



## Praise for the writing of Alecia Monaco

### *Kiss of the Fairy*

Even though it is written with a St. Patrick Day flavor, it can be enjoyed any day of the year. Ms. Monaco has a delightful wit and a flair for the written word. This is an enchanting piece that was a thrill to read.

-- Karen Magill, *Coffee Time Romance*

Alecia Monaco penned a whimsical story that had the right balance of characters and plot. Her characters were fun and just real enough to make this a light read.

-- Serena, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

4 Stars! A comedic masterpiece overall; *Kiss of the Fairy* has the ability to put me in stitches and simultaneously melt my heart with the dreamy splendor of love.

-- Keely Skillman, *EcataRomance Reviews*

Ms. Monaco weaves these two star crossed lovers a magical tale of romance and passion. Their heated embraces and steamy lovemaking left my heart pounding. Patrick and Siobhan's connection fills the pages with beautiful scenes of love and tenderness.

-- Ophelia, *Erotic Escapades*

A cute, sizzling and well-executed romp of a modern fairy tale, *Kiss of the Fairy* is a perfect St. Patrick's Day read.

-- Border Minx, *Literary Nymphs*

*Kiss of the Fairy* is now available from Changeling Press.

# HOTTER THAN HADES

Alecia Monaco

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This book contains explicit sexual content and graphic language.

# Hotter than Hades

Alecia Monaco

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## Chapter One

“The queen is *divorcing* me?”

The black-haired king of the Underworld laid his scepter aside and sank back on his massive ebony throne, rifling through the thick sheaf of legal documents, each page bearing the ominous seal of the Olympus Supreme Court.

“Please don’t shoot the messenger.” Hermes appeared to quake inside his gold lamé flight suit.

“I have no plans to harm you, my friend.” Hades glanced up from the papers. “You were merely doing your job by delivering these. It’s certainly not your fault that my marriage has come to an end.”

“But surely, sire,” Hermes said, “Her majesty will have a change of heart.” The slight young male shifted his gold messenger bag to his other shoulder.

“Not this time.” Hades scanned the documents with his eyes. “I had a feeling she was gone forever, and these ...” He wagged the papers at Hermes. “... confirm it.”

“But she’s gone above every spring for centuries now, and never failed to return at harvest time.” Hermes adjusted his gold helmet and frowned.

“This year is different.” Hades rubbed a hand over the black stubble covering his chin. He’d neglected his appearance for weeks now, becoming more certain with each passing hour that Persephone would not be back. “Our love began to fade hundreds of years ago, and we’ve been married in name only longer than I care to remember. She’s become more and more dissatisfied with life here below, and the modern world holds endless attractions for the eternally young.” His gaze drifted around the dim throne room. “What have I to offer that can compete with shopping at Bloomingdale’s or meeting Athena for cosmopolitans in SoHo?”

Hermes coughed back a laugh, earning a glare from the king. “With all due respect, sire, you can’t believe this phase of running around in the upper world wearing Manolos will last? After all, she’s the queen of the Underworld, not Carrie Bradshaw.”

“Someone’s been watching cable again.” The corners of Hades’s mouth turned up in a wry smile.

Hermes returned it with a sheepish grin of his own. “What can I say? Samantha Jones is my idol.”

Hades turned serious again. “I mean to say that Persephone has gone above to enjoy the life I denied her when I brought her below ...” The words “by force” hung in the air, unspoken. He didn’t like to recall his actions so many centuries ago. “She never had the chance to be a young woman on her own.” Hades glanced at the empty throne beside him, a smaller version of his own. The black velvet robe, with its elaborate silver embroidery, lay tossed across the back. He’d miss her, even if the passion between them had cooled. “She’s having it now.”

Hermes hesitated. “And you don’t intend to intervene.”

Hades shook his head. “No. I was wrong to take her freedom in the first place. The last thing I should do is take it away from her a second time.” He took a solid gold pen from his



pocket and scrawled his signature across the dotted line of the divorce papers. "She may have her freedom, from both my kingdom and me."

Hermes took the papers and tucked them into his bag. "That still leaves one tiny problem." He shifted uneasily from one winged foot to the other on the black marble floor.

"Summer has yet to end, when we should be well into autumn in the northern hemisphere by now." Hades's face darkened. "Unless she returns, the seasons cannot change." He rose from his throne and began to pace. "I absolutely refuse to demand she return on those grounds."

"But, your majesty," Hermes said, falling in step with the king, "there *might* be another way around this issue of climate control."

Hades glanced down at the much shorter god. "Without compelling her to come back to me?" He shook his head. "No, it's impossible."

"Maybe not *technically*," Hermes stopped a few steps ahead of Hades. "I was chatting up Zeus earlier ..."

Hades snorted. "That pompous old windbag?" His stormy relationship with his father-in-law was well known in the kingdom of Olympus.

"He'd sent me out to pick up the latest Vin Diesel movie on DVD for him." Hermes stepped aside as Hades began to pace again. "Anyway, I mentioned the situation with her majesty. You know the old man has never been the biggest fan of your marriage." Hermes rolled his eyes theatrically. "It seems Zeus completely approves of his daughter sowing a few wild oats in the modern world. Goddess knows he's sewn a few himself, the old coot."

"And this helps me *how*?"

"Well, your majesty, Zeus has a proposal." Hermes stood tall, puffed up like a blowfish with the importance of his announcement. "He's willing to suspend the ruling about the return of autumn coinciding with the return of Persephone."

Hades knew his father-in-law too well to fall for it. “What, as they say above, is the catch?”

Hermes cleared his throat. “He’ll allow autumn to return when you have a new queen.”

For a minute Hades didn’t believe his ears. “A new queen?” Zeus had been trying to force his hand where Persephone was concerned for hundreds of years. “It’s unthinkable. How dare he even suggest such a thing?”

“Well, as her father and supreme god of Olympus, he pretty much suggests whatever he pleases.” Hermes grimaced. “Including asking for double anchovies on pizza. You should’ve heard me trying to explain *that* at Little Caesar’s.”

“And who, among all the goddesses of Olympus, did he suggest I crown the new queen?” Hades scoffed. “Or did he manage to get around to that little detail, between gulping down some deep dish and watching *The Pacifier*?”

“He *did* have a few suggestions.” Hermes whipped a sheet of gold stationery from his messenger bag and studied it with narrowed eyes. “First of all, there’s Hestia, always looking for a few good men. She’s great around the house and one heck of a fantastic cook ...”

“And a dedicated virgin. Next?”

“Nemesis is single again, and tired of looking for love in all the wrong places.” Hermes peered up at Hades hopefully.

“After the blind date I went on with her a few millennia ago, during which she argued with everything I said and cursed the very womb that bore me, I think I’ll have to pass.” Hades rolled his ebony eyes. “Next?”

“Medusa?”

“That suggestion doesn’t even merit a reply.” Hades rocked back on the heels of his black boots. “Anyone else?”

“Well, there’s always ...” Hermes blushed a rosy pink. “There’s always Maia.”

Hades's dark features softened at the mention of Hermes's mother. "My friend, as much as I admire you ..." He gave the messenger god a warm pat on the shoulder. "... I would not want to be your stepfather." He stood up straight and squared his broad shoulders. "Come." He turned to exit the throne room through the massive onyx doors.

Hermes walked double-time to keep up. "Where to, sire?"

"The crystal cavern." The king smiled for the first time in weeks. "If I'm to find my new queen, I've a bit of summoning to do."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Summoning the Fates isn't a task to be taken lightly," Circe cautioned him. "If we do indeed find your fated queen, you will have no peace until you've secured her hand." The eternally lithe and youthful sorceress absently played with the silver crescent moon amulet hanging from a chain around her smooth white throat. "What of the countless maidens of Olympus?" Circe regarded him with a frosty expression. "Are they unworthy of reigning as queen of the Underworld?"

"It's not a question of worthiness." Hades shook his head, his black hair grazing his shoulders. "It's a question of fate. I want the woman who belongs with me. The woman whom the Fates have decreed should ascend the throne of the Underworld. I'll settle for no one else."

Circe didn't bother to conceal her disdain. She stood up and banished her chair into thin air with a wave of her slender hand. "Shall I consult the reflecting pool?"

"I thought you'd never ask." Hades followed her to the inner recesses of the crystal cavern with Hermes in tow.

Circe gathered her silver skirts around her and knelt at the pool's edge.

*"Ancient ones from Olympus above*

*Titans, guardians of immortal love*

*Fates, wise weavers of time and space*

*Appear to us and reveal the face*

*Of the one destined as queen to rule*

*Show Hades's bride in the reflecting pool!*

\* \* \* \* \*

"That's when he broke the news to me." Hyacinth Garret finished placing a fire-colored silk mum in a centerpiece of fall flowers -- all silk, since real fall flowers were in short supply during this year of endless summer. "He asked Denise to marry him over the weekend."

"And of course she said yes." Cyndi, her best friend and co-owner of Flower Power, rolled her brown eyes. "Silly girl doesn't know the old adage about once a cheater, always a cheater." She smirked. "What made him think you'd welcome a midnight phone call about his big news?"

"He *had* to rub my face in it. Keeping something like that to himself would've given him a hernia." Hyacinth squinted and turned the basket containing the silk arrangement a full three hundred and sixty degrees on the surface of her worktable. "You know Riley. He loves to point out that *he's* the one who left *me*."

Cyndi looked up from her account ledger. "Remind me again why you married this jackass?"

Hyacinth cut a strip of floral tape and sighed. "Another old adage ... love is blind." She shook her head. "Apparently, Denise is wild in bed, and we all know how important *that* is to him."

"Why is it always the dental assistants?" Cyndi echoed Hyacinth's bitterness.

"I should've paid more attention to the deeper meaning of *Little Shop of Horrors* -- dentists enjoy causing pain." Hyacinth looked down at her finished project. Hopefully the Chamber of Commerce would love it. It was perfect.

Unlike the rest of her life.

\* \* \* \* \*

The image swam before Hades's eyes, at first nothing more than a faint impression on the rippling surface of the pool. He knelt closer to the edge, gripping the cold stone rim of the pool with his hands. The picture grew in clarity and sharpness, coming slowly into focus.

"Behold the queen." Circe gestured to the young woman's image with a flourish.

Hermes dropped to one knee beside Hades. "Long live the queen."

"Well, sire." Ice dripped from Circe's voice. "This is the woman the Fates have chosen for you. Your mutual destiny is sealed. What do you think of your future wife?"

Hades didn't speak -- *couldn't* speak. Not with his pulse pounding like a Trojan horse and a knot in his throat.

"I think she's quite lovely, your majesty," Hermes supplied.

Hades dragged a rough breath into his lungs. "Lovely isn't the word for her." He bent lower, gazing into the moving image, drinking in her spun-silk golden hair, her violet eyes, and her moonlight-pale skin. "She is the beauty of every maiden of Olympus combined and surpassed."

They watched her gathering artificial flowers and arranging them in a basket. She was meticulous but artistic with her work.

A flash of color in his empire of gray.

"It seems she works with flowers," Hermes observed.

"And they pale beside her, in every respect." Hades longed to reach out, to touch her reflection with his fingertips, to know the warmth and feel of her.

“You must lead me to her.” He addressed the sorceress, never looking away from the pool. “I must make her mine at once.”

“That ...” A sneer filled Circe’s face. “... might be a bit of a problem.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Hyacinth kicked off her shoes the minute she stepped inside her house -- the house she’d shared with Riley during their brief marriage.

It had become a shrine to hopes and dreams that had never materialized.

She picked up her mail from the pile on the hardwood floor in front of the door where it’d dropped through the slot. Nothing but circulars, junk, and bills. Casting it aside, she made her way to the kitchen.

Every night managed to be an exact rerun of the one before it. She put on a kettle of water for tea and popped a frozen dinner into the microwave. While her dinner heated in the kitchen, she went to her bedroom to change into her slippers. After padding back to the kitchen, she made herself a cup of tea and took her freshly nuked meal into the living room. She arranged her food and drink on the TV tray in front of her favorite corner of the couch, and with a click of the remote, turned on a rerun of *Seinfeld*.

Reruns. The stuff her life was made of.

## Chapter Two

“To the cave of Morpheus.” Hades shouted as the ferry drew closer to the riverbank. He tossed an obolus into the bronze urn near the bow, payment for his passage.

“At your service, sire.” The skeletal form of Charon bent in a deep bow. He placed his double-headed hammer into a loop on the belt of his robe and steered the vessel toward the dock.

Hades settled into the ferry with a disgruntled huff. He tried to avoid traveling by ferry whenever possible, but he needed to cross the river Acheron to get to the cluster of caves where Morpheus and his brothers resided, which made Charon’s ferry unavoidable. Of course, as king, he had his own vessels and a crew standing by, but Charon took it as a personal offense when Hades took his own barge across the Acheron. Under the circumstances, he thought it best to keep on the ferryman’s good side.

“Dealing in the business of sleep and dreams, sire?” Charon looked over his shoulder at Hades, the empty sockets of his eyes black and vacant.

“Something along those lines.” Hades stared down into the dark, murky waters of the Acheron. He had no desire to reveal the details of his plans to Charon. The ferryman

gossiped like the Church Lady at a bingo game. Thank goodness for reruns of *Saturday Night Live*.

"I hear the queen still hasn't returned from the upper world." The skeleton's raspy voice grated on Hades's ears. Great Zeus above, why didn't Charon just start his own tabloid and be done with it? Didn't he have anything better to do with his time, Hades thought with a wrinkle of his nose, such as washing his hooded black robe?

"Her majesty is enjoying an extended vacation this year." Hades leaned back in his seat, feigning an unconcerned air.

Charon's cackle sent chills down the king's spine. "Trouble in paradise? And so soon, with you two lovebirds married only a few thousand years now." He stopped laughing abruptly, his teeth meeting with a stomach-churning crunch when his mouth shut.

There had to be some way to shut the bony one up before the story of his wedded unbliss became fodder for the Underworld gossip pipeline. The last he heard, Charon was dating one of the furies. They'd have the entire palace whispering about Persephone abandoning him before the next load of souls crossed the river.

"Charon, my loyal servant, did I tell you I received a catalog of Halloween costumes from the world above?" If there was one thing the old bag of bones loved more than gossip, it had to be flattery.

"Why, no, sire." Charon's skull formed something resembling a grin.

"You've become quite a popular costume choice up there." Hades rested his arms along the back of the bench seat behind him. "A cult figure, you might say."

Charon rested a skeletal hand on his chest, the very picture of false modesty. "Who, little ole me? Why, I hardly know what to say."

That would be a first, Hades thought with a barely repressed snort. "I believe they're calling you the Grim Reaper these days."



“Well, fancy that. What will those crazy upper world kids think of next?” Amid Charon’s giggled protests against his own renown, they approached the site of Morpheus’s cave. Hades called it to his attention, and the ferryman guided them to the bank.

“What time should I return for you, sire?”

Hades stepped down from the ferry onto the riverbank. “Just wait here. I won’t be long.”

Not if he could help it. This phase of his plan would be short and sweet.

Very sweet.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hyacinth turned off the television before the late night talk shows began. With a yawn and a stretch, she padded to the kitchen and prepared her coffee pot for the next morning, set the timer, and turned off the overhead light.

She bolted the front door and went to her bedroom. She never stepped foot in that room without feeling a twinge of pain mingled with frustration. But then, those two words had described her entire marriage to Riley.

She opened the top drawer of her blond wood dresser, her mind going over ideas for the Peterson wedding. She reached inside for a cotton nightshirt when her gaze fell on the stack of carefully folded lingerie in the back right corner of the drawer.

A lump of sadness formed in her throat as she ran her fingers over the silk, satin, and lace garments, some with the tags still attached. She’d tried to please Riley and to be pleased by him, to be sexy and sexual, but all it ever earned her was frustration for both of them, and words such as “frigid” being tossed at her like stones.

For the first time, her sadness turned to anger. How the hell did *he* know she was frigid? Maybe the problem was his terrible lack of sexual skills. She remembered how he told her she was mousy and boring. Maybe he’d been wrong about that, too. In fact, she’d

welcome an adventure. Her life could use a little ... all right, a lot more excitement. She'd *welcome* some excitement. To hell with Riley and his small-minded ideas about her.

She snatched the plainest, oldest cotton nightshirt she owned from the drawer and slammed it shut. At least her boring life kept her safe from dealing with love and lust. She'd shut the door on that craziness the instant she signed her divorce papers.

But was it worth it?

She turned back the blue floral spread on the queen size bed, which seemed to grow larger and emptier every night, and crawled inside.

A framed photo of her mother and father occupied the spot on her bedside table between the lamp and clock radio. She missed them so much. Sometimes she felt she'd give anything to have one more talk with her dad, or to see her mother's smile one last time.

She'd never gotten to say goodbye. They'd never even known Riley. Thanks to a drunk driver, they hadn't been alive to see her marriage unravel, to witness her failure as a wife and a woman.

"Goodnight, Mom and Dad." She blew a kiss to the photo before turning off the small milk glass lamp above it.

She closed her eyes, willing sleep to come, for dreams to overtake her.

She punched her pillow and buried her face in it. Too bad reality kept her tethered to the here and now.

\* \* \* \* \*

The cave turned out to be exactly as Hades remembered it.

