

DESCENT DESCENT DESIRE

SUSAN M. SAILORS

Whiskey Creek Press

www.whiskeycreekpress.com

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First published in 2010

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Olympians: Descent Into Desire

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by

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Susan M. Sailors

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WHISKEY CREEK PRESS

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Published by

WHISKEY CREEK PRESS

Whiskey Creek Press

PO Box 51052

Casper, WY 82605-1052

www.whiskeycreekpress.com

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ISBN 978-1-60313-678-5

Credits

Cover Artist: Kendra Egert

Editor: Sara Kent

Printed in the United States of America

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WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT

OLYMPIANS: ARCADIAN NIGHTS

"This was a fun novella, especially for a Greek mythology buff like myself. I found it to be both humorous and heart touching."

Karen

Ecataromance

"Susan Sailors did a great job with Hermes and Eris and it was easy to see the story come to life. I loved the passion between them and wow the heat between them was spectacular... These two were great for each other and can't wait for more of the *Olympians* from Susan Sailors."

Melinda

Night Owl Romance

"Susan Sailors has written a very sexy and humorous look at the Greek pantheon, with all the petty jealousies and egos inherent in being a god... The level of heat in the sex becomes scorching hot, and very imaginative...and when you read this book, keep the fan on high."

Holly

Whipped Cream

WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT

MIDNIGHT ROSE

"This was a good read and Susan's solid writing kept my interest in the unfolding tale as well as enjoying the characters' quirks. I'll definitely keep an eye out for future offerings from Susan."

Nerine You Gotta Read

WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT

SOME ENCHANTED EVENINGS

"Susan M Sailors captures the readers' attention as well as their hearts with these charming romantic adventures. Well written with an excellent flow and alluringly worded erotic scenes this collection holds something for everyone."

Cassandre
Simply Romance Reviews
WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT

NIGHT GARDENING

"Night Gardening by Susan M. Sailors is a wonderfully sweet love story. Jennifer is accepting of the new knowledge she is given. Asyan must deal with reemerging into living after years of mourning for his wife. I was touched by the emotions he feels for Jennifer and the fact that he is willing to put her needs before his own desires. Another wonderful aspect of the story is the secondary character cast. Jennifer's friends and Asyan's family round out the story to perfection

adding humor to the love. *Night Gardening* is a well written love story that will touch every reader."

Tara Renee

TwoLips Reviews

"Susan Sailors writes a refreshing romantic fantasy that leaves you wanting to know what happens next. Each character was wonderfully written with precision and flare. [Night Gardening] is going to be one for my keeper shelf and I can't wait for the next installment in the series."

Zollyanna Night Owl Romance

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Other Books by Author Available at Whiskey Creek Press:

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Fear

Torrid Teasers Volume 13

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Torrid Teasers Volume 58

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Curse of the Moon

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Dedication

To Charles

* * * *

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Chapter 1

Persephone ran the brush through her long, blonde hair a few more times before setting it back on the dresser. She listened again, but she still couldn't hear anything. Why was he keeping her waiting?

She sighed and walked over to the bed and sat down. She'd been a little nervous when she'd discovered her secret online admirer was actually Hades, the god of the Underworld, but that nervousness had dissipated after four hours of waiting for him to come to her bedroom. She couldn't believe he would have whisked her away to his underground palace just to leave her sitting in her room all alone.

Ever since they started their online romance, his messages had grown steamier by the day. Then she'd told him she wanted to run away with him, still not knowing who he was, and he'd agreed. She'd expected him to tell her a time and a place, but instead his text had read: *Look behind you*. When he rode up on his chariot and she realized who he actually was, she'd half expected him to make love to her right there in the field. Instead he'd pulled her into the chariot and started off again without even kissing her.

She knew she had no experience with men, but she also knew he wanted her. She refused to believe he had been toying with her. He had a notorious reputation, but did it extend to cruelly breaking hearts? She didn't think so. She also couldn't bring herself to believe a man who had

expressed so much desire and passion could stay away from the woman he loved.

Her phone vibrated. She looked down and saw a text from Hades: *Are you comfortable?*

Instead of replying, she dialed his number. He'd never answered before, probably knowing she would recognize his voice, but she hoped this time he would.

"Yes, my love?" he answered.

His deep voice sent a shiver of pleasure down her body. She wanted to be angry with him, but when she heard his voice she couldn't be.

"Where are you?"

"In my bedroom."

She hesitated, but then asked, "Why aren't you here with me?"

After a long silence, he said, "I'll come to you if you want me to."

"Yes. I do."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"I'll be there soon."

She hit the end call button. Her nervousness returned, but it was accompanied by excitement. She was about to lose her virginity with a very experienced god. She didn't know what to do, but she had the feeling she wouldn't have to. She felt a throbbing between her legs, and she knew she was becoming aroused. Hades was more handsome than she'd remembered. She'd only seen him a few times before tonight, when she'd been in her godfather Zeus' palace. Then Hades' black hair

had been very long and his skin very tanned. Now his hair was shoulder length and his skin a little lighter, as if he spent much less time outside of the Underworld. His dark eyes hadn't changed though. When he'd pulled her into his chariot, she'd gazed up into them as she waited for him to kiss her or say he loved her. Instead he'd spurred the horses onward and whispered, "You're mine now."

She looked at herself in the mirror again. She'd put on one of the nightgowns she'd found in the dresser drawer. It was red silk, simple and elegant. She assumed he'd like it since he must have picked all of them out for her.

Everything in the bedroom looked brand new. Flowery red silk wallpaper covered the walls, and the curtains on the enormous oak bed matched it perfectly. The black carpet was plush and felt wonderful under her feet. The oak dresser, chairs, and settee were very similar to the ones she had in her own bedroom. She wondered if he had been spying on her, or if he had done it by magic without ever going to her bedroom. She knew Hades used magic far more than any other god. It was one of the few things she did know about him. The thought that he might have spied on her in her bedroom excited her a little. Shouldn't it have felt creepy or embarrassing? She shook her head. He could have seen her reading his texts and emails over and over again like a silly child. He could have already seen her naked dozens of times. Why did it thrill her instead of bothering her? Could he change the way she felt or thought by magic too?

Ten minutes passed, but he still didn't come. She began to worry he had been disappointed when they met. She hadn't

said or done anything, but maybe that was what she'd done wrong. Should she have kissed him? Told him she loved him? She wasn't sure she did, but he'd said it so many times perhaps he'd been expecting her to finally say it when they met face to face. Was he angry she hadn't said it yet?

She heard a soft knock on her door. "Come in," she called.

Her door opened, and Hades stepped into the room. She smiled and walked toward him. He reached his arms out, but rather than embracing her he took her hands in his.

"Do you like your room?" he asked casually.

What? I'm your girlfriend! Not a guest! She made herself keep smiling and nodded. "Yes. It's like my own room, just in darker colors." She looked down at the floor, but then had an idea. She smiled in a way she thought was coy. "The bed's bigger though."

He nodded. "Glad you like it."

"I'm sure I'll love it."

"I'm sorry it took me so long to come and say goodnight. I was discussing something with Hermes."

"Oh, that's fine. Message from Zeus?" Her mind raced. Did her mother know already? Had she gone to Zeus?

"Yes. I need to go see him, but I wanted to make sure you were comfortable first."

She couldn't hide her disappointment. "When will you be back?"

"An hour maybe. I'll check on you in the morning."

"In the morning?" she said with a whine. She hadn't meant it to come out like that, but she found it hard to keep hiding her confusion.

He raised his eyebrows. "Yes? What's wrong with that?" He's testing me. I know he is. I'll show him. "No. That's fine. I'd like some time to myself."

"Goodnight." He left the room and closed the door.

The room felt very cold suddenly.

"Stupid!" she muttered. "He wanted you to tell him you wanted him to come back! Why didn't you? Why did you have to act like a child? He doesn't want a child. He wants a woman!"

She looked down at her clothes, running her hands down her body. She knew she looked beautiful in the gown. It clung to her slim frame in a way that showed off her breasts and hips very nicely. She knew her hair was still perfect, as was her make-up.

"Why doesn't he want me?" she whispered. She tried to push back the tears, but she couldn't. She felt even more childish for crying, but she told herself that he'd never know she'd been crying at all since he'd abandoned her for the night.

She curled up in the middle of the bed and hugged her pillow. As the hurt ebbed away, she felt it being replaced by anger. He was going to regret humiliating her like this.

"What do you think you're doing?" Zeus asked as soon as Hades appeared in his office.

Hades looked at his brother. "I haven't touched her."

"If you say so. I'd have fucked her long ago if she weren't my goddaughter." He laughed. "And if I weren't afraid of Demeter freezing my cock off."

"I doubt that first 'objection' would have stopped you if she were anyone else's daughter or even if she had a father to fight for her honor. That shows the difference between you and me. I'm not afraid of Demeter. She'll soon see my intentions are honorable."

Zeus looked at his office door. "Honorable? Yes, that's admittedly more like you than me. She may take more convincing though."

Hades guessed Demeter was outside the door, probably restrained by Hera. "Let her in. I'm not afraid."

The door burst open. "Where is she? Where is she?" Demeter yelled as she rushed toward him.

"She is asleep, most likely, in a bed of her own in my palace. I haven't even kissed her, so rest assured her sweet maidenhead is intact."

Demeter slapped him. Hera cringed as she moved to stand beside Zeus.

Hades took a deep breath and met the goddess' harsh gaze. "Demeter, I want to marry your daughter."

"You want to ravish her and cast her aside like every other woman you've ever had."

"Name one woman I've treated that way."

Demeter's face grew even redder and more menacing. "You will pay for this."

"She will be the queen of the Underworld. Isn't that good enough for her?"

"No!"

"Then what is?"

"Give my daughter back to me!"

Hades had underestimated how irrational Demeter would be. She wasn't going to listen to him tonight. "I love her. If she will have me, I will marry her."

"You're forcing her! You're keeping her prisoner!"

"She is very comfortable. Her door is not locked. No one is guarding her."

"But I can't go get her! I can't go there! Only Hermes or Zeus could enter the Underworld." She turned on Zeus. "You should have ordered Hermes to bring her back!"

Zeus shook his head when they all looked at him. "No. Persephone wanted to run away with him. It was her own idea."

"That's a lie!"

"Would you like to see the message she sent Hades?"

Demeter hesitated. "No. I don't need to. He's been influencing her for months. I do not want to see anything that's passed between them."

Hades laughed. "Then how are you going to know what's really going on?"

"I know exactly what is going on! And I know you aren't going to give her back. She is special. She belongs only to me. There is no one else like her."

Hades knew Demeter was referring to the fact that
Persephone had no father. Demeter took pride in her malefree conception. All gods were born for a purpose. The
cosmos had not needed another fertility goddess, but
Demeter's very special influence over the creation of life had
overcome that cosmic limitation. Or so she told herself.
Persephone's uniqueness was her favorite topic, next to man-

hating. All other gods or goddesses born to only one parent had, in Demeter's opinion, been summoned into being by the primal gods who came before them. Persephone, she claimed, had been born because Demeter wanted a daughter to be like her. Anyone who dared to point out that Aphrodite's son Eros was exactly like Persephone, a perfect reflection and echo of his mother in powers and deeds, felt her wrath quickly, and then got a lecture about the "male taint" with several points regarding how a male born to the god of war and the "easiest girl in Olympus" could not compare to her perfect daughter. Demeter had slept with many of the same men as Aphrodite in her younger days, but that was another topic that resulted in a fiery lecture.

"I know just how special she is, Demeter. That's why I love her."

She ignored his declaration and pointed her finger at Zeus. "This place will not see the sun again until you help me!" She stormed out of the room, and they all felt a cold breeze in her wake.

"I better get my snow boots out," Hera said with a wry smile.

Hades shook his head. "She'll calm down. I am telling the truth."

"We can handle her, uh, 'cold shoulder' for now. Though if she starts messing with weather or the harvest in the human world, I will have to take action," Zeus said.

Hades met his brother's gaze. "I know. I remember all the times before. I think she'll restrict her vengeance to us

though. I'm sure she doesn't want to cause any more human deaths."

Hera looked down at her hands. Demeter's last temper tantrum had resulted in a year without summer in the early nineteenth century. Her anger had been aimed at Hera, and he knew both goddesses felt responsible for the effects their feud had on humans.

"I won't let anything like that happen ever again, but you have to promise me you will let Persephone make her own decision. If you use magic on her, we'll know."

"I understand."

"Does she love you, do you think?" Hera asked.

He shook his head. "No. She doesn't. She's very infatuated, which is why I haven't touched her. She's confused now. She expected me to ravish her the moment we arrived in my palace." He smiled a little. "She's probably very angry with me, but I don't want her mistaking an orgasm for love."

"You couldn't resist it though when she said she wanted to run away with you?" Hera asked.

"No. I couldn't. It's for the best. We couldn't go on the way we were."

Zeus groaned. "I wish you'd found someone more convenient, but if she falls in love with you, I'll deal with Demeter."

"Once she sees I love Persephone, she'll be happy. With you and Poseidon both married already, I'm the best catch in Olympus."

Hera smiled. "You do have a point. She won't be able to resist. I managed to snag one of the three great Olympians, so since a mortal got Poseidon, I can think of no better match for you than my beautiful goddaughter and favorite niece."

Zeus snickered. "She's your only niece since Hestia's always hated men as much as Demeter does now."

"She doesn't hate them. She simply doesn't care for them."

As Zeus and Hera laughed, Hades thought briefly of the ancient times. He and his brothers Zeus and Poseidon had watched over the world. Then the three women had come, Hera and her sisters Demeter and Hestia. Primitive man hadn't needed much. Poseidon ruled the sea, Demeter the harvest, the two of them feeding the world. Hestia had ruled the order of life and the home above, Hades the one below. Zeus and Hera ruled them all once Zeus took power from the Titans, who had never revealed all their secrets to the Olympians. Other gods and goddesses had followed as the mortal world demanded more of them and their powers. Zeus and Hera were the first to taste Aphrodite's power when she was born to bring the joy of love to a world that no longer had to fight every moment to survive. Ares followed soon from their union, his addition again changing the world. On and on it had gone, but now it had all stopped. The world had no more needs to fulfill it seemed, since no goddess had born a child for centuries.

"Would you please quit brooding?" Zeus asked, jarring him from his thoughts.

Hera came to him and kissed his cheek. "Go home to her. Talk to her. See what happens. I'm sure you'll be pleased."

Hades wanted to share Hera's confidence, but he knew his submissive sweetheart was soon going to show her feisty side. He only hoped she would resist just enough to make their consummation sweeter and not so much that she would break his heart. He'd never feared such a thing before, so he knew he'd have to tread carefully as he pushed her limits in hopes of awakening her deepest passions.

Hades stood on the balcony of Zeus' palace, looking up at the clouds as they moved across the moon. He turned when Ares walked up behind him. "You here for raunchy remarks or dumb blonde jokes?"

Ares chuckled. "Neither. Just being nosy. My girl's a little upset with you."

Hades winced. "I'm sorry. If it makes Alala feel better, I didn't kidnap her best friend."

"She might not believe that. She scolds me for dumb blonde jokes, but she's always thought of Persephone as someone who needs to be looked after."

"She can call Persephone's cell phone. Or she could summon her in a pool of water. That still works if there's water or a mirror around."

Ares shook his head slowly. "Ah, the old days. Blood and war and magic spells and very odd seductions."

"Usually involving someone being an animal." Both gods laughed.

"Well," Ares began, "she just might do that. She's very worried. It's nothing personal though. I think she's actually a little worried about you."

Hades had wanted to ask that question, but hadn't dared to. "Persephone is very infatuated. No other man has ever been able to get near her. No real man at least. Just awkward, gauche, mortal boys."

"Alala thinks Persephone is out to prove something. Or just rebel against her mother. I think you should consider that. And don't be insulted for her when I say you're probably too mature and complex for her."

Hades wanted to argue in her favor, but he knew how she appeared to most people. She could be immature and whiney and spiteful. He knew her better than any of them though. He'd talked to her about literature and movies and all kinds of ordinary things. She was smarter than she seemed and more thoughtful than any of them imagined. She was silly and sometimes flighty, but he loved it. She made him smile and laugh. She made him happy.

He finally spoke. "We are very different, but so are you and Alala. What such a sweet girl sees in you I can't imagine."

Ares smiled. "I have no idea either. Okay, I see your point. I'm just passing along Alala's concern because I think it's justified."

"I agree. Tell her thank you and that she can contact Persephone whenever she wants to. She's not a prisoner, and I'm sure she could use a friend."

"She mad at you? I hear you haven't lived up to your sexy text messages."

"Word travels fast. I'm not sleeping with her until she takes me seriously."

Ares crossed his arms and gave him a skeptical look. "I think she takes you seriously. She just doesn't know what she's getting into or what to expect. Maybe I'm wrong though."

"No, you're right. She's upset because she didn't get what she thought she wanted. I hope someday she'll truly want it."

Ares leaned against the railing and looked down into the garden. He spotted a couple ducking behind some bushes. "What is going on lately? If this were a cheesy romantic comedy, or a Shakespeare play, I'd say Aphrodite had a cold or something. Making people fall in love every time she sneezes."

Hades shook his head. "Yeah. There does seem to be something in the air. It's working out for most people though." He reached out to Persephone in his mind. She was asleep, but she stirred slightly and clutched her pillow. He withdrew his mind so he wouldn't wake her. "I'm heading back. It's getting pretty cold up here."

Ares looked up at the gathering clouds. "Demeter trying to make a point?"

"The only way she knows how to." He shook his head.
"We'll see. She'll have to see reason soon." He started to walk away.

"Good luck with that," Ares called after him.

"Thanks." He kept walking and mumbled to himself, "For all the good it may do me." He walked down into the garden and pressed a stone on the wall. The wall opened a little, and he slipped inside. He followed the tunnel and arrived on the shore of the Acheron, at the point where it connected with the river Styx and the Underworld. Charon, the ferryman of the dead, sat on the shore with Cerberus, who was actually quite friendly for an enormous, three-headed, dragon-tailed black hound.

"Excited to meet your new mistress, Cerb?" He patted the hound's middle head, and the hound's tail wagged as he stood up to follow him.

The Underworld was the one place only few beings could enter without terrible consequences. Or being dead. Everyone except him and Zeus had to enter the old-fashioned way, walk to the river and be ferried across. Or be brought there by Thanatos, the god of death. Hades had granted Persephone special status by allowing her to enter his realm while still alive. She could also leave whenever she wanted. Only Zeus and the Olympian messengers Hermes and Iris could do this. Anyone else would be trapped until Hades brought them back across himself.

"Getting a bit chilly out there," Charon said.

Hades got into the boat with Cerberus. "It is. It may get very cold."

Charon nodded. "Could be interesting."

Hades looked at Charon, who hadn't talked this much in the past two hundred years. "Oh it's going to be interesting. Very interesting indeed."

In the morning, Persephone opened her door and looked down the hall. She thought the dining room was to the right. She'd considered staying in her room, but he might think she was pouting or being stubborn. She'd picked out a very modest pink, lacy dress with lots of tiny buttons up the front. She looked pretty instead of sexy. She thought that might be what he wanted. She didn't want to be punished further. She wasn't sure why she felt she was being punished, but she couldn't deny the feeling that all his actions were carefully planned to produce a certain effect.

Cerberus was in the dining room. She'd never seen the giant hellhound so close before. He stood and walked over to her slowly, then sat and waited to be petted. She rubbed his middle head tentatively. He weighed more than she did, but he was gentler than her mother's yappy little rat terrier. Cerberus followed her to the dining table and sat on the floor beside her.

"Where's your master, Cerberus? Isn't he here?"

"Good afternoon, Persephone."

She turned, but it wasn't Hades. Another man had walked into the room, and when she looked at him he bowed to her. He was pale with short white hair and completely black eyes.

"Afternoon?"

"Yes, though time matters little down here."

Hades had said he would check on her in the morning.

Why hadn't he? "You're Hypnos, the god of sleep?"
"Yes."

"You look just like your brother Thanatos, except his hair is black." She felt like she was babbling. Of the two, she'd definitely prefer having a conversation with Hypnos.

He smiled. "You've met the god of death? That's interesting."

She wasn't completely sure what he meant. Why was it interesting? He seemed so serious, but he was smiling. She cleared her throat. "I've seen him. He came to see my godfather once when we were together."

Hypnos nodded. "I believe that was how you first drew my master's attention. Thanatos mentioned your presence, as well as your beauty, and I believe Lord Hades became jealous."

She tried to remember. That had been over a year ago. How could he have known anything about her? Had he really been jealous? "You're both gods. Why is Hades your master?"

Hypnos stared at her for a long moment.

"Is that question offensive? I'm sorry if it was."

He shook his head. "Just odd. My brother and I are part of the Underworld. Sleep and death are very similar, more so than any mortal could understand. I'm also the god of dreams. The land of dreams is here as well, like the Elysian Fields or Tartarus. Without sleeping or dying, what good would the Underworld be? It would be nothing."

"Tartarus is real? I thought Hell was a mortal notion. Hades punishes people?" She didn't like the sound of that. She couldn't imagine him torturing anyone.

Hypnos seemed puzzled. "Has Demeter really kept you so sheltered? Come and walk with me. Nothing can harm you while I am here."

"Hades won't mind?" She stood up and looked at Cerberus.

"He will not. Cerberus will follow us. Will that make you feel safer?"

She moved toward him. "I'm not afraid of you. I just don't understand this place."

He offered his arm and she took it. "Or the man you followed down here?"

She nodded. "I wanted to come though. I wanted the freedom only he could offer."

"Others could have given you freedom."

She looked at the paintings in the hallway. All of them were beautiful, in their way, but most of the scenes were very dark and grim. "No one ever noticed me before he did."

"Every god has noticed you."

She turned back to him, her free hand absently stroking one of Cerberus' heads. "That's not true. They all think I'm a silly little girl."

"You're a beautiful woman, Persephone."

"You think I am beautiful?"

He nodded. "Very beautiful."

"Kiss me."

He laughed. "You would not like that."

"Why not?" she asked, annoyed by his laughter.

"You would be unconscious for a long time. Kissing is one thing I cannot do."

"But you can..."

"Yes, I can have sex, but there's an intimacy about kissing I've always longed to experience."

She felt her skin warm as she imagined what kissing him might be like if it were safe to do so. "Oh." *Damn it, I can't get anything right down here!* "But if you could, would you like to kiss me?"

He stopped when they reached a large black door. "I would love to give you my kiss and live forever in a dream with you, but you are not meant for me."

"Hades could kiss me." She looked up into his eyes. "But he hasn't."

Hypnos leaned closer, putting his arms around her waist. He brought his lips to her ear. "Perhaps he is afraid of you."

She felt her heart pounding as Hypnos leaned close to her. His lips touched her ear, and she sighed. He groaned deep in his throat and kissed her neck. Electricity shot through her. His touch was amazing. His lips and tongue found spots she'd never known were so sensitive. She felt the ache between her thighs again. Hypnos' lips felt amazing.

Cerberus growled at Hypnos.

The spell was broken, and she pulled away from him, incredibly embarrassed. "I'm sorry."

Hypnos gazed into her eyes. "Not as sorry as I am."

Sorry they had touched? Or sorry they had stopped? She couldn't tell. "I didn't plan that. You're handsome and you said I was beautiful, but that's a feeble excuse for almost cheating on Hades." She sighed. "If I'm even in a position to do such a thing."

He stroked her cheek. "I know you are innocent. In every way. I will carry the memory of touching you in my heart forever. But may I ask you something?"

"Yes."

"Was that brief pleasure worth the guilt you feel now?" She shook her head. "No. That was my first kiss, and I used someone to get it."

He smiled. "Don't feel that way. I don't. What else did you learn?"

She looked down at Cerberus, who seemed equally anxious for her answer. "I didn't come here just to find a lover. I came here to meet the man I've been sending messages to every night."

He nodded. "Good. Perhaps that's why I could not resist you. You needed to see what you wanted more clearly. We'll leave the tour until later, shall we?"

"Yes." She blushed. "You're very kind. You could have gotten angry, or gone to tell Hades."

"Or ravished you."

Her eyes widened. "But you wouldn't have done that."

He started to say something, but then he stopped. After a moment, he said, "Take Cerberus with you. Hades left him here to protect you. He did just that, waking you from my spell before you were the one to ask me for something you didn't truly want."

She touched Cerberus' back, and he looked up at her loyally. "He did. I'm glad for both of us he did. I won't tell Hades. It wasn't your fault."

"But he will know. He knows everything in this realm."

Persephone froze. "What?" she managed to say.

"He knows I touched you. As frustrated as you are, he can't blame you for letting me. He also knows you pulled away. He knows what you said. Don't be afraid."

"He won't punish you?"

"His anger will be tempered because of what this incident made you realize."

In a whisper, she asked, "How can he love me? I can't even talk to a man without making ten mistakes."

"Perhaps he wants to be the one to teach you...everything."

Her mind filled with images of Hades, the sound of his voice, his scent. "I hope I'm worthy."

He bowed. "You are. Go find him now. He is here, waiting."

"Where is he?" she called as he walked away.

"Follow Cerberus. He will take you."

After he was gone, she looked down at the hound. His dragonlike tail was wagging.

"Take me to him."

Cerberus led the way, and she followed as she wondered what Hades would say to her.

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Chapter 2

Hades sat in his chair by the fire waiting for the door to open. He could feel Persephone's conflicted emotions mixed with her confused arousal. He wanted to pull her to him and finally make her truly his as soon as she arrived. But he wasn't going to do that. He vowed not to confuse her even more. She needed to see and feel his love more than anything.

He'd been aroused by her passionate reaction to Hypnos as much as he'd been jealous. Hypnos was correct though. Her words had made his anger and jealousy evaporate. She'd asked him to take her away with him before she'd known who he was. She wanted the man she'd been talking to, the man she'd come to care for.

But she hadn't said she loved him.

He felt her arrive outside the door. "Come in."

She opened the door slowly and followed Cerberus in. She took a long time closing the door behind her, and then finally faced him. She looked afraid, and he didn't like that.

"Persephone, don't be afraid of me."

"I'm not."

He stood and walked toward her. "You are. I can feel it."

"You have every right to be angry."

"Because of how you behaved?"

She nodded.

"I'm not going to blame you for becoming aroused."

She met his gaze. "But you're angry with me. Aren't you?"

"It was my fault. I haven't given you what you wanted."

She blushed a bright red, and he smiled. He could feel her heart racing. He walked around behind her, brushing the hair off her right shoulder and pulling her close. She gasped when he pressed his body close to hers, and then she sighed when he ran his finger over the place Hypnos had kissed her.

"You respond to my touch," he whispered.

"Of course I do. I was just..." She didn't seem to know what she meant.

"Frustrated?"

"I guess." She tried to turn so he couldn't see her face.

"After all the things we've talked about and everything we've shared, are you really going to start being shy now?" She shrugged.

He laughed and gently kissed her neck. He made sure no spot went untouched by his lips. He moved his hands upward to unbutton her dress. She sighed as he cupped her breasts and massaged them. He found it hard to resist as she moved against him so sweetly. After a moment though, he pulled away.

She opened her eyes and turned to look at him. "What's wrong?"

"We aren't ready yet." He ran his hands over her breasts, admiring how perfectly they rose and fell with each breath.

Her hands went straight to her hips as she backed out of his reach. "What? Almost losing my virginity in the hallway with another man is no big deal, but us having sex is?"

He tried not to smile. Her shyness was now completely gone, and the fire in her eyes was very promising. "I know

Hypnos would not have done that, no matter how tempting or willing you were. If you can admit how inexperienced you are, why can't you trust my judgment?"

"Then why did you kiss me? Why did you touch me like that?" she asked as she buttoned her dress.

"So you would remember my touch, not his."

"You are angry then. This teasing is my punishment!"

"No, it isn't." He sighed. Most of his lovers had been mortal, so he was used to arguing about feelings as well as actions and their consequences. Goddesses didn't have love spats like this. They didn't form arguments and make points. They got angry and used their powers. Aphrodite had zapped her share of males, as had Hera. He liked how mortal Persephone was. She rarely used her powers and enjoyed being around ordinary people. They had a certain kind of vivacity and urgency about them he found very appealing. He'd once tried to explain it to his brother Poseidon, who had married a mortal woman. Layla had adjusted to being a goddess since Zeus had granted her immortality, but she still acted very human. He'd thought his brother would understand, but he hadn't. Poseidon loved Layla for who she was, but he didn't see her former mortality as part of that. Hades felt no one would ever understand mortals the way he did or get why he found them so fascinating.

Except, maybe, for the woman glaring at him furiously.

"Are you going to say anything else, or do I just have to stand here and wait for a decree?"

"I'm sorry. I was just thinking."

"Then tell me what you're thinking."

"Persephone, I want you to stay with me forever. That's a very long time."

She rolled her eyes. "I think I know that."

He shook his head. "You don't understand. If you marry me, you can never leave. You could go above or to the mortal world, but when the sun sets in our world, you have to be here. I'm different from other gods, as are Thanatos and Hypnos. Marrying me means eternity with me."

She turned away and paced a few steps, looked back at him, then went a few more steps to the right.

"You see why it's more significant than you thought," he said.

She turned to face him. "How did we get to marriage? We haven't even had sex, and you're talking about marriage."

Her logic gave him the overwhelming urge to throw something. He held back and calmly said, "Persephone, I am going to be very honest right now, okay? I am in love with you, but I know you don't feel the same way. That's why we haven't made love. You like me. You're having a good time. This started out as rebellious fun, but now you aren't getting your way. You will play by my rules though."

"What if I want to go home?"

"I granted you very special privileges. You may come and go as freely as Zeus himself."

She considered this for a few moments. He wondered if she was angry enough to leave. They'd argued before, and the result had been her online silence for a few days. If she left though, she might not come back.

"Will you have a drink with me as you consider?"

She eventually nodded.

He went to the small bar behind his desk. Zeus was going to be very angry when he found out, but he didn't care. He wasn't going to let her leave. "You like martinis, right?"

"Yeah. Fruity ones anyway."

"Gin or vodka?"

"What's the difference?"

He smiled. "Depends who you ask. Gin it is then." He poured gin into two martini glasses, and then touched their rims.

Persephone looked over his shoulder as the glasses filled with a dark red liquid. "Magic to impress me?"

He handed her glass to her. "A pomegranate martini. I think you'll like it, even if it doesn't make much of an impression."

She looked down at it for a moment, and then moved to the couch. "Let's talk about this then."

After she sat down, she took a sip. He moved to sit beside her, putting his own drink down on the table. "I hope my honesty means something. I've made my intentions known to Zeus."

"He approved of your choice? Someone like me as queen of the Underworld?"

"Yes. Zeus and Hera love you and think highly of you, even if others do not. Others don't know you as they do. As I do."

She took another sip and licked her lips. "This isn't what I imagined. I want a boyfriend, not a husband."

He shifted in his seat and dared to ask, "Will you ever want one?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

He felt his heart sinking. He knew her love could match his. He knew it. How could she be so indifferent to him when moments earlier she'd been melting in his arms and longing for his touch?

"I see."

She groaned. "You know, I didn't know who you were. You can't blame me for not taking this as seriously as you want me to. We've been together one day, and you were gone most of the time. You want to trap me just the way my mother did, lock me up and keep me for yourself."

His hands balled into fists. "Do you really believe that?" She set her own drink down. "A little, yes."

The hurt of her words grew worse as he looked at her drink. "Then you've very quickly made a fool of me."

