "My shoes, my shoes, my shoes, my shoes, my shoes . . ."

Apollo stood up to his full height, filled with pride. And hope. "Now if you will, please let me through!"

And the door opened, just like that.



“Why do we need to wash their clothes by hand?” Era moaned. “The Furies have powers. They could just blink this stuff clean.”

We were in our small gray cube of a room, the floor deadly cold, the Venus flytraps snapping away, me in no shoes (they were somewhere back on the River of Moaning).

“Why, isn’t it obvious?” replied Polly. “The Blessed Ones want us to suffer. They want us to smell their evil. They want us to see the stains from the elegant feast they had last night. They want us to know their dirt, feel their dirt, be their dirt. Oh, I can’t stand it!” and she threw up her hands. Tizzie’s velvet robe went flying and hit me on the head. “Sorry,” said Polly sheepishly.

* GODDESSES *

"It's okay. We've all about lost it, and why not? This is ridiculous! Absurd! We are goddesses!" I yelled. The sound bounced back at me off the walls.

"If you say that one more time, I am going to scream," yelled Polly, pretty much already screaming. "Of course we are goddesses. Era and I already know that, and Era and I are the only ones who can hear you say it over and over. It doesn't matter to anyone here." Polly covered her face with her hands. "Oh, Zeus, we're doomed. I can't bear this life. I can't."

My older sister was on an emotional Pegasus ride through the sky. Up, down, up, down.

"*You* can't bear this? What about me?" asked Era, slumped over an old tin wash basin, which was a major step backward from the washing machine we'd had in Athens, Georgia. "Look at what this cheap soap is doing to my hands! They are dried and cracked and itchy and freezing! I feel that my skin may never recover. And I need a bath; I need one baaaad. When will Daddy get here?"

"Daddy," I quietly said.

"Daddy," echoed Polly.

But he didn't appear.

I went back to scrubbing silently, trying not to notice the sands of time draining on my wrist. It

* LOVE OR FATE *

was just too depressing since there was nothing we could do about our situation. Our “room” was tightly locked. We had washed dozens of black gowns, black shawls, black stockings since we’d arrived, after a nap that seemed all too short. According to our hourglasses, our arrival had been almost twelve hours ago. And still no one had come to save us.

“I’m sick of all this black! It’s making me even more depressed! I wish they could at least have some orange or pink in their lives!”

And then it happened. POOF. The pair of stockings in my hands went from a dark and dreary black to pink and orange stripes.

“Whoa.”

My sisters and I looked at each other, then down at the socks. Powers? Powers!

“That was my powers, right? These were black a moment ago, weren’t they?” Era nodded, while Polly just stared. “Powers! I have powers!”

“Let me see that.” Polly snatched the stockings out of my hands. “There must be some mistake. How could you have powers?”

“I dunno. Maybe they’ve recharged or something, like on those Duracell commercials back in Athens, remember? Like, maybe Hera took them away, but now that we’ve been here for a while, in

* GODDESSES *

the godly realm, we're getting them back because, well, we're goddesses." This time Polly didn't get mad; she just listened quietly. "You try. Wish for something!"

"Oh. Oh, no. This is trouble, I know it!" erupted Polly.

"Oh, c'mon, Pol," I exclaimed, but Polly wasn't budging. "Fine. Era, you try!"

"Okay, I want . . . um, I want a candy bar!"

"A candy bar?" But before I was even finished questioning her choice, a paper-wrapped bar appeared at her feet. Era squealed with delight. That is, until she looked at it closely.

"It's not candy! It's one of those granola bar things!" she pouted.

"Who cares! We have powers!" I cried.

"Don't get too excited," said Polly. "I fear this is a trick. And besides, if we do truly have our powers back, they don't seem particularly powerful."

"Maybe we're just adjusting to them," I reasoned.

Just then Tizzie popped in. Literally. Popped. She didn't bother to use the thick door, let alone knock. How rude.

Era quickly slid her granola bar behind her.

Get back to work, and Thalia, put away that smirk.

* LOVE OR FATE *

I was not smirking. I was giving her a sideways glance filled with hatred.

Next up I need you to lance Alek's boil,
then make a likeness of her from aluminum foil.

"Nope, can't do it," I said matter-of-factly, going back to my cleaning. I had no patience for Tizzie right now. I wanted to think about our powers. How could we use them to get out? Did we all have them? Would they be stronger if we used them together?

That wasn't a question, but rather a demand,
lest you forget who has the upper hand.

I just stared down at my work, biting my tongue.

I'm leaving now, but we can see all.
Fight us and you'll find yourself against a wall.

And poof, she was just a cloud of smoke.

"Arrgh!" I yelled. "Oh, I wish she were an eight-toed toad with giant lymph nodes, ohhh, à la mode!"

And then out of the smoke cloud appeared an eight-toed toad, swollen to the gills with a single

scoop of cherry almond fudge ice cream on its head.

My sisters and I gasped.

“Ribet. Cough, cough, ribet,” said the toad.

“Did I just turn Tizzie into a toad?” I asked.

“It couldn’t be, could it?” asked Polly.

“Well, it looks like I did. No, I’m sure that I did. Our powers are back for real!”

“Shhh,” said Polly. “Not so loud. And we’re not supposed to use our powers, remember? It will get us into even more trouble.”

“How can we be in even more trouble?” I asked. “Lancing Fury boils is about as bad as it gets. We’re here for an eternity unless we get out of here soon. *Eternity*—that’s forever. If we have a chance, we need to grab it by the horns and go!”

“But Tizzie said they can see us in here. Surely Meg and Alek will be here shortly. Surely they will know. Oh, what will they do to us now?” Polly cried.

“We *can* use our powers, and we will,” I demanded. “This is our ticket out of here.”

“Maybe we should just use them to do the chores while we wait for Daddy to come get us,” suggested Era, looking at Polly, then back at me like she didn’t know who to agree with.

“No! Daddy is not coming, Era. Hera has pulled

* LOVE OR FATE *

the wool over his eyes; I'm sure of it. We can't take a chance," I argued. "This is our only hope. We have to act fast before those other two realize Tizzie is a toad!"

Meanwhile the aforementioned toad, which had been eating the ice cream, was now hacking up milky balls of phlegm. If we didn't leave soon, I could guarantee we'd have to clean them up.

"No, we are not using magic—that is what got us into this mess," said Polly frantically.

"Are you insane? We can get out of here. Beam us home to Olympus!" I yelled, disregarding Polly's protests.

But nothing happened.

"We wish to be home in Olympus, my sisters and I!"

But still, nothing.

"Era, help me! Wish it, wish to go home with me now!"

"Yeah, okay, I wish to go home, too."

But nothing happened.

"Okay, okay. What about the gates? We can figure something out from there. We wish to go to the gates!"

Nothing. Our powers couldn't be gone that easily, could they?

"Well, fine. So it's not that easy. We need to find

another way to get out of here. We've got to try it. Are you with me, Era?"

Era nibbled on the already jagged nails of her right hand. Her eyes were huge. "I don't know. I don't think I want to risk a scary, dirty escape. It sounds exhausting. You know, if I could just have a bath, I could think clearly afterward. Let's blink a bathtub and some of that delicious lavender soap, the French kind."

And just like that, a tub appeared, with a cube of scented soap hanging in the air above it. Thank goddess, our powers were still with us. They just weren't strong enough to get us home on their own.

"Yay!" squealed Era. "I want to decide after my bath."

"There is no time. C'mon. Polly, please! We can't waste another minute. It's ridiculous that we're even arguing about it."

"But your powers aren't even working correctly," said Polly. "They're simply too weak."

"Too weak? Too weak?" I was frantic. I was desperate. I noticed that Era had already doffed her clothes and was climbing into the bath. I was losing control of the situation. "We'll just have to walk out. I can do it; I can get us out of here!" I said.

* LOVE OR FATE *

“Thalia, no!” yelled Polly. But it was too late. I was already making the decision that would get us out of this place and back where we belonged. I was commanding the heavy stone door to open wide. And this time it worked. The door opened just like I commanded.

And then it promptly fell on Tizzie the sick toad, squishing her with one loud SMACK!



“What is the hottest chili known to god or man?” asked the Black Knight at the spike-covered turnstile. Apollo had made it through another hallway only to be confronted by a very tall suit of ebony armor.

“So you’re a gatekeeper, too, huh?” asked Apollo.

“Yes. Hector, the Trojan Prince, at your service. You must answer my riddle to move on.”

“Greetings, Sir Hector, but please, what does the hottest chili have to do with finding Thalia?”

“Don’t know who this Thalia is or why she is lost, but I know that my questions are often about heat. This is Hades, after all.”

“But it’s not even hot down here. It’s actually ridiculously cold.”

"What are you talking about? I'm boiling up!" said the knight indignantly.

Apollo couldn't help but shiver. He was freezing. Plus he had no idea what the hottest chili was.

"Please, Sir Hector, can't you ask me something about gods? Maybe a little trivia about mortals of the future? I also know a lot about the sun and battles near and far."

"Sorry. The question is, what is the hottest chili known to god or man?"

"Um, okay, let's see, um, well, I seem to recall something called a jalpeeny?"

"Wrong! That's a jalapeño, and it is far from the hottest chili. The answer is habañoero. You lose."

"No!" yelled Apollo.

"Yes. I'm afraid I must send you back to the gates, to contend with Cerberus."

"But wait," said Apollo. "Isn't there anything I can do? Can I give you something, anything?" But Apollo knew he had nothing of real value. Except . . .

"I'll give you Hades' magic helmet!" he declared.

"Oh," exclaimed the knight. "Oh, that would be very fine. Yes, yes, I will take that."

"Great!" Apollo cried with relief. "Then please let me through."

"Oh, no, I will take the helmet, but only in exchange for another riddle. If you then answer it

correctly, I shall let you through; otherwise, it's back to the gates."

Apollo's heart sank. "This one isn't about peppers, is it?"

"No, this one is about the Great War."

"The Great War?"

"The Trojan War. Do you accept my offering—will you release the helmet? Or shall I send you to the three-headed dog?"

"I have no choice," Apollo said, hanging his head low. It didn't seem quite fair, but who was he to argue? Anyway, he didn't have time.

The helmet popped away into thin air and then appeared in the knight's hands as Apollo slowly came back into sight. He was worse for the wear, too, for his football uniform was filthy, covered in dirt, goop, and grime.

"Okay, well, go ahead, then—what is the next question?"

"There is a king in Cyprus who did not himself go into battle—"

"Why, that is Cinyras, king of Paphos. I'm correct; let me through!" Apollo said with glee.

"Wait, I am not finished. He made a promise to Agamemnon—"

"Oh, I know this. To send fifty ships for the war effort! Let me through!"

"Not yet. Here is the riddle. Did King Cinyras fulfill his promise to Agamemnon?"

"Well, this is tricky, isn't it?"

"Did he fulfill his promise or not? Simply answer the question."

"Well . . . yes. Yes, he did send fifty ships. But the thing was, he sent only one real one and forty-nine toy clay ones with forty-nine tiny clay soldiers inside."

"Why, that is . . . correct! Congratulations! He did indeed keep his promise. Of course, the ships soon disintegrated in the sea." Satisfied, the knight lifted the helmet and placed it on his head. He began to fade away, laughing to himself. "Go on," he said. The spike-covered turnstile beckoned behind his now invisible body. Apollo chose to jump it rather than risk injury by pushing through.