Its cavernous interiors were lit with enough candles to supply the Vatican well into the next millennium. Their flames danced, heating the air, filling the space with the scent of beeswax.

Poppies grew everywhere, their vibrant hue coloring the inside of the cave like living flames. He knew the flower well. It was the opiate of dreams.

Mirrors hung from the rock walls, reflecting the candle flames and flowers until it became difficult to tell where reality ended and reflection began.

And in the center of it, on a giant four-poster bed covered with a king's ransom of red silk velvet, lounged Morpheus himself, god of dreams.

Hades waded through the poppies and stood a respectful distance from the bed. "Greetings, Lord Morpheus."

The god of dreams rolled over to face Hades, leaning on one black velvet clad elbow. His white hair shone stark against the mountains of red and black silk pillows behind him. He narrowed his black eyes and smiled without mirth. "What brings you to my lair, oh great king?" His words were not without mocking bite.

Reminding himself that he ruled supreme over the entire Underworld, Hades rose up to his full height of six-foot-three. "I require your assistance, my lord, with a dream."

Morpheus raised a pale hand and twisted his index finger through his hair. Hades caught sight of the dream god's long black nails, each filed into a razor sharp point.

"Interpreting royal dreams is one of my specialties." Morpheus laughed, the cold sound of it echoing through the cave. "Has this anything to do with her majesty's desertion?"

Great Zeus, gossip spread faster than poppy seeds in this place. "Her majesty is taking an extended vacation this year." Hades cleared his throat and assumed an expression of authority. "And I require nothing in the way of dream interpretation."

"Then what need have you of my services?" Morpheus sat up a little, looking slightly less bored by the proceedings.

"I need to send a dream." Hades paused, seeking the right way to phrase his request. "An erotic dream."

"Who is the intended recipient?" Morpheus's eyes glittered with speculation.

“My future queen.” *That* ought to get his attention, Hades thought with satisfaction.

“We’re to have a new queen?” Morpheus sat up, ramrod-straight. “Is she of the royal house of Olympus?”

“No, I can say with pleasure, she is not.” Hades broke into a grin, remembering the golden haired beauty destined to be his bride. “She’s mortal.”

“Mortal,” Morpheus repeated in a shocked whisper. He closed his lips over his fangs.

“It’s hardly unheard of. The gods of Olympus have taken mortal brides since time immemorial.”

Morpheus recovered himself with a snort. “With varying degrees of success, I might add.”

“It matters not. She’s destined to reign beside me as queen of the Underworld. Circe herself located our future queen. Her fate is sealed.”

“So it is, so it is. If Circe declared it, it must be so.” The dream god tapped his black talons against the nearest bed post. “And you wish to send the future queen an erotic dream this night?”

“Indeed I do.” Deciding a little buttering up wouldn’t hurt, he added, “With your consent, of course, oh master of dreams.”

Morpheus leapt to his feet. “I’d be delighted -- *delighted* -- to assist you in procuring the favor of our new queen.” He led Hades through a door carved into the wall of the cave. “It’s not as if I lack the time to create a specific dream, what with sleeping pills, melatonin, and such cutting into my business these days.” He threw his hands up. “And don’t get me started on that damned Ambien ...”

The door led to another room, smaller and less opulent than the main chamber. A little round table draped with a red velvet cloth sat in the center of the room, with a black crystal ball centered on its surface. An ebony cabinet occupied most of the back wall. Beside it stood a matching table, covered with tubes, vials, mortars, pestles, and bowls.

A few torches provided dim lighting. Hades realized he'd entered the workshop where dreams were made.

"An erotic dream, you say?" Morpheus opened the cabinet and began rifling through its contents. "Do you wish to be included, sire?"

"Is that possible?" Hades leaned against the wall of the cave near the door.

"Indeed, it is." Morpheus retrieved a jar of red powder from the cabinet. "Aha!" He bared his fangs in a grin. "Powder of Eros," he said by way of explanation to Hades.

Hades watched in silence as the god of dreams selected another jar, this one containing a fiery orange-gold power. "Dust of Aphrodite," Morpheus mumbled. He added a brown bottle to the table. "Vanilla," he said, and took out a jar of red rose petals. Finally, he removed a clamshell from the bottom shelf of the cabinet, and closed it.

"We'll need just one more ingredient." Morpheus removed a pair of golden shears from his table. "A lock of your hair, so you may enter the dream."

"By all means." Hades bent low so the shorter god could clip a few strands of his black mane.

"Now." The dream god held Hades's hair in his hands and laughed again. "To mix the potion and send a dream across the waters of time."

He measured spoonfuls of the various powders and petals and extracts, mixing them all inside an ebony bowl marked with ancient symbols Hades didn't recognize. At last, he added Hades's hair to the mix and poured it into the clamshell.

"What is the young lady's name?" Morpheus stood over the table, holding the clamshell over the crystal ball.

Hades felt heat creeping into his face. "I have no idea. Circe wouldn't tell me. She had a bit of an old score to settle with me on behalf of her friend, Minthe."

Morpheus tapped himself on the chin with a long black nail, deep in thought. Finally, he said, "I know of but one way to do what you ask."

“Anything.” Hades grew more desperate to reach his queen by the second.

“Come with me, back to the bed chamber.” The king fell in step behind Morpheus. When they reached the bed, Morpheus indicated that Hades recline on it.

“This bed carries its own magic, a powerful dream enchantment, and whoever sleeps on it can travel to their desired destination as they sleep.” Morpheus waited until Hades had arranged his tall form on the bed to continue. “Picture your intended queen in your mind. Focus your intent upon her, and you shall travel to her, bringing the magic of this dream potion to her.”

Hades closed his eyes, sinking deeper into the bed, the most comfortable one he’d ever experienced. The sumptuous velvet and piles of pillows created an unparalleled level of bliss.

*“Flame of Eros*

*Fire of Aphrodite*

*Passion of roses*

*Your power is mighty*

*Carry your magic*

*Inspire a dream*

*Sensual and unbound*

*For Hades’s new queen!”*

With those words, Morpheus sprinkled the contents of the clamshell around Hades, who opened his eyes long enough to see a glittering red cloud form above him. Drowning in the perfume of roses and vanilla, he called the phantom face to the forefront of his mind, and drifted into a deep sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hyacinth stirred in her sleep, sweat making her nightshirt cling to her skin like gauze.

What was happening to her? It was as if she were locked in some netherworld between dreaming and wakefulness. Her mind felt sedated, drowsy, filled with fogged images. But her body hummed like a tuning fork, waiting to burst into an aria of desire.

She drew in a ragged breath through dry lips and caught the scent of another person nearby -- and not just any person. The scent could only be described as spicy, exotic, and undeniably male.

The heat of a hand skimmed just above her breast, hardening her nipple to a sensitive peak without coming into actual contact with her skin. She arched toward the touch, which lingered so tantalizingly out of reach, and found it hovering above her other breast, performing the same act of torment, tracing circles around the tip of her nipple.

Her breasts had never been sensitive before, much to the frustration of her ex-husband and herself. But now they were practically singed with heat, burning to life as erogenous zones she'd never imagined possible.

She writhed on her back, wanting more of this dream lover. He complied, his touch feeling more like pure energy than a human hand as it roamed over her belly, around her hips, between her legs.

"Please." She reached out, daring the dream to end, defying the spell to be broken. "Don't stop." She sought him with her hands, finding only a solid mass of charged air in the shape of a flawlessly sculpted male.

She felt the same electric warmth making small circles on her inner thighs, moving upward inch by inch. Tension coiled inside her, pulsing for release, demanding satisfaction.

Nothing like this had ever happened before. She'd never come close to orgasm -- in fact, she'd been convinced she couldn't have one. And now she teetered on the edge of a freefall into mind-bending pleasure, all the result of a dream she could neither touch nor hear, despite the fact that she could feel him with every fiber of her being.

But maybe she could *see* him. Feeling him certainly didn't seem to be a problem. A gasp wrenched itself from her throat when he focused his efforts on the juncture of her thighs. Only the thin barrier of her panties stood in the way of ultimate release.

But not for long. Casting aside her fear of awakening, she pushed her panties down and kicked them off, then pried her eyes open.

His muscular form knelt between her legs. Around six-foot-two, with wide shoulders and a chest so broad she could use it as a pillow, he was masculinity personified. As her eyes adjusted to the dark, she could make out his chiseled face, the ebony hair just grazing the collar of his black shirt, and the most haunting pair of black eyes she'd ever gazed into.

Something bloomed inside of her other than the urgent need he'd evoked. A feeling of looking into her own soul through those eyes, that the missing piece she'd always sought, as if the answer to every question had finally arrived.

"My queen." His voice flowed over her, indescribably sexy and masculine. The love in his eyes was unmistakable.

She answered him without words, parting her legs further and giving him access to her body, unashamed. He followed her lead, bringing his hand to her core, finding the hub of her desire and touching it in his own inimitable way.

Hyacinth closed her eyes, giving herself over to sensation. There had never been such bliss.

He found her clitoris, bringing it to pulsating life, the way he'd done with her nipples. He teased it, promising one kind of touch and delivering another. She felt her own wetness, wanted him inside her when she finally came -- because, for the first time, she knew she would come, and soon.

"Inside me," she whispered, unable to open her eyes, feeling nothing but his fingers on her clit and the pounding of her own heart. "I'm going to ..."



“Come,” he rasped. “Come for me now.” He intensified his touch on her clitoris, and she exploded, wave after wave of pleasure rocking her, shaking her, and leaving her weak and too spent for words when it subsided.

She went limp against the mattress. She’d been married for five years and had never known ecstasy until this.

His touch against her lips brought her back to earth. Her eyelids fluttered open, and she found his face inches from hers.

“Stay with me.” She reached for him, feeling the outline of him with her hands.

“I will find you and bring you home.” He stroked her bottom lip with his finger. “Wait for me.” And like a flash of lightning, he was gone.

Hyacinth woke up with a start, sitting straight up in bed. Her breath came in gasps. A sheen of sweat covered every inch of her body.

What the hell had just happened?

The room looked the way it always did, empty save for her. The clock radio’s green digital numbers told her it was 4:17 AM.

She commanded her heart to slow down, and patted the bed around her. It was damp, the way it would’ve been after a session of lusty lovemaking.

But the only lovemaking had been in her dreams. She verified with a single glance that her panties had been kicked to the floor beside the bed.

A blush flamed in her cheeks. She must’ve had a wildly erotic dream, tossed her panties aside, and brought herself to orgasm -- something she’d never done before, but recalling the earth shattering pleasure she’d experienced, something she might have to try again.

But then the memory of her dream lover came back to her, his hands roving her body, his fingers on her lips, telling her to come, promising her he’d find her and bring her home.

Home? Where was home, if not there in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania?

She tried to dismiss it as merely a dream, but nothing had ever seemed more real than the emotion flooding through her when she'd looked into his eyes.

She fell back onto her pillow and stared up at the ceiling. She had to get back to sleep, and fast, before she lost his image in the slew of her subconscious. She'd finally found the man of her dreams -- literally. What could be safer than love with someone who didn't exist? If she could conjure him up again, experience him in the confines of her dream world, she'd have everything and risk nothing.

Risking her heart, she reminded herself, would never again be an option. Dream lovers were the only kind she could ever hope to have.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cyndi walked into the back room of Flower Power, a box of donuts in one hand and two take out cups of coffee balanced precariously in the other.

"What a night." She took a frosted donut covered with colored sprinkles from the box before setting it down on the table where Hyacinth was midway through creating a "get well" balloon bouquet.

"What happened?" Hyacinth extracted a jelly filled confection from the box and bit into it with relish. "I thought you and Joe had reservations at that new restaurant on the river last night."

"We did." Cyndi groaned and placed a hand gingerly over her stomach. "Take my advice -- don't eat the seafood alfredo."

Hyacinth giggled. "Duly noted." She polished off the donut and returned to the balloons, curling ribbons and humming to herself while she worked.

Cyndi squinted her eyes and took a few steps in Hyacinth's direction. Hyacinth looked up and met Cyndi's eyes, barely able to suppress a smile.

“Girl, what happened to you?” Cyndi circled her like a shark swimming around a seal. “You’re positively *glowing*. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear ...” Cyndi clapped a hand over her mouth, muffling a squeal. “You got lucky last night!”

Hyacinth tried to look nonchalant. “Hardly. I was in bed alone by 10:30.”

Cyndi cocked her head. “Well, something sure as heck happened between Jay Leno going off and Matt Lauer coming on, because you obviously got laid.”

“I didn’t, I swear.” She averted her eyes, hiding her face behind a gigantic purple balloon. “Jay and Matt were both safe from my advances.” She snipped a length of ribbon and tied it to the balloon. “I guess I’m just exceptionally ... well rested.” Memories of her dream surged to the surface, heating her body instantly. She could recall every microsecond of the encounter with a clarity that would make her wet if she continued with that train of thought.

“If that’s what rest does for you, I must need a new mattress.” Cyndi shook her head.

“Did you call Laura Peterson with the estimate for her wedding?” Hyacinth changed topics, hoping to divert her friend from the truth -- she’d finally found sexual fulfillment in the arms of a man who didn’t exist.

“No, I was just about to take care of it. Do you have the worksheets on that?”

Hyacinth pointed to a folder on Cyndi’s desk, mentally sighing with relief when her partner picked up the cordless phone and began to dial. As much as she loved Cyndi and enjoyed her company, she didn’t really want to talk. She wanted to relive every moment of the dream, to recall his scent, his touch, his voice, his promise they’d be together again.

She cut another length of ribbon and glanced at her watch, wondering if she could sneak home during her lunch hour for a nap.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Why do you summon me, my son?” The voice of the ancient witch spoke to Hades through the mist surrounding her apparition.

Hades fell to one knee before her. “Ancient crone, wise one, I seek the help only you can give me.”

The sound of the hounds that always accompanied Hecate penetrated the thick white mist in front of him. Hope spiraled through his heart. She always sent her hounds in first, before she appeared herself.

“What do you require of me, oh king of the Underworld?” Her voice carried with an authority that would be the envy of the rulers of many an empire.

“I seek the location of a woman in the upper world.” He bowed his head, remembering the mutual dream of passion he’d shared with her last night. After that, nothing could keep him from her, if he had to claw his way to the world above and comb every inch of it on foot until he found her.

The mist began to part, and the figure of Hecate appeared, hounds at her heels and a raven on her shoulder. Her wizened face revealed wisdom and strength, and her bent figure in its black and violet robes had the regal bearing of a queen.

“The woman is to be your new queen, as Persephone has decided not to return.” Her gray eyes met his, and silent understanding passed between them.

“I knew you would be aware of my plight, as you are Persephone’s guide when she journeys back and forth between the worlds.” He stood up, keeping a respectful distance from her. “You’re aware that winter cannot come until a new queen has been crowned.”

Hecate nodded. “My daughter, Circe, has found the woman fated to reign beside you?”

“She has, but refused to tell me the woman’s name or location.” He let his mute pleading extend from his heart to hers.

Hecate took a small leather pouch from her belt and opened it. Reaching inside, she filled her hand with strips of yew bark and cast them onto the ground. Bending slightly, she seemed to divine meaning in the pattern they made on the rock floor of the crystal chamber.

“The new queen’s name is Hyacinth.” She peered down at the bark again. “I will send my raven with you to lead you to her.” Hades opened his mouth to thank her, but she stopped him with a hand. “On one condition.”

Hades bit the inside of his mouth with impatience. “Anything, wise one.”

“The only way you can bring her below will be by force, as you did with Persephone.” The witch heaved a rusty sigh. He knew her affection for his former wife. Persephone had become like a daughter to her. “I wish there was another way, but alas ... there isn’t. She will be frightened.”

“But, my lady, she and I have already met in a dream.” He let the newly discovered name of his beloved course through his veins, letting it resonate with his heartbeat. Hyacinth. Hyacinth, his beautiful flower.

“It matters not a wit.” The witch glared at him contemptuously. “A woman captured is a fearful woman. You will resist your urges toward her until she’s a willing participant.”

“Of course,” he murmured, recalling Hyacinth’s face contorted with the pleasure of her release.

“If she wishes to return to her life in the world above, you *will allow it*.” A clap of thunder punctuated her words. “You will not hold her here against her will, no matter the consequences to yourself, or the world above.” Her eyes turned the cold gray of steel. “Am I understood?”

He knelt before her again. “You are, my lady. I shall follow your conditions to the letter.”

“Very well, my son.” She grasped his arm and steered him to his feet. “Make ready your chariot for the journey to the upper world. My raven will go before you and take you to your queen.”

## Chapter Three

She missed him.

Hyacinth frowned as she straightened up her worktable. She'd drunk warm milk, taken a bath scented with lavender, and employed every other sleep-inducing trick she knew, but to no avail. When sleep finally came to her the previous night, it had been dreamless. The face of her phantom hadn't appeared.

She longed for his touch the way the parched grass outside longed for winter's cool. For all the good it did her -- she might as well wish for the moon. Apparently, the dream had been an isolated occurrence, one she couldn't replicate at will.

She nicked her hand with her wire cutters and winced. So, this is what sexual frustration felt like.

She finished putting away her tools and gave the floor a quick once-over with the broom. Cyndi had taken off early, leaving Hyacinth to close the shop alone. She hadn't minded seeing Cyndi go. The question in her friend's brown eyes was impossible to miss. Cyndi knew something was up, and Hyacinth had no intention of telling her what that something was.