"What? Because I'm not in love with you? Look, I'm crazy about you, but I can't marry you. Not now."

"No, because I proved you right." He couldn't look at her. He couldn't bear to think of what her reaction was going to be.

She touched his arm and shook him. "What are you talking about?"

He looked up at her. "I said that you could leave. Now you can't."

"What? That's not fair! What did I say? Let's talk this through."

"It won't matter."

"Why not?"

He stroked her hand. "The drink. You drank something made with my magic. You can't leave."

"No, you can do anything you want. You can take me home."

"No, I can't. You cannot leave the Underworld for a hundred days."

She pulled her hand away, her eyes fixed on the fire.

"I was afraid you would leave. I made a mistake." He expected her to scream at him, hit him or run from the room. She sat perfectly still.

"Persephone?"

She stood up and unbuttoned her dress. It fell to the floor. She wore nothing underneath it.

"What are you doing?"

Her eyes were cold as she knelt before him. "Submitting to my master."

He turned away. "Stop it."

She took his hands and rubbed them over her body. "This is what you want. You know it is. A prize to keep all to yourself."

He hadn't expected this from her. She knew just how to touch his heart and make him love her. He hadn't realized she'd also know exactly how to hurt him. He realized he had far more reason to fear her than she did to fear him.

"Please get up," he said as he pulled his hands away.

"Oh no," she said as she stood up and moved in front of him. "I need to be punished for wanting to leave."

"Persephone, please!" He stood up and headed for the door.

She ran ahead of him and blocked it. "You wanted this." "Not like this."

"You should have thought about that earlier."

"I know."

She sighed and moved away from the door. A new dress appeared on her. It was black velvet and tight, nothing like the pink lacy one she'd been wearing. "I'm not going to forgive you anytime soon."

"I don't expect you to. If I let you read my mind, will you believe I'm sorry?"

She backed away. "No, I don't want to read your mind."

He was puzzled. Why did the idea frighten her?

"Persephone, I made a mistake, several of them, because of how much I love you."

"Stop saying that!" she yelled. The entire room shook, and Cerberus whined. She went to kneel by the hound and petted his back.

"So that's why you're angry, why I need to apologize?"

She stood and patted her leg so Cerberus would follow her.
"I want to go to my room now."

"Of course."

She still didn't look at him. "Please leave me alone."

"I promise."

"You promise? I think I'll lock my door." She left the room

quickly. Cerberus looked back for a moment, but still followed her.

Hades sighed and covered his face with his hands. A sharp blow from behind sent him sprawling onto the floor. He turned and looked up at his brother Zeus.

The king of the gods glared at him furiously. "You tell me why you don't deserve a good thrashing."

"Because you've made worse mistakes, done worse things, over nothing more than sex. I'm in love with her."

"And this is how you'll win her? She's stubborn, Hades, and stronger than you think. A hundred days is nothing to her. She's endured longer captivity, as you well know. You're going to cause nothing but heartache."

"When she calms down, she'll talk to me. She'll understand. She opens up to me. She does."

"You've lost every ounce of her trust. And ours. We won't help you manipulate her more."

"I wouldn't ask you to."

"You may grow desperate. You certainly didn't plan this, did you?"

"Are you here to do something or just warn me?"

"If you use magic on her again, I will bind you in Tartarus until her hundred days are up, and then I will come take her home myself."

He knew his brother meant it. "Okay. I promise." After a moment, he asked, "Why not just break the spell? You could."

"That's not the way I do things anymore. Better to let it run its course and let her punish you in the process instead of simply taking her away and forbidding you to see her. She'll teach you a far better lesson than I could, and doing so will help her deal with what she's feeling."

"Hmmmm. I can't say I'd agree with you, but I guess my opinion wouldn't matter."

Zeus looked at him seriously. "What were you thinking?"

Hades dared to stand up, as Zeus' temper seemed to have cooled a bit. "That I'd lose her forever."

"You may still lose her."

Hades knew Zeus would be angry, but he took the chance and asked, "May I see Aphrodite?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"You know why not. Loving you has certain complications."

"But I don't want her help. I want her to tell me if Persephone could love me."

"That would not be fair. I won't allow it."

"Nothing will change your mind?"

Zeus shook his head.

Hades reached out with his mind. Persephone was in her room, crying. He felt as if an icy hand had gripped his heart. "She's upset. Please go to her."

"I might not be your best defender," he said.

"I don't care. I'm not asking for that. I want her to feel better."

He nodded slowly. "You know, I talked to Aphrodite." "You did?"

"Yes. She's been keeping to herself lately, so it seemed a good excuse. She confirmed you do love Persephone."

"I already knew that. You should have as well."

He shrugged. "I'll get to the point. I would love for you two to be happy, but I'd rather see your heart broken than hers. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly. It's what I'd prefer as well."

"You and I have never fought the way Poseidon and I do, but I'm willing to make a special exception."

Hades nodded. He and Zeus had rarely disagreed on anything. For the first time in his existence, he wouldn't be able to fall back on Zeus' help. "I understand."

"You better." Zeus disappeared.

Hades' gaze fell on the two drinks. They both exploded, glass shards flying everywhere. He left the room quickly, wanting to be away from the scene of his failure.

"Persephone?"

She jumped, but then she realized the voice belonged to Zeus. She tried to wipe away the tears, but she knew her face was pink and blotchy as she turned to look at him. "Yes?"

"It's a pretty stupid question, but are you okay?"

She nodded. "Yeah. Just pissed."

"I suppose so. Would you like to tell me about it?"

"You already know what's happened."

"I know, but I thought you might want to talk."

She did, but she had no idea what to say or even where to begin. "I don't understand. He's not the man I was talking to."

"I don't think you were expecting a man, much less a god. I think you were expecting a much younger mortal. Am I right?"

"I guess. What kind of god spends his nights on the Internet?"

"Perhaps a very lonely one."

She rolled her eyes. "Why does he think he's in love with me?"

"Is that what's really bothering you?"

"Yes!"

Zeus nodded. "Your mother is worried about you."

"I'm sure she is. Any snow on the ground yet?"

"She's still playing with wind and lightning at the moment."

She smiled. "Well, tell her I'm still a virgin and likely to stay that way."

"I'm not going to tell her anything, not yet anyway."

"I really have to stay that long?"

"Yes. Do you want to leave? It's not the kind of precedent I want to set, but ultimately I could break his spell. And I will, if you want me to."

She thought about it. She wanted to leave because she was angry, not because she wanted to be away from Hades. She wasn't sure if she was angrier he wouldn't have sex with her or that he'd tricked her because he'd thought she'd run away like a scared little girl.

"No, I don't, but I'm pretty mad."

"Because he used magic?"

She nodded. "Yes. It shows what he thinks of me. I'm a spoiled child who'll run away when she can't have what she wants."

"I think he knows you better than that. The thought of you leaving frightened him."

She knew he was probably right, but that didn't take away the hurt of finding out so abruptly that he didn't trust her completely. "Maybe. I still think this shows how little he believes in me. Why do I have to love him for us to have sex? I care about him. Why isn't it enough?"

"Hades got most of the honor when it was passed out between me and him and Poseidon."

"Honor? Tricking me into thinking he was human? Giving me that drink so I couldn't leave?"

"Love makes even gods do ridiculous things, things they regret later."

"So he ran to his room to cry?"

Zeus laughed. "No. We had a little chat. After I knocked him flat on his face."

"Really?" That was pretty exciting; the king of the gods standing up for her. She managed to smile.

"Yes, I did. He upset my favorite sweetheart. I had to do it."

"What does everyone else think?"

"Hera and I were happy until he did this. She's very worried. She wants the two of you together."

"You must too. You're definitely in favor of it."

"He's my brother, and I know he's good enough for you, even if he isn't acting like it. I'd like for you both to be happy, but I think I see the problem now."

"What?"

"You don't really know him. When he was talking to you, he knew exactly who you were. He had the advantage. He knew what to say and how to say it. He knew everything about your life, so it seemed to you that this stranger completely understood you. It was his first mistake. He's frustrated you don't understand, but that's not fair to you."

She raised her eyebrows. "Wow. That's a good point. I wasn't thinking about it like that. It explains how he can feel

so much when my feelings are just beginning. He knew what he was getting into. He was a mystery to me."

"I'm not here to argue in his favor. I want you to know I'm here. Hera can't come to you, but you can talk to her through your mirror, or a pool of water. Your cell phone still works, but I thought you might like to know you could see people."

"I'm not ready to talk to anyone yet. I'll get worked up or confused."

"Am I bothering you now?"

"No, you're fine. I need time though. I have to stay here, so I can wait a few days and then know what I want to say to him."

"I'll leave you to it then."

"Wait! What else is going on up there?"

"It's only been two days."

"I know, just tell me."

"Your mother's having a fit, and the weather is terrible.

Apollo and Aphrodite are both acting like freaks, to use your favorite word."

She smiled. She'd needed that. He knew how to tease her in a way that made her feel loved instead of stupid and childish. She knew she didn't have a father, and even though she'd definitely had a crush on him for part of her life, Zeus filled the role very well. He'd never once tried to seduce her, and that showed his love for her more than anything else possibly could have. "Apollo is a freak. He's the epitome of a male chauvinist pig. He used to be so sweet."

Zeus scratched his chin. "I don't remember that."

She laughed. "Yes, you do. He used to be sweet and charming. Now he's smooth and charming. Not the same thing at all."

"And you think you know nothing about men?"

Her smile faded. "If Hades really loves me, why are we having so much trouble communicating?"

"For one thing, you've only had a couple of face-to-face conversations. Your relationship is beginning. He needs to realize that. He wants to win your love all at once."

Cerberus put his left head on her knee.

Zeus made a face. "Do you like him?"

"I love him!" she declared as he scratched behind his ears.

"You and Hades may be fated to be together then. I can't get used to him."

"Too many heads?"

Cerberus stood up and walked to Zeus, sitting at his feet and staying perfectly still.

"And too many brains." He patted the middle head. "No offense, old boy. I'm a bulldog man myself."

"Thank you, Zeus. I think I'll be more eloquent the next time I talk to Hades."

He nodded. "I hope so. I don't want to see either of you hurt."

She smiled. "You'll come back and see me?"

"You only have to call."

"Oh I will."

He kissed her on the forehead. "Goodbye, sweetheart." "Bye."

He disappeared. Cerberus looked at the spot for a minute, then went back to lie down by Persephone's feet. She curled up on the bed, dangling her arm off so it rested on his back. She'd had very different plans for the evening, but they weren't going to happen now.

Alala knew Aphrodite was home. She could feel her. She stood on her doorstep and knocked, even though she felt nothing keeping her out of the house. She thought they'd get off to a better start if she didn't invade Aphrodite's home.

Aphrodite opened the door sheepishly and said, "Come in."

Alala wanted to give the other goddess a good smack, but not because she was angry. Being sheepish and quiet and reclusive was not like Aphrodite, so much so that it felt downright wrong to Alala.

Aphrodite led her into the living room. "Have a seat. I'm sure you want to talk about Persephone."

Alala sat on the loveseat by the window. "Yes. Among other things."

Aphrodite sighed and clasped her hands together as she sat down. "No one can be made to fall in love with Hades. It's nothing to do with love, actually. It's because marrying him would bind that woman to the Underworld, forcing her to return there every night."

"Why?"

"Zeus only knows." She smiled. "Actually, even he doesn't. I've asked. I was born with that knowledge. Hades is the only creature of the Underworld who moves completely of his own will."

"Hypnos and Thanatos don't?"

"They do, but Hades could change that if he wanted to. They feel the pull of it and can't stay away too long. Neither of them have to leave the Underworld for people to die or dream. It's just more convenient sometimes if they come above."

Alala nodded, wondering if Aphrodite was thinking about what she had so recently done to Ares in her botched attempt to give him and Alala a 'happily ever after.' Her spell had backfired to such an extent Hera had summoned Hypnos to put him to sleep to keep the pain away.

"Hades is supposed to be a bad boy, but I think we both know a little about those types. What's he really like?"

Aphrodite blushed, which was something Alala was sure she'd never seen the goddess do before. She took a deep breath and tried not to think about how many times the love goddess had fucked Ares. Alala knew Ares loved her, but sometimes she still resented how long he and Aphrodite had been lovers.

"He's very nice. He's quiet, and that bothers people because of who he is. He's more honorable and honest than either of his brothers, but you may not believe that right now."

"Did you and he ever...have anything going on?"

Aphrodite shook her head. "I tried, we flirted. Nothing ever came of it. He's very focused. I was too silly for him. Besides that, he's into exclusive relationships."

"So he really wants Persephone? He isn't just having fun?"

"He loves her very much. He's never felt this way before. All his lovers have been brief, most of them mortal. No one

has ever hurt him, but that is what he's most afraid of. He doesn't like to talk about it. He claims to like his solitary existence, but I can feel how lonely he is."

Alala sighed. "I hope things are going well then."

"You think they might be bumpy?"

She nodded. "Persephone can be hard to get along with at times, so I can't imagine living with her. We camped out for a weekend, and by the second night she was driving me a little crazy. I simply don't see them as a couple."

"If it's meant to be, she'll love him. She doesn't yet though. They're only now starting on that path. The Fates aren't always kind. His being in love with her is no guarantee they'll ever be together."

"She hasn't contacted me, and I'm waiting, even though Zeus made it clear anyone can contact her. I'm worried though."

"For whom?"

Without hesitation, she said, "Both of them."

Aphrodite nodded.

Alala took a deep breath and decided to get on with the real reason she'd come. "Can we please talk about us?"

Aphrodite nodded again. "Of course."

Alala got up and went to sit beside Aphrodite. "I don't hate you. Ares doesn't hate you. You've been avoiding us, and I want you to stop it. We want the goddess of love to be a big part of our wedding."

"Hera hates me."

"Well, you nearly killed her favorite son."

Aphrodite blushed even more than she had a few minutes ago.

"Is there something you want to tell me about you and Ares?" She hoped the answer would be no, but she had to ask even if she found out something she didn't want to know.

"No, it's Hera. The only reason she doesn't know is because he hasn't told her."

"Ares?"

"Hephaestus."

Why would Aphrodite still be worried about him? He'd dumped her, if Alala remembered correctly. "What about him? You two have been done for a long time."

"Not quite. He wants me back."

"Why?"

Aphrodite leaned over and whispered, "I'm his wife."

Alala suddenly understood Aphrodite's anxiety. Hera only had two sons, and Aphrodite had managed to entangle both of them. Add to that a wedding Hera hadn't been invited to, and Aphrodite was in lots of trouble.

"For how long?"

"Hundreds of years."

"Hundreds? You're kidding. Tell me you're fucking kidding!"

"No. I'm not. It was a foolish thing to do."

"What happened?"

"Short version?"

"Please." Alala could not wrap her head around the idea of Aphrodite keeping such a big secret. It seemed miraculous to her. Hephaestus shunned them all most of the time, but how had she managed it for centuries?

"We were having sex, and he chained me to the bed. When we were, well, finished, he asked me to marry him. I said no. He said I would stay chained there until I agreed. And he was right. He'd forged chains I couldn't break."

"So you agreed?"

"Yes. I thought I could go to Zeus, but he made me recite the vows and marry him before he took the chains off." She ran her right hand over her left, and a ring appeared. "The ring was forged by him. I can't remove it. I'm his until he sets me free."

"A marriage like that can't be binding."

"For us it is. Only the vows are required."

"But you never see each other. Does he really exercise that much power over you?"

"He can call me whenever he wants me, and I have to go to him."

Alala felt a wave of panic wash over her. She remembered the many times she'd slaughtered men on the battlefield when she'd discovered them violating women and children. Her temper flared. How could such a thing be going on? Hera would be livid. "What? Aphrodite, are you saying he forces you to—"

She held up her hand and shook her head. "We haven't had sex since that night. He just calls me to him. He makes me dinner or we talk. We go for walks. Depends on his mood."

"Oh." Alala let out the breath she'd been holding. "I'm glad to hear it. Why haven't you gone to Zeus? Aphrodite, Hera won't be angry because Hephaestus forced you to marry him.

She doesn't approve of things like that, even if he is her son. No matter what she thinks of you, she'll see him as in the wrong."

She gazed down at her ring, and then reinstated the glamour that kept it hidden from everyone. "I don't know why I haven't tried to tell anyone. I've cheated on him so many times. The first time he caught me with Ares, he locked me up for a week. Ares doesn't know this; I made sure of that, so please don't tell him. He would have tried to fight Hephaestus. Ares had no idea he was fucking someone else's wife." She looked out the window. "It's not a marriage, not even close. He won't give it up though."

"If you aren't together, what does he gain? He doesn't have a wife at all."

"He never saw it that way. We had many fights because I wanted to be free. We had one that was far worse than any others. Hermes was the man I wanted at the time, and my frustration at not having him probably made that particular fight with Hephaestus more severe. Hermes turned me away, and I wound up with Ares. That was the night, I've always believed, Eros was conceived." She looked down at her hands. "I thought he would release me because I'd had another man's child while we were married. He didn't. He always knew Ares was the father, but it changed nothing. He wouldn't set me free." She looked back up at Alala timidly.

"You should have told Ares about this. I'm fine. Really. I know Ares is Eros' father, and I believed it before you finally told everyone." She touched Aphrodite's hand. "He stayed with you so long because the sex was good and he does love

you, just not that way. He would lay down his life for you in an instant. We'll help you. You may never be close friends again, but you and I can be friends."

Aphrodite met her gaze and a single tear fell. She took a deep breath. "Ares chose the right woman to love. You're so forgiving. Far too good for him."

Alala laughed. "I know." She repositioned herself on the couch and released Aphrodite's hand. "Look, I'm worried about Persephone, but if you need my help, I'll try. You might not want Eros involved. I can understand that. So tell me if you need Ares to do something."

She shrugged. "There's nothing to do. If I don't return to Hephaestus soon, he may go to his mother. She'll really have it out for me if she learns I've hurt both her precious boys. Her disapproval of his actions will fade quickly if he decides to play up to her love for him. She loves him and Ares so much she'd do anything for them."

"How do you know he's hurt? He's done nothing to stop you."

She smiled sadly. "He's never loved anyone but me. I think he's finally decided to fight for me. When the pain is great enough, I can feel what unrequited love does to someone. I feel it from him some days. He's going to keep trying."

"You don't love him?"

She shook her head.

"Is he really...you know..."

"Ugly?"

Alala felt silly, but she hadn't been able to bring herself to say it. "Yeah."

"He's rugged and manly, but by no means is he ugly. A long white scar runs down the side of his face. It's shaped exactly like a lightning bolt. Some say it's just an old legend, but Zeus really cast him off Mount Olympus when he was born. That's how he got the scar and why he walks with a limp. The fall shattered his left knee and the lightning bolt blinded him for three days. Zeus is not his father, and Hera took great pride in that because she was angry. Athena was born to Zeus without a mother. She came from his mind as the ideal goddess, wise and with a taste for warfare and seeing justice served. That's why he favors her so much, even though they are no longer that close. Hera wanted to bear a child without Zeus after this. Also, Zeus had been fucking two nymphs a little too long for Hera's liking, and she saw having a child without him as a way to express her resentment at his having so many children through all his affairs and at times favoring them over Ares." She sighed. "Hera let all that resentment and anger come out when she presented Hephaestus to Zeus as her own triumphant prize. His scar takes getting used to, but the limp is hardly noticeable. He's very handsome and has an amazing body. I just don't love him."

"He never tries to seduce you?"

She shook her head. "We had great sex, but he doesn't want to just fuck me. He wants to love me."

Alala looked down. "I'm sorry. Everyone thinks you have it so easy."

Aphrodite smiled, but it looked forced. "I nearly botched things for you and Ares, and then Apollo started mooning

over Daphne again. Now Hades." She paused. "You knew all about Daphne, didn't you?"

She shook her head. She'd lost her virginity with Apollo, and they'd been lovers for decades, but he'd never told her about Daphne. "It was before I was born. He never told me. Hypnos mentioned it, and Eris told me the story."

"What did you think?"

"It helped me understand him. He never let me in that far, but her rejection of him explains so much. I mean, she'd rather be a tree than have anything to do with him? It's awful. He can be so insensitive, but I think he's done it to himself. He's hardened his heart, and it's poisoned his whole being. I understand the pain he kept trying to hide now. As much as it would upset Ares, I feel very sorry for Apollo."

Aphrodite nodded. "He's never loved anyone but her. Never. It's been hundreds of years by mortal reckoning. I sometimes hope I'll feel her calling out to me to break the spell."

"Could you?"

"I could break the power of the arrow that made him seem repulsive to her. Any of us could reverse her father's spell. Peneus turned her into a tree to protect her because he had no power to compete with Apollo's when she cried out for him to help her. He's only a minor water deity, after all. But she begged us not to change her back."

Alala shivered. "The singing in that field. I used to think it was the wind or other nymphs. It gives me the creeps now that I know it's her."

"I know what you mean. That was my fault too. I made that stupid arrow because Apollo made fun of my son's archery skills." She shook her head. "It was a farce that turned into a tragedy."

"I'm sorry, but you can't blame yourself. I have to go home to meet Ares, but I hope you feel better. I seem to have opened old wounds though."

"No, no, it's fine. It's nice to talk to someone. Hera's always been my confidante, but I can't talk to her about Hephaestus."

"I know. I'm here if you need me."

Aphrodite smiled and showed her out.

As Alala headed home, her mind whirled. She'd wanted to make Aphrodite feel better, but with everything that weighed upon her, she doubted even Atlas himself could ease her burden.

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Chapter 3

Hades stood at his bedroom window, watching Persephone talk with Hypnos in the garden. It had been three days since they'd last spoken. He always knew where she was, so he stayed out of her way. Her shunning of him was less painful when he didn't actually have to see her turn or walk away from him. He'd hoped her usual impatience might get the better of her and make her seek him out. That hadn't happened though. She'd spent most of the past three days in her room or in the library. Today she wanted to learn more about the Underworld and had asked Hypnos to give her the tour that had been erotically interrupted her first day here.

Hades trusted Hypnos not to succumb to temptation again. The god of sleep pushed the limits from time to time, but he also knew Hades wouldn't forgive the same thing twice. He watched Persephone pull her long hair back into a ponytail and tie it with a ribbon. A strong breeze blew through the garden, and Hades wondered if Hypnos would tell Persephone what that meant. Since the Underworld was unaffected by the world above, the weather it did have was the result of Hades' emotions. The storm that had been brewing but never breaking for three days reflected his brooding.

Persephone smiled and laughed at something Hypnos said. Hades watched her and Cerberus follow Hypnos from the garden. He looked back at the letter he'd been writing. It burst into flame and disintegrated, leaving no sign it had ever

been there. Writing her a letter would be breaking his word. He'd promised to leave her alone.

He looked into the mirror near his bed, but then he hesitated. He wanted to talk to Alala, but he wasn't sure how she would react. She might not trust him. He touched the mirror's edge and thought of her. Luckily, she was lounging on the diving board in Ares' training room reading a book.

"Alala?"

She looked at the door, then all around the room. She finally looked down at the water in the pool and jumped. Her book went flying and she fell off the diving board. She emerged and looked at his reflection.

"You scared the shit out of me!" she exclaimed as she coughed up water.

"Sorry. May I come talk to you?"

She pushed her wet hair out of her face. "Yes, this is kind of creepy." She swam away from him quickly.

He sighed, feeling he'd gotten off to a very poor start. He appeared next to the pool as she got out and reached for a towel. "You can see already I'm terrible with women."

Alala looked up at him and then dried her face and ran the towel over her hair. He had no idea what she might be thinking. She'd always been Ares' silent and beautiful shadow, but she was just as deadly as he was. She could kill with a touch, like Ares and Thanatos. It was the one power she had to top his own, and at this moment he was far more afraid of her than he was of the gods of war and death.

"I talked to Aphrodite. I want to hear you say it though," Alala said.

"Say what?"

"How you feel." She sat by the pool and put her feet in the water. "Come sit down."

He did so, changing his clothes to black shorts and a tshirt and putting his feet into the water too. It was very warm, but he still felt chilled as he looked at her. "I love Persephone, but I know her feelings for me aren't that strong."

"No, they aren't. I thought you were just a passing interest. Did you know I suspected 'Hellraiser' was you? Before Ares got sick from Aphrodite's spell. I was with her brother Arion and the thought just came to me."

"That weird kid who plays the guitar?"

She narrowed her eyes. "The weird kid you want for a brother-in-law."

"Sorry. I thought you and him hooking up was a rumor." His stomach lurched. He'd now insulted her ex. What else could he do wrong?

"We were together for a few weeks. Nothing serious. He's dating Psyche now."

"Eros' ex-wife? You're serious?"

"They both love mortals. She lives in California now. He's there all the time."

"That's interesting."

"It is, but it's not what you're here for."

"I know. She's angry because we didn't have sex right away. Then I tricked her into drinking something I made with magic. She has to stay with me for one hundred days now."

Alala glared at him. "She wanted to leave and you wouldn't let her?"

"No. I was afraid she would leave. She only wanted to be away from me after I admitted what I'd done."

Her expression hardened even more. "That doesn't sound like love to me. It sounds like obsession."

"I know. It was wrong."

"You're damn right it was wrong! I'm sure you've been punished for it. She's good at holding a grudge and making people feel like shit."

"She won't talk to me."

Alala kicked the water with her feet. "Wow, you've really fucked this up. I thought maybe you were just frustrated because you'd found out how hard it is to get along with her." She laughed and added with fake enthusiasm, "But it's you screwing it all up! What fun!"

He didn't know how to react to her sarcasm. He hadn't expected it from her, though he preferred it to outright anger. "So have I screwed it up too much to still have hope?"

"Well...that's up to her. You were a fantasy to her, and you needed to take it slow. I know Demeter would have been a problem, but you shouldn't have taken her down there."

"I know I don't deserve your help, but you're her best friend. Tell me what to do."

She looked into his eyes for a long time. "You're afraid of me."

"Is that so odd? You could kill me."

"But I wouldn't. You made mistakes, and I don't really like this, but I do see your side. She'll hurt you more than you can imagine if you keep going like this."

He took a deep breath, trying to find the right words and hide his frustration. "Help me then. Help me be a better man."

Alala bit her lip. "Only you can do that. Someone else could motivate you or advise you, but being a better man is all about what you do. You have to balance being yourself with trying to please her. I don't know. I don't even see how I could help. What could I tell you? I don't know what she's feeling now, and I won't spy for you."

"I'm not asking you to. She told me to leave her alone. Do I wait until she comes to me?"

Alala considered this. "Yes. It's safer. She expects people to read her mind sometimes, but in this case, leave her alone. Don't try anything because if she doesn't want to see you, she'll get angrier and push you away more. It's possible she wants you to pursue her, even seduce her now, but if that's wrong and you tried it, she'd be so angry."

He nodded, but his heart sank.

"I know she's hard to figure out. I'm sorry I don't have any answers."

"I'm not sure why I expected you to. My ethics lately have been pretty questionable. It's unfair to ask this of you."

"It makes perfect sense to me. I am the best person to turn to. I went to Aphrodite to reassure myself because I didn't want to meddle but being so in the dark was driving me

crazy. Your situation is too complicated. Only you and Persephone can work it out."

"I had to try though. Zeus and Hera are now limiting their help to not kicking my ass."

"You're not what I expected."

"I'm not?"

"You're from the Underworld, so you're supposed to be dark and brooding. I expected a bad boy, dangerous and mysterious like Thanatos and Hypnos. But you're different. You're like Ares. Very vulnerable beneath the darker parts."

He couldn't help smiling. "I'm sure he doesn't want that getting out."

"Probably not, but I can see you bury feelings the way he does. It's very bad for you." She touched his hand. "I've never felt loneliness like this. How do you live with it?"

He wasn't sure he understood her. He was anxious about Persephone, but he didn't think he really seemed that upset. "I don't understand. I'm worried about what to do, but do I seem that pathetic?"

"No. That's not what I'm saying." She ran her hand up his arm. "I can sense pain. It comes from a life spent on the battlefield. It's all over you."

She seemed so serious. Her hand was warm, but he felt his nervousness returning. Was she trying to do something to him? "What's all over me?"

"Loneliness. Why do you deny how unhappy you are? You are not like the other Underworld dwellers. Emotionally, you're different. I don't know Hypnos or Thanatos well, but their auras, their essences are different. They feel things,

they can love and hate, but they have more defenses than we do. It's part of who they are."

He pulled away from her. "Maybe my life isn't exciting, but I'm not unhappy, okay?"

"What does excitement have to do with it? You could have a great social life and be lonely. I didn't mean it to sound offensive. You are like Ares. He'd still be just like you if I hadn't reached out to him."

"I'm at a disadvantage then. Persephone isn't in love with me. She isn't going to reach out to me." He stood up and began walking away. "This was a mistake. Forgive me for disturbing you."

"Wait, please!"

He didn't want to, but he did. He felt like a fool. He shouldn't have come. No one could help him. "What?"

Alala stood up and walked over to him. "Be patient with her. She'll come to you and want to talk. No matter how long she's upset, she likes to have things settled."

He nodded.

"I meant what I said. I'm worried about her hurting you because I know she could. She'll get over you quicker than you could get over her. Okay? I didn't mean to insult you. I'd probably take her side before yours in some cases, and I'm going to be angry if you hurt her or pressure her, but I'd be glad to hear you two were happy together."

"Thank you. And I didn't mean to be rude either. Don't worry about me though."

"Can't promise that. I have a soft spot for tough guys who turn out to be teddy bears."

"So long as I'm the only one who gets to touch that very sweet soft spot," Ares said as he came up behind Alala.

She put her arms around him immediately and kissed his cheek. She beamed up at him as he embraced her, and Hades wondered if Persephone would ever be so happy to be near him.

"Just finishing up harassing your sweetheart," Hades said. His heart felt even heavier seeing them so happy.

"No wedding invitation yet? Damn. Maybe next week," Ares said.

Hades forced a smile. "Nice. You've destroyed all the confidence Alala managed to give me. It wasn't much, but it was something."

Ares rolled his eyes. "Am I the only one around here with a sense of humor?"

"At the moment, yes."

"Fine, go brood. You're pretty good at it."

Alala poked Ares in the ribs. "Ignore him. Go home and be patient."

"I'll try. Don't be surprised if you see me again though."

She nodded, and with a thought he was back in his bedroom. But despite her encouragement, he felt he was right back where he'd started. He headed for the garden, needing to be alone before Persephone came back to the palace. The closer she was, the more he wanted to see her. It wasn't going to become easier to resist, but he knew he had to.

Persephone looked at the three-story shopping mall and wanted to laugh. She turned to Hypnos. "There's a mall in Hell? What kind of stores does it have?"

Hypnos smiled at her. "Your ideas of Hell, including the word itself, are very human. That's the reason for this tour."

She nodded. "Okay, I guess you're right, but still." She gestured to the building. "It's a mall in the middle of an orchard."

"This is like Heaven. The things here in the Elysian Fields make those who dwell here happy. Natural beauty and animals side-by-side with modern things."

She looked back to the water. She hesitated to call it an ocean, but it certainly seemed that big. "And the Elysian Islands? That's where the best of the best go."

"Yes. The heroes and the people who helped their world and others dwell there. Aphrodite's son Aeneas, for example. Great warriors and monarchs from all over the world."

She nodded again. "But Tartarus looks just like this." She walked back toward the houses, looking at the faces of the people moving around them. "Are the people there made to be unhappy by magic? They didn't have a mall or so many flowers and animals, but the houses were just as beautiful, the light just as bright." She looked up. "Is there a sun? A moon?"