He ran down this latest corridor at lightning speed, hoping no one would see him now that he was visible. Faster and faster he ran, past a minute rhinoceros with a golden horn, past three five-legged mohawked monkeys who were whooping far too loudly, past a witch in a flowered bonnet and a thick-necked giant. All these creatures appeared to be going through their dark dead days without so much as a worry or a care.

* LOVE OR FATE *

Abruptly the long hallway poured into a seemingly empty and dark cave that echoed Apollo's every step, where the wind whipped so fast that it moaned angrily. The place was dismal. And disturbing. But this was the right way. He could just feel it deep down in the base of his spine. He had to keep going.

"Pretty, squawk, yummy, squawk."

This new noise was even more unsettling. It burned Apollo's ears. Every hair on his body stood on end.

And then he saw them. And froze.

Up along the high ceiling of the cave, hanging on every possible corner and ledge, were the most sinister creatures he could remember seeing, with huge, monstrous wings and eerily human faces. He'd heard of these creatures; there was no mistaking them. They were Harpies. And they were all looking down at him with hunger in their eyes.

Up until now, Apollo's journey through Tartarus had been upsetting and stressful, even occasionally amusing, but certainly not scary in a deadly kind of way. Now, however, Apollo feared for his life.

"Pretty, squawk, yummy, squawk."

Apollo concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other, not too slow, but not so fast that he'd

rile the creatures up. They weren't attacking yet, but he felt their descent was imminent.

He wished they knew his real identity. Most creatures of Hades, no matter how horrid, were supposed to make exceptions for gods. But in his football uniform he hardly looked the part.

"Pretty, squawk, yummy, squawk."

One, two, then a third let go of their ledges and drifted back and forth above him. He was sweating despite the arctic chill. They were taunting him, flying dangerously close.

"No, no. I can't fall victim to these . . . beasts. Thalia, I must find Thalia," he said to himself.

"No, squawk, Thalia, squawk."

"What? Did you just say Thalia's name?" Apollo ventured to ask the creature nearest him, who looked at him with bloodthirsty eyes.

"What, squawk, Thalia, squawk," it replied.

"Are you copying me?"

"You, squawk, copy, squawk."

Apollo thought hard. There was something here that he needed to figure out. But it was difficult to concentrate because more and more of the creatures were now swooping down from their perches, circling his head. Every once in a while one would graze his hair.

"Ahhh!" One had just bitten his left ear.

“Owww!” Another scratched at his cheek.

Apollo was ready to shift into panic mode. The creatures surrounded him so thickly that he could no longer see the way out. They continued their horrible squawking.

Then it came to him. It was worth a try.

“Foul tasting I am. Dirty and grimy, too.” Apollo started to mumble under his breath. “Too skinny, no meat on those bones.”

“Foul tasting, squawk, skinny, squawk,” his attackers mimicked.

“Sour and bitter, rancid and vile.”

“Sour, squawk, bitter, squawk.”

“Rancid, squawk, vile, squawk.”

Sure enough, the creatures began to back away as if hypnotized. The excitement in the air seemed to evaporate. A few of the animals even returned to their perches, looking bored.

Apollo took the opportunity to make a run for it. He bolted, just forged ahead in a straight line. He heard the violence of hundreds of wings flapping behind him, but he didn’t pay any heed; he just kept mumbling and running, running and mumbling.

He didn’t slow down, even when he’d gotten far out of range. The cave took a sharp right, then a hard left, and then, suddenly, there was light up ahead. He ran toward it, knowing he was near. Now

* GODDESSES *

that the wind was gone, he could smell the evil breath of the Furies festering in the air.

He came to a roaring halt in front of three doors. Light streamed from behind them. Beside the one on the right was a huge pile of what looked like dirty laundry. What was *that* doing there? Just as Apollo took a step closer to investigate, he heard footsteps coming toward him. Heavy footsteps that could easily belong to the Furies.

Apollo had no time to do anything but jump into the pile of clothes. He covered himself in the stinky fabrics and held his breath, wondering what to do next.



At least the door to our prison cell was open. Unfortunately, it was now atop Tizzie the toad. I hated Tizzie with every fiber of my being, but I'd never wanted her dead! I wouldn't even kill a spider. And now I was a real murderer.

My sisters and I all looked at each other in total despair. I didn't think I was crying until I felt the tears streaming down my face. But I had to pull myself together. We had to get out of here.

Era was not happy about having to get back into her dirty clothes after her quick dip in the bubbly lavender bath, but she had no choice. We tried to blink her clean clothes, we tried to conjure up clean clothes for all of us, but all we came up with was a single tube sock and a linty moth-ridden sweater.

* GODDESSES *

Polly still didn't want to risk escape, especially since our powers were so obviously unstable, but I finally just grabbed her arm and pulled. Era stumbled behind us.

As the three of us ran up the stairs, then through the replica of our old home, I tried desperately not to look around. I didn't want to be distracted by the memories, both sad and happy. The drapes. The candles. The piano. It was so bittersweet.

We got out quickly through the door we'd used to come in, and once we were outside, we stopped for a moment to catch our breath and get our bearings. I looked over my shoulder just in time to see the doorway through which we'd entered disappear. Now we had no choice but to keep going.

We were in a room surrounded by doors. Off to the right of us was a dank, dark passageway that looked like it led nowhere. In front of us were three other doors that looked more promising. Yes, the way out had to be one of these. But which one? I couldn't think clearly; all I could think about was Tizzie and what I'd done to her. Until Polly gasped, grabbing my attention as she pointed to a corner of the room, her eyes filled with fright.

Then her eyelids fluttered closed and she fainted.

* LOVE OR FATE *

My eyes followed the direction in which Polly had pointed—and there, poking out from underneath a pile of dirty Fury clothes that were surely waiting for us to wash them, was a single sneaker, connected to a real live foot. Somebody was hiding in that pile, watching us. I didn't want to stick around to find out who.

"Get up, Polly! Era, pick her up!" I whispered.

Era, also noticing the foot, looked at me and began to cry. Polly started to come to.

"Let's get out of here," Era sobbed, pulling me and a half-standing Polly toward the middle door.

"No, I think it's this way," muttered Polly, regaining her feet and her senses and pointing to the left.

"Whoa, you're both wrong; it's this way," and I grabbed Polly by her filthy sleeve. It was damp, just like mine.

"No, it's not," Era said. "I paid attention on the way in. Really, it must be this way?" But she didn't look so sure.

"I'm going this way. You two can do what you want," I said as I kept moving in the *right* direction. Polly and Era waited for a second or so, threw another glance in the direction of the shoe, which, by some stroke of luck, hadn't moved to reveal its wearer, and then followed me.

We ran and ran and ran until we came to a gate. A locked gate. A locked gate I had never seen before. "Argh!" I let out a scream of frustration when I realized things looked unfamiliar. I cast a glance at my timepiece—another hour gone.

"Shhh," said Polly. "We have to be quiet. Oh, who am I kidding—this will never work!"

"I guess I went the wrong way," I said sheepishly. "Let's turn around."

"Wait, I'll let you through." It was a deep voice. It was coming from the top of the gate. We looked up but saw only shadows.

"Did somebody up there just say something?" I asked.

"Yes. I said I'd let you through," came the reply from the darkness.

"Okay, then, let us through."

"First you must answer my riddle." I couldn't tell for sure, but the voice sounded like it was smiling.

"A riddle? What kind of riddle?" I asked.

Polly tugged on my sleeve. "Let's just run," she whispered. "It could be a trap. A Fury trap."

I ignored her and asked again, "What kind of riddle?"

"History!" said the voice.

* LOVE OR FATE *

"Oh, I stink at history," I said. "Polly, you're right, I think we should—"

"Wait, wait! " the voice cooed softly. "On second thought, how about a question regarding gossip?"

"What?" I asked.

"The question, it's about gossip. Will you stay and take my challenge? It will be so much fun."

"Fun?" I couldn't imagine anything being fun right now. But if it got us through the gate . . . "Um, okay, I'm good at gossip. But what happens if we get it wrong?"

The voice in the darkness gave out a laugh. "Then it's back to your room."

"How did you know? . . ."

Polly nudged me, panic in her eyes. "It's a trick," she whispered. "Let's go."

I pulled away from her. "Um, can you show yourself first?" I asked.

"Thalia, let's just go," said Polly.

"I think I know the way. It was back there," said Era under her breath.

"No, I know the way—let's go my way," said Polly even more quietly.

"Show yourself," I said again.

Down swooped a scraggly-looking bird, like an old condor or eagle. But it had pointy ears, big

pointy ears. And its nails, or claws, were at least six inches long and curled away from its body. As it landed before us, I could see that it looked like it had been picked over by a few hungry bugs. It would have been quite a scary creature if it hadn't stood only a foot and a half high.

I hoped against hope this wasn't a Fury in disguise. Anyway, if it was, we were all doomed, anyway.

"Okay, let's get on with this," I said. "What's the question?"

"Okay, okay. Let's see. Back in prehistoric times—"

"Wait, you said no history! You said it would be about gossip!" I complained.

"Oh, right—yes, I did. Forgive me. Hmmm, a question about gossip. Okay, then. Yes, I've got it. Who is the lucky new girl who has won the young god Apollo's heart?"

"What?" I screeched.

"Yes, I heard he is happily in love with a young woman and they are off to settle in Crete somewhere, then they are to travel the world together."

"Are you sure it was . . ." I choked on the last word.

"This is some sort of game, Thalia, a trick. We must get out of here," said Polly as she clutched my hand and started to lead me away.

"No," I whispered.

"Oh, wait." The bird laughed. "Wait, maybe it wasn't Apollo, maybe it was Ares. I always get those two gods mixed up."

"How can you get them mixed up?" I screamed. "Apollo is young and gorgeous. Ares is old and fat and bald."

"I think it was Ares. Maybe it was Apollo. Oh, goodness, who knows? Never mind, obviously that question was no good. Let's see, a new question. Hmmm."

"Um, Thalia, I think Polly is right. I have a bad feeling—let's just get out of here," Era whispered.

"Listen, if we can get through this gate, we'll at least be farther out of the Furies' lair. Besides, I don't want to find out which one of them was hiding back there." I turned back to the bird creature. "Let's hear the new question."

"Yes, okay, the question. Hmmm. Why was Eris not invited to the wedding of Peleus and Thetis?"

"I know!" Polly, Era, and I each yelled out simultaneously.

"She was a wretched person, and nobody wanted her to come," said Polly.

"The bride hated her," I said.

"She had atrocious hair," said Era.

On hearing our answers, the bird smiled in its beaky way. "You're all right," it said. "Bravo!"

* GODDESSES *

“Great, let us through,” I gushed. My sisters jumped up and down in excitement. We were going to make it!

Then the bird started to laugh. No, not just laugh; it began to cackle. A giant red buzzer appeared out of nowhere, and a horrible noise echoed around us. “But it doesn’t matter! You lose all the same!” The buzzer was a loser button, like on those horrible game shows. The bird’s cackling got louder and thicker and higher as we gazed at each other in confusion. The sound was coming at us from every angle; it was surrounding us with hideous sound. The noise seemed like it could gobble us up right then and there.