She closed out the register, checked the lock on the service door, and switched off the lights. After a final check on the flowers in the refrigerated case, she flipped the sign on the front door over to “Closed” and let herself out, locking the door behind her.

The days had grown shorter, reflecting the time of year in a way the weather had failed to do. Hyacinth paused in the parking lot, wishing for a cool wisp of fall air. It was almost Halloween. She was ready to watch the leaves change into their usual spectrum of color, to drink cider and carve pumpkins. She’d had enough of summer to last a lifetime.

Mulling over the odd weather, she shuffled over to her two-door economy car, unlocking it with the remote control hanging from her key ring.

The bird stopped her from getting in.

A raven, as black and glossy as midnight incarnate, sat on the metallic blue hood of her car, looking at her with eyes as alert and intelligent as those of any human.

Expecting it to fly away as she approached, she edged closer to her car. The raven continued to stare at her. It was almost ... almost as if it *knew* her.

She shook her head. Maybe the bird was ill or injured. Normal birds didn’t sit on car hoods, letting humans come within inches of them. She briefly thought of news reports about West Nile Virus infecting local birds during the summer.

“What’s wrong, little guy?” She circled the front end of her car, trying to inspect the bird from a safe distance. “Did you meet up with the business end of a hungry cat?”

The raven let out a piercing cry. Hyacinth covered her ears with her hands as it continued to shriek.

Suddenly, the ground gave a vicious shudder. She screamed, staring in shock as her car vibrated against the pavement. The raven continued his dirge, lifting himself from the hood of the car to circle the air above her.

What the hell was this? An earthquake? In Pennsylvania?



The entire parking lot was rent in two as the ground tore itself asunder. Hyacinth screamed and fell to the ground, staring in horror as the mouth of hell seemed to open before her.

Flames shot out of the massive crack in the earth, smoke as black as the raven's wings and pools of molten lava pouring from it like an open wound. She was going to die. Her mother's face flashed through her mind, the sound of her father's voice. She'd be with them again any minute.

And then the heads of four black steeds emerged from the crevice in the ground, seemingly immune to the fire and its effects, leaping over the ruby streams of lava and pulling a golden chariot behind them.

She stood up on knees that nearly buckled. Before she collapsed again, a heavily muscled black-clad arm reached out from the chariot and pulled her in.

Air left her lungs as if she'd been punched. Before she had time to catch a glimpse of her captor, the chariot turned and sped back down into the earth from whence it came, with her holding on for dear life.

\* \* \* \* \*

They raced through an underground tunnel, a tube of rock, illuminated only by the torches held by the footmen clinging to either side of the chariot.

Hyacinth coughed, trying to clear the film of dust and dirt from her lungs. She pushed hard against the steely arm holding her, but she might as well have pushed against granite. He held her fast to his side.

"Let me go!" She shouted to be heard above the horses' thundering hooves. "Who the hell are you?"

Without further hesitation, her captor released her and turned her to face him.

She sucked in a breath.

It was *him*.

She had to be dreaming again. Nothing this fantastical and frightening could be real.

“It’s real,” he murmured, as if he’d read her thoughts. “I’ve come for you, my darling. Just as I promised I would.”

This was *so* not happening.

“I don’t know who you are, or where you’re taking me, but people will look for me, and you’ll get caught.”

“No one will ever find you. I’m taking you to a place few of the living have ever seen.” His onyx eyes burned into hers, and a flame crept over her cheeks, remembering what they’d shared a few nights ago in her hazy, half-dream state. Or had it been a dream at all? She felt her grasp on reality slip away like sand through a funnel.

She shook off the flush of arousal and fixed a glare on her face. “I demand some answers here.”

He clutched her close to him as the chariot rounded a sharp corner. “All in good time, my sweet. All in good time.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The chariot stopped short at a massive iron gate with spikes at the top of every bar. It was embedded in the rust-colored rock interior of the tunnel, and fastened with a black lock and heavy chain.

A cluster of creatures unlike anything Hyacinth had ever seen clustered around the outside the gate, wandering around in a daze.

“Graiae.” Her captor pointed to the swan-bodied beings with the faces of elderly women. His arm brushed against Hyacinth’s breasts and sent an unwilling shiver through her. “They guard the entrance to my kingdom.”

She eyed the steel-colored hair of the half-human, half-fowl women. It was obvious where they got their name. “Your kingdom, huh?” She didn’t bother to hide her sarcasm. “You’ve sat through one too many role playing games, buddy.”

He threw back his head and laughed, surprising her with the rich, vibrant sound. “I assure you, this is no game.”

“Then explain why you’ve dragged me into this sewer, or whatever it is.” She pushed his arm away again, shocked at her own boldness.

“I’m afraid to disappoint you, but we’ve not come to a sewer.” He pointed to a footman. “Jason!”

The well-built young man hopped down from the side of the chariot and ran through the crowd of clucking Graiae to unlock the gate with a gem-studded silver key.

“Welcome to the Underworld.” He bowed to her with a flourish.

“The Underworld?” She grabbed hold of the chariot seat as the vehicle rolled through the open gates. The Graiae jumped nervously out of its way. “As in Greek mythology?”

“Greek, yes.” He bent his head down to hers. She caught a whiff of his unforgettable scent. “Myth, no. This is very much real.”

His nearness had her brains too scrambled to remember her own name, much less the finer points of ancient Greek studies. “That makes you ...” She sought to retrieve the correct name from her mental cache.

“Hades,” he supplied. “King of the Underworld.” He lifted her hand to his perfectly sculpted lips and kissed it. “And your eternal slave.”

Trying to ignore her body’s reaction to the touch of his lips, she forced herself to focus. “What would the king of the Underworld want with a florist from Harrisburg?”

“To make her his queen.” He released her hand, dragging his fingertips across her palm and setting off a chain reaction of heat inside her. “His bride.”

She tried to digest that bit of info as they reached a second gate, this one guarded by the most hideous dog she'd ever seen.

"Cerberus," Hades called out in a booming voice. The dog looked up at them, his red eyes glowing in the darkness of the tunnel. Catching sight of the king, he lowered his three heads to the stony ground in submission.

"Good boy." Hades reached down and stroked the dog's short brown fur. "Good dog." He tossed down what appeared to be a dog biscuit, which Cerberus caught between his clawed paws.

"Don't tell me that's the family pet." Hyacinth looked on in semi-horror as the dog devoured the biscuit, tearing at it with his fangs and lapping up the crumbs with a blood-red tongue.

"Cerberus is a loyal servant of the crown." Hades snapped his fingers at the other footman. "Nicus!"

Nicus, just as handsome and buff as Jason, leapt down and ran to unlock the gate. "He's friendly as a newborn pup, once you get to know him."

"Who, Nicus or the dog?" She bit her bottom lip and tried not to laugh.

"They're both nice fellows, but I'd prefer you to ignore Nicus's considerable charms and notice the dog instead."

"I think I'll take your word for it when it comes to Cerberus's good qualities." She braced herself as the carriage rolled through the gate, and she drew a deep breath. She had to get to the bottom of this. "What did you mean with what you said about your queen?"

"You are my fated bride." He spoke as if this were the most natural thing in the world to say. "The seers revealed you to me, and I had to find you."

She stopped him with her hand. "Wait a minute. What about your real wife? Persephone, isn't it?"

“Persephone and I are no longer together.” He spoke without the faintest hint of emotion in his voice or face.

Trying not to fixate on the fact that she was discussing a failed marriage between two mythological deities, she pressed on. “But what does any of that have to do with me? I mean ... I’m just a florist. I like to watch *Seinfeld* reruns and *Nick at Nite* while eating TV dinners.”

“You’re not ‘just a florist.’ You’re beautiful, and passionate.” She blushed at his words, remembering the passion he’d evoked in her. “You’re the only woman who can reign beside me.” He eased back against the chariot seat with the air of having settled the matter.

Not so fast, she thought. “What if I don’t *want* to reign beside you?” She turned on the seat to face him. “I didn’t agree to any of this, and right now, you’re no better than a common kidnapper.”

He chuckled. “You must admit that nothing about this situation could be called common.”

She went on, ignoring him. “You’ve taken me against my will, away from everything I know. I have a life back home --” She stopped herself. Did she *really*?

Was there anything in her life, other than her work and Cyndi, worth returning to?

He studied her face like a hawk scouting prey. She quickly arranged her features into a scowl of rebellion. Of course she had a life worth returning to. She wasn’t about to sign on for an eternity as some ghoulish queen of the undead, or whatever it was that he had in mind.

“You were saying?” A note of steely resistance entered his voice, and for the first time, she realized just whom she was dealing with. A deity and a sovereign, older than time itself.

But did that give him any excuse to take her captive?

“I was saying --” She cleared her throat. “-- I want to go home. I don’t want to stay down here with you.” Her gaze swept the dismal gray landscape they were crossing, devoid

of color or foliage, save for the black hued cypress trees dotting the hillsides. No, this could never be her home, not this colorless world.

“You find my kingdom lacking.” It wasn’t a question.

She didn’t want to insult him, but she had to get out of this mess. “It’s just not to my taste. I’m used to the world above, with its sunshine and rain and seasons.”

He peered down at her, a glint in his eyes. “You enjoy the change of seasons?”

“Of course I do. It’s like ... a form of magic, to watch the world transform itself.”

“Wouldn’t it be sad if the seasons ceased to be?” He stared out at the sluggish dark river in the distance. She winced at the sight of a grim reaper-ish figure steering a ferry through the bleak waters.

“It would certainly harm the environment.” Nature had been her first love.

“I must inform you that the seasons cannot change until someone takes Persephone’s place on the throne.” He gave her a sidelong glance.

“What are you saying?” A knot tied itself firmly in her midsection.

“Why do you think summer has lasted so long? She decided to live above, which means that autumn can’t come. Soon, global warming will reach epic proportions. The ice caps will melt, all the plants will die, and earth will suffer a catastrophe.” He reached down and plucked a gray flower from the ground and handed it to her. “It’s an asphodel,” he told her as she studied the fragile blossom. “It’s *our* flower, down here in the world below. Now it’s yours.”

She twirled the stem of the asphodel in her hand, lost in thought. Global warming? She couldn’t stand by and witness the destruction of the environment. She thought of the mountains back home in Pennsylvania, of the rivers and streams, the winter snows and autumn leaves. Didn’t she owe it to them to at least play along with Hades’s request, no matter how insane it seemed, until she could find a solution?

\* \* \* \* \*

Hyacinth held her breath as the chariot pulled up to a massive gray castle. The entire thing looked as if it had been carved from solid rock. It rose to jagged spires that seemed ready to pierce the dark sky above. A waning moon hung over the cliffs behind it, and the grounds were clustered with the same black cypress trees she'd noted all along their journey.

It was majestic, in an Addams Family sort of way.

Jason stepped around to open the coach door on her side, but Hades waved him away. "I'll assist the queen from here on out," he informed Jason, and stepped out of the carriage.

He walked around the back of the vehicle, and opened her door with a bow. "My lady." He offered her his hand.

She couldn't think of any alternative but to accept. She didn't want to get out of the chariot and face the next phase of this experience, but with the future of the environment riding on her shoulders, what choice did she have? She took his hand, melting when she felt the warm pressure of his skin on hers.

A squawking noise overhead caught her attention. She looked up to see yet another flock of strange creatures, these with the wings of hawks and the faces of women.

"Meet the furies." Hades offered them a wave as they flew through the air above him, their fringed leather garments rustling in the wind. "They look fierce, but they're harmless enough."

"Loyal servants of the crown, I suppose?" She stepped out of the carriage and onto the gravel covered drive.

"But of course." He took a gadget from the pocket of his black trousers. Hyacinth could've sworn that it was a beeper of some kind. He punched a few buttons on it and slipped it back into his pocket.

"As are they." He pointed to the arching stone doors of the castle, which swung open, as if at his command. A swarm of thin, pale beauties filed out, all dressed in black floor

length gowns. It looked like the goth convention she'd accidentally wandered into during a weekend in Philadelphia.

My God, Hyacinth thought, there's a Hot Topic in the Underworld?

The herd of Morticia wannabes reached where she and the king stood and stopped. They all bowed to Hades in unison. Hyacinth rolled her eyes. What an ego this guy must have. She bet even the owls nesting in the cypress trees had to bow when he glanced their way.

One of the girls stepped forward. She looked identical to the others except for the silver diadem capping her smooth black hair. "Sire, welcome home." She bowed so deeply that her forehead nearly touched the ground.

Hyacinth coughed, and the girl stood upright. She glanced from Hyacinth to Hades, her eyebrows raised questioningly.

"Yes, Anemone, this is the future queen." Hades squeezed Hyacinth's hand as he spoke.

Anemone curtsied to Hyacinth. "At your service, my lady."

"Anemone was Persephone's most honored lady-in-waiting," Hades explained. "She and the other ladies will be thrilled to serve you."

"Yes, your majesty." Anemone bowed again, and turned to Hyacinth. "This way, if you please."

The swarm of black-gowned babes surrounded her. "Wh-where are they taking me?" she called to Hades over her shoulder as the ladies-in-waiting swept her toward the castle doors.

"To prepare you." He folded his arms over his chest, a smile of amusement spreading across his handsome face.

"For what?" Hyacinth called back to him as Anemone opened the stone doors and led her inside.



“Your royal audience.” A hush of awe filled Anemone’s voice. “You’ll spend tonight with the king.”

## Chapter Four

“Your royal bath chamber, my lady.” Anemone swung open a pair of marble doors inlaid with lapis.

Hyacinth halted. There was no point in trying to appear blasé, as if she saw castle bathrooms on a regular basis. She’d never seen one before.

In fact, she’d never seen *anything* like this bathroom before.

Her mind vaguely registered the sound of Anemone’s voice as she pointed out the various amenities to her, but she couldn’t concentrate. Although she’d only seen the private hallway leading to her suite, she had a feeling the opulence of Hades’s humble abode could dazzle the most decadent earthly ruler.

The floor was made of solid marble. She traced the toe of her sandal over it. “This marble is *blue*.”

“Yes, my lady.” Anemone touched a switch on the wall beside the door, and the room burst into a warm golden glow of light.

“But ... blue marble doesn’t exist.” Hyacinth threw a glance at the ladies-in-waiting stationed by the bathroom door. “Blue is my favorite color. I’d know if it did.”

Anemone chuckled. "We have many things in our world which don't exist in yours." She took Hyacinth's arm. "Including blue marble." Steering her into the interior of the room, she indicated for the ladies to follow.

The room defied description. Easily twice the size of her entire house, appointed in blue marble and huge gold-framed mirrors, it was more like a spa than a personal bathroom.

The ladies led her behind a screen. A sunken tub made entirely of lapis, at least the size of a small swimming pool, had been filled with water. White rose petals floated on the surface, and countless white candles flanked the edges. A wall made entirely of rock stood behind the tub.

"Your bath, my lady." Anemone gestured to the tub. "And if you wish for fresh water ..." She turned a silver lever beside the tub, and the rock wall behind it transformed into a waterfall.

"This is ..." Hyacinth sought the right word and failed. "... Overwhelming." She shook her head. "I'm not sure what to do next."

Anemone placed a hand on Hyacinth's shoulder, leaning in to whisper in her ear. "Relax." She stroked Hyacinth's hair back from her face. "And enjoy it."

Before she had time to object, the ladies-in-waiting were undressing her. They removed her sandals first then slid her pale blue t-shirt over her head.

Hyacinth covered her chest self-consciously. She'd never been naked in front of anyone but her doctor and her ex-husband. And here she was, in this fantasy bathroom, surrounded by a clan of black-haired beauties, wearing nothing but her bra and her jeans.

Make that her bra and panties, she thought, as one of the ladies unfastened her jeans and removed them.

Anemone's soft hands found the clasp of her bra and unhooked it. With an inexplicably gentle touch, she slipped the shoulder straps down, and freed Hyacinth from their constraints.

She closed her eyes, letting the bra fall away. She covered her breasts with her hands, feeling the nipples harden beneath them.

Two of the ladies tugged down the simple white cotton panties she wore and tossed them aside, leaving her completely nude. She knew her face bore the stains of an embarrassed blush, but she refused to act like the mouse Riley had always accused her of being. This was a once in a lifetime experience, and she planned to embrace it to the fullest, despite her embarrassment.

The ladies had all stripped down to nothing. Hyacinth snuck a glance, taking in the scene around her. It looked like a painting of a Roman bathhouse.

Flanked by her ladies on both sides, she stepped into the tub and under the waterfall. The ladies splashed water at each other, their giggles piercing the air. Hyacinth relaxed a millimeter as the hot spring water poured down her back. If the ladies-in-waiting weren't ashamed, why should she be?

"May I?" Anemone's voice broke into her reverie. Hyacinth looked up to see the handmaiden holding a silver pitcher.

"To wash your hair," Anemone explained, indicating the pitcher.

"Of course." Hyacinth tried for a sophisticated nod, trying not to stare at Anemone's naked body. The girl had the figure of a centerfold model.