"There is light and dark. No sun or moon."

"Ah. But back to my point, what makes the people there unhappy? They seemed melancholy. Depressed even."

"They remember the bad things they did and regret them. If they had no conscience, they are given one. If they never felt remorse, they do now. That is how they are punished."

"Forever?"

"They eventually move on. Hades decides those things. A judgment is held once every ten years."

Persephone looked all around, admiring the trees and flowers, as they moved away from the houses and people. "Is he fair?"

"Yes. He is fair and just."

She nodded once again. She wanted to ask so much, but she was a little afraid to do so. "How big is this place?"

"How big is your world? Mount Olympus is in the center, but do you know what is on the edge? Do you know how you pass from your world to the mortal one?"

She smiled. "It really doesn't matter, does it?" "Not really."

To avoid being more inquisitive about Hades, she moved on to another slightly uncomfortable subject. "Did you get in trouble for what happened between us?"

"In a way. I know I would not be forgiven if I succumbed again. I'm not in trouble though. You shouldn't feel self-conscious about it. I'm not upset with you."

"I used you though. I wanted to get his attention as much as I wanted to be touched by a man I knew was attracted to me."

"Your action was an innocent mistake. You were confused and meant me no harm."

She shook her head, laughing. "The Underworld is not what I expected. I imagined it would be dark and scary. I thought I'd see actual flames and boiling rivers. I expected you to be dangerous. And Hades? I thought he'd never let go as soon as we touched."

"Once you knew who he was, you expected to be ravished, I suppose?"

"I thought I was in for a night of...I don't even know what. I was terrified and excited."

"I can understand that."

She looked at him and sat down on the grass, inviting him to sit with her. "I'm glad. I don't want to talk to anyone else yet. I do want to see Hades though."

"You do?" he asked as he settled down beside her.

"Yes! I was expecting a leather-clad bad boy who'd tie me up, but instead I'm in some twisted beauty and the beast story, wandering his palace as he watches from a distance hoping I'll love him."

Hypnos remained silent.

"He loves me, doesn't he?"

He nodded.

She closed her eyes. "I don't see why."

"I can't help you on this subject. Love is something I have never felt."

"Never?"

"Never. I've felt drawn to certain women and visited them in their dreams. It's the only safe way to touch them. I've been with goddesses and nymphs. But I've never been in love."

She thought he looked sad. Was he telling the truth about never having been in love? Or did he regret never having felt it? His touch had been tender and loving. Perhaps he longed for someone to love. "Then we have something in common. I've never been in love either."

He smiled. "I suppose we do. I've never had a friend either." His smile faded. "My brother and I are not close, at least not anymore."

"My brother's sweet, but we aren't close either. Alala is my only friend. I'd like you and I to be friends."

"I would like that too."

She stood up. "I think I know what I want. Tonight, at least. Tell Hades we're going on our first date."

"Your first date?" He rose and followed her as she walked to the south toward Hades' palace.

"Yes. It's what we did wrong from the start. We went from talking online to this. It can't work. I want to talk to him for a few hours. So I want us to have dinner. One date, and then we'll see what happens."

"He'll probably be terrified of you."

"The Lord of the Underworld? Terrified of me? That's what you said before."

"Yes, terrified of the beautiful woman who holds his heart in her hand."

"I liked him before. I will again when we've talked. I'm still upset, but not angry. I'm going to be more patient. I was cruel the other day."

"He deserved it. He needed to see he'd never win you by force. He didn't mean to force you to stay."

"I know. He panicked." Persephone felt warm as she thought about him using force to seduce her. She shook the thought away. She was not going to let her curiosity ruin what she had planned. "I guess I can see that. I'm going to apologize anyway."

"He'll be honored. He thinks you despise him now."

"Honored, huh? We'll see. Hopefully it won't be an evening of us both tripping over our words."

Hypnos shrugged. "I wouldn't worry."

Persephone wished she had his confidence. Her stomach was already questioning her decision.

Thanatos walked around the tree he'd been hiding behind. "No, brother, we aren't that close anymore. And we're nothing alike."

He knew what his twin had done, daring to kiss Hades' bride. Persephone would have gotten much more than a kiss if he'd been in his brother's place. Hypnos had already warned her, gently, to avoid him. He resented that, but he felt no shame in admitting he would be painfully tempted to take her sweet maidenhead. He thought of how tight the little virgin would be, how she would gasp as he penetrated and pushed deep inside her. Whether she blossomed into a passionate temptress or screamed and struggled against him, he knew taking her would bring him great pleasure.

He'd been lying low since her arrival. Hades probably suspected nothing. Thanatos had no trouble getting as much sex as he wanted. Mortal girls and the many nymphs of Olympus who sought out the "wicked" god of death were always very willing. Some of them ran away afterwards,

frightened at having learned just how wicked he could be, while others came back begging to be used and abused by him. He'd need one of them soon, his cock responding to his lascivious thoughts of Persephone. They slaked his lust, but they meant nothing. They were nothing.

Persephone was a prize, a woman worthy of devotion and capable of keeping a man satisfied once she was trained properly. She was beautiful and powerful. Now free of her mother, she had the chance to come into that power. She was worthy of being the queen of the Underworld, if the right man were to become its king.

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Chapter 4

"Are you serious?" Hades asked.

Hypnos blinked. "I would joke about this?"

Hades shook his head. "No, of course not. I just didn't expect this."

"It's a good thing though. She seems to have sorted through her feelings. Listen to her and see what happens. She didn't tell me anything specific, but she wants to talk."

Hades looked out the window. He'd been doing that a lot since Persephone's arrival. "I'm sure you're right, and thanks for the advice, but I need to be alone right now. When do I meet her?"

"In the dining room after dark. She's making dinner."

He couldn't hide his surprise. "She's making dinner?"

"Yes. She and her brother love to cook, so she's very good at it apparently."

"Oh." That had to be good. She didn't want to simply have a chat. She wanted to go on a date, and she was going to cook for him. Hypnos had said she wasn't angry anymore. He almost smiled. No matter what he'd done, if the Fates had a plan, it would be achieved in the end. He knew that was true more so than any other god could. It didn't calm his nerves though.

Alala didn't usually sneak up on people, but she didn't want Apollo to disappear. Since her talk with Aphrodite, she'd been wanting to talk to Apollo. They hadn't spoken alone in ages, and the last time they had, Ares had been accusing him

of raping her. It hadn't been a comfortable environment for soul-baring.

She touched his shoulder, using powers she hadn't used in over a hundred years. He would be unable to move until she released him. "Apollo?"

His body tensed, and he turned to look at her. "Where's Ares?"

"Somewhere else."

"Then perhaps we shouldn't be alone. I don't feel like being accused of anything else right now."

Apollo was the only man, besides Ares, she had ever been with. She'd loved Ares as long as she could remember, and Apollo had used that to seduce her, appearing to her as Ares. "I felt you weren't Ares after we touched, but you looked like him so I gave in. If I couldn't really have him, then why not enjoy a fantasy? I knew you weren't Ares before you took my virginity, and I still made love with you a second time that night."

"Made love? We fucked."

She smiled, easily tolerating his bad temper as she used to. "I got love from you. I felt loved those years we were together. Maybe I won't tell Ares that in so many words, but it's true. I've explained to everyone, and they understand. Ares resents you because you got to have me first, but he doesn't think of you that way anymore. Even though he went through with challenging you, he knows I was with you by choice."

"You don't have to make me feel better. Why are you here?"

Alala looked out into the field and scanned the trees. "Which one is she?"

Apollo tried to stand up, but she wouldn't let him. She sat beside him.

"Which one?"

"Can't you tell? The one in the middle with the purple flowers."

Alala nodded. It looked like a laurel tree, but it was covered in star-shaped purple flowers and the leaves were more ornate. She'd never seen another tree like it in her world or the mortal one.

"It hurt me you never told me about her."

He stared at her. "So it wasn't enough you knew I had a completely perverted thing for Aphrodite? You wanted to hear about my ex too?"

Alala sighed. She could tell their conversation was going to take a while. "She wasn't really your ex. That seems to have been the problem. I think it's also why you wanted Aphrodite so much. Did you two ever have sex after the night I caught you?"

He shook his head.

"You wanted to subdue her. You wanted to fuck her and be the one to leave. Any man with a cock wants her, but not all give in to her. You were angry with her for hundreds of years."

"Why bring this up? Why do this to me, Alala?"

"Meet with Zeus and Hera. Beg them to give you and Daphne another chance. Or go to Peneus. Ask him to plead with her."

"She's been in this state for too long, Alala. Don't you understand that? She doesn't even talk anymore. She hums. She hasn't spoken in a very long time. She wants nothing to do with any of us."

"If she doesn't speak, how do you know?"

"When I go near her, the humming stops. If I touch her, her petals start to fall. She hates me!"

She cringed at the pain and self-loathing in his voice. She remembered it all too well. "That's the spell though. Can't we try?"

"We? Why do you want to help me?"

"Because I care for you and you're in pain. Persephone is older than me, and she said when she was young you used to come and try to amuse her with tricks and jokes. She said you were sweet and funny until your brief feud with Aphrodite."

"My brief feud? She made the only girl I ever loved hate me!"

"You only loved her because of the spell attached to Eros' arrow. Aphrodite was petty and cruel, but she would have lifted it if Daphne hadn't refused."

He started to say something then paused. "How is Persephone?"

She regretted giving him a chance to change the subject, but she let him do it anyway. "I have no idea. We haven't spoken. I'm leaving her alone. Do you know what Hades has done?"

"He's trapped her. Yeah, I heard. Maybe he'll be the jerk of the month for a while."

She chose her words carefully. "I don't like what he did, but if you had Daphne, would you let her go? Would you let her out of your sight?"

"If she didn't want to be with me, yes," he said softly.

She hesitated, wanting to object. There had been nights he'd hated himself so much he'd clung to her all night, becoming forceful and even pleading at times if she wanted to go home. She remembered frenzied couplings when he'd been so frustrated he couldn't lose himself in her body fast enough. She also recalled nights he'd punished himself, making her come over and over again, sending her into so much ecstasy but then refusing himself release. He'd revealed so much of himself in the way he'd touched her, and now it all made sense to her. Instead of bringing that up, she lifted her hand from his shoulder. "Do you think you would still love her if you were free of the spell of the arrow?"

He looked into her eyes. "I believe I would."

"I want you to try. I don't know who can help, but please try. Let me help you."

He seemed amazed. After a moment, he reached for her hand. "You've shown me so much kindness with so little reason." He leaned forward to whisper. "You've seen the real me and you haven't abandoned me. I love you for that, as much as I can." He kissed her cheek, but then he flew backwards across the grass.

Alala saw Ares standing over him. She groaned. "Ares, will you please listen to me?"

"Not until I've beaten him to a bloody pulp!"

She jerked Ares by the arm and pulled his face close to hers. He tried to pull away and she jerked him back again and slapped him. He was so stunned he didn't move when she put their foreheads together. She showed him, in a few seconds, her whole conversation with Apollo. Maybe she was giving away too many of Apollo's secrets in doing that, showing him too many of the intimate moments she'd shared with Apollo, but she wanted Ares to regret his rash action. After she released him, she glared at him furiously.

After a moment, he looked down at Apollo, then back at her. "Shit," he mumbled.

Apollo stood up slowly. "I asked her to leave. No one can help me. There's no point anyway."

Ares looked at Alala. "He's right. If he wants to do anything, only he can do it."

She crossed her arms and turned away from him.

"You know," Ares said, "this wouldn't have happened if you'd told me you wanted to talk to him. I come to find you like this, and I jumped to the conclusion he sought you out. Know why? We trust each other and tell each other everything. I would have let you talk to him, Alala."

She turned back to him, still angry at his violent reaction but knowing he was telling the truth. "You're right. I'm sorry. I know you're sensitive about him though. You were testy when I mentioned him the other night."

Ares smiled wickedly. "I wanted to have sex, and his name was the first thing I heard from you. Bit of a turn-off."

"Okay, fine. Again, I'm sorry."

Apollo stepped forward. "You two sort this out. I came here to be alone, now I'm going elsewhere to be alone. Okay?"

Alala looked at Ares.

He took the hint quickly. "Yeah. Fine. Uh, sorry I did all that. I have no problem in admitting I'm still sensitive about you."

Apollo nodded. "I understand. Your lady is very special." He disappeared before they could say anything else.

Alala sighed.

"Are you okay?"

She smiled as he moved closer to her and put his arms around her. "I ought to make you fuck me right now to make up for that. I made him feel better, at least for a moment."

He laughed and kissed her neck. "I'm not sure Daphne wants to see us rutting like a couple of animals."

Her smile faded and she turned her head to look into his eyes. "It makes me so sad. I always felt his suffering, but never pried. I didn't feel I had the right. Now that I understand, everything he ever did makes sense. Even in sex he was conflicted and confused, wanting to open up but afraid to fully do so. I see pain in the actions I once found merely confusing or odd."

"I know, baby." He pulled her away from the trees. "Let's go."

"Where are we going?" she asked as he led her toward the river.

"A special place."

She followed him down through the field to a waterfall and soon saw there was a cave behind it. A rainbow shimmered near the bottom.

"It's beautiful."

"I planned to bring you here tonight. That's why seeing him made me so jealous."

She ran her hands over his chest then moved one down to his hard cock. "You know you should never be jealous of any man."

"Prove it, my lady."

She took his hand as they went behind the waterfall. "I certainly will." She pulled him to her for a long kiss. "I need you to make me stop worrying."

His free hand slid under her skirt and his fingers toyed with her panties, sliding in under them. "I think I can do that."

She sighed as they kissed again. She'd needed him for days, but she'd been avoiding him because of her visit to Aphrodite and her plans to see Apollo. She wanted to keep Aphrodite's secret, and despite what he'd said she knew he wouldn't have liked her seeing Apollo. She didn't like him being jealous, but something about it turned her on a little. She giggled as he ripped her panties off.

"You like that?" he asked as he nibbled on her neck.

"I like you." She opened her legs to give him better access.

He toyed with her clit, making her squirm at the pleasure. He groaned deep in his throat as they kissed again, and then he pulled her closer to the waterfall, laying her down on the

cold stone. The stone immediately warmed and softened. She ran her hands over it and felt lush grass.

She raised her eyebrows.

"I want you to be comfortable. I'm not letting you up for a long time." He lowered himself over her and pulled her top up to kiss her breasts. His tongue and teeth teased her right nipple and sent pleasure all through her body. She held his head there as his hand roamed up and down her body. He almost touched her pussy, and then moved away. He fingered her clit for a moment, and then his hand strayed down her leg.

She tangled her fingers in his hair and pulled his face up to hers. "You're teasing me."

"You love it," he whispered heatedly as he slid two fingers into her pussy.

She gasped. "I do." She moved against him. His fingers slid deeper into her wetness. "You know I do."

His thumb pressed her clit gently as he looked into her eyes. "Tell me you love me."

She stroked his face. "I love you. You know I love you." She kissed his cheek. "I've never been *in* love with any man but you."

He slid his fingers out and positioned himself between her legs. His cock nudged at her entrance, and she pushed forward to welcome him.

"I was a fool for so long. You were by my side the whole time, waiting to make me this happy." He slid part of the way into her.

She gasped as he entered her. She wanted, needed all of him. Her heart raced as he stroked her face. "We're together now," she said as she turned her head to kiss his hand. "It's all that matters."

He kissed her as he slid all the way in. She gasped again as he filled her. His cock was the perfect fit. It was thick enough to stimulate her in all the right places, and long enough to hit the spot that made her explode and scream his name. Apollo had been a skilled lover, but she and Ares had been made to give each other pleasure.

"I know." He thrust into her slowly, smiling at her reaction. "You think it's silly, but it drove me wild when I saw him that close to you. I'm a possessive brute, I know, but you'll have to forgive me."

She moaned as he pushed deeper. His cock rubbed a very sensitive spot, and she held to him as her orgasm built. "I'll forgive you for anything if you keep doing this." She sighed when he thrust harder. "Look at me."

He braced his arms on each side of her head and looked into her eyes. He slowed his pace, but continued to move his cock in and out of her.

"I didn't expect you to change, and I don't want you to."
She wrapped her legs around him and pulled him closer,
pushing his cock as deep as it would go. He groaned as she
bit his neck gently, and then looked into his eyes again. "I fell
in love with the man you are. I love your passion, even when
it might be a bit brutish or possessive. I'm here to give you
balance, remember? I was made to complete you."

He became perfectly still above her. "I love you. So much."

She smiled and brought his lips to hers. "Show me."

He pumped into her, pushing her into the grass. She tightened her pussy around his cock the way he loved, wanting all of him. He growled deep in his throat, making her giggle as he thrust harder.

"Come for me," he whispered. "Come, my love."

After three more strokes, she came. She shook beneath him as he continued to pleasure her. She kissed him deeply and held to him as she rode out the sweet bliss of her release. Her orgasm pulsed deep inside her, and he kept pushing her to her limits. His cock was still very hard, and her pussy was so sensitive. He smiled above her.

"I love how you feel when you come," he said.

The smoldering look in his eyes and his insistent cock made her gasp as she came again. He knew just how to draw her pleasure out, how to stroke and caress, the right words to say.

"Mmmmm" was all she could manage as he quickened his pace. She could feel every inch of him against her heated skin. "Oh, Ares."

He thrust twice more, and then she felt him release into her. He kissed her as he crushed her body against his. She was out of breath when he finally loosened his grip on her.

"I think you've made your point," she whispered.

He rolled her over beneath him and pushed her hair aside. He trailed kisses over her back as his hands massaged her ass. "I have a few more, if you're interested."

She sighed as she felt her need for him building again. The problems of others could definitely wait.

Persephone looked down at the casserole. She hoped fresh veggies would be a treat. The kitchen had been empty, so she had no idea what Hades normally ate. Hypnos said he and Thanatos rarely ate. Was Hades the same way? Apparently he had a cook, but she never seemed to be around. Hypnos explained that people from Tartarus were the servants. The present cook had cheated on her husband three times. Hypnos said the guilt of having cheated on a good man made her very attentive and accommodating. Persephone still felt troubled about Tartarus. It did seem fair, since no one stayed in Tartarus forever, but she could still see the misery in people's faces. Hypnos explained that someone like the cook might stay in Tartarus a few decades while a murderer or child abuser stayed much longer. She wondered if such things were unchanging, if Hades would listen to her opinions on them. The idea of deciding people's fate and changing policies excited her. She'd never been treated like an adult, even though she had lived thousands of years. If Hades still respected her the way she had once believed he did, he might be perfect for her after all.

She picked up the casserole dish and took it out to the table. She set it down, and then looked in the mirror again.

"You look beautiful."

She turned to see Hades standing in the door. She hadn't heard his voice for several days, and she had to admit it sent a little thrill through her. He wore black pants and a black button-up shirt. Upon closer inspection, she could also see a black tie. She wondered if he even had a closet, or if he

simply conjured the appropriate black garments for every occasion.

"Thank you. You look nice too." She walked over to him and stood in front of him. He remained perfectly still as she stood on her toes and kissed him on the cheek. "I'm glad you came."

"I'm yours to command."

"Are you?"

"Yes."

She swallowed, and then said, "Then I have a command. Please forgive me for my reaction the other day. It was very cruel. You forgave me for coming on to Hypnos, and then I reacted like a spoiled child when you only wanted us to take it slow. You've tried to respect me since you brought me here, and it was wrong for me to act as if you wanted nothing more than my body. I knew it wasn't true. I just wanted to hurt you."

He stared down at her for a long moment. "I forgave you the moment you walked out of the room. You were upset, and I promise I understand. What I did was wrong."

"But I know it hurt your feelings. You hide them very well, but I know my words and what I did caused you pain. You panicked when you thought I wouldn't give you a real chance."

He looked down at the floor. "I said I forgive you, and I do. For everything. Please don't trouble yourself."

She shook her head. "You aren't the same man I talked to every night."

He looked back up at her, and she could tell that statement worried him, though he tried to hide it. "Why do you say that?"

"You seem terrified of me. The man I developed such a crush on was confident and manly. You act scared and nervous."

He reached out to touch her, but instead he let his hand fall back by his side. "Perhaps I am."

Persephone didn't know what to say. Hypnos might have been right after all.

"Whatever you've made smells wonderful."

She started to object, but since she didn't know what she wanted to say, she let him change the subject. "Squash and zucchini casserole. Asparagus and wild rice. Some of my favorites."

"A good choice. I like knowing things like that about you."

She smiled and walked to the table. She'd moved two chairs to the end closest to the door. "Let's eat then."

He walked over to the table and pulled her chair out for her.

She sat down, suddenly feeling very conscious of how close he was. He sat down too and reached for her hand. He didn't say anything though.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Have you forgiven me? For trapping you here?"

"I don't feel trapped."

He squeezed her hand, and then let it go.

Persephone removed the glass lids from all the dishes, wondering if her stomach would stop flopping around and let her eat something. She certainly had her doubts.

Hades poured two glasses of wine and carried them out to the terrace. Dinner had been wonderful. He'd liked the food, but it had meant so much more that she'd invited him to dinner and prepared everything so carefully. She'd beamed when he told her how good everything was. She looked breathtaking standing on the terrace looking up at the purple and blue sky.

"There are no stars, just swirls of color," she said.

"Yes. I'm not sure what they are. They change shape all the time."

"It's beautiful."

"Do you miss seeing stars?"

She shrugged. "I suppose. This is pretty though. And it's different. Everything here is different."

"Do you like it here?"

She accepted the glass of wine. "Yes. I've learned so much."

He took a sip of his wine and then put it down. "I'm glad." He moved to stand next to her, leaning on the marble balustrade so he could face her. "What do you think of my world?"

"It's interesting. I'd like to see how it works."

He felt his heart rate quicken. "That would interest you?"

"Yes. Will there be another judgment soon?"

"Of those in Tartarus?"

She nodded, setting her own wine down and moving closer to him.

He tried not to let her see how her nearness affected him. "Not for another two years. I can't change that. Would you like to come with me to meet the arriving dead? You will see how I determine where they go."

"Could I?"

"In secret. I'd let you wear the Helm of Darkness so you would not be seen."

"It wouldn't be breaking any laws?"

"No. I'd only want you unseen because some might try to plead with you."

"Oh. If I were your queen would I have any say in these matters?"

He looked deep into her eyes. "Would it please you?" She looked down and blushed.

He touched her shoulder. "What is it?"

"I've never been allowed to do anything. I plant trees and my mother moves them. I plant roses, and she says they are the wrong color. I'm just a blonde with nice tits and no brain to most people."

Hades smiled. "Your breasts are beautiful, but I don't want to hear you say things like that. I'm very impressed with you, and I don't impress easily."

She rolled her eyes. "It's true though. That's how they see me."

"Soon it won't be. No matter what your choice is, people will see you very differently because of this."

Her eyes brightened a bit, but she still didn't smile. "Really?"

"Yes." He reached out and this time he stroked her cheek.

"It hurts me to hear you belittle yourself. Please don't do it again." He felt her tremble at his touch. "We haven't really kissed yet."

"No, we haven't," she whispered. Her breath came out in a sigh, and she lightly put her hand over his.

He leaned in and brushed his lips against hers. He kissed her gently. She wrapped her arms around him, but he resisted deepening the kiss. He pulled back and looked into her eyes. She wanted more, so much more, but he still pulled her arms away and held her hands in his.

"I want you to feel what I feel before we go further," he said.

She nodded tentatively. "Okay."

He kissed both her hands. "That means I need to go. For now."

The disappointment on her face pulled at his heart. She squeezed his hands.

"I'll see you tomorrow?" she asked.

He brought her right hand to his face. He'd expected her to be angry or upset, maybe to even say she didn't want to see him for a few days. It gave him hope she hadn't reacted that way. "We'll go for a walk in the garden in the morning. I'll come get you."

She nodded, but she held tight to him as he pulled his hands away. He could feel her eyes following him as he walked away from her. He hadn't thought going to bed alone

tonight would be so painful, but every step was harder than the one before. He wanted her desperately and knew his night was going to be long and sleepless.

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Chapter 5

Persephone brushed her hair and thought of her first night in the Underworld. It hadn't been that long ago, but in a way it seemed like a completely different part of her life. Cerberus sat watching her. He wandered off some days, but he spent most of his time by her side.

"Are you going to come on our walk with us?" Persephone always talked to animals. They never talked back, and never would, but she'd taken care of enough over the years to know it did make them smarter.

He came forward a few feet and sat down again.

She smiled. "Good."

There was a knock at her door. She stood up. "Come in." Hades opened the door and stepped over the threshold.

"Are you ready?"

She nodded and patted Cerberus' head. "We are."

Hades held out his hand for Cerberus, and the hound walked forward to sniff it and be petted. Persephone smiled.

"What?" Hades asked.

She laughed. "Both of you are supposed to be scary, striking fear into mortal hearts. If they could see you now."

She definitely liked what she saw. Still all black, but he was at least wearing a t-shirt and jeans. He looked nice and much less formal. She held her hand out.

He took her hand and kissed it. "Let's go then."

They walked through the halls in silence. Persephone looked at all the paintings. "Who painted all of these? Are they from the mortal world?"

"They are duplicates of ones from the mortal world." He pointed to a canvas covered in flames. "That one was painted by Thomas Miller."

"I've never heard of him."

"No one else has either. He was a lawyer. He painted for his own pleasure. No one knew about it, and after he died there was a fire. His family didn't even know what treasures they'd lost."

"That's sad." She looked at another. "I've seen this one."

"They are all portrayals of the Underworld. This one is from the sixteenth century by an unknown artist. We know his name was Daniel Roper. It's a vague interpretation of Dante's *Inferno*. The swirling colors are meant to be the different parts. The Catholic Hell of Dante's time had separate places for murderers and atheists. The middle is blue. Do you remember why?"

She smiled. "It's frozen. Satan is frozen in the middle of a lake."

He nodded. "Many of these are taken from literature. The Greeks and Romans, but also men like Dante and Milton."

"I like Milton."

"Do you?"

"Yes. Surprised?"

"No, of course not." He led them out into the garden. "Did you think I would be?"

"I suppose not, but no one's ever talked to me about literature before you."

"I see. No one down here reads that much, except me."

"It's the same up there. Except for Eris, no one in our world really writes either. Have you noticed that?"

He considered this, and then nodded. "You're right. We don't exactly have a literary tradition."

"Just my luck. One way I could impress people, and it's not relevant."

He gave her a slightly warning look.

"I know, I know. People will be impressed once they get to know me."

He kissed her hand again. "Yes, they will. Your mother kept you hidden away. It was the main reason I didn't feel guilty for bringing you here."

"Really?"

"Yes. My plans haven't gone too smoothly from there, but I'm working on it."

She squeezed his hand. She had no idea what to say to him. She tried anyway. "You're doing fine. We had a few kinks to work out."

"Is that what they were? Kinks?"

She looked up at him. "Yes. That's exactly what they were."

"All right then."

After a few moments of silence, she took another chance. "I finally got what I wanted."

He seemed puzzled, but also intrigued. "I'm glad to hear that, but I'm not sure I understand."

"I said I expected certain things when we met. I wasn't looking for a husband, remember? I was looking for a boyfriend."

Hades smiled, and she thought he blushed a bit. When he looked back into her eyes, she was sure of it.

"You're blushing," she said, unable to resist teasing him.

He shrugged. "Maybe I am. It's good though. Very good."

He lowered his head.

She thought quickly, not wanting him to feel she was teasing him because she thought it was silly or weird. "So are you. You're not a bad boy at all. You're the good guy every girl would try for if she had any sense."

He was silent as they entered the maze. He held his hand in front of Cerberus, and the hound sat down. "Stay." He pulled Persephone into the maze with him.

She felt her pulse quicken. When he didn't speak, she asked, "Did I say something wrong?"

He turned and pulled her close. "No. It was very right. No one has ever described me or thought of me that way. I'm amazed you could think that, after what I did."

"I already told you I forgive you. You didn't want me to leave. I've done very selfish and stupid things to get my way. I understand why you did it."

He stroked her face. "So you don't want a bad boy anymore?"

She found it hard to breathe in his arms. "I think we all have more than one side. I'd like to see all of yours."

He smiled and pulled away. He held out his hands and an enormous Greek helmet with a visor appeared in his hands.

The Helm of Darkness. Why would he want that? He put it on and lowered the visor, disappearing before her eyes. She heard him move around her, and she tried to follow the sound. His hand slid around her waist.

"We'll see if I live up to your idea of a bad boy. I'll give you a head start."

He pulled away, and she had no idea where he was.

"You're going to chase me?" She felt that heat low in her belly again as she imagined being pursued by him. Making love out in the open on the grass.

He didn't answer.

"Oh boy," she whispered to herself.

She looked to the right and left. Both ways looked the same, leading her to a turn that would take her toward the center. She went to the right and then took a left. She stopped and listened. She couldn't hear anything. She went forward a few feet and had three choices. She went straight. She paused again when she came to a fork that would take her to opposite sides of the maze. A warm breeze blew around her.

Then she felt a hand slide over her ass. She gasped and instinctively pulled away. He didn't make a sound. She reached out, but she only felt air. She turned and jogged back the way she'd come. She took several turns and became disoriented. The maze's walls were two feet taller than her, so she couldn't see any landmarks.

What do you want?

She heard his voice in her head, and her knees went a little shaky. "I want you to catch me." She didn't hear anything, so she wasn't sure how far away he was.

Then something else touched her, but it wasn't his hand. A thick vine twisted around her waist and pulled her against the hedge wall. She couldn't move. She tried to break it, but she couldn't. It wouldn't obey her. All living things obeyed her above.

"Down here," Hades said, "Everything obeys me."

He was still invisible, and she looked all around her. "Including me?"

He removed the helmet, and he stood just inches from her. He shook his head. "No. Never you. I obey you." His finger traced the strap of her purple sundress. "Command me."

When she'd first arrived, she'd felt like she was being tested. This felt different. He was giving her this choice to find something out, though she wasn't sure what. He'd said he only wanted them to have sex when she returned his love. As fast as her heart was beating, as aroused as she was, she knew she didn't. What did he expect her to ask for then?

Since she didn't know, she asked for what she wanted. "Kiss me."

His finger strayed down to the swells of her breasts. "Where?"

She took a deep breath. "Anywhere you like."

His finger moved lightly over her breasts, down to the tiny buttons he slowly undid. He moved his hands over her breasts, never reaching inside, just caressing what he had

uncovered. He leaned forward and kissed the hollow between them, and she sighed.

"Anywhere, my lady?"

She nodded her head. She felt dizzy with him touching her. The pulsing between her legs returned. She felt it often when she thought of him. She didn't have to touch herself to know she was wet.

He lowered himself to his knees and toyed with the hem of her skirt. Then in one movement he ripped it off. She gasped as he pulled her panties down. These were the kinds of fantasies she'd had, the kinds of things she'd pictured as she waited for him that first night. The real sensations flowing through her blew the imagined ones away, and he hadn't even started yet. He smiled as he ran a finger over her shaved pussy. The look in his eyes confirmed his approval.

"You'll have to forgive my enthusiasm." His voice was different, deeper and darker. He was breathing as heavily as she was. "May I pleasure you?"

"Pleasure me?" she repeated, her mind struggling to make sure she knew what he meant.

He smiled and leaned forward to kiss her just above her clit. "You said I could kiss you anywhere. I want to make you come."

"That'll be quite a kiss."

"It will be." He lowered his mouth to her pussy and licked her slowly.