We turned around to see them then, standing there, their smiles as wide as Hera’s bottom. It was Meg, Alek . . . and Tizzie!



From his hiding space in the laundry pile, Apollo thought he heard voices. He tried to peek, but it was too risky to move an inch, so he just stayed put. He waited till the rustling sounds were gone before stepping out into the open and faced the three doorways once again. He could hear voices echoing from the one on the right. If the Furies had gone that way, maybe they would lead him to the place where his true love was locked away.

When he opened the door, however, there was nothing but black space behind it. He opened the second door—the one in the middle. Just more black space. The third door held nothing behind it as well. Was this a trick? Was someone toying with him?

* GODDESSES *

Apollo was stunned. There was no place to go. He didn't want to backtrack the way he'd come, for he was sure the Furies' lair was still ahead of him. But now it looked like there was no way to move forward. Once again he stood helpless, wondering what his next move should be. No powers, no idea where the girls could be, no idea truly of where he was.

"This whole thing is unfair!" he cried. "Rotten and unfair." He sank down on the ground to think. His heart had an ache. It had been too long since he'd seen Thalia's eyes. Her smile. Since he'd felt her hand in his. "Argh!" he screamed. "I'm running around like a crazed mortal in Hades, with no help from the other realm. I've got to save the girls—and myself—from this abominable fate!"

Apollo paused. *Fate?* he thought. "Yes! Fate," he yelled. "The Fates*!"

Apollo realized he was talking to no one, yelling at air, and he quieted down. But this, he thought, this had to work.

If he'd had his powers, all he would have had to do was call on them out loud and they would have appeared. But in this mortal form, he wasn't sure they would listen. Still, he had to try.

Apollo got on his knees, clenched his hands

* The Fates—Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos—have the power to control the destiny of gods and mortals alike, though they are themselves neither gods nor mortals. They are more like servants to justice; super-heroes of ancient times. Gods can call on them in times of real need.

* LOVE OR FATE *

together, raised them above his head, and yelled, "Fates, I command you to show your faces!"

A small bolt of lightning pinged off one of the doors. But no one appeared. Still, Apollo was hopeful, for his voice had at least produced a lightning bolt. No matter how small, it wasn't bad for someone with no powers. He would try again.

"Fates, I beg of you, show your faces!"

This time a minuscule firecracker appeared, popped in midair, and then fizzled to the ground, leaving a small pile of ash on the hallway floor.

"Hmmm, still nothing. Okay." Apollo tried one last time. "Fates, please, you are my only hope, show your faces!"

This time there wasn't even a fizzle. The room was silent.

It was useless without his powers. *He* was useless without his powers. *How*, he pondered, *how does one reach the Fates when they have no godly powers of their own?* And then he remembered an old children's tale that his grandmother used to read to him. It was about Tartarus and the Fates. How did it go? He concentrated on the memory of sitting in his grandmother Gaia's lap, in her overstuffed brocade chair, the book in her hand.

There was once a young mortal boy named Gerard, who, curious as he was, was constantly

* GODDESSES *

finding himself in places he didn't belong. Once, he followed a soldier twenty miles on foot, wandering straight onto a battlefield—all because he'd been enthralled by the soldier's uniform. He even managed, at the tender age of eight, to gain entrance into Aphrodite's changing room.

But one particular time he took his curiosity a step too far. In the dark shadows of a particularly deep and dastardly swamp where he and his father were camping, Gerard spotted a boat that caught his fancy. He quietly tiptoed toward the vessel and, seeing that no one was inside, he climbed aboard. He pretended he was a great sea captain, commanding hundreds of men. But then he heard someone coming and crouched down into the bow, under a large box. Little did he know that he had stowed away on a boat bound for Tartarus.

Gerard shivered and shook the whole ride there. Once the boat docked and the coast was clear, he got out—a big mistake—for as soon as he took one step onto land, the boat disappeared. He had no way of leaving Tartarus.

Gerard was frightened, more frightened than he had ever been. He sat on a rock next to a small muddy creek and began to weep. The next morning a very old Tartarus witch, one of the Secret Society of Witch Tarts, found him

* LOVE OR FATE *

crying. The Secret Society of Witch Tarts were a particularly evil brand of witches with many special powers, but this one in particular thought Gerard looked a lot like her own grandson, whom she hadn't seen in many years.

"What say you, boy?" she asked in her witchiest voice.

"I'm not scared of you," said young Gerard through tears.

The witch liked the boy's spunk and asked him why, then, he was crying.

"I am crying because I miss my home. I would like to see my mama again. I cannot, can I?" And he began to cry even harder.

The witch, who had a soft spot for young Gerard, could hear no more of his weeping. And using her special Witch Tart powers, she called on the Fates for help in getting Gerard back to his family. They came and listened as the Witch Tart pleaded the young boy's case. The Fates then returned the boy to the mortal realm of the living.

Yes, he thought, the Witch Tart was indeed able to contact the Fates, and the Fates had been able to get the boy out of Hades.

Well, that was it. He would go in search of a member of the Secret Society of Witch Tarts.



THIRTEEN

Upon seeing the Furies—all *three* of the Furies—my sisters and I mustered up a weak, “Tizzie!”

That’s right, Tizzie wasn’t dead at all. But the toad was. Turns out my powers had been strong enough to create a toad out of thin air but not strong enough to turn one wicked witch goddess into the aforementioned toad.

After the Furies had sent their scraggly pet bird creature on his way, and after they were finished laughing at our lousy attempt at an escape, our poor magical skills, and our wretched hairdos, they escorted us back to our “home,” aka the concrete box. It was a long walk, as filled with slime, bile, and gobbledygook as before.

The bath that Era had conjured up was long

* GODDESSES *

gone. All that remained was a small puddle of lavender bubbles.

I'd failed. Our escape had failed miserably, and now we were faced with Polly's biggest fear: the Furies were actually more angry, more enraged than before. Maybe she had been right. Maybe things could get worse.

It is here you will stay, in this tiresome abode,
For thinking you can turn me into a dead toad.

Tizzie was speaking; her sisters just stood on either side of her, their hands placed confidently on their hips, their gazes burning a hole right between my eyes.

You thought it was bad, but thanks to your boldness
We're shrinking the space and
increasing the coldness!

At these words the temperature seemed to drop another twenty degrees. The room, which was already incredibly smushed, shrank even more right before our eyes.

We're going to leave you with jobs aplenty,
Thirty-two thousand, three hundred and twenty.

* LOVE OR FATE *

Well, at least that was no big shock. We were already expecting to do their chores for all eternity. But now, apparently, the chores were numbered on a giant scroll, which the Furies dropped at our feet at that moment. Then they left the room, laughing, slamming the big, thick door behind them. It locked with a giant click.

"No!" I yelled, banging my fists against the door in pure frustration. I tried my powers on the lock, but nothing. I guess they were gone again. OH! To have freedom within our reach, and then to have it ripped away again. It was too much to take.

I looked down at my timepiece. There was little time left, perhaps seven or eight hours. That probably wasn't even enough time to make it through the maze, even if we hadn't been locked in a freezing cold cell with no way out.

"Daddy," I whispered. And then, even quieter, "Apollo."

Then I leaned my head against the door and cried.

Sometimes sisters know exactly what to do to make you feel better. At that moment I felt two sets of warm arms around me.

"It's okay," Polly said.

"Yeah, we'll be okay," Era added.

I turned to both of them and squeezed them

tight. "I'm sorry, I know it's my fault. I got you in this mess. I'm so very, very sorry."

"I'm sorry I got so caught up in my bath," said Era. "I love you both dearly. Dearly!"

"Yes, yes, I love you both, too. Very much," said Polly. "We mustn't work against each other. We must help each other. Who knows how long we may be here?"

"I'm afraid," said Era with wide eyes, "we may be here forever, just as they said."

"I'm afraid you may be right," agreed Polly. "If Father could have rescued us, I suspect he would have done it already." Her eyes drifted to her wrist, and we sat there silently. "Oh, he should have been here by now!" she cried.

"You know," I said, "I could take the cleaning all day long and into the night. I could, I really could. But I can't bear the thought of not seeing my friends again. And our other dear sisters! And Apollo!"

"I cannot bear the idea of never seeing another tree," said Polly. "Or Pegasus!"

"Oh, yes, Pegasus," we all concurred.

"It's just that it is so cold and unfriendly here. So dark and dead. I want to see life!" Polly had a single tear rolling down her cheek.

"Well," said Era, "I don't think I can bear to be without clean beautiful clothes. And a fluffy bed."

* LOVE OR FATE *

And my nettle leaf shampoo. And boys! I mean, maybe I could clean all day if I knew that in the end, I could make myself all pretty and then have a dance or two around a ballroom with a handsome young man."

We all laughed. Even Era. The idea of going to a ball in Hades after a day of cleaning the Furies' clothes was, well, humorous, in a sad sort of way.

"I think I know how we can get through this. But we all must do our part," said Polly.

"You know a way out?" I cried.

"No, Thalia. I didn't mean to get your hopes up. It's just that I think we can make the best of this."

"What do you mean?" asked Era.

"I believe if we focus on the good from our lives, remembering fun and joy and love and laughter, it will make this unbearable reality a little less cold."

"What do you mean, focus?" I asked. "How do we focus?"

"Well . . ." Polly thought for a moment. "I think we should take turns telling a story about something that happened to us back home. Even if we think we've told it before."

"Like the story about how I summoned Cupid to help me win the attentions of Percival?" asked Era, excited by the prospect of retelling a tale she's told a thousand times, about when she wore the most

beautiful silk gown and kissed one of the handsomest gods in all of Olympus.

"Exactly," said Polly.

"And I know, when we're tired of telling stories," I suggested, "we can sing! That might drive the Furies crazy!"

"Yes, yes, we can sing," said Polly. "But we mustn't think about what will make the Furies mad or glad or any such thing. We should do it strictly for ourselves. For each other. And one day, if we get out of here . . ."

"If," I said sadly.

"No, one day, *when* we get out of here," said Polly, "we will be that much more thankful for our wonderful lives and for each other. What do you say?"

"Yes!" cried Era and I.

"Now, let's take a look at this scroll they left us." Polly picked it up and started to read it. "Yes, I'm afraid it's a list of thirty-two thousand, three hundred and twenty chores. But hey, that's fine—it's not a list of thirty-two thousand, three hundred and twenty-*one* chores, and that's a good thing!"

I tried to be as upbeat as Polly, but that was too much. She seemed to sense this as she moved on to read the list, a little less perkily.

* LOVE OR FATE *

“Okay, let’s see what it says. ‘Chore number one,’” and then her smile faded.

“What does it say?” asked Era.

“Is it really that bad?” I asked, knowing full well it probably was.

Polly just winced and read on, “‘Chore number one: clean up dead squished toad.’”



FOURTEEN

Apollo went back in the direction from which he had come, in search of a Secret Society Witch Tart. Only problem was, he didn't know what they looked like. Nor did he know where exactly to find one.

Before coming to the lair of the horrible, squawking creatures he had met before, he made a sharp left into a new hall. Down a new corridor he ran, this one well lit, until he happened upon a very large earthworm. Very large. The earthworm was over five feet long and at least two feet wide. It was wearing a top hat. He had no idea why or how a giant earthworm would have ended up here in Hades, but there was no time to think about that.