As the handmaiden tipped Hyacinth's head back under the streaming water, some of the other ladies joined them. Hyacinth felt several pairs of hands lathering her hair, working a luxuriant shampoo through it with fingers that massaged her scalp and temples. She'd had her hair shampooed by her hairdresser, of course, but it couldn't compare to such a complete sensual overload as this. Nothing could.

She gasped when she felt a pair of soapy hands smoothing over her breasts and shoulders. Unable to open her eyes with the water from the pitcher raining down on her head, she had to rely on her sense of touch to inform her. She felt soft hands washing her,

making her breasts ache and her nipples tighten. Another pair of hands began to wash her back, stroking soap down its length as if they had all the time in the world.

When two sets of hands began to wash her belly and between her thighs, Hyacinth didn't even try to stifle a moan.

Her hair washed and rinsed, she opened her eyes. All but four of the ladies had stepped back. The four who remained began to rinse her soap-covered body, their slick hands sliding over her breasts, swirling around her nipples, gliding down her hips and trailing between her thighs.

She could feel their wet, slippery breasts against her, their warm, hard nipples grazing her skin. They washed and rinsed her as if she were made from priceless porcelain, as if their very touch could shatter her into a thousand pieces.

Maybe not in the literal sense, she thought, but close enough. She found herself overcome by heat pooling at the juncture of her legs. Steam from the waterfall rose up from their bare skin. Hyacinth gasped, trying not to stare at all the exposed female flesh before her, all of it rosy from the warm water and the pleasure of a shared bath.

The desire to reach down and touch herself the way Hades had touched her in the dream tempted her. She needed to find completion, to end this torment of the senses. She pulled in a shuddering breath and met Anemone's heated gaze.

Anemone clapped abruptly. "Ladies, let us give our future queen a moment of privacy to finish bathing." The ladies all made a rush for the huge closet, taking out black robes and slipping them on within seconds.

"When you're finished," Anemone threw her a knowing smile, "just ring the bell for me."

With that, they emptied the room, leaving Hyacinth alone with her overheated body.

She who'd been called frigid during her marriage, who'd never had a single orgasm until Hades had appeared in a dream to give her one, was so aroused it had become painful.

Finally alone, she turned to face the waterfall. Its powerful streams ran over her breasts, bringing her already sensitized nipples to torturous peaks. She rubbed them slowly then leaned back and opened herself to the gushing water.

The falls pounded her clitoris, stroking it like a lover's tongue. She thrust her hips, varying the pressure, letting it trickle down her throbbing cleft. Clutching her breasts with both hands, she came in a violent eruption, crying out in a voice ragged with longing.

When the final aftershocks subsided, she collapsed against the side of the tub and let the hot water soothe her. What had just happened here? She'd ended up in a room full of naked women, felt their hands and breasts all over her body, then brought herself to a mind-bending climax with the aid of a waterfall?

Not bad for a florist from Harrisburg. She gave herself a congratulatory smile, and reached out a weak hand to ring for Anemone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hades shifted on his throne, his eyes fixed on the door. Never had he been so anxious about a royal audience before.

What if he failed to please his future queen? He rubbed his chin with his hand, hearing the rasp of stubble. If she demanded to return to the world above, he was bound to let her go. But before it came to that, he had to take every chance to prove to her that he could make her happy, that they shared a destiny far too rare to cast aside without due consideration.

How could he make her see that?

Just then, two footmen opened the doors to his throne room, and Anemone ushered Hyacinth inside.

His breath caught in his throat. Had he ever seen anything so beautiful before?

She approached him slowly, her eyes never leaving his. Feeling his pulse race, he tore his gaze from hers and took the opportunity to study her, from the top of her pale golden corn-silk hair to the toes of her jeweled sandals.

Her willowy body was encased in a perfectly draped chlamydon, which left most of her ivory arms and her swan-like neck exposed. The black fabric, embroidered with countless silver stars and crescent moons, made her fair hair even more striking. She wore it twisted back in an elaborate knot, the work of the ladies-in-waiting, he was sure. Nevertheless, the effect had nearly brought him to his knees.

She stood at the foot of his throne now, and he returned his gaze to her eyes, drinking in their color like a rare vintage. Had he ever seen such blue before? Not in his world.

He rose to greet her, taking her hand and brushing it with his lips. He felt her shiver.

“You are lovely beyond compare, my dear Hyacinth.” He continued to hold her hand, feeling her pulse jump. A masculine surge of pride shot through him. He was the cause of her unrest.

She touched her hair self-consciously with her free hand. “Anemone is an amazing hair-dresser.”

“That may be true, but in your case, she had amazing hair to dress.” He drew her closer to him. “I trust you’ve found your accommodations to be adequate so far?”

The corner of her mouth turned up. “You could say that, yes.”

“Good.” He reached behind him and took a silver box from the floor beside his throne. “This is for you.”

He held it out to her, willing her to take it. She hesitated, her smile fading before turning into a frown. Finally, she took the box from him and opened it as if she expected Pandora herself to pop out of it.

She stared at the contents of the container for a brief instant, looking as if she held her breath. He held his as well, feeling his entire world hanging by the gossamer thread of her response.

"These are ..." She paused.

"The crown jewels," he supplied in a rush. Great Zeus, if she didn't accept the crown ...

Before she could offer a protest, he removed the ruby and emerald encrusted platinum crown from the box. He made a move to place it on her head, but she stopped him.

"I can't accept this." She reached inside the box and retrieved a matching necklace. She studied it briefly and returned it to the box. "I can't accept any of it." She held the box out to him with a determined expression.

After recovering his powers of speech, he sputtered, "Why the hell not?"

Her calm violet eyes met his. "Because I have no intention of staying here."

He took the box from her and, with patience he was far from feeling, put it down on the seat of Persephone's former throne.

"I thought you were willing to make the sacrifice to protect the environment." He didn't turn back to face her. He couldn't, not when she threatened to crush his heart beneath her heel.

"I care very much about the environment, but I can't give up my own life for a problem you should solve yourself."

He whipped around, not bothering to mask his anger and disappointment. "How the blazes am I suppose to solve this?"

She shrugged. "Talk to Zeus, or whoever created this insane set of rules about the seasons."

"You say that as if changing the mind of the supreme god of Olympus is as easy as ordering take-out."



"I'm sorry you have such a burden to carry, but I want to go back home." She dropped her gaze. "I have a life waiting for me in the world above."

"Do you?" He inched closer to her. "Or do you have a failed marriage and countless empty nights to fill?"

Her eyes shot fire at him. "Don't you dare bring my ex-husband into this."

"And why not? Let's see, you have no marriage to return to." He ticked his reasons off on his fingers. "No family, one good friend, and a small business." He let out a bitter laugh. "I'm forgetting the cramped dwelling you call a house."

"You should know, since you managed to sneak into my dreams and seduce me in my own bedroom." She shot him a look from beneath her lowered eyelashes.

"I didn't hear you object at the time," he muttered in a dry voice.

She looked as if she were about to say something, then changed her mind. "What happened between us in my bedroom isn't important right now. You have to let me go home."

He reached for her. "Tell me about your marriage, about what went wrong. I can't imagine any man giving you up willingly."

She let him take her hand. "Riley had his reasons." She rolled her eyes. "One of them was named Denise."

"Only a fool would look at another woman with you at his side." Hades squeezed her hand, trying to convey the depth of his feelings for her.

"I never said my ex was smart." She gave him a feeble smile. "Even though you're being really sweet to me, I still can't stay with you." She returned the squeeze of his hand. "I'm mortal. I don't belong here."

She belonged with him. Why couldn't she realize that? Desperate, he tried another angle. "Just give me time to win Zeus over to my side before you return to the upper world. A week, maybe two."

“And then?” She raised her eyebrows at him.

“Then, you’re free to go.” But he planned to win her, both body and soul, before that time came.

He refused to lose her.

\* \* \* \* \*

The thing she’d miss the most would be the flora.

Hyacinth picked an asphodel and inhaled its faint scent. Sighing, she tucked it behind her ear. She’d walked every inch of the castle grounds in search of something green and alive, and found nothing.

It was only her second day in the Underworld, but the landscape was already as familiar to her as the back of her hand. She’d managed to avoid getting lost in the castle, thanks to the constant presence of her ladies-in-waiting. But she’d dismissed them to go for a walk outside, craving the solitude she’d grown so weary of since her divorce.

The business of running his kingdom had kept Hades occupied all day, and when she found herself dining alone with Anemone in her private chamber for lunch, she felt a pang of disappointment she couldn’t dismiss, as much as she’d wanted to squelch it. The last thing she needed was to develop feelings for another man, not after what had happened with Riley.

It could only lead to another heartbreak, and she wasn’t sure it could take another blow without shattering into a million fragments.

“I thought I might find you here.”

She looked up at the sound of Hades’s voice to see him standing before her, looking more gorgeous than any man had a right to be.

“This is the closest thing I could find to a garden.” She swept her arm out. “Asphodel must be the state flower here.” She shook her head. “I’m afraid to ask about the state bird.”

He laughed, a sound that always made her want to laugh too, whether she got the joke or not. "This was Persephone's grove. She had a taste for dark things." He rubbed his chin. "I suppose she got her fill of color and blossoms during her time above each year."

"I can't imagine ever getting my fill." She took the asphodel from behind her ear and fastened it to the buttonhole of his black shirt. "Flowers have been my best friends ever since I could remember."

His arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her closer to him. "You're named for a flower. It makes perfect sense that you'd have a close kinship to them."

"My father was an avid ... actually, a fanatical gardener." Her voice shook from the rush of emotion that came from being close to Hades. "He named me after his favorite bloom."

"An excellent choice." He bent down and nuzzled her ear. Her breath came in a dizzying gasp. "You're as fragrant as any blossom of the field." His lips did something to the spot just below her ear that made her knees buckle.

She lifted her hands and pressed them against the muscled wall of his chest, trying to still their trembling. No man had ever affected her like this. It made her wonder would happen if her hands dipped a little lower ...

Suddenly he released her. She managed to avoid whimpering in disappointment ... barely.

"Would you care to join me for dinner on my balcony?" His face betrayed no hint of arousal. Maybe she didn't have the same effect on him as he had on her. Her heart sank like a leaky rowboat.

"Sure." She took the hand he offered her and kept silent as they turned to walk the path back to the castle. How could she be so stupid? One minute she warned herself against having feelings for him, the next she could barely keep her hands off him.

Zeus had better find a solution to their problem sooner than later, or else she was in for another crack in her battered heart.

\* \* \* \* \*

“That dinner was spectacular.” Hyacinth breathed out a sigh of contentment.

“There’s a reason why they call it ambrosia.” He twined his fingers through hers, feeling the same lightheaded sensation he experienced every time they touched. It had taken an effort worthy of Hercules to pull himself away from her in the grove earlier, but he’d done it despite his body’s throbbing objections. He wanted her to be sure of her feelings if he finally got the chance to make love to her.

*When*, he reminded himself. Not *if*.

“I thought chocolate was fabulous, but after tasting ambrosia, my life-long love affair with the Hershey bar may be in grave danger.” She laughed.

He considered her words. “Often your potential greatest pleasure is hiding in plain sight, waiting for you to find it.”

She bit her bottom lip and kept her eyes focused on the tapestries covering the walls of the hallway. “Sometimes the greatest pleasure is just hiding, period. You end up blaming yourself when you can’t find it, and disappointing everyone else in the process.”

Her ex-husband. He *knew* it. “You speak of that imbecile who left you for another woman?”

She’d apparently developed a feverish interest in tapestries. Without turning to look at him, she spoke. “I was a total letdown -- no pun intended -- in bed.” She twisted the fringe of the nearest canvas around her fingers. “He said I was frigid.”

Hades spat a curse. “You’ve already disproved him on that point.”

She tilted her head, her face filled with skepticism. “I felt free because we were in a dream state. Who knows what would happen in reality? I’d probably bomb out again like I did on my wedding night.”

He spun her around to face him. "If you 'bombed out' again, the blame would fall on the inept male who used you callously for his own enjoyment, with no thought for your own."

She sighed. "I wish I could believe you."

And he wished he could show her, a thousand times over, the heights of pleasure he could give her.

But not yet, not until she'd given him at least the smallest piece of her heart.

"I promise you ..." He cradled her face in his hands, stroking her petal-soft skin with the pads of his thumbs. "There will be a man someday who will show you ecstasy beyond your wildest dreams." He tipped his head forward until his dark hair fell against hers. "A man worthy of you, and everything you have to offer."

She placed her hands over his. He heard her rapid intake of breath and felt blood stirring below his belt. One more little sigh from her, and he'd be hard as the stone walls surrounding them.

"Don't waste yourself on fools." He brushed her lips with his. "You're worthy of kings."

He pulled away from her, watching her eyes widen with surprise. She touched her fingers to her lips in a gesture that finalized the painful erection he'd been developing for the past few minutes.

"I see we're at your door." He reached around her and turned the knob. "Thank you for your company this evening."

She blinked. "You're welcome."

He turned and walked away, leaving her to go into her bedroom alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

The whispers caressed her like the softest fingertips. Hyacinth rolled over in the gigantic bed, letting her sleepy brain sort through the sounds and sensations to determine if they were part of a dream or of waking.

But the sounds continued, the airy voices rushing around her like wisps of wind. They called her name in a singsong voice, an echo of a nursery rhyme.

“Hyacinth ... come with us ...”

She stirred beneath the silk sheets. Her emotions had run at a fever pitch that evening from her encounter with Hades. All she’d wanted was to sleep for a while.

“Hyacinth ... it’s time to wake up ...”

The breezy chorus continued.

She hoisted her eyelids up, letting her sight adjust to the darkness of her suite.

The sources of the voices swirled around above her bed. They appeared to be female, these ghostly apparitions. Their beautiful faces were flanked with long windblown hair leading down to shapely figures. They were completely lacking in color, mere white outlines in the night.

They began their siren song again, urging her to come with them. Hyacinth dragged herself out of bed and threw her robe over her shoulders. These little poltergeists could be messengers from Hades, for all she knew. Her curiosity convinced her to go with them.

She followed them down the long hallway to the curving stone stairs that led to another floor below. They beckoned to her, gesturing for her with crooked fingers. She rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand and tried to keep up.

They went down the stairs and then through another long hallway, through a set of double doors and into a small study. One of the spirits pointed to a bookcase.

“Take out *The Odyssey*.” She indicated a thick tome near the edge of the shelf.

Hyacinth yawned. “All right, but it’s a little heavy for bedtime reading.” She reached out and removed the book from the shelf.

Without warning, a panel opened in the wall.

“A secret door.” Hyacinth nodded to the spirits. “It’s like I’ve stepped inside a game of *Clue*.”

Their eerie laughter echoed through the room.

They urged her through the open panel, and she found herself in another hallway, this one dimly lit and undecorated. There were no doors and no windows until she reached the end of the hall.

A wide section of the wall had been cut away to make a half-partition. She stood against it, looking into the room on the other side. When her mind processed the view from the other side, her jaw dropped and her heart began to race. She’d seen erotic films before and had her share of fantasies. But nothing could’ve prepared her for the sight before her eyes. Every nerve in her body roared to life with sexual heat.

She couldn’t have looked away if she’d wanted to.

The first face she recognized belonged to Anemone. Her handmaiden stood near the back of the other room, her perfect body unclothed and her long black hair mussed.

Two men -- Hyacinth studied them and realized they were two of the footmen, Jason and Nicus -- stroked Anemone’s skin, running their hands over her as if she were a fine tapestry and they were merchants appreciating her value. The men were both nude, their hard muscles and firm bodies pressed against Anemone, one on either side.

Jason lowered his head and took one of Anemone’s nipples into his mouth. Nicus followed suit, taking care of the opposite nipple. He tugged at the nipple with such powerful suction that Hyacinth could hear his mouth working. The sound of his lips sucking Anemone’s nipple made Hyacinth wet.

She shouldn’t be seeing this. It was a private moment. She should turn away and go back to bed.

“These are the rites of pleasure,” one of the spirits whispered from some disembodied place. “It’s the privilege of royalty to witness these events.”

Hyacinth gasped when Jason released Anemone’s nipple and brought her to her knees in front of him.

She watched as the tip of the footman’s cock brushed Anemone’s lips. The dark haired girl moaned and snaked her tongue out to glide over the head of his erection. He snarled his fingers in her hair, drawing her mouth closer to his hardness. She complied, taking his cock into her mouth.

Anemone sucked him then let him fall from her mouth with a pop. She swished her tongue around the head and worked it up the length of his shaft.

Meanwhile, Nicus arranged Anemone on all fours. Jason stepped back, watching as the other man plunged his cock into Anemone’s wet sheath.

Hyacinth’s breasts ached with desire. Her nipples beaded to painful points. Without thinking, she stroked them through the silk of her nightgown, never taking her eyes from the scene before her.

While Nicus slid his cock in and out of Anemone, Jason stood before her, silently asking her to take him into her mouth again. She opened her red lips and welcomed his thick shaft, her tongue dancing around the head before he pushed it deep inside her mouth.

From behind Nicus pumped harder, his hips thrusting like a piston. The entire lower half of Anemone’s body shook from the power of his thrusts, while Jason cradled the back of Anemone’s head to hold it steady and slammed his cock in and out of her mouth.

Hyacinth panted, slipping a hand into her panties. She found the hub of her pleasure and rubbed it, timing it to the dual thrusts being performed on Anemone on the other side of the wall.