She gasped as his hot tongue delved into her. He groaned as he explored her further. After a few moments he ripped at the vine that held her, freeing her. He pulled her down to the

ground and pushed her back on the grass before burying his face in her pussy again.

She wanted him to touch her everywhere, but he only held her hips still as he licked and kissed her pussy. He took her clit between his teeth for a moment, and she jerked at the sensation. A white-hot bolt of pleasure had shot through her. She'd touched herself before, and Alala had given her a vibrator years ago, but the pleasure she'd experienced then didn't compare with this. The hum of the little toy and her own fingers were nothing compared to the powerful and passionate man eating her pussy.

She felt her orgasm coming, and she wanted him to touch her more. All she could do was moan as his tongue found her most sensitive areas.

His voice was in her head again. Say my name.

"Hades," she said with a gasp.

He intensified his efforts, swirling his tongue around her clit.

"Hades!"

Come, my love.

"Oh, Hades!" Her orgasm hit suddenly. The force of it and the pleasure took her breath away. She arched off the ground, and he held her down. He continued his attentions, and it drove her wild. His tongue stroked her in a smooth and steady rhythm as the energy of her release moved all over her body. Her breasts felt heavy, and her heart raced. She ran her fingers over her tingling nipples. She heard him groan and looked down to see him watching her. He pulled away from her core, and then kissed her one final time. She was

still trembling as he moved up her body. She knew she'd never touch her vibrator again, not now that she knew all that an orgasm could be. It was like comparing a strong wind to a hurricane.

He hovered over her. "You're so beautiful. So many nights when we talked, I imagined doing that to you."

"You did?" She knew her voice sounded shaky.

He smiled and leaned closer. "Would you like to taste how sweet you are?"

She felt her pussy tighten at the suggestion, and she nodded. He brought his lips to hers, and she kissed him and tasted the tangy sweetness of her arousal. She licked his top lip, and then his lower lip before deepening the kiss.

He groaned and pushed his body down on top of hers. She ran her hands through his hair as they kissed, but he soon pulled away and sat down beside her. "Your kiss and sweet taste are overwhelming me."

"Really?" she whispered.

He nodded. "This was not my plan. I lose my head completely when I'm near you."

She sat up and turned to him. "I'm glad you did." She lowered her voice. "That was amazing."

He looked into her eyes, and yet again it stole her breath. Why would such an amazing man even look at her twice? She knew she was beautiful, but he was Zeus' brother. Another goddess would make a more fitting queen.

His eyes darkened. "I can feel what you're thinking. Stop it. In this, I will demand obedience."

The firmness of his words sent a shiver through her. It startled and aroused her. "I'm sorry."

He held up his hand to silence her. "I will have you as my queen. And when that day comes," he said as he grasped her chin and brought her face close, "you will know how worthy you are to be so."

When she'd caught her breath, she moved forward to kiss him, but he turned away.

"What?" she asked.

"I shouldn't have spoken to you so forcefully." He turned back. "I'm sorry."

She stared at him, unbelieving. "Any chance you're a Gemini?"

"What?"

"I feel like you're two different men. There's the one who sent me texts about ravishing me and tricked me into staying here. That man just gave me an amazing orgasm. Then there's the man who apologizes every five minutes and tells me he'll be fine if I leave him as long as I'm happy. That man acts like he's scared I'll break if he holds me too tightly. You demand obedience and then apologize for doing so. It's hard to know what you want, and even harder to know what you're feeling. I think that is most important of all right now, but I don't know how to judge your actions and words all together. They don't go together very well."

He nodded slowly. "And this is bothering you?" He sighed. "I understand."

"It's not bothering me. It's puzzling me."

"I think I didn't explain myself well enough before. I'd give anything to make you my queen this moment, right now. That would be unfair to you. It will only be all I want it to be if you choose it willingly."

"So for now I'm to be kept constantly aware of how much you want me?" she asked.

"Yes."

"But you want my happiness more?"

"Yes."

"Thus the prisoner has at least emotional free will?"

"Of course."

"I think I understand. Can I object though?"

"To what?"

She smiled mischievously. "Seems you've already seduced me. I thought you wanted to wait?"

"I persuaded you to let me give you pleasure. I have not yet seduced you."

She made a face, and then laughed. "Just because we didn't..."

"No. True seduction will make you mine. You will love me."

Her smile faded. She felt bad for teasing him now. "I see what you're saying. I do like you. A lot. We wouldn't be here if I didn't."

"You don't have to explain."

"Okay." She took his hand before he could say anything else. "Now that we've gotten that out of our systems, take me for that walk. Tell me everything about your life here."

She stood and snapped her fingers. Her torn purple sundress was replaced by a light green one just like it. She

held her hand out to help him up. He accepted her hand, never taking his gaze from hers. She walked around him and dusted the grass off his clothes.

He kissed her forehead. "You said I was amazing before. You're the one who's amazing."

She linked her arm with his and walked forward. "You were a bit forward on our second date, but I'll forgive you." She stopped and looked around. "If you get us out of here."

He laughed and led her out. Cerberus looked very happy to see them.

"Was he lonely or does he know what we were doing?" she asked.

"Most likely both."

She squeezed his arm as they walked in the direction of the orchards. She'd gotten more than she expected, and now she had to decide just how much she really wanted.

Thanatos fumed as he watched them walk away. Hades was flaunting her. That display of passion had been meant to show his power and privilege. He watched Persephone's ass as they disappeared from sight. She filled his fantasies now. Her passionate cries of pleasure told him what a delight she would be.

He imagined chasing her and catching her. He wouldn't ask her what she wanted. He would just take her, make her scream for mercy...or for more. He didn't have the power to bring anyone to the Underworld as Hades had brought Persephone. He'd met many mortal women who suited his tastes, but Persephone's power and influence were what he

truly needed. Her sweet body under him would be a bonus as well.

He walked back into the maze. He had a few plans, but they weren't ready yet. Take her? Seduce her? Trick her in some way? Whatever he decided, he would soon have her in his arms, and nothing would make him let her go.

Hera had had enough. She threw her gloves against the wall. "It's bloody freezing out there!"

Zeus absently looked out the window. "It's snowing."

"Yes, it is. It's sunny everywhere else, but Mount Olympus is covered in snow!"

Zeus laughed. "I think you'll live. Go to the mortal world for a few days."

Hera sighed. "Oh, I don't care about the weather. I want to know what's happening."

"Then send Persephone a message! We went over this last night."

"That's too obvious."

"Can't help you then."

She smiled and walked over to him. "Maybe you can take my mind off it." She ran her hand down to his cock, and he responded immediately. She loved the power she had over him. No matter how many girls and goddesses and nymphs he had, his appetite for her was constant.

"Perhaps a quickie." He reached up and grabbed her long, dark ponytail, yanking it back. He stood up and bent her over the desk.

She sighed. "Why a quickie? I could do this with you all day."

He pulled her coat off, and then pulled her skirt up. He reached into her panties and rubbed her clit. "I'll tell you when we're done."

Her pussy was already growing wet as he rubbed her. She reached back and pulled her panties down.

He laughed. "Need it that badly?"

She sighed as he rubbed his cock against her entrance.

"Don't tease me now. You haven't fucked me for days."

He slid into her slowly. "You know, you're right." He pushed all the way into her.

She moaned as he rode her. So many people were pissing her off and annoying her lately. She needed this. Her pussy was tight and only a little wet, but she liked the roughness of it. His cock felt bigger and hotter.

He groaned. "Mmmm. You feel so good."

"Harder, Faster,"

He did as she asked, and she soon cried out as she came. A few more thrusts and he followed her. He rubbed her ass as they both trembled and sighed, and then moved away from her. She demurely pulled her panties up and smoothed her skirt before kissing him on the cheek.

"Thank you, baby."

He laughed. "Oh, anytime. Now, your son is here."

"What does Ares want? I saw him last night."

"No. Hephaestus."

Her heart leapt. He hadn't come to see her in years. "Why didn't you tell me?"

He slapped her ass. "Because seeing you so agitated made me realize that, as you said, I haven't fucked you for days."

She laughed loudly. "Well, we both needed it then. Where is he?"

"In your sitting room."

She turned on her heels. "I'll let you know if it's anything interesting."

"Interesting and Hephaestus don't really go together."

She shot him a warning glance when she reached the door. "Maybe I won't tell you then." She stomped down the hall.

"I'll live, I'm sure!" she heard him yell after her.

Hera burst into her sitting room and saw no one.

"Hephaestus?" she called.

He emerged from behind the door. "Looking at your books."

She pulled him into a tight hug. "It's been too long, darling. You know I'd come see you if you'd leave the entrance to your mysterious lair unlocked more often," she said jokingly.

"I like my privacy."

For what, I'll never know. She smiled lovingly at him.

"How are you?" she asked.

"I'm fine."

She waited for him to elaborate. He wasn't much of a talker in the first place so he often needed encouragement. "And?"

"It's a little cold up here."

Hera groaned as she sat on the couch and motioned him to sit by her. "Have you heard what's happening?"

"Yes," he replied as he sat down.

"And what do you think?"

"Hades knows what he wants, and he's going after it. I see no problem with that."

She gave him a quizzical look. "I think they'll be good for each other, but I think he went about it all wrong."

"He tricked her, didn't he? She can't leave?"

Hera nodded. "Yep. She's at his mercy."

"I'm sure she's fine."

"I'm more worried about him. If she's pissed off, it's going to be very cold down there as well."

Hephaestus nodded.

"So what do you want? You must have some news."

"More a request."

"Yes?"

"What would you say if I told you I wanted to marry someone?"

Hera was very glad she was sitting down. She bit her lip hard to contain her reaction, something between laughter and an undignified gasp.

Her son raised his eyebrows.

"Um...well...don't you need a girl first? I mean, are you saying you're in love with someone?"

"Yes, I am."

She closed her eyes and smiled. This time she let her loud reaction come out because it was a happy one. "Who is she?"

"Here comes the request part."

"What? Tell me who she is."

"I want your permission to marry."

"You don't need my permission or anyone else's."

He smiled patiently. "I want your permission to marry," he repeated, "someone you will not see until our wedding day."

Her smile faded. "Why?" she asked flatly.

"Because if she won't marry me, I don't want anyone to know who she is."

Hera felt very confused. "Is she mortal? Is she already married? Why does it matter?"

"I can't tell you."

"Gods, you're here to drive me crazy too! Ares is finally happy, and it's wonderful. Now you tell me you're in love and won't tell me who? Why are you here?"

He looked at her for a few moments. "I suppose I wanted you to know. Will you be happy if I am happy?"

"Yes, of course!"

"Then say you will come to our wedding, if it happens."

"If? If she says no, you talk to Aphrodite. She owes you something for cheating on you. I'm glad you stood up to her. She needed to be dumped by a decent man. Ares never counted because they'd be back in each other's bed within two days. Being dumped by him had very little impact."

Hephaestus shrugged. "I'm at peace with all that. It was a long time ago."

"I know. I'm just saying. She owes you."

After a moment, he asked, "You wouldn't go to her for me?"

Hera didn't hesitate. "No. We aren't on the best of terms right now."

He nodded. "Because of Ares."

"Yes. She could have killed him. She needs to stop using magic. Sex is the only thing she's good at."

"That's a little unfair. Last I remember she was your closest friend."

"Sorry, maybe so, but I still think it's true."

He remained silent.

"You thinking about your girl?"

He took a deep breath. "Yes. I haven't talked to her for a while."

"How long is that?"

"Only a few days, but it's felt like longer."

"Then go see her. I promise not to spy. I wouldn't let Ares get away with this, but you wouldn't do this if you didn't have a good reason."

He nodded and said nothing.

She couldn't resist though. "Are you *sure* you don't want to tell me?"

He stood up. "I'll come see you again soon."

She resisted pouting. He hadn't had to come tell her anything, but he'd taken the chance and told her at least part of what was going on. "Okay." She hugged him and kissed his cheek. "I love you."

He squeezed her hand. "I love you too."

She squeezed back and then watched him walk away. She waited until his footsteps had faded and then dashed to the secret panel. She had to find Zeus and hoped he was still where she'd left him. She'd promised not to spy. She hadn't promised not to tell.

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Chapter 6

Demeter glared at Hades. They were standing in her kitchen, and she wore a plain blue dress under a plain white apron. Her dark auburn hair was in a bun at the nape of her neck. In her hand she held a barbeque fork. She didn't look much like a goddess, but Hades couldn't help being a bit afraid of her at the moment.

"I want her back!"

Hades held up his hands in surrender. "You have to wait eighty-five more days. I can't change that."

Demeter sank the fork into the table. "Zeus is going to pay for not punishing you!"

Hades looked at the ice on the window. "I'm sure he already is. So are lots of other people."

"Best way to get people's attention. Men who abduct naive young girls should be made to answer for it."

Hades tried to control his temper. "She's been around for more than a few hundred years. She's hardly a barely legal innocent."

Demeter turned away and furiously stirred some vegetables.

"Demeter, she said she wanted to run away with me. She didn't realize quite what she was asking for."

"You can say that but deny she's innocent and naive?" She stopped stirring and slammed the spoon down on the stove. "You're going to have to do better than this."

"I am in love with her," he said slowly. "She will be my queen. No goddess but Hera will be above her. She will gain some of my powers in addition to her own. What better match do you propose?"

Demeter didn't answer.

"Eros is married. Hermes and Ares will be soon enough. Poseidon's taken too. I'm sure you can't mean to marry her to Apollo. He's the god of the sun and loves nature, but see there's this tree that might get in his way..."

Demeter shoved him.

He was taken aback. She hadn't hit him, she'd just shoved him. It hadn't even hurt. And she was crying.

Oh, Zeus, protect me. He was not good with anyone crying, especially a woman. "Demeter, please."

She cried harder.

"Couldn't you just throw knives at me?" He reached out to touch her shoulder, but then he stopped. He didn't have sisters, and he hadn't really had a mother. The Titan Rhea had watched over all of them in the days when mortals had first appeared, but Zeus' rise to power had caused such a schism the Titans had abandoned them completely after many long battles, taking with them the secrets of how everything began. It wasn't an upbringing that could have helped anyone relate to others. He had gone to the Underworld, and Poseidon had gone to the sea while Zeus ruled the land. It seemed very long ago, but it was constantly on his mind lately.

He realized Demeter was staring at him.

She wiped a few tears away. "You're not exactly with me. You might want to work on that too."

"Do you remember when you were born?" he asked.

She looked at him as if the question made no sense. "Most people don't, you know."

He gathered his thoughts. "Because they were babies. We were never babies. None of the six of us. I knew no one else besides all the Titans, Zeus and Poseidon. Then you, Hera, and Hestia were just...there. You just existed."

Demeter folded her arms over her chest. "The supernatural tends to work that way. Has any priest figured out where his god came from?"

"You believe in god? Singular case and capital 'G'?"

She rolled her eyes, and she reminded him of Persephone for a moment. "Have you ever left Earth? Been to another planet? Been to the moon? Since Artemis hasn't, I doubt you have."

"No, I haven't."

"Do people believe in us?"

"Not really."

"Then maybe there are things you aren't meant to know just as there are things mortals aren't meant to know. Do *you* remember being born?"

He shook his head.

"Then are we going to talk about cosmic mysteries or my daughter?"

"Your daughter. I'm sorry. Thoughts like that keep distracting me lately."

"So my daughter is your...what? Mid-eternity crisis?"

Hades sat down at the giant kitchen table. "No. Why don't you ask me the only question that matters?"

Demeter slowly turned the gas burners off, and then equally slowly moved the skillet and the pot on the front burners to the back burners. She wiped her hands on her apron, and then she took it off before sitting across from him. "Is my daughter still a virgin?"

"Yes."

"Have you touched her at all?"

He knew better than to hesitate. "Yes."

"Will she marry you?"

He couldn't believe how calmly she asked. "Demeter, I don't know. If I knew, I'd either have left her alone or already married her."

Tears were forming in Demeter's eyes again. "How can she be happy down there? She needs life. She can't live in a dead world."

"My world is a place for the dead, but it is far from dead. It's a beautiful place, Demeter. Would you like to see it?"

He stood up without letting her answer. He filled a bowl with water and set it before her. He touched the rim, and Persephone appeared in the bowl. She was in the rose garden. She touched a pink rosebush, and the blossoms turned yellow. She stepped back and looked around. Then she picked up a spade and started digging in a flowerbed next to it. She wore jeans and a plain blue t-shirt and no shoes. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and she was humming.

Demeter leaned forward and stared. "How can all that exist down there? There's no sun."

"There is light. Each day is half light and half dark, just as it is here."

Demeter watched her daughter for a few more moments. She sat back and crossed her arms again. "Take it away."

He did so, and then waited for her to say something else.

She sighed and softly said, "Go away. I want to think."

"When shall I return?"

"I'll let you know. Get out." She stood quickly and left the room.

Her few moments of softening obviously hadn't been enough to outweigh her anger, but he hadn't expected that to happen anyway. He looked down at the bowl and saw Persephone again. She had a smudge of dirt on her cheek, and he wanted to wipe it away. He touched the rim and the image rippled away. He poured the water out and headed outside.

A cold wind whipped across his face. The heart of the storm seemed to have spread out from over Mount Olympus. The snow was coming down more furiously than it had been when he arrived. He didn't like what that implied.

Hera pulled the book out of Zeus' hands. "Guess what?" He turned to her and smiled, his arm going around her waist. "What?" he asked as he leaned in to kiss her neck.

She let him, for a moment, but then she pulled away. "Later. I have news."

"Indeed?"

"Hephaestus is in love!"

Zeus narrowed his eyes. "With whom?"

"No idea!"

"And you let him leave without telling you? I find that hard to believe."

"He wants to marry her!"

"It's been contagious lately."

Hera laughed. "Oh, they all see how happy we are every couple of decades."

He laughed too and pulled his wife closer. "So, what did he want?"

"He wants our permission to marry someone without telling us who first. If she says yes, we just show up!"

"And you gave your permission?"

"Yes. If he wants to marry her, she's a good choice. He's not like Ares. He doesn't need to be beat over the head to notice a good woman."

"So why won't he tell you? That sounds like trouble."

"When has Hephaestus ever caused us trouble?"

"I agree, but for now I reserve the right to be smug if something goes awry."

"Whatever. He says he's afraid she'll say no."

"Why is he afraid of that? What makes him think she might?"

Hera thought for a moment. Maybe she should have questioned him more, but she'd been so bowled over by his news.

"Hera?"

"Well, I got the impression they might not be in a relationship yet."

"What? Has he gone off and fallen for a mortal?"

"I don't think so. Something's odd though. He seems reluctant to tell her how he feels. I don't know. He was very vague."

"That's not like him. He's usually straightforward about everything."

"I know." Hera knew Hephaestus didn't go among mortals much, so it had to be someone in their own world. She wasn't sure of his type though. He'd been with Aphrodite, but that had just been about sex. He'd dumped her easily and gotten over her in no time. His disdain and dismissal of the beautiful goddess told Hera that. Who else had he been with? There had been a dark-haired nymph, but that hadn't lasted long either. She groaned. "I think I'd be able to figure out my son's type better if he had even the tiniest bit of personality."

Zeus laughed. "Ask Aphrodite. She'll know."

"Will she tell me though? If it's a secret, or if the girl doesn't know, she might keep it to herself."

Zeus rubbed her arm slowly. "She knows you're mad at her. She'd tell you to please you."

Hera made a doubtful face. "She could care less that I'm angry with her."

"She's not herself, and you know it. She's very depressed."

"Hermes and Ares are in love with other women. Of course she's depressed."

Zeus began unbuttoning her blouse. "I'd love to see you two make up. Maybe I could watch."

Hera giggled. "Well, gee, forgive me if her sleeping with both my sons puts me off the idea of a threesome."

The teasing went out of his eyes, and he pulled her closer as his hands rubbed her breasts. "There is no one like you. No one."

Hera didn't know what to say. Zeus had his devoted moments, but he never said things like that. "Of course not," she said, trying to keep her tone light.

"Everything else, everyone else, it's just sex." He kissed her deeply, and then whispered in her ear, "You know that. We were made for each other."

She wrapped her arms around his neck. "I know. I've been with my share of other men. And women. It's never affected our love before."

He laughed and slid his hand under her skirt. "Hmmm. Some historians would disagree. I think we both have a few decimated cities to take credit for."

She arched toward him as he toyed with her clit. "And an army of bastards."

He slid his finger into her. "Some very heroic ones though."

She ran her hands down and found his cock. She struggled to free it from his pants, eventually worming her hand in and stroking it slowly. "Indeed. So what are we talking about? Everyone else is finding love and behaving, so now you want us to?"

He started to fully undress her, first slipping her blouse off, and then her skirt. He kissed her breasts as he removed her bra. He removed all of his clothes before pulling her panties off. She thought he wasn't going to answer her as he ran his hands over her body.

"Whatever you want," he finally said, "you can have. Whoever you want, you can have."

"I feel the same. Why do you feel you have to say it?"

He pushed her back onto the bed and climbed on top of her. "I have a condition." He parted her legs and rubbed his cock over her.

"What?"

"Don't stop wanting me."

She ran her hands over his hips, pulling him closer and making his cock penetrate her. He closed his eyes for a moment, and then looked down at her again.

"Have I ever?" she asked.

He braced himself on the bed and entered her fully. "Can't blame me for wanting to keep this," he whispered as he thrust slowly.

She sighed as her orgasm steadily built. She knew something had happened to make him need her this way, but she decided not to push him. In his own time, he would tell her. She held him close as they moved slowly together. She pushed all her worries away. Being fucked by the king of the gods was very consuming, as always, and she let herself be completely engulfed by him as the beat of their hearts matched the rhythm of their lovemaking.

Persephone knocked on Hades' office door. No one answered. She opened the door and peeked in to find it empty. She closed it and turned to go, only to run right into Hades. She jumped and grabbed his shoulders to brace herself.

"Sorry," he said. "I just returned. I came quickly when I felt you searching for me."

"You felt that?"

He nodded.

"You feel everything down here, don't you?"

He nodded again. "I can filter it all, but the entire Underworld is part of me."

Persephone thought about that. "It's a hard thing to imagine. Hypnos tried to explain it. Your moods affecting the weather and other stuff like that."

"Why were you looking for me? I wanted to take you to the Elysian Fields today, but we can do anything you'd like."

"I wanted to see what you were up to. I was bored and didn't feel like reading anymore. I'd love to go to the Elysian Fields with you."

He smiled and offered his arm. They walked down the hall.

"Hypnos took me, but we didn't stay long. He just showed me around."

"I'd like to hear what you think of it. You said you had opinions and asked if the way the Underworld works was open to discussion. It is."

"Things can change?"

"We can discuss them. I will tell you when there are things I cannot change."

She smiled up at him. "Fair enough. I hardly know where to begin."

"Do you still want to see how new arrivals are judged?"
"Yes, I would."

"You'll have the chance in a few days. What did you think of what Hypnos showed you?"

Persephone thought carefully about what she wanted to say. "I found it hard to grasp. I didn't expect life down here to be so much like it is above or in the mortal world."

"The two become more and more alike with each passing day. Perhaps no one will ever cut an interstate through Mount Olympus, but our world is no longer so different from every other place on this planet."

She laughed. "I could just see Zeus' face at the idea of anything being built anywhere near Mount Olympus. He's a purist when it comes to that stuff."

"Zeus liked the old days more than Poseidon and I did. Perhaps that is why he was destined to rule."

They emerged and began walking away from the palace. The day was bright and warm. Did that mean Hades was happy? Perhaps very happy?

"Was he? I thought all of you chose."

Hades was silent for a moment. "It just...happened. Zeus' arguments with Cronus grew worse and worse, and one day the Titans left when they were tired of the warmongering and endless battles."

"I've never met any of the Titans. Aren't they here?"

"They were, for a time. Then they left for the mortal world."

"They live among mortals? How is that possible?"

"They have powers just like ours. They aren't all stuck being twelve feet tall."

"Oh. I don't know much about them. Just what's in mortal mythology. No one talks about them."

"There's not much any of us know anymore."

"My mother never told me anything. Tell me about them."

"There's little to tell. The Titans were the gods before us and as far as we know they existed from the beginning of this world when it was created by the original, primal gods. They, like the primal deities, imparted very little knowledge to us."

"Why?"

"We don't know. Despite Cronus' reluctance to relinquish power to Zeus, the Titans' departure implied it was supposed to happen."

"They were no longer needed? Or they wanted to go?"

"Perhaps both." He rubbed her hand as it rested on his forearm. "It's our great mystery. We wonder where we came from and why we're here, just like mortals."

"Then we're more like mortals. Maybe that was meant to be. They couldn't relate to mortals, but we can. We understand them better because of it."

Hades smiled. "I've never thought of it that way before. My mind keeps straying to things like this lately."

"Really? I think it's fascinating."

"You do?"

She nodded. "I like history. Any kind of history. Zeus used to tell me stories about Ares and the Amazons. He liked to tell the story of Prometheus. He's kind of biased in his telling though."

"And dramatic, I'm sure. I haven't seen Prometheus for years. The story isn't quite as interesting as Zeus or the Greeks made it out to be."

"Really? Tell me."

Hades looked down at her. "I was once jealous of how much time you spent with Zeus. I didn't think he was telling you stories."

"I loved it. He tells great stories, but I'm sure you'll be okay at it."

He smiled again, and she was glad her teasing pleased him. Though she grew very bored when he was away, she was enjoying her stay in the Underworld. She also felt more and more happiness each time she saw him. She didn't want to tell him that yet. It had been three weeks, and she wanted him to believe her when she said her feelings for him were growing.

She nudged him again. "Tell me."

He led her to a grassy hill, and they sat down. Below them on her left was a view of the sea with Tartarus starting on one side and the Elysian Fields starting on the other. On her right the river Styx bubbled out of a hot spring to flow past the Valley of Dreams and branch off into the Acheron, the Lethe and all the other rivers that circled the Underworld and ran into the sea. She turned her attention to him, knowing that she'd enjoy the story even if it turned out to be terribly boring.

Alala listened to Persephone and struggled to keep up with her. Her friend was so animated Alala could hardly believe the water in the pool wasn't rippling. She was lying on her

stomach and looking over the edge into the water as her friend told her all about the Underworld. Based on the sky behind her and the grass under her, Persephone seemed to be sitting on the edge of a lake or river. Alala had never been to the Underworld, but she'd escorted quite a few soldiers there to be taken by Thanatos in her day. Occasionally she was still called to speak on behalf of such men, but not as often as she used to be. Ares was actually somewhere in the Middle East eavesdropping on some treaty negotiations. He'd gotten tired of wedding preparations and become interested in the affair after reading a few press releases online. Alala had decided to take the opportunity to try calling Persephone. Her friend had been gone nearly a month, and the suspense had finally gotten to her.

"So," Persephone went on, "Prometheus did show men how to make fire, but later was the big conflict. Apollo had Zeus' blessing to introduce medical arts to men, but Prometheus didn't ask permission to establish the first school."

"The first school?" she interrupted, wanting her friend to catch her breath. "The absolute very first one?"

"Yes. Smart people taught their own children and rich people had tutors. Children learned in small groups, like home schooling or something. Prometheus encouraged the idea of everyone being taught basic knowledge. Math and reading and music to start with."

"So the Greek academies were his idea? That makes sense. Ares said he loved to read."

"Prometheus?"

Alala nodded and repositioned her hands under her chin. "Yeah. Some of the Titans lived among the Amazons at one time. It's the last time Ares saw any of them."

"Hades is very interested in them."

"The Titans? Why?"

"Not sure. He's been thinking about why we're here. I am not kidding. He's really questioning things like that. He talks about it a lot because, he says, no one else is interested. His brothers don't care and won't really talk about it."

"So besides exciting tales and exploring new worlds, how are you? I mean, the two of you?"

Persephone smiled. "Getting there. I really like him."

Alala laughed. "You already liked him."

"Finding out his true identity was a bit of a shock though."

"I'm sure it was. I'll admit I was pissed when I found out, but he's a good man."

"He is! I was so nervous when he brought me here. Now that seems silly."

"He is the god of the Underworld. The idea of him scares the shit out of some people."

"Even people down here who say he's fair and just avoid being near him. I can see why he's so lonely."

After a few moments of silence, Alala asked, "So you really like him? The him you know now, not the guy you talked to online?"

Persephone nodded. "I do. And I like it here. I'm considering it."

"Marrying him?"

"I think I could love him."

"I don't think you have to consider anything. When your time is up, you'll just know."

"Everyone always says things like that. We all have free will though!"

"But saying something is 'meant to be' doesn't negate that free will."

Persephone ran her hand over the grass beside her.
"That's true. I'm not crazy about the concept. To me, there's
a difference between saying you're 'perfect' with someone
and saying you were 'made for' each other. That makes
sense, right?"

Alala nodded. "It does. I understand what you're saying. Don't overanalyze it though. You'll just drive yourself crazy."

"It still doesn't seem—you know—real. It's hard to believe he loves me even though everything he does shows it in some way."

"I didn't believe Ares loved me, and all of you told me I was being silly."

"That was different. He didn't realize he loved you until he thought he would lose you. Hades is very aware and very conscious of the fact that he loves me. Ever since our little incident, he's been treading carefully. He's afraid of messing up again."

"So now it's just a 'little incident,' huh?"

"I was so pissed when it happened, but after a few days I saw that he'd panicked and made a mistake. It was insecurity, not some need to dominate me."

Alala looked at her nails, trying to figure out how to ask her next question. "Anything else interesting happen?"

Persephone blushed.

Alala suppressed a giggle. She wanted to be very happy and enthusiastic, but she wanted her friend to feel comfortable. Persephone had always begged for details when Alala was still with Apollo, though she had respected Alala's privacy and kept the affair a secret. She might not be so eager when it came to her own details, especially as whatever had happened would have been her first time.

After a moment, she said, "It's okay. You don't have to tell. I was just curious."

"No, no, it wasn't that I didn't want to tell. I just wasn't sure where to begin. I am still a virgin, but stuff has happened." Persephone frowned. "I think I'm still a virgin. I am until he actually...you know. Right?"

Alala wondered what exactly had been going on. Hades had promised all of them he wouldn't do that without Persephone's full consent, and for him that meant she had to love him. So what had they done?

"Yes. Until then, you might not be pure as the driven snow, but you are a virgin."

Persephone smiled. "You know you want to ask."

"Then just tell me!"

She giggled. "Usually, he just kisses me. He lingers and his hands roam a bit, but he usually controls himself and leaves before anything happens. But a week or so ago, we sort of played a game."

Alala raised her eyebrows. She only had eyes for Ares, but she definitely liked games. She wondered what kinds of

things might interest Hades. She imagined leather straps immediately. "What happened?"

"We went for a walk, and we ended up at the hedge maze. I told him I'd always thought of him as a bad boy, and then said he wasn't at all. That sparked his interest, and he decided to show me there was a bit of a bad boy underneath all the manners."

Alala's interest grew. "And?"

"He put on the Helm of Darkness and then chased me through the maze."

"What happened when he caught you?" She hoped Ares wouldn't be gone too long. The story was making her miss him very much.

Persephone blushed furiously. "Well," she whispered. "He started touching me, and then asked me what I wanted. I told him to kiss me. And he did." She paused and looked around before lowering her voice more. "Just not on the lips."

Alala giggled. "So you had an orgasm?"

She nodded enthusiastically. "It was amazing!"

Both girls laughed. Alala missed her friend, but she was happy because it sounded like everything was going to work out. Persephone seemed like a very willing captive, and most importantly, she hadn't complained once in their whole conversation.