"Excuse me, sir," said Apollo.

* GODDESSES *

"That would be ma'am," said the earthworm angrily.

"Oh, excuse me, it's just, well, the hat and all," said Apollo awkwardly.

"You have some nerve commenting on my hat. Have you taken a look at your ridiculous outfit?"

"Yes, I know, I am wearing a rather odd outfit for Tartarus, but believe me, back on earth, well, in the future, in the United States, well, Georgia, in this one high school, this football uniform is a very respectable choice of clothing."

The earthworm made a "hmpf" noise and started to slither away.

"Wait, I need to ask you something."

"What is it? I haven't got all day," said the worm impatiently, still slinking down the hallway. Apollo followed her.

"Do you happen to know where I can find a Secret Society Witch Tart?"

The earthworm gasped. "No, that's secret." She continued to move away from Apollo as fast as she could. Which wasn't all that fast—earthworms aren't known for their speed.

"Look, it's tremendously important. I'm a god, a very important god. Maybe you've heard of me—Apollo is the name."

* LOVE OR FATE *

“Of course I have heard of Apollo, and such a god would not be in Tartarus, nor would he be caught dead wearing such absurd clothing. Good day.”

With that, the worm slithered around a corner and out of sight, and Apollo was left to search for another inhabitant of Tartarus. Hopefully a friendlier and more helpful one.

Moments later he came upon a young man. A very normal-looking young man. When Apollo tapped him on the shoulder, he jumped three feet in the air and let out a petrified yelp.

“Oh, sorry to have startled you, sir. It *is* sir, isn’t it?”

The man just looked at Apollo without so much as a blink.

“Right, okay, my name is Apollo, I’m a God, and . . .”

The man began to laugh hysterically.

“No, really, I am.”

The man didn’t seem so scared anymore. “Okay, then do a trick, *Apollo*. Perform some great feat. Prove it.” And he laughed some more.

“Well, you see, I can’t. It’s really a very long story, and I haven’t much time, but trust me, I am the god Apollo. Now, I have a question of grave importance. Do you know where I can find a Secret Society Witch Tart?”

The man looked frightened again. He shivered

* GODDESSES *

and shook, and then he made a run for it. He was gone in an instant.

Apollo thought about running after him, but what good would it do him?

So he continued to wander along the unending halls of Tartarus. It seemed like he had covered miles of hallway before he came upon another soul. This time it was a woman. She was young and beautiful. For some reason, she was crying.

"Excuse me," said Apollo, "I don't mean to interrupt. Are you all right?"

"No, I'm not all right," the woman said, looking up at Apollo with a mournful, tear-streaked face. "I'm stuck in Tartarus. And for what? What! Just because I turned a young man into stone!"

"Well, that doesn't seem like such a bad crime," Apollo consoled, patting her on the shoulder. "Maybe you could . . . wait! Does that mean you're a witch?" he asked.

"Turning a man into stone shouldn't mean you have to spend an eternity in Tartarus," she cried. "You understand. Just because he was Demeter's boyfriend, that's still no reason!"

"Oh, he was betrothed to a goddess? Well, that does get into sticky territory there. You know, you really shouldn't mess with the goddesses." Apollo realized they were straying from the point. "Anyway,

* LOVE OR FATE *

you didn't answer me. Does this mean, if you have the power to turn someone into stone, that you are a witch?"

"Gods, schmods! I will mess with whomever I want! Wait till they see the damage I can do from down here. You just wait!"

The young woman looked at Apollo again, like she was actually noticing him for the first time. And seeing him young and handsome, she quickly lost her angry look and smiled a flirtatious smile.

But Apollo didn't notice. "So you are a witch? Wonderful!"

"Yes, I am a witch," said the woman. She was twirling a piece of her long blond hair around her index finger coyly.

"You aren't, by chance, a Secret Society Witch Tart, are you?"

The young woman wrinkled her nose. "Oh, heavens no, those old broads are ugly. In case you haven't noticed, I am beautiful. That's why Demeter's boyfriend fancied me over her!"

"Right, okay." Apollo plunged ahead, not wanting to get off track. "Do you know where I might find a Secret Society Witch Tart?"

"Well, you know, it's secret," she said as she batted her eyelashes.

"So I've heard," said Apollo, a little exasperated.

"But do you think you could tell *me*?" He made an earnest attempt to flirt back. He lowered his chin and looked up at her from under his long eyelashes.

"Well, I don't know. What can you do for me?"

Apollo began to sweat around his shoulder pads. "Um, well, I am actually the powerful god Apollo, only my powers are not intact at this moment. Once I have regained them, perhaps I can speak with Demeter and get you out of here."

The young witch began to laugh. "You, a god? Hardly. Don't get me wrong, you are good-looking, but that getup? No, no, I don't believe you."

"Really, I am!" But it was no use.

"Still, I think I can find something for you to do for me."

Apollo was scared to ask. "What, exactly?"

"If you give me a single kiss, I think I may be able to tell you where you can find a silly old Witch Tart."

"A single kiss?"

"Yes, a single one. On the lips."

Apollo knew better than to make deals with witches, and as harmless as a single kiss on the lips sounded, he knew it could be very dangerous. Still, this was Thalia's life at stake. Plus her sisters' and possibly his own. He had to find a Witch Tart, pronto, and this might be his only chance.

* LOVE OR FATE *

He looked into the eyes of the young witch. They were jet black and cold as ice. But as he got closer, he could swear he saw a figure, a shadow, really, dancing a little jig in each pupil. It scared him a bit; he shut his own eyes so as not to see and planted a dry kiss on the young witch's lips.

Apollo stepped back and opened his eyes, and then he gasped. The woman before him was no longer a young and beautiful witch—she was decrepit and old. Her long fair hair had turned a dirt brown color, and it was dry and frizzy on the ends. Her pale silk gown was now tattered and torn and bulging in places a gown shouldn't bulge.

Apollo didn't understand. He took a step back. And another.

"Don't go away so fast, young man. You said you were looking for a Secret Society Witch Tart. Well, you have found one. Now, why would you want such a creature in your midst?"

"Are you really a Witch Tart?" asked Apollo.

"I am more real than you. *Apollo*, did you say it was?"

"But I *am* Apollo—I really am. This body, well, it's from the future; that's why it looks so odd to you. It's simply a disguise."

"Hmmm, yes." But it was obvious she didn't believe him. She giggled.

Then she stopped abruptly. "What is it you want, young man?"

"I must contact the Fates."

"Well, if you are the great and powerful Apollo, you do not need a lowly old witch, Secret Society or not, to do that."

"Yes, but see, like I told you, I am without my powers right now."

"So you said. Hmmm. No. I do not do favors for silly clowns or ridiculously dressed mortals."

"But I am neither. Please, you are my only hope. I must contact the Fates. I need their help on a most dire matter."

"And what is that?"

"Well, it's a rather long story, but suffice it to say that my true love, Thalia, and two of her sisters are trapped here in Tartarus and I must get them out."

"No one leaves Tartarus, you fool. Besides, I heard from a recently dead arrival that Thalia wants nothing to do with the god Apollo. You really must keep up with the godly gossip if you're going to walk around claiming to be one of the gods!"

"With all due respect, Madam Witch Tart, Thalia does indeed want something to do with me, or at least I am fairly certain that she does. Now, please, call on the Fates for me."

"No," said the witch.

* LOVE OR FATE *

"Please!" said Apollo.

"I'll tell you what," said the witch.

"Yes, please," begged Apollo.

"No matter who you are, I shall call on the Fates for you—"

"Oh, thank you, thank you," cried Apollo.

"Wait! I was not finished. Under one condition."

"Of course, name it!" exclaimed Apollo.

"You must bring me a three-ounce vial of Cerberus's slobber!"

"The three-headed dog?"

"That is the one!" said the witch.

"But that's all the way back at the gates! I'm up against a clock here. Don't you have a quicker job, perhaps?"

"No, that is the condition. I need a few drops of it for a spell. Get the slobber and I will command the attentions of the Fates. Fail and you're on your own."

"Fine. I will get you the slobber. But you better hold up your end of the bargain," said Apollo.

"And remember," said the witch, "Cerberus's slobber is deathly poisonous to mortals. So you better hope you are in fact the one and only Apollo!" And then she cackled and howled so hard, it hurt Apollo's ears.

No problem, thought Apollo. He was a god.

But then he had a thought.

He might be a god, but the body he was inhabiting was all mortal.



Fifteen

Polly was finishing up chore number seven: “Make jewelry out of Alek’s earwax.”

“Done—that’s only thirty-two thousand, three hundred and thirteen left to go!” she said cheerfully, and then she frowned at how pathetic that sounded.

Era and I were scrubbing the yellow stains out of the armpits of all the Furies’ lace tops. They had given us eyelash brushes and a small vial of baking soda to complete this task.

“Go on, finish your story, Pol,” I said, rubbing at a particularly difficult stain. Polly had been telling us of a time when she and Mother had happened upon a lost lamb on one of their long walks through the pastures back home.

“Well,” Polly said, shifting back into storytelling

* GODDESSES *

mode, "I wanted so desperately to pet it, but I knew better, so I just watched from afar. But then Mother said that it was okay, that we could take it home because it was an orphan. So she picked it up and placed it in my arms. You know, she was so gentle that lamb didn't seem scared at all."

"She *was* gentle," Era repeated, her eyes taking on a faraway look.

"Gentle but strong," I agreed. "She was kind, but she had so much strength in her. Everybody says so."

"Strength? Strength? That woman had about as much strength as a caterpillar!" The voice was coming from behind us.

Polly, Era, and I turned to see that there was a fourth person in the room. It was Hera. Hera the Horrible. As if this place wasn't bad enough already. She was wearing some tacky fur-lined bikini under a black velvet robe that barely covered her pasty white flesh. She began to laugh her horrifying cackle, the one that makes you feel like pins are burrowing into your skin with every chuckle.

She snapped her fingers, and suddenly Meg, Alek, and Tizzie appeared beside her, looking as surprised to see Hera as we were.

"You really need to do something with this

* LOVE OR FATE *

place,” Hera boomed. “It’s a dump! Some drapes would be nice, wouldn’t they, Tizzie? Polly, you really should conjure some up—OH, WAIT!—you don’t have any powers!” And the cackling started all over again.

“Seriously, though.” Hera tried to catch her breath, but she started to wheeze. “Lack of powers does not excuse poor taste. You really could have spruced up the place a little for me.” Green smoke oozed from under the impossibly long, velvety train of her cover-up as her eyes fixed on each of us, one by one, with mockery and glee.

“Now, on to the business at hand. A little bird told me that you little weasels tried to escape. Stupid, stupid girls. Needless to say, I am not pleased, not hardly. Nor am I pleased with *you* three,” and she turned on the Furies a furious glare. “You’ve all interrupted my lovely vacation with Zeus. We were enjoying a seaweed wrap when I got the news. Let the responsibility of my uneven tan rest upon all your shoulders!” She swept her robe above us, indicating us all.

Hera waited a beat or three, clearly expecting some kind of response—most likely from me, the loudmouth. My face grew tighter, and I grew angrier, but I didn’t have a clue what to say or do. Maybe I was just too beaten down and scared to come up with sassy comebacks.