As her pleasure built, she stared at the two cocks going in and out of her handmaiden, both slick and shiny from the wetness of Anemone’s mouth and dripping cleft. Nicus reached



around and found Anemone's clitoris. When he began to stroke it in tandem with his thrusts, moans erupted from deep within the girl's throat.

Then Anemone came. Her face and breasts flushed, and her entire body quivered with the pleasure of it. Jason pulled his cock to the very edge of Anemone's mouth and came. Hyacinth watched her handmaiden's throat work as she swallowed the footman's essence.

From behind her, Nicus thrust deeper inside Anemone, so deeply that Hyacinth groaned from vicarious pleasure. Finally, when it seemed he could go no deeper, he palmed the handmaiden's clitoris. Nicus came, taking Anemone over the edge again, their cries reverberating off the walls of the empty room.

Hyacinth found her own orgasm at the same time, almost weeping from the power of it, the spasms shaking her until her knees threatened to buckle.

The smell of desire hung thick as fog in the air, and Hyacinth suddenly realized what she'd seen and done. Ducking, she turned and ran out of the room and down the hallway before the threesome, currently collapsed on the stone floor, could recover and see her there.

She rushed into her bedroom and shut the door, bolting it behind her. She'd just had another orgasm, this time with no help from anyone but herself.

Well, maybe not *entirely* by herself. When she'd fallen over the edge of sensation, Hades's face had been the only image burning in her mind.

## Chapter Five

Hyacinth had just finished her breakfast when a knock sounded at her door.

She hesitated before rising from her seat at the small table in her bedroom and going to the door. She hadn't seen Anemone that morning, and wasn't sure how she'd hide her embarrassment over what she'd seen and done the night before. But to her relief, it wasn't Anemone on the other side of the door, but Hades.

After giving her his customary kiss on her hand, his gaze roved over her from head to toe. "You look especially lovely this morning."

She glanced down at her simple white robe draped in classic Greek style. "Thank you." She smoothed the skirt with her hand. "I prefer simple clothing like this." Realizing her potential blunder, she continued. "Not that I haven't enjoyed all the silks and velvets you've given me."

He dismissed her apology with a wave of his hand. "No, you're quite right. I prefer this style on you. Your beauty has more room to shine against a simple gown."

Flushing with pleasure, she lowered her eyelids. He looked even more handsome than usual, as well. His modern-cut black jeans and simple v-neck black shirt showed off a physique that would've made the greatest works of Michelangelo weep with envy.

"I have a bit of a surprise for you, if you're done breakfasting." He leaned on the doorframe and folded his arms over his chest.

"What is it?" She slipped white sandals onto her feet and joined him in the hallway.

"It's outside, around the back." He offered her his arm, and she took it, shyly wrapping her hand around his thick bicep. Something about touching him always felt so ... so ... *right*. His presence made her feel safe, protected, even cherished. She'd never had such a comfortable rapport with any man before. She flipped through her mental photo album of life with Riley. He wasn't the affectionate type, or so he claimed when she'd tried to take his hand in public.

She couldn't help but compare Riley's behavior to that of Hades, who never failed to take her hand or offer her his arm. She'd envied other women whose husbands showered them with the kind of attention that Hades gave her.

It could be habit-forming. Her stomach turned over at the thought. She couldn't get used to this kind of thing.

They wended their way to the back of the castle, and Hades pointed out a white lattice trellis in the distance. "It's through there, beneath the arch." He looked down at her, mirth sparkling in his dark eyes. "I'll race you there."

"You'd lose." She grinned up at him.

"That's a chance I'm willing to take."

She opened her mouth to reply, but he'd already broken into a run down the hill, toward the archway.

Gathering up the skirts of her white robe, she sprinted behind him, overtaking him before they both came to a stop at the archway.

"You're rather fast, for a florist from Harrisburg." His chest rose and fell with rapid breaths.

"I was on the track team in high school." She pushed a stray lock of hair back from her forehead. "Did I forget to mention that?"

"Yet another thing I didn't know about you." He plucked a blade of grass from her robe. "I can hardly wait to discover your other secrets."

Tension zinged back and forth between them like a current. His dark gaze bore into hers, and her thoughts tangled into an unreadable jumble.

This had to stop. "Where's the surprise?" She broke the almost unbearable eye contact by turning her gaze to the trellis.

"Right this way." He ducked his head and went through the archway, disappearing between the cypress trees on the other side.

She followed, passing through the cypress grove. On the other side, surrounded by classical Greek statuary, she found the most exquisite garden imaginable.

Wild roses of every shade grew around the perimeter, filling the soft breeze with their fragrance. Daffodils flanked the stone walkways cutting paths through the garden. Their yellow tops waved in the air like the hands of old friends greeting her.

Lilies in terracotta pots stood on either side of several stone benches. Dogwood and honeysuckle complemented each other in small patches, and circling the fountain in the center of the garden were a million blooming hyacinths.

She put her hand over her heart, fearing it would explode with emotion.

"Do you like your surprise?" Hades's voice was soft and questioning.

She struggled for words. "*Like* doesn't even begin to cover it." She turned a full rotation, taking in the entire scene again. "How ..."

"I called in a favor from Khloris, the goddess of flowers." He sat down on the bench nearest Hyacinth. "Just don't ask for any mint. We've been, uh ... *cured* of our mint problem here, thanks to the help of Khloris."

She didn't quite catch his meaning, but her mind raced onward. "You realize there are flowers with completely different growing seasons all blooming at the same time here."

He nodded. "We're not bound by the seasons here."

She was reminded of her purpose there -- to help avoid a climate crisis in the world above, not to have gardens constructed by the king in her honor. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, the scent of countless flowers filling her with their perfume. She'd have to say goodbye to all of this soon.

The thought of leaving stung her unexpectedly. A few days ago, she'd wanted nothing more than to return to the world she'd known before. But now ...

She opened her eyes and saw Hades watching her closely. "Hermes is in negotiations with Zeus," he said, as if he'd read her mind. "We should be able to reach an agreement soon."

That news should make her happy. She tried for a look of satisfaction. "The sooner the better. I'm sure I'm needed back home at the shop."

"I'll let you know as soon as anything develops." He stood and bowed to her before beginning to walk away.

"Hades, wait." She ran to his side and caught his arm with her hand. "I don't know how to thank you. This is one of the ..." Honesty welled up inside her. "No, it's *the* nicest thing anyone has ever done for me." She became aware of the heat and strength of his arm beneath her hand. "I hardly know how to thank you."

After a silence in which she could feel her heart rate double, he brushed the side of her face with his fingers. "Know your own heart." He clasped her chin and tilted face toward his. "Know what it is you truly desire and follow it. Don't let your past decide your future."

"I don't understand." She tried to attach meaning to his words, unsure of what he'd tried to tell her.

“Think on it.” He withdrew from her, preparing to leave again, but she stepped in front of him and placed her hands on his shoulders.

“Thank you,” she whispered, standing on her tiptoes to reach his ear. She leaned her body into his and planted a shy kiss on his cheek.

He stepped back, touching the spot she’d kissed. His eyes burned, and she could see a pulse racing near the hollow of his throat.

Without another word, he turned and left the garden. Hyacinth sank down onto the bench behind her, her senses reeling. Hades’s spicy, masculine scent clung to her gown, and she drank it in, enjoying it more than the scent of all the flowers combined.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lap number thirty-seven.

Hades pushed his arms through the water, fighting it, willing it to submit to him. He kicked against it, propelling himself forward in the deep end of his indoor pool.

Exhaustion hadn’t set in yet. He’d continue until it had. He wanted every muscle to ache, for bone weariness to claim him. Maybe then he could fall into his bed and experience a coma-like sleep.

Only then might he escape the pounding frustration filling every fiber of his being.

His mind flashed back on Hyacinth’s kiss, the way her lips had touched his face like the petals of one of her flowers. His blood turned hot and his body became molten steel.

He wanted her. If he didn’t have her soon ...

The edge of the pool loomed closer with each stroke through the water. He reached out and grabbed it, gulping for air. Draping both arms over the side of the pool for support, he rested his back against the tile edge and took a breather.

His eyelids fell like shades over dark windows. He needed to stop obsessing on Hyacinth, to let things take their course. But how could he do that, when she presented him

with constant temptations? He'd wanted to take her in the garden, to make love to her on a bed of her namesake flowers. He wanted ...

"Taking a late night swim?"

His eyes popped open at the sound of her voice. She stood in the doorway, watching him with a glint of amusement in her eyes.

"I sleep better if I've had some exercise." He became instantly aware of his nudity. Why wear a suit in your own indoor pool, he'd always said. With the threat of an imminent erection, he could understand for the first time the potential usefulness of a pair of trunks.

She drifted toward the pool, her skirt gathered casually in her hand. "I'd think running a kingdom would leave you exhausted every night." She slid a sandal off one foot, never taking her eyes from him. "You have a busy job, meting out the destinies of the dearly departed, overseeing eternal punishment of wayward souls, that kind of thing."

He watched her kick off her other sandal. Her feet and ankles were as graceful as those of the statues around her garden. "I don't judge or punish. I'm merely a glorified overseer."

"Then you have a lot in common with most earthly rulers." She let out a teasing laugh and knelt down at the edge of the pool. "Mind if I put my feet in?"

"Be my guest." He included the entire pool in a sweeping gesture. "My pool is your pool."

"Thank you, sire." She dipped a narrow foot into the water.

Hades winced. "Please, never call me that again."

Her eyes widened. "I thought you liked that sort of thing."

He made a sound of disgust. "Hardly. How often can you watch people bow to you before it becomes tedious?"

"You're asking the wrong person." She put her other foot into the pool. "The only person who has ever bowed to me was Mr. Tanaka at his sushi bar back home."

He threw his head back and laughed. "Hyacinth, you are *such* a pleasant change of pace."

She swung her feet, making ripples in the water. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"Always." He submerged himself and swam toward her underwater, surfacing a few feet from where she sat.

A pretty blush colored her cheeks. "I see this is a clothing-optional pool." She raised an eyebrow at him. He could see she was trying not to look below his chest.

"So it is." Blood rushed to his cock. "Care to join me?"

She ducked her chin and averted her eyes. "I've never been much of a skinny dipper."

He waded closer, until he stood between her ankles. "Skinny dipper? If that's what I think it is, perhaps you should become one."

"I've never been brave enough for nude swimming." She let her gaze travel down the length of his body. When she caught sight of his burgeoning erection, she bit her bottom lip and looked away.

"You don't know what you've missed, then." He lifted his hands from the water to stroke the sensitive skin of her inner ankles. "Drop your robe and jump in." He permitted himself a smile. "I promise not to look."

"I couldn't." She shook her blond hair back from her shoulders. "It would be too weird."

He laughed again. "You, a mortal, are here in the kingdom of the dead, talking to the god of the netherworld about skinny dipping. How can *anything* seem too weird?"

Her laughter joined his. "You promise not to peek?"

He covered his eyes with his hands. "I swear to Zeus."

"I guess that'll have to do." She retracted her feet from the water and stood, dropping her robe from one shoulder. She stuck her foot out and nudged him on the shoulder. "Turn around, or I'll start bowing and calling you sire again."



“We couldn’t have that.” He obeyed her, turning his back to her. In a few seconds, he felt her swift descent into the water behind him.

They were in the shallow end, with water barely touching his chest. “May I turn around now?”

“The no peeking rule still applies,” she reminded him. He faced her, trying not to gape at the image before him.

The water rose higher for her, with only her smooth shoulders and the flawless column of her neck remaining dry. She’d removed the combs holding her hair in its ancient Greek-style knot, and it fell below her shoulders, fanning out around her in the water like a golden mermaid’s tail. Droplets sparkled on her face and shoulders, shimmering as if she’d been sprinkled with a million fragments of diamond dust. Her champagne glass breasts, buoyed by the water, undulated just beneath the pool’s surface. Aphrodite rising from the sea hadn’t possessed half such beauty and allure.

She took his breath away.

“What is it?” She raked a wet hand over her hair, reacting to his scrutiny. “Is my hair a total mess?”

“Your hair ...” He removed her hand from her hair and brushed back the fair strands. “... couldn’t possibly look more desirable than it does now.”

Their eyes connected, and the same hum of tension that had played like background music between them all day burst into a full symphony movement.

“This is quite a pool you’ve got here.” She glanced around, breaking the spell. “It looks almost as if it’s tiled in lapis.”

“It is.” He’d chosen lapis for his pool to give the water a specific blue cast.

“And the waterfalls.” She pointed to the cascade flowing into an alcove of the pool secluded by rocks. “You Olympians really do things up in style.”

“Would you care to experience the falls?” He’d had the warm waterfall placed in a sequestered alcove to provide privacy for whoever chose to enjoy it.

“I’d love to.” She waded behind him as he led the way. “I’ve *so* enjoyed the waterfall in my bathroom.”

He pictured her nude, rinsing her long hair in the streaming water. “This one is even better.”

“It’s certainly bigger.”

He swam between the two boulders that marked off the private section of the pool. “And hotter.”

He groaned as his cock swelled to Herculean proportions. The falls weren’t the only things getting bigger and hotter by the second.

He turned to guide her between the boulders. Once she passed through them, they stood in a smaller pool of water rising to his waist and her chest. Surrounded by plants and rocks, they were safe from prying eyes.

“Mmmhhh,” she breathed. “This water feels fantastic.”

Steam rose from the surface of the pool. “Rather like one of your modern hot tubs, I assume?”

She nodded, letting her eyelids flutter shut. “Even nicer.” She backed into the falls, letting them massage her shoulders with their pounding flow. “Our hot tubs don’t come with waterfalls.”

He hedged his way closer to her. “Do your shoulders ache?”

She tipped her head back, letting the water flow over her hair. “They won’t after a few minutes of this.”

The blissful expression on her face came close to undoing him. He had to touch her, or he’d chew his way through one of the boulders.

“Let me help you.” He moved in behind her before she could answer and slid his hands up her arms and onto her shoulders.

The falling water stroked his back as he kneaded her shoulders, letting his fingers memorize the feel of her body and the texture of her skin. She leaned into his touch, and her breasts rose out of the water. He moaned, pressing his lips against the back of her neck. She parted her lips and drew a shallow breath.

He drank in the sight of her breasts. They were round and perfect, more luscious than Hera’s golden apples. Her nipples were peaked and their color reminded him of a ripe peach. He longed to suckle them, to roll them with his tongue and taste their sweetness.

“Hyacinth.” He whispered her name against her shoulder. “My beautiful queen ... my lovely flower.” He skimmed her neck with his lips.

“Hades ...” Her voice broke on his name. “We can’t ... shouldn’t ...”

He moved his hands, dragging them from her shoulders, letting them linger on the sides of her breasts. “Feel my desire for you.” He pressed against her, allowing the hard length of him speak for itself. “Feel how much I want you.”

She reached behind her, crooking her arms to reach his hair. She anchored her fingers in the dark strands. “I need you to touch me.” She moved her legs apart until they were flush with his. “No one has ever touched me the way you do. I feel ...”

“Shhh.” He turned her around to face him and silenced her with a kiss.

She opened for him, instantly taking his tongue into her mouth. He let his tongue explore, tasting, twisting against hers. When his erection nestled between her parted thighs, the movements of his tongue changed, its swirling motions becoming insistent thrusts.

She whimpered into his open mouth, drawing on his tongue with the heat of her mouth every time he retreated from a thrust. His engorged cock grazed the blond thatch between her legs, so close to entering her, almost inside her.

His hands wandered lower, stroking her abdomen, then clutching her hips. He had to get inside her before he burst into the water. The brush of her sex against his sent the pressure inside him spiraling to unbearable heights. He disentangled her arms from him, turned her around, and bent her forward. She complied, bracing herself against a boulder.

“Oh, my beauty, how I’ve wanted this.” He trailed kisses down her back, cupping the firm flesh of her backside. He worked his hands back up and around to her breasts, holding them, lifting their weight. Guided by an instinct stronger than rational thought, she lifted her hips to meet his pelvis.

A primal sound broke loose from his throat. He slid his hands from her breasts and gripped her hips like a vise, ready to feel the curve of her rear end against his pelvis when he entered her, knowing he would erupt in sweet bliss when he finally buried his cock in the depths of her wet cave.

He pulled a ragged breath into his lungs and pressed the tip of his erection against her opening. Go slow, he reminded himself. Savor it.

Her hand snapped around and pushed him backwards. “Stop.”

He panted, feeling blood rush to his face -- a miracle, since his entire supply seemed to be rooted in his cock. “Stop? How can we stop?”

She turned around, covering her breasts with her arms. Her eyes were wild, dilated with passion, and her usually pale face flushed. “I don’t know how we can, but we will. We can’t do this.”

He spoke with difficulty. “Why ever in the name of Great Cronus not?”

She reached out to touch him and apparently thought better of it. “Don’t be angry, please. After you’ve been so kind to me, I couldn’t stand it if this came between us.”

“The only thing about to *come* between us is me, like the great volcano of Pompeii.” He backed away from her, ignoring his cock’s pulsing arguments to the contrary.

She covered her face with her hands, abandoning her breasts to his gaze. Oh, joy. His cock jerked in approval.

"I'm so sorry." Her voice predicted a forecast of tears. "I just can't make love with you."