Persephone, even though she was older than Alala, had been very sheltered by Demeter from the day she was born. She'd always been rather naive and spoiled because of it. She had a tendency to complain, pout, sulk, or even go into a rage if she didn't get her way. Now she was trapped in the

Underworld and unable to see her family or her friends, yet she seemed content. Hades might be perfect for her. She needed a firm hand at times, but one that loved her enough to let go at the right times. Perhaps in the end he'd be able to find that balance.

"That's wonderful! I hope—"

Persephone waved her hands. "Someone's coming. I'll talk to you later. I don't want anyone to hear."

The water cleared. Alala pushed herself up and sat next to the pool. She couldn't wait to tell Ares the good news. She was even more eager to tell him she had an idea for a new game for them to play.

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Chapter 7

Hades knew he shouldn't have been listening, but he couldn't change that now. As he watched Persephone in the mirror, he saw Hypnos approaching her. Persephone turned and looked up at Hypnos as she quickly ended her conversation with Alala. Hades turned away from the mirror and sat at his desk. He'd been curious enough to spy on her as she talked to Alala, but he would not spy on her and Hypnos. He trusted them together.

Hades had been pleased to hear her recounting stories he'd told her so enthusiastically, but had it been right to keep listening when she began talking about him? Probably not, but his heart had skipped a beat when she'd started telling Alala about their romp in the maze. He'd been guarding against it because he knew he would dwell on what she said too much, but he couldn't undo it now. However, everything she'd said indicated she was happy.

He tried to focus on that, but it soon became clear he needed a distraction. He went to a bookshelf and opened the secret panel. His office was filled with them, and each one led to a different place in the world above. Even though he might end up even more frustrated, he headed for the beach. If Demeter hadn't dropped the temperature enough to freeze the ocean, he would probably find Poseidon very quickly.

Poseidon watched his wife Layla sleeping. What had started out as a massage to soothe her muscles after a workout had turned into very intense lovemaking. Layla still

hadn't fully adjusted to the immortality Zeus had granted her, and she tended to sleep far more than anyone else in Olympus. He loved watching her sleep. Besides the titillation of knowing exactly what had worn her out, watching her sleep reminded him of how much she calmed and soothed him. He had a very bad temper, and his mind tended to resist shutting down. Her ability to make him slow down and savor everything, especially her, was one of the characteristics he loved the most about her.

He pulled himself from his thoughts when he felt someone on the beach above. He and Layla had moved to one of his underwater retreats when it had become obvious Demeter wasn't going to let the sun come out again anytime soon. He looked above in his mind. It was Hades. He couldn't help smiling. This might be interesting.

He kissed Layla on the forehead and watched her for a moment as she snuggled closer to his pillow. He headed up to the surface.

Hades looked down at the waves. He didn't smile when he looked up and saw Poseidon coming, but he didn't look upset or displeased either. He'd taken his shoes off and stood ankle deep in the water.

"I see you're keeping the ocean warm enough. You can hardly tell it's freezing out here," Hades said.

Poseidon walked up to stand beside him, also keeping his feet in the water. "Yeah. It'll keep you warm no matter how cold it gets. I learned I could do that the last time Demeter did this. All the fish were getting stuck."

"Nice. Fertility goddess killing sea life."

Poseidon laughed. "Didn't kill them. They just got stuck. Animals don't die here."

"Ah. I'd forgotten."

He was tiring of the small talk, especially as he knew Hades hadn't forgotten that fact at all, but he kept it up anyway. "How old's that pup of yours?"

Hades almost smiled. "Good point. I guess I always thought Cerberus was different."

Was his brother stalling? "Would make sense. You're pretty different."

Hades didn't reply, and Poseidon rolled his eyes.

"What's wrong? What's going on, besides the trouble you've brought on yourself?"

"Nothing's wrong. Persephone seems happy. She's become friends with Hypnos, and Cerberus follows her everywhere most of the time."

"She likes that thing?"

Hades paused and gave him a warning look. "He's a dog. A big one, but in the end he's just a dog."

"He's bigger than any hound in the mortal world, plus he has three heads and a dragon's tail. He starts wagging and he can clear a room." He found the warning glance encouraging. If he could annoy Hades, maybe he could get him to stop being cryptic and tell him what was wrong.

"She likes it down there. She likes the freedom of being able to do what she likes and go where she wants to."

"I'm not surprised. The mortal world can only be so stimulating after a while."

"I like mortals."

"I'm married to one, so I obviously wasn't putting them down."

"She's a goddess now. She's different."

"She was mortal when I fell in love with her." He could admit though that Hades did like mortals more than most of them did. He was around them so much.

Hades sighed. "I suppose it helps that the Underworld isn't what she was expecting."

Poseidon wasn't sure what he meant. The nature of the Underworld wasn't a mystical secret. "You saying she was expecting fire and brimstone? No wonder she was pissed you didn't chain her up and have your way with her right off, if that's the image she was working from."

He watched his brother's reaction, and the mildness of it surprised him. Hades looked down and bit his lip, but then said, "Yes, she was expecting something along those lines. Demeter kept her just that sheltered." After a few moments, he asked, "Where did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

Hades bit his lip again. "The other part."

Poseidon managed to suppress both a laugh and a remark about Hades biting his lip like a nervous teenager. "Hera. Zeus gleaned as much from his conversation with Persephone. She was angry because she was expecting a very different experience from you. Seems now though that she's happy you made that choice for her. I admire you. I couldn't resist staying away from Layla for even twenty-four hours once I'd seen her."

Hades smiled. "Layla is lovely."

Another smile. Good sign. "She is, but you prefer blondes." "I prefer a particular blonde."

"You'll like her once Demeter can't control her and you actually get to talk to her."

"I'm sure. Zeus likes her, and you know he doesn't like silly women."

"Are there really any women he doesn't like?" Hades asked.

Poseidon pretended to consider. "I can rephrase that. He doesn't have conversations with silly women."

Hades fell silent again.

"If you and Persephone are fine, or at least getting along well, why are you standing here acting melancholy?"

"Just a mood lately."

Poseidon was tempted to push him into the water. "You've had this mood before. Contemplating the mysteries of the universe again?" Maybe his teasing was a bit cruel, but Hades could be annoying on this point. Poseidon had problems seeing why a god would question his own existence or place in the cosmos. It didn't seem very godlike.

"There's nothing wrong with wondering about these things."

"Doesn't seem healthy though."

"I've been tossing a few theories around. Persephone likes to talk about issues like these. She asks lots of questions and keeps an open mind. And she's not afraid to tell me what she thinks."

"That's good. I'm glad to hear it."

[&]quot;Seems so."

"The thing is that's what I need. I like the fact that I have something to do."

Poseidon had no idea what Hades meant. "What is that, exactly?"

Hades looked puzzled, but then he laughed. "Sorry. I should start from the beginning, shouldn't I?"

"Yes. Please do. You've completely lost me."

"I like Persephone taking an interest in how the Underworld runs and how it works. I was thinking about that. You and Zeus don't do anything. Zeus makes decisions, and we all used to have a closer relationship with the mortal world, but up here there's nothing that has to be done. In the Underworld, everything would stop without me."

"So we're lazy oafs?"

"No, of course not, but I'd hate it if nothing and no one depended on me. I'm not on a schedule or anything, but I can't ignore any of my duties for too long."

"That's your answer then. You were ordained for the Underworld because that makes you happy."

"That's not an answer. It's an idea."

"What are you looking for then? Why there's an Underworld? Why there's an afterlife at all? Men and women have souls. They are eternal beings. They have to go somewhere."

"The Titans left. Why are we still here? Men don't need us."

"The Titans left Olympus. They didn't fly off to a different galaxy or another dimension. Maybe, from the mortal point of view, we did leave. We withdrew. By the time the Romans were in power, we were just figureheads. We'd become

ideals. Most people would have fallen over in shock and horror if we'd tried to talk to them. They certainly would these days. A man who says God spoke to him has a fifty-fifty chance of being believed. Some guy says he talked to me and everyone is going to call him crazy."

Hades shrugged. "Maybe not. Lots of people are turning back to older ways."

"They don't know anything about the older ways or whatever you'd like to call them. They wear natural fibers and eat tofu and plants and read books written by people with five SUVs who just want their money."

"That's unfair! A hundred people like that don't matter if one person finds peace and a better way to live. Not everyone is a fraud, you know."

Poseidon stared at his brother. "I didn't mean any offense. I guess I am cynical. The last mortal I encountered was a rich asshole who treated my girl like shit and practically raped her the last time they spent the night together."

Hades looked out across the water. "I know you didn't, and I can understand that part. I was getting to my point though. I think, with Persephone by my side, I won't wonder about these things anymore. I'll be complete."

While Poseidon understood that feeling of completeness very well, he thought Hades shouldn't get his hopes up. "You think so?"

"I can't be sure. It's not a bad guess though."

"So all this time you've been missing your soul mate? That's the great cosmic void in your soul?"

"The great cosmic void in my soul?" Hades repeated.

Poseidon rolled his eyes again. "Layla likes poetry. I can't help it, but it does convey my meaning. You're not upset you didn't have a mother or father to love you, and you're not 'lost' because the Titans or the primal gods never told us our purpose. You've been longing for someone to love. Someone who could choose to love you."

Hades nodded slowly. "Maybe. It doesn't sound half bad."

"It doesn't. You thinking of running it by Persephone?"

He shook his head immediately. "No. Not yet. Maybe someday, if she stays."

"That seems to be taking care of itself." It started to snow.

"I kind of wish you hadn't trapped her down there though.

You could get this over with sooner. Now she'll keep thinking it over until her hundred days are up. You know? She won't feel certain she wants to stay until she's actually able to leave."

"Maybe not. Tomorrow she's going to watch me judge the dead. She's very interested."

"Expecting many tomorrow?"

He nodded. "Hypnos has been leading them to the Valley of Dreams. They don't know they're dead yet while they stay among mortals who are dreaming. They won't know until I've taken them into the heart of the Underworld by way of the Acheron."

Poseidon felt a chill run up his back, despite the warmth flowing through him from the sea. "You know, I'm glad it's forbidden for us to go down there. I'm sure it's pretty, but it sounds very creepy. One great big mind-fuck everywhere you go down there."

Hades laughed loudly. "I suppose I was meant for the Underworld since my brothers are such wimps."

"Wimp or not, I prefer having a dolphin to having...whatever Cerberus is."

"He's a dog!" Hades made a face. "You two have a dolphin? I thought you had a cat Hera gave you?"

"We still do, but Layla named a couple of dolphins, so now they're always around." Poseidon crossed his arms. "Laugh all you want."

"Oh I will." Hades turned and walked toward the cave behind them. The cavern was a dead end to all of them, but for Hades the walls opened up to take him back to the Underworld. "I'm sure you'll keep up with the gossip."

"Count on it." He looked down into the water and then down the beach. Far away, he saw someone sitting on a rock. Someone very thin with lots of curly blonde hair.

He hadn't seen her in a long time, and he had started worrying like everyone else was. He began walking, and when he was close enough he yelled out to her. "Aphrodite!"

She jerked her head up and jumped. She'd been staring down at her hand. She stood and looked at him, but then she bolted away.

He stopped, but then he thought for a moment and dove into the sea. He'd catch her faster this way, and she wouldn't be able to see him. Everyone around him was acting strangely, and at least with Aphrodite he felt he might be able to get a straight answer.

Aphrodite fell face first into the sand as the giant wave crashed over her. She sputtered and spat as she wiped the

sand off her face and coughed up saltwater. She couldn't stand up though because Poseidon was on top of her.

He stood and extended his hand. "Sorry. You didn't seem to want to talk, but I do."

"Sure Layla would approve?"

"My wife is not your biggest fan, but she knows anything we had going on ended when I met her. Being best friends with your daughter-in-law probably helps her trust you though."

Aphrodite sat down on the sand. "What do you want?"

Poseidon looked down at both her hands. She wasn't

concerned though because she knew he couldn't see the ring

Hepheastus had given her.

"I want to know what's wrong. You have no reason to worry about Hades, I'd say, and by now you should be over what happened with Ares, even if you aren't quite back in Hera's favor yet."

"I'm not likely to win it back anytime soon."

"I see. There must be something more then. All that could add up to a ruined day or week, but you've been distant a bit too long."

"Everyone notices when I stop fucking every man in sight, it seems."

"That's a little unfair. No, it's very unfair. No matter what has happened, we love you. You don't like being alone, but lately you're avoiding everyone. That's what we've noticed."

"I know." Aphrodite thought quickly. She needed to distract Poseidon. He wouldn't let her go until he felt he'd

done something to help. "I went looking for Hestia recently. I couldn't find her."

Poseidon thought for a moment. "I have no idea where she is. Why did you want to see her?"

Aphrodite pulled her legs up against her chest and patted the sand beside her. Poseidon sat down.

"We're alike in some ways. She feels as useless as I do. The home is a very different thing these days. The hearth has been replaced by the microwave. Domesticity isn't very domestic. It's very rushed and busy and impersonal."

"Not always. People still make it all work in the end. They make time for each other. Parents can't help it when they both need to work."

"And get married three times and shove their kids back and forth."

"You've expressed this before. Why get worried now? I prefer a world in which people can divorce and have another chance at happiness. Your own son is divorced, and he's found happiness with someone who's also divorced. I'm divorced. You complain about this all the time. It's one of your pet peeves maybe, but it doesn't upset you like this. Not usually."

Aphrodite wanted to cry very desperately. "This is why I ran away from you. You're too smart and far too good at seeing things." A few tears fell and she pushed them away.

"It's really this bad?"

Aphrodite tried to smile. She'd already told Alala, but she could not tell Poseidon. He would tell her going to Hera and revealing all was the "right" thing to do. His own ideals of

morality made him very overbearing at times. Something else had been bothering her. Maybe if she told him about that she'd be able to keep her secret and get his help. It was worth a try.

"Apollo and Daphne. I want to fix my mistake." It wasn't a lie. She really did want to do something.

"How? Daphne refused to let you lift the spell."

"If I can convince Zeus she doesn't know what's best for her because the arrow has poisoned her soul, he might say yes."

"Is it true?"

"No. It would happen if we broke the spell keeping her a tree though."

"She's said she wants to stay as she is. It won't work."

"Her father must miss her. Maybe he could say something."

"He would have done it by now."

Aphrodite drew swirls in the sand between her and Poseidon. Not her best plan, but he seemed to believe this was what she'd been so upset about. "There has to be a way."

"Is this why you wanted to see Hestia?"

She jumped at the chance to explain that away. She didn't want him to suspect she'd wanted to see Hestia for any other reason. She didn't want him to know she'd been wondering if she and Hephaestus could really live together happily. "Yes. I thought she might have a different perspective."

Poseidon looked doubtful. "Maybe. I don't know."

Hestia was responsible for the "proper" ordering of the home and the family. Aphrodite didn't need someone to confirm Hephaestus loved her, as she was the only one who had that power. She needed someone to confirm what was right. She already had a family, her son and daughter-in-law. She and Ares were not meant to be, even after having a son together. Hera was the goddess of marriage, but going to her was the last thing Aphrodite could or would do.

"I think it's logical. Daphne being a tree separates a family. Her father is alone. Apollo will never have a family because he loves her."

"Okay, I can see that. Why not petition Zeus to remove the spell from Apollo?"

"The arrows were forged together. It's impossible."

"Will Daphne really object? Would we notice if she did?"

"We can't lift it while she's a tree."

"Did Hephaestus make them? Perhaps he'd have an idea." Aphrodite nodded slowly as if she were thinking about it.

"Are you two still not talking? I know he rarely talks period, but surely he'd talk to you."

"We talk," she replied quickly. "It's just awkward sometimes. He probably can't do anything, but I'll ask."

"What if he shattered the molds he made the arrows with? Didn't something like that work before?"

Aphrodite considered this. "He set Prometheus free by destroying everything he used to make his chains with. Zeus would probably remember because it pissed him off for months."

"That's what I was thinking of. You have to admit it didn't look like Zeus would ever let Prometheus go."

"Then it didn't, but now none of us would hesitate to attempt changing his mind about something. Zeus is capable of changing too. He's a bit slow about it."

"Could it work?"

"I don't know. The molds weren't special. The magic added to the metal made the difference in the arrows."

"Sounds like a good place to start though. Find out if it's possible and then petition Zeus. It can't hurt. I'm sure he'd listen if he knew worrying about Apollo and Daphne was why you've been acting like this."

Aphrodite smiled and hoped it looked genuine. "It's a good idea. I'll see what I can find out." She stood up and brushed sand off her clothes and legs.

"You glad I chased you down now?" he asked as he stood up.

"Yes. I needed someone to talk to."

"Anytime."

"Thanks." She snapped her fingers and materialized in her living room. She slumped down on the couch. She really was concerned about Apollo, but she wasn't optimistic about finding an answer for him and Daphne. Poseidon's idea wasn't bad, but she didn't exactly want to talk to Hephaestus about working out a "happily ever after" for another couple. He'd want to know if she was considering his offer, and he might even make her saying yes a condition of his helping her in any way.

She curled up on the couch and turned the television on, hoping something vapid enough was on to make her brain shut down for the rest of the day.

Persephone sat beside Hades. She wore the Helm of Darkness so no one would see her. She wasn't sure what to think yet. Instead of a line of people looking desolate and forlorn, she saw perfectly normal people standing in small groups talking. Hypnos brought each person up to Hades individually. The person then sat down next to Hades to answer questions. Everyone else continued talking, barely taking any note of which direction the others were being sent. The river Styx split just before the Valley of Dreams, and the Acheron flowed by a few hundred feet away from where they sat. Hypnos was taking the people to stand by two different boats. Charon sat in the first one, and thus far only one man stood by that one. Everyone else stood by the second one. The woman Hades was questioning now was talking about her husband. Hades had explained they all thought they were dreaming, but their calmness still seemed odd to her.

Hades smiled at the blonde woman sitting next to him. "And what was your son's name?"

The woman smiled back, looking sad. "Adam. He was just four years old."

Hades nodded slowly. "Yes, that's right. You'll be seeing him very soon."

Hypnos came over and the woman stood up as if she knew they were done. He led her to the group by the second boat.

Persephone leaned over and whispered, "Her little boy died?"

"Yes."

"Why did talking about that matter?"

"Pushing her husband away after her son's death was the only bad thing she ever did in her life."

"You just know that?"

"When I talk with them, I know everything about them. It's not exact, but I judge them based on their reactions, more or less."

"So this is something I could never do?"

Hades looked up as the next person drew near. "You'd never have my power, but if you wanted to plead for someone, I'd consider it and change my judgment if you convinced me."

Persephone started to reply, but the next person arrived.

"Harold, tell me about your sister."

The man sat down and shrugged. "Not much to tell. She's dead."

"Why?"

"I killed her for being a greedy bitch."

"The money your parents left you? She wanted more?"

He nodded and smiled. "Exactly. She thought I'd done something dishonest. I hadn't."

"Since you hadn't done anything, you were in the right. She couldn't do anything legally."

"But she was buggin' us. My wife and me. It was drivin' us crazy."

"So it was a relief when you got away with it?"
He nodded again. "Yeah. It's been nice and quiet."
"That will be all."

Hypnos led the man to the first boat.

"So if he'd regretted it, what would have happened?" Persephone asked.

"He gave her sleeping pills, and she was very unhappy in her life. Some humans would say he did her a favor, so I take that into consideration. She was in fact happier dead. However, he killed his sister because she annoyed him. Even if he'd regretted it, I'd have sent him to Tartarus for ten vears."

Persephone thought about it. Considering how long eternity was, ten years wasn't bad. He'd probably have spent longer in jail, depending on where he'd lived. "So he'll go to Tartarus and there he'll feel regret?"

"Yes. Good and evil are black and white in Tartarus. You feel guilt for anything that caused harm. You then learn."

"So when he sees his sister again, he'll be sorry and apologize?"

"Yes. And he'll see her very soon."

"Why?"

Hades looked down and sighed. "She killed their parents to get the inheritance in the first place."

"Oh."

A little boy sat down next to Hades.

"Hi," Hades said. "What's your name?"

"Jamie."

"Well, Jamie, of everyone who's gone to heaven, who do you want to see the most?"

Jamie thought. "My Nana Myrtle." He smiled brightly. "Is she here?"

"Yes. We're going to take you to her right now."
The little boy hopped up and followed Hypnos away.
"I guess children are easy," Persephone said.

"Yes. Very rarely has anyone younger than ten or eleven done anything worth judging."

She watched the little boy who would never grow up walk away. "How do you deal with all of this? It seems very sad."

"It can be hard, especially during wars or disasters when so many come at once. But once judgment is over, I forget all of it. I can recall it if I need to, but mostly I forget."

"But you knew that little boy's grandmother was here?"

"Yes. She's been dead less than a year, plus knowledge of her came with my knowledge of him."

Persephone nodded. She listened and didn't ask any more questions as the rest of the people were judged. Hypnos had been right. Hades was very fair. One man had cheated on his wife, but when she'd died in a car wreck he'd regretted it. He still did. Persephone had wondered where Hades would send him, but after a moment he sent him to the Elysian Fields. He told the man his wife had been waiting for him there for five years. It seemed people who had only harmed themselves or who had already atoned for their wrongs went to the Elysian Fields, but those who had hurt others went to Tartarus.

Hades went with Charon in the first boat, taking six people to Tartarus. The others continued to talk by the river while she sat with Hypnos.

"What did you think?" he asked.

She removed the Helm of Darkness and rubbed her neck. The helmet was very heavy. "It seems like a great burden. I couldn't do it. I'd second-guess myself so often."

"If you had his knowledge, you might not think so. It might come just as easily."

"Maybe. I'm not sure I'd want the responsibility."

"How is everything else going?"

The personal question surprised her, but in a good way. "Well, I think. He seems more relaxed."

"And you?"

"I definitely feel more at home. I could be very happy here. I don't want to stay because of that though."

"You'll know when the time comes."

Persephone thought carefully before she asked, "So what do you think about the Fates? Alala and Eris believe in them so strongly. Others never think of them. They do assign destiny, and they can see the future, but how much power do they really have? Do they let us do one thing and then lead us somewhere from there? Do they do something and then let us make what we will of it?"

Hypnos thought for a long moment. "That's a hard question. I don't think anyone can answer it."

"Well, if Hades sometimes questions where we came from and why we're here, couldn't he ask?"

"The Fates won't always answer. Or they speak in riddles like the Oracles."

"So we're just as lost as humans in a way?"

"Not quite to that extent. Not really."

"So can you marry?"

"Yes."

"Would you?"

"We'd be separated. She couldn't live here, as you will if you marry Hades, and I can only stay away for so long."

"That's not fair."

"Does it have to be? If I loved someone, I'd be happy just to have my love returned. I must return here for the darkest part of the night. It's only four hours. I could return to her by dawn, but I do have many responsibilities."

"People can't sleep without you?"

He laughed. "They can sleep. They can't dream."

"How do you do it? There are so many people."

"My presence in the Underworld allows people to dream. You can go a long time without dreams, but if you go too long, you'll lose your mind. It would be irresponsible for me to stay away too long."

"And you can visit people in dreams?"

"Yes. And I can do anything I want."

She blushed. "Yeah, you told me that." After a moment, she asked, "Does that make you happy?"

"I never hurt anyone. When they wake, they know I'm not real. I leave women alone if I sense they could become attached."

"But are you happy? What if you fell in love?"

"I try to avoid that too. Thus far I have."

Persephone shook her head slowly, but again she thought he looked sad. He always looked like that when they talked about love. "It would be interesting to get to know your brother. You're a hard guy to understand."

Hypnos frowned. "As I said before, I'd avoid Thanatos if I were you. He's been in a dark mood lately."

"Really? The god of death in a dark mood? Imagine that." She laughed.

Hypnos started to speak again, but Hades returned for the other boat and passengers. When Charon and he exited the first boat, it vanished. Hades looked at her for a moment before they left again.

"I should take you back to the palace."

Persephone stood up. "I could use a nap."

"It's being here. If you stayed, you'd be asleep soon enough."

"I'm sure I will be anyway." She stretched and followed Hypnos. Something touched her shoulder, but she saw nothing when she turned around. She thought happily about spending the evening with Hades and talking about what she'd thought of the judgment. She smiled because she knew he'd be interested and actually listen to her thoughts. She hoped they'd end up snuggling in front of the fire or gazing up at the night sky. She kept thinking about how she'd felt when he made her come, and she longed for him to touch her again.

Thanatos materialized and glared after his brother as he led Persephone away. He'd felt the desire in her heart when he touched her. Hades was a fool. She'd come here dying to be taken, and he hadn't done it yet. Thanatos imagined for the hundredth time how sweet and tight she'd be if he took her maidenhead. He watched her hips swaying and thought about bending her over a bed and taking her from behind.

Hypnos had been forgiven for touching her, but Thanatos knew Hades would not be so understanding with him. If Thanatos got the chance to touch her, he wouldn't let go until he found out just how sweet every part of her was, until he'd made her so completely his Hades could never take her back.

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Chapter 8

Hades stoked the fire. He heard footsteps coming down the hall. After a few moments, Persephone opened the door.

"Here you are," she said before closing the door and walking over to him. She took his hands in hers and kissed him on the cheek. She stayed very close and looked up at him for a moment.

He squeezed her hands, and then he brought his lips to hers. She gave into the kiss at once so he let his hands slip around her waist and pull her closer. She wound her arms around his neck and ran one hand through his hair. All he could think about was how warm and alive she felt. His brain soon filled with memories of how she'd tasted that day in the garden, the sounds she'd made when she came. He pulled away.

"That's a very warm greeting," he said. He withdrew from her embrace as if he'd only meant to kiss her passionately and hadn't been thinking of spending the rest of the night making love to her over and over again.

She looked disappointed, but after a few seconds she smiled and looked at the low table between the couch and the fireplace. It had been laid out with wine, fruit, cheese and bread.

"Thought we'd have an indoor picnic," he said quickly.

"Yes, that sounds nice." She sat down and looked at her fingernails.

He wondered if she was embarrassed about being so bold. He knew she couldn't possibly think he didn't want her, but she seemed to be feeling something else besides disappointment.

"How was your afternoon?" He felt stupid asking such a vacuous question, especially since they'd become so much closer recently, but he suddenly felt awkward as he sat down next to her.

"It was nice. I did some reading."

He nodded, unsure what to add.

Luckily, she seemed to have an idea. "I enjoyed watching this afternoon. It gave me a lot to think about."

"Good things, I hope."

"Yes. Hypnos and everyone else here have always told me you're fair and just. You are. There weren't that many people, but it gave me a good idea of how it all works. I didn't disagree with anyone who went to Tartarus, and that's most important."

"So being more merciful is better than being more...judgmental?"

"Yes, I think so. No one can do evil here, right?"

"No mortal, no."

"So you can do something evil?"

"Of course." He wondered if that was a random thought or if it had somehow occurred to her before.

"I'd wondered. Since you judge everyone, I didn't know if you had complete free will."

He didn't understand what she meant at all. "Of course I do."

"I meant...hmmmm...you know, you have to be pure or something like that for such a task. I thought maybe it would hurt you to do something bad or maybe you couldn't or something." She sighed. "I'm not conveying what I mean. It's coming out too vague."

Hades started to understand. "No, I think I see. If I can do bad things, what's to stop me being selfish? Or making a mistake in judging someone? I forgive a woman for something because she's pretty, but condemn a man for the same crime?"

She nodded. "Yes! That's what I mean."

"I'm as likely to make a mistake as anyone, but I do think I was meant for this task."

"I started thinking about that today. I remembered some of the things you talked about when you told me about the Titans and the days before I was born. No one else ever talks about them."

"They are important, but I think we know all we need to know."

"That's a change. You didn't feel that way the last time we talked about this. What brought this on?"

He thought carefully. He didn't want to say something sentimental. He knew he had felt calmer the last few weeks and he had worried less, but he didn't want to play with her emotions. Telling her she'd soothed his worries and made him happier might seem like he was putting pressure on her. Her time wasn't even half up yet, so he wanted to be careful.

"I've seen how the Fates always work things out in the long run. Some things you've said made me start thinking

more along those lines. It's also been nice to have someone to talk to. You're actually interested and want to hear about my thoughts and tell me your own."

She smiled brightly. "Thank you. That means a lot."

He smiled back at her. That had come out pretty smoothly. He'd given her a compliment that truly meant something to her. No one had ever cared about her opinions before, and he always made the effort to let her know that he did. Maybe if she thought about it more later she might see the deeper meaning behind the compliment, including all the things he hadn't said about how happy she was making him. He didn't just want her. He loved her. It seemed she was finally starting to believe that, so he wanted to tread very carefully and not make more mistakes.

She picked up a bunch of grapes and started eating them. "I was also wondering something else about what I said before."

"Yes?"

"Well, if you couldn't make mistakes or bad choices that would mean you were right to choose me."

She looked down at the floor as she said this. She appeared calm, but it was obvious this question was the one she really wanted answered.

"I believe I made the perfect choice."

"Whv?"

"I love you."

"It needs to be more than that, doesn't it?"

"No. But I do love you because of all your good qualities. They make you fit to be my queen."

"Do they?"

"Yes. I need a queen with a keen mind and a strong will. I need someone who won't be afraid to speak up when needed and who could and would stand up to me. I also need someone who is compassionate."

"You're sure I'm all those things?"

"Yes." He wanted to reach out to her, but he waited because he didn't know what she'd say next.

She put the grapes down and moved close to him. "Then why should we wait? I want to stay with you tonight."

She'd just said she wanted to sleep with him. His heart sank though because she hadn't said she loved him.

"Persephone, I want to make love to you the day we are married. I want you to be in love with me."

"I love you very much, and I want you even more."

"It should be the other way around. You need to be in love with me. I want that. Can't you understand?"

She ran her hand up his leg and fondled his cock through his pants. "Why touch me once then refuse to do it again? Why make me wait?"

His cock hardened the moment she touched it. He thought about how sweet she would feel as he took her for the first time. He thought of holding her close as he slowly made love to her, touching her as no other man had. He imagined feeling her come as he told her he loved her.

"You believe you're falling in love with me?" he asked.

She trailed kisses over his cheek and then down his neck. "Yes. Please let me stay with you. At least kiss me and hold me. We don't have to have sex."

That was very tempting, and her pleading and her caresses were driving him wild with desire. Even if she didn't feel everything he felt yet, she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

"If I took you to my bed, I'd be making love to you all night. I can't, Persephone. You act like I'm rejecting you because I want to wait. You know it isn't true."

She pulled away, and her face was expressionless. "I'm glad I'm making you happier. What you said earlier...I know it's what you meant. But if we can't be together like that I want to be alone for the rest of the night. All I want to do is touch you, so I can't think if I stay here with you."

She stood up and he grabbed her hand.

"Are you angry? Please stay for a minute if you are. I'd rather talk about it."

She pulled her hand away gently. "I'm not angry. I'm as frustrated as you are, just for slightly different reasons. Will you try to understand that as I try to understand your actions?"

"Yes. It's my fault. I shouldn't have touched you that day in the garden. I wanted to touch you so badly, and I wanted to intrigue you, keep you guessing. I started playing a sex game and then stopped after my first turn. I'm sorry. It's like I was leading you on. It's unfair to you."

"I let you touch me. You would have stopped if I'd objected in any way. Can I go now?"

"Yes." He felt his heart sinking. It was a feeling he was getting tired of experiencing. "Can I see you tomorrow?"

"Yes. Let me find you though."

"Of course. Good night."

"Good night," she said softly as she walked to the door and left. She made the effort to close it very gently.