* GODDESSES *

Then she continued with her yelling. She went on and on about how useless and horrid we were and how we weren't worth the fur on her fur-lined sandals. I had to drown it all out by singing inside my head for fear that I would just explode with anger. Hadn't she done enough to us?

"Thalia! Thalia!" she yelled.

I met her eyes, but still I said nothing.

"Why so silent? I expect more from you," she said.

But I said nothing.

"Meg, Tizzie, Alek, have you put a no-speak spell on Thalia?"

"No, Your Highness, perhaps she has a clogged-up sinus," said Alek.

"Cause of your stinky old sweat stains!" I yelled. Crud. I couldn't contain myself.

"Ah, there is the spunky Thalia I despise so much. Nice to have you back." She turned to Alek and the others. "Now, obviously, if they had time to escape, these girls are not suffering sufficiently. If they can get out into the halls of Tartarus just like that, well, Blessed Ones, I do not think they are being punished severely enough!"

"Yes, Your Majesty, that escape was quite the travesty!" said the Furies in unison, looking sheepish.

"Yes, so let's see. Are the tiger pits cleaned? Is

the wild boar good and angry? What about that four-headed giant, the one with the chip on his shoulder? What shall it be?" Hera was smiling now.

The Furies chattered and tittered. "Boar gore, defiant giant, pits blitz!"

Hera's fingers were curling in delight. "The worst of the worst, O Blessed Ones, for I hate these girls! I want them to suffer, suffer so hard; I want them to feel pain and longing and fear. Do you feel fear, Era, dear? You look frightened down to your soul. That's the look I want in each of these girls' eyes; that's what their punishment should make them feel!"

Era did look scared—Hera wasn't lying. She was cowering in the corner, and frankly, I was right there with her. I had never felt this scared. I had never felt this far from home, even in Georgia. I had never felt this helpless, this hopeless. And if even *I* had given up—me, the stubborn one—what about Era and? . . .

"I'm through with these games!" A voice, one that was practically a stranger's, tore through the air. I say practically because I'd recognize it anywhere. It was Polly's. But there was something different to it.

"Excuse me? Do you dare to speak to me that way?" demanded Hera, looking positively shocked.

"Oh, yes, I dare," Polly said, rising to her full height and clenching her fists. Era and I looked on, also in shock.

"I am no longer going to make jewelry from earwax; I will no longer clean pit stains from clothes. I will no longer scrub and brush and wash and clean. I will not be going to any tiger pits, nor will I be confronting any giants today. I have had it. Ever since you came into our lives, you have been wretched and evil. I was only ten, and I had just lost my dear mother, and did you ever console me? Were you ever my friend? No! You were jealous of my mother, and you always will be—because you aren't half the goddess she was! You are unfair, unjust, and unwelcome in my life!"

Hera stood there, the smoke pouring out of her ears. She gasped and wheezed but said nothing.

"I will no longer allow you to bully me," Polly continued. "I will no longer allow you to torture me. I will no longer allow you to hurt me. This is over. Now, you let us go this instant!"

I had never seen Polly demand anything for herself before. It was quite a sight. She didn't shake as she spoke to Hera; she didn't cower in the corner like Era and me. It was inspiring. I took Era's hand and led her just a couple of steps toward Polly so that we stood silently, but strongly, behind her.

* LOVE OR FATE *

Hera's eyes were ablaze. She peered down her nose, directly into Polly's face, but Polly didn't even blink. Our stepmom seemed so angry that she didn't know what to say. Bubbles of spittle just sprayed out of her mouth, but no words followed. Her hands started to swell, and then so did her feet.

Something about what Polly was saying—whether it was just the shock of it, of somebody (who wasn't me) standing up to Hera, or anger at what Polly had said about our mother, I don't know. Whatever it was, it apparently infuriated Hera to new heights. Polly continued to stare her down, even as molten lava started to ooze from her mouth. And then came the yell.

It was horrifying and ugly and worse than anything we had ever heard before.

The lava that was oozing from her mouth shot all over the room, covering it in burning metallic goo. We ducked and escaped real harm. Even the Furies looked scared as they backed away from Hera, toward the door. Even they had never seen her this angry.

And then Hera began to speak, but her voice wasn't her own. She sounded like one of the horrible goblins that were rumored to inhabit Tartarus. It was deep and gruff, and it sounded like it could

* GODDESSES *

shave concrete off a slab. "How dare you, you little rat."

Hera then turned to the Furies. "As for you three, you have failed me for the last time. They mustn't escape again. You must never let them out of your sight again, do you hear me? Outside, now! We will devise the vilest, nastiest, most treacherous punishment known to man or gods . . . ever! These girls will suffer for all eternity!" Her last words echoed loud and long.

She turned on her heels and ushered the Furies hastily out of the room through the one entrance, which now stood open. Then she followed them out and slammed the heavy slab of a door behind her. But the train of her long black velvet beach cover-up got stuck in the doorjamb, a piece of it ripping off and sticking in the crack, causing the door to stay slightly ajar.

That's right, the train of her long black velvet beach cover-up got stuck in the doorjamb.

The door didn't shut. The door didn't lock.



SIXTEEN

Polly was the first one to go. She didn't say a word to either Era or me. She simply slipped through the slightly open doorway. Era followed her, and I followed Era.

Hera was so busy yelling at the Furies that she didn't even notice as we crawled past her. I kept thinking we were surely going to get caught, but she just kept on bellowing about tigers and giants (I was glad we were making a run for it). Luckily, too, her big bottom blocked us from the Furies' line of vision.

As soon as we entered the replica of our old house, Polly grabbed Era and me by our shirts and pulled us behind the velvet drapes.

"We haven't much time, but we need a plan.

Without one, we're destined to end up back here, just like before," she said.

"Yeah," I agreed. "Beam us to the gates!" I said, but nothing happened. Well, there went that plan. I looked at the timepiece on my wrist. There couldn't have been more than an hour or two left on the hourglass. "Okay, we obviously don't have our powers, so I think we should definitely go down the hall we went the first time, but this time—"

"No. Listen to ME!" Era interrupted. We both looked at her, aghast. "I *know* the way. I do! I was trying to tell you before—I know the way. You need to follow me."

Polly looked at me and shrugged. I looked at Polly and raised my brows. Era seemed so sure of herself. And Era never acted sure about anything, except which candy bars were the best.

"Okay," we whispered in unison.

We hurried out of our faux house and followed Era through the door she chose, then into one of the bazillion corridors of Tartarus. Left, right, and then three lefts later, we were still following her, and she never seemed to lose sight of where she was going.

Sure enough, this was the way we had come. We flew by the vats of fat and slimy slithering snakes. Again we passed the gory masks on the walls that cackled and hissed. We breezed by the molten fire

* LOVE OR FATE *

pits. Then suddenly, breathtakingly, we could see the gates of Tartarus looming ahead, just beyond a patch of decrepit old trees. Era had done it!

"See, I was *too* paying attention in my survival class!" she proclaimed as we approached the gates. "On our way in, I made mental pictures of the path, just like we learned, Polly!"

Polly was about to reply when a grated wall came crashing down right in front of our eyes! It almost nipped Era on the nose, and it cut us off from the way out.

"Oh, no, the Furies, they must know we split!" I yelled.

"I'm not a Fury," said a cavernous voice. And then we turned to see a squat, oddly shaped figure coming toward us from behind a nearby tree. I couldn't believe the voice we'd just heard had come from it, it was so tiny. It looked like . . . like a . . . could it be? The pointy ears. The pointy teeth. The bubbly green skin. It had to be a gnome! Finally I was seeing a real live gnome!

"Well, then, who are you?" Polly asked.

"I am Crane, head pygmy and keeper of this gate," the creature replied, crossing his arms over his chest. He seemed to be shivering slightly.

"So you're not a gnome?" I couldn't hide my disappointment.

"No, young lady, I am not a gnome. Gnomes are gentle. Pygmies are bloodthirsty," he said and then growled to remind us which one he was. My sisters and I jumped back a step.

"W-well," Polly said after a moment, "if you're a gatekeeper, then you have the power to let us through this gate, right?"

"Y-yes, I do," the pygmy replied, his teeth chattering.

"Okay, well, then, can you let us through?" asked Era, and then she added a very syrupy sweet, "Please?"

"You must answer my riddle first," said the pygmy, hugging himself and shivering.

"We don't have much time," I said as I glanced down at my wrist. The sand seemed to be trickling faster, more furiously than before. "Can you ask us the riddle now, please?"

"Brrr. It's rather cold, don't you agree?"

"The riddle, please," Era piped in impatiently.

"You know, even if you get through my gate, you will be confronted with the meanest creature in all of Tartarus, the dreaded three-headed Cerberus."

"Yes, we know," I said. And Polly even giggled a little.

"The riddle, yes. All right. At night they come without being fetched, by day they are lost without being stolen; what do I speak of? Oh, I am so cold!"

* LOVE OR FATE *

“What?” whispered Era. I, too, had no idea what the gnome, oops, pygmy, was talking about.

Apparently neither did Polly. She had her eyes closed tight, her nose scrunched up in concentration. I was biting my fingernails down to the skin bits.

“The answer, please. Oh, my toes. I believe they may be frozen to my shoes.”

We hemmed and hawed. We shifted back and forth on our feet and stared at our timepieces—second after second passed. “We don’t know,” I finally moaned*.

Polly let out a doomed sigh. I hung my head in frustration.

“But I tell you what,” said Era to the pygmy. “If I build you a fire to keep you warm, would you let us through?”

“A fire? How interesting. You can do that?”

“Yes. Yes, I can.”

Polly and I looked at each other in shock. “She can?” our eyes said.

“Are you a witch?” asked the pygmy.

“No, I just learned how to do it in this class I took.”

The pygmy considered a moment longer. “Well, then, yes. If you can build me a fire, a good hot one, then I will let you three pass.”

* The answer is: The stars!

* GODDESSES *

“Okay,” said Era. And then she stood there, deep in thought. I chewed my nails even farther. Did she really know how?

Polly and I watched in agony as Era looked around, then gathered a hard pointed stone and four pieces of wood of different sizes. One piece was flat and rectangular, and Era quickly carved a faint groove in one side with the stone. The next piece was a small thin stick that she fit tightly on top of the groove.

The third piece was small and fit against the first piece. She took the last piece of wood, a long thin one, and stared at it.

“Polly, I need your shoelace.” Polly quickly sat down and pulled the lace out of her sneaker, then handed it to Era. She knotted it on both ends of the fourth piece of wood, making a bow like for a harp.

“Polly, gather a few medium-size branches. Thalia, you gather up some bark and dried leaves.”

We did as we were told. When we came back, Era had gotten all of her pieces together. She was crouching down on the ground, her foot holding the flat piece of wood steady. She held the smaller stick upright in place and took the bow in hand.

Once we’d arranged the bark and twigs to her

* LOVE OR FATE *

liking, Era took a long, deep breath and began to slowly rub the bow against the stick. It turned back and forth in the groove of the flat piece of wood. Era picked up speed, moving the stick faster and faster till a long wisp of smoke rose from the leaves.

Polly and I couldn't believe our eyes. Neither could the pygmy. He began to jump up and down with delight.

Era got on her knees and began to blow on the leaves fast and furiously. Then she pushed the wood aside and scooped up a handful that was already dark and burnt and smoky.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow," she cried as she placed the leaves into the pile of branches and bark that Polly and I had made.