"That wasn't making love." He had to get into cooler water before he came right there in the alcove. "It was primal rutting between two very amorous people."

"I know, and believe me, it felt good for me too." She uncovered her face and leveled her unsteady gaze on him. "But whether it's primal rutting or making love, I can't have sex with you. It wouldn't be fair to either of us."

He'd backed himself all the way to the other side of the alcove. "I can't believe you were weighing issues of fairness with my cock poised to slam into you until you screamed out in pleasure."

"I know, I know, it sounds stupid." She shook her head and splashed some water on her face. "But it doesn't change the fact that I'm leaving soon, and I don't want us to become more connected ..." Her voice faltered, and her next words came out with evident difficulty. "More connected than we already are."

"So you admit there's more between us than a random mortal-meets-Olympian encounter."

"I'd have to be dead not to feel it," she admitted. "I might be in the Underworld, but last time I checked, I'm still very much alive."

"That you are." He'd never felt such heat as this woman had evoked in him.

"I've only slept with one man in my entire life, and even though I've become a lot more adventurous since coming to the castle." She paused, conflicting emotions playing over her face. "And I do mean *a lot* more adventurous -- I still can't have sex with someone unless I know there's some kind of potential for a future with him." Her features morphed into that old expression of resistance she'd worn since the second he'd brought her below. "We both know that's not in the cards for us."

"I'll have a sorceress read our cards, if you put stock in that." He was stalling, trying to get to the root of this blockade she kept throwing between them, hoping she'd stumble into her true feelings if she kept talking.

"No, I didn't mean it literally." She shook her head. "I'm just saying, we both understand that there's no hope for a long term relationship between us. You have your world here, and I have mine. Neither of us can or want to leave our lives behind." She shrugged. "How could we ever have any kind of normal relationship?"

"I hear that normal is rather overrated." He took her hand and pulled her between the boulders, back into the cooler waters of the larger pool.

"Maybe so." She looked at him through lowered lashes. "But Persephone still chose to try it, didn't she?"

That stung. "Touché, my beauty." Between her icy words and the cool water, his erection dropped like a wilted stalk.

"I'm not trying to hurt you." She put her hand on his shoulder. The gesture lacked the soaring heat of their previous interactions and conveyed mere friendly concern. "I meant what I said back there. I'd never want to bring you pain, not after everything you've done to make my stay here a happy one."

Apparently, all his efforts to secure her happiness hadn't been enough to make her stay. "You're afraid if we make love ..." He put his hand over hers, slowly lowering it into the water, away from his body. "You're afraid if you let me inside you ..."

She pressed her lips together and closed her eyes.

"You're afraid if we make each other come until we're both limp and soaked with sweat ... it will strengthen the connection between us."

She opened her eyes, a heavy, drugged expression on her face. "That's exactly what I'm afraid of."

He let his gaze devour her breasts. "Don't you think it might be worth it?"

She scrubbed her forehead with her hand. "I think we can't afford to find out."

He lifted her hand and kissed it in the old familiar way. "As you wish, my lady." He let her hand go and swam toward the ladder. "But if you change your mind ..." He glanced back at her over his shoulder as he climbed out of the pool. "... you know where my bedroom is."

He stood beside the pool, drying himself with the towel he'd placed on a nearby chaise longue. Her mouth hung open in surprise. Not bothering to cover himself, he turned and went through the doorway that led to his private chambers.

She could deny it all she wanted, but their heat and passion was mutual. If making love would form a stronger connection on her part, then he had to find a way to get her into his bed as soon as possible. If it would make her stay with him, he'd keep her in his bed until the next millennium rolled around.

Not that he'd have any objections to such a plan under the best of circumstances. He grinned to himself.

He just had to find a way to make her give up her resistance and realize they were meant to be.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Can I take the blindfold off now? Please?" Hyacinth groped blindly at the scarf covering her eyes.

"Not yet." Hades held her hand, directing her step by step, but she still longed to see exactly where they were. They'd been walking for a while, and she could tell they were outside, but otherwise she didn't have a clue.

"Almost there." He took her other hand in his. "Step down." His voice came from in front of her now, instead of from her side.

She gingerly put a foot down, feeling for solid ground. He led her down three small steps and stopped her.

“Here we are.” He reached around to untie her blindfold.

The scarf fell away, and she blinked a few times, her eyes struggling to adjust to the bright sunlight.

“Where are we?” She took in the towering trees hung with golden fruit, the green grass topped with bushes bearing crimson roses, and the majestic white gates in the distance, looking as if they’d been carved from solid mother of pearl. A strong west wind blew her hair back from her face and cooled her skin deliciously. She inhaled deeply, realizing the wind carried the scent of incense.

“This must be paradise.” She gazed around with wonder.

“Close enough.” Hades wrapped his arms around her from behind and rested his chin on the top of her head. “This is the gateway to the Elysian Fields.”

“No wonder it took so long to walk here.” She nestled into his embrace and sighed with contentment.

“Says the lady who walks all the way to Persephone’s grove every day to feed the owls.”

He must’ve memorized her routine. “This is a wonderful surprise ... I’m so glad I got the chance to see it.”

“And I’m glad I got the chance to show you.” His arms tightened around her. “But we’ll see much more, before the day is done.”

She craned her neck to look up at him. “How so?”

“Watch this.” He released her and stepped back, taking a golden whistle from his pocket. He blew into it and a lilting tune emerged. He flashed a smile and pointed to the sky.

She squinted against the sun, scanning the clouds. “I don’t see anything.” She glanced over her shoulder at Hades.

He put the whistle back in his pocket. “You will.”



She turned her attention back to the sky. It remained unchanged, the same placid clouds drifting across a brilliant sky.

“Look to the west.” Hades spoke from behind her.

She followed his suggestion, gazing up until her neck cramped. “It might help if I knew what to look for.”

He laughed. “You’ll know it when you see it.”

She was about to answer when something appeared between the clouds, a white speck, moving rapidly through the sky.

“I see it!” She hopped up and down. “But what the heck is it?” It came closer by the second, until she could make out the shape of a horse.

A horse with wings.

“Oh my God.” She couldn’t take her eyes from the sight of the white equine speeding toward them on angelic wings. “Is that who I think it is?”

“Pegasus!” Hades beckoned the creature toward them. “Feel like giving us a ride today?”

With more grace than the finest Russian ballerina, the horse came to land on delicate hooves a few yards away from where Hades stood. Hyacinth gaped, astounded by the creature’s beauty.

He pawed the ground with his front hoof and let out an affirmative whinny before turning his dark, wise eyes toward Hyacinth.

“Pegasus, my friend, allow me to introduce Hyacinth.” Hades waved his hand in her direction. “She’ll be accompanying us today.”

Hyacinth nodded, almost blinded by the creature’s dazzling white coat. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Hades took the horse’s golden bridle in hand. “Are you ready to go?”

"I'm not about to turn down the chance to ride on Pegasus, if that's what you mean."

She ran to Hades's side. After mounting the horse himself, he helped her to settle into the saddle behind him.

"Hold on tight," he cautioned her.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed herself against his strong back.

"You couldn't pry me away with a crowbar."

With him nestled between her legs, she had to fight the urge to moan. She heard him cluck to Pegasus, and suddenly they were moving effortlessly into the air.

Hyacinth squeezed Hades and looked down, watching the earth seem to fall away as Pegasus lifted them higher and higher into the sky. Soon they were soaring through the clouds over the Elysian Fields.

"How do you like this mode of transportation?" Hades called to her.

"I love it. I've never felt so free and alive before." The landscape gave way to a shore beneath them, with crystal blue waves washing against pure white sand.

He inclined his head down. "Be sure to wave to the Nereids."

She followed his gaze to the rocks dotting the seashore. Hyacinth could hardly believe her eyes. Mermaids sat on the smooth gray surfaces of the rocks, their tails fanned out in the water. They combed each other's long hair, dressing each other in strands of resplendent pearls and ornaments made from seashells. Each of their tails was a different color, ranging from palest coral pink to deepest violet, from apple green to vivid emerald, from sky blue to the richest sapphire. Their hair, impossibly long and every shade from blond to red all the way to chestnut and ebony, swirled around them in the ocean breeze.

Hyacinth cautiously let go of Hades with one hand and waved it at the mermaids below. Apparently Hades was well known in every corner of Olympus, for the mermaids all waved back enthusiastically before bursting into a haunting song.

“They have such beautiful voices.” She breathed deep of the salty air, letting the music combine with the sensation of flight until she felt as if she were soaring toward heaven itself.

“You should hear the Sirens,” he answered, steering Pegasus with the gold reins.

They flew further out to sea. Hyacinth couldn’t take her eyes off the water flowing endlessly beneath them, where dolphins performing synchronized ballets and fish leaped into the air, reflecting the joy she felt at that very moment.

There were ships, too, seafaring vessels of every description, both modern and ancient, some with sails billowing in the wind. The captains at their wheels and the crews on deck looked like tiny dolls from Hyacinth’s vantage point. She waved to the figures below, smiling when they lifted their caps to salute the king of the Underworld.

She pressed her cheek against Hades’s shoulder, enjoying the way his spicy scent mixed with that of the wind and sea. She couldn’t ask for more than to be close to him, sailing through the sky as if they were the only two people alive.

To the east she saw another mermaid, this one more regal and beautiful than all the others. Her tail was the color of the finest aquamarine, and countless stands of pearls hung around her neck. She wore a fishnet hung with pearls and jewels on her wavy golden hair, and rode across the waves in a chariot made from a giant seashell. Hyacinth gasped to see a team of dolphins pulling it through the water.

“Who’s that?” She indicated the chariot to Hades.

“That would be Amphitrite, queen of the sea.” He saluted the queen, and Hyacinth did the same. Amphitrite gave them a wave of her hand as she sped away. A burst of white sea foam formed in her wake.

“We’re approaching land,” Hades said, steering Pegasus further west. “Our capital, Olympus City.”

It certainly looked like a capital. Near the shore, she could make out buildings constructed in classical Greek style, all white with towering columns. Some were

government buildings, courthouses and town halls. Others were temples dedicated to various gods and goddesses, and still others appeared to be bathhouses.

“Look, there’s the Olympus Supreme Court!” She pointed out an especially imposing building with a statue of blind justice on its grounds.

“Yes, negotiating my divorce settlement even as we speak.” He threw her a wry smile over his shoulder.

She giggled and held on to him a little tighter.

“And here’s our marketplace.” They flew over a sprawling white structure surrounded by countless signs, including one welcoming visitors to the Olympus Mall.

“You have a *shopping mall* here?”

“Hyacinth, darling, we live in Olympus, not the dark ages.”

He could say that again. She saw signs advertising Hestia’s Depot, promising supplies for every imaginable home improvement project. A sign with a logo composed of gold wings invited customers to try Hermes Cellular for all their calling needs.

She studied the strip of shops across from Olympus mall, a pink boutique catching her eye. Her mouth turned up in a smile when she saw the name of the place. Aphrodite’s Secret. No mystery about what was being sold there.

“D&D’s Superstore,” she read out loud from the sign above a huge one story building. “What’s that?”

“Demeter & Dionysus’s all purpose grocery and liquor store.” He guided Pegasus to swoop down, giving her a better view of the place. She caught sale ads in the windows offering ambrosia, two quarts for an obolus.

“Feel like doing a little shopping?” He leaned down slightly, reading the signs on the window. “I see they’re running a special on feta cheese.”

"I'm perfectly happy letting your kitchen staff cook for me, thank you very much." She nudged his shoulder with her chin. "I'll be back to my own kitchen before you know it, heating up Lean Cuisines and wishing I had some ambrosia or baklava."

Her heart sank when she heard her own words. Back to sitting alone at her TV tray, picking at a half-thawed chicken breast fillet and watching reruns. Would Hades miss her? Or would he be so busy living the life of Olympus's most eligible bachelor that he'd forget her as soon as she went above?

"Onward, Pegasus." Hades spoke in a gruff bark. They rode in silence for a few minutes, until he pointed out another storefront to her. "Nine Muses Art Supply," he said, shaking his head. "I wish they were open today. You'd love their floral design department."

"I know I would." She let her face rest against his back, savoring the feeling of peace he gave her, trying to extract the maximum mileage from each passing second.

They flew over an arena so enormous that it dwarfed everything in its shadow. A statue the size of Lady Liberty back in the mortal world overlooked it, holding a crossbow the size of a small ship over the area itself.

"I think you guys should apply to host the next Superbowl." She looked down in awe at the line of patrons eager to enter the arena and take their seats.

"We're rather busy putting on the annual Golden Fleece Cup." He began to turn Pegasus in the opposite direction. "The Centaurs are taking on the Lapiths, with Apollo 5 playing the halftime show."

"Do I want to know about Apollo 5?" She hid a smile.

"Lyre playing boy band," he explained. "The maidens go quite wild over them."

"Where are we headed now?" She braced herself as Pegasus gained speed and altitude.

"Home." He transferred the reins to one hand, leaving the other free to rest on her thigh. "By way of Atlantis."

"You mean it actually *does* exist?" She shook her head in disbelief.

“It’s just a few miles off the shores of paradise.” He stroked her outer thigh with his fingertips. “I want to show you things you’ve never seen before.”

She gave in to the shiver of need rocking through her. He’d already introduced her to worlds she’d scarcely imagined.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Did you have a good time today?” Hades twined his fingers through Hyacinth’s. The walk back to the castle had been filled by a contented silence, but he needed to know that she could be happy in the life he’d shown her that day.

“I don’t even have the words to tell you how I’m feeling.” She beamed up at him. “It was perfect.”

Then don’t go, his heart cried out to hers. “Olympus isn’t such a bad place to live, after all?”

“It’s fascinating.” She followed him up the stone stairs leading to his private quarters. “I could’ve listened to your stories about the places and creatures all day.”

He seized the opportunity. “Then let me take you out again.” He rushed on before she could refuse. “We’ll take my golden barge out onto the sea.”

She averted her eyes. “It’s almost too good an offer to turn down.”

“Then don’t.” He stopped at the door to his sleeping chamber. “Let me show you my world.”

He sensed her teetering on the edge of decision. So close, just a fraction away from giving in to her feelings for him. He summoned every ounce of his will to sway her, mutely chanting his desire for her like an incantation.

“I really should head for bed.” She dropped his hand from hers, and gave him a peck on the cheek. “Thank you for everything today.”

Hades watched her walking away, his hopes deflating like a pricked balloon. Every time he came close to unlocking her heart, she slammed down the gate of her internal fortress, leaving him standing outside, empty handed and begging for one last crumb.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hyacinth reached the end of the hallway and stopped, overcome with self-loathing.

What the hell was wrong with her? She'd just frozen out the only man who'd ever made her feel like a woman, denying her own overwhelming attraction for him and walking away. And why? Because it had to end at some point?

Or because she was afraid to risk getting hurt again?

Hadn't she vowed to give herself fully to this once in a lifetime experience? She wanted to be with Hades, whether they had a future together or not.

Even if pain was the price she paid, she wanted one night with him.

She'd had enough of self-denial. What was the use in saving her heart for someone she might never meet? The man she wanted was right down the hall, waiting for her.

She turned around to go to him.

## Chapter Six

When she arrived, she found the door to his chamber closed. Without knocking, she turned the heavy knob and opened it.

“Hades?” He sat in a large chair in front of the fireplace, a book in his hand. A fire filled the room with a golden haze. Her heart jumped into her throat. Could she really go through with this?

“Yes?” He rose to greet her.

She walked toward him, feeling as if her feet didn’t touch the ground. Propelled by desire, she stopped a few inches from him and ran her hands down his chest.

“Hyacinth?” He caught her hands in his. “What’s the meaning of this?” His words were gentle, his expression puzzled.

She answered him without words, seeking his lips with hers. He returned her kiss tentatively, and she felt him holding himself in check, waiting to be sure of her intentions.

“Make love to me,” she whispered in his ear. “I don’t want there to be any boundaries between us tonight.”



He responded with his body, crushing her in his embrace. She felt the hard length of him against her stomach, and when he slanted his mouth on hers, his tongue communicated his plans for her with teasing thrusts.

She opened wider for him, letting him wedge himself between her legs. Her core pooled wetness, readying itself for him. Everything she'd witnessed, every sight and taste of forbidden fruit she'd discovered since coming to the Underworld, came roaring back to her in the form of desires she'd never known before.

She wanted him in every way possible.

He took his mouth from hers and stepped back, gazing at her. She looked at him in the firelight, lightheaded with anticipation. Her dream lover, the only man who had ever roused her passions, stood before her in the flesh, ready to fulfill every fantasy.

With a single motion, he tore the simple white robe from her body, leaving her naked before him except for her sandals. He knelt down to the floor and unlaced them, removing them from her feet. When he stood again, he pulled the combs from her hair one by one, letting the strands fall around her shoulders like a curtain.

For the first time in her life, she felt no self-consciousness about being nude in front of a man. She felt free, wanton, and ready to be taken.

She reached for the buttons of his black shirt, wanting to touch his bare skin, but he stopped her.

"Let me enjoy you first." He ran a finger from her jaw down to her throat, between her breasts and over her hip. "Tonight, your pleasure will be mine."

His words whirled through her mind, evoking a plethora of sensual images. But when she felt his hands on her breasts, thought fled her mind, giving way to sensation.