Something about that action made him incredibly sad. Weeks ago she would have stormed out and slammed the door. It was a good sign, but that in and of itself made him want her more. She was changing. She had grown and matured so much in only a month, and that made him love her more because it proved how amazing she truly was. He resisted the urge to go after her. He knew it would end with them making love, and he'd promised Zeus, Hera and Demeter as well as himself that would only happen on his wedding night.

Persephone stopped when she heard a noise behind her in the hall. She turned but didn't see anything.

"He's such a fool, making such an eager girl like you wait." She thought she knew the voice. "Hypnos?"

She turned around again, but it wasn't Hypnos. Thanatos stood very close to her, smiling suggestively. She was struck again by the resemblance to his brother. They were the exact same man, but Thanatos had jet-black hair. Their eyes were also the same, but she didn't like the way he looked at her. Even when Hypnos had been kissing her and touching her that first day, there had been warmth to the desire she'd seen in his eyes. The look in Thanatos' eyes could only be described as cold lust.

She'd never been afraid of anything before, but she felt a cold chill go over her entire body. "It's none of your

business." Her bedroom was very close. "I'd like to be alone now, if you don't mind."

"I do mind, actually."

She heard a loud bang in her bedroom. The door shook and she heard barking and growling. She also saw chains on the door.

"Cerberus!" she called, suddenly panicking. Cerberus would only act like that if she were in danger.

Before she could move, Thanatos grabbed her.

"You're mine now, and unlike Hades, I will follow through and make that true in every way."

She struggled against him. "Hades! Hypnos!" She tried to kick at him, but he held her tight. "Zeus, help me!"

Then everything faded to black.

Hades ran down the hall, colliding with Hypnos. "Where is she?"

"I don't know. I heard her say my name. I started to go to her room because I thought she had called me. Then I heard her yell for both of us."

Hades ran to her room faster. "She called out for Zeus. Something is wrong." His blood began to burn when he saw the chains on the door. They glowed bright red, and he saw the doors shake as Cerberus snarled and growled on the other side, throwing his body against them.

Hades kicked the door, but it didn't move.

"Those are Thanatos' chains. You can't break them."

Hades grabbed Hypnos and walked both of them through the wall. Cerberus stopped when he saw his master, but he soon began barking again.

"What is he playing at?" Hades asked.

"He's taken her. It's his way to defy you."

"Defy me?"

"He's stolen your queen. You'll do anything to get her back."

Hades balled both his hands into fists. "Including giving the Underworld to him."

Hypnos nodded. "I thought he'd given up the scheme after Zeus warned him all those years ago. I think his jealousy made him forget that."

"He'll have taken her to the Chamber of Darkness. No one can enter it. He will pay for this."

"But if he's taken her there, won't she die and be trapped there forever?"

Hades felt his heart jolt, but then he shook his head. "No. I protected her from all of it. No powers of the Underworld can affect her. I would never have brought her here if I couldn't do that."

A strong hand landed on his shoulder. "What have you done?"

Hades turned to Zeus, who was dressed in full armor and carrying a sword. "Thanatos has taken Persephone."

"And you let him?" Zeus roared. The pressure of Zeus' hand increased exponentially.

"I wasn't quick enough. You took your time getting here."

"I was in the mortal realm."

"Where, at a Renaissance fair?" He could care less if Zeus threw him across the room.

Zeus brought the sword tip to Hades' neck. "I was at a costume party, but the armor and sword are quite real. Where is she?"

Hypnos spoke up. "We believe he'll have taken her to his inner sanctum."

"That means it's up to her to escape."

"She is a goddess," Hypnos continued. "Can't she protect herself?"

"She's never had to before. What if she doesn't know how? His powers are so unlike those of others." Zeus kicked the bed and threw his sword down.

Hades felt his mind spinning faster and faster. He was powerless. He couldn't save her because he couldn't get to her. His brain filled with gruesome images of Thanatos forcing himself on her. He tried to push them away, but all he could think of was her crying out for him to help her. And he couldn't.

"Do something!" he yelled. He pushed his brother. "Fucking do something!"

Zeus pushed him back. "You are responsible for this. You left her unprotected."

"We came as fast as we could," Hypnos said. "Cerberus tried to protect her. If you want to place blame, it's me you want. I knew Thanatos was jealous and wanted her for himself as much as he wants the Underworld. I of all men should know what's in his heart, so the failure to protect her is mine."

"It's not your fault," Hades said. He turned to Cerberus.
"Go, Cerberus. Find your mistress and quard the door. Let no

one leave the room." He touched the wall so Cerberus could leave the way he and Hypnos had entered.

Cerberus growled and ran out of the room.

Zeus watched him go. "Will it work?"

Hades nodded. "Those chains were unbreakable, and Thanatos was lucky Cerberus was inside the room, not outside. Cerberus cannot be killed, but he could have killed Thanatos. And he would have done it to protect Persephone."

Zeus stood very still. "And what happens if it comes to that? If we kill the god of death?" He seemed to be addressing this question more to Hypnos than to Hades.

Hades had no idea. "Is it possible?"

"Perhaps we shouldn't worry about it. Persephone's rescue is all that matters. If he can be killed, then his death couldn't harm the world," Hypnos said, looking at Zeus. "The cosmos balances itself in the end."

Hypnos seemed very confident, not to mention calm, and he and Zeus appeared to be hiding something. Hades knew Hypnos' loyalty would fall with him and Persephone, but the coldness of his statement bothered Hades. "I want to rip Thanatos' heart out, but Hypnos, he's your brother," Hades said. "Wouldn't you rather see him punished than killed? Don't you care whether he lives or dies?"

Zeus held up his hand. "We don't have time for this debate. I need Ares and Hephaestus. We have to think." He grabbed Hades by the shoulders. "Go to Hera. I don't give a fuck what you want. Go to her and stay there. Now that he's gone this far, he wouldn't hesitate to kill you, and you're so upset you'd run right into it. Hypnos, go and tell Demeter.

She can't do anything, but she'll be uncontrollable if she finds out and thinks we were hiding it. Then come back to me."

Hypnos bowed to Zeus and left, disappearing in a swirl of white smoke.

Zeus shook Hades. "Are you listening?"

He grabbed Zeus' arms and threw them off his own. "He knows he has little chance of winning. He's going to take what he can, do what damage he can. She's the only woman I could ever love. I want his head, Zeus. How can you of all people tell me to just go to Hera and wait?" He lowered his voice, trembling with rage. "She's as close to you as any of your daughters, if not more so, and you know he's going to rape her. How can you bear that thought?"

Zeus' eyes flamed. "Go to Hera. Now. He will wish he'd never even looked at her when I'm done."

Zeus disappeared in a burst of flame. Hades didn't even flinch as the heat rushed against him. He reached out with his mind and couldn't find Persephone. She was in the Chamber of Darkness. He swore that once he got her back he would never leave her side again.

Persephone opened her eyes to a very dark room. Torches lined the walls. She was naked and lying on a bed. Her arms were chained over her head. She tried to break them with her mind, but it didn't work. She tried again.

"It won't work. They are special, made by Hephaestus himself."

She turned to see Thanatos come out of the shadows. He wore black leather pants and nothing else.

"You must be completely insane." She was so shocked at what was happening she couldn't even be scared. "Do you know what Zeus will do to you? What Hades will do if Zeus lets him have the chance?"

"Not if you protect me."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because I am willing to do what Hades will not. I'll give you what you desire so much." He sat on the bed, and his gaze fell on her breasts.

"I love Hades. No other man will touch me."

"Maybe you should have told him that tonight then, if it's even true. He will give me his crown to free you. Will you still want him when he's no longer Lord of the Underworld?"

"Of course I will!" I love Hades. I do. I am in love with him. Why didn't I tell him? Why did I get angry and deny it when he pulled away from my touch? Even if he'd been doubtful, he'd have believed me in the end. We've grown so close, but now...

Thanatos ran his hand over her breasts. She tried to pull away, but the chains that held her were very short. His hand drifted down her stomach and then over her thighs. She squirmed to get away from him. He flipped her onto her stomach and forced his hand between her legs as he pressed his body on top of her. His rough hand scratched and chafed at her. She pushed and struggled as hard as she could but he was too strong for her.

"You are going to be so much fun, little one," he whispered as his rough fingers began to work into her.

And then he screamed and jumped off of her.

Persephone lay completely still. Her heart raced, and she felt tears running down her cheeks. A chill went down her spine as he thought of his body pressing hers down, his coarse fingers worming into her pussy, him forcing his cock into her brutally. Her body felt very hot, but it seemed to be more than fear.

She rolled over. Thanatos glared at her from the corner. His chest was burned, the skin pink and covered in blisters. The hand that had been violating her was twisted and warped as though he'd thrust it into an open fire.

"Nice trick, you little whore."

She felt her body grow even hotter. "You of all people should know I'm not a whore. Considering where your hand just was, you should know I'm a virgin."

He stood and walked over to her. His skin seemed to be healing, if slowly. He reached out his other hand, and she was shocked when he ran two fingers over her breast. She heard the skin sizzle. He snatched his hand away. She looked down, amazed her own skin looked normal.

He groaned loudly. "I do enjoy a little pain with my pleasure. Perhaps not this much though." He looked deep into her eyes. "How are you doing this?"

"I don't want you touching me. That's all I know."

His eyes narrowed. "You can't maintain it forever. You'll weaken. I will be the first to take you." He leaned forward. "And you will scream, my girl. Whether from pleasure or pain, I can't say I'll care."

He turned abruptly and went to the door. He opened it and started to leave, but he soon fell backwards.

Persephone sat up as much as she could and craned her head to see. Cerberus stood outside the door. He tried to get in but he couldn't. He began whining frantically and pawing at the invisible barrier.

"I'm okay, Cerberus. I'm okay." She sighed with relief.
They had heard her. They knew where she was. They would
come for her.

She concentrated and a simple black dress appeared on her body. She brought her hands together. Her skin felt cool to her own touch, but she still felt hot all over. She hoped her defense was still working, as she had no real idea how she was doing it or how to control it. Was someone else protecting her, giving her a power she didn't really possess?

Thanatos shot daggers at her with his eyes. "I think you're more trouble than you're worth."

"Hades doesn't think so. That's why I love him."

"He tricked you."

"He made a mistake. He regrets it, and I forgave him."

"He hasn't fucked you."

"He loves me. I'm more than a pussy and a nice pair of tits to him."

Thanatos smirked. "If you want to believe that. That's all any woman is."

"Care to say that in front of Hera?"

He turned away from her and retreated around the corner. The chamber was large, but there were no mirrors so she couldn't see what he was doing.

"You're trapped here, aren't you?" she called. "This is the Chamber of Darkness. Hypnos told me about it. That door is

the only way in and out, even for a god, and it is the only place no one else can enter. They can't come in, so they won't let you out."

She heard a thud, like a bottle being set down on a table. He came back around the corner carrying a drink. The liquid was completely black.

"Stop talking."

She wanted to say "make me," but she shifted and sat back against the headboard instead. She didn't know where Hades was, but she knew he would come for her.

Ares watched as Alala ran from the room in tears. Persephone was her best friend, so she'd demanded to be told what was happening when Zeus and Hephaestus appeared in their dining room. He and Zeus had tried to reassure her, but she'd turned from both of them, mumbling incoherently against the male gender.

Zeus took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Ares, I need something that will kill him."

"Can you do that?" Ares asked.

Zeus nodded. "Trust me when I say we can. All will be explained later."

Ares didn't question his father. He looked around the room and thought. "We may need to make something new."

"That's why I needed you both. I need a new sword, but we need to make it from something old. Something that has harmed a god or at least an immortal. He's strong, so it cannot be an ordinary weapon."

Ares nodded. "Yes, that makes sense. We should go to the weapons room." He led them out into the hall and up the

stairs. He approached the large double doors at the end of the hall and pulled a large black key from his back pocket. He always had it with him, since many of the weapons in the room were sacred and very powerful. He turned it in the middle lock, and a succession of clicks followed as the nine interconnected locks worked their way open.

He pushed the door open and a rush of air and dust went past them. He snapped his fingers to light all the candles, as it wasn't safe to have windows in the room. After the dust cleared and his eyes had adjusted, he led them all in.

Ares looked around. "Over here might be best." He went to a long table and pulled back the linen covering it. Several swords lay there. Ares examined them.

He ran his hands over them. "Most of these were used in the Trojan war. Aphrodite gave this one to her son Aeneas, and he returned it when he went to the Elysian Islands. This one was used by Theseus to slay the Minotaur. Dionysus' wife Ariadne gave it to him."

Zeus hefted the sword and examined it, swinging it in a circle.

"I recognize this one," Hephaestus said. "I made it at Hermes' request, and he gave it to Perseus to fight Medusa." He picked up the curved sword. "It's made from adamant."

"Yes, that might do," Ares said. He took the sword from Hephaestus and wiped the dust from its blade. He examined it for traces of blood that might impede its power as it was remade into a new blade.

"We should combine it with this," Hephaestus said. He held up a sickle, also made of adamant judging by the look of it.

Zeus set Theseus' sword down and walked over to Hephaestus. He took the sickle from him. "I remember this." He laughed.

Ares looked at the blade, trying to remember.

"Cronus used it to castrate his father Uranus," Hephaestus explained. "This was before our time."

Ares raised his eyebrows. "Why did he do that?"

"His mother was tired of Uranus, I believe, and wanted her sons to rule. Cronus was the only one willing to do it, so he was the one to rule." His expression grew dark. "I think it's appropriate to use against Thanatos, considering his crime. Cutting his balls off would give me great pleasure."

Zeus nodded. "Let's hurry. Is the forge still through here?" "Yes, down the stairs back here," Ares said.

Hephaestus followed Zeus, and Ares shut and locked the door to the weapon room and the door to the forge behind them.

"Should we call Hades?" Ares asked.

Zeus shook his head. "No. Not for now. Hypnos will help me."

Hephaestus broke the blades off each weapon easily and put them together to melt over the fire. Colorful sparks and green smoke rose as they combined. Magic had been used to forge both of them, it seemed. Ares felt antsy. He knew they were working as fast as they could, but he knew he wouldn't have had the ability to obey his father if Alala were in danger like this. He wondered what his mother was saying to Hades. He was most likely blaming himself. Ares wanted to check on

Alala, but he didn't want to leave in case they might need him further.

The floor and the building shook. A chill followed by intense heat rippled briefly through the air.

"What was that?" Ares asked.

"Demeter, I imagine," Zeus said. "Hypnos has told her. I thought it best not to keep her in the dark."

"Shit." The best he could muster at such moments was thunder, but he could only imagine how powerful the earth goddess' grief was. She probably believed her daughter was already ravaged and possibly dead.

Hephaestus worked very quickly, forming the mold with his hands. Ares saw the smoke rising from them as he worked. He'd heard that Hephaestus could melt and form metal with just his hands, but he'd never seen it done. He and his halfbrother didn't have much of a relationship. Sleeping with Aphrodite had definitely contributed to that distance. Hephaestus had always acted like it meant nothing, but Ares had always suspected Hephaestus had been falling for Aphrodite when they were together, which explained his proud denial of any feelings for her at all. Aphrodite had joked about how infatuated and possessive Hephaestus was, how many times he'd told her he loved her. He'd laughed at the time, believing she was trying to make him jealous, but now Ares wondered if any of it had been true. Now it seemed cruel of Aphrodite to joke about such things. Thinking of Persephone and Hades had turned his thoughts this way, and he jumped when he realized Hephaestus was watching him.

"Persephone is safe. Did you hear me?" Hephaestus said.

"No," Ares said. "I was thinking of Alala. Sorry."

In his mind, he heard Hephaestus very distinctly say, *No, you weren't.* But instead of reacting, he turned back to his work and repeated what he'd apparently just told Zeus.

"Thanatos must be using my chains to hold her. I feel her using my power. If he touched her, he's very badly burned. Perhaps it's a sign she's safe from his touch."

"The power you just used to shape the mold?" Can he read my mind or sense my thoughts because we have the same mother? I didn't feel it. He tried to keep his expression blank.

Hephaestus nodded. "If she's bound by my chains, yes. The situation is extreme. If she was afraid, she could have used my power." He began pounding his hammer on something small. "Hopefully Thanatos won't figure that out though."

"I hope you're right," Ares said. He looked up to see Zeus glancing between the two of them. When he didn't look away, Ares tried to think of something to say.

But Hephaestus spoke up. "Do you have a bow?"

"Yes," Ares replied. "There's one here." He pointed to a table off to the side.

Hephaestus thrust six arrows at him. "These are made from the excess metal." He then began to hammer out the blade of the sword.

Ares stared at the arrows, and then at the sword, marveling at how fast his brother had worked. Before he could speak this time, someone knocked on the door of the weapon room. He sensed it was Hypnos, and he opened both doors for him.

Zeus took the arrows and picked the bow up from where Ares had indicated. "Can you get the Helm of Darkness?" he asked Hypnos.

"Yes. It's in Persephone's room. She was using it today."

"You and I are the only ones who can go. Take these." He gave him the arrows and bow. "Wait for me outside the Chamber of Darkness. I'll follow soon."

Ares felt lost. Perhaps he'd been away from the battlefield too long.

Hephaestus handed the sword over along with a metal ball. "Throw it into the room. When it breaks, the spell will shatter Persephone's chains. She will be able to run out of the room if you can hold Thanatos away long enough."

Zeus nodded and disappeared.

Ares shook his head. "Why didn't we ever work more closely during the great wars?"

Hephaestus wiped the soot from his hands. "I didn't like you. You're mother's favorite, and I also seem to recall you were fucking my girl."

At least that opened the door for him to ask. "Did you read my mind?"

"I felt your thoughts turn to Aphrodite, and then I felt your guilt. It's over now. I shouldn't have said anything."

Ares nodded. "Yes, it is over, but when Aphrodite told me Eros was my son, I was surprised a little. I'd always thought it might possibly have been you. I thought maybe you felt cheated since most people thought it was me even before she told."

"I didn't care about Eros. I knew he wasn't mine."

"How?"

Hephaestus looked him in the eye. "It had been too long since we'd had sex. Our relationship was never as simple everyone thinks."

"But you two were still together then, right? That was when you ended things. The day Eros was conceived."

Hephaestus didn't answer.

Ares suddenly realized why Aphrodite had found Hephaestus so frustrating. "What I really wanted to say was this. When she told me Eros was my son, she also told me about you two ending. The things you said really hurt her. She's been so upset lately I think it would mean something if you two made up. She needs friends now more than ever."

Hephaestus pushed the anvil over, sending the hammer flying across the floor. "I've been trying to make up with her for years." He pointed his finger at Ares. "You were always in the way. But you were like the others. You only wanted to fuck her. That's all she was to you."

Ares stepped forward until Hephaestus' finger touched his chest. "I love her very much. We weren't meant to be together, so we never fell in love. That doesn't negate my feelings. I loved being with her. She was my best friend for a long time." He saw the flames in Hephaestus' eyes, exactly like his own. "But you...you are in love with her."

Hephaestus took a deep breath and backed away. "And she'd be upset if we fought, so let's not." He set the anvil upright and put the hammer on the table. "Do me one favor?" "What?"

"Don't tell Mother. Not yet. I want her to welcome Aphrodite as my wife, and she won't do that now, not so soon after what Aphrodite did to you."

Ares closed his eyes, wondering if maybe he'd wake up when he opened them. He didn't. "You want to marry Aphrodite?"

"I will have no other as my wife. Perhaps I should have asked you to back off long ago, but it doesn't matter now. You have Alala. It's a risk telling you, but I had to tell someone, and you of all people know why it's important not to tell Hera. Please promise."

Ares considered. If keeping the secret would protect Aphrodite, he'd do it, no matter how angry his mother might get when she found out. "Okay. I promise." He shook his head. "Has anyone else noticed this whole place going mad?"

Hephaestus smiled, which came as close to shocking Ares as his declaration had. It was something he'd never, ever seen before. "Perhaps," Hephaestus said, "we're becoming more like humans."

Ares stood alone in the forge as Hephaestus left. He hoped it would be a long time before he saw Aphrodite again. He had no idea how he'd hide what he'd learned.

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Chapter 9

Hades sat on Hera's bed. Demeter was at his feet, her head in his lap, crying hysterically. They'd felt the ground beneath them tremble, and then a few moments later Demeter had burst into the room. She still hadn't said a word. She'd hit him repeatedly with her fists, and he'd let her. He'd hardly felt it. However, the parts of his arms and chest that were visible had turned a bright pink that was now darkening to purple.

Hera paced by her mirror. That was the most likely way they'd hear from Zeus. They wouldn't be able to travel as they usually could from the lower parts of the Underworld. They had to be in the upper parts to appear and disappear as they normally did, so finding a pool of water or mirror might be the quickest way to report that Persephone was all right.

Hades stroked Demeter's hair. "I can say everything you want me to say. It's my fault. I'm sitting here uselessly while Zeus does all the work. I should never have taken her. I was wrong to ever leave her alone and unprotected. I should have made Cerberus stay by her side constantly."

She looked up at him and punched him in the stomach. Then she sat back against the edge of the bed and pulled her legs close to her chest. She sniffed several times in her efforts to stop crying.

Hera looked down at her sister sadly, and then met Hades's gaze.

He shook his head. "I can't stay here. Surely Zeus didn't mean for me to stay here while he goes after Thanatos."

"If he hasn't sent for you, you should stay here!" Demeter said sharply. "Do something right for once."

"I can keep saying I'm sorry, but that undoes nothing! We were starting to understand each other when I came to talk to you a week ago. Despite that, you can't deny you would not have given me permission to court her."

Demeter wiped her cheeks and rubbed her left eye before looking at him. "You're right, but someday I would have relented. If you hadn't gone behind my back and started influencing her, I might have agreed after only a few months, once I'd seen you were sincere." Fresh tears started to fall. "You have no idea how much a mother wants to protect her child! You don't understand!"

Hera came and knelt by her. "I know how you feel, but Zeus will save her. You won't always blame Hades for this. And Hades, you know very well he meant for you to stay here. You're too emotional." She poked Demeter. "So are you. This is not Hades' fault."

Demeter gave Hera a fake smile. "So are you and Aphrodite going shopping this weekend?"

Hera's expression hardened and she stood and turned away.

"I thought not," Demeter said. "Your ideas of right and wrong behavior never apply to you and your actions. You can be petty, but I'm supposed to be mature and act properly when my child is in danger?"

Hades touched her shoulder. He was glad when she didn't pull away. "Don't fight with Hera. We've all fought with each other enough to fill centuries. Remember how we were before the others came? Before any of the children were born? The six of us acted liked spoiled brats."

"We fought back then," Hera said. "We bickered constantly when it was just the six of us. We drove each other crazy." She met his gaze. "We all remember, Hades. We began to grow after Aphrodite came, after Ares was born."

"But before the others, before we did so much in the mortal world, we never tried to hurt each other. We never hated each other."

"I don't hate you, Hades," Demeter said. "I hate myself." "Demeter, don't—" Hera began.

"She left because she hates me! I kept her so protected she never thought anyone could hurt her. If I'd let her be normal, you wouldn't have had to sneak around. If she'd seen the threat earlier, Thanatos couldn't have taken her. No one had ever looked at her too harshly without feeling my wrath. Who can blame her for not realizing others might try to hurt her?"

"You can't take the blame for that!" Hades protested. "We don't know what happened. She may not have had enough time to think about anything. Thanatos is very powerful."

"He's insane," Hera said. "What did he think would happen? You love her. Zeus sees her as a daughter. She's my only niece and Demeter's only daughter. Everyone who has power over him loves her."

"He wants the Underworld."

Hera shook her head. "He doesn't have your powers. He couldn't judge the dead."

Hades stood and began pacing. "He doesn't see it that way. He thinks he is death. Literally. He's not just the god of death. He believes he *is* death itself. Zeus and I discussed this when he rebelled before. It will be his downfall."

"Why?" Demeter asked.

"He believes he cannot die."

"What? He can't believe that. Even Zeus could die. Only the Fates are truly immortal."

"I've talked about it with Hypnos as well. Thanatos believes no one can kill him. He's not afraid of being bound as Prometheus was or of being trapped in the Underworld. He's not afraid of torture or punishment because he believes he can escape or convince someone to have mercy on him in the end."

The door opened, and they all turned to see Ares enter the room.

Hades walked over to him. "What's happening? Where are they?"

"They left almost an hour ago. Hephaestus made a sword for Zeus to use, and he also made some arrows for Hypnos. You've heard nothing?"

Hades shook his head. "What's their plan?"

"They didn't take the time to explain. Freeing Persephone first of all. Getting Thanatos to leave the Chamber of Darkness may be difficult though."

"I wish they'd let us know what's happening," Demeter said.

Ares looked at Demeter and then back at Hades. "She's protecting herself. We think she's been able to stop Thanatos from...uh, hurting her in any way."

Demeter stood up and moved toward him quickly. "What? Are you sure?"

Ares nodded. "Thanatos has chains made by Hephaestus that no one can break. Persephone isn't just some nymph or powerless creature. She's a goddess. He must have bound her with those chains because Hephaestus says she could use his powers to protect herself if she were in enough danger simply because she was touching the chains. He told us he could feel her using them."

"She could burn him!" Hera said. "Oh yes, yes! Demeter, it is true, I swear. Hephaestus can melt any metal with his hands, and he can summon fire from nothing. If she's doing that, he can't put a finger on her."

Hades felt a glimmer of hope. He knew Zeus would save her, so his worst fears were of what she might endure until then. He watched Demeter move back to the bed. She sat down slowly and took several deep breaths. He didn't like how she was blaming herself. No one had ever approved of how protective she was of Persephone, but it wasn't anyone else's place to interfere. He also knew Persephone loved her mother and didn't resent her, no matter how much she had hated all her rules and attempts to control her life.

"How's Alala?" Hera asked quietly.

"She's upset and scared. She wanted to be left alone so I came here," Ares said.

As Ares and his mother talked and tried to distract Demeter, Hades stared into the mirror, willing it to change and bring them good news.

Aphrodite woke suddenly. Her mind was clouded because she'd been sleeping for nearly twenty-four hours. Hephaestus had called her. She snapped her fingers and went from sitting on her bed to sitting beside him on the couch in his bedroom.

"You were sleeping deeply," he said. "I had to call you twice."

"Sorry. I sleep a lot lately."

"Are you that unhappy?"

As usual, she found it hard to lock onto what he was feeling. "No. I'm worried. I have a lot on my mind right now."

He reached for her hand and ran his fingers over it gently. "I hope you're thinking about what we talked about, even though I hope it isn't what's distressing you."

"It's everything. Apollo's depression is worsening. I'm powerless though. I'm still anxious about Hades as well. I don't want to see him hurt."

He squeezed her hand. "That's another reason I called you. Persephone is in trouble."

"What?" Aphrodite reached out with her mind. She felt negative emotions from everyone. "Where is Persephone?" She reached out again. "Zeus. Where is Zeus? I can't feel them at all."

"Thanatos has kidnapped Persephone. Zeus and Hypnos have gone to the lower parts of the Underworld to save her."

Aphrodite shivered. Thanatos had always given her the creeps. It wasn't only because he was the god of death.

Something deep inside him was different, different in a very bad way.

Hephaestus put his arm around her and drew her close, and she let him. "Thanatos frightens you?"

She nodded. "I think he frightens almost everyone." She smiled a little. "Maybe not you."

"I get frightened at times."

She didn't turn her head. She knew if she looked into his eyes she'd kiss him. That wouldn't be fair to him. "We all do."

"I have to tell you something else."

"What?"

"It might have been a mistake, but something about this situation made Ares want to talk about the three of us. He wanted to clear the air."

She turned to look at him. "So you did? That's good. I don't want you to resent him. I should never have come between you."

"I told him."

She stared into his eyes. "What did you tell him?"

"That I love you and want to marry you."

"We're already married. Did you tell him that?"

"No, and we're not married in the true sense of the word."

"Why did you do it?"

Hephaestus sighed. "It happened, okay? It's amazing we both kept this secret for so long."

Aphrodite saw no harm in confessing that she'd told Alala. He couldn't very well get angry with her. "Things could get interesting. Alala and I talked about some issues of our own

recently when she first became concerned about Persephone. I told her the entire story. She knows we're married."

"So Ares and Alala know?"

She nodded.

"Why did you tell her?"

"I had to tell someone. It was driving me mad." It was the truth. Keeping their secret had been weighing on her more and more since he'd told her he wanted her back.

Hephaestus sank back against the couch, releasing her hand and drawing his arm away. "Driving you mad? I see."

Aphrodite regretted the words she'd chosen. "I didn't mean it that way."

"You wanted me once."

"Of course I did. I never said I didn't care for you."

"Ares said my words hurt your feelings. You told him that? That I'd hurt you with what I said during our fight that day?"

"What?" Ares had told him about that? What had he said?

"He said the things I said when this all ended before, when you were pregnant with Eros, hurt you."

"Of course they did! I cared for you and you insulted me."

"I spoke out of anger. I offered you all my love, and you still wanted to chase other men."

"You forced me to marry you. I wanted my freedom."

He leaned forward, very close to her, and touched her cheek. "I did force you to marry me. I could think of no other way to keep you. You're the only thing I've ever wanted."

She turned her head so his hand fell away. "I've told you I don't love you."

"I know." He pulled her against him. "I haven't touched you since that day. Tell me if you still desire me."

She closed her eyes, but she didn't push him away. She wanted to let him hold her. She knew how good it would feel. "It wouldn't be fair. I'm upset and scared." She opened her eyes. "It would be just like leading you on. I've done enough of that. We're friends. I want my friend back. He's been gone since you said you wanted me back."

"Do you want to leave and go to the others?"
She shook her head. "I'm afraid of seeing Hera."
He nodded. "I see. Let me comfort you then."
"We can't make love. The way you feel changes things."

"I'm not trying to seduce you. That's the difference between love and lust. I want to show you love, make you feel loved."

She pulled out of his arms and stood up. After walking a few feet away, she said, "Do you know how much it hurts when you say things like that?"

"As much as when you tell me you don't love me, perhaps? I simply don't want you to forget. I don't mean them to hurt you."

"They do though. Do you think I get a thrill out of you wanting me so much? Do you think it's this romantic fantasy that makes me smile and feel special?" Tears pooled in her eyes and soon began to spill down her cheeks. "Do you know how much I wanted to love Hermes because I admired him so much? How much I tried to fall in love with Ares because we were so close and had such amazing sex? I'm incapable of love! You'll only get hurt."

He stood and went to her. She didn't resist when he pulled her close.

"You love more than any other being. It overwhelms you. You feel so much."

"That's what Ares says," she whispered.

"He's right." He swept her into his arms and went back to the couch, settling her in his lap as he sat down and wrapping his arms around her.

She rested her head on his shoulder and wiped at her tears. "Can we stay like this until someone calls for us?"

"Yes."

After a few moments, she said, "I never told you if I tried to love you or not."

"It doesn't matter."

"I didn't. I thought we weren't right for each other, so I never tried. I never even considered it until the day you asked me to marry you."

He rubbed her shoulder and turned his head a little to press his cheek to her forehead. "Does it make any difference?"

"I don't know." She sighed and wrapped one arm around his chest, snuggling closer on his shoulder. "I only wanted you to know. It's not that I couldn't love you. I never tried."

She listened to his heart beating as he remained silent. His silence often frustrated her, but sometimes his still, silent strength was very comforting. Things would be different after this, but even she wasn't sure yet what that might mean for any of them.