"Help, blow!" she yelled as she crouched over the pile.

We dropped to the ground and blew hard, harder, hardest and POOF! The bark and the leaves burst into flames!

"Yay!" we screamed. Within moments the entire thing was ablaze.

"Oh, it's hot! It's really hot! Oh, happy day!" cried the pygmy.

"Brilliant!" I said, grabbing Era around the waist and hugging her tight.

"Oh, Era, that was exceptional!" cried Polly.

The grated wall disappeared, and the gates of Tartarus loomed before us once again.

I looked at my timepiece and immediately forgot my excitement. "We've got to go!"

We took off for the gates at top speed. As we approached, Polly let out a huge whistle, and suddenly there was Cerberus, thundering toward us.

"Here, boy, here, boy!" Polly called to him. "He . . . eaahhhhh!" Polly's voice was muffled under the weight of one of Cerberus's giant tongues, which covered her in a wad of slobber as he greeted her. Era looked disgusted, but Polly just laughed. "Hi, Cerberus. I'm glad to see you, too, boy, but we don't have much time. We need to get out, please; can you open the gate for us?"

Cerberus let out a roar that rocked the gate.

"Please, Cerberus. I know it is your job to guard this gate, but we have been wrongly sent here," she pleaded.

He just roared again, only this time it caused a small dust storm.

"I don't know if this is working, Pol," I said. But she shushed me and continued.

"Cerberus, look, here's our story. Hera is our stepmother. When she married our father, who by the way happens to be Zeus . . ."

* LOVE OR FATE *

Cerberus's ears perked up; he tilted two of his three heads to the side.

"Yes, *the* Zeus. Ever since she married our father, she's tortured us girls. She's never shown us love or kindness or generosity. And now she has banished us here, to be slaves to the Furies, and my father knows nothing of it! She's done it all behind his back."

Cerberus put his two humongous paws together and crouched low, like he was really listening to Polly's tale.

"Now you are our only hope. We must get out of here now, or we are doomed to spend eternity here. Please, Cerberus, let us through these gates, let us out of here alive."

Cerberus looked at Polly with his six big brown eyes and then looked at Era and me. A single tear trickled out of the third eye from the left. He let out a doglike whimper and kicked back his hind legs, and the gate slowly and majestically opened up!

Polly gave him a huge hug and kiss. "Thank you, Cerberus, we won't ever forget you!"

We raced through the gates triumphantly. Hallelujah, we were out of Tartarus! Now the hard part—figuring out where to go next.

As soon as the gates shut behind us, a river

appeared before us. The same river we'd seen before when we'd first entered the gates. We ran out onto the beach, where a lone boat rested along the shore. But if we took this boat, where would we take it *to*?

Gazing across the water, I saw the island I'd noticed when we'd first come to Tartarus. With the black blob floating above it. And I got the same feeling I'd gotten when I'd seen it before—that there was something about it that was, somehow, *hopeful*.

The island was where we had to go; I just knew it.

"Over there." I pointed to my sisters.

Without another word, we just started running toward the water. My sisters hopped into the row-boat ahead of me. Polly grabbed one oar and Era grabbed another, but just as Era reached out her other hand to pull me on board, I heard a screech from behind us.

"You wretched little monsters, get back here!"

It was Hera. The ground rumbled as, with a wave of her hand, the gates flew open once again and she charged out onto the sand, then swung closed again behind her. She was coming after us with a vengeance.

"Stop, you nasty ingrates—I said stop!" screamed Hera.

We don't have a chance, I said to myself. *We're powerless*. I looked at my sisters, already in the boat. And I suddenly realized what I had to do.

* LOVE OR FATE *

It was my fault they were here. I was tougher, stronger than either of them. And Hera hated me the most. I could distract her. For just long enough.

Then I didn't think; I just acted.

I pushed the boat into the river. While I stayed onshore.

"What are you doing? No!" cried Polly.

Hera was still coming toward me. "Just go! You have to get away!"

"No," cried Era, "you'll be stuck here!"

I looked at my timepiece—a few measly grains of sand remained. "It's okay. Please just go!"

Polly desperately tried to get out of the boat, but a wicked current whipped the vessel into deeper waters.

I was glad. It wasn't that I was any less desperate than before to get home or to see Apollo again or my family. But the fact was I didn't have delicate skin like Era; I didn't get dishpan hands. And I knew Polly couldn't live without seeing the sun, breathing fresh air, and spending time with her animals. Of the three of us, I was the only one who could stand this fate. And there was no way I'd let my sisters suffer for my mistakes any longer.

That was what was going through my head as I stood on the shore, watching my sisters float off into the distance.



SEVENTEEN

Apollo just needed to reach the gates of Tartarus to get Cerberus's slobber. But *that* was easier said than done because he was lost in the maze of corridors that made up the underworld.

He asked everyone he passed, be they animal or human or beast. He even asked the walls and doors and rocks, hoping that they, too, could talk. But most creatures simply ignored Apollo or refused to help.

One old woman acknowledged him long enough to laugh and point at his tight pants. "They are football pants," he yelled at her. "And very fine ones at that!"

After much exasperation and desperation (how would he find his way back to the Secret Society

Witch Tart, anyway?), Apollo saw a man hanging from his knees off the limb of a tree that grew beside a small pond. As he got closer, he realized he knew this man, for he was Tantalus, king of Sipylus. Apollo was overjoyed to see someone he knew. That is, until he realized what that must mean.

"Tantalus, Tantalus, is that you? Are you really stuck here in Hades?"

"Yes, it is I. And, pray tell, who are you?"

"It's Apollo, sir!"

"I think not. You look nothing like him." Tantalus was swinging back and forth, swiping at an apple that was just beyond his fingertips. "Do you think you could help me grab that apple? You see, I'm attached to this tree here—at the knees, for all eternity—and that apple is just out of my reach."

Apollo effortlessly nabbed the apple off the tree, but as he handed it to Tantalus, it slipped from his grip and fell into a puddle at his feet. When Apollo bent over to pick it up, the apple sank deep down, far deeper than he would have thought such a small puddle could go.

"Sorry, sir."

"Look, another is right there, just out of my reach—do you think you could get that one?"

"Right, um, okay." Apollo plucked the second apple from the tree and handed it to Tantalus. This

time Tantalus's fingers grazed the surface, and he began to drool profusely, but as soon as he formed a grip on the fruit, it, too, fell into the puddle. "Yow!" cried Tantalus. "It's no use. This is my fate."

Apollo felt terrible for the old king. "Look, I could try again. There seems to be an apple just behind you."

"No, it's no use. So who are you . . . really?"

"Really, I am Apollo. I'm here, in this modern mortal disguise, trying to save Thalia and her sisters from an eternity in Tartarus."

"But those who are sent here, they are forbidden to leave. I should know," said Tantalus.

"Yes, but these girls, they did nothing wrong. Nothing really wrong. Not that you, sir, have done anything wrong." Apollo cleared his throat nervously.

"Well, I did steal, or rather acquire, a bit of sacred food from a few gods, namely Zeus. Oh, and I divulged a few divine secrets. I regret that, but what am I to do? This is my life now."

Apollo felt even worse, especially now that he had to change the subject so abruptly. "Tantalus, I don't suppose you could direct me to the gates of Tartarus? I am in search of Cerberus, the three-headed dog."

"Why should I help you?" he asked.

* GODDESSES *

"Well, I did attempt to help you with those apples, even though it didn't work out. And I am really the god Apollo; perhaps I could do something about your situation when I return to Olympus."

"If you are indeed Apollo, then tell me, who is my son?"

"Why, Pelops, sir." He couldn't help tapping his foot.

"Yes, and the gods gave him something. What was that?"

"An arm, sir. An ivory arm. I was there."

"Apollo! It is you!"

"Yes, sir, now I beg of you, do you know where the gates of Tartarus are, where I can find the three-headed dog, Cerberus?"

"Why, yes, Apollo. Yes. Just turn around."

"Turn around?"

"Yes, turn around." Apollo did just that. And there they were, looming in a not so distant field, the ominous black iron gates of the underworld. He could even hear Cerberus's deep growl from where he stood. Funny, he thought, they hadn't been there a moment ago. But he didn't question it. He simply thanked Tantalus and ran toward the gates.



Eighteen

I could still hear Polly and Era screaming. Polly was yelling for me to swim. Era was just yelling.

And Hera was charging toward me. The ground was shaking with each step she took.

“Come and get me,” I screamed at Hera. She lifted up her hands as if to do something drastic, something with her powers, but then I surprised her. I didn’t turn and run away. I charged her right back.

Hera stopped in her tracks as I ran and then backed up a few steps in surprise.

I pulled to a stop a few feet in front of her with no plan, no clue of what to do next. My only thought was to taunt her, distract her from my sisters and their getaway. But I didn’t know how long I

could do it before she zapped me with her pointed fingernails.

“Hey, Hera, don’t you think you’re a tad under-dressed for Tartarus?”

“What?” she asked, glaring directly into my eyes.

“I said, that outfit really doesn’t go with your skin tones. It doesn’t really work with that pale shade of green.”

Hera looked down at herself, then back at me. It was true, her pasty skin had still not lost the tinge of green it had taken on when I’d given her Scyllia disease, accidentally, on the night of the engagement party so long ago. And nothing was more important to Hera than her vanity.

“You little monster!” she screeched, and flung out her hands again, but just as she did so, I crouched, scooping up a huge fistful of sand. And then I flung it right into her face.

Hera’s hands flew up to her eyes, and the steam poured out of her ears. She was now a violent shade of red; it was almost electric. She was mumbling angry gibberish, and wiping the sand from the crevices between her lids, and spitting gobs of it out of her mouth.

Finally she formed the words. “Now you’ve done it! I’ll fix you good! Lions and tigers and bears! Yes, yes, lions and tigers and bears!” She raised her right

* LOVE OR FATE *

hand and pointed her dreaded third finger from the left at me. I tightened up every muscle in my body, preparing for the very worst, shutting my eyes tight.

But then there was a scream, and amazingly it wasn't mine. I opened my eyes to find Cerberus swatting Hera down with one of his gigantic paws. She hit the dirt hard, and a cloud of dust rose overhead.

"Not me, you idiot!" she yelled at the oversized dog.

Cerberus put one of his three huge wet noses down on the ground, right near Hera's bottom, and he pushed her several feet with a nudge that was probably meant to be playful but that made Hera howl.

"Not me, I said!" Her fur bikini was now completely covered in dirt. "Thalia, get Thalia!"



NINETEEN

Apollo had finally reached the gates, but Cerberus was nowhere to be seen. Apollo looked high and low, from corner to corner, but nothing. He was ready to burst with frustration.

Then he heard a scream.

Apollo hurried toward the sound, which had come from beyond the gates. He slammed into one of the bars with a thud and peered through the slats in the direction of the noise.

Thank goddess! There on the beach was Cerberus. But he was on the outside, and Apollo was on the inside. And he appeared to be busy. In fact, he appeared to be pinning an old woman under one of his paws.

Poor lady, thought Apollo. Getting a vial of slobber

from a creature that cruel was going to be quite a task.

He continued to stare in horror, wondering what to do next. But imagine his surprise when he then realized that the woman under Cerberus's paws was none other than Hera the Horrible!