He stroked them, as if familiarizing himself with their weight and shape. Her nipples tightened instantly when the heat of his hands explored her breasts, but he avoided the sensitive peaks, letting them hum with an unsatisfied ache.

She whimpered, begging for him to take the hardened beads. He framed her breasts with his hands, scraping his thumb over the tips of her nipples. She threw her head back and moaned with abandon.

“Close your eyes,” he commanded. “Use your senses instead of your sight.”

She obeyed, a spasm of pleasure uncoiling in her sex. His mouth followed his hands, taking her nipple between his lips. He circled it with his tongue, sucking it until she cried out. Just when the pleasure became too intense, he switched to the other breast, showering it with kisses. She placed her hands on the back of his head and guided him to her nipple. When he touched his tongue to it, her knees went weak.

He licked her nipple until it tightened to a painful point. Then he abandoned it, using his tongue to leave a wet trail from her breast to her belly button. From there, he knelt on the floor before her, parting her legs with his hands.

She shivered, knowing what was about to happen. She’d dreamed of having a man’s mouth on her sex, wondered how it would feel, but had never expected it to happen. A team of butterflies careened through her stomach and she held her breath, waiting.

He traced a finger over her damp slit and parted her folds with his thumbs. Then his tongue touched her clitoris, and pleasure tore through her like a riptide.

He explored her clit with the end of his tongue, flicking it rapidly, then massaging it with long, slow licks. Spreading her cleft further, he lavished both sides of the swollen bud, circling the tip with a precision that made her shake.

She fisted her hands in his hair, aching, swaying her hips forward for more.

He obliged, dipping his tongue into the well of her sex, gliding it between her inner lips before delving deeper into her core. He worked her clit with his thumb, caressing it in slow circular motions, then moved his hand, rubbing the hood of her clit until she felt ready to scream.

She'd never been touched this way before, with such intimacy. Her body gave up its secrets to his tongue, melting into a puddle of wetness beneath his mouth. With his fingers, he spread her juices over her clit, easing the way for his tortured friction to continue.

Her sex beat with a pulse of its own, taking her over wave after wave of pleasure. When he slid a finger inside her and found the sweet spot on her inner wall, her legs gave out and she came with his tongue still working her clitoris.

He took her through her orgasm, continuing to worship her with his mouth and fingers until the last tremors subsided. She stepped back from him and tipped his chin up to look at her.

"Take me to your bed." She skimmed her hand down the side of his face. "It's your turn to come."

His bed stood in the center of the room, covered with a black satin spread and enclosed with sheer black curtains. She led him to it and slowly removed his shirt, taking her time to unwrap him like a gift. His boots and pants came off next, leaving him on full display for her enjoyment.

He was flawless. Looking at him, she understood why gorgeous men were compared to Greek gods. He reminded her of a fine sculpture -- all lean muscle and toned strength.

She guided him to lie back on the bed and she joined him, hovering over his naked form. With her fingers, she explored every inch of his skin. She felt bold, empowered when his erection swelled and a soft moan echoed from his lips throughout the chamber.

She positioned herself over him, letting her hair drag down his chest. When her mouth reached his cock, he groaned her name and fisted his hands in the satin coverlet.

Her tongue swept her lips once, and then darted out to capture the pearl of fluid seeping from the tip of his erection. He shuddered at the contact and reached for her, knotting her hair around his fingers. She opened her mouth and enveloped the head of his cock in its warm confines.

Instinct guided her, helped her to return the earth-shattering pleasure he'd so freely given her. She swirled her tongue around his cock, licking the tiny slit before sucking it deeper into her mouth. Encouraged by his fitful breathing, she lowered her head and took him deeper, until she could feel him pulsing against her throat.

She slid his shaft in and out of her mouth, working the base of it with her hand. He moaned, muttering her name in a rough whisper. She felt a feminine thrill, a surge of sexual power from controlling his pleasure, and increased the suction on his cock until she felt it jerk inside her mouth.

The orgasm rocked through his body, sending his warm seed shooting into her throat. She swallowed and stroked him until the aftershocks passed, leaving him glassy eyed and spent.

She fell back onto the bed beside him, caressing his damp skin. He turned his head and met her eyes.

"My Hyacinth has become a wildflower." He reached over and stroked her breast.

"It's all you." She arched into his touch, feeling her nipple respond as if for the first time. "You brought out something in me I didn't know I had."

"Then let's see what other secrets are hiding beneath this beautiful exterior." With that, he rolled her onto her back, parted her legs, and knelt between them.

He grazed her cleft with his finger, stopping when he reached her clit.

"Put your hand over mine." He looked at her, his gaze smoldering. "Show me how to bring you the most satisfaction."

She slid her hand down her body until it met his. Placing her fingers over his, she let out a tense breath and began to move his hand.

She directed his fingers, circling them around her clitoris then brushing the hardened tip. The sensations intensified until it felt as if every nerve ending in her body were

concentrated in that tiny pulsing bud. When she had him roll it between his thumb and forefinger, pleasure overtook her and she came in great trembling waves.

She'd barely passed through the height of her climax when he wrapped one of her hands around his hard shaft.

"Put me inside you." He inched closer, his chest rising and falling like a racehorse.

She bit her bottom lip to keep from crying out. Slipping her hand down his shaft, she spread the slick pre-ejaculate fluid from the tip all the way to the base, readying him to enter her. Then steadying herself, she arched her hips and placed the tip of him against her core.

He growled an oath to Zeus and held back, letting her take him in slowly. She shivered when he breached her, feeling her heart explode inside her chest in a combination of lust and an emotion she feared to name. With both hands, she grasped his backside and pushed him further inside her, until he reached the depths of her core.

She looked down at the place where their bodies joined, his slick black thatch of hair meeting her nest of pale gold. He held still, his cock quivering inside her tight sex. The moment felt sacred, almost holy. No one had ever made her feel this way before. When he entered her body, he entered her spirit.

Then he began to move, pulling his cock out of her, one inch at a time. It was slick with her fluids and slid back into her with ease. He withdrew and pushed back in several times, increasing the speed and pressure incrementally with each thrust. Whimpering from the feel of his hard length gliding in and out of her sex, she pumped her hips to meet his.

He braced himself with his hands, holding onto her thighs as he pushed his hips forward. When she sought her clit with her fingers and began to rub it in time with his thrusts, he moaned an expletive and pumped harder.

Each powerful thrust brought her closer to mindlessness, poising her on the edge of a release so complete that it threatened to shatter her. They became a whirling mass of hands, caressing breasts, abrading nipples, rubbing clits, stroking cocks. She tossed her head back

and forth on the pillow as her body shook, building up to the pinnacle of pleasure. When she tightened her inner walls around his pounding erection, she could feel him against the spot just inside her core that had brought her so much ecstasy earlier.

“Right there, Hades.” She squeezed around him, feeling his cock inside her with blinding detail. “Right ... there ...”

She felt as if she’d been spun out of time and space, the spasms of release so strong that they catapulted her into another dimension. Her sex convulsed around his cock, pulling his orgasm from him until he filled her with his essence. The tremors seemed to go on endlessly, ricocheting through her body like a rocket.

He fell on top of her, kissing her breasts then finding her lips. Their tongues tangled as he grew soft and slipped out of her. She sighed at the loss of connection and wrapped her arms around him.

“Is it always that good for you?” She wrapped a strand of his dark hair around her finger.

“Truthfully?” He rested his chin just above her breast and looked into her eyes. “I have never experienced such fulfillment.”

“Really?” She hooked a leg around him and smiled. “I never dreamed sex could be like that.” She hadn’t imagined it could make her feel so completely bonded to a man, either.

“It can, when you’re with your fated partner.” He kissed her again, passion building. “We were made to make love to each other.”

“I could make love again, right now.” She wrapped the other leg around him, nestling beneath him. “How long before you ...?”

He ground against her, displaying a definite erection. “You forget, my dearest. I’m not bound by mortal limitations.”

Their mouths merged, lips pressing against each other with bruising pressure. She opened for him, greedy to feel his tongue in her mouth again. He swept his tongue over hers, stroking it clockwise then sucking it into his mouth.

She nearly wept from desire. His chest scraped her nipples, and his cock rubbed against her, teasing her closer to coming with every touch. She wanted to take him where no man had ever been before with her, to allow him into her body in a way she'd never share with anyone else ever again. Breaking the kiss, she gazed up into his eyes and felt pure trust. She could put herself in his capable hands and feel completely safe, cherished, and protected without being smothered. He let her be a woman in charge of her own pleasure. Now she wanted to show him the depths of her belief in him.

"I'm going to get on my stomach." She wiggled out from under him and rolled over, pulling herself up on all fours. Grabbing a pillow from the head of the bed, she tucked it between her legs and lowered her upper body onto the satin coverlet.

He positioned himself behind her, ready to enter her, his cock coated with the remnants of their lovemaking. She looked over her shoulder at him. "Don't."

His brow furrowed. "Do you not want me to enter you from behind?"

She shook her head. "I do, but not the usual way. I want you to put yourself inside me the ... other way."

"Are you sure about this?" He held onto her hips, waiting for her answer.

"I trust you. I want to share something with you that I never have with anyone else." She angled her rear end toward him. "Please, Hades. Make love to me again."

"We may need something to ease the way." He reached around her, stretching his long form until he could open the drawer of his bedside table. He removed a small tube and pushed the drawer shut again.

She hissed out a breath when the cool, slippery lubricant hit her sensitive skin. A glance over her shoulder told her that he'd coated his erection with the same substance.

When they were both sufficiently lubricated, he grasped his cock. Hyacinth squeezed her eyes shut, readying herself.

He pressed himself against the tight entrance, breaching the virgin territory with exquisite caution. She compelled her body to relax, silently inviting him in, craving this new invasion from the man she loved.

Her mind snapped on that word. Love? Did she love Hades?

But she couldn't think clearly, not when he eased himself past her body's resistance, delving into the hard grip the ring of muscle presented. He stopped, allowing time for her to adjust to the sensation. She swayed her hips encouragingly, urging him forward.

The intensity of it tore through her in a crush of primal heat. She'd never felt such raw desire. When he slowly withdrew his cock from her, an entirely unexpected reaction set in, making her shiver as if she'd fallen in a frozen lake. When he pushed himself back in, her clit brushed against the pillow between her legs and she cried out.

He continued his agonizing slide in and out of the tight hollow, pushing her clitoris against the pillow with every thrust. She pushed back against him, a body without a mind, the shuddering need to come overtaking her last grain of restraint.

She couldn't fight back against the rising hum inside her, couldn't resist the animalistic current he created with every trek into this untried place. She ground her clit against the pillow, bearing down on his cock and crying out as she finally came. She felt him join her, pumping into her with his own climax until they both collapsed, limp and sweaty on the coverlet.

"I love you," he murmured into her ear, holding her close against his slick body. "My darling, I love you."

The same words gathered in her throat, ready to pour forth. She loved him too. There could be no denying it. And after what had just passed between them, every minute spent in his arms would make it more impossible to walk away.



Her body went from relaxed to rigid. This wasn't a fantasy -- it was a nightmare. She'd let herself fall in love with a man who wasn't even a mortal human being like herself, a man who ruled a kingdom of the dead.

She rolled over and away from him, staring at the filmy black bed curtains in horror. After her divorce, she'd vowed to never open herself up to that kind of hurt again. Falling for the king of the Underworld wasn't exactly the best way to avoid heartbreak.

"Hyacinth, what is it?" He rose up on an elbow to look at her. "Did we overdo it?"

She couldn't stay. If she looked into those concerned dark eyes and felt his love for her, she'd stay with him. And staying was the worst thing she could do. This place could never be her home. She belonged in her own world, living the safe life she'd created for herself, boring but insulated from the kind of pain losing Hades could bring.

"No, I'm fine." She threw back the blanket he'd just draped over her. "I need to be alone for a little while, ok?"

Ignoring the look of baffled hurt on his face, she climbed out of the bed.

"What are you running from now?" He sat up in bed, watching her frantically putting on her robe and sandals.

"I just need to process what happened between us." She gathered the hair combs littering the floor in front of the fireplace.

"You mean you need to explain away what you're feeling." He rose from the bed and stalked to his wardrobe.

"Hades ..." She fought back tears. "You promised you'd never hold me anywhere by force."

"And I won't." He extracted a black silk robe and shut the wardrobe doors. "But I wish you'd stay with me tonight." He shrugged into his robe and tied the sash in front.

"I can't." She shook her head and stumbled toward the door, her heart banging away like a fist pounding on a locked door. She turned for one more look at him and felt herself weaken instantly. "I can't," she repeated and left, shutting the door behind her.

\* \* \* \* \*

The hot bath didn't help.

Hyacinth stirred in the hot water, trying to ease the anxiety her decision had wrought inside her. She'd dismissed Anemone and the other ladies, having no desire to deal with their knowing glances and innuendoes. She wanted to be alone with her thoughts until she found the words to tell Hades why she couldn't stay.

She could hide here in the splendor of her bathroom forever and avoid the issue. Then she'd never have to face the choice of staying and getting hurt or leaving and losing him. But when it came down to it, what choice did she really have? She didn't belong in his world any more than he belonged in hers.

He'd find another queen, she reasoned. Every woman in Olympus would probably jump at the chance to be with him. Her stomach churned at the idea of Hades with someone else, of another woman sharing his bed. But how long could the passion she'd shared with him keep burning? He'd tire of her and stray, just like Riley. And being a king -- not to mention a gorgeous man with sexual skills that could short out any woman's wiring -- the temptations would be ten times stronger than they would be for any other man she might find herself with.

In short, she thought with a frown, she'd wandered into her own worst nightmare.

She stood up, shivering when her heated skin made contact with the cool night air drifting in from the open bathroom windows. This had to end *now*. Back to Lean Cuisine and lonely nights.

Back to being cloistered from heartbreak, even if it meant losing out at love.

\* \* \* \* \*

The knock at his bedroom door didn't surprise Hades at all. In fact, he'd been expecting it ever since Hyacinth made her exit, running from him as if she were a fire and he were a bucket of water.

"Come in." He set his goblet of wine on the table beside the chair where he'd been sitting when she'd burst in earlier.

She cracked open the door and peered inside, her mortal vision struggling to adjust to the low lighting. The fire had almost died out and he had no desire to rekindle it.

"Let me guess." He couldn't keep a barb of sarcasm out of his voice. "We need to talk."

She gave him a weak smile. "You're not going to make this easy for me, are you?" She let herself in and closed the heavy stone door with a soft click.

He scanned her from head to toe, noting that she wore the clothes she'd had on when he'd taken her from the parking lot in front of her flower shop. Not a good sign.

"You know that I'm always eager to hear anything you have to say."

She nodded, taking a seat on the edge of the bed where they'd exploded with mutual heat such a short time ago. "This isn't easy for me to say."

"Then it won't be easy for me to hear." He drained the wine from his goblet. "I'm listening."

Her eyes took on the brightness of tears. "I have to go home."

His heart went mercifully numb, but he knew the pain of her lethal blow would come later. "Is there anything I can say or do to make you reconsider?"

"No." She dug her nails into the coverlet beneath her. "Hades, as much as I feel for you --"

He cut her off with a bitter laugh. "As much as you feel for me, you can't bear to spend another moment in my presence?" He rubbed his chin. "Please continue."

"You know it's more complicated than that." She pushed her moonbeam gold hair back from her face. "What we have could never last, even though it's so incredible right now."

"At least you concede that point." Images of their intimacy flashed through his mind, flooding him with need for her ... a need that would probably go forever unsatisfied.

"How could I deny it?" Her face blushed pink. "What happened between us tonight was the kind of thing I've only dreamed of and never expected to experience."

"Yet, you find it so easy to walk away." He stood up and walked to the small wine rack opposite the fireplace.

"You think this is easy for me?" She followed him, standing a few feet away while he selected a vintage. "I'm walking away from the only man who ever ... who ever ..."

"Made you come?" He got a corkscrew from a small case on the mantle. "Let's be blunt here and admit your only real feelings for me are related to how we affect each other in bed."

She reeled back, wincing as if she'd been slapped. "I can't believe you said that."

"What else am I suppose to think?" He sauntered back to his chair, fighting to control his spinning emotions. She stood behind his chair as he refilled his goblet with wine.

"If you weren't so blinded by anger over not getting your way, maybe you could see that it's tearing me up inside to leave you."

"If you weren't so blinded by fear ..." He took a long gulp of his wine. "... maybe *you* could see that your ex-husband is still ruling your life."

"He's completely in my past." She crossed her arms in a defensive stance.

"Since you've managed to turn our relationship into a potential replay of everything he did to you, I disagree." He set his goblet aside. "I vowed I wouldn't keep you here, and I won't. Meet me in the throne room in an hour and I'll have someone there to transport you back to your world."

She seemed to shrink into herself. The light and fire he'd seen in her face mere hours ago faded, leaving her the pale, shy creature he'd first seen in the reflecting pool.

“What about the situation with the seasons?” Her voice had lost its vibrancy along with the rest of her. “Isn’t it still summer in the world above?”

“You’ll see for yourself soon enough.” He rose to escort her to the door. “But, yes, it is.”

“Can anything be done about it?” She held back while he opened the door.

“I’ll work something out with Zeus.” What, he didn’t know, since finding love after being with Hyacinth would never happen.