Persephone rolled her eyes. "You're doing this all wrong. You need to work on your 'reveal my evil plan' speech."

Thanatos gripped the footboard of the bed and leaned forward. "I am trying to tell you something you should already know. Once I have power, others will be willing to admit they don't like being ruled by the likes of Zeus and Hades. They drove out the Titans, so I'll drive them out."

"No one rules here. The Titans chose to leave after they got tired of the conflicts. Come on. If someone is really upset they run to Zeus or Hera, but we all live and work together."

Thanatos shook his head and smiled. "Not down here, little one. The Underworld is still a kingdom. Once I have it, I can take Olympus."

"Zeus will kill you first."

His smile broadened. "You keep telling yourself that."

Persephone was beginning to wonder where Zeus was. He could enter the Underworld. She knew he and Hades couldn't enter the Chamber of Darkness, but what about Hypnos? Hypnos was now her best friend after Alala. She knew how much he cared for her. Now she understood why he and Thanatos were not close. It had also become very clear why he'd warned her to avoid his brother. She wished her thoughts could penetrate the room and reach him. Even though she was cut off, she could almost feel Hypnos' sense of guilt. He'd warned her, and then that very day he'd let her be taken. She knew he would see it that way. Hades would also see it as a way in which he had failed. He had no idea she'd been able to protect herself from being raped by

Thanatos. What would he be feeling if he thought that was what she was enduring right now?

"You look sad, little one. Once this is over, I won't harm you."

His voice sounded sickeningly sweet. He was enjoying torturing her the only way he could.

"Why do you want to rule? The work Hades does seems like a burden at times."

"The Olympian aristocrats are spoiled brats. They need to be overthrown. Hades will still judge the dead, if I let him live."

She glared at him, but didn't react. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

"And you'll be one of my consorts. Dreadful shortage of blondes here. Aphrodite's a stupid bitch. Eris may be right to be my queen. Nice and feisty."

Persephone could not stop herself from laughing. "Now I know how insane you are. Eris would rip your heart out if you tried to touch her. Ares would resurrect you so he could have the pleasure of doing it too."

"You need to start changing your tune, little one." He came and sat on the bed, but she noted he didn't touch her.

"And why is that? All of Olympus is going to be against you for this."

"I cannot die."

"Yes, you can. If Zeus can die, so can you."

He shook his head. "No, I can't. I am the god of death. How can I die?"

When it was put like that, it made enough sense to make Persephone nervous. "But Zeus is more powerful."

"Zeus has grown lazy and comfortable. I can take him." "No, you can't."

Thanatos slapped her hard. He lost some skin, but as he stared at his hand he looked like he was enjoying the pain.

Persephone backed away as much as she could.

"I really don't like that dress," he said. He reached for her, but a crash made him jump up.

The doors of the room had splintered into a million pieces. Zeus stood there in full armor carrying a sword.

Thanatos laughed. "All the theatrical crap does you no good if you can't get to me."

Zeus threw a metal ball into the room, but Thanatos dodged it easily.

"Missed."

The ball broke and blue smoke filled the room. Persephone felt her chains fall away. She glanced quickly between the two men. Thanatos was looking at Zeus. She inched toward the edge of the bed. She saw Zeus tilt his head to the side without looking at her, as if he meant for her to run from the room. She hoped he knew what he was doing.

She bolted up, but Thanatos grabbed her. He wrenched her arms behind her, and she felt a snap in her right shoulder. She screamed as the pain spread, and she realized both that he'd pulled her arm out of socket and that she wasn't burning him.

"You seem to have lost your powers, little one."

"Let her go!" Zeus's voice boomed and shook the chamber. Behind him Cerberus growled.

"She's mine now. There's nothing you can do about it. Not a very clever trick, dissolving her chains. That the best all of you could come up with? Maybe you'd enjoy watching me make her a woman? I know how much you love her, Zeus. I'd love making her scream for you."

An arrow came out of nowhere and hit Thanatos in his shoulder. He screamed and grabbed at the arrow. Persephone kicked at him several times and then dashed for the door when he released her. She ran behind Zeus, throwing her arms around him as her heart pounded with fear.

Zeus squeezed her hand tightly and kissed it. "I've released her from Hades' spell so she can leave the Underworld. Take her to Apollo. She's in a lot of pain."

She looked around, but she only saw Cerberus. Then Hypnos appeared, removing the Helm of Darkness. She tried to move toward him, but suddenly every muscle in her body throbbed.

Zeus helped her into Hypnos' arms. "Using Hephaestus' powers has weakened her. Find Apollo. Now."

As Hypnos carried her away, she heard Thanatos yelling after them.

"Yes, run away, as always! She doesn't love you. She will never love you! Pandering to these fools gains you nothing! You could have everything!"

She felt weak and dizzy. "It hurts," she whimpered as she clung to him.

Hypnos kissed her forehead. "You will sleep. Apollo can help you."

Everything began to go dark, but she managed to say. "He's the fool. I do love you. You're my...friend."

Hypnos held her closer as he moved up toward the surface. "I know, Persephone. Sleep now."

She closed her eyes, hoping Hades would be the first thing she saw when she opened them again.

Zeus stood glaring at Thanatos. The only thing preventing him from taking the scum's head off was the protective barrier placed over the door. The Chamber of Darkness was Thanatos' refuge, the one place he could change from his corporeal form. Hypnos could change into a mist anywhere, but then dreams couldn't hurt anyone. Death could.

"I know what a coward you are, so I'm assuming you won't come out."

Thanatos gave him a smug look. "I could and would. Don't feel like it now."

Zeus threw his sword down. "What if I'm unarmed?"

"Doesn't matter much either way." He smirked. "You think your get up is scary?"

Zeus snapped his fingers, and his armor was replaced by black pants and a green sweater Hera liked. "I can't say I was thinking about my appearance. I was thinking about saving someone I love. You can't understand something like that."

Thanatos crossed his arms. "Nope. Not one of my problems at all. Aphrodite has turned all of you mad. Everyone's going at it, falling in love and trying to be human.

Too stupid to admit marriage is little more than guaranteed sex."

"I'm done talking. Nothing you say matters. I am challenging you. Tomorrow at dawn."

"I didn't fuck her. Check for yourself. You know you want to."

Zeus stomped his right foot, and everything around them shook. He smiled when Thanatos fell back against the fireplace.

"Judging by those burns, you tried to, you piece of filth. I've treated some women very badly, but I openly admit it and dare anyone to say I haven't changed over the years. Any man who could harm that sweet child is no man at all."

Thanatos rolled his eyes. "But the fact is I didn't succeed. You can't challenge me for kidnapping her. Hades is basically guilty of that, and you chose not to act then. Sets a bit of a precedent."

"I am the king of the gods, and I do as I please. You will come with me, and the six of us shall vote as to whether you live or die. If you choose to protest, you must fight me."

"You can't do that."

"Your plan was to overthrow Hades and rule the Underworld, was it not?"

Thanatos didn't answer.

"I'm sure you didn't sit here in silence. I can tell by your response you told Persephone enough for us to prove it. You were warned the first time. This time you will be judged." He took a small bag out of his pocket. It had been a present from Ares a long time ago. He removed ten metal pellets and

dropped them to the ground. Each one burst into flame, and from the smoking metal arose ten Greek warriors. "You will come with us. These men cannot be killed by your touch, but it doesn't truly matter. As soon as you step from that room, I will bind your powers."

"You can't make me."

Zeus rolled his eyes this time. "You are an idiot. Your own estimation of your worth has really gone to your head. Now that Persephone is safe I'm not afraid to do this." Zeus cleared his throat. He hadn't used this power on anyone in a long time, but he was sure it still worked. "I, Zeus, command you. You will come with us!" His voice made the ground shake.

Thanatos walked out of the room very quickly, stumbling awkwardly as if he'd been pushed across the threshold. He lunged for Zeus, who held up his hand. Thanatos stopped and watched Zeus make a fist. Zeus smiled as he opened his hand to reveal a black marble.

"It will be placed in your brother's keeping. It will be his if you lose."

Thanatos grabbed Zeus by the shoulders. Nothing happened.

"Tyrant," he whispered as two warriors pulled him away.

Zeus followed behind as the men led Thanatos up toward the surface. Tomorrow they would meet and pass judgment, something that had not been done for nearly four hundred years. As long as the Fates did not intervene, he felt assured Thanatos was going to get what he deserved.

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Chapter 10

Persephone groaned. Her arm ached. She opened her eyes and saw Apollo sitting beside her, massaging her arm.

"Hi," she said weakly.

"Hello. How are you feeling?"

"Better."

"We were afraid you might be in shock. You should have woken up a while ago."

"I'm not in shock. I was scared, but it wasn't...um..." She felt very flustered suddenly, blushing under Apollo's gaze. She looked into his eyes and quietly said, "He didn't."

"I know." He placed his hand on her abdomen. "I was able to check without being, well...invasive."

She smiled because she thought he was blushing. Wasn't he supposed to be worldly and roguish now? She touched his hand as she remembered the silly stories he'd told her so long ago when she a little girl. She wondered how many other people in Olympus she had the wrong impression of. "Thank you. He didn't hurt me at all until Zeus arrived. Then he got scared. He knew it was all over." She looked around. "Where is Zeus? Where is Hades?"

He squeezed her hand with genuine affection. "Zeus has not yet returned, and Hades is outside. Shall I get him for you?"

"Yes! Who else is here?"

Apollo smiled. "Lots of people. Alala and Ares, Hera and Hypnos. And your mother."

Persephone took a deep breath. "Let me see Hades first. Then the others can come." She tried to smile. "I'm surprised my mother hasn't burst through the door."

"Hera convinced her you needed rest. I'll bring Hades in."

Hades burst in as soon as Apollo opened the door and said his name.

She sat up, trying to think of the very best thing to say to let him know she was okay, but he stopped her with a deep kiss. She gave into it, and as she did so she wished they could be alone much longer.

He looked deep into her eyes when he released her. "I swear no one will ever hurt you again. Ever."

"He didn't hurt me."

Hades held her face in his hands, then ran them down her neck and over her body before cradling her head in his hands again. He couldn't seem to touch her enough. "I was going mad when I thought of what he wanted to—"

"Don't think of things like that," she said as she placed her finger on his lips. "He didn't, and that's what matters. I was scared, but the Fates protected me. He's so much stronger than me. He didn't have to chain me. He did though. Hypnos explained it all to me while I was sleeping."

"He did? So that's where he went."

She nodded. "He told me how I used Hephaestus' powers. He came to tell me why you weren't there, but I wasn't even thinking of that."

"How could you not be thinking of that?"

"I could only imagine what you'd be going through, and deep down I'd been hoping Zeus would keep you away. Something could have happened to you."

"I could have saved you myself though."

She stroked his face. He looked so anxious, and she was amazed he could think she would criticize him or think any less of him. "Thanatos is different. Remember when he rebelled before? He nearly killed you then."

He stiffened. "How do you know that?"

"He wouldn't stop talking. He told it from his own perspective, but because of that I know how close you were to dying. He touched you with only half his power on purpose because he needed you until Zeus gave in. Apollo had to work hard to save you."

He put his arms around her waist. "Let's not talk about any of it. Just come here." He kissed her again, a long and luxurious embrace that made her melt.

She pulled away reluctantly. "After Hypnos left me, I had time to think before I woke up. The Fates did something else today."

"What?"

She ran her hands over his chest, smiling up at him. "Can't you guess?"

"They scared me to death and made me determined to never let you out of my sight again."

She laughed. "And because of that, I'll let you."

He considered this, but still looked confused. "I don't understand."

"I'll let you 'never let me out of your sight again.' Hades, I'm trying to say yes to your marriage proposal. The moment I knew what was happening, I didn't think of myself. I thought of you. I thought of how scared and angry you would be. I couldn't stop thinking of how worried you would be. I couldn't think of myself at all. I only thought of you."

"You're sure?" he asked before she could go on.

She rolled her eyes and hit him in the chest with both of her hands playfully. "I was pausing for effect, my love. If you'd given me five seconds, I would have told you how deeply I've fallen in love with you."

Before she could blink or even take in his reaction, he'd brought his lips to hers and pushed her back into the pillows. She couldn't breathe, but she didn't care. She reveled in the feel of his hot body pressing her down, the urgency and joy of his kiss.

Reluctantly, she pushed him up. "I want you so much, but if we don't stop, my mother may break the door down."

He smiled and quickly kissed her again. "You're right. I'll bring everyone in."

He went to the doors and opened them. Hera, Hypnos and Ares came in and moved to her bed. Demeter stood outside the door though, and Alala seemed to be urging her to come in.

Persephone looked at everyone, but no one said anything. "Mother? What's wrong?"

Demeter looked at her, but she didn't move.

Persephone swallowed, feeling confused and apprehensive. "I know you're angry, Mother, and I'm sorry, but—"

Demeter shook her head adamantly. "I'm not angry." She strode into the room and sat on the bed, taking Persephone's hands.

"How can you not be angry?" she whispered.

"It was all my fault! If I'd given you more freedom, you wouldn't have run away. If I'd been more open, Hades wouldn't have had to sneak around to see you. It's my fault."

Persephone did not believe what she was hearing. She'd never have imagined anything breaking her mother's spirit like this. Her mother was serious and reserved. She never showed any emotion to anyone, unless it was anger.

"Mother, it's okay now. You don't have to apologize.

Anything you ever did made me who I am, and Hades loves me the way I am." She squeezed her mother's hands. "I know you might not approve, but I love him, and I want to marry him."

Demeter let the tears in her eyes fall. "Yes. Of course." She hugged her daughter tightly.

Persephone once again had trouble breathing, as much from amazement as from anything else. "It's okay," she whispered to her mother. "Everything is okay now." She pulled back and smiled at her, and then she looked at everyone else.

"I think," she began, "I owe everyone an apology. When I told Hades I wanted to run away with him, he could have been anyone. He could have been someone like Thanatos. He could have been some crazy mortal. I probably could have handled a mortal man, but how did I know? I had no

assurance the person I'd been talking with truly loved me. I had no way of seeing how it would end. I'm very sorry."

Demeter shook her head. "We were scared, but everyone except me understood why you did it. It's over now. You're safe, and you can be happy now. You can do anything you want."

Persephone looked at Hypnos and Hera. "What's going to happen to Thanatos?"

"He's going to be judged. It's likely he'll have to fight Zeus because he'll object even if his punishment is light," Hera said.

"He told me he can't die. I wanted to tell Zeus, but the pain clouded my mind. Is he okay?"

Hera nodded. "He's fine. Thanatos is imprisoned. Judgment will be tomorrow."

Ares spoke up. "Thanatos genuinely believes that. He wasn't trying to scare you. It's not true though. He can die just as any of us could if the circumstances were right."

"He could be sentenced to death as his punishment, or die if he fights Zeus and loses?"

Ares nodded. "Hephaestus made a new sword, one that could deliver a deathblow to a god."

Persephone swallowed. "And to be fair, Thanatos would be given the same kind of weapon?"

"If it comes to that," Hera explained. "Don't fear for Hades though. Challenging the judgment is a direct challenge to Zeus."

She nodded slowly. "I've caused everyone so much trouble."

Hades kissed her forehead. "The blame then is mine. All of this can be traced back to my actions."

"Why doesn't everyone stop talking and start being happy?"

They all looked up to see Zeus enter the room.

Persephone smiled and held her arms out. "My hero!" He came over and hugged her, and she kissed him on the cheek before looking at Hades and saying, "No offense meant."

Hades embraced his brother as well. "None taken. So long as your crush on your hero is long over."

She blushed furiously as Alala giggled.

"Don't worry," Alala said. "Her major crush was about fifty years ago. My first clue he wasn't really her father."

Persephone threw a pillow at her friend. "Let's move on to that being happy thing, shall we? Much better than the teasing Persephone game. I think the first step involves my future husband taking me out for some fresh air."

"Are you sure? Shouldn't you rest?" Demeter asked.

Apollo said, "It will do her good. She needs to move around. It will help her body adjust as her arm completely heals itself." He looked at Hades. "But make her rest if she seems tired. The healing process will leave you a little drained. Drink this first." He handed her a glass of purple liquid. "It will purge the effects of using Hephaestus' magic. You had a lot of power flowing through you."

She drank and immediately felt better. She took a deep breath as Hades helped her stand.

Zeus began to move everyone out. "We all have things to do. Ares, I want you and Hypnos to stay with Thanatos, just in case." He handed Hypnos something. "Keep this safe."

Persephone saw Hypnos close his hand over a black marble, but when he let his hand fall by his side it was gone.

Demeter stood and kissed her daughter. "I'll see you later. Come by before you go home. Hera and I have to go find Hestia for the judgment."

"We will." She watched her mother nod and smile at Hades before turning to go. Her mother had called the Underworld her home. That small gesture meant more to her than anything her mother had said. She knew she had her mother's blessing, and nothing could go wrong so long as she had that.

Alala ran up quickly and hugged her. "No more garden romps until you're better though. Save it for the wedding, which I'm going to start designing dresses for." She punched Hades in the arm. "I told you not to worry."

Persephone blushed yet again. "I did tell her about the time in the garden," she whispered. "I didn't know you two had talked that much."

"Only a few times. I wanted it all to be perfect, and she did kick my ass verbally a few times, just so you know we weren't exactly conspiring together." He took her hand as they walked toward the door.

"It will be perfect now."

She held his hand tightly, knowing she was exactly where she belonged.

Persephone noticed how quiet everything was as they entered Zeus' palace. As she and Hades made their way to the throne room, a door opened.

"Persephone!"

She looked up and saw Hestia standing in the doorway smiling at her. She walked to her aunt quickly when she opened her arms to her. Hestia wore a simple linen dress with a hemp cord at her waist. Her brown hair fell simply down her back, and though her green eyes were dramatically highlighted by brown and green eye make-up, the rest of her look was natural. Hestia was the only goddess who lived completely in the mortal world. She had not been back to Olympus for any reason in several decades as far as Persephone could remember.

"It's wonderful to see you," Persephone said. "Despite the circumstances."

Hestia continued to smile as she took Hades' hand and joined it with Persephone's. "Everything is going to be fine. The Fates have worked out all things for the good."

"I hope so," Hades said. "It's hard to be sure at times."

Hestia rubbed their hands before releasing them. "You can be sure of this."

Hades finally smiled. "That means a lot coming from you." Hestia was the goddess of the hearth and the home. In a roundabout way, she had just given her blessing for them to make a home together. She often said things the way the Fates did, saw things the way they did. At this moment, it wasn't melodramatic. It was very comforting.

Persephone sighed. "Are they ready? Should we go in now?"

"All is ready. We were only waiting for you to arrive. A place is reserved for you by Hypnos. Hades and I must sit with the others."

She nodded. "I've never been to anything like this. It's a little frightening."

"We're all safe. No one can use any powers in that room unless Zeus allows it. Everything is bound so truth can be revealed without anyone being afraid."

"Don't be afraid," Hades said. "If Demeter or I sought a judgment based on vengeance, the others would check us. We would lose our right to vote. He will be punished in the best way and only as severely as he deserves."

"You reading my mind now?" she asked. "I was just hoping you'd all be fair."

He kissed her forehead. "I don't want you to be afraid of what happens. Justice is always served when we balance one another."

She took a deep breath as they all walked toward the door. She didn't know what would happen, but more than anything she wanted it to be over, no matter the outcome.

Hades stared down at Thanatos as he stood before the six of them. Zeus and Hera sat in the middle on their thrones with Demeter and Hestia seated by Zeus and himself and Poseidon next to Hera. Hypnos and Persephone sat off to the side. Ares and Hephaestus stood a few feet behind Thanatos, acting as his guards. The Fates sat on the opposite side of the room from Hypnos and Persephone. They were veiled heavily

so no one could tell them apart, and one of them sat in front of the other two. This arrangement implied they already knew the outcome.

The door opened again, and the Furies entered. Tisiphone, Megaera, and Alecto positioned themselves in front of the door after it closed.

"I must be very important," Thanatos said.

Zeus kept his face neutral. "You cannot use your powers, but you could escape. If you do, the Furies will pursue you until you are caught, no matter how long it takes."

Thanatos looked back at them, brazenly eying the three women up and down. "I might let them catch me very quickly."

Hera spoke. "Why do you speak so foolishly? This meeting will decide whether or not you shall still exist an hour from now."

Thanatos met Hera's gaze. "We shall see."

Zeus stood and said, "You are not being tried for kidnapping Persephone. We all know you are guilty, and you will be punished for that regardless of the outcome of this meeting. You are being tried for your intention to try to overthrow Hades and conquer the Underworld a second time. You were warned before, but this time you will be held accountable for your actions."

Thanatos bowed, acknowledging this. Then he looked at Hades. "I do not think I should be punished at all for kidnapping Persephone. Hades was not."

"Persephone went with him of her own free will," Zeus said.

"She didn't know who he was though."

"But once she did, she didn't say no. Her screaming for three people to help her implies she said no when you kidnapped her."

Thanatos looked at each of them before speaking again. "If he hadn't brought her down there, I would never have been tempted. Seeing that he was able to take a beautiful woman just because he wanted her reminded me how corrupt and disgusting all of you are."

"He courted her," Hestia said, "even if it was unconventional. He loves her and would never harm her. Hurting someone you love with your rash actions is not the same as maliciously seeking to cause them pain."

Thanatos laughed. "More excuses."

Hestia continued, "Sex is a beautiful thing, and it is enjoyed very freely by most of us here."

He leered at her. "Not by you."

She smiled. "No. Athena, Artemis and I each made the decision to remain a virgin long ago. It is a decision and condition that should be honored and respected. To rape a virgin is a double crime, both as a violence to the girl and an affront to love and the beauty of sex as well as a showing of disrespect for the state of innocence and the woman's right to choose who receives such a beautiful gift from her. It is, to use your words, corrupt and disgusting."

"You are so full of shit! Zeus has been forgiven. Or are all of you too afraid to remember he wasn't exactly the first feminist?" He fixed his gaze on Hera. "But maybe some women do prefer men who treat them like that."

Hades was having so much trouble controlling his temper he couldn't believe Hera was not reacting more.

She sat forward and said, "Yes, he has been forgiven. Very often he was punished with no help from us. The children of some of the more questionable unions, whether heroes or otherwise, often brought a great deal of pain to us and to men."

"So that makes it okay?"

Hera shook her head. "No, and it never could. Justifying someone and forgiving someone are two different things. Subtle, yes, but different. We will never forget no matter how much time has passed, and learning is what is important."

"And one thing we have learned is that forgiveness should always be a possibility," Zeus added.

"You're going to forgive me?" Thanatos asked.

Poseidon asked, "Have you learned something?"

"I'm sure I can make up some bullshit to make all of you bleeding hearts happy enough."

Demeter stood. "I should be demanding punishment for you, but I'm not. It is against my nature to destroy life."

"And I exist only to do precisely that. Perhaps I should fuck you instead. The child might be interesting."

Hades leapt to his feet. "You will not speak to her like that!" He looked to Persephone, who clung to Hypnos' arm with both her hands. She was terrified by what was happening.

Zeus motioned for him and Demeter to sit down. "Demeter is right. None of us wish your death. We only want to protect those we love, as well as the natural order of things. You can

attack me all you like. You can say all the lewd things you can think of. We are questioning your threat to the world of the gods."

Thanatos looked over at the Fates. "Why debate this for show? You've already decided."

Zeus shook his head. "The Fates already know what will happen. They are only here because this is an important event. It's fitting they should be present."

"This trial isn't even real. It's to make you look good."

"Your punishment is going to fit your intentions this time. The time for warnings is over." Zeus looked at everyone. "We are going to confer now. Please escort the prisoner out."

Ares and Hephaestus took Thanatos from the room with little trouble, and the Furies guarded the door. They all, except Persephone and Hypnos, went into Zeus' private chamber behind the thrones. Hades looked back as the doors closed. He saw the Fates come to guard the doors to the chamber and then he saw Persephone speaking rapidly to Hypnos. She seemed flustered and confused, but there was nothing he could do. He joined the others at the table, waiting to see what Zeus would propose to them.

Persephone tried to stay calm, but she couldn't. She didn't want Thanatos to die, no matter what he'd done, but she also didn't want him to be able to take his revenge on Hades.

"Persephone, do you realize what Zeus gave me earlier?" Hypnos asked.

Persephone thought, and she remembered Zeus handing him a small ball the night before. "Yes. A black marble? Something like that. What does it mean?"

"He gave me Thanatos' powers. He could not harm any of us now."

"That's comforting, but only for now. Zeus will give him back his powers once his punishment is over, if not immediately. He's guilty of plotting, but he didn't do any harm."

Hypnos gave her a long, hard look. "He kidnapped you. Even if he couldn't hurt you, you were afraid. Hades was beside himself, and everyone was in an uproar. We all knew the danger because he tried before. He inflicted harm, Persephone."

"I know. I'm still not sure how I feel though." She shrugged. "People throughout history have died for treason. Do we have treason here?"

"Of course we do. The problem is, those who have committed treason have usually won, so punishing rebels is a bit new."

Persephone wanted to go home. She wanted to walk in her mother's garden, and then she wanted to go home with Hades. And tonight, she wasn't going to let him deposit her in her own bed while he camped out on her couch. "Whatever they decide, we'll all be safe?"

"Don't you trust them?"

"Yes. I'm scared though."

"So you think he should die?"

She sighed. "No. It's like what my mother said. Destroying life, to me, is the ultimate crime. It's unforgivable."

The doors opened before Hypnos could say anything else. They all took their places again, and the Fates drifted back

across the room. They sat down in the same order. Persephone still couldn't tell them apart through the veils, but the woman in the blue dress still sat in front of the ones in the green and yellow ones. She hadn't expected them to change places, but it would have been interesting if they had.

Zeus clapped once, and the room shook a little. Thanatos was brought back in.

"Are you ready for your sentence?" Zeus asked.

"Sure," Thanatos said. "It won't matter."

Zeus paused, but then he stood and said, "Your powers will stay in your brother's keeping. You are no longer bound to the Underworld in anyway. In fact, you are now forbidden to go there, like everyone else."

"You, Hermes and Iris go there," Thanatos pointed out.

"I am the king of the gods, and Hermes and Iris are our messengers. It is needed, at times. You are being denied free access because it was the source of your temptation. You will still have all of our basic powers, but the special powers you were created with are now gone forever. They were what made you a threat. Otherwise, you are free to do as you like."

Persephone finally let out the breath she'd been holding. It wasn't perfect, but if he could no longer kill with his touch, he would be far less likely to start any trouble. In the Underworld, she and Hades would be safe from him.

Thanatos shook his head.

Hera said, "We have been more than generous. You have complete liberty. You will endure no pain or imprisonment. What more could you want?"

"Everything. And I can have it." He turned to Ares. "Bring us weapons. I challenge the verdict and therefore Zeus. I will fight to keep my powers."

"If you are sure," Zeus said. "You will only have your strength and skills to rely on. All other abilities are bound in this room."

"That's fine. I don't need them."

Zeus held up his hand. "Before you absolutely decide, I need to warn you that you can die. These are weapons forged by Hephaestus, and Apollo will not be allowed to step in and heal either of us."

Persephone held her breath. She had no idea if Thanatos would believe Zeus or not. She held Hypnos' hand. No matter what he'd done, they were brothers, and that meant something to her. She knew she could never turn from her brother, no matter what.

Hypnos squeezed her hand. It's going to be okay.

How can you know?

Simply believe that I do.

Thanatos turned to Ares again. "I won't relent. Bring them."

Ares looked to Zeus, who nodded, and then he walked to the back of the room. He brought back two swords wrapped individually in black velvet. He handed one to Zeus. "This sword will be new to most of you. It was made from the sword of Perseus, which was used to slay the gorgon Medusa, and the sickle which Cronus used to castrate and thus overthrow his father Uranus."

Zeus uncovered the sword, the adamant shining darkly. The handle was dark copper, and a thunderbolt was engraved on it.

Thanatos laughed. "Well, you aren't going to unman or overthrow me." He turned to Ares. "Well? What do you have for me?"

Ares paused for a long moment, but then reluctantly handed the man preparing to fight his father the other sword. "This sword will be very familiar to everyone. It's yours. The sword of Death. It can kill anyone simply by cutting a lock of their hair."

Thanatos smiled as he hefted the dark gray sword in his hand.

Persephone stared from Ares to Zeus.

Ares said, "And I wish for it to be known that I am returning it to you against my will. Zeus commanded that these be the swords brought here today."

Persephone turned to Hypnos. "What is it?" She could certainly understand why Ares looked so angry as well as why Hera watched Thanatos so closely, but she wasn't sure of the greater significance.

"It was taken from him by Zeus when he rebelled before. It has been with Ares ever since then."

"Why is Zeus doing this? He has nothing to prove."

"Perhaps he wants everyone to know justice has been served."

"By making it easier for him to die?"

Zeus and Thanatos had begun to circle each other. Zeus struck first, but Thanatos blocked him. He countered and

Zeus did the same. Persephone turned her head away. She heard the swords clashing together, but she didn't want to watch. Yet somehow only hearing it made the experience so much worse. When she looked back up, the Fates were standing.

The woman in the blue dress stepped forward slowly, raising her veil. Persephone had only seen the Fates once, but her mother had told her their story hundreds of times. In the story, the three women sat at a spinning wheel. Clotho spun the thread and gave life, Lachesis measured that life out, and then Atropos cut the thread to bring death. All three women were blonde, so when her veil was pushed back, Persephone still did not know which one of them was about to intervene. And who would she act on, Zeus or Thanatos? Was she going to save Thanatos or kill him? At the same time, she couldn't stop thinking that the death of Zeus would logically be something the Fates would have a hand in.

"Who is it?" she whispered to Hypnos.

"Atropos. She has blue eyes."

Persephone moved closer to him, but she turned back to the scene when she heard the gasps. Atropos held the sword of Death in her hand. She had plunged it through Thanatos' heart. His hands grasped the sword, and his face very clearly reflected how shocked he was.

Atropos spoke softly, but her voice still echoed throughout the room. "You will destroy us all if we let you. We cannot let it be so."

Thanatos fell backwards onto the ground, and his body dissolved into black smoke. Atropos stepped past Zeus and

walked to Hypnos. Persephone held to him tighter as the woman approached. Atropos knelt and offered the sword to him. "You are now the god of death once more. Your once divided soul is now whole again, all its evil purged."

He accepted the sword, and in that moment his hair changed. It darkened and turned deep silver. Atropos walked away.

Persephone looked at Hypnos, her hands still gripping his upper arm. "What does she mean?"

He looked down, and then met her gaze. "My brother and I were once close, very close. We were inseparable."

She felt the truth deep her in soul and finally understood. "You were one man. Not twins. You were one man," she whispered.

He looked away. "Yes. I was the god of both, but when I corrupted the dreams of men on purpose and tried to take power that was not mine, Zeus split me in two. With a thunderbolt."

"Painful?" she asked softly.

"Yes."

"And the 'evil purged'?"

"What was corrupt in me became Thanatos. His desires were mostly satisfied by the use of his powers, but not always." He touched her hand. "I knew all of his darkness, which is why I did not want you near him. I could easily imagine all he was capable of."

Persephone felt fear rolling off of him in waves, and he kept his gaze averted. "Hypnos?"

"Yes?"

"You are my friend. I am not afraid of you. This all seems very strange, but I know you. There is no evil in you."

"If I had told you, perhaps you'd have been safe. Death is part of me again though. How will it affect me?"

"You don't have to worry about that, Hypnos," Zeus said.

They both looked up at the king of the gods. Persephone asked, "You know this?"