Apollo's mind raced. "Why would Cerberus have Hera pinned?" He leaned forward for a closer look. He could make out another figure, just a little bit farther down the beach, but Cerberus's gigantic behind kept moving back and forth, blocking his view. What in Zeus's name was this all about?

And then his heart stopped.

It was her. He had found her.

"Thalia!" he cried, for he could see now that it was she facing Hera and Cerberus, just a few yards away. "I'm here—I'll save you!" he yelled, but it didn't appear that Thalia could hear him over Hera's bellowing and Cerberus's barking.

Without another thought, Apollo grabbed the tall gate before him and began to climb it with a vengeance. But as soon as he'd gotten a few feet above the ground, the post he was clinging to lost its shape. Before his very eyes, it morphed into a huge steel dragon with long, sharp talons and even sharper fangs. Apollo let go with a scream and landed flat on his back.

* LOVE OR FATE *

In all his travels, Apollo had never encountered a gate such as this before. It threw him off his game. Immediately, though, he was off the ground and climbing again. This time he chose a different post, but again, as he got closer to the top, the metal in his hands morphed into a rabid monkey, and Apollo fell to the ground once more.

Leaping to his feet, he pressed his face against the gates in desperation. He could actually see Thalia with his own eyes. He focused his gaze upon her. And this time he found himself filled with power, deep with emotion. He was close, so close! He readied himself for any beast, any beast at all, and began to climb the gate one last time.

As he'd expected, the post changed again, this time into a wicked goblin with pointed teeth and the sharpest of fingernails. It grabbed Apollo by the neck and shook him hard. But Apollo just clung tighter. He threw his shoulder into the horrid creature's stomach and knocked the wind out of it. He then flung his hand toward the goblin's eyes and scratched fiercely. The goblin screeched and let go, grabbing at its face. Apollo took the moment to use the goblin's back as leverage and hoisted himself up, then lunged and took a flying leap off the creature's spiny tail. This jump took Apollo clear over the gate, and he landed on the other side with a giant thud.

* GODDESSES *

Apollo shook his head. And looked around. Then he picked himself up and ran as fast as he could toward Thalia.

A few feet away, Thalia finally seemed to sense his presence. She looked up. And then their eyes met.

Hera let out another dreadful scream, but neither Apollo nor Thalia seemed to hear.

Thalia's eyes, looking into his own, went from petrified to bewildered and then back to petrified. She didn't run toward him with open arms, as he had imagined. Instead her bottom lip began to tremble. She looked like she was going to cry. As Apollo reached her and grabbed her hand, she whispered, "Nooo!"

Apollo didn't know what to do. He had thought all along that Thalia would want to see him, *need* him, in fact.

But she let out another painful cry. "Nooooo!" Apollo froze, the worry and panic and fear and longing welling up in his eyes.

"Thalia . . ." he whispered meekly. But he didn't finish. He had no idea what to say.



Twenty

“We’re alive. We’re still alive,” cried Era.

Polly and Era’s boat had been whipped into a nasty current that had tossed the tiny vessel up and down, into the cold water and then out again. It had then collided with a large pile of rocks just twenty feet from the island, directly across from where Thalia and Hera were having their face-off. The sisters had barely been able to cling to the wreckage and paddle to shore, but here they were. Alive.

They crawled up onto the bank and rolled about in the sand, coughing up slimy Hades river water.

“We’re alive,” cried Era again.

“Where are we?” asked Polly. “Where is Thalia? Can you see her?” Polly got to her hands and knees and spit up some more water bile. She then offered

* GODDESSES *

her hand to Era and pulled her up. "Oh, there's a dead fish in your hair," Polly said, tugging the fish out of Era's snarled curls.

"Look, there she is! Thalia's still alive!" Era squealed. Then she squinted. "What—does Cerberus have Hera?" asked Era.

"Oh, thank goddess! But Thalia must run—she's got to try and get away!"

The girls started to yell Thalia's name, but they were far too distant for her to hear.

Then they heard it. It was like the sound of air being sucked through a vacuum, the kind Polly had tried to use once back in their home in Athens. Only this sounded much bigger, louder, almost . . . *endless*. "Oh, Zeus," Era whispered, grabbing Polly's shoulder and turning her around so she, too, could see.

That black blob they had seen from the opposite shore. It was a gaping hole—swirling around madly, dark as the darkest blackness they'd ever seen. It was clear that this was an exit of some sort. But where did it lead to?

"We have to wait for Thalia," Era said, but they both knew that without a boat, Thalia had no way to get to them.

Polly trembled and shook. "We can't leave," she agreed. "Not until we absolutely have to."

They both looked down at their timepieces,

* LOVE OR FATE *

watching the little bit of sand remaining trickle way too quickly downward. A few more minutes. Less than five, perhaps.

They turned to watch what was happening on the opposite shore.

Twenty-one



Dylan was standing before me. It was like a dream come true. Only really it was more like a nightmare because this was Hades, and if Dylan was in Hades, that meant he was . . . he was . . .

“Dylan. Are you . . . you’re dead?”

Dylan looked at me for a second, his eyes wide with confusion. And then, I couldn’t believe it, he actually laughed.

I yanked my hand out of his. This wasn’t funny. This was definitely not funny.

He wiped at his eyes and then, noticing the look on my face, became serious again. “I’m sorry! But you’re upset because you think I’m . . . I mean, you think Dylan is dead?”

“Well, why else would you be in Tartarus?”

* GODDESSES *

Dylan cleared his throat. And took my hand back into his. And he stared into my eyes in a way that made my toes tingle. "I am not dead, sweet Thalia."

I sputtered. I could feel myself turning bright red. "Th-then how do you know about Tartarus? You're a mortal! Why are you here, how are you here?" This was so confusing, so utterly bewildering, I thought I might just pass out. But something about holding Dylan's hand made me feel comfortable, peaceful, almost. Only for a moment.

One glance at Cerberus and Hera and all that changed. Hera was squirming under one of the dog's giant paws, trying to get her hands free as she screamed and cursed my name.

"I'll fill you in on all of the details later," Dylan said, "but right now, I think we must run for it. Hera won't be tied up for long."

And with that he squeezed my hand tight. For just one brief second I thought about the warmth of his palm, and he gave me a sweet, almost shy smile. Then he pulled me quickly toward the shore.

"It's Polly and Era, look!" We spotted my sisters jumping up and down on the opposite bank of the river. "We have to get to them!"

We looked at the beach around us.

"There!" Dylan said, pointing to a huge pile of

* LOVE OR FATE *

what seemed like junk, a little farther down the shore.

"We've got to find something we can use as a boat," he said once we'd reached it. He started sifting through it.

Yuck. The smell emanating from the pile made me want to hurl. Clearly we'd stumbled onto Tartarus's one and only trash heap. The pile oozed with slime and smelly tin cans and rotten fish heads.

"Here!" Before I had so much as sifted through one piece of trash, Dylan yanked a giant billboard out of the pile—like the ones I'd seen along the highway on our road trip. Only this one had a picture of the Furies on it, and it read, "Abandon all hope, ye . . ." But I didn't catch the end because Dylan was already dragging it toward the water.

"We'll use this as a raft to sail across to Polly and Era. Get on!" I climbed on the sign, and Dylan pushed me into the river and then he climbed aboard. Thank goddess, it stayed afloat! As we drifted away, side by side and flat on our stomachs, he put his arm around my waist and I shivered. The feeling was so familiar. It felt so natural and right. It felt just like, just like . . . being with Apollo.

I pulled away as much as I could. I was confused. What about Apollo? What was Dylan doing here?

* GODDESSES *

If we got out of here alive, what would happen then?

Dylan seemed to sense how weirded out I was. He put his hand on top of mine and said, "I have to tell you something very important. I—"

But just then we heard a horrendous screech. We turned to look over our shoulders.

There was Hera, free from Cerberus's grip. And the Furies, standing right behind her, Tizzie's hands grasping a giant leash that now held Cerberus tight.

Hera stood on the water's edge, her right hand lifted straight up in the air and her eyes closed tight. She was chanting and cackling. And then above us the sky began to roil and howl. Dark clouds came rolling in from every direction, and lightning ripped through the sky. The water was becoming rougher and rougher, tossing our little raft back and forth on giant waves that leaped far above our heads.

"Oh, no," cried Dylan. "No, we can't perish this way! You don't even know the truth!" But before he could say any more, we were engulfed by a wave that came washing down on us.

We both held on tight. And the raft rose once again on the crest of the wave. We spluttered and coughed and tried to get the hair out of our eyes. As soon as we did, another wave came, and we rose and

* LOVE OR FATE *

fell once again. A familiar feeling came over me—that rise and fall, the raft balancing itself on the wave, trying to stay upright. It reminded me of . . . of . . .

“I have an idea!” I cried. “Stand up, hurry!”

“Stand up?” he asked.

“Just do it. I’m going to surf us to safety! We’re going to hang twenty!”

“You don’t know how to surf, Thalia!” cried Dylan.

“I’ve seen them do it on TV a million times. I’m *addicted* to those surf shows on ESPN. It’s a lot like skateboarding. We just have to find the center and go with it.”

We fell a couple of times, trying to get our balance. I even went tumbling into the water once, but Dylan grabbed me by the back of my shirt and pulled me back on. Finally, just as a giant wave poured in underneath us, we found our balance and we were off. I masterfully surfed the wild waves, breaking left, then right. I caught a superclean peaky swell and then went big for some straight air.

I could hear my sisters’ faint cheers as I managed the mad conditions. I went off the wall and into a front-side 360. There was a swell from the northwest, and I just blitzed on through.

Dylan wrapped his hands around my waist and held me tight. “You’re brilliant!” he exclaimed.

Then suddenly the waves stopped. The air went still. We fell off balance and both landed with a thud on the board, not quite toppling into the water. Around us the storm raged. It was too dark and wild to see Polly and Era anymore. But somehow *our* little area was perfectly still.

"We're in the eye of the storm," Dylan said.

We sat in stunned silence. It was almost, well, beautiful.

"We may not get out of here," Dylan whispered. He looked deep into my eyes.

For some crazy reason, despite the fact that our lives were seriously in danger, him looking at me like that made me realize how truly horrid I must appear. I'd been slimed and goosed and drowned; I'd cleaned pit stains and popped zits and lanced boils. But then Dylan went on, and I forgot to worry.

"So I have to say this now. I have to confess something." He leaned in close then. I could feel his breath on my face. This was a dream; we were just floating. And then he whispered, "It's me, Apollo."

I nearly fell off the board. Then I nearly *pushed* him off the board. "What do you mean, 'it's me, Apollo'?"

"It's me, Thalia. It's always been me."

"That's ridiculous!" It was. It was crazy. Unbelievable. But even so, I swelled with embarrassment. What did he mean? I could feel my face getting hot despite

* LOVE OR FATE *

the chill of the water. I knew I had to be three shades of pink.

Just then the wind picked up and the waves grew stronger. We were coming out of the eye of the storm with a vengeance. Dylan, I mean Apollo, I mean we climbed back to crouching positions as the waves swelled to fifteen, twenty feet. We could barely hang on. I kicked the nose of the board up in the air and slammed it down on the top of a gigantic wave.

I steered us right and left and we fell down the side of an enormous wave, only to land flat on a smooth swell, just yards from dry land.

