

Courting the Underworld



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COURTING THE UNDERWORLD

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DEDICATION

To my darling floof,
who supports me no matter
what crazy schemes I start.

P.S. Can we get a dog?

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THE CAST

The Greek Deities

Aeacus: One of the three judges of the dead, alongside Minos and Rhadamanthus. Originally the mortal son of Zeus and the nymph Aegina, Aeacus was renowned in life and death for his justice and piety. He is also the grandfather of Achilles, who really should have worn better shoes.

Aletheia: The goddess of truth and sincerity. Whilst not featuring prominently in Greek mythology, she held a significant place in philosophical discussions of the time.

Aphrodite: The goddess of love, beauty, and desire, Aphrodite's influence extended over both humans and gods, often leading to complex entanglements and many of the ancient narratives.

Ascalaphus: The guardian of the pomegranate tree, Ascalaphus is the child of the rivers Orphne and Acheron.

Cerberus: The bestest boy, and Hades' trusted guardian in the underworld.

Demeter: Goddess of harvest and agriculture, and Persephone's mother. Revered as the giver of life to the earth and of agricultural bounty, and responsible for the fertility of the land.

Hades: The king of the Underworld, and god of death and riches. In Greek mythology Hades was portrayed as passive, with a role of maintaining balance, as opposed to more modern depictions of

Hecate: The goddess of magic, crossroads, and ghosts. Often depicted holding two torches or a key, she is considered a protective goddess who bestows prosperity and daily blessings on the family. Hecate is unique in her ability to freely travel between the realms of the gods, humans, and the underworld.

Hera: The wife (and sister) of Zeus, Hera is the Greek goddess of marriage and the queen of the gods. Despite being depicted as a jealous and vengeful wife, she is honoured as a goddess who oversees the well-being of married women.

Hermes: The messenger god, known as the guide for souls journeying to the afterlife. He is also the Greek god of trade, wealth, luck, thieves, and travel. Has cool shoes.

Leuce: A nymph and former lover of Hades. In Greek mythology, she was also abducted to the Underworld, where she remained. When she died, Hades planted a white poplar tree in the Elysium fields in her memory.

Nymphs: minor female deities associated with a particular location. They are often considered nature spirits, and are depicted as beautiful young women with an amorous freedom - in contrast to the women of the time.

Persephone: The goddess of spring, (future) queen of the Underworld, and daughter of Demeter and Zeus. She has the unique position amongst the gods of representing the contrast between life and death, rebirth, and decay.

Zeus: The king of the gods, god of the sky, lightning, thunder, law, and order, and father of far too many children he abandoned. So many that Wikipedia has to add “various others” to sum them up, which tells us enough.

The Realms

Mount Olympus: The home of the Olympian gods, Mount Olympus is depicted as a majestic, cloud-covered realm that exists beyond the reach of mortals. It is here that gods like Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, and others reside, govern the world, and feast on ambrosia and nectar. Olympus is often portrayed as a place of harmony and grandeur, symbolizing the divine and ethereal nature of the gods.

The Underworld: The realm of the dead. It's divided into various regions, such as the Elysian Fields (a paradise for the virtuous), Tartarus (a deep abyss for the wicked), and the Asphodel Meadows (where ordinary souls reside). The river Styx forms its boundary, and the souls of the dead are ferried

across by Charon. The Underworld is often depicted as a shadowy and sombre place, yet not always entirely grim.

The Earth: The domain of humans and animals, this realm is where most Greek myths and heroic sagas take place. It includes the land, seas, and islands, each inhabited by various creatures and often influenced or controlled by specific deities, like Poseidon for the sea, Demeter for agriculture, and Artemis for the wilderness.

The Sea: Ruled by Poseidon, the sea is a realm within the Earth but distinct in its inhabitants and mysteries. It is home to a variety of creatures, including nymphs, sea monsters, and the kingdom of Atlantis in some myths. The sea is both nourishing and destructive, reflecting the dual nature of Poseidon himself.

The Sky and Heavens: Governed by Zeus, the sky encompasses the sky, weather, and celestial bodies. It's where Zeus metes out justice, manipulates the weather, and supervises the universe. The sky is also home to various other deities associated with celestial bodies, such as Helios (the sun), Selene (the moon), and Eos (the dawn).

THE ABDUCTION OF PERSEPHONE

‘Persephone, daughter of Zeus and Demeter, was a beautiful young goddess who captivated Hades, god of the underworld.

Hades wanted to marry the goddess, and with Zeus’s permission, Hades emerged from a fissure in the ground and kidnapped her. Demeter, devastated and enraged by her daughter’s disappearance, roamed the earth in search of her. In her absence, she neglected her duties, resulting in the earth becoming infertile and lifeless, marking the first winter.

Eventually, Zeus intervened, ordering Hades to return Persephone to her mother. However, because Persephone had eaten pomegranate seeds in the underworld – a symbol of marriage – she was bound to spend part of each year with Hades. This period, when Persephone resides in the underworld, corresponds to winter. Her return to the surface and her mother each year brings about spring.’

Tldr; Zeus causes many issues by being an utter tool. Hades isn’t great, either.

The story of Persephone’s abduction is not exactly a romantic ideal. I find a lot of my frustration with Greek mythology comes from the portrayal and treatment of the female characters. I know it’s a product of the time and the lens through which it was written, but it’s still not okay.

Contemporaneously to the mythology, marriage was controlled by male guardians, with little input from the young women involved. It is easy to believe that, given Zeus’ consent to the relationship, Ancient Greeks did not see the abduction as anything of note.

Now, over two thousand years later for many countries, this is an absurd concept. Partners come together from mutual

respect (or lust), and there is a duality not seen in our recent past.

It's also worth noting that despite the way the relationship began, there is a distinct lack of adultery from either party, and where suggested, stories contradict on if romances occurred before or after the abduction.

The other big issue with the relationship is their relation to each other. Niece and uncle is now a frowned upon relationship (and illegal in many countries, including the UK where I am writing this).

I have always believed that if deities existed, they would not procreate in the same way humans do. Even on earth we have asexual reproduction, and so it is not too much of a stretch to imagine that deities being "siblings" is more of an abstract concept than that of shared genetic information.

My aim with this series is to retell the original myths through a modern lens. Persephone was as intimidating as her husband when she became Queen of the Underworld, referred to as 'Dread Persephone'. Furthermore, mythology portrays her as holding equal domain to her husband.

Courting the Underworld came about with the premise that it was Persephone who saw Hades and, feeling the connection between them, pursued him. As a young goddess, it would be easy for her mother and other deities to make assumptions, rather than looking into the truth of how such bonds formed.

This is a story, a love story, and so for the next few hours, suspend your disbelief for a wee while and escape into another world.

PROLOGUE

“Darling, seven millennia is old enough for a taste! I had my first at six!”

“She is not ready. The ambrosia is too potent for her young spirit.”

Persephone plucked at a peony, watching the petals float down, disappearing before they hit the ground. Her mother Demeter was facing off against Aphrodite (again), the women nose to nose as they argued about something that was none of their business. Persephone rolled her eyes.

“Every deity has tasted it. Why should Persephone be any different?”

“Because she is my daughter!”

“Darling, *relax*.”

“Demeter, I understand your concerns,” Hera interjected from where she lounged on an ornate divan. Persephone didn’t hold her breath that the wisdom would be listened to. “However, don’t forget we live outside the mortal concept of age and time. You spend too long in the mortal realm.”

“As does darling Persephone. Let her loosen up, taste our nectar. It could do wonders for her love life!”

“That’s my concern.”

Love? No thanks. Persephone had heard countless stories of the affairs and escapades of her fellow immortals, and how they treated the poor souls in the mortal realm. If that was love, she’d rather keep a bargepole between them. Her gaze drifted to the table laden with ambrosia. Golden nectar gleamed in crystal goblets, unattended and tempting.

A reprieve from listening to her family argue over something so ridiculous on the other hand, was quite welcome. She edged her way around a column, towards the table.

“Lighten up, Demeter! Love is life.”

“Persephone, what do you have to say?”

Persephone winced, turning back to the goddesses.
“Mother, you know my feelings on this.”

Her mother’s lips pursed.

“Come now, Demeter. This is a party! Let’s not get into a fight. Now, I happen to know—” Aphrodite interrupted, guiding Demeter away.

“Indeed, we have more pressing matters to discuss.” Hera rose from her seat, joining Aphrodite in distracting her mother. Once it was clear her mother was suitably distracted, Hera glanced over her shoulder and winked.

Persephone smothered the giggle that threatened to bloom and headed to the refreshments table. She slipped her shoes off, tiptoeing across the marble floor.

On the highest tier, several chalices of the drink stood. This close, she could see tendrils of mist ascending from the divine liquid, small bubbles bursting forth. Persephone grabbed the chalice and clutched it close to her chest.

Now to get away and consume her prize. Trying to appear nonchalant, Persephone stepped into the grand ballroom, blending into the crowd. She glanced around the opulent room, looking for any deities that might inform her mother. Tall marble pillars lined the room, etched with scenes from myths and legends, and providing suitable hiding places. Gilded braziers provided a warm, flickering light that cast dark shadows perfect for hiding in.

Moving from pillar to pillar, Persephone took in the beautiful costumes and sparkling jewellery on the divine guests. Amongst the major deities she knew, there were hundreds of minor gods and nymphs. And, of course, the mortals. So many mortals unaware of where they were. Snippets of conversation reached her as she passed through.

“Did you hear? Zeus has taken a new lover.”

“Hera will be furious when she finds out.”

“Have you seen how big her—”

Persephone turned away, nose wrinkling. Nearby, Dionysus regaled a group of enraptured satyrs with an animated tale, arms flailing. One beckoned her, but she declined, moving around another pillar, heading to another antechamber.

Her heart sank as she spotted a rowdy group near the centre of the room. Mortals sprawled on sofas, laughing too loudly, moving too clumsily. Their eyes were glazed over from ambrosia, their cheeks flushed and chitons falling from their shoulders.

In the centre sat her father, Zeus, a jewel-encrusted goblet in hand. He whispered in the ear of a pretty young woman, pulling her onto his lap and nuzzling her neck.

A mortal giggled, caressing his bearded cheek.

A flare of anger burned in her chest. How dare her father behave so, without a thought for propriety or his wife’s feelings? The other gods ignored the display, but Persephone couldn’t tear her eyes away.

The ambrosia in her hand warmed. She glanced down at it. The sweet drink would loosen her up, but was it worth it? Persephone thought of her mother - always so cautious, so repressed. For all her desire to rebel, Persephone balked at the thought of losing control. Only...

What harm could a small sip do? Before she could overthink it, Persephone raised the glass to her lips. The liquid shimmered gold. She shut her eyes, ready to savour it. But before the ambrosia could touch her tongue, a large hand clasped around the glass, wrenching it away.

Persephone’s eyes flew open. A tall, imposing figure stood before her, dressed all in black. The colours marked him as one who dwelled in the realm of the dead, but his garb was embroidered with silver thread that glinted in the candlelight. His face was pale yet handsome, with dark, penetrating eyes that scrutinised her.

Persephone drew in a sharp breath. Without breaking eye contact he lifted the glass to his lips and downed the drink. As

he swallowed, the liquid illuminated his throat, a bright gold against the shadows.

“My Lady Persephone,” he said, bowing crisply.

Heat rose in her cheeks. Should she greet him or berate him for his presumptuousness? Before she could decide, he turned on his heel and disappeared into the crowd, still clutching her glass.



Persephone watched him go, teeth bared. Who did he think he was, swaggering around like that? Persephone balled her fists, ready to follow. She would not be patronised. Not by him, not by anyone. She had her fill of that from her mother.

But as she moved to walk away, a hand gripped her elbow. Her mother.

“My dear, what has you looking so cross?”

Persephone bit her lip, flushing. He would have seen her mother approach. He had saved her from Demeter’s wrath. It didn’t stop her from wanting to confront him, but her ire was someone settled.

“It’s nothing, mother.” Persephone smoothed the irritation from her face. She allowed Demeter to link their arms together and lead her further into the grand hall. “Merely seeing Father with the... guests.”

“During these celebrations, it’s best to avoid thinking about your father. It’s what the rest of us do.” Demeter patted her hand. “Come, my dear; let’s take a turn around the hall.”

Demeter led them through the crowd, exchanging pleasantries with different gods and goddesses, but Persephone paid them no mind, searching for the man. She finally spotted him by a marble column, obscured in the shadows. Their eyes met, and he raised a glass towards her.

A thrill ran through Persephone, and she looked away. Who was he? Why did she want to know?

“Mother, who is that? The one that looks like he’d rather be anywhere else?” Persephone asked the next time her mother stopped talking.

Demeter turned where she pointed, the smile dropping off her face. “Hades, your uncle. I’m surprised he’s ‘graced’ us with his presence.”

Persephone studied him. The Lord of the Dead. She had heard rumours of his stony heart and brooding nature but had never spoken to him herself. She doubted she had even seen him.

“Does he not enjoy the celebrations?”

“Hades has always been... aloof. His temperament has shifted to reflect his realm.”

Persephone glanced between her sombre uncle and her father, the boisterous and lusty Zeus. She could see why Hades avoided such gatherings.

“He seems lonely.”

“Do not let his solitary ways fool you, child. Hades rivals your father in cunning and danger, if not surpassing him. He belongs to darkness and death, not to our world of light and life. Do not allow his lustful gaze to fall upon you.”

She knew nothing about this man, but few deserved to be compared to Zeus. Before she could think more about it, a delicate hand gripped her shoulder.

“There you are my darling!” Aphrodite drew Persephone into an embrace. “I’ve been searching everywhere for you.”

“Aunt Aphrodite.” Persephone wondered if the goddess had already forgotten they had been speaking mere moments ago. Given the way she wobbled, it was likely.

“Tell me, has anyone caught your eye tonight?” Aphrodite asked with a playful wink.

Demeter clicked her tongue in disapproval. “Please, Aphrodite. My daughter has no time for your frivolous.”

Aphrodite waved a hand. “Posh! There is nothing more important than love. Isn’t that right, Persephone?”

The orchestra spared her the need to respond, playing once more. Aphrodite clapped in delight.

“Come, let’s find you a partner. The night is still young.”

“Aphrodite.”

“This is a masque. She needs to have fun. No, no, I refuse to allow your protests.”

Aphrodite dragged her into the crowd, lost in the mass of bodies. Watching the couples dance, Persephone’s mind drifted back to Hades. She imagined his strong arms around her. Their eyes locked as they moved together.

Persephone craned her neck, trying to spot Hades among the swirling couples. Where had he gone?

“Keep up, my dear!” Aphrodite called over her shoulder. “Plenty of handsome options to choose from.”

“Mm-hmm,” Persephone said, not paying attention. She moved automatically through the steps of the dance as she scanned the room.

There! A flash of dark robes disappearing around a pillar. It had to be him.

As the music swelled, Persephone made her excuses to Aphrodite and left. She hurried through the crowd, pushing past gods and mortals alike. The air grew thick with the smell

of ambrosia and lust. Still, she pushed on, picking up her pace. She had to find Hades before her mother found her.

Rounding the pillar, Persephone stopped short. The space was empty, no sign of Hades. Her shoulders slumped. Had it just been her imagination?

No. There was a door at the end of the hall, ajar. Persephone stepped out onto the balcony, the cool night air hitting her face. She could see the sea far below, the moon reflecting off the waves.

A lone figure stood on the winding path descending from the palace. Hades.

She watched him approach a shimmering portal at the edge of the cliffs. He paused, tilting his head to the side. Then, slowly, he turned, facing her. For a heartbeat, across the vast distance, their eyes met. An instant later he turned, stepping through the portal, and vanishing from sight.

Persephone sighed, turning back to the lit path leading to the throne room. The lights seemed brighter now, the laughter louder, as if Olympus itself were rubbing Hades' absence in.

But even surrounded by such warmth and opulence, her thoughts were with the other god. If fate didn't bring them together again, she would do it herself.

CHAPTER ONE

“Sixty years. Can you believe it? And she still makes my stomach spin when I see her.” Roy held out his wallet, showing a small photograph of his wife. The ink had faded, but Kathryn’s face was still visible, her coiffed hair a stark contrast to the mischievous glint in her eyes. “She claims it’s age, but I know better.”

“You’re both very lucky.” Persephone stared at the picture, trying to picture the woman as a girl. How she and Roy had been when they first met. Who asked who out. If they bickered over who paid for their dates. Who was the one to take out the spiders.

It was fascinating how mortals held on to those they loved, even when they knew their time was limited.

As Persephone moved around the shop, selecting blooms, Roy told her stories. She learned about Kathryn making daisy chains with their grandchildren, the way the sun caught in her hair while gardening, and how her laughter was more of a bark than a giggle.

“Let’s make this anniversary unforgettable.” She put together the bouquet with practiced ease. A bright yellow sunflowers for adoration, small sprigs of baby’s breath for everlasting love, and daisies for innocence and purity. She tied the finished bouquet with a white ribbon.

“Here you are, Roy,” she presented the bouquet with a flourish. “A testament to your love. Get it in water as soon as possible. And here, some food for them. Put one spoonful in every third day, and your blooms will last far longer than you’d expect.”

“Persephone, this is perfect. Thank you.”

She waved away his thanks and undercharged him, as she always did for her regulars. Save for paying her staff, Persephone had no need for financial gain.

“Just promise me you’ll keep cherishing each other.”

Roy blinked rapidly as he tried to hold back the tears. “You know we will.”

Persephone watched Roy leave, feeling that familiar stab of jealousy. The nearest to love she could claim was her shop, *Blossoms of Elysium*. She had built it up from the ground, curating every bloom that grew within its walls, crafting each vase lining the shelves. This was her sanctuary, away from the influence of her fellow gods.

When she was here, surrounded by her flowers, the burden of immortality lifted. She could forget the ceaseless ceremony and etiquette of Olympus. She walked through the rows, tending to her plants, nurturing life in an intimate recreation of the entire realm.

Her mother always claimed that they had no need for love. Not with the divine duties that tied them down. For gods, love only brought pain to others—her father was a prime example of that. Persephone allowed herself a moment to dream about what it would be like to entrust her life to another and have their heart in return.

“Persephone?” Maeve poked her head from the backroom. “Any remaining tasks before we close up?”

“I think we’re all set,” Persephone shook her head to clear out the lingering fantasies. “Got any fun plans for tonight?”

“Oh, just a blind date my sister set up. She seems to think I need help in that department.”

“A blind date. How exciting! I hope they sweep you off your feet.”

Maeve laughed. “Easy there. It’s just a first date. But I appreciate the vote of confidence.”

“Here, let me make you a good luck bouquet.” Persephone jumped up, hurrying around the shop to select the right flowers. She settled on a combination of bright gerberas, soft roses, and fragrant lilies.

Persephone knew she was overthinking a first date. But she couldn't help it. Romance was fascinating, and she could see why Aphrodite was always evoking it. The mortal realm offered such a wealth of experiences. She wanted Maeve's date to go well, wanted to hear more stories.

"What about you, anyone new in your life? Or are you living through me again?"

Persephone felt her cheeks grow warm. She busied herself tidying the already pristine counter.

"Oh, not really..." she started. Technically, it wasn't a lie. She had only exchanged a few words with Hades over the millennia. Mother was right. Hades didn't enjoy going to Olympus.

"That isn't a 'no'. Come on; spill."

"Fine. There is someone. We share the same social circles, but I've not had chance to speak with him alone much. My mother doesn't approve."

She smiled, remembering when their eyes met at Zeus' revelry. The way he'd looked at her made her feel seen, even if she had been pissed off with him at the time.

"Well, if that isn't the beginning of a historical romance, I don't know what is. If the fates have foretold it, it'll find a way."

With a cheery wave, Maeve left the shop, securing the door behind her. Alone at last, Persephone released her powers. The shop came alive, plants growing towards an invisible sun so that no bloom ever died under her charge. There was no waste here. No flower abandoned.

Retreating to the back room, Persephone gathered the flowers she'd been preparing for tonight. For weeks she'd been siphoning off the best blossoms, gathering them here.