Zeus nodded. "The Fates and I knew the split could not last forever. We simply did not know how it would end."

Persephone couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Did everyone else know about this but me?"

"No. Only the Fates and I. Hypnos knew, but Thanatos had no idea. In the minds of the others, Hypnos and Thanatos had always been twins, two aspects of one concept. Only we knew they were in fact two sides of the same coin in a more literal way. Thanatos was the bad one, the rebel who tried to overthrow Hades. No one else remembered the days before Thanatos existed."

Hades walked to Persephone quickly, and she gladly went into his arms.

"I would have told you, but I was sworn to secrecy, even from Hades," Hypnos said. "I couldn't take that risk."

"So I didn't have to be afraid of anyone dying because no one has died," she said.

"Not really, no." Hades held her close. "I learned the truth only moments ago. It's why I was so afraid when he took you. Thanatos had no conscience. Only fear kept him in line. He had no idea he and Hypnos were the same person. Once

he began to believe he was so special he couldn't die, he became hard to control."

Lachesis walked up to the group, and Persephone looked at her. "You were meant for many things, my dear, and one of them is to love Hades. Another was to heal the Underworld. Hypnos learned much over the years as he watched Thanatos, and now that he is whole again, the light will always overcome the darkness within him. He is better and wiser for what has happened. Though unpleasant, your ordeal has brought redemption."

She extended her hand, and Persephone took it. Lachesis kissed her on the forehead, and then vanished. The other Fates vanished as well.

Persephone looked up at Hades. "Take me to the garden. I want to walk in the sun for a while."

"And then?"

"Take me home," she whispered.

He kissed her gently, but she felt the fire beginning to blaze deep within him. He could object all he wanted. She had no intention of waiting for their wedding night.

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Chapter 11

Persephone let Cerberus go out into the hall, and then she shut the door behind Hades and locked it.

Hades turned around and raised his eyebrows. "What are you doing?"

"Keeping you from getting away." She ran her hands up his chest and locked her hands behind his neck. "I don't want to wait until our wedding night. I want you right now."

He stroked her cheek, but he didn't say anything.

"Please don't say no. We only waited because you wanted to be sure I'd marry you. You wanted us to make love after I'd fallen in love with you." When he continued to just look at her and caress her face, she asked, "I mean, you've had sex before. We don't have to wait, do we?"

He laughed. "I wasn't objecting, sweetheart. I was only savoring the moment."

She tugged his hair playfully. "Don't do that to me!"

He twined his fingers into her hair and tugged back. "What do you want me to do to you?"

"Everything." She pulled his face down so she could kiss him. As their tongues danced against each other and he pressed his body close, she thought about how it would feel when he took her. She kissed him more urgently. When Thanatos had attacked her, she'd only partly been afraid of the pain or humiliation. She'd been angry that it would mean Hades would not be the first and only man to be inside her and touch her that way. But the Fates had been looking out

for her. They had known, deep down, that she could get over being assaulted or injured far better than she could get over the emotional anguish of Hades being robbed of this night. Her dark thoughts were soon replaced by joyous ones as she gave in to his embrace.

He pulled away and ran his hands down her arms. "This is how I pictured you our first time."

She felt cool silk on her skin. She looked down at the simple white silk slip gown. She smiled suggestively. "Want to know how I pictured you?"

He laughed as he massaged her shoulders. "I'm not sure if I do."

She touched his face and looked down. He wore nothing but black leather pants.

He laughed more heartily. "Ah, I was a stereotype. I see." He toyed with the straps of her gown. "You may have to pay for this."

She turned around and pressed her back against him. His chest felt hot, and she rubbed her ass against the bulge in his pants. "Make me pay for it then."

He groaned and began kissing her neck. "I may have trouble reining myself in if you go on like this, my dear."

"Then don't. Give me everything. Please." She slumped against his body as his hands moved up and cupped her breasts.

He rolled her nipples between his fingers. "I don't want to hurt you."

She tilted her head back to look into his eyes. "You could never hurt me." She turned and began leading him to the bed. "Come make love to me."

The fire in his eyes made her entire body tingle. She felt her own need building deep inside. When they reached the bed, he turned her to face it and gently bent her over it. He pushed her hair aside and ran his fingers over her back, tracing her spine and then swirling his fingers in patterns over her skin. A sweet, hot aching curled deep inside her belly. His touch tortured her. She liked his gentleness, but she wanted so much more.

As if he'd read her thoughts, he took the straps of the gown in his hands and ripped it in half. She gasped as the air hit her skin. He placed his hand firmly on her shoulder and leaned forward. His hot breath on her neck sent a ripple of pure lust through her.

"I can feel your need, my love. It's practically filling the room," he whispered in her ear. He nibbled on her neck and moved to her left to begin kissing her back. He held her firmly as his tongue drew circles on her hot skin. His hand inched lower and lower until his fingers played back and forth between her butt cheeks. He slid one finger down, growling deep in his throat when he felt her wetness. He bent down further and sank his teeth playfully into her left buttock.

She gasped as he spread her further, inserting one finger, then two. He knelt down behind her and found her sensitive nub. He brought his hand down and toyed with it as his other hand continued to explore her hot, wet pussy. She gasped

again when his lips latched onto her clit. He sucked gently before slowly circling it with his wet, rough tongue.

She found it hard to support herself on the bed. She relaxed her arms and sank onto the sheets. He slid his fingers out of her and began lapping at her pussy. Her blood surged hotly as his tongue teased her sensitive skin, surging into her with a maddening rhythm. When she moaned, he pulled away and ran his hands up her body. He lifted her up and turned her around.

"My love," he whispered as he kissed her.

She melted into his arms. "I love you."

He kissed her deeply, and then reluctantly pulled away. "I love you so much. All I am is yours, my heart." He swept her into his arms and placed her on the bed. He climbed onto her slowly, never taking his gaze from hers.

"Please, Hades, I want to feel you now," she pleaded.

He smiled and kissed her neck before rubbing his cheek against hers and whispering, "I will always be yours to command."

She spread her legs, and he settled between them. He sat back and looked at her, exploring with his fingers again. His gentle touch and hot gaze were driving her mad. She arched her hips upwards when he ran one finger over her wet slit. He smiled down at her and got up to remove his pants. His cock stood out hard and thick when he threw his pants aside. He rubbed it as he looked into her eyes and moved back onto the bed. She felt the heat of desire coursing through her even more. He repositioned her hips and moved back on top of her, resting his arms on each side of her head. He moved to her

entrance and pushed in slowly. She was so wet he slid in several inches before there was any resistance. He paused and kissed her.

"Take me, please," she said against his lips.

He pushed into her slowly. She wrapped her arms around his chest and kissed him as he moved deeper. His cock was thick and long, so she shifted upwards. It was uncomfortable, but it didn't hurt.

He broke the kiss, gasping for breath. "You feel so perfect." He pushed deeper. "Gods, you're so wet." He pushed further, and then began to move in and out slowly. He kissed her cheek. "Are you okay?"

She nodded, "Yes, Love me."

He moved faster, and she held him tighter as it began to feel different. She felt a very pleasing friction that got even better when she arched up more. She moaned.

"Yes," he said as he kissed her neck. "Show me how to please you. Teach me what you like."

She shifted more and wrapped one leg around him, trying to push him deeper. She gasped as the head of his cock rubbed a very sensitive spot. After a few thrusts, it began to feel very good. The throbbing desire deep in her core curled tighter.

"Hades, I think I'm going to come."

He tilted her head so she looked into his eyes. "I can feel it. It's amazing." His voice was low and husky. "I want to feel you trembling and shattering around me."

She dug her nails into his back as he moved faster. She held his gaze. "I'm so close. I'm yours now. Completely

yours." She brought her lips to his as she began to tremble. A few more seconds and she felt her orgasm begin. Slow ripples of pleasure came and then another thrust from him made it truly break. Its intensity made her cling to him more. The all-consuming rapture burning through her was even better than the day he'd made her come in the garden. The feel of his hot shaft inside her was intoxicating. As she writhed in pleasure, he continued the exquisite rhythm. Her pussy pulsed sweetly, and she was even more sensitive to his attentions. He thrust deeper, and she climaxed again. She whimpered against his mouth. "Yes, oh yes." He began to move more slowly as she milked his cock. Their lips finally parted, and she took in the pleasure on his face with great satisfaction.

She ran her fingers through his hair. He'd slowed his movements, surging in different ways. He obviously wanted to make her come again, but she had a more interesting idea. They had all night after all.

She pulled on his hair very hard. He gasped, and she was almost certain she felt his cock get even harder as it jumped slightly within her. "You're mine to command?"

He smiled down at her. "Oh yes."

"You'll do as I say?"

He nodded and tried to kiss her, but she held his head so he couldn't bridge the final inch. She opened her mind to him and felt his desire building rapidly.

"Then you will come exactly when I say."

His eyes darkened with lust and he nodded more slowly this time.

She arched her hips and caressed his shaft. His breathing became more labored as she repeated the motion several times. She teased his lips with her tongue, biting gently before pulling back out of his reach. "Faster. Give me more."

He pushed deep into her and thrust harder and faster. She closed her eyes and ran her hands over her breasts. She felt his body tense. She looked back up at him and smiled wickedly. She ran her fingers over his lips, and he took three of them into his mouth, biting gently.

"Come for me."

He grabbed both her arms and pushed her down on the bed. With two hard thrusts, he spilled into her. He pressed her into the mattress and kissed her, tasting her deeply and thoroughly. She moaned and returned his lusty kiss as he groaned and collapsed onto her.

"Is this a taste of how demanding my mistress shall be?" he asked when he'd caught his breath.

"Just a taste. It was only my first try. I'm sure I'll get better."

He rolled off of her. "My beautiful queen," he said softly as he stroked her face.

"Lover," she replied.

"Wife," he said with renewed fire. He moved closer. "I do hope I haven't worn you out."

She shook her head and pushed him onto his back. She ran her hands over his stomach, and then down his thighs. His cock stirred.

"We're just getting started."

Persephone had looked everywhere, but she couldn't find Hypnos. She sat down on the grass and sighed. "Hypnos? Are you here? I need to ask you something. It's for the wedding tomorrow."

A shadow fell over her, and she looked up at Hypnos.

"Are you avoiding me?" she asked as she stood up and brushed grass off her skirt.

"Not on purpose. Do you need my help?"

"Yes. I want you to do something in the wedding."

"What?"

"I want you to give me away."

His face still didn't show any emotion, but he did become very still. "Wouldn't it be better for Zeus to do that?"

She shook her head. "He's going to officiate. Aphrodite will still bless our vows, but Zeus is going to do the talking. I think he's pretty excited."

"I'm not sure I'm the best choice."

"You're my closest male friend."

"You know what I mean."

It had been one month since Thanatos had kidnapped her, one month since it had been revealed through his demise that he and Hypnos were two parts of the same person. All of Olympus had adjusted to this as the cloud the Fates had put in place to protect their secret had dissipated. They all suddenly began to remember when the splitting of Hypnos' personality had happened and why. They also enthusiastically rejoiced in the fact that it had come to an end because it signified to them that the plan of the Fates had worked.

Persephone could tell Hypnos did not share everyone else's opinion. He had many doubts and fears.

"Yes, I do, but I want you to give me away. I think what happened makes it even more appropriate. It affirms the good that has been done."

He frowned. "I understand, but I vaguely remember some things." He reached up and touched her cheek. "The bruise faded quickly, but I know he hit you. I can almost remember it."

"But that wasn't you! Zeus and the Fates did this for a reason, and it worked. Because of who you are, the darkness will always be there. Hasn't this done something good? Don't you agree it worked? How could you feel such guilt if it hadn't? Isn't that part of how Tartarus works?"

"Yes, everything you said makes sense. It doesn't change how I feel. The first day you were here, when I—"

"When you kissed a beautiful woman because she practically begged you to?"

He looked helpless, as if he didn't know what to say.

"I'm good at sensing what others feel. That day, you wanted to give me pleasure. That desire came above your own desire not to displease Hades. You want to love. Maybe now you can."

His brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"You weren't whole for so long. You couldn't love anyone because loving someone takes everything within you. You're a better man now. If you won't believe the Fates, will you believe me?" She reached for his hand. "I could never be afraid of you. You would never hurt me."

"We can't settle this in one conversation, Persephone. Can you please choose someone else?"

"No." Getting Hypnos to accept this honor meant so much to her. Since his transformation, she'd felt fear and guilt from him constantly. At times though, she felt a peace that somehow caught her attention. He'd always been calm before, but something about it had seemed hollow. Now, in those rare moments, she felt his peace was more contented. She could think of no other way to describe it.

"If you command me, I will do as you say."

She rolled her eyes and threw his hand down. "You know, the men down here are very stubborn."

To her joy, he laughed. "There's not much to be done about that."

She held her hands together in a beseeching gesture.

"Please, Hypnos. Remember what the Fates said? I was meant not only to love Hades but also to heal the Underworld? I want everyone at my wedding to see how true it is."

"It means so much to you?"

"Yes. I will respect your feelings, but I will be very unhappy if you say no."

He bowed his head in submission. "I will not make my queen unhappy."

"Your friend. Before anything else, I am your friend."

"More than anyone else ever has been."

They stood in silence for a moment. "I want you to come fetch me in the morning. I'll be at my mother's house."

He nodded.

"She approves. So does Hades. I asked them both if they thought you'd say yes. They were hopeful you would. It will make them happy."

He took her hand and quickly kissed it. "I won't ruin your day or mar your happiness. In time, I will see things your way."

She squeezed his hand. "Yes, please believe that. I know you will."

He released her hand and walked away.

She sighed and looked up at the sky. After a moment, she heard humming. She looked around. In the distance, she saw that someone had joined Hypnos as he walked further into the Valley of Dreams. The figure was petite and wore a dress. Persephone stared for a moment. Somehow, she couldn't sense who the woman was. Something blocked her. Was the woman one of the dead? Was she dreaming?

That had to be it. The woman was asleep. Persephone had never seen anyone in the Valley of Dreams, except for the day she had watched Hades judging the dead. She wondered if Hypnos had met the woman before. Would he feel different now? She hadn't thought about how mankind had been affected by Hypnos once again being the god of both sleep and death. She hoped it was going well for him, but more than anything she hoped he would come to her and Hades if he needed help.

When Hades was told he could kiss his bride, he wanted nothing more than to carry her straight back to their bedroom. However, he decided against it to avoid the wrath of his new mother-in-law. Demeter pulled Persephone out of

his arms and hugged her tightly as most of the gathered guests surged forward.

He truly hadn't expected this big of a turnout. He inched closer to Hypnos. "Any chance of putting them all to sleep together and letting them dream all this?"

"You trying to get me in trouble again?" he asked.

Hades looked up at him and felt relieved when he smiled. His transformation finally seemed to be doing some good. At first, it had been confusing and almost debilitating, but now that Hypnos had adjusted he'd definitely regained lots of personality. Hades had always been annoyed by this void in Hypnos, but at the time he hadn't been aware Hypnos' personality literally had been stripped away. Hypnos as he was after being split into two separate beings had been both the perfect servant and the most boring person to be around. Hades had always simply accepted that the two brothers were meant to be complete opposites. It all made sense now that he knew the truth. The first spark of independent thought or action had come with Persephone's arrival. Hypnos' uncharacteristic behavior, and the passionate embrace he and Persephone had shared in and of itself had told Hades something significant was going to happen to Hypnos. He simply hadn't expected anything so dramatic. The Fates had been right not to tell him because everything would have been different if he had known Thanatos' true nature, and Hypnos' fate might have been a less happy one as a result.

"No. Not at all. I'm glad you were willing to give Persephone away."

Hypnos looked at Persephone and smiled wider. He turned back to Hades. "I'm glad she asked me. It meant a lot to me. I think you've gained a diplomatic advantage with her. Demeter's old-fashioned ways might not be perfect, but Persephone knows how to send a message without saying a word. Her choice showed people how she feels about me and what happened, and it shows that the Fates were right about her effect on the Underworld. They've all been reassured that what Zeus and the Fates did was for the best."

Hades nodded. Hypnos had a good point. Despite her lack of socialization in Olympus for so many years, Persephone looked perfectly at ease accepting everyone's congratulations and good wishes. "I think you're right. Apollo said you're all right then?"

Hypnos nodded. "My headaches have stopped. I think everything is going to be fine now."

"Good. Keep an eye on her if I get trapped talking to anyone. I think she's still nervous."

"She does seem a little anxious. Why?"

He sighed. "For so many years, no one knew her very well, especially not men. Only Zeus and Hera really knew her. People thought she was dumb. You know that. No one held it against her or said anything, but they all dismissed her as a silly girl and didn't think of her as a goddess."

"I think Eros could relate to that. It's hard living in that kind of shadow. It's a very mortal feeling."

"Exactly. She hasn't said anything, but I know she wants everything perfect."

"I'll do my best. You may be occupied for a while."

Hades followed Hypnos' gaze and saw Hera pushing through the crowd. He smiled, but he knew she was carrying cameras by the way she carefully moved around everyone. When she finally emerged, he saw she did indeed have one around her neck and two in her hands.

"Why do we need those?" he asked. "It's not as if we couldn't create pictures right out of our own memories."

"I like real stuff. Stuff I can touch." She handed him the ones in her hand. "But take them for now. I'm tired of holding them anyway."

"Isn't this Aphrodite's job? You know, annoying people at weddings?"

Hera smiled. "She's busy." She pointed across the room. Aphrodite was talking to Hephaestus. They both looked very serious.

"What's going on?"

"Hephaestus has fallen for someone, finally. I kept pestering him to talk to Aphrodite, but he wouldn't because of their little affair all those years ago. I guess he was embarrassed or thought it would get complicated." She rolled her eyes. "Who knows? Ares is so much easier to understand. The point is, he's either being too shy or the girl isn't interested. He's taking his sweet time, but it looks like this could get things rolling."

Hades looked at Aphrodite's face. She'd smiled genuinely and been very pleased to bless his union with Persephone, but he'd felt how heavy her heart was when she'd joined their hands. How could Hera not feel it?

"You two talking more?"

Hera thought. "Not officially, but yes, we're fine. I'm going to talk to her today. She meant well. She would never have tried that spell if she'd known it might hurt Ares. We've gotten through worse, and she's a good friend. We all need each other. I'm glad things aren't like they once were."

Hades nodded, though he wondered if Hera would be so enthused if she noticed the look in Hephaestus' eyes. He touched Aphrodite's shoulder and whispered to her. He walked away before Hera looked back, but Hades knew that look. He wasn't sure how it had happened, but he was willing to bet his whole kingdom Aphrodite was the girl Hephaestus had fallen for. It certainly helped to further explain Aphrodite's mood.

He decided to take a chance. "Let's go talk to her." He offered his arm to Hera and then escorted her over. When Aphrodite looked up, he felt a slight twinge of nervousness she quickly covered up. Hera didn't seem to notice since the festivities were providing plenty of distractions.

He spoke to Aphrodite quickly in his mind. *It's okay. I'm trying to help. Trust me.*

She smiled, and he felt her relax a bit.

He bowed very theatrically to both ladies and handed both cameras to Aphrodite. "I'm acting out of self-interest here, but I want you two ladies to talk. It will save us all from being assaulted digitally for at least a few minutes."

"We do need to talk," Aphrodite said.

Hera smiled. "Yes, we do. Poseidon told us how worried you are about Apollo. Zeus and I have been considering it. But I'm going to want a favor in return."

"Okay. What?"

"I think you've already agreed to it. Hephaestus has told you about his problem?"

"Yes, yes he has," she said quickly.

"Well?"

Aphrodite froze for a second.

Hades gave Hera a playful shove. "She's going to help him, of course. You two can talk business later. Come on. Make fun of the ugly dresses. Let's hear some dirty remarks about Persephone tying me up."

Aphrodite smiled as Hera laughed, and then she touched Hera's arm. "Of course I'll help Hephaestus. I want to see him happy. He deserves it."

"Good!" Hera said. "Hades is right. We can talk about it all later. Let's go round up the bridesmaids and make sure they all have someone to run off in the woods with later."

Aphrodite laughed and it seemed genuine. Hades kissed them both on the cheek quickly.

Thank you, Aphrodite said.

He smiled at her as Hera pulled her away and began chatting animatedly. He turned to try to find Persephone. She was standing with Alala and Ares. He decided to walk over to them as Ares kissed Persephone for the second time.

Hades put his arm around Alala's waist. "So do I get to kiss your bride twice at your wedding?"

Ares and Persephone laughed as Alala turned to kiss Hades on the cheek. "You have *my* permission," she said, "so you don't need his at all."

Ares pulled Alala to him and held her close. "Wait till we get home," he said in a playfully menacing voice.

Persephone sighed heavily. "I can't wait to go home. Look at all these people. Everyone is here. I'm sure of it."

Hades looked around yet again. Persephone was probably right. He hadn't seen such a crowd in Olympus in a long time. As he turned back, he noticed one other thing. Alala was looking at Aphrodite, and Ares was looking at Hephaestus.

Persephone didn't seem to notice, so he didn't say anything. Eros' wedding had been more than eventful enough. He didn't want anything to ruin Persephone's day. He scanned the rest of the crowd. Eros and his wife Iris stood talking with Hermes, who would be marrying Ares' sister Eris a few weeks before Ares married Alala, Zeus and Hera looked like newlyweds, holding hands under the table as they sat talking with Aphrodite. Demeter was sharing a plate of veggies with Poseidon's wife Layla at another table, while Poseidon stood behind them talking to Dionysus and Proteus. His gaze finally fell on Apollo. He sat alone, but Hades noticed the three women behind him. The Fates all gazed at him, and then Lachesis looked up at Hades and smiled. They moved as one and walked away. Apollo continued to sip his drink as if nothing had happened. Hephaestus was talking to Persephone's brother Arion a few feet away. Hades wondered if Apollo and Hephaestus were destined to be as happy as most of the people around them.

"Are you listening?" Persephone asked.

"No," he admitted. "I'm people watching."

Persephone wrapped her arms around his waist. "You can do that while we dance."

He smiled down at her and kissed her softly. "I certainly can." He led her out to the dance floor, anxious to get her back to his bed for a less public expression of his love for her.

Persephone sighed as Hades applied more oil to her shoulders and rubbed. Her dress had been beautiful, but it had felt like it weighed nearly as much as she did. Even when she had been sitting, she'd constantly felt it pulling her backwards. For luck, her mother had sewn natural, uncut gemstones into Persephone's train. She'd wanted to protest, but since her mother had never had a wedding, she'd held her tongue. Her mother never talked about Iasion, and she barely knew her two half-brothers who lived in the mortal world. She felt sad, but as she remembered her mother laughing at the reception and dancing with Arion she smiled. Despite being unable to marry the man she'd loved, Demeter was happy. She loved Persephone and Arion and had always tried to do what was best for them. She sighed as Hades rubbed harder. Her mother's loss made her appreciate her own happiness even more.

"What are you thinking?" Hades asked. "Your emotions are very mixed."

"Lots of things. Life in general. How happy I am. I was thinking about my mother too. She's very happy now."

"She's certainly happier than I'd ever have expected. You should have seen her the first time she confronted me."

Persephone giggled. "Did she call you a ravisher and a despoiler and a downright scoundrel?"

"In her own words, yes. Many times." He rubbed lower.

"But at the time I wasn't guilty at all. I could only be blamed for countless fantasies."

She felt her need for him curling tighter deep inside. She'd need release very soon. His hands moved lower, massaging her buttocks. "I've liked the ones you've shared with me so far."

"Have you?" He slid his middle finger into her slowly.

She sighed. His hand was hot, and he pushed in so his other fingers could tease her clit. "Yes. I like thinking about them."

He removed his hand and turned her over. He traced a line up between her breasts. "Why?"

She blushed, and he smiled. "Mmmm, you like making me blush, don't you?" she asked.

He cupped both her breasts and rubbed them gently. He didn't touch her nipples though. He liked to tease her this way because he'd found, much to his delight, that her nipples were incredibly sensitive.

"Yes, I do," he finally said.

She closed her eyes to concentrate on his touch. "It's flattering. That's why I like to think about them. They aren't just naughty. They're sweet."

He pinched her nipples between his fingers, and she gasped. "Should I make them naughtier?"

She ran her hand down between her legs and toyed with her clit. "Tonight you should. I really need you."

He looked down at her hand as her finger circled her clit. He groaned deep in his throat. One of the fantasies he'd

shared with her, and which they'd acted out just two days before, involved him watching her bring herself to orgasm. He used to imagine it often when they only communicated online. After they'd end their conversations, he'd imagine her being as worked up as he was. He'd been very gratified to learn she had indeed pleasured herself a few times after their long, late talks.

"Tell me what you want," he whispered.

She pulled him down onto her, spreading her legs wide for him. "You. Right now."

He kissed her hungrily as he moved closer to her. He rubbed his cock against her and bit her lip gently. When she sighed, he pushed into her a little. "You get so wet, baby. Mmmmm." He pushed further, and he slid in very easily.

She gasped when he was in to the hilt. "You get me so wet," she said against his lips.

He kissed her hard and began to press her deep into the mattress with his thrusts. She wrapped her legs around him and cried out. His massage had brought her so close her orgasm exploded quickly. He slowed as she trembled around him, his lips moving down her throat. Hot waves of pleasure moved over her. Her clit was very sensitive, and his skin rubbing it roughly drove her wild.

"Your mouth," she whispered.

He bit her neck playfully, and then immediately positioned himself between her legs, locking his mouth onto just the right spot.

She arched off the bed. His tongue was insistent. He'd learned very quickly which strokes she liked, when to use his

teeth, how to make her explode. She ran her hands into his hair, tugging hard, and then pushing him against her. "Make me come again."

And he did. He grasped her hips and laved her clit firmly. He had to tighten his hold to keep her down on the bed. She grasped one of the pillows beside her tightly, grinding against his mouth. She still trembled when he pushed her over and moved up behind her, kissing her back.

"You like it, don't you?" she asked.

"What, my love?" His hand slipped between her legs again. Her hot pussy trembled even more at his touch.

"When I tell you what to do."

He kissed her neck and pressed against her, looking into her eyes when she turned her head. "I love it." He kissed her cheeks. "I want to know your fantasies. You haven't told me any of them yet."

Her pussy tightened at the idea, and he seemed to sense what his suggestion had done to her.

"Tell me. I want to hear what you desire."

She thought for a moment, and then settled onto her back. She looked up at him. "I already have it."

"What do you mean?" He stretched next to her on his side and put one arm across her stomach.

"I wanted you to make me want you."

He stroked her skin. "You wanted me to be forceful with you? Is that what you mean?"

"That's the only way I understood it then. I did want to be seduced. But now I understand better what I truly wanted. I didn't care about sex. It was vague, and most of it didn't

sound like that much fun to me. I'd had orgasms, but they were empty."

"You wanted me...to teach you about desire? To make you feel it?"

She smiled. "See? Perfect. That's the best way to put it. I'm not used to talking about these things. You've gotten it just right though."

His face became serious. He pulled her close and kissed her softly. "Do you know how happy that makes me?"

His intensity surprised her. "Why?"

"It's what I wanted too. It's why I didn't kiss you the moment I saw you. It's the reason I wanted to wait, even though your nearness was driving me into a frenzy of desire. I wanted you to want me. I wanted it to be important that it was me who made love to you."

She nodded, understanding. Her heart swelled with her love for him. "I never considered that. I see what you mean now. I suppose what happened with Hypnos showed how confused I was."

He put his hand on her lips. "Your frustration and confusion were my fault. I'm sorry I made our journey harder."

She pulled him close, kissing his fingers before he pulled his hand away to slip it around her waist. "It doesn't matter now." She kissed him. "Want to hear the naughty part?"

He smiled. "Sounds intriguing."

"Once I knew who you were, I imagined I was in for quite a night."

He rubbed her back and pulled her closer. His hard cock pressed against her thigh. "What did you imagine?"

"Something like this." She snapped her fingers. Hades stayed in the same position, but her hands were tied above her head with leather straps attached to the headboard. "Simple, yes, but it was an image that seemed compatible with what I wanted."

"What you said before?" He reached over and caressed her cheek.

"Yes. I imagined you...teaching me things this way."

He gazed over her body slowly. "You really thought you were going to be my sweet little captive, didn't you?"

"Yes. You aren't insulted, are you? Given your reputation, I couldn't help expecting something kinky."

After a long moment, he shook his head. "No. You wanted sex. You wanted excitement."

"I found love."

"I know." He kissed her deeply as he climbed on top of her. "I may need to punish you though, only a tiny bit, for thinking I meant to ravish you."

She pretended to struggle with her restraints, which made him smile wickedly. "I'm at your mercy then, aren't I?"

"Yes, my lady, you are."

She eyed his cock. "And you plan to use that on me?" "Oh yes."

"Might I get a closer look?"

"Now who's at whose mercy?"

She giggled as he moved up her body and positioned his cock in front of her face. "Oh that's the best part." She flicked

her tongue out and ran it over the head of his cock slowly before closing her lips over the shaft.

He groaned loudly. "My love."

She ran her tongue up and down his cock and sucked. She shifted her head forward to take his head to the back of her throat. She'd learned to do this without gagging, and the sounds he made told her how much he appreciated it.

He pulled out and moved back down her body. She opened her legs wide for him, but instead of entering her he knelt and explored her with his hands. He slid one finger in, only for a moment, and then returned to caressing and fondling her wet folds.

She sighed with frustration. "What are you doing?"

He smiled up at her. "Such sweet torture deserves a little repayment." He licked her clit, and then pulled away.

Her pussy throbbed with need. The sounds he'd made as she sucked his cock made her need him even more. "I want your cock."

"I must be careful though, what with you being a maiden and all."

She saw what he was doing, and as much as she wanted him, she was intrigued. Two could play at this game. "I see. I am very tight."

His eyes blazed with desire. "I shall have to go very slowly."

"Oh yes. But you'll have to push deep so there can be no doubt."

He moved onto her quickly, grasping her hair and kissing her roughly. "I can hardly describe what you do to me."

She arched up to rub her pussy over his cock. "Then don't use words." She pulled at her restraints and broke them easily. She couldn't stand it any longer, not being able to touch him. "Take me, my love."

He plunged into her. She shifted beneath him, surprised at how good his quick penetration felt. She moaned and held him close.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?"

The concern on his face disappeared when their eyes met. She shook her head and brought her lips to his, kissing him sweetly as she urged him to thrust. Everything else melted away as he surged inside her. Her desire coiled tightly, ready for release.

"Come with me. I'm so close."

He quickened his pace, going deeper and deeper. He thrust harder when she cried out and began to tremble beneath him. He groaned and squeezed her tight as he spilled into her. They lay tangled in each other's embrace for several moments. Hades rose and went into the bathroom. Persephone sat up when she heard the water running.

When he emerged, she asked, "More pampering?"

"Oh yes." He swept her into his arms. "Lots more of everything. No one's going to expect us out there for a few days."

She put her arms around his neck and kissed him. She'd only wanted to feel passion and find a lover, but instead she'd found a man who completed her and a love greater than anything she could ever have desired.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan M. Sailors lives in Bonita Springs, Florida with her husband and three cats. She began writing seriously in graduate school and sold her first short story in November 2003 just after graduating with an M.A. in Literature from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. When she isn't writing, she spends lots of time editing between watching episodes of *Dark Shadows* and *Doctor Who* and reading H.P. Lovecraft and Jane Austen. When she is writing, she's usually listening to The Cure, The Damned or My Chemical Romance. Check her out on Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace.

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