Nor would he wish it to.

Hermes paced the floor of the throne room, the wings on his gold helmet swaying with each step. “Sire, something must be done to stop her.”

Hades slumped in his throne, the rush of anger that had sustained him during Hyacinth’s announcement long gone. “I promised I’d never do to her what I did to Persephone. She’s free to go.”

“But, your majesty.” Hermes scrambled to the foot of the throne. “What about the climate control problem?”

Hades folded his hands. “It’s up to Zeus now.”

“I suppose I could have another chat with him.” Hermes threw his hands out dramatically. “He’ll put up with a lot if I bring him a few sandwiches from Blimpie.”

Nicus led Hyacinth into the throne room. Hades felt his heart split in two raw halves at the sight of her.

“Hello, Hades.” She glanced toward Hermes, her eyebrows raised in a silent question.

“This is Hermes.” Hades gestured toward the messenger god, who bowed to Hyacinth. “He’ll be taking you back home.”

“Thank you.” She addressed Hermes but never took her eyes from Hades.

"Can you give us a moment?" He shot Hermes a look that invited no arguments.

"Certainly." Hermes backed toward the door. "I'll just be in the anteroom. I hear they have a plasma television in there. I've just been dying to see *All My Children* on a good screen."

Hades waved him away, remaining mute until Hermes vanished behind the throne room door.

"Are you sure this is what you wish to do?" He drew her to him, taking her hands in his. He couldn't help but hope the bond they'd formed during their time together would sway her, providing him with an eleventh hour miracle.

"I don't see any other way." She laced her fingers tightly through his.

"You needn't fear being imprisoned here." He pulled her closer. "You can come and go as you please, returning to the upper world whenever it suits you." He squeezed her hands. "Stay with me, my darling. I love you so."

A single tear rolled down her cheek. "I feel too much for you ... I can't bear to stick around and watch us destroy each other."

He felt a lump forming in his throat. "Not every man is your ex-husband. Let me have a chance to prove you wrong about relationships. Give me a little while longer to love you before you sever the connection between us."

She closed her eyes, a tremor passing through her body. "I can't." She looked at him, pleading. "I wish I could."

He rose unsteadily. "If you ever need anything, summon me and I'll be at your side at once." He took the jewel case he'd left on Persephone's throne and handed it to her. "Just put these on and call my name, and I'll come for you. There will always be a place for you in my heart and in my home."

She opened the case and peered inside. "These are the queen's crown jewels."

“Yes.” He’d planned to place the crown on her head and coronate her with his kiss. His heart gave a dull thud as he realized the loss of that dream.

“I can’t take these.” She closed the lid of the case and held it out to him. “They belong to your future wife, the next queen.”

He shook his head. “I will never love another woman.” He brushed her cheek one last time. “And I will never have another queen.”

A sob broke free from her throat. “Hades, don’t do this.”

He held up a hand to silence her. “Hermes!”

The golden clad form of the messenger god appeared instantly. “You rang, sire?”

“Yes.” He let himself take one final look at the woman he’d given his heart to, the woman he’d let into his soul. “Please escort Miss Garret safely back to her home in the upper world.” He shot a glance at Hermes. “See to it that no harm comes to her.”

“Your wish is my command, sire.” Hermes took Hyacinth by the arm. “Hold on, my lady. We’re about to take flight.”

And with that, they both vanished, fading from his sight and from his life.

## Chapter Seven

Hyacinth stabbed a forkful of Mu Shu pork and forced herself to eat it. It tasted like sawdust, but then everything did since returning home. After ambrosia, Wan Fu Palace wasn't quite the same.

"When are you going to 'fess up?" Cyndi scooped a heaping spoonful of fried rice onto her plate. "You up and disappear on me without a single word, worrying me like crazy. Then you come back with no explanation, when I *know* something is totally up with you." Cyndi speared a pot sticker and swirled it in ginger sauce. "Who is he?"

Hyacinth dropped her fork. "What are you talking about?" She tried not to sigh with impatience. She'd been back three days, and Cyndi's questioning had grown more relentless with each passing hour.

"The guy you were with the whole time you were gone." Cyndi calmly popped the pot sticker into her mouth without looking at Hyacinth.

This time she didn't fight the sigh. "How did you know?"

Cyndi took a sip of hot tea from a delicate cup painted with Chinese dragons. "You reek of sex and despair."

Hyacinth made train tracks through her rice. "It's complicated."



Cyndi rolled her brown eyes. "It's a relationship. They're complicated by definition."

"This one is a little more crazy than your average hookup." She managed another bite of pork. "He's ... not from around here."

"So?" Cyndi tapped her fork on the edge of her plate for emphasis. "Since when is long distance love off limits?"

Hyacinth shook her head. "It's more than that. Let's just say we're from different worlds."

"What about love conquering everything, and all that jazz?" Cyndi chewed a mouthful of fried rice. "Or do you not believe in any of that these days?"

"I believe love is rare and hard to sustain." Hyacinth pushed her plate back and slumped in her chair. "And I could never sustain it with this guy. Too many women would be gunning to take my place at his side."

Cyndi shook her head in disbelief. "You think every guy is Riley all over again, don't you?"

"Aren't they?" Hyacinth laughed without mirth.

"Do you really believe that, or is it just an excuse to keep from taking a risk again?" Cyndi finished her tea in one swallow. "I guess you're going to let Riley decide your future for you from now on. He cheated on you, so you're going to put yourself up in mothballs and let any chance for happiness slip through your hands because you're too damn scared to take a chance."

"You sound just like him." Hyacinth groaned.

"Then he must be smart as hell, because I'm right and you know it." Cyndi tossed her napkin onto the table. "Come on, I think this kind of disaster calls for double chocolate mocha chip." She stood up and grabbed her purse from the extra chair at their table. "I'm buying."

“Do you really think it’s a disaster?” Hyacinth hauled herself out of her chair and trudged to the register behind Cyndi.

“Only if you let your past stop you from having a future.” Cyndi handed her credit card to the hostess with a smile.

Hyacinth stepped through the exit and stood outside the restaurant, bathed in the light from its red neon sign. It was still unseasonably warm outside, much more like summer than early November. Hades would have to work something out with Zeus soon or conditions would really begin to suffer.

She leaned against the stucco exterior of the restaurant and closed her eyes, trying not to remember his voice or the feel of his arms around her. She’d cried herself to sleep every night since returning, longing to kiss him goodnight.

It hadn’t hurt this much when Riley left her. Anger over his betrayal had sustained her. But losing Hades had sliced right down the center of her heart. She’d been unprepared for how all consuming the pain would be.

She’d known it would be hard to get through the day. What she hadn’t known was that each second without him would seem like an eternity, that he’d haunt her every thought, and that the life she’d made for herself before him would seem like a cold shell after him.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Sire, you simply must eat something.”

Hades propped his eyelids open to see the worried visage of Hermes peering down at him. He spat a curse and rolled over in his bed, burying his face beneath a pillow.

“Your majesty.” Hermes tapped him tentatively on the shoulder. “How long has it been since you had a hot meal?”

“How long has it been since someone -- as they say above -- kicked your ass?” Hades growled. He’d never lay a hand on Hermes, and the messenger god knew it, but it felt good

to bluster and make threats. Great Zeus, couldn't a man mourn the loss of the woman he loved in peace?

"Sire, I'm known for being fleet of foot." Hermes coughed nervously. "I don't think an ass kicking is on my agenda any time soon."

Hades moved the pillow from his face enough to peek out at Hermes. "If I eat something, will you be silent and leave me alone?"

"As you wish, sire." Hermes bustled around the bedchamber. "Cook has prepared a delightful breakfast for you, and I have a few topics of light interest to discuss while you eat."

Hades tossed his pillow aside and sat up on the edge of the bed. "I thought silence was part of our agreement."

Hermes brought a breakfast tray to the bed. "I'll only require your attention for a brief moment, sire." He handed the king a glass of juice.

Hades took a sip of juice and huffed out a breath. "Go ahead."

"I had another chat with Zeus last night ..." Hermes reached inside his bag for a notepad.

"Another pizza and action movie delivery?" Hades helped himself to a bite of ambrosia.

"Sandwiches and new games for his Play Station." Hermes cleared his throat. "He had what I believe to be a brilliant suggestion to end your, er ... predicament."

"I can hardly wait." Hades tore into a muffin.

"He thinks you should apply to be on the next season of *The Single God*." Hermes rattled his notepad.

Hades nearly choked on his muffin. "Zeus thinks I should do a *reality show*?"

"Sire, just consider the advantages!" Hermes's voice reached a higher pitch. "You'd be paired with twenty-five single maidens, all carefully screened to be your potential wife!" He leaned forward as if imparting a great secret. "The show even pays for the engagement ring if you choose to propose at the final Asphodel ceremony."

"I can afford to buy my own engagement ring. Have you forgotten that every gem in Olympus is mined from my kingdom?"

"All right, you have a point there." Hermes tucked his notepad back into his bag. "But where else will you find such beauty and quality as you would on *The Single God*?"

Hades finished the muffin and reached for a cup of coffee, thick with cream. "I could find twenty-five women at any meat market in Olympus City."

Hermes sighed in frustration. "Would you at least consider it, sire?"

"If I say yes, will you abandon the topic?" Hades stirred a lump of sugar into his morning brew.

"Yes. Moving on to my next suggestion ..."

"Great Cronus, there's more?" Hades sat his coffee cup down on the tray with a bang.

"You could try the personals." Hermes whipped a copy of the *Olympus Herald* from his bag. "They're completely private and anonymous, and some of the ladies here could tempt even a dedicated bachelor like me."

"Do go on." Hades sipped his coffee and tried not to gag.

"Or you could look into using a dating service. Eros seems to be having great success with the one he opened this year."

"Gods 'n' Gals?" Hades snorted. "I think I'll pass."

"Sir, if I may ask," Hermes sidled up to the bed. "How do you intend to find your queen, if not by these methods?"

"I have no intention of finding a queen." Hades wiped his mouth with his napkin and placed it back on the tray.

"But, sire, there's the issue of the seasons to consider."

"That may be so." He pushed the tray aside and stood up. "But Hyacinth is the only woman I'll ever love, and I'll have no other as my queen."

“Then we have a potential nightmare on our hands.” Hermes dropped into the chair by the fireplace and sank his face into his hands.

Hades could hardly bring himself to care about the climate or anything else. He’d begun to consider appointing a successor to run the Underworld. His kingdom no longer mattered to him. Nothing did.

Hyacinth had gone and taken all his passion for living with her.

## Chapter Eight

Hyacinth was halfway through another sleepless night when she heard the insistent knock at her front door.

Rolling over, she glanced at the clock on her bedside table and muttered a curse over the hour. Only bats were awake this time of night, and she didn't think they went visiting.

She threw off the cover and took her robe from the foot of the bed, hastily tying it around her on her way to the door. The knocking grew louder.

"Just a minute!" She finally reached the door and gazed through the peephole only to see the face of her ex-husband on the other side.

"Riley!" She threw the door open. "What on earth are you doing here?"

He leaned against the doorframe for support. Hyacinth wrinkled her nose when the overpowering stench of alcohol hit her.

"She left me." He tried to take a step forward and almost fell on top of Hyacinth.

"I really hope you're not driving in this condition." Hyacinth took his arm and tried to hold him up, kicking the door shut with her foot.

"I took a cab." He flashed his cosmetic dentistry enhanced smile at her and landed on her couch with a thud.

“Why did she leave you?” Hyacinth stood in front of him, arms folded over her chest.

“She met this orthodontist guy. Ted.” Riley barked a laugh that turned into a sob. “I thought she loved me.”

Trying not to choke on the irony, Hyacinth sat down on the opposite end of the couch. “I’m ... sorry. I know how much you wanted to be with her.” Enough to throw away his marriage vows, she thought, looking at the spot on her left hand where her rings had once resided.

“One good thing has come out of what that bitch did to me.” Riley tried to take her hand, but Hyacinth extricated herself quickly.

“I finally realize ...” Riley dipped his head toward hers and she turned away from the reek of booze on his breath. “... That you’re the right woman for me.”

Hyacinth had seen things beyond the wildest imaginings of mortal beings within the past few weeks, but those words from Riley’s mouth were the first to shock her speechless.

“Wha--” She shook her head and grabbed at her mental composure before it fizzled away. “What the *hell* are you talking about?”

“I made a mistake when I left you.” He put his hand on her thigh and she let it stay there, too stunned to throw it off. “I just had to get the whole Denise thing out of my system to realize what I had with you.” He stroked her leg, his fingers curling against her inner thigh. “Come on, baby, let’s try it again.”

Hyacinth stared blankly down at her former husband’s hand working its way toward her crotch and felt her stomach heave. She grabbed his wrist and flung his hand away from her body with such force that Riley winced.

“How *dare* you.” She jumped up from the couch, burning with rage. “What the hell am I supposed to get out of this little reunion?”

“You get to be married again.” Riley looked up at her, confused. “I thought that’s what you always wanted.” He struggled to stand and reached for her. “Let’s seal this deal with some time in the sack. What do you say?”

Every moment she’d spent with Hades came rushing back to her like a reel of film. Hades showing her the value she possessed. Hades helping to give and receive sexual pleasure. Hades unleashing the power inside her. Hades telling her that she worthy of kings.

Hades loving her until she could love herself.

And she’d thrown it all away because *this* man had ruined her belief in lasting love?

An unexpected laugh bubbled up from her throat. “Riley, you are beyond pathetic.”

It was his turn to look stunned. “Are you saying no to time in the sack, or no to getting back together?”

“Both.” She put her hand to her forehead and took a breath. “I’ve found out some things since we split up, and one of them is that you have all the sexual prowess of a chipmunk.”

Riley fell back onto the couch, his mouth slack with surprise and drunkenness.

“Secondly, you don’t love me. You *never* loved me. And now that I know what real love is, I’m not sure I ever loved you either.” She took him by the elbow and guided him to his feet. “One thing’s for sure, I could never love you now, not after being with someone who cared more about me than he did about himself.”

She opened the front door and pushed him out. “Give my regards to the cabbie.”

His eyes widened. “You’ve changed. You didn’t used to be so damned aggressive.”

“No, you’re right. I used to be a doormat. But I’m not the fool you married anymore.” She gave him a push. “That mousy girl is gone forever, and so am I.” He took a step back.

“Goodbye, Riley.” She took one more look at him. How could she have given him so much power over her life? “If I’m lucky, this is the last time we’ll ever see each other.”



He opened his mouth to say something, but she slammed the door on him and bolted it. She knew what she had to do and wasn't going to waste another minute waiting.

She rushed to her bedroom and knelt down beside the bed. Within seconds she'd located the jewel case Hades had given her and pulled it out from the spot where she'd hidden it.

She placed it on the bed and opened it, revealing the gleam of priceless jewels within. Taking out the necklace, she fastened it around her throat and stood up.

"Hades!" She closed her eyes and prayed for him to hear her. "Hades, hurry! I need you!"

Her floor opened and he rose up through it. It sealed instantly beneath him, leaving no trace of his point of entry. "You called for me?" He came to her side and took her hands. The necklace caught his eye. "You're wearing ..."

"Yes." She squeezed his hands and tried to steady her voice. "My darling, do you still need a new queen?"

His eyes darkened with emotion. "Only if that queen is you."

She let go of his hands so she could wrap her arms around him. "I understand what you tried to teach me now. I was so wrong, about us, about love, about everything." She faltered, her heart trembling within her. "Can you give me another chance?"

"Give you another chance?" He cupped her face with his hands. "You're the one who has given *me* another chance. At life, at love, at everything." He smiled down at her. "No matter what happens, we belong together."

She brushed his hair back from his face, feeling more alive with every second. "This has to be forever. No giving up and walking away when things get rough."

"I'll never walk away." He pressed his forehead to hers. "You're the only woman for me."

Amazing how different those words sounded coming from the lips of a man who loved her, treasured her, *cherished* her.

She gasped when he removed himself from her embrace. “There’s just one thing left to do.” He turned and took the crown from the jewel case on the bed behind them. “Darling, will you reign beside me as my bride and my queen for all time?”

“I can’t imagine anything I’d rather do.” Tears of happiness welled up in her eyes.

“Return with me and let us begin our lives together.” He held out his hand to her.

“Just a second.” She rushed to her beside table and took the framed photo of her parents from it, holding it close to her.

“Now I’m ready.” Smiling, she stepped back into Hades’s arms.

“All of our wildest dreams are waiting to be fulfilled.” He placed the crown on her head. “You are my only queen and my only love.”

He bent her back for a kiss containing all the fire held within the depths of the earth, sealing their vows for eternity. Hyacinth returned the kiss with all the passion he’d helped her to discover, knowing she’d finally found the home her heart had always sought.

As the promise of their lips bound them together as king and queen, the first crystal white flakes of snow began to fall outside.

A new season had finally begun.

 THE END 

## **Alecia Monaco**

Alecia Monaco has been writing since she dictated her first story at the age of three. Now she happily writes paranormal and erotic romance while living in Houston with her family and pets. She loves to hear from readers and they can email her at [AleciaMonaco@aol.com](mailto:AleciaMonaco@aol.com), or visit her site at [www.aleciamonaco.com](http://www.aleciamonaco.com).