The pièce de résistance lay in a cooler stored under the floorboards. They had carpeted thirty years ago, but it peeled away easily, revealing the nook that hid her most precious gift.

Taking it and the flowers, Persephone closed her eyes. Her surroundings blurred and shifted, fading from the familiar confines of the shop to an ancient, disused altar hidden deep within a forest glade.

Vines snaked over the cracked marble, aged by millennia. Fallen leaves and moss covered the engraved dedication to the God of the Underworld. Persephone traced the eroded letters, feeling the way life had taken back the stone, reclaiming what mortals had created.

She worked with the existing growth. Who was she to compete against the beauty nature had already nurtured? Carefully, she wove the carnations through the vines, letting their luminous blooms contrast against the dark leaves. The orchids added bursts of colour, while the lilies lent their perfume. Finally, she added to the greenery, encouraging ivy to grow up high, embracing the shrine, and ferns around the base to support it.

Persephone stepped back, admiring her handiwork. It was beautiful, divine.

It was not enough.

Five offerings she had made to Lord Hades, and he had yet to even visit his shrines. She knew the flowers were perfect, that they depicted her feelings in the floriography, but...

Her gaze fell upon the cool box. She lifted the lid. Inside lay six human hearts, their once-beating rhythms silenced forever. The sight would unsettle other gods, those who liked to ignore mortals once past their prime, but Persephone saw the manifestation of justice and the equilibrium of life and death.

This was the language that Hades spoke.

These men had preyed on the innocent, letting their darkest desires control them. They would reside in Tartarus forever. With great care, Persephone used her thumbnail to slice the muscle into petals, thinning the ventricles into delicate fronds.

Her hands were steady as she turned violence into art. She wove the crimson petals through the moonflowers, the shiny

texture reflecting the light.

Persephone repeated the ritual with each heart, acknowledging the fine line between life and death. Light and dark. When finished, she stepped back and looked upon her creation and saw it was good.

These hearts belonged to wicked men. Those who left suffering in their wake. Persephone had ensured justice, that the men had faced justice in life, but it was Hades who determined their eternity.

She hoped he would like it. That he would know it was from her. That he would understand she saw more than just the darkness he clung to. She gave a quick bow and left where she had come. The other gods would know about it soon enough.



CHAPTER TWO

The moment Zeus materialised in his throne room, Hades' day was ruined.

“Whatever nonsense you're peddling, I want none of it,” Hades cut off before Zeus could speak. He refused to look at his brother, choosing instead to keep his gaze fixed on the dark recesses of the chamber. He had neither the time nor the patience for his brother's whimsy.

Only the last week Zeus had fed Cerberus spiked figs. The resultant stench had filled the Underworld enough that even Ascalaphus could smell it.

Zeus didn't even have the grace to appear annoyed, laughing boldly. Only when he was too close to ignore did Hades look at him. Zeus stood before him, tossing a pomegranate into the air. With a growl Hades lurched forward and snatched it away.

“Have care how you handle the fruits of my realm, brother, lest you end up under my care forever.” He vanished the pomegranate back to the orchard. He needed to have words with Ascalaphus about allowing other deities near. “Why are you here bothering me? Don't you have some nymph to lie with?”

Zeus raised his hands. “Apologies. I only wished to have your attention.”

“You have it. What do you want?”

“Why have you been ignoring me? It's unlike you to shirk your duties so.”

“My duties are to these lands, not yours. Perhaps I didn't feel like climbing all the way up that thrice-damned mountain of yours. I'm not as spry as I used to be.”

“There are more important matters than your convenience. Strange things have been occurring in the mortal realm.”

“There are always strange things occurring with mortals,” Hades said, already losing interest. “I have enough to deal with here after your visits. What nonsense are they getting up to now?”

“Old altars dedicated to you are being excavated. The old ways are being honoured with offerings. Ancient methods that were forgotten.”

Hades waved a hand, unimpressed by Zeus’s ominous words.



“Let the mortals play around on some old rock if it pleases them. I will not smite every fool who leaves a withered bouquet. Is your quarry the offerings, or that it is my altar they attend to and not your own?”

Zeus’s expression darkened, the carefree charm fading from his features. He drew himself up. He was still shorter than Hades, so he didn’t look particularly intimidating.

“You are being deliberately obtuse. The offerings have not been seen since the days when mortals bent their knee to us.”

Hades frowned. Interest pierced his apathy despite himself.

“Speak plainly.”

“I don’t mean they’re writing love letters in Ancient Greek. I mean, they are sacrificing other humans to you. This is no

meaningless gesture, brother. Someone wants your attention, and if you keep ignoring them, they will only escalate.”

Hades considered Zeus’ words. He knew humans consulted the past, but this was beyond even them. Although if it had escalated since he last checked, then perhaps it deserved his attention. He had taken note of those that visited his shrines frequently. Not that he would ever let Zeus know that.

“You make it sound as though these offerings are a threat. Mortals police themselves. You were the one to declare we stay out of their business.” He arched an eyebrow. “Why the concern? Are the mighty gods so disturbed by mere mortal whims?”

Zeus’s jaw tightened. “This is more than whimsy. Will you at least look upon the offering before dismissing it?”

Hades considered. Much as he hated to indulge his meddling brother, the thought of seeing such pieces again, well, he hadn’t seen artworks like that in thousands of years, and his palace could do with some memories lighting it up.

“Very well,” he said at last. “I will examine this mysterious gift, as you request. But—” he held up a finger, “—I will deal with the matter as I see fit. No interference, brother. Not if you want me to handle this.”

“So be it. The matter is yours.” Zeus stepped back, preparing to depart. Before he could be left in peace, Zeus’ solemn expression turned mischievous, a dangerous glint in his eye. “The summer solstice celebration comes a fortnight hence. You will join us, yes?”

Hades bit back a groan. Drinking and revelry held little appeal at the best of times. And Zeus knew well how he valued his solitude.

“I have duties here. Souls still come, celebrations or no.”

“Come now, brother! Even you should experience joy occasionally. It will do you good. Besides, think of the gossip when you appear. Perhaps you will even smile and give the nymphs palpitations.”

Hades huffed. “Unlikely.” He worked his jaw, debating. Zeus’ eyes glinted with stubborn hope.

“I will consider it,” Hades said at last. “But I make no promises.”

“Good enough!” Zeus clapped him on the shoulder. “That’s all I ask.”

His form shimmered, dissolving into golden light. But his parting words echoed around the chamber.

“Oh, and try to wear something with colour, won’t you? You always appear like you’re in mourning.”

Before Hades could retort, Zeus was gone, his chuckle lingering. Hades scowled up at the empty air where his brother had stood.

“Good riddance,” he muttered.

Not a minute of peace blessed him when Hades felt a chill run down his neck. He scanned the shadows. A wisp of smoke curled through the air, twisting and turning towards him.

“Must you always lurk around?”

The smoke solidified into a tall, pale figure shrouded in darkness. Hecate, goddess of the crossroads, cocked her head, a smirk gracing her lips.

“Lurking is such an uncharitable word. I prefer ‘observing’.”

Despite himself, Hades huffed, amused. Only Hecate would dare speak so candidly to him. She glided closer, studying him with her eerie white eyes.

“Did the visit not go well?”

“As well as expected. Zeus remains convinced he can badger me into frivolity whenever it suits him.”

“The summer solstice?”

“He refuses to comprehend that I have no wish to join in his overindulgence.”

“It does you good to emerge occasionally. You spend far too much time alone.”

“Thank you for the concern, but solitude suits me well.”

“So you keep insisting. The man doth protest too much. I’d almost say you were avoiding something. Or someone?”

“I avoid everyone, Hecate.” He reminded her, not liking how close the woman was getting to the truth. “That said, you are hardly the beacon of sociability.”

“Touché. Unlike you, however, I am happy with that. I get what I need when I need it. The mortal realm is full of wonderful beings that are happy to partake. I could set you up?”

“Ah, no, thank you. I am content.” Hades scrambled to change the topic. “Zeus has been complaining about some offerings.”

“This is the first you’re hearing of this?”

“I’m not deaf. It’s the first that I’m dealing with it. Believe it or not, I am aware of when someone is at my shrine. As you are, or Zeus is, when you get visitors.”

He simply didn’t care to gossip about it. It was distasteful, and disrespectful to anyone who did want to worship.

“Care to share who it is?”

“No. Those who go to my groves to find solace deserve their privacy. Go bother someone else Hecate. I might as well get this over with.”

“You’re going? Now this I must see!”

“Your enthusiasm is contagious,” Hades deadpanned. “If you must, then be useful and fetch Aeacus. I may need to consult with him.”

The judge would be able to see more into the motivations behind the offerings, unclouded by emotion.

“With pleasure, my lord.” She dissolved into thin air, leaving Hades alone. He glared, daring anyone to come interrupt him, but the shades stayed away.

When he could no longer avoid it, Hades shifted to the shrine that held the latest offering, stepping from the shadows into the muted light of the mortal realm. He surveyed the area, taking in the crumbling columns and weathered stone. This temple had long been abandoned by mortal and god alike. Left for nature to reclaim.

He stepped into the temple, bowing his head from the caved-in ceiling. Small footprints crushed the earth beneath him. Hades stepped over them, recreating each step.

Before him, in the middle of the table, sat his offering. A floral arrangement, made from a variety of flowers and what nature had already taken back. Moonflowers and orchids cascaded down the altar steps, mixed with sweet smelling lilies and vibrant red carnations, all woven together with ferns and ivy.

But most striking were the six carved hearts nestled within, still glistening as if they had only just been plucked from the body. Hades drifted closer, mesmerised. The hearts were carved into flowers, runes and symbols pressed into each petal.

This was no haphazard collection of slaughtered livestock or burnt grain. Here was a message crafted for him. But why six?

Hades reached out for the nearest heart, but stayed his hand as he heard Hecate and Aeacus materialise behind him.

“Well now, this is quite the display,” Hecate purred.

Hades straightened, schooling his features into detached indifference. “It seems Zeus was correct. Someone is trying to garner my attention.”

Aeacus didn't pause as Hades had, taking one heart and studying it. His eyes flashed bright blue as he judged the soul. He moved to the second, doing the same. “The donor has chosen the hearts of the most despicable people on the planet.”

Hecate drifted closer, leaning down to inhale the bouquet's heady perfume.

“Mmm, exquisite,” she said. “The previous offerings were similar. Flowers and hearts, crafted with antiquated rituals.”

One additional mortal heart each time.”

“Six in total.” It wasn’t a question. “Were any innocents among them?”

“No. Rapists, murderers, traffickers. All died in the process of mortal justice. These souls all reside in Tartarus. The offering couldn’t have come from a single mortal. They died decades apart. Only an immortal, or other long-lived being, could be behind this. Someone who has stored the hearts in this fresh state since death.”

Hecate smiled, sharp-toothed. “It seems you have an admirer, my lord. One who dispenses justice in your name.”

“Justice,” he echoed. “Always more Zeus’ remit, despite death being the last judgement. There are cults that exist. Perhaps it was a family over many generations.”

Hades picked up a flower from the offering and studied it. Someone had carefully arranged the flowers, each chosen to convey a message. Hades wished he knew what that meant, he had scant knowledge of floriography.

“Lavender,” he saw most of the purple buds were mixed in with the other flowers. Running his fingers over the petals, he counted the remaining flowers.

“Oleander, yarrow...”

Hades turned to Aeacus. “You say these offerings are beyond mortals. Have you insight into who could tie this all together?”

How much did the other gods know of this gift giver?

Aeacus inclined his head. “No, my lord. Though perhaps...” He paused. “There is a florist, the daughter of Demeter and Zeus. She introduced the art to mortals, several centuries ago. If any could divine the message crafted here, it would be Persephone.”

Hades tensed. Memories of the young goddess surged. A radiant smile and innocence that called to him in ways he did not appreciate. Did Aeacus know? Had he seen something when holding that heart?

“An interesting suggestion. I shall consider it.” He tucked the purloined bloom into his chiton. “For now, let us return. I would reflect on these strange tidings.”

Hecate stayed behind as Aeacus bowed and disappeared in a puff of smoke. She gave Hades a knowing smile, her eyes glinting from under her hood.

He frowned. “Do you find something amusing?”

“My lord seems distracted.” Her smile widened. “Dare I wonder if it is a goddess who occupies your thoughts?”

Hades stiffened at the insinuation. “Do not be absurd.”

“As you wish.” Hecate’s gaze drifted to the flower peeking from his chiton. He pushed it further down. “Good day.”

With that, she vanished, leaving Hades to scowl at where she had stood. He pulled the bloom from his chiton, intent to toss it aside, but hesitated. It would be so easy to crush the soft petals, to deny it of life. Even easier to place it back on the shrine, ignore how it affected him. How the heady scent reminded him of sunshine and secrets. Of a goddess with flowers in her hair, smiling up at him through a veil of blossoms.

Hades shook off the vision, irritation warring with a bittersweet ache, like the lavender tucked against his breast.

He kept the bloom.

In the shrine’s silence, Hades considered his response. He could no longer ignore the tributes. He told himself he was only seeking Persephone to clarify the offering.

No other reasons. He would not allow himself to succumb to the message that was calling out to him.

CHAPTER THREE

“Emma adored the bouquet you made,” Maeve declared as she bundled together some ferns. “I think the curse is lifted!”

The cold room hummed around Persephone and Maeve, their breaths visible as they worked side by side, preparing arrangements for an upcoming wedding.

“I’m glad she liked it, but perhaps it was your confidence that made it go so well, not the flowers. Tell me all about it.”

“We went to this cute little café that’s just opened up downtown. They have the best hot chocolate I’ve ever tasted, Persephone, I swear. And those pastries? To die for. You need to go!”

As Maeve talked about what she and Emma had shared over hot chocolate and pastries, Persephone felt happy for her friend. She knew how hard it was to find someone you connected with so easily. It was something she had felt before, but couldn’t pursue. Not yet. There were orders to complete, after all.

A burst of giggles from the front room jolted her thoughts. Puzzled, Persephone raised an eyebrow at Maeve, who shrugged in return.

“Old Mr. Jones isn’t that funny.”

Persephone’s fingers stilled on the silk ribbon she’d been using to bind the bouquet. She put the flowers aside. “I’ll just take a quick peek.”

Persephone pushed back her stool and rose. As she approached the curtain, the whispers and laughter grew louder. Looking through a crack, she saw her two Saturday girls huddled together, peering out of the window. Maeve was soon at her shoulder.

“Is everything okay out there?” The two women jumped.



“Sorry, Persephone,” one of them stammered. “It’s just, there’s a man outside, and he’s...”

“Hot,” the other finished, her eyes still glued to the window. Persephone stepped closer, following their gaze.

Just outside her shop crouched the god she had been thinking of. Hades. His imposing figure was softened as he stroked a stray dog. The god looked up from the animal, nodding to her, before rummaging in his pocket.

To her surprise, he pulled out a small treat and gave it to the dog, who nearly took his hand off along with the gift. With a final pat, Hades rose, dusted his hands, and made his way to the shop. The dog attempted to follow, stopping when Hades held up a hand.

Persephone clutched the curtain tighter.

“Alright, everyone, don’t just stand their gawking,” Maeve announced, pushing forward, grabbing the assistants’ arms, and pulling them toward the back room. “Let’s go grab lunch, shall we? Persephone can deal with this client. Come on. Out, out.”

As the three filed out the back, Persephone tried to tidy her hair and wipe the dirt off her face. She only succeeded in smudging it.

The bell rang, and Hades stepped into the shop, head dipping to avoid the wreaths that hung from the ceiling.

Dressed in a long black overcoat and heavy boots, he looked imposing, a stark contrast to the shop.

“Lady Persephone,” Hades greeted, taking her hand. He brought it to his lips, pressing a soft, formal kiss to her knuckles. The decorum felt wrong, like how the gods greeted her mother. She doubted Demeter felt like she was about to faint when Hermes or Ares greeted her like this.

“Lord Hades?” She opened her mouth, but no words came out. Glancing around the store frantically, she looked for something to say. “Are you looking for some plants to keep the spirits company?”

“I don’t think the shades would appreciate the beauty of your creations as much as the mortals of this realm.”

“Even the darkest corners of existence benefit from life and colour, don’t you think? Have you asked your shades?”

“I seldom hear this argument from people who work with the living.”

“Life is as fleeting as beauty. It’s our duty to celebrate these ephemeral moments wherever we can find them.” She gestured around at the vibrant array of flowers surrounding them. “We all can benefit from the infusion of life’s vibrancy.”

Had she said too much? Oh gods, she’d made it weird by talking too much. Wincing, she struggled for a way to lighten the mood.

“Or at least, I can bring some ferns down so visitors can see you know more than one décor style. I’ve heard towering stone is so last season.”

“You mock my decorating skills?” Hades’ lips quirked.

“Never!” She threw a hand to her chest in faux affront. “I’m just saying that every space could use some variation. Shades of grey don’t count.”

Emboldened, Persephone plucked a few blooms. Lilies for purity, ferns for sincerity, ivy for affection. She wove them into a wreath and placed it on Hades’ dark curls before she could second-guess herself.

His eyes widened, then crinkled at the corners.

“I don’t believe I’ve received flowers since. Well, in a long time. They’re beautiful.”

“They suit you.”

“Thank you,” Hades took the wreath off and inspected it. He held it delicately, turning it around. His brow creased, lips twisting as he caressed a lily. Then he placed the wreath back upon his head. “Aeacus told me you invented the language of flowers that mortals use. Is that true?”

“Each flower has its own story, its own message given over the ages, by both mortals and gods. Not that different to names. I simply formalised it.”

“Offerings have been made to my shrine,” Hades said, pointing to the flowers. “I recognize some of the flowers in this wreath. What do these flowers mean?”

“You went to the shrine?” Persephone voice rose, and she clamped down on it, unwilling to give herself away so quickly. He didn’t know it was her. She couldn’t let him know it was her. Not yet. Clearing her throat, she continued. “I mean, I heard mother say you had no interest in offerings.”

“Your father demanded I attend.” Her heart sank. That wasn’t quite the first impression she had intended. “It was an educational experience. Might you help me interpret it?”

“Each flower holds a special meaning,” she began, her fingers tracing the delicate petals of the ivy. She would need to only describe flowers he named or indicated, to not give herself away. “Ivy represents eternal fidelity and loyalty, a bond that stretches across time and space.”

“I see.”

“Next is the fern,” Persephone continued. “It symbolises sincerity and humility, qualities that are often overlooked but are crucial for any deep connection.”

“And carnations?”

“Love and fascination.” She felt her cheeks heat but refused to look away. “A captivating allure that draws you in,

impossible to resist.”

“The lilies stand for rebirth and renewal, and the hope that love can bloom even in the darkest places.” Persephone swallowed hard, gathering the courage to ask the question that had been burning inside her since he mentioned the offering. “What did you make of the shrine? I, uh, the others, they spoke of the new arrangements. Mother wouldn’t let me go—”

Hades’ eyes flickered away before returning to meet her gaze. “Well,” he began, “I heard some gods found the arrangements quite disturbing. I can imagine the mutation of life and death particularly affected your mother. It seems like the entire pantheon visited it before I did.”

“My mother makes her opinions clear, Lord Hades. What did you think?”

Hades frowned, and for a moment Persephone feared she had gone too far.

“I was... touched by the offerings. It is rare for anyone to remember me, let alone with such sincerity and thoughtfulness. In all my years as a god, I have experienced nothing quite like it.”

Her heart leapt up. Persephone quickly ducked her head to hide the smile that threatened to spill.

“Then the offering was successful. I can imagine you’d have found the naked revelries given as gifts to Father just as disturbing as this was to him.”

Hades chuckled. “Indeed, I must admit that the excesses of our fellow gods can be overwhelming. Thank you for your help. I feel I understand the offering more.”

“Would you like to go for coffee?” Persephone blurted out. “I’ve heard of a lovely little café that makes a mean hot chocolate.”

Hades froze, his Adam’s apple bobbing. His voice, when he spoke, was strained. “I... I’m afraid I cannot, Lady Persephone. There is much work to be done in the Underworld, and I cannot neglect my duties. If you’ll excuse me.”

“Of course,” she tried to mask her disappointment. “Duty calls. Maybe another time?”

“Perhaps.” With a polite nod, he turned and hurried from the shop, the door swinging shut behind him.

Persephone slumped to the floor, her earlier hope and excitement replaced by dejection and uncertainty. Had she pushed too far, too fast? Had Hades realised what she had done and gone running? Did he disapprove of her actions?

Sighing, she brushed the wetness from her cheeks. This was not the time to wallow in self-pity. Aphrodite was always saying you had to go out and get what you wanted if Eros was hungover. Perhaps she would have some better ideas, too.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hades materialised within the cold stone confines of his castle, marching through the endless corridors. Shades edged around him, whispering as he passed, but Hades couldn't bring himself to care about their petty worries.

"Lord Hades," a voice called out from the murk.

He ignored it, leaving the echo in his wake.

"Master?"

"Leave me," Hades commanded, not bothering to glance at the source. Once alone, he leaned against a pillar, pressing his forehead to cool marble.

In the silence of his private chambers, only Cerberus remained, the massive hound rising to meet his master.

With a groan, Hades went to his high-backed chair, slumping on it with fingers steepled under his chin. Cerberus rested his great heads on Hades' knee, regarding him with soulful red eyes.

"I've made a fool of myself, old friend," Hades murmured.

The encounter with Persephone disturbed him. Her teasing remarks, the earnest light in her eyes when she'd asked him to coffee. He'd faltered, uncertainty staying his tongue until the moment passed. All he saw when he closed his eyes was her disappointment. And the knowledge that he had caused that light to flicker out.

Cerberus whined, breaking Hades from his brooding. He scratched the hound behind his ears.

"You're right. It's unseemly, this self-pity." Hades' lips twisted. "I'm behaving like a godling."

Hades rose and went to the window overlooking his realm. Cerberus padded over to stand beside him, butting his hand. Hades rested a hand on the hound's back, taking comfort in the warmth and familiarity.



Guilt weighed in his chest. He wasn't often plagued by words or actions - such things meant little in his world. Yet with Persephone, he regretted the brusque refusal he had given her. She had been nothing but kind and welcoming, and he had returned that with cold dismissal.

Hades sighed, resting his forehead against the cool glass. Cerberus whined, nudging at his hand. Hades absentmindedly scratched behind the hound's ears.

"I was too harsh with her," he admitted. "She did not deserve such bluntness."

A movement caught his attention. Hades tensed, looking for movement in the window's reflection. There, by a flickering torch, a figure formed. Hecate appeared, her blank white eyes staring at him. Her hair moved with ghostly snakes, framing her timeless face.

"Well met, my king."

"You always arrive at the most inconvenient of times."

"Something troubles you. Did your research not go well?"

Hades considered his answer. He respected few as much as Hecate. She had been by his side since the world began, shaping the Underworld from the chaos. Her advice was

priceless. But this wasn't a political matter. This was... personal. He didn't like it.

"I am well enough," he said at last.

"Come now, old friend. I know that look in your eyes. What happened above?"

"Can't the look stay in my eyes?" He huffed. "I did as Aeacus advised and visited the Lady Persephone."

"Well that explains the mortal garb. Have you ever worn clothing that doesn't flow after you? How did it go?"

The truth spilled out of him. His meeting with Persephone. The flowers. Her comments. He stumbled, stopping himself. Some things were still too dangerous to say.

When he looked to Hecate, her face was softened, the snakes turned to dark locks that more resembled her mortal guise.

"She has a certain charm, doesn't she?"

"She is Demeter's daughter."

"Yes," Hecate agreed. "But her parentage does not define her; she is also of the blood of Zeus."

"Half of Olympus has been spawned from Zeus. One of him is more than enough."

"How many can you even claim are like him? Aeacus certainly isn't."

"You don't need to keep going on about it."

"Don't I? The seeds are sown. But what shall bloom?"

What could he and Persephone have in common? He was order and reason. His was not a world of growth or light. And after Leuce, he had closed that part of himself off. The part that wanted others. It was better this way. Safer for everyone.

"Don't be so crass."

Better for Persephone to remain in the sunlit world above, untainted by his shadows. She would forget him soon enough.

"Nice gift you've got there."

“Gift?”

“First a corsage, then a crown. Next thing you know the entire Underworld will be covered in flowers.”

Hades lifted a hand to his head, anticipating the familiar feel of his crown, only to find the softness of the flowers. They were still fresh, a vivid green against the dullness of the Underworld. He took it off, smiling down at the flowers.

“Are you smiling?”

“No.” He forced a stern facade.

“You are.” She stepped forward, with something that to Hades seemed like awe. “Obol for your thoughts?”

Hades ignored her, staring at the wreath. He half-expected them to wither at his touch. But they remained soft and fragrant, defying all reason.

“Hades, is this about her?” Hecate asked. Hades’ grip on the wreath tightened, threatening to crush the flowers. He forced himself to relax his hold and place the wreath down, somewhere Cerberus couldn’t reach.

Only one woman had ever captured his heart in this manner before. Leuce, a beautiful nymph who had never desired his attention, and yet he had fallen quicker than one should. A burning obsession became a plot to steal, and he had taken the woman with no thoughts of her desires or plans in life.

The love of a god, especially one such as himself, was dangerous.

“I wronged her. I thought only of myself. I never considered how she might fade here, so far from the lands of her birth.”

“Leuce loved you.”

“By circumstance, not choice. The first opportunity she had to flee, she did. How can I blame her?”

He turned away, gazing out into the vast caverns of his domain. “She needed warmth and light to thrive, and I could

not provide her with that. In the end, she wilted and became a permanent denizen of my realm.”

He would not make that mistake again. Better for Persephone to remain above. This wreath of flowers was but a temporary bloom.

“I regret how I went about that relationship. My courtship was wrong, and it proved what they all claimed—that I bring darkness and misery to those I care for. I was a fool to believe otherwise.”

“Be careful to not repeat the mistakes of your fellow gods.”

“Pardon?”

“The Lady Persephone is no nymph. If you gave her the chance, then you would see it. Don’t attribute to her qualities or limitations that she does not possess. Use your eyes.”

“She is young.”

“I wouldn’t let her hear that. She’s older than the twins, and you’ve seen what they get up to.”

Hades grimaced. Apollo and Artemis could certainly not be claimed as ‘young’.

“Persephone placed her mark on you. Perhaps she sees beyond the rumours, the warnings. Beyond even your own misgivings. Have you ever seen her give flowers to Dionysus? Hermes? Hell, have you ever seen her gift her father her blooms?”

“It is irrelevant. I swore never to bring the living here again,” he said. “Never to let my own desires eclipse another’s well-being.”

“Noble words. But life is not so simple. It demands risk.” She tilted her head, thoughtful. “Persephone knows her own mind. Grant her the chance to prove herself if she so chooses. You underestimate her spirit.”

Could he trust himself not to repeat the past? Not to taint something so achingly pure? Persephone may even believe herself strong enough to endure, but how long until the cold and gloom sapped her spirit?

With a heavy sigh, Hades flipped the wreath over, holding it for a moment. Such a flimsy thing, to bring up old pain and wistfulness. He carefully set it on a windowsill, where the weak sunlight would hit the flowers.

“I swore it on the Styx. I cannot go back on my vows.”

CHAPTER FIVE

The Aphrodisias spa was an extravagant building full of pastel marble and bubbling fountains. The luxury and decadence clashed with Persephone's own untamed, natural domain, but nonetheless she could appreciate the beauty.

She weaved through the corridors, avoiding eye contact with the mortals slipping in and out of the backrooms concealed by silk drapings. The air was heavy with exotic oils, laced with the sound of laughter, marking the spa as both a beauty and socialising spot. Aphrodite had barred her from those rooms as a young goddess, saying she wasn't ready for mortal lovers yet.

That Persephone hadn't wanted to go there in the first place had not mattered.

Now, she simply passed through the men and women in various states of undress, keeping her gaze fixed ahead as she hurried past the 'love rooms'.

When she was younger, Persephone had thought something was wrong with her. That her lack of desire was a flaw. Even considering her feelings for Hades, she couldn't fathom joining in with the writhing masses here.

Gods didn't love like mortals did. She had to remember that. Aphrodite's spas weren't what she should use as an example. Probably.

It was still the best place to come for advice on romance.

Persephone trailed her fingers along the edge of a decorative fountain as she passed, relishing the cool marble against her skin. She inhaled, detecting the rich floral scents. It was amazing how much the careful choice of florals could change the feel of a place. Something was missing with the perfume. She would need to work on a new combination.



Approaching Aphrodite's private rooms, Persephone could hear her aunt's laugh. Despite the early hour, there was a hub of noise. Gathering her wits, Persephone stepped through the curtain.

Aphrodite, in all her radiant glory, lounged at the edge of a sunken hot tub, surrounded by adoring worshippers, their eyes were glazed with lust. The steam obscured most limbs, but amongst the frothing water Persephone could discern glimpses of flesh against flesh, hands wandering beneath the surface.

Persephone fidgeted with her chiton. Perhaps she should turn back, give Aphrodite privacy. Fate declared otherwise.

"Persephone, darling!" Aphrodite shooed her companions with a graceful wave of her hand. "Come, join me. Leave everyone, Persephone doesn't like orgies. The purple room is open, carry on there."

Aphrodite's guests exited, some draping themselves in silk robes, others baring their bodies proudly. Persephone kept her gaze on the bubbles. When a woman burst forth, gasping for breath, Persephone jerked back. The woman seemed happy enough, giving lingering kisses to Aphrodite's legs, but soon enough she too left the waters, water cascading from her long auburn locks.

One young man, muscular and dripping, lingered, tripping over his words as he attempted to address the goddess.

“Jimmy, dear, I’ll be here in an hour. Go have fun elsewhere.” Aphrodite waved the suitor.

“Uh, it’s John.” It was clear the man had some unresolved ‘tension’ from the hot tub, and he bared it proudly. She’d rather he didn’t.

“Shoo, shoo. You’re making my niece self-conscious. Look at her, covering up all that beauty. Go.”

“Aphrodite—”

“Go.” Her aunt’s demeanour hardened, and she rose from the hot tub to meet the young man eye-to-eye. “You know the rules.”

Persephone pitied the man as he glanced down and moved off, shoulders tense as he headed out. His pride was noticeably more flaccid than it had been a moment prior.

Aphrodite lounged back, gesturing for Persephone to sit beside her. “You must try this new ambrosia nectar,” she said, holding out a jewelled goblet. “It’s divine. From the vineyards in Australia, of all places! Surely your mother can’t object now.”

Accepting the cup, Persephone took a large gulp. The nectar was sweet, its effects potent. Once they were alone, Persephone let her chiton fall into the water, the fabric vanishing as she settled into the bath.

“You seem tense, my dear. Are you here for a nymph? I can recommend the most exquisite—”

“No! Nothing of the sort. I need your advice.”

Aphrodite’s eyes lit up, shuffling closer. “Ooh, tell!” She leaned forward as Persephone clutched her goblet.

“I’ve met someone,” she began, focusing on the ambrosia. The bubbles bounced, hitting her nose. “They make me feel... alive. Excited. I want to be around them, to keep speaking with them. I’ve never experienced these desires before. What do I do?”

Aphrodite let out an excited squeal, sloshing ambrosia over the tub's edge. It infused with the water, adding to the heady scent. "I knew it! I knew this day would come! Just the other century, I discussed this with Athena. Tell me, tell me, who is this mysterious person of yours? Man? Woman? God?"

Persephone bit her lip. Among her aunt's many qualities, being a gossip unfortunately topped the list.

"I'd rather keep his identity to myself for now. He's, uh, rather shy and I don't want the pantheon watching our courtship. You know how it is."

"A secret lover? How can I say no to a forbidden romance? Keep your man close to your bosom then—or better still, in it—and tell me; what ails you? How is it that he's not already at your feet?"

"I don't think he knows that I exist. Well he knows I exist, of course, but not as a prospective partner."

Aphrodite waved a dismissive hand. "No need to worry about that. I'll just have my son pay this mysterious man a visit. A little arrow from Eros, and he'll be head over heels before you can say 'happily ever after!'"

"Auntie, that's cheating! No. I want Ha-him to desire me for me, not because of divine intervention."

"But darling, this is so much faster. And you'll get what you want. He's always doing it for Zeus."

"I don't want to know about my father's sex life. It's unsettling enough to be aware of all my half-siblings. I don't want a slave, I want love."

Aphrodite's head tilted, squinting as if she didn't understand what Persephone was saying. Persephone tried to clarify.

"I need to do this myself. I need to win his heart, not have my affections forced upon him."

"How very noble of you. Very well, let's discuss the noble art of seduction."

Persephone listened as Aphrodite described strategies for winning someone over in the 21st century, starting with dressing provocatively and showering the desired individual with expensive presents. She flowed into stories of her various paramours over time.

“Remember, most men are visual creatures. You must appeal to their senses. Drape yourself in the finest silks that cover your modesty but guide the eye to your preferred assets. Adorn your hair with exotic blooms. Lead his eye that he might follow. Be bold in your pursuit.”

“I’m unsure if draping myself off his arm would interest ha-him. He’s quite reserved, solitary, one might say.”

“A tough nut to crack! Very well, we can be more subtle. For the complex sort, it’s the small intimacies that kindle the flame of passion.”

She leaned in, touching Persephone on the shoulder, her fingers dragging down. “A light touch on his arm when speaking, sitting close so your knees occasionally brush. Laugh at his jests, gaze into his eyes. Make him feel he is the most captivating creature in existence. Men like to talk of themselves to a pretty woman.”

“What if he is aware of such guiles? He guards his emotions. He has been hurt before, but I don’t know how.”

“Ah, a wounded heart! Those require the gentlest care. You must earn his trust. Convince him you are worthy of his innermost secrets.” Aphrodite squeezed Persephone’s hand. “Be open, but patient. Vulnerable but strong. And remember, genuine passion starts from a connection. From shared experiences between the two people. Persistence can break through even the toughest exterior. Let your actions speak louder than the words you whisper in his ear at night.”

Persephone turned over Aphrodite’s words. This seemed truer to her predicament, advice more in tune with Hades. If she was careful, perceptive, she just might coax Hades from his self-imposed isolation. She needed to find topics of conversation; something about Hades that would draw his passions out.

“Thank you. I think I can work with this.”

“Think nothing of it, sweet Persephone.” Aphrodite shifted nearer, her breasts rising from the water. “Now, the second step. Without access to your wardrobe, I will need to ask. Have you upgraded your undergarments? Demeter may be a prude since I—never mind that, ignore what I said. Nevertheless, it’s no excuse for you. No cotton panties. We will need to get you a collection of scented oils too, perhaps a...”

A deep blush rose on Persephone’s cheeks. “I-I’m not sure I’m ready for all that.” Persephone took a large gulp of wine. The heady vintage did little to calm her sudden nerves. “Baby steps, Aphrodite, please.”

Aphrodite let out a peal of laughter. “Forgive me, I sometimes forget you are still new to the game of passion. We will take things slowly. Let’s meet next week for another lesson.” She gave Persephone a reassuring pat on the arm. “For now, simply enjoy his company. I promise the rest will come with time.”

CHAPTER SIX

“Is your goal in life to irritate me, or are you avoiding Hera?” Hades drawled, as Zeus rambled about his most recent escapade. The other god was lounging on a fake loveseat that looked like it was from a 60s magazine. Hades could already feel the dull throb in his temples.

“Brother, you must attend this year’s masque! I have planned a theme I know you will find most amusing.”

“I won’t.”

“The theme!” Zeus exclaimed, thrusting his arms wide. “Hidden in the open.”

Hades repressed the urge to face-palm. Zeus, true to form, had chosen a theme that would make a mockery of him, forcing him into some gaudy costume.

“I suppose Aphrodite will dress as a maiden then?” He allowed himself a wry smile at the image of Athena draped in frills and lace.

Zeus chortled, slapping his knee. “Oh brother, you have a sense of humour after all!”

The man moved on to describing the mortals he planned to ‘borrow’ for the evening’s entertainment, artists and musicians who had caught his fancy on his many visits to earth. It was followed by an overly descriptive account of nymphs that had recently graced Olympus (and likely Zeus’ bed).

“Exquisite creatures,” Zeus sighed, “each one more beautiful than the last. I could arrange for you to meet one of them. It’s been long since you’ve had company. They’re your type too, the last I checked.”

Hades choked on his wine, setting his chalice down with a harsh clatter. He stared at Zeus, disbelieving. “Are you attempting to play matchmaker now?”



“Oh come now. When’s the last time you properly indulged yourself? No! Don’t tell me you’ve sworn off pleasures of the flesh?”

Hades felt his jaw clench. He didn’t want to be the subject of his brother’s meddling. His past was his own, and he preferred it to stay that way, buried deep in the past. He didn’t want to be involved in Zeus’ frivolous dalliances and pointless romances.

“You know very well that I have,” Hades snapped, “I’ll stick to being a proud dog parent and leave it at that.”

“That was millennia ago, dear brother! You’ll find plenty would happily chase you down. Why just last week I met the most lovely—” Zeus fell quiet, his blue eyes flickering over Hades’ face. It should have been a miracle, only Hades knew that silence was never a good thing around his brother.

“Hades,” Zeus began, the usual jovial tone of his voice gone. “There’s something different about you.”

Hades bristled. “There’s nothing different about me,” he responded. Undeterred, Zeus continued.

“It’s a woman, isn’t it?” Hades rolled his eyes but said nothing. “Let’s see. Could it be Athena? She might appreciate your brooding nature. Perhaps a young Nymph that has joined our ranks? Oho! Have you made the eternal mistake and fallen for a mortal? Let me tell you brother, they always end in chaos.”

Zeus’ tirade continued, encompassing all women of beauty and grace who frequented Olympus. Hades was grateful Zeus

didn't mention Persephone, but each suggestion only emphasised Zeus' lack of respect to his fellow gods.

"Enough, brother. My love life, or lack thereof, is not a subject for idle gossip." He stood up, the sudden movement causing his wine to slosh close to the rim of the goblet. "I'll thank you not to make sport of me. My private affairs are not fodder for Olympian gossip."

"Come now, brother, no need to be shy! Your secret is safe with me. It is about time you took an interest in someone. I was worrying you'd become a complete recluse."

Hades rubbed at his forehead, trying to stave off the headache building behind his eyes. He should have ignored his brother's taunts. Now Zeus was fixated.

"I am a recluse." He sighed. "There is no secret, Zeus. Your imagination has got the better of you."

"Nonsense! I know the look of a smitten god when I see one." Zeus wagged his finger. "Now, tell me about this mystery woman who has captured your attention. What is she like? Have you spoken to her yet?"

"There is no woman."

Zeus held up his hands in acquiescence. "Very well, very well. But when you decide you need advice on charming your paramour, you need only ask. I'm quite the expert in affairs of the heart."

Hades doubted that. His brother's 'advice' usually comprised lavish gifts and flowery proclamations of love, neither of which appealed to him.

"I assure you, brother, I have no need for your counsel on such matters."

"No need to be shy, Hades! In my pursuit of Hera, I had doves released every time she walked into a room. The flutter of wings and cooing was symbolic of my heart beating for her, you see."

Hades tried not to cringe. Releasing flocks of birds indoors was exactly the over-the-top gesture he wished to avoid.

“And I once had a statue commissioned in Aphrodite’s likeness,” Zeus continued. “Marble carved to perfection, with jewels for eyes. Had it placed in her chambers as a token of my affection. Now, that Hermes placed it in my own bedchamber for Hera to see was unfortunate, but I’m certain Aphrodite appreciated the gesture.”

“I appreciate the... advice, brother. But I believe our tastes differ somewhat,” Hades said.

“Nonsense! The path to a woman’s heart is universal,” Zeus declared. “Now, tell me about this mystery woman. What does she like?”

Zeus wasn’t backing down. Perhaps Hades could use his brother’s stubbornness to his advantage. Just not in the way Zeus thought.

“She enjoys flowers,” Hades said. An image of Persephone, flowers threaded through her hair, flashed through his mind.

“Excellent! Then you must send her bouquets daily. Have them delivered on a chariot drawn by doves, with sonnets tied to each stem.”

Hades nodded, noting what not to do. He was certain Persephone would hate being smothered so.

“I shall take that under advisement,” Hades said. With any luck, Zeus would now consider his brotherly duty done and let the matter drop.

He did not.

Zeus leapt up from the loveseat, rubbing his hands together.

“Body language is key when courting a woman. You must exude confidence.”

Before Hades could protest, Zeus had stepped forward and taken his hands, pulling Hades up from his throne. “Stand tall, shoulders back. Chin up. You must take up space to show your dominance.”

Hades reluctantly adjusted his posture, feeling ridiculous. He towered over most, as it was. Did he need to make himself

even more imposing?

“There, much better!” Zeus said. “Now, you must perfect ‘the gaze.’ Watch me.”

Zeus turned to face Hades and fixed him with an intense stare, his blue eyes smouldering. One eyebrow quirked up as his lips curled into a roguish smile.

Hades had to stifle a laugh. On Zeus, the expression resembled that of a preening peacock.

“Now you try.”

Hades hesitated, then attempted to mimic the look, raising an eyebrow as he met Zeus’s gaze. He was certain he had failed.

“Oh yes, she’ll be enthralled!” Zeus said, either missing or ignoring Hades’ lack of enthusiasm.

“Let’s move on to gestures, shall we?” Zeus continued without waiting for a response. “You must learn to touch her arm when you speak. Take her hand in yours.”

Zeus demonstrated by clasping Hades’ forearm. Hades stiffened, fighting the instinct to pull back. He never started physical contact. Especially not with his brother.

“Go on then, you try,” Zeus coaxed, offering his own arm.

Hades reached out and mimicked the gesture, immediately withdrawing his hand as if burned.

“Good, good! Now, take her hand like so.”

Again, Zeus demonstrated, taking Hades’ hand in both of his. Hades copied the movement, releasing Zeus’ hand as soon as he could without being impolite.

“Excellent, you’re a natural.”

Hades doubted that. He was fairly certain he had all the charm and allure of a statue. Subtle gestures of intimacy were not his strong suit.

“Just remember, brother, confidence is key.” Zeus clapped Hades on the back once more. “She won’t be able to resist

you.”

Somehow, he suspected she would be able to. Nevertheless, he nodded, hoping Zeus would take this as his cue to leave him alone. The sooner he could get his brother out of his realm, the sooner he could make this conversation stop. The Fates had other ideas.

“I have an excellent idea. We shall role play, so you can practise your wooing skills before approaching your paramour.”

Before his very eyes, Zeus morphed into a busty young woman with long blonde hair and a revealing chiton. “Is this her?” Zeus said in a high, feminine voice. “Shall I be a pretty water nymph to win you over?”

Hades grimaced, shifting as he averted his eyes. “Really, brother, that’s unnecessary.”

“Nonsense! You must practice if you wish to court your lady love. Now, tell me what you desire me to look like.” He fluttered his eyelashes and posed dramatically.

Hades sighed, realising Zeus would not relent until he played along. “Very well.” He studied Zeus critically, trying to think of the least provocative description possible.

“She is slender, yet strong, like a young birch sapling,” Hades began. As he spoke, an image formed unbidden in his mind. Sunlight glinting off waves of golden hair, eyes as green as new spring leaves.

“Her hair is long and fair, the colour of ripe wheat swaying in the breeze,” Hades continued, lost in the image. Zeus shifted his hair to a softer, blonde tone.

“Her face is fine boned, yet full of spirit. Rosy cheeks that dimple when she laughs...” Hades trailed off. He was just describing Persephone to a tee. Thankfully, Zeus seemed oblivious to his daughter’s appearance, preening at the description.

“How wonderful. I shall be the very image of your heart’s desire.” He struck a dramatic pose, one hand fluttering to his

forehead. “Oh, woe is me! My heart burns with longing for your powerful embrace!”

Hades blinked, torn from his reverie. “Yes, well, that’s quite enough of that.” This had veered into the absurd.

But Zeus was not done. He grasped Hades’ hands in his, gazing up at him with wide, adoring eyes.

“Oh, my love, my soul! How I ache for your tender caress!” Zeus proclaimed. He mimed a swoon, almost toppling into Hades’ arms.

Hades stepped back, face flaming. Zeus fell to the floor. “Really, brother, this is highly inappropriate.”

“You must get into character, Hades. Here, help me up. Let me gaze longingly into your eyes.”

Zeus bounced up, grasping his face in both hands, staring into his eyes with an exaggerated, besotted look.

“Enough, Zeus.”

His brother blinked in surprise, then dissolved into hearty laughter. “Oh, Hades, you are too easy to fluster.” With a casual wave of his hand, Zeus transformed back into his normal (yet still irritating) form.

“I mean it, brother, you did well,” he chuckled, clapping Hades on the back. “Keep practicing those gestures, and your lady love will soon swoon in your arms.”

“I assure you, that will not be necessary.”

“If you say so, brother,” Zeus said with a knowing wink. “But the offer stands. If you require advice in matters of the heart, I am always happy to oblige.”

“I believe we are done here,” Hades said stiffly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I should return to my duties.”

With a final chortle, Zeus vanished in a clap of thunder. Hades exhaled. That had been mortifying. Still, at least Zeus remained oblivious to the true object of his budding affection. Small mercies.

Shaking his head, Hades strode from the hall. He had a lot to do, and no time for such frivolous distractions.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Persephone crept through the dimly lit grove that served as the entrance to the Underworld. She half-expected alarms to blare or Cerberus to appear and bite her. But she was met with silence. Even the cloud of fog that rolled through the land muffled her footsteps.

She was trespassing in Hades' domain though she had heard tales of what he did to intruders. Thrill shot through her. Even her mother hadn't been this far.

Beyond the veil, the Underworld was a strange contrast of barren wasteland and life. Obsidian towers jutted out at odd angles, organic in appearance, reflecting the faint light from the mortal realm. The river Styx was a mirror of the grey sky, while fields of asphodel swayed without wind. Persephone didn't expect to find it so beautiful.

From the way her mother had described the place, she had expected fire and brimstone, not this cold, creeping sensation.

She ventured deeper into the Underworld. Torches illuminated paths leading off into the distance, flanked by ancient shrines. She jumped as a figure passed by, barely visible—a ghost? The deceased were all around her, only visible out of the corner of her eye.

Persephone imagined Hades wandering these same paths, alone with his thoughts. The ominous peace surrounding him.

She took another step. There was no breeze but sounds, whispers, echoed in her ears. The words weren't distinguishable, but Persephone could feel the sibilant threads weaving through the air, slipping between her ears.

Hermes had once told her the whispers could make you go insane.

'Turn back.'

Persephone paused mid-step. "They are just stories," she reminded herself. She needed to build a wall of logic against

their warnings. If she stopped, they would pull her down with them.

'Leave this place.'

'It's not too late. Stay away from him.'

Persephone pressed her hands over her ears, trying to block out the whispers that swirled around her like smoke.

'He's cruel.'

'Heartless.'

'Stay away from him.'

'Save yourself.'

The warnings grew louder, more insistent, until the voices overlapped into a cacophony. Persephone's breath came in sharp gasps as panic rose in her chest. She knew the rumours about Hades. That he was detached and pitiless, ruling the Underworld with an iron fist.

She had to remember that there was more. Hades was gentle, sincere.

'He won't care for you.'

'He's incapable of love.'

Persephone shook her head, tears pricking at the corners of her eyes.

"No," she whispered. She refused to believe that. The voices pressed closer, whispering over and around her, their insubstantial forms chilling her skin.

'His love will consume you until there is nothing left.'

A low growl echoed through the darkness.

Persephone's head snapped up. The spirits were fading, and a colossal figure was approaching. She stepped back as a massive form loomed out of the darkness. Cerberus, the three-headed dog that guarded the gates of the Underworld. His eyes glowed red as he snarled at the spirits, flecks of saliva flying from his jaws.

Then his eyes fixed on her.

Where Cerberus was, Hades would soon follow. Her courtship would end before it began if the god thought she was trespassing. She needed to get the dog on side.

“Here, boy. Who’s a good pupper?” With shaking hands, Persephone retrieved a handful of seeds from her pocket.

She held out her open palm, allowing the juicy seeds to grow into ripe strawberries. Throwing them forward, the fruit tumbled to the ground at Cerberus’ feet.

The hound paused, sniffing at the fruit with one head even as he glared with the others. First the middle head, then the side ones joined in, nudging each other to get to the food. In a second, the fruit was gone, red juice staining their teeth.

“There’s a good boy. See? No threats here.” She reached for more seeds, holding out her hand as the fruit grew, allowing the dog to approach her. Three wet noses nudged her arm before the left one swiped the strawberries from her hand, covering her hand and lower arm with saliva.

Persephone tentatively reached out to stroke one of his heads. The fur was rough but warm. Cerberus emitted a low, purring noise, and Persephone laughed, shaky with relief. Encouraged, she buried her hands into Cerberus’ fur, rubbing behind his ears. His tails wagged, thumping against the floor.

“Who’s a good boy?” Persephone cooed. Cerberus flopped onto his back, presenting his belly for rubs. His legs kicked with delight as she indulged him. Gone was the terrifying guard dog that struck fear into mortal hearts. Now Cerberus acted like an oversized puppy craving affection.

Once he was sated, Cerberus rolled back onto his feet, nuzzling against Persephone. Any remnants of malice were gone, only gentle fondness reflected at her.

She could do this. She could find common ground with Hades. His realm wasn’t all dark like her mother or the shades claimed, if this creature resided happily within its walls.

“Conversation topic number one; adorable puppies like you. Do you think you can help me find some more, Cerberus? What can you tell me about your daddy?”

Cerberus gave a deep woof, the heads battling to be the one to respond. With a wag of his tails, Cerberus turned, bounding deeper into the Underworld. Persephone hurried to keep up as she took in the new sights. Jagged obsidian formations jutted up from the ground, framing the path ahead. Wisps drifted past, their mournful whispers no longer audible over Cerberus' panting.



Cerberus finally turned down a narrow passageway built into one of the obsidian spikes. Persephone followed, fingers skimming the crystalline growths that jutted from the cavern walls. The passageway opened into a larger chamber, with a carved stone altar in the centre. Intricate runes and symbols covered its surface.

Persephone edged closer to the altar, her hand outstretched. A small white flower bloomed in her palm, its petals opening to reveal a gentle light. Lifting the flower, she shone it around the cave.

“What is this?”

Cerberus licked at the flower, scooping it up. His face scrunched up at the taste and he spat it out, the small light shining upon the cave walls.

The rock face was covered in elaborate carvings of figures and scenes from mythic tales. Persephone traced the images, telling the story to the attentive hound.

“Here's Hades, standing before the river Styx.” The carving showed the god of the Underworld with one hand over his heart. His likeness was so detailed that Persephone could make out his brooding expression, the hard set of his jaw.

“He’s taking a vow,” she murmured. “An oath made on the Styx can’t be broken.” The next panel displayed Hades seated on a throne, shoulders slumped. “And after, he remains here, in his kingdom.”

Persephone chewed her lip in thought, moving down the wall. “But why? What oath did he make that keeps him confined to this realm?” The rest of the story had been erased, the engravings marred by deep gouges that obliterated the images.

“Perhaps he didn’t want people to know. But if so, why have it on the walls to start with? Did he not make this shrine?”

She caressed the depiction of Hades, trying to smooth the frown that marred even this depiction. “What did you promise?”

A sharp whistle cut through the air. Cerberus perked up, his entire stance changing as he waited for direction. With one last grateful lick to Persephone’s hand, Cerberus took off towards the source of the whistle.

Persephone watched him go, his form fading into the darkness. Reluctantly she turned, following the trail of flowers back where she had come.

CHAPTER EIGHT

1972

Hades stood in the corner of Zeus's banquet hall, which had been decorated for the 1970s-themed celebration. String lights and glittering disco balls hung from the ceiling, while someone had haphazardly scattered lava lamps and beanbag chairs around the room.

Whoever had decided to invent strobe lighting would be in Tartarus for the rest of their existence.

Deities laughed and danced to the pounding beat of the music, dressed in ridiculous costumes of bell bottoms, platform shoes, and tie-dye tunics.

Hades grimaced, tugging at the polyester collar of his own black and white outfit. He felt ridiculous. The fabric was stifling, and the wide lapels and flared trousers made him look like an extra from Saturday Night Fever. He hadn't bothered with the era's over-styled hair or facial hair, preferring his standard slicked back hair and clean-shaven face.

Poseidon sauntered over, clapping Hades on the back. "Lighten up, brother!" he boomed. "You look great!"

Poseidon had donned an obnoxious patterned shirt unbuttoned halfway down his hairy chest, tight white pants, and a thick gold chain so was in no position to comment on his fashion choices.

"I look like an idiot."

"Nonsense. Here, have a drink," Poseidon handed Hades some neon-coloured concoction that looked like it should be in a toxic waste barrel. Hades sniffed it. The sweetness was enough to make him sick.

"If you'll excuse me."

Hades slipped away from the main hall, the thumping music growing faint as he retreated down a long corridor. He

ducked into an empty antechamber, sighing in relief as the pulsing beat no longer threatened to give him a migraine.

Leaning against the cool marble wall, Hades sipped the sugary cocktail Poseidon had pressed into his hand. It was sweet, with none of the bite of ambrosia. He grimaced, setting it on a nearby table.

He had only come tonight at Zeus's insistence. His brother had refused to take no for an answer, claiming Hades spent too much time brooding alone in the Underworld.

That he had somehow persuaded Cerberus to get involved, the dog hiding somewhere in this building was enough to get Hades out of his realm.

Maybe Zeus had a point. But Hades found these loud, bustling events more draining than enjoyable. He wasn't much for dancing and mingling. Give him a peaceful night with a book by the hearth any day.

With a heavy sigh, Hades straightened and squared his shoulders. He supposed he should make at least a cursory appearance before begging off for home. The sooner he returned to the comforting gloom of his realm, the better.

Some liquid courage first, however.

He emerged from the antechamber, hoping to find a buffet table filled with something more appetising. Just as he reached for the goblet, a delicate hand touched his arm. Hades turned to see the most stunning creature standing before him. He recognised the young goddess immediately; how could he forget those large doe eyes narrowed in anger at him? Especially when those eyes followed him at every function?

Hades glanced down, taking in Persephone's paisley print dress. The long bell sleeves and demure neckline contrasted with the short skirt. He quickly looked back up, focusing just over her shoulder instead. Most goddesses favoured displaying their upper half; it had been centuries since he had seen so much above the ankle.

He shuffled, feeling like a green boy again. She was attractive, but he didn't want to stare like some dirty old man

(or Zeus).

“Lady Persephone,” Hades said with a slight nod of his head. He grasped for something else to say, some polite conversation to make that would distract him from looking down at her legs. “How may I help you?”

Hades winced. It was a stupid question. The thumping music from inside made it clear the party was in full swing. Hades felt his neck grow hot as he waited for her to answer.

“Lord Hades,” she curtsied. “I apologise for the interruption to your solitude, but my father wishes to speak with you.”

Hades looked over to where Zeus lounged on his elaborate throne, a giggling nymph perched on his knee, and arched an eyebrow. “It appears delivering the message himself may prove... challenging,” he remarked.

Persephone laughed. It wasn’t brash like Athena or tinkering and fake like Aphrodite. It was soft, slightly smothered, but her eyes crinkled most delightfully.

“You make a fair observation.”

“Perhaps we could take the long route, and you can summarise his latest inanities as we walk? You would save me from having to listen to him when he does start talking.”

A delicate pink tongue darted out to wet her lower lip. “I-yes. That would be lovely.”

He offered his arm, and she took it, fingers curling around the garish pattern on his shirt.

“I didn’t realise it was possible to obtain clothing that wasn’t psychedelic.”

“I, ah, had Lady Hecate alter them as a favour. Your father sent the most hideous poncho over.”

“He sent one to Poseidon too, I think he fancied you all matching.”

“Then I will thank the fates that didn’t occur.”

Her fingers tightened around his arm as the lady snorted, obscuring her face behind her hair. Hades found himself smiling at the sight.

They continued to walk, Persephone telling him about Zeus' latest shenanigans. He responded, conscious of how close she was, almost brushing against him. He watched her as they spoke, taking in the bright eyes and the strands of hair that had escaped her braids.

"And how have you been finding the festivities?" Hades inquired, hoping to prolong the journey.

"Oh, they've been lovely," Persephone hesitated.

"But?"

"It's nothing."

"If it is playing on your mind, then it is something."

"Oh, I-mother wanted me to come, make connections. Just when I made a breakthrough in splicing..."

Hades watched as she spoke, noting the way she gestured with her hands, the way she absently tucked back stray locks of hair when the breeze caught them. Her passion was infectious, lighting up her face like Apollo's rays. He realised he was staring and composed himself, turning his gaze forward once more.

They were approaching Zeus again. Their private interlude was drawing to an end. It surprised Hades to feel a pang of regret at the thought.

Persephone smiled up at him. "Thank you for indulging me, Lord Hades."

"The company was pleasant, a welcome distraction. I wish you luck with your shop."

Hades watched her go, taking in her warmth, before hurrying to Zeus. Maybe he could head off the inevitable blow-up when Hera returned.

"Brother," Zeus boomed, throwing an arm around Hades' shoulders. "So glad you could join us. Now, about this matter

in Austin.”

Hades nodded, only half listening as Zeus prattled on about some regional dispute. His gaze drifted to Persephone, who lingered in the doorway. Their eyes met, and she gave him a small smile before darting away. Hades felt an unfamiliar flutter in his chest at the gesture.

“Hades?”

Realising Zeus had asked him a question, he wrenched his focus back to the matter at hand.

“My apologies, brother. You were saying?” With a sigh, he turned his full attention to Zeus’ current issue.

Still, as they left the antechamber sometime later, Hades found his gaze straying once more to Persephone. Their eyes met and her lips curved in a gentle smile. Hades smiled back before he could stop himself, surprising them both. With a swish of her dress, Persephone turned and vanished into the throng, leaving Hades staring after her, his stoic heart fighting against his oaths.

Hades wasn’t sure why that encounter came to mind now.

Perhaps it was the prospect of another party. The possibility that they might interact again, now they were more familiar. Now that he was certain that Persephone’s feelings were more than a childhood crush, or an act of teenage rebellion.

Perhaps it was how, as he walked through his realm, he felt more settled.

His domain was still. The spirits in their places, the rivers running their courses. However, as he approached the gates, he saw that Cerberus was not at his post. Had Zeus come meddling again?

“Cerberus?”

No response. Hades pursed his lips, raised two fingers to them and whistled. A call Cerberus could hear no matter where in the realm the dog was.

There was no immediate sign of Cerberus. Hades surveyed the horizon. The beast was not known for shirking his duty.

Had something happened to the dog while he'd been gone?

Just as he was about to venture deeper, a burst of excited barking echoed through the Underworld. The noise grew until Cerberus bounded into view.

But it wasn't the imposing beast that usually guarded the Underworld's gates. Instead of the usual fierce guardian with snarling heads and gleaming red eyes, an overly excited and friendly-looking puppy stood before him.

His three heads were wagging their tongues out in joy, tails swishing so hard they threatened to topple over a nearby urn. Hades barely recognised his own dog.

"Cerberus?"

Cerberus's tails wagged, eyes shining with delight. He looked like he'd returned from a playdate rather than a stint at guarding the Underworld.

"Zeus," he cursed. It wouldn't be beyond his brother to slip Cerberus some ambrosia. Who knew what chaos the liquor would have on the hound?

Hades made a mental note to return the 'favour' when he next saw his brother.

For now, he had an overly excited dog to calm down. Hades reached out, scratching behind Cerberus' ears to soothe him, only for the dog to grab his glove in its teeth and bound away. All three heads wrestled over the leather prize.

"Cerberus!" Hades called after him, but the dog paid him no mind, already racing back the way he had come. Hades huffed and gave chase, his robes trailing behind him as he pursued the dog.

A smile tugged at Hades' lips. It had been a long time since he and Cerberus had played like this. It reminded Hades of simpler times.

The dog led him on a merry chase through the paths of the Underworld, ducking behind columns and doubling back to stay just out of Hades' reach. The god followed doggedly, refusing to let Cerberus get the better of him.

As they neared the deeper caverns, Hades broke into a run, easily catching up to the pup, and jumping over him. With a quick grab, he snatched his glove from Cerberus' mouth, wrestling the dog to the ground.

“Got you!”

Cerberus whined and nudged Hades' hand, begging for more play.

“That's enough, boy,” he said, holding up his now slobbered-on glove. With a quick wave he banished it to his palace. “We've both got work to do.”

Cerberus' heads drooped in disappointment, but he fell into step beside Hades as the god turned and begun his patrols. Hades patted Cerberus, scratching his ears.

“Perhaps later.”

They strolled through the asphodel fields, the shades parting for them. He knew he should be thinking about the shades, the souls that needed judging, but his mind kept wandering to Persephone. The sound of her laughter, the way her eyes lit up when she smiled.

“What's got into you?”

He was the detached, aloof Hades. The cold ‘King of the Underworld’. Stern, intimidating. Predictable. And yet, whenever he spoke with Persephone, he felt anything but stoic.

He slowed as he passed a lone tree, its skeletal branches bare of blossoms like everything else in his realm. His heart twisted at the sight, the reminder of his shortcomings. A life cut too short. A ghost from his past that wouldn't leave him be.

The sight gave him pause. Perhaps Zeus had reason to believe Hades yearned for more. So caught up in his own thoughts, he didn't notice Cerberus' behaviour change until he tried to walk on. No more playfulness, just the dog sniffing the ground, swatting away shades as he made his way to a wall. Hades followed.

There, nestled in the barren black soil of the Underworld, was an anomaly: a small green sprout reaching towards the light. A single flower bloomed from it, its vibrant orange petals standing out against the surrounding desolation.

An orchid, Persephone had called it.

He snorted. Of course, the symbol of virility would come after Zeus had visited.

Hades crouched, fingers hovering over the lone bloom. Cerberus' three heads nudged each other to get a better look. Hades gave the hound a look, motioning him to step back.

Cerberus whined but backed off, his bulk receding into the darkness. Left alone with the flower, Hades dared to touch a petal. The coolness against his skin left a yearning. For life. For colour. For Persephone. What if he brought Persephone here? His realm could use her. It would be so easy. He knew where she—

He quashed the thought down. Persephone deserved better than what he could offer. He had learnt from Leuce. He would not steal another bride. He withdrew his hand.

The flower remained, fragile stem swaying. A reminder that some things were beyond even a god's grasp. He would leave this small moment of beauty alone, not taint it with his presence any longer.

“Come, Cerberus,” Hades commanded, turning away. “We have much to do.”

Hades walked off, Cerberus trailing behind. After a few steps, he hesitated, and looked back at the flower. It still stood, the fragile blossom bobbing in the barren earth.

Hades scowled, angry at himself for hesitating. And yet the small splash of colour called to him.

Cerberus let out a questioning whine, noticing his master's pause. Hades waved a hand.

“Go on ahead. I'll catch up.”

Hades returned to the flower. He crouched, examining it, the bright green of the leaves, the orange petals. He ran a

finger over them. Unable to resist, Hades summoned a sketchbook and piece of charcoal. If he could replicate the flower, perhaps he could rid himself of this preoccupation. He sketched, engrossed in the task.

When he finished, it surprised Hades to find he felt... satisfied.

CHAPTER NINE

Persephone sang along to the radio, her voice bouncing off the walls. With each stroke of her broom, the scuffed wooden floor shone, and the flowers she passed by perked up a bit, their petals unfurling as if to meet her. Maeve hummed along as she placed the last of the bouquets back on the shelves.

She was so engrossed in the music that she didn't hear the bell, or notice anyone entering until she turned too quickly and walked straight into a solid mass. Blinking up in surprise, she found herself face to chest with a familiar figure.

"I'll just, uh, go," Maeve made a hasty exit into the back room.

Persephone's cheeks flamed as she stepped back, untangling herself from Hades. "We're closed?"

Mortification swept over her, and she bowed her head forward, hiding behind her hair. What was she thinking, speaking to one of the most powerful gods like that?

"I can come back later?"

"No!" Persephone hurried to correct herself. "I mean, you're welcome to stay. Anytime. We don't exactly need sleep, I mean."

She led him further into the shop, hyper-aware of their proximity. Should she try to utilise some of Aphrodite's advice? Persephone changed direction, moving to a sofa tucked away in one corner. If her arm brushed against his as she did so, then that was no one else's business.

He started speaking, something about a flower. Blinking, she forced herself to focus now that she had Hades in her shop.

"Forgive me, I've been terribly rude to burst in on you after a full day of work with my issues," Hades interrupted himself. "It's late and I've neglected to consider your needs. We may not require sleep, but we require rest from our burdens. We'll



discuss this further after you've had something to eat.”

In a daze, Persephone let Hades lead her to the door, his arm out for her to take. She did, resting her hand on his forearm. No electricity crackled between them, but then, that was more Zeus' thing.

Locking up the shop, Persephone saw Maeve watching them from the back-room doorway, grinning and giving a huge thumbs up. Shaking her head, Persephone put her hand back on Hades' arm.

The god led her along the street, the soft glow of the streetlamps and the neon signs of the shops and restaurants lighting their way. She stole glances at him as they walked, trying to gauge his expression. Was he still thinking about what had happened between them?

They stopped in front of a tiny restaurant tucked into a back street. Window boxes overflowed with colourful flowers. A faded wooden sign reading “The Rabbit Hole” hung above the door. Hades held the door open for her and she stepped inside, inhaling the mingled scents of fresh bread, roasted vegetables, and simmering sauces.

The restaurant itself was dim, with candles flickering on each table. The tables and chairs were a hodgepodge of mismatched woods and fabrics that lent the space a comfortable, lived-in feel. Servers wound their way between tables, chatting amiably with patrons as they took orders and

delivered food. Soft music played in the background, though it was difficult to make out over the buzz of conversation.

A server approached them with a friendly smile. “Table for two?” he asked, already gathering menus and cutlery. “I have a lovely little alcove in the back; perfect for a such a night.”

Persephone opened her mouth to counter the assumption. Were they here as colleagues? Friends? More than friends? She looked at Hades, but he offered no clarification, simply nodding.

The waiter escorted them to a small table at the back, with a view of a charming back garden. Hades overtook her at the last minute, holding out her seat. Persephone flushed, sitting down. She played with the stem of her glass as the waiter set down their menus with a wink. “I’ll leave you two to look over the menu.”

Persephone stared at the menu, though the words swam before her eyes. She searched for something to say, hoping to ease the tension.

“So,” she began, sneaking a glance at Hades. He looked up at her, waiting. Her mind went blank. She gestured around them. “This is... nice?” She cringed. Nice? Is that the best she could come up with? “Sorry, that’s not fair. It’s beautiful. The garden, the little fountain...”

“I agree. It is ideal for when one wants quiet, but not to be alone. There are not many places where one can obtain that.”

The initial awkwardness of their meeting melted away as they navigated the familiar terrain of small talk. Persephone learned Hades preferred summer over winter, quiet evenings in the Underworld over the chaotic revelry of Olympus. She confessed her love for autumn, and how she envied the beautiful rich colours of leaves as they cascaded through the crisp air. The natural world held a beauty beyond her control, and she revelled in it all.

“Dogs or cats?”

“Dogs. I have one, or rather, they have me.”

Persephone recalled the three-headed beauty she had met a few days prior. “I always wanted a dog, but mother is terribly allergic to pet fur. I didn’t know that, of course, the first time I snuck a stray into her fields. He was a gorgeous racoon who hid in the corn for weeks until mother found him. Mother had been sneezing the entire time. She wasn’t happy with me.”

“A shame. Animals are loyal companions. They love in a way few other beings can replicate.”

Their server returned, ready to take their order. Hades ordered first—a Caesar salad topped with honey-roasted pecans and pomegranate seeds. Plants she supposed he rarely tasted in the Underworld.

“I’ll have...” Persephone hesitated, looking down at the menu. Were she with her mother, or Aphrodite, she would go for a meal deemed ‘appropriate’ for a goddess of her realm. But if she couldn’t be herself around Hades, how would she handle bigger secrets? “Your rib-eye, please. Rare, with the peppercorn sauce. And a side of Mediterranean vegetables.”

“A good choice, ma’am.”

Once he had left, Hades regaled her with stories of Cerberus as a puppy, the mischief he would get up to like peeing in Zeus’ wash bowl and eating Zeus’ favourite slippers. Persephone realised Hades enjoyed pulling pranks as much as her father, only his seemed to only affect Zeus. In return, she told him about the mortals that passed through her shop over the years, seeing love blossom, and the great-grandchildren of her original patrons go grey. While few were aware of her divine nature, she never concealed her work, leaving mortals to decide for themselves.

Persephone was halfway through a story about a customer who had come into her shop, demanding a bouquet that would make his wife forgive him for forgetting their anniversary, when Hades let out a deep bellow. His laughter, deep and rich, filled the quiet corner of the restaurant, shocking her. His eyes crinkled at the corners.

“I imagine she wasn’t too pleased,” he said, setting his glass down.

“Quite the opposite,” Persephone replied with a grin. “She had already ordered a bouquet that morning as an apology for her reaction. I can imagine it was quite a surprise when they both got home!”

When the waiter took their plates, Hades straightened, fishing in his pocket. He pulled out a small leather-bound book and pushed it across the table to Persephone.

“What’s this?” she asked, opening it to the marked page. It was a detailed sketch of an orchid in bloom. “It’s beautiful. Did you draw it?”

“This is what I wanted to discuss with you. I found this flower in the Underworld when on patrol.”

“The Underworld?” Persephone stilled, a prickling sensation crawling up her spine. She forced herself to remain calm. It was a coincidence. It had to be. “When was this?”

“Three days ago.”

The same day she had visited.

“Where did you find it?”

“Near the entrance to Elysium. Cerberus found it, actually, while we were out on patrol.”

She had planted orchids around her last offering to Hades. But they were mortal blooms, devoid of divine touch. How did one not only survive, but thrive in the harsh climate of the Underworld? How did it get to the Underworld?

Perhaps she hadn’t cleared away all the remnants of her visit.

She turned the sketch around, examining it from different angles, as if the drawing itself might yield answers. But it was a simple rendition. Lifelike and detailed, but no clues lurked in the charcoal lines.

“What colour was it?”

“Orange? Does that matter?”

“I have no idea. Orange orchids are said to represent excitement, enthusiasm. Determinations.”

“Didn’t you invent the language of flowers?”

Persephone flushed. “I wish I could have seen the flower myself. There may have been some sign, some anomaly to explain how it grew. From a purely academic view, it’s fascinating.”

“Unfortunately, it had wilted away by the time I returned. I was distracted at the time. If another should grow, I could send someone to fetch you, to see it for yourself.”

“O-okay.” She tried to keep her tone casual, to mask the flutter of anticipation in her chest at permission to enter the Underworld but knew she had failed. Hades kindly didn’t comment on it. “Are you attending the celebrations this week?”

Hades let out a groan of exasperation, his hand dragging down his face.

“It is all anyone speaks of. There are times I envy the souls that live in my realm, at least they can escape your father’s demands. Yes, I will be going.”

“They cannot be so terrible,” she teased, despite sharing his sentiments. The thought of all the coaxing it would take for her mother to allow her to wander off alone was exhausting enough.

“Clearly, you have not suffered Zeus regaling you with the details ad nauseam. By the time the actual event occurs, one has lost all interest.”

Glancing out of the window, Persephone noticed the fading light. She didn’t want to go, but she should get back before her mother fretted. Remembering Aphrodite’s words about leaving on a high note, she called it a night.

“Well, I should be off. Thank you for the lovely dinner.” She stood, smoothing down her skirt. Then, after a moment, she reached out and squeezed Hades’ shoulder. As she drew her hand back, a garland of small white flowers sprouted from her fingertips, cascading over Hades’ hair.

His hand lifted, touching the flowers.

With a smile, she bid farewell and left the restaurant. She could feel his eyes on her the entire time.

CHAPTER TEN

The gloom of the workroom was a comfort, the darkness enveloping Hades' hunched form like an old friend. Here, the sounds of the Underworld were muted, the cries of the dead unable to penetrate the thick stone walls that surrounded him. Here, he could focus on his work, and his own thoughts.

The gemstone lay secure in its vice, catching what little light filtered through the tall windows. The ruby, dark as pomegranate seeds yet brilliant as fire, held life and death in its facets.

With each tap, Hades carved petals into the gem, finding peace from his hounding thoughts. He found solace in the repetition, in the focus required to coax delicate beauty from such unforgiving material.

Hades lifted the incomplete rose, examining it. It was near perfect by most standards, but the slight asymmetry of the petal on the right marred the overall effect. With a huff, he returned the chisel to the stone, adjusting the form.

His thoughts returned to the previous night's dinner. What had possessed him to open up to her as he had? He was so guarded, so mistrustful. What magic was this woman wielding over him?

Somehow, her innocent smiles and teasing comments had encouraged him to open up. He realised now that he had probably bored her with his stiff formality and talk of responsibilities and domains. Yet she had given him another flower. A beautiful bloom that once more thrived in his realm. A flower that sat in a glass of water, by his side.

The rose before him was cold, lifeless. It lacked the vibrancy of Persephone's offerings that had so disturbed the gods above. Running a hand through his hair, Hades stood. He couldn't capture in lifeless crystal and stone that gentle, teasing smile that made him... made him feel.

Foolishness. Sentimental folly. He was not some besotted youth or quivering mortal in thrall to flighty passions.

And yet, when she had promised to return if another living bloom appeared in his realm, hope had risen in him. Hope was dangerous. The worst of the evils in Pandora's box, because it persisted when all else was gone.

He picked up another raw stone, beginning the process again.

"You're going to wear down that chisel if you keep at it."

"Damn it," he hissed, the chisel skidding to nick his thumb. He released the stone, blood welling up.

"Did I interrupt something important, my king?"

His grip tightened around the tool, and he scowled. Whether at the injury or her perceptiveness, he could not say. "I did not hear you approach."

"Clearly." Her laughter grated on him. He focused on the incomplete rose, feigning interest in it.

Hecate moved to his workbench, picking up the discarded flower. With a wave of her hand, the broken petals resealed with gold lines connecting the fractures.

"What troubles you this time?"

He scowled at the patched bloom. It felt like showing his hand to an opponent, even a friend, to admit his own fears. He would not show weakness.

To distract her, he nodded towards a corner of the courtyard where a stubborn cactus had taken root against a wall of shadowed stone. "That."

"Indeed. Most peculiar." Her lips twitched.

"It's unnatural. Plants don't grow in the Underworld. They wither and die as they ought. I don't like it."

"What you don't like, Hades, is change."

"The living should not take root here."

"Says who?"

“Everyone.”

“The decree of gods has never distressed you this way before.”

Hades scowled. “This is different.”

“Yes,” Hecate smiled. “I rather think it is.”

Hades glared at the offending cactus. “I don’t like it,” he muttered. “It bodes ill, mark my words. The balance here is delicate. For something living to manifest...”

“Perhaps it is merely the balance shifting, as the Fates decree it must. Change comes for us all, in the end.”

Hades opened his mouth to scoff at the idea that the Fates had anything to do with this, then hesitated. He couldn’t ignore the disruption Persephone’s gifts had caused. The way Cerberus had been behaving. The strange flower that had appeared and withered. The Fates had made many unpredictable twists in the fabric of life and death.

“The fates are cruel,” he admitted.

“They are far-seeing. They weave a pattern we are too close to see.”

“I suppose that’s a possibility.” He didn’t like the idea of the Fates interfering, but he couldn’t rule it out. There was nothing he could do about it if they had decided to stick their eye in it.

“You forget, old friend, I am always right.” A mischievous smirk crossed her features, sending alarm bells ringing. “And what of Persephone?”

“What of her?” Hecate laughed, dumping herself on the workbench, refusing to allow him to look away. “Don’t feign indifference to me. You were more animated discussing that flower than any affair of state. Aeacus mentioned you went above world to see her again.”

“Traitor.”

“You’ve been treading water in still lakes for far too long, Hades. The other gods have dallied among mortals. Why don’t



you? Observe life as they do.”

He bristled at her words. “I’m not intimidated by life or her.”

“I didn’t say that. Yet you lurk here while she flits among her blooms in the mortal realm. How can you get to know someone if you don’t know them in their natural habitat?”

His jaw clenched. “This is my realm. My duty lies here, not out playing god among those who quiver at shadows.”

Hecate’s words stung, but Hades kept his expression neutral. He stacked the half-finished carvings, arranging them along the workbench as if they were the most important things in the world.

“You cannot hide down here forever, Hades,” Hecate said. “Fate has given you an opportunity; a spark. Why not explore it?”

Hades scowled, slotting a chunk of ruby into place with more force than necessary. “I know my duty. My realm requires constant vigilance—”

“Which Aeacus provides in your absence.”

Hades bit back a sharp retort, his knuckles whitening around the edges of the bench. She was right, of course. His lieutenant was more than capable of maintaining order, just as

Cerberus guarded the gates without fail. He forced his grip to relax.

“I’ve no interest in frivolous gatherings. Persephone is better served enjoying the festivities above without my looming presence.”

Hecate tilted her head, regarding him. “Looming? An interesting choice of word. I’ve never known you to be self-conscious, Hades.”

He stiffened. “I’m not. But it’s a fact that I can be off-putting. The living fear death, and therefore me. Even if we both know it is illogical.”

The thought of seeing revulsion or wariness in her eyes made his chest ache. It was better not to risk it. Not when she looked at him across the dinner table with such genuine interest, coaxing him out with her soft-spoken questions and uninhibited laughter.

Hecate smiled. “The sun may dazzle at first light, but the moon has her quiet mysteries too. Give the girl some credit.” She waved a hand, and the mended rose glided through the air into his grasp. “At least consider an offering, should your paths cross. Something to match her unique perspective.”

Hades turned the rose over in his hands. It was flawless now, the joins seamless, gleaming veins of gold running through the petals. An immortal flower. Yet it seemed diminished somehow. Lacking the vital spark Persephone’s living gifts held.

“I’m not some suitor desperate to curry favour with gifts and trifles.” The thought of gifting Persephone something less macabre than her own offerings lingered. “Not so plebeian as that.”

He would need a better source than Zeus or Hecate for that.

Molly, Mildred... Maeve! She enjoyed Persephone’s confidence. This woman knew Persephone better than any god or goddess could hope to understand one of their own. Might Maeve let slip something that would bring that sun-like smile to Persephone’s face?

“Gifts can speak in ways we find difficult to express in words.”

“You may have a point.”

Hades looked at the half-formed rose in his hand, the gemstone petals lacking the vibrancy he was trying to replicate. What was this about? Not a symbol of death and darkness, but... affection? Was that it?

“How strikingly mortal of you,” he muttered.

“Good luck, my lord.” With a wink, she flickered from sight. He jabbed the chisel where she had sat in case she was invisible.

Hades scowled. Meddlesome witch. Ever since they were young gods together, she'd seen fit to prod him into action like an older sister, rarely taking no for an answer. He could almost hear her voice whispering that perhaps his outlook lacked perspective. With a heavy sigh, he banished the unfinished carvings and rose from his seat.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hades hovered outside the flower shop, waiting for the right moment to enter. He was dressed in casual human clothes of jeans, a t-shirt, and a leather jacket with his long hair tied back to conceal its otherworldly shine. His skin was healthy, the blue-black flames in his eyes fading to a brown. He even managed a glamour to hide the scar on his forehead. Anything to avoid being recognised by another god.

He had taken great care to blend in. As both ruler and guardian of the dead, interacting with mortals always felt precarious. Their lives were so short, yet the tapestry woven by the fates was intricate, with customs he never quite understood. They were so delicate.

Through the window, he watched Persephone move about the store, caring for her plants and flowers in efficient, graceful motions. Her wheat-blond hair hung loose down her back, and her gauzy floral dress billowed around her knees as she walked. Even doing something as mundane as this, he was mesmerised.

Hades checked his watch again. Patience was his friend, but it was wearing thin today. She usually left the shop at exactly 3pm for deliveries, but she was two minutes and three seconds late. He squinted, and could see her lips moving, head tilted to the sky. Hades leant back against the wall. A song she liked must be playing.

Hades didn't have to wait long. Persephone exited the shop minutes later, humming to herself. She glanced around, waved to the shopkeeper opposite the street, then headed left carrying a gigantic bouquet.

Now.

Hades stepped into the shop as Persephone went around the corner. He took in the shop; the shelves overflowing with flowers and plants, a far cry from his own realm.

He turned to the flowers. Mortal flowers, he was sure. Lilies, roses, hydrangeas, tulips. Nice, but unremarkable. His eye caught on a bunch of white asphodels tied with a black ribbon. Interesting. Humans usually left asphodels as a tribute to the deceased. Was it a funeral arrangement?

He spotted a woman with messy brown hair flicking through an order book behind the counter. She glanced up and smiled at him, a recognition in the gaze that indicated she wasn't greeting a stranger. Strange.

“Good morning, Hades, how can I help?”

Hades frowned, taking a step forward. There was no power object at her wrist or neck, no sigil marking her as a god born. Yet the way she looked at him said otherwise. Perhaps she was a descendant.

Which of Zeus' many affairs had led to this mortal?

Before he could speak, she glanced over at the two assistants, busy making floral arrangements. She beckoned him to the backroom.

“You're looking for something special, aren't you?” The smirk on her face was more Hecate than Zeus. If he didn't know better, he would assume the goddess had donned a glamour of her own. “Come with me.”

She led him through to a chilled room, a large bench spread out in the centre.

“How may I help the lord of the Underworld today?” she asked once they were alone.

“I, uh, I wish to buy a gift for someone.” He winced, knowing he couldn't get help without identifying the object of his affections. “For Persephone.”

The woman's grin widened. “Of course. Don't worry; she won't be back for at least an hour. She prefers to make deliveries 'the traditional' way.”

Hades nodded. If this woman could help him understand the goddess, it would be a start.

“Please, have a seat.” She pulled out a stool for him. “I’m sure you’re more than capable of providing gifts; what is your specific issue?”



The wooden stool creaked under his weight. He clasped his hands together, elbows resting on his knees.

“On the contrary, gifts have never been my forte,” he began. “The riches of my realm are cold comforts. I know precious metals and gems hold little joy for Persephone.”

He huffed, brushing back a lock of hair that pushed past its confines. “I know little of her tastes here in the mortal realm. Her mother kept her close until recent centuries; any dalliances to the surface outside of this shop are brief. She favours flowers, I know that much. And dogs. Although I don’t have the time to make her the perfect breed.”

“You breed dogs?”

“I invented dogs.” He shrugged. “It’s a shame the multi-headed variety never caught on.”

“Damn. We have a high bar then.”

“I want my gift to mean something. To show her...” He trailed off, frowning. The real question still eluded him. Why was he so compelled by Persephone? “I want to understand her better. And have my gift reflect that. Can you help me?”

“Of course. Persephone always makes a first date bouquet; how about we start there? Something that shows you trying to learn her craft, and the understanding of floriography.”

A reflection of how in gifting Hades the hearts of the dead had conveyed Persephone’s feelings in a language he spoke.

“Now, let’s begin with the basics,” Maeve handed Hades a pair of shears. “Red roses symbolise romance and desire. White lilies connote majesty and purity.”

Hades frowned at the tools. They were blunt compared to his usual blades. Snipping a lily stem, he observed the white petals lose their sheen, browning at the edges. He put it down.

“Ah, perhaps we should avoid the lilies, and go for something with more colour.” Maeve replaced the bloom with a vibrant red rose. “Just a short trim at an angle...” The moment Hades sliced the stem, the once lush bloom blackened and curled in on itself.

Hades tensed. Even here, his touch brought only decay.

“It’s alright. This is your first bouquet. I burned my first soufflé, you know? My new girlfriend, Emma, loves baking, so I wanted to surprise her. Nearly set the kitchen on fire instead.” She laughed. “Let’s try something less conventional. Solidago symbolises encouragement. Iris, wisdom.”

She placed several stems in Hades’ hand. He stared down at the yellow and purple flowers, stark against his pale skin. Even these traces of life seemed fragile.

“I don’t belong here.”

Maeve tilted her head. “That’s hardly the attitude, is it? Don’t let a few dead flowers shake your confidence.” She regarded the piles of stems and blooms. “Emma bakes stunning creations. Me? I burn toast as often as not. But nothing delights her more than when I try my hand at baking with her, because my efforts come from the heart. Provided I tidy up after myself, of course!”

Maeve lifted a hyacinth bloom, its clusters of purple flowers vibrant against the fading yellow in Hades’ palm.

“This realm is not yours. But you are trying, for Persephone’s sake. Is that not what matters most?”

Hades weighed her words, twirling the fragile stem in his fingers. In all his immortal existence, he had only ever shaped death, in honour of the deceased shades. He had never had to consider the delicate beauty of life being within his reach.

Yet for Persephone, perhaps clumsiness was a worthwhile price. If it allowed him to craft something unique, something only he could give.

Hades placed the hyacinth amidst the Solidago in Maeve’s hand.

“You speak wisdom beyond your years, mortal.” The corner of his mouth lifted.

Hades watched Maeve set aside the wilting flowers, a sympathetic smile on her face. “Perhaps perishable gifts aren’t the wisest choice for you. Luckily, there are plenty of options that are a bit more enduring.”

Maeve dumped the pile of blackened stems into the waste bin. “I know you’re ancient and all, but we have some more modern options, too, that you might want to consider.”

She gestured to a shelf lined with ceramic pots and vases. “A lovely planter for her personal garden, perhaps?”

Hades frowned as he inspected them. The glazes were vibrant - golds and crimsons and deep forest greens.

“A bit...garish for my tastes,” he remarked.

“Oh, I can see why Persephone likes you! We must bring you into this century. Bright colours and sleek lines are all the rage with the youths.”

“You are hardly old, even by mortal standards. I may be a touch old-fashioned,” he ran a finger over the smooth ceramic curves, “but I find solace in familiar things. I believe she does, too. Much has changed since last I walked so freely amongst the mortals. It is unsettling.”

“The world may change, but people remain very much the same. Kindness, loyalty, love. The things that matter most

stand the test of time.”

“As do the worst.”

“Let’s not dwell on that while gift hunting.” She took the planter from his hands and set it aside. “Let’s find you something a little more classic.”

They moved to a set of shelves along the back wall lined with various gift items—ornate vases, ceramic planters, tasteful decorations. Little captured Persephone’s vibrant spirit. His fingers brushed a delicate glass flower, petals rendered in shades of pink and gold. Beautiful, but too fragile. Persephone was steel.

“I’ve had few opportunities to court fair maidens. Even less desire to do so.” An unexpected heat rose in his cheeks. “Persephone is different. I want this to work, if she permits it.”

He ran a hand through his hair.

“I wish to show her she means more to me than idle amusement. That I,” he faltered. Even giving voice to the sentiment felt dangerously exposed.

“You sell yourself short. Persephone’s heart is already inclined in your favour.”

To think one such as Persephone looked upon him with affection... He glanced down. His hands were trembling. He drew in a slow breath, steadying himself.

“In my long existence, none have stirred my heart as she does. She sees beyond the trappings of my station, beyond...” He gestured to himself. “All of this.”

“Then give her a piece of you, my lord. Something to reflect who you are beyond your duties. If gods and mortals share anything, it’s the longing to be seen for our true selves.”

“Yes. Yes, I see.” He closed his eyes, picturing Persephone. What she would enjoy experiencing.

“If your heart is still set on a living gift, there are plenty of options out there that are a bit more enduring.”

Perhaps something that merged both worlds - a link between his and hers. He had always assumed life would not grow in the Underworld, but it wasn't strictly true. The pomegranate orchards, the yew, the orchid.

“What do you propose?”

“A terrarium. A garden under glass. The plants inside can thrive even without sunlight or frequent watering, contained in their own tiny domain.”

Much like his own realm, dark and self-contained, yet life persisting still.

“A garden that endures within a world of its own making,” he murmured. “Yes, I believe I see your vision.”

Turning, Maeve unlocked a cabinet and pulled out a glass orb the size of a grapefruit, empty save for a layer of charcoal and smooth stones covering the base.

“We would decorate the inside with mosses, ferns and succulents,” she explained. “Hardy plants that require little care. You could make a miniature version of your realm, or a place Persephone is inspired by.”

Hades accepted the orb. A perfect, enduring world held within his hands. Yes. This felt right. He peered closer, imagining how he would craft every detail.

“It shall have trees of obsidian and crystal, with vines of heliotrope draping between. The river Phlegethon will wind through black sands and stones, with lichens dotted along its banks.”

Maybe he could make a larger version in his own palace.

Maeve beamed. “It sounds perfect! Now, let me show you some basic terrarium designs on the computer. We just need the right container and plants to bring your vision to life!”

She led Hades to her desk and activated the odd contraption. He observed the illuminated display as she brought up images with a flick of her wrist.

“I confess, mortal technology often eludes me,” Hades remarked. “The dead don't carry portable communicators with

them.”

“Well, welcome to the 21st century! Let me give you a crash course on computers and the internet. We’ve got some online shopping to do!”

Over the next hour, Maeve patiently walked him through the unfamiliar world of mortal innovation and invention. She taught him how to use search engines, shop online, and find digital images. He even created an email account, in case he needed to contact Maeve. She offered to have everything delivered to her private abode, so that Persephone would not see the goods arrive. Though much remained alien, Hades found himself captivated by the vast breadth of knowledge and resources. With but a few keystrokes, millennia of information unfurled at his command.

“Incredible,” he murmured, scrolling through images of terrariums. Each unique world was meticulously planned and crafted. “To think mortals have designed such wonders to replicate the magic of the gods.”

Maeve smiled. “The modern world has its conveniences.”

“Indeed.”

Hades bid Maeve farewell, grateful for her help to navigate this strange mortal realm. As he turned to leave, Maeve called out, “Oh, one last thing! There’s a delightful little chocolate shop just down the lane that Persephone is quite fond of. She has a particular weakness for their sea salt caramels.”

Maeve winked. “And between you and me, our fair maiden has quite the penchant for dark chocolate. The richer the better.”

A smile tugged at Hades’ lips. He could picture Persephone enjoying the rich, dark treats. Her eyes would widen at the first taste, lips curving in a smile. He could almost hear her pleased hum as the chocolate melted in her mouth.

Yes, he would be sure to get some of the shop’s best for her. He didn’t care for the sweets, but the thought of Persephone enjoying them was a sweet prospect. He would have them sent to the shop.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Persephone arrived at Roy and Kathryn's flat, bouquet in hand. The vibrant colours of the blooms stood out against the muted brick of the bungalow. She pressed the doorbell, shifting the weight of the bouquet, eager to see how Roy would react.

The door swung open and there stood Roy, his eyes crinkling with delight as he welcomed her inside. "Persephone! Come in, come in!" he ushered her in.

Persephone stepped inside, taking in the surroundings. Her fingers trailed over the soft, faded material of the armchair, eyes landing on the tidy, modest layout of the space. Photos of the pair over the years were hung up, showing moments of joy.

In one corner was a bookshelf filled with novels, their spines cracked, and loose sheets of newspaper sticking out of them as bookmarks. A hand-knitted blanket was draped over the armchair, threads fraying from years of use.

She held out the bouquet. "Order for Kathryn. Is she in?"

"That sneaky woman," he chuckled, taking the flowers. "Beautiful. Thank you for bringing these over, even though I told her I didn't need... well, never mind. Come in, come in."

Persephone watched as a blush rose on Roy's cheeks. "What didn't you need...?"

Roy chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck. "Oh, it's silly, really. Today is the 46th anniversary of when I finally learned how to swim. I was terrified of the water my whole life, you see, but Kathryn helped me face my fears that summer. We like to celebrate all the little anniversaries. First date, first dance, first time I cooked dinner without burning it!"

Persephone smiled, charmed by the effort to preserve such joyous memories.

"Is that Persephone here? Right on time, the kettle has just boiled."

The scrape of wheels on hard wood heralded the arrival of a small, older woman, balancing a tray of tea and biscuits on her lap. Persephone went to help, but Roy waved her off and took the tray himself.

“I’ve got it, darling,” he said, pressing a tender kiss to Kathryn’s hand before placing the tray on the coffee table. A pretty blush graced the woman’s cheeks at the gesture.

Roy smoothed a crinkle on Kathryn’s sweater.

“How do you take your tea, dear?”

“Just milk, please.” Persephone accepted the cup, enjoying the warmth against her face. On the coffee table, a large photo of the couple sat. A younger Kathryn and Roy beamed back at her, mid-laugh with their arms around each other. Kathryn’s smile was radiant, her eyes crinkled with laughter as she looked up at Roy, who leant against her chair.

Persephone smiled. “How did you meet?”

“Oh, it was by chance. I was rushing to catch the bus when my bag slipped off my lap and spilt its contents everywhere! And this dashing young man—” Kathryn nudged Roy playfully, “—came running over to help me gather my things.”

“I could hardly walk past now, could I? The moment I looked into her eyes, I was a goner.”

“My hero. He picked up all my lipsticks and loose change, while I just sat there stunned. Little did I know my entire world was about to change.”

“We went for a cup of tea after that,” Roy continued. “Ended up there until closing time. I walked her home under the stars.”

“And stole a kiss at my doorstep!” Kathryn finished, blushing. “I never got to go shopping that day.”

“The rest is history,” Roy said, taking Kathryn’s hand. “Two beautiful children, a lifetime of adventures...” His voice grew gruff with emotion. “More mince pies than I can count.”

“You softie.” She batted his hand away, cheeks stained pink.

“Seeing you two together gives me hope. I’ve met someone special, too, recently.”

Kathryn turned to her. “Oh, dearie, I am so happy for you! What’s this young man like?”

“Does he have respect? Kids these days.”



Persephone blushed, wondering what the two would say if they knew how old she or Hades was. “He is honourable, Roy. More serious and guarded than I am. But I can’t stop thinking about him. We come from very different worlds. My mother worries about the age gap between us. The ‘experience’ gap.”

Kathryn nodded. “Roy and I faced the same scepticism when we first dated. Many of our family didn’t approve of the relationship. They thought I was too old to be raising children. That I wouldn’t be able to look after them properly with my condition. But we knew what we had was real and were willing to make it work.”

“How did you deal with those challenges?”

“With patience, empathy, and communication. I let Roy know that despite outside opinions, he had my whole heart. He vowed to stay with me despite my deteriorating condition. We promised to see each other’s perspectives when tensions arose. And we always spoke openly and honestly about our doubts.”

Roy smiled. “Tune out the naysayers and listen to your heart. Focus on building trust and understanding. The rest will follow.”

Persephone listened as Roy began recounting the challenges he and Kathryn faced early on because of the evident age gap between them.

“People pass judgement,” he said, shaking his head. “At first our families were convinced it was just a fling, that we couldn’t share anything real. That Kitty was just after some excitement in a younger man.” His arm tightened around Kathryn.

Kathryn nodded, her eyes tender. “It was difficult. Cruel remarks from strangers, sceptical looks from loved ones. It took resilience not to let that sway us. But the connection we shared was worth fighting for. We proved it to ourselves, and eventually everyone else saw it too.”

Persephone bit her lip, thinking of her own blossoming relationship with Hades and the wariness it provoked from her mother and fellow gods. She thought of Hades himself, solemn and withdrawn, and her longing to know him and nurture the spark between them.

“How did you reconcile those external judgements with what you felt inside?” she asked.

“The world saw an odd pair. We saw two souls who understood each other. That was enough.”

“You give me hope.”

“Good. We all need it.” Kathryn stifled a yawn, and Persephone took it as her cue to leave. As much as she was enjoying their company, it was clear the older woman was growing weary.

“I should let you both rest,” Persephone said, rising from her chair. She pressed a fond kiss to Kathryn’s cheek, then turned to embrace Roy. “Thank you so much.”

Roy patted her shoulder affectionately as he walked her to the door. “Anytime, my dear. Our door is always open if you need an ear.”

Persephone stepped out into the hallway, smiling to herself at Kathryn and Roy’s enduring love story. But as she went down the path, the sound of hushed voices from a cracked doorway made her pause.

“... can’t believe he’s still looking after her. They should just stick her in a home,” a nasal voice whispered.

Persephone froze, outrage flaring within her. How dare they judge what they didn’t understand?

Snarling, she spun around, seeing two middle-aged women in the doorway of the next door property. She glared at them, ready to advance and tear into them. Only the thought of disturbing Kathryn kept her from doing so.

Instead, she laid a hand against the trunk of a sturdy oak that bordered the two properties. At her touch, resilient weeds and wildflowers erupted amongst the orderly garden beds lining the path, tenacious as the bond Roy and Kathryn shared.

Persephone smiled, humming as she walked back to the shop.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Darling, try this. No, not there. Yes, it—no, Aegle.”

Persephone smothered a giggle, watching her aunt flutter around the room, coordinating the gaggle of nymphs that had arrived to prepare for the celebrations that night.

Honey and olive oil scented the air, drifting through the marble halls of the celestial spa. Wine, sweet and rich, poured from ornate amphoras, mixing with the heady aroma of ambrosia. It was all going to her head, and she hadn't taken her first sip.

Aphrodite had pulled the stops out for this ‘preparation party’. Gossamer drapes billowed from the towering pillars, ethereal and translucent in the soft glow of the silver moonlight filtering through the open roof. The goddess herself was a whirlwind of vibrant energy amidst it all. With a laugh that echoed down the corridor, she led the way. This was her domain; the spa was her haven, where she worked her wonders on anyone who entered its doors.

Persephone ran her hand along the rack, feeling the silks and chiffons slip through her fingers. Nothing quite felt right. She wanted something daring, yet demure. Captivating, yet modest. The colours were all wrong. Too bright or pastel.

The excited chatter of nymphs drifted over from the next alcove. Persephone edged closer, peering around a carved pillar.

“I’ve got my eye on Zeus this year,” declared Thalia, fluffing her golden curls.

“Good luck with that. Everyone knows Hera is keeping him on a short leash this year.”

“It hasn’t stopped him before!”

“Well, I’m going after Poseidon. All those rippling muscles...” Lyra fanned herself.

The others dissolved into giggles. Then another spoke up, one she hadn't been introduced to. "You know who I'd love to snag? Hades."

Persephone's hand froze, hovering over a dress of emerald silk. A strange feeling swelled within her, hot and prickling. She pressed herself back against the pillar, listening.

"Ooh, going after the strong silent type, are we?"

The nymph tossed her chestnut hair. "I bet I could get him to crack a smile. The poor guy just needs someone fun to liven him up."

Liven him up. Liven. Him. Up. They obviously knew nothing about Hades, if they thought something so simple would cause such a fundamental shift in the god.

"I'll take that bet!" cried Lyra. "Five drachma says you won't even get him to dance with you."

"I doubt he'll even look at her!"

The nymphs broke into excited chatter, betting on who could catch the dour god's eye. Persephone dug her nails into the pillar, a tight knot in her stomach. She wished she had Hera's ability to smite the unfaithful.

"Persephone," Aphrodite called out, breaking through her thoughts. "Stop fretting! You'll look divine, no matter what you wear. Now, have you decided upon your look? Are you going as a creature of Poseidon's domain? You'd look dashing in aqua! Or taking inspiration from my home here? I saw the most exquisite pale pink chiton around here somewhere."

"No, thank you. I have an idea already. I just need your help to execute it."

Aphrodite clapped her hands together.

"Do tell, do tell!"

"I would like to embody the Underworld."

Aphrodite's smile faltered, confusion replacing it. "The Underworld?" she mouthed, as if trying to make sense of an unfathomable riddle.

“Yes.”

“Now, darling, the masquerade theme is of contrast, not stark opposition! The Underworld, it’s, well, it’s not what most would consider an appealing or fashionable choice. You are beautiful, my dear, but black does not suit your complexion. It would wash you out.”

“There is also a richness that reflects my power. What else could be more fitting for my costume? We can make it unique, beautiful.”

“What about Artemis, goddess of the hunt? She is as different from you as can be. Or Athena, so serious and scholarly compared to your light-hearted ways.”

Persephone shook her head. Light-hearted? Aphrodite wouldn’t claim that if she had seen the offerings. “I appreciate the ideas, Auntie. But I am set on representing the Underworld.”

Aphrodite wrinkled her nose. “It seems rather morbid, don’t you think?”

“Death is a natural part of life’s cycle, the inevitable end for all. There is beauty in that poignancy. I have full faith in your abilities to make it beautiful. Besides, who else would dare take this challenge on?”

“I suppose I just don’t understand the appeal, my dear.” She gave an elegant little shrug. “But if you are set on it, who am I to judge? Just promise you’ll not look like a nun. Dark colours and dreary rags won’t do!”

“Don’t worry, I still intend to leave the exact look in your very capable hands.”

Her aunt nodded, satisfied. “Very well. We shall make a statement! Give me five minutes.” Her eyes lit up as she began perusing all the materials at her disposal, ever ready for a new challenge.

Gesturing for the nearby nymphs and mortals to gather round, Aphrodite became a drill sergeant. “We have a task at hand,” she announced. “Our dear Persephone here wishes to embody the Underworld for the masque.”

The nymphs and mortals shared confused looks, but complied, deferring to their goddess. Under Aphrodite's direction, they brainstormed, fetching dark fabric, suggesting luminescent paints and cosmetics. Persephone herself was pushed onto a stool to wait as they moved around her.

First, she was draped in a long, midnight black gown that pooled on the floor around her feet. It was accented with silvery spiderweb lace and had a high collar that came up to her chin, scratching at her skin.

"Very mysterious," Aphrodite mused, "but I was right, the black washes you out."

It was followed by a gauzy outfit that hung off her like mist. They placed metal cuffs around her wrists. Persephone gave a quick spin but got quickly tangled in the fabric. "I like the ethereal vibe, but it needs to still feel like something you would wear."

"The skulls are a bit on the nose too, don't you think, Auntie?"

"Yes. We need to suggest the Underworld, not shove it in everyone's face."

Next, the nymphs brought out a dress made of layers of feathers, dark purple and green like the plumage of exotic underworld birds. It was striking, but the feathers shed all over the place as Persephone moved. She shuddered.

"Too impractical," Aphrodite tutted. "No woman should suffer through that."

Finally, the nymphs presented a gown of dark red velvet that clung to Persephone's figure. Subtle embroidery in silver thread created a motif of poppies, cypress trees and entwining rivers.

"Oh, perfect," Aphrodite exclaimed. "The fabric is romantic, and the embroidery symbolising sleep, death, and rebirth is just exquisite. I think the colour is perfect, not too dark, and it plays off your warm skin tone beautifully. And the best thing? It has pockets!"

Persephone smiled as she turned, admiring how the gown moved with her. “It’s perfect.”

Persephone couldn’t wait to see Hades’ reaction when he saw her at the masquerade. As she listened to the gentle laughter and eager conversation, Persephone pieced together her look. A nightshade crown sat atop her head, a striking contrast to her blonde locks. A smoky eye and subtle jewellery featuring key designs completed the outfit.

As Persephone looked at herself in the mirror, she smiled. She resembled a queen of the Underworld.

“So, how goes your courtship, darling?” Aphrodite asked as she finished up Persephone’s hair.

Persephone felt her cheeks heat and raised her hands, covering her flushing cheeks. “It’s, it’s going, albeit slower than I would like,” she admitted. “We shared a meal. One he initiated.”

“How did it go? Have you bridged the gap between yourselves?”



“We spoke all night.” She wasn’t quite ready to reveal Hades’ identity to Aphrodite yet. If the other gods were involved, it would only crush their budding romance. If it could even be called that.

Aphrodite hummed. “Will your mysterious suitor be attending the masque?”

Persephone flushed even deeper at the question, a reaction that didn't go unnoticed by Aphrodite. A knowing smile curved her lips as she leaned in closer to Persephone. "So, he will be there! I shall keep my eyes peeled!"

She was saved from responding by the nymphs pulling Aphrodite away.

When she returned, Persephone noted that she too had embraced the theme. In contrast to her usual flowing gowns and elegant jewellery, Aphrodite was dressed in warrior's attire - polished armour, a helmet with feathers from celestial birds, and a sword with an intricately designed hilt. Practical and beautiful.

As the nymphs dressed her, Persephone glimpsed herself in the mirror and smiled. She looked good in the warrior outfit. It was so different from her usual style, but it worked. It was a reminder that love was not just about softness, but strength, too. Underneath the armour was a pretty dress, with a long train in a deep red.

Persephone turned to compliment her aunt's costume choice, to see a serious expression on the vivacious goddess' face. "Persephone, might I have a word with you before we depart?"

Persephone nodded, smoothing her gown self-consciously. "Of course, Auntie. What is it?"

Aphrodite placed a gauntleted hand on Persephone's shoulder. "I know you are still discovering yourself, my dear. And the stirrings of first love are powerful. Is this man worthy? Does he know how precious you are? Will he cherish you?"

"I know my mind, Auntie. Mother still sees me as a child, but I'm stronger than she thinks. I don't just fall for anyone." She took Aphrodite's hand. "I can look after myself. Roses have thorns. I would not allow any suitor to treat me as less, and likewise I would not treat them as such."

"You have become wise beyond your years, little goddess. I am proud." She pulled Persephone into an embrace. "I just

want you to be safe and happy.”

Persephone returned the hug, touched by her aunt’s concern. “I am, Auntie. Might I ask something?”

“Of course, my dear.”

“Why is Mother so reluctant for me to experience love? She seems to fear it, even.”

“Your mother has her reasons, though they may not make sense to you now.”

“But why?” Persephone pressed. “Love is a natural part of life. Why does she act as though we must avoid it at all costs? How can I understand her reasons if she does not divulge them?”

With a small sigh, Aphrodite guided Persephone to a nearby chaise lounge and sat beside her.

“Demeter has been hurt terribly in matters of the heart,” she explained. “She loved once, long before you were born. But it ended in grief. Your mother has never forgotten those wounds.”

Persephone’s brow furrowed. She had never heard her mother speak of past loves. Neither parent even spoke of the circumstances of her own birth.

“What happened?”

“It is not my story to tell. However, the experience left your mother guarded. She only wants to protect you from potential heartbreak, as any mother would.”

“But keeping me from love cannot be the answer.”

“No, it isn’t,” Aphrodite agreed. “But her overprotectiveness comes from a place of care, even if it is smothering. Your mother needs time to see that you are ready for independence.”

“Time? One cannot claim that I’m rushing into anything!”

She tilted Persephone’s chin up. “Be patient with her. The roots of fear run deep. Yet, she will come to understand that

growth can only occur through first-hand experiences of life and love. You are a flower, after all; grow is what you do.”

“I will try. I can’t promise that she won’t still infuriate me.”

Aphrodite smiled and pulled her into an embrace. “You have a wise heart, Persephone. I will ensure Demeter is sufficiently distracted. Now then, let us be off. I confess, I’m rather looking forward to seeing Athena’s reaction to my costume.”

“You cut quite the striking figure.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Mount Olympus had been radically changed for the night. The celestial palace was lit up with flashing neon lights running along the marble pillars and gold archways. Huge garlands of alien flowers hung from the buildings, their sweet scent mixing with the tang of ambrosia in the air.

Persephone stepped into the grand hall, engulfed by the press of bodies. Laughter, murmurs, and music melded into a symphony of noise. She glanced at the sea of deities, their magnificent forms glinting under the otherworldly glow.

Poseidon stood to one side, dressed as Apollo in flowing golden robes. She didn't know where he had got the lyre from, but Artemis was trying to wrestle it from his hands. Given how off-key the sea shanty he bellowed was, Persephone agreed with the goddess' assessment.

"Persephone!" a booming voice echoed through the din. Hephaestus, dressed as Hermes, with a comically large caduceus clutched in one hand. His face was creased into a wide grin beneath his helmet.

"You look radiant," he said warmly as she approached him.

"Thank you, Hephaestus. You look wonderful too."

She scanned the room once more, looking for Hades among the sea of gods. He wasn't there.

Rounding a corner, she spotted Zeus and Hera. They stood close together, drinks in hand, laughing. Zeus had a broad smile on his face as he murmured something in Hera's ear. Their relaxed stances, and the early hour suggested they had not yet drunk too much ambrosia.

Caught up in her search for Hades, Persephone ran into the one person she had wanted to avoid. Her mother. Beside her

stood Aphrodite and Athena, both engaged in animated conversation.

“Look at our darling Persephone,” Aphrodite cooed, reaching out to tuck a stray curl behind her ear. “Doesn’t she look divine? I did a rather good job, if I say so myself!”

“Divine,” Demeter repeated. Her lips tightened into a thin line as she traced the silver embroidery on Persephone’s dress. “It is... intricate.”

Persephone’s heart sank. She had been expecting her mother to disapprove, but the dismissive tone hurt more than she’d like to admit.

“Oh, don’t be so stiff, Demeter,” Aphrodite waved a hand, her golden bangles clinking together. “She looks breathtaking.”

Demeter didn’t respond. The silence grew.

“Mother?”

“I’m not sure this is appropriate,” Demeter gestured at the dark velvet and silver accents of Persephone’s gown. “You look like you’re going to a blood bath, not a party.”

Persephone bit her lip, blinking back tears. She had been so proud of the costume, the way it made her feel mysterious and powerful. Like a true queen descending into the realm of shades. But under her mother’s withering stare, she felt small again. Just a foolish girl playing dress up.

“Leave her be, Demeter,” Aphrodite jumped in. “She looks wonderful. Our Persephone has many layers, like a flower bud preparing to unfurl.”

Demeter’s frown only deepened. “I think it’s inappropriate for the Goddess of Spring to be cavorting about as the Queen of Death. What would people think?”

Persephone’s anger flared. There was no shame in being associated with Hades. She was sick of living in her mother’s shadow, of needing her mother’s approval. She had chosen this outfit for herself, not for Demeter.

“What I wear is my choice, Mother. This is a fancy dress party, not a wedding. The whole point is to dress up. If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to get some ambrosia.”

Ignoring her mother’s spluttering response, Persephone turned on her heel. She felt the eyes of the crowd on her as she made her way to the refreshments, back straight and head held high. She didn’t care what they thought. Tonight, she was the Queen of the Underworld. And she would revel in it, even if it were only for one night.

She headed to the grand table laden with divine ambrosia and goblets of nectar, its sweet aroma a comforting balm.

As she reached for a goblet, a soft chuckle drew her attention. A woman stood next to her. Her long, dark hair cascaded over her shoulders, braided with delicate golden threads that glinted in the ethereal light. She had gone as Aphrodite, smiling brightly, and wearing a rose gold dress that sparkled as she moved.

“You know,” she began, an amused smirk playing on her lips, “it is usually Hades who lurks by this table.”

“Lady Hecate.”

“Oh, stuff formalities. Just call me Hecate. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” She grinned, mischief glinting in her eyes. “Hades has been quite insistent that we don’t interfere with interactions with you. What a shame that he’s not here to stop me.”

“What do you mean—oh!”

Hecate tugged her onto the dance floor, their bodies moving to the beat of the music. The thumping drowned out the conversation, giving them privacy.

Hecate led Persephone through the throng of dancing deities to one corner of the grand hall. Her gaze darted across the crowd before resting on a lone figure standing by an ornate pillar.

“There he is,” Hecate pointed to the side of the room.

Hades was dressed to the nines. An homage to Dionysus, the god of wine. A deep burgundy toga, interwoven with gold and silver thread, hung off his broad frame. Ivy leaves circled his head, a stark contrast against his black hair. His frown made him look like a statue carved from obsidian, out of place amidst the revelry.

Looking down at her own robes, Persephone smiled; they would match this night, after all.

Persephone watched a nymph approach him, running a hand down his arm as she spoke in his ear. The same nymph she had heard talking seduction. Even from here, Persephone could see Hades stiffen, the unease in his eyes as the nymph moved in closer, trailing her fingers down his chest.

Hecate's grip on her hand tightened, pulling her attention back to their dance. "Remember," she shouted over the music, "He may be the god of the Underworld, but he's still a man."

Protectiveness—or maybe possessiveness—flared up inside her. Before she knew it, she was striding across the polished marble floor towards Hades, breaking away from the dance. As she neared, she overheard the nymph whispering promises of delights in shadowed alcoves.

Hades shifted, trying to extract himself without seeming rude.

"There you are!" she exclaimed, as though they had arranged to meet. Hades' eyes snapped to hers, visibly relaxing. Persephone ignored the nymph's indignant stare as she looped her arm through Hades', steering him away.

"I'm so sorry I'm late. I should have rescued you earlier." Persephone summoned a vine to hold the nymph in place until they were out of sight.

"It's alright," he murmured. "I'm glad you're here now."

On a whim, she reached out, smoothing his tunic where the nymph had crumpled it, her fingers brushing against his chest. Hades stiffened once more, a hint of doubt in his eyes, but he didn't pull away. Persephone wondered if he could hear how loudly her heart was pounding. She offered a tentative smile.



His lips curled into a small smile in return, an unexpected warmth radiating from him that made her heart flutter.

“Lady Persephone, would you care for this dance?” he offered a deep bow before guiding her into the rhythm of the dance.

His hand was warm and solid as he guided her through the crowd, the way parting for him. The atmosphere shifted as they danced, the noise of the bar fading into a distant buzz. All she could concentrate on was him.

“How fares your shop?” he asked, his voice low and smooth like aged wine.

“Oh, it’s been growing beautifully! I’ve been experimenting with some new species. You won’t believe the colours I’ve coaxed out! I’ve been experimenting up here in Olympus too, trying to design new plant life and am getting the most peculiar results.”

Hades’ smile widened, a soft chuckle escaping his lips. “I can imagine it is both colourful and chaotic. I find myself curious.”

The music swelled. He wanted to see her garden, her sanctuary. She felt a rush of warmth spread through her at the thought.

“I could take you there. Would you like to see it? Now?”

There was a pause, his gaze flickering over her face as though searching for something. Then he nodded, offering his arm to her with a small smile.

“I would be honoured, Lady Persephone.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Hades spotted Hecate across the crowded ballroom, watching them. He raised a brow as she gave a thumbs-up. Hecate was always one for assumptions (although this once she was correct to make them).

He drew the darkness around himself and Persephone, casting a cloak that would shield them from the prying eyes of their fellow deities as they left. The noise of the party faded to a dull thud as they moved away.

Stepping out into the night, the stars blinked down at them from an indigo sky. The crisp air brought with it a sense of tranquillity that had been absent within the crowded hall. He could breathe.

Clutching his arm, Persephone's fingers were slender and dainty, but marred by rough calluses. Warmth spread through him as he looked at her, a sensation he recognised all too well, an affliction that made mortals weak at the knees and foolish in their decisions. Love. He stiffened at the thought.

"Hades?" Persephone's voice broke through his thoughts.

He turned to her, schooling his features. A faint blush coloured her cheeks.

"I was asking about your favourite flowers?"

"I don't see enough to make an informed decision. I liked the one that grew in the Underworld. The ah, orchid?"

"Yes, that's what it is called. I'm surprised you remembered."

"How could I forget something so unexpected?"

Persephone tugged him along, and the scenery changed from cloud and stone to something more organic as they stepped into the garden. It was incredible. A sprawling work of art, a living tapestry, a canvas of green and gold and every shade in between. It stole the breath from his chest.

The thick canopy above shielded them from the night sky, but moonlight still filtered through the leaves, casting an ethereal glow over the wild vegetation below. Hades reached out, running his fingers over the soft petals of a flower. It didn't wilt at his touch; instead, it leaned into him.

Persephone watched him, her face lit up as she smiled.

“You've created something extraordinary.”

Hades trailed after her as she wound through the garden, past vibrant flowerbeds and towering trees that scraped the sky. She gestured to different plants and flowers as they passed - a hardy fern, a blossoming rose bush, an olive tree.

He took notes on the flowers she favoured, to inspire his own creation.

“The way they coexist,” she explained as they passed by a serene pond mirroring the star-studded sky above, “that's what makes this garden beautiful. They each have their place, their purpose.”

His eyes moved from the water to Persephone, the moonlight softening her features. He admired her, her intelligence, her resilience, her capacity to find light in darkness. Her garden wasn't just about life, but about her.

“Which is your favourite?”

The fountain was beautiful, surrounded by a small garden of ferns and moss-covered trees. The water droplets that fell into the pool below caught the light, sparkling like diamonds. Fireflies flitted around them, casting brief flashes of light. It was enchanting, in a way that made Hades' chest ache. He knew now that his own gift needed to be just as extraordinary.



“Come here.”

Persephone led him to the water’s edge. Her fingers were warm against his, a stark contrast that sent unfamiliar sensations through him. As they sat side by side on the stone rim of the pond, their reflections rippled in the water.

They lapsed into a companionable silence, watching the fireflies. He could feel the warmth of Persephone’s body where their arms touched, her hair brushing his shoulder as she leaned on him. He was surprised to find he liked the warmth.

“Tell me about your realm?”

“The Underworld is a place of quiet. Of peace. It is not filled with light or colours like this,” he gestured around them, “but it has its own beauty. It is serene, like a breath expelled.”

Hades told her about his realm; about the quiet peace that settled over it like a blanket, the souls that found solace in its embrace.

“I find comfort in its silence,” he admitted. “In the stillness. In the predictability.”

Persephone’s squeezed his hand, her touch grounding him. “Do you ever feel lonely?”

Hades’ gaze flickered back to their reflections in the water.

“Sometimes. But I’ve learnt to live with it.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

They fell into silence once more, lost in their own minds. Sitting side by side like this, under the moon, Hades felt an odd sense of calm wash over him. For once, he didn’t feel so alone in his solitude.

Hades glanced down to see Persephone still staring up at him, wide-eyed. There was such innocence and yet age in those eyes. The corners of her lips twitched, biting her lip as she observed him. He had the sudden urge to lean in closer. He did, the air crackling between them. He held his breath as she closed her eyes, her long lashes casting shadows on her cheeks.

Their lips were about to meet when a sudden force swept him into the pond. Water enveloped them as they tumbled, the world reduced to a muffled echo and bubbles. Hades surfaced with a gasp. His composed façade vanished as he searched for the source of the assault.

There. The Meliae, gathered in a large tree, laughing and using its branches to push each other. Hades made his way over, intending to give them a piece of his mind.

Then he heard it. A soft, melodious giggle that warmed him more than any sun could. Turning towards the sound, he saw Persephone rise from the water like a naiad. Her hair clung to her face, her gown ruined, but none of that mattered. Moonlight caught on the droplets on her skin, making her look ethereal. Her eyes danced as she wrung out her hair.

“Persephone,” he began, but she was still laughing. His face softened into a smile, the lines around his eyes creasing with genuine mirth. The sight of the goddess of spring, wet and bedraggled, was a rare one. One he would cherish.

“Seems like we’ve made quite a splash,” she said between her fits of giggles. Her eyes twinkled with mischief under the moonlight.

“Yes,” he agreed. “Quite literally.”

They climbed out of the pool, water dripping from their soaked clothes. Persephone curled into his side, spreading literal warmth through his body until the water evaporated off. Even once they were dry, their skin-on-skin contact remained, and she snuggled into him. Hades wrapped his arm around her lithe frame, holding her close.

Perhaps the plunge wasn’t so unwelcome after all.

A distant clang shattered the peace. The sound carried, reaching every part of Olympus. It was the signal for the grand fireworks display to begin, the highlight of the evening. Zeus had promised it would be even more impressive than the last.

Hades would have preferred to remain in this quiet corner of Persephone’s world, where laughter bubbled, and they drowned their inhibitions under moonlit pools. But duty called, and he couldn’t deny his place amidst the revelry.

“Persephone,” he began, extending his arm towards her. With a mere thought, their appearances were somewhat restored. “Shall we return to the festivities?”

A faint smile played on her lips as she touched his arm. As they made their way back to the grand palace (bodies closer together than they had been leaving it), its golden domes shining in the starlight, Hades sensed something odd. A disturbance in the air, a sign of another god nearby. He stopped, looking at Persephone apologetically.

“One moment. I must attend to something before the fireworks. I will join you.”

Persephone nodded, giving him a tight smile before melting into the cluster of gods waiting for the fireworks to

start.

Hades faced the dark grove behind them. Each rustle of leaves and chirp of nocturnal animals seemed louder without Persephone's chatter. He knew who this was.

"What do you want, brother?" Hades called out.

A low chuckle resonated from the shadows, soon followed by Zeus, stumbling slightly in his Artemis-costume.

"Always so quick to assume," Zeus jested, leaning against a marble pillar with an ease that irked Hades.

"You promised not to interfere."

Zeus shrugged his broad shoulders. "And I haven't." Zeus then turned to look at Persephone, who was engrossed in an animated conversation with Aphrodite. A mischievous grin spread across his face as he remarked, "She's quite the girl, isn't she? Looks like the two of you had fun."

The casualness of his words stung. Hades' hands curled at the mention of her name. Zeus interfering in his life was one thing, but to bring Persephone into this...

"That 'girl' is your daughter," Hades snapped. "Show some respect instead of treating her like every other woman you lay eyes on."

Zeus' brows raised, but his expression soon turned into a smug smile, eyes sparkling. The god leaned in closer, whispering into his ear. "You have my blessing, Hades. You can take her."

Take. Take. As if Persephone was a gaudy trinket.

His jaw clenched, and his fingers curled into fists at his sides.

"I have no interest in 'taking' anyone against their will," Hades prowled forward, stepping so close even Zeus couldn't get away. "Persephone deserves more than to be reduced to a commodity. The mortals have moved on from that, and so should we."

"You didn't have that problem with Leuce."

Hades froze.

“I know my sins, Zeus. I won’t repeat the past.”

Zeus blinked, but quickly recovered, giving a careless shrug. “I’m just saying, if you wanted her, you could have her. With my blessing, of course.”

“Persephone makes her own choices. And she deserves more than what I could offer. You should be more careful with your words, brother,” Hades warned. “Not everything is yours to give away. What would our dear sister say if she heard you being so careless with her precious spring?”

“What Demeter doesn’t know won’t hurt her.”

“You won’t be saying that when her ire turns on you.”

With one last glare at his brother, Hades turned and left. The mortal world was too much tonight. Not even Persephone’s presence would soothe his temper. He wanted to be alone. Hades returned to his own domain, where he could sulk in peace with a few bottles of nectar.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Persephone arrived at the shop in disarray. The night before had been wonderful. She'd felt so alive, so carefree. Until the fireworks, at least. Then Hades had vanished without a word. She chewed on her lip as she pulled the shutters open, trying to push away the niggling worry that she'd done something wrong.

What had she done wrong? Was it something she said? Did she push him too far? She had been so caught up in the moment, in the hope of something more, that she hadn't noticed anything amiss. But maybe there had been signs she'd missed. Her mother always told her she was too trusting.

She just wanted to hide away from the world and nurse her bruised ego. Persephone trudged through the shop, slipping into the back room, shutting the door behind her.

Closing her eyes, Persephone slumped against the door, when she heard a sob.

"Maeve?" She opened her eyes to see a sight from a horror.

Maeve sat among decaying bouquets. Once vibrant blooms had turned to muted browns and greys. Petals wilted, leaves shrivelled, and stems slumped.

"Gods above."

Maeve looked up at her through tear-streaked eyes, clutching a wilted lily in her hand. "I don't know what happened. They were fine last night, I swear, but when I came in—"

"Perhaps there was a fault with the chilling system. I'll have someone look into it." Persephone said, keeping her voice calm as she took the flowers and set them aside. "If there's nothing we can salvage, we'll close the shop front and start over. We can order pizza and work through the night if we need to."

Maeve wiped her eyes and nodded. Together, they examined the flowers, but found no signs of disease or pests. The water buckets were still full. There was no sign that the room's temperature had risen at all.

As Persephone studied a blackened rose, a thought struck her—a cold, creeping suspicion she hoped was wrong. There was one place where flowers withered, their vibrancy leached away. The Underworld.

She thought back to the previous night, to her dance with Hades and their almost-kiss. Had her boldness somehow affected her domain here on earth?

Was this her fault? Her life had changed so drastically since she had begun speaking with him. Just the thought of him made her heart race. The way he was so quiet and strong, so charming, and that penetrating gaze.

Could her growing affection for Hades have caused this blight? She shook off the thought. Her mother had always warned her about meddling with the balance between life and death, but love wasn't meant to destroy. Destroy hearts, yes, but not flowers.

With a sigh, she threw the bouquets into a basket, determined to leave thoughts of death behind her. Together, she and Maeve replaced the wilted flowers with fresh bouquets, but the scent of rot lingered.

When the sun was at its lowest, and Maeve went to get dinner, the bell above the shop door rang. Persephone sat up, to put on her professional face, before she noted it was her mother walking through the shop. Demeter looked as immaculate as ever, despite the late night, but her lips were pressed thin, her eyes tight.

“Mother? What brings you here?”

Demeter's gaze flickered across the shop, her eyes landing on the partially restored bouquets behind her. “I heard about the incident this morning. Show me them.”

Persephone felt a knot tighten in her chest, wondering which spy had been in the shop today, but she forced a smile.

“It was just a technical glitch, Mother. Maeve and I have fixed everything.”

“Persephone, I know you’re capable. Let me look.”

Persephone shifted as her mother swept into the back room, her elegant robes trailing behind her. Demeter’s keen eyes appraised the bouquets Maeve and Persephone had been working on. Without a word, she began dismantling their work, plucking out stems and rearranging blooms with deft fingers.

Persephone hovered. She knew Demeter was better at this, had eons more experience, but it still hurt to have her work replaced so easily.

Finally, Demeter stepped away, examining the bouquets. Persephone had to concede they were beautiful, but she would have preferred her mother to advise her rather than taking over. She would have to alter them to match the brief once the woman was gone.



“It’s not your fault, my dear. Nor is it an issue with mortal technology. Something has drained the life from those blossoms.” She selected one of the withered blooms and

pressed it into Persephone's hand. "Can you discern what caused this, like I taught you?"

Persephone's fingers closed around the dry stem, the texture like old paper under her touch. She shut her eyes, focusing on the faint residue of the lily's spent life force.

She felt nothing at first. Then images formed in her mind. The orchid blooming under her and Maeve's care. The sunlight. Then the darkness, the cold. The same life that bloomed in the Underworld, where Hades had found the flower.

She blinked up at her mother. Persephone bit her lip, unsure if she should voice her suspicions. She was still figuring out her connection with Hades herself, let alone how to explain it to her mother.

"It's all a blur," Persephone said. It wasn't a lie, but the words still hurt. She'd never kept things from her mother before.

Demeter nodded, a crease of worry still lingering on her brow. After what felt like an eternity of uncomfortable silence, Demeter spoke again. "I heard that you wandered off during the masque."

"I just needed some fresh air."

Demeter's stern expression didn't waver. "The dryads tell a different tale. They saw you leaving with someone dressed as Dionysus."

A trickle of cold sweat slid down Persephone's back. "What's wrong with that? It was Cereon, passing on a message. He left soon after."

Demeter's eyes narrowed, her gaze like an icy arrow. "I didn't raise a fool, Persephone," she retorted. "You're evading my question.."

A sinking feeling settled in Persephone's gut. She fought to keep her expression blank, to think of an excuse. Demeter could always tell when she was lying.

“Why ask if you know the answer?” Persephone glared at her mother. “I went on a walk with Hades. It was just a walk!”

Demeter stared at her, mouth agape. Persephone waited.

“You’ve been consorting with Hades?”

“Hardly consorting. We danced. Spoke. There was nothing inappropriate, not that anything between us would be inappropriate.”

Demeter shook her head. “Persephone,” she began, reaching out to grip her daughter’s shoulders. Her fingers were cold and hard as marble against Persephone’s skin. “Your dress was completely dishevelled. You don’t understand what you’re getting into.”

“I haven’t gotten into anything!” Persephone yanked her arm from Demeter’s grip.

“Hades is dangerous.”

“He’s a god, of course he’s dangerous! And are you, as am I! He’s not the monster you make him out to be!”

“This is not about what you think you know about Hades. It’s about your safety. I won’t have my daughter put in danger. His track record—”

“You don’t get to decide who I spend my time with.”

Demeter recoiled as if Persephone had slapped her. She stared at Persephone, her face pale and stricken. “I am your mother,” her voice trembled. “It’s my duty to protect you.”

Persephone took a deep breath, forcing herself to remain calm. “I am not a child anymore. Whether it’s a god or mortal, I choose who I want to be with, not you.”

Persephone held her breath, watching her mother’s face. After a drawn-out pause, she could almost see the gears turning in Demeter’s head, the conflict etched into her mother’s normally impassive face. The moment stretched on.

Demeter sighed, her gaze softening as she looked at Persephone. “You’re right,” she conceded. “You’re not a child

anymore. You may make your own choices. But choices have consequences.”

Demeter rose, regaining her composure as she smoothed down her dress and pushed a stray curl behind her ear. “I can’t stop you from seeing Hades,” she warned, eyes fixed on Persephone. “Not everyone will be as accommodating. You may find shadows where you don’t want them.”

“I will handle them.”

“I hope so,” Demeter replied. She turned to leave, then paused at the doorway. Without looking back, she added softly, “I just want you to be safe.”

With that, Demeter left, leaving Persephone alone once more. She looked down at the shrivelled flower in her hand. For a moment, she was afraid. Then she forced it down. She wouldn’t allow other’s fears control her actions.

Persephone was the goddess of spring. She could bring life to death, encourage growth from decay. She had met the lord of the Underworld as an equal and seen the complexities of the god beneath. And she intended to continue doing so, no matter what her mother or anyone else thought.

Persephone set down the wilted flower and straightened her back. No one would sway her from this path; not Demeter, not Zeus, not even Hades himself.

If that meant striding up to his door and shouting at him to let her in, then so be it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Hades stirred awake, his head throbbing, and face covered in slobber. Perhaps that third bottle of nectar had been too much. Cerberus (now the size of a spaniel) nuzzled him, eager to start the day. All three tongues were lapping at his face, eager to play.

Hades nudged the enthusiastic hound away by the snouts. “Not now, boy. Daddy is regretting life.”

He sat up, rubbing his head. Zeus’s masquerade was a blur, but he remembered walking with Persephone. Her smile, her laugh, the way she looked at him. No one had looked at him like that in centuries.

Their moment in her garden replayed in his mind. The riot of colour and life was unlike anything in his realm. They had sat together by the pool, so close. He was sure she wanted him to kiss her. And, gods help him, he wanted it too. Still wanted to.

Cerberus whined, rolling over until Hades was within reach. He sighed and scratched the hound’s ears. “You’re spoiled, you know?”

Groaning, Hades sat up, shaking off the hangover and self-pity. People didn’t stop dying just because he’d had too much to drink. Forcing himself out of bed, his robes from the night before turned back into his usual chiton.

He didn’t bother preening; he doubted anyone would dare look close enough to see how rough he felt.

Then the doors burst open and Hecate burst in, stuttering to a halt when she realised he was out of bed.

“Well, this isn’t what I was expecting.”

“What did you expect? A gaggle of goddesses warming my chamber? Yet still you came charging in?”

Hecate nodded, face reddening. Cerberus gave a soft woof, as if laughing. Hades patted the dog's head in solidarity.

"That would be less tragic than this."

"As you can see, it's just me and the hound," Hades said. "My evening was perfectly inane. No blushing virgins hidden under my covers. You can check if you desire it that much."

"Yes, of course." Hecate straightened, regaining her composure. If she seemed somewhat disappointed, Hades chose not to acknowledge it, for his own sake more than hers. "Please accept my apologies for the intrusion."

Hades waved a hand. "It's forgotten. Did you need something?"

"Just a routine report on the influx of shades. But it can wait until later."

Hades shook his head with a wry smile. "Assuming I have time for trysts. Come, we can start the patrols."

Cerberus whined again and nudged Hades' hand. After the requisite scratching, the hound transformed into something altogether more intimidating and bounded ahead, sniffing at each ghost they passed as if they were holding food just for him.

To her credit, Hecate waited an entire thirty seconds before asking, "So, how was the masquerade? Any interesting encounters?"

"You know very well who 'bumped' into me." Hades gave her a pointed look. "Given you spun the woman into my arms."

"You didn't seem that upset about it. She saved you from quite the encounter."

"I wasn't upset. I was simply waiting for the right opportunity to approach her."

"Bull. Hades, you were cowering in a corner, afraid of a pretty girl. I did you a favour!" Hecate paused, grinning. "Did you enjoy her company?"

Images of the garden flashed before him. Persephone's delighted laughter as she showed him her flowers. The way the fireflies illuminated her face as they sat by the pool.

"You did!" Hecate gasped. "Hades, are you blushing?"

"What? No." Hades resisted the urge to check.

"You are."

"She is unlike any I have known."

"The fates may have designs for you yet."

Hades scowled. "The fates can mind their own affairs. I want no part in their schemes."

"Darling, no one can avoid the fates, not even Zeus. Speaking of, did you see what he dressed in?"

Hades' scowl deepened. "My brother's arrogance tries my patience. He paraded around like a peacock, dismissing all decorum after his second glass."

"Causing his usual trouble?"

"He didn't even acknowledge his latest bastard. Refused to bring her to the masquerade. As if ignoring the girl will make her disappear. Hera of all people allowed her entrance."

"His behaviour towards his offspring has long been reprehensible."

"He discards them as easily as he does their mothers. Such callousness is hard for me to stomach at the best of times."

Hecate studied him. "It bothers you more than usual today. Because of Persephone?"

Hades looked away. "I do not wish her ill-used for my brother's sport."

"You care for her."

"I barely know her." But even as Hades denied it, he knew Hecate spoke the truth.

"Do not let Zeus or the past rule you, my friend. What happened with Leuce was tragic, but you cannot flagellate forever."

“You speak out of turn.”

“Someone must.” Hecate met his glare. “I have been at your side for eons. I know you better than you know yourself. You care for Persephone. Do not let the past or your pride prevent you from opening your heart again.”

Hades looked away, jaw tight. “I am but a mere fancy, a way to irritate her mother and get experience in life.”

“You don’t still believe that, do you? She welcomed your company in her garden. Does that seem like the action of someone who wanted a fling? There would be much easier suitors to annoy her mother with if that was the case.”

Hades thought back to the smile on Persephone’s face as she showed him her flowers, the teasing lilt in her voice, the shy way she tucked her hair behind her ear as they sat together. “No,” he admitted. “But I am a jealous man, and she could change her mind. I am afraid of what would happen then.”

“You aren’t a wild thing Hades, you have control.”

“I fear my feelings, of being able to love.” Hades squeezed his hands, remembering Leuce’s laughter, her touch. He’d loved her, treasured their time. But it was tainted by the start and the end. He’d loved and lost her. He’d failed her. And now he was alone in his cold, dark world, with nothing but memories and a broken heart.

He’d closed himself off after that, vowing never to let anyone in again. Not to protect himself, but to protect everyone else. He had managed it until Persephone had slid into his life. Her vivacity was a light in his dark world, and despite himself, he’d been drawn to her.

“You think I should pursue this, don’t you?”

“I think,” Hecate said, “that you should follow your heart. You have locked it away for too long.”

“I do not want the past to repeat itself. What if I do something unforgiveable to her?”

Hecate sighed, crossing her arms over her chest as she leaned against the wall. “Hades,” she said gently, “you are not

the monster you believe yourself to be. That you acknowledge your mistakes and repent of them shows you are unlikely to repeat them.”

“I do not wish to cause her harm. But my temper, my jealousy...”

Hecate stepped closer, placing a hand on his arm. “You are not the same god you were back then. You have grown wiser, learned patience. Do not let old wounds convince you that you are unworthy of love.”

“Our realms could not be more different. She tends the living. I shepherd the dead.”

“You underestimate how intertwined life and death are.” Hecate gave him a knowing look. “Without death, life has no meaning. Just as the darkest night makes the dawn all the sweeter.”

“You make it sound so simple.”

“It is, if you let it be,” Hecate smiled. “Stop overthinking. Open yourself to the possibility of happiness. Persephone challenges you, inspires you. Perhaps even excites you?”

A ghost of a smile crossed Hades’ face at the thought of the lively goddess. “She is like a breath of fresh air. Vibrant in a way I have not known for eons.” The smile faded. “But any relationship between us would cause an uproar. Her mother already mistrusts me.”

“Demeter’s prejudices are just that, hers alone,” Hecate asserted. “Only you and Persephone can decide what is right for you. To do that, you need to speak with her. Have a god-damned grown-up conversation instead of allowing your insecurities to produce phantoms.”

She gave a sharp bow. “I will take my leave, unless you need me for anything else?”

“No, you have given me much to think about. I value your counsel, Hecate, even when I do not wish to hear it.”

Hecate inclined her head. “I only wish you to be happy, my lord. The rest is up to you.” She glided away, vanishing into

shadow.

Two guards opened the palace doors as he approached, cold air whooshing forward. Cerberus stood to attention, ears pricked as he sniffed the air. A low rumble sounded in the hound's throat, not quite a growl but not his usual playful woof, either.

“What is it, boy?” Hades asked. Cerberus took a step forward, head lowered, focused on the path ahead. His tail gave a slow wag, belying the guarded posture of his body. Hades drew his sword, moving with practiced stealth to stand beside the hound. Muscles coiled, ready to unleash Tartarus on any intruder.

Without warning, Cerberus lunged, tearing through the Underworld. Hades cursed and ran after him, sword flashing in the torchlight. He expected to find Cerberus attacking a shade or nymph. After the night before, Demeter wouldn't be unexpected. But as he reached the edge of the palace grounds, he skidded to a halt.

Cerberus had someone trapped under one of his paws, but it wasn't an intruder. A mass of honey curls spilled out from under the dog's chest as he licked their face. From the accompanying giggles, the person didn't seem to mind.

“Cerberus!” Hades sheathed his blade and gave a shrill whistle.

The hound woofed happily but obeyed, releasing his captive and dancing back a few steps. The figure sat up, spitting hair out of their mouth, and wiping dog slobber from their cheeks with a slender hand. Hades' breath caught.

“Lady Persephone?”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Three large heads batted to get to her face, growling and pushing each other away. Persephone scratched at whatever fur she could reach.

“Back, boy!” She pushed at his body until Cerberus had moved enough to let her breathe.

Each head competed for her attention, tongues lolling out. One nudged its snout into her hand, searching for food another gnawed at her sleeve, and the third just lay his head on her chest, staring at her with large, adoring eyes.

Persephone scratched behind their ears. She giggled, lost in the moment of playful absurdity. It amazed her that the dog regarded her with such fondness after one meeting.

A low whistle sounded. Cerberus’ ears perked and with a reluctant whine, they pulled away from Persephone and returned to their owner.

Brushing ash and dust from her dress, she