And then we were thrown into the water, just inches from each other.

The first thing I heard when I resurfaced was the sound of my sisters cheering. We reunited a few feet from shore—all of us, standing ankle deep in the water. Dylan and I were soaked to the bone.

“Dylan, is that really you?” Era squealed after a tight embrace.

He opened his mouth to reply, but there was no time. Behind us the water was . . . it was turning solid, right before our eyes. The storm had stopped, and we could see, on the opposite shore, that Hera and the Furies were taking their first tentative steps onto the ice. They had frozen the river, and they were coming for us.

* GODDESSES *

We turned toward the gaping black hole that swirled before us. It was the blob I'd seen from the other side. It was dark and deep and unknowable. It would lead us somewhere, but where? Back to earth? Back home?

There was only one thing we knew. That it would take us out of *here*. And it would take us out together.

"I don't think we have a choice," Polly said.

"No," Era agreed. "We don't."

"I love you guys," I said. I looked at both of my sisters, and for the first time I noticed there was something different about them. Something had changed since we'd left Olympus, what seemed like so long ago. They had a strength about them now, both of them. It reminded me of someone. And after a second I realized who. It reminded me of our mother.

The four of us gathered in a giant hug.

"I think we can only go one at a time," Era said, clearing her throat and looking down at her time-piece. A few measly grains remained. "So I guess I'll go first." We hugged tightly one more time. Era's eyes were filled with tears. She took a step into the darkness, and then she was gone.

Polly was next. She threw a hurried glance across the water, where Hera and the Furies were now

* LOVE OR FATE *

picking up speed. Then she smiled at me and stepped into the blackness.

Only Dylan and I were left. "You go, Dylan," I said, giving him a gentle shove toward the hole.

Our eyes met then. His were filled with warmth. They knew me so well.

And I knew it then—Dylan *was* Apollo. I didn't know how or why, but I knew he'd been telling the truth. In fact, I wondered how I hadn't seen it before—I could see Apollo underneath his skin, through his eyes. I wrapped my arms around his neck, and I could smell Apollo. I squeezed him tight, so tight, I thought he might disappear, but he squeezed back gently. "Apollo," I whispered. "I'm so glad."

He whispered back into my ear, "So you're not angry with me?"

"No, never, never again. And you're not angry with me?"

"Never, ever again. You'll be right behind me?" he asked, gazing for a moment over the water. He smiled at the sight.

Hera had slipped on the ice, and all three Furies, Meg, Alek, and Tizzie, were struggling to pull her back up. Another yank and all three went down with a plop!

* GODDESSES *

We both laughed. "I promise, I'll be right behind you."

With one last squeeze of my hand, Apollo disappeared into the blackness of the hole.

And this time I kept my promise. I followed him.

Twenty-two



The throne room was still just as cold as I remembered. We still had to kneel. Polly's hair was, indeed, looking even more smooshed than it had the last time we'd knelt here, what seemed like an eternity ago.

Hera and Daddy were arguing. We couldn't hear what they were saying. But something was different—I could tell by the tone of their voices. Hera was yelling, but Daddy wasn't stammering or begging or pleading. He was sitting tall. He was speaking calmly. He was acting a bit like the old daddy, the one who was in charge.

And looking at my sisters, I saw things were different with them, too. Era, though she did still look worse for wear, wasn't trembling. Polly didn't appear

* GODDESSES *

to be angry or nervous. She was actually smiling at me. Not a joyful smile, for we didn't know what was to become of us. But a solid, sisterly smile. A smile that said she would stand by me, by us, and even by her own self, no matter what.

We'd been separated as soon as we'd landed. With a thud, again. In the marble foyer of our home, thank goddess. The one place where we'd wanted most to be.

My lady-in-waiting, Lenora, had taken us to our rooms to wait for Daddy. He was on his way home from Ibiza, where Hera had left him and then later summoned him back to the palace. Apollo had been allowed to go, and with a nervous look in my direction, he'd taken his leave.

Now here we knelt, unable to run to our father to hug him. Awaiting our punishment. Again.

"I am taking care of this in the way I see fit," Daddy finally boomed. Hera stiffened and shut her mouth, glaring at us as he straightened up in his throne and cleared his throat.

"Polly, Era, Thalia, please rise," he said. He looked very serious.

"Hera has been updating me on your recent escapades. I am to understand that in addition to using magic, you have caused great chaos on earth and in the underworld, thwarting the rules of

* LOVE OR FATE *

Tartarus as well as those of your stepmother herself. Is this true?"

I took a tiny step forward. "Yes, Daddy, but—"

"No buts, young lady, let me finish."

"You, Polly, you insulted Hera with your words and your actions, not only for the sake of your sisters but simply for yourself, because *you* wanted to. It was you, in fact, who led your sisters out of their, er, quarters in the end. Is this true?"

Polly hung her head. "Yes, Daddy."

Hera grinned with satisfaction. I wanted to wipe it off her face.

"And you, Era. You are the one, in fact, who led your sisters out of the maze and convinced the pygmy to let you through the wall. Is that so? Hmmm?"

Era looked like she was going to start crying, but then she swallowed hard and straightened her spine. "Yes, Daddy." Hera snorted under her breath.

Finally Daddy's eyes rested on me. I hung my head and waited for the worst.

"And you, Thalia. You goaded your sisters into escape. It was so important to you that they get out of their punishment, you were willing to risk life and limb to help them do it. Is that so?"

I looked up and met Daddy's eyes. His were filled with the utmost seriousness. There was no

* GODPESSES *

point in arguing. He was right. I had to take responsibility for what I'd done.

"Yes, Daddy." Hera began to cackle, actually cackle, with no attempt to hide it from Daddy or anyone else. But then Daddy did something I would never have expected. He turned to Hera and with a roar that shook the entire hall said, "Be quiet!"

Hera looked at Daddy like he had three heads. Her mouth opened and closed like the mouth of a fish gasping for water.

Daddy softened a little, added a "my dear," and patted her on the knee. But Hera was speechless as he turned back to us.

He surveyed my sisters and me a moment longer. From me to Polly to Era and back to me. He nodded solemnly. And then, just like that, his mouth widened into a smile.

"I am so proud of you," he whispered.

Then he opened his arms wide, and in another second my sisters and I were locked in his warm embrace.

TWENTY-THREE



Paddy said we'd completed our challenges. I guess that must have been obvious to you, but to us, it was a big surprise. We'd done it when we'd least expected it.

Polly had stood up for herself—she'd done what she wanted to do for once instead of just meddling. She'd told Hera off and told her off good, expressing things she'd been keeping in forever—and not for anyone but herself.

Era had taken charge. When Polly and I had wanted her to simply follow along behind us, she'd stood firm, telling us she knew which way to go in the maze and sticking by it. She'd even saved us with her survival skills, building a fire for that gnome, I mean pygmy.

* GODDESSES *

And I—I guess I had finally learned to put others before myself. I hadn't realized it at the time, but pushing my sisters into that river, knowing that it meant I'd be left behind in Hades—I guess it was the most unselfish thing I'd ever done.

It's funny how things work out. I guess it's the Fates, constantly playing with us. We think things will go one way, and then they go completely the other. I mentioned this to Era, but she doesn't agree. She said it was love, not the Fates, that got us where we are now. Apollo's love. Our love for each other. Sometimes I'm amazed at how wise she can sound.

One thing we do know is that now that we've learned our lessons, we'll never unlearn them. I can just see it—when I look at my sisters and when I take a good look at myself.

Anyway, since we did complete our challenges, Daddy managed to keep us out of Tartarus for good. Gods' laws can't be broken, but they can be *bent* a little, I guess. Hera, of course, was outraged. She took off the next morning for a private retreat in the Atlantian mountains, and I haven't seen her since. I'm sure she'll be back, but when she does return, I think I'll be able to handle it.

The same morning she left, the morning after we'd arrived, I emerged from my room, still tired,

* LOVE OR FATE *

quietly so as not to wake my sisters. All six of our siblings had insisted on staying up all night and listening to the tales Polly, Era, and I had to tell of earth, and Hades, and how the Furies had tricked us and tormented us and how Apollo had come to earth disguised as Dylan just to rescue us.

Speaking of which, that was the reason I was up so early. I couldn't wait to see Apollo. We had so much to talk about. Maybe now that I had my powers back, I'd just wiggle my nose and pop myself over to his—

“Thalia.”

I practically jumped out of my skin. There, in our plush foyer, the one with velvety curtains and golden columns and carpet six inches deep, was Apollo. He even looked like Apollo now. It kind of took my breath away.

“I was just coming to see you,” I said, but before I had a chance to finish my sentence, he had grabbed my hand and gently pulled me toward him. It made my knees go weak. I was now staring straight into his eyes.

“I'm way ahead of you,” he whispered, staring back at me. “I came because I have a question for you.”

I pulled back a little and smiled. There was Apollo's mischievous grin that I loved so much—I

* GODDESSES *

couldn't believe he was in front of me. "A question?" I asked.

"I know you have a lot to do today, getting caught up with your sisters and all of that, but I was wondering if afterward, tonight . . . you might . . . want to have dinner?"

"Dinner?" I asked.

"Yes, dinner." And then he dropped to one knee and took my hand. "Thalia, would you do me the pleasure and the honor of going out on a date with me?"

I couldn't help but laugh.

"Is that a yes?" he asked, his eyes sparkling. "It would be our first official date, you know."

I began to smile. My first purely happy smile in who knows how long. "I'd love to," I responded.

Then he snapped back up, and I felt it. That toe-tingling feeling. That feeling I might actually faint. I knew what was coming next.

And then, just like that, he kissed me.

And I kissed him right back.

About the Author

Clea Hantman has written for and about teens since she was one herself. She's worked on teen marketing campaigns for companies such as Ticketmaster, Wet Seal, Contempo, Skinmarket, and Dawls. She's written for *Sweetie* and *Phoebe* (retailer Wet Seal's magazines) and Transworld publications like *Skateboarding* and *Warp*...and she's been written about in *Seventeen*, *YM*, and *Wired*. In addition, Clea is a Cancer who collects lunch boxes and likes to boogie.

Visit www.AuthorTracker.com for exclusive information on your favorite HarperCollins author.

Credits

Cover illustration © 2002 by Lizzy Bromley

Cover photograph © 2002 by Barry Marcus

Cover design by Marci Senders

Cover © 2002 by HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

Copyright

GODDESSES #4: LOVE OR FATE. Copyright © 2002 by 17th Street Productions, an Alloy, Inc. company, and Clea Hantman. All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, down-loaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins e-books.

Adobe Acrobat eBook Reader May 2009
ISBN 978-0-06-195428-3

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



About the Publisher

Australia

HarperCollins Publishers (Australia) Pty. Ltd.
25 Ryde Road (PO Box 321)
Pymble, NSW 2073, Australia
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.com.au>

Canada

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
55 Avenue Road, Suite 2900
Toronto, ON, M5R, 3L2, Canada
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.ca>

New Zealand

HarperCollins Publishers (New Zealand) Limited
P.O. Box 1
Auckland, New Zealand
<http://www.harpercollins.co.nz>

United Kingdom

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
77-85 Fulham Palace Road
London, W6 8JB, UK
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.co.uk>

United States

HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
10 East 53rd Street
New York, NY 10022
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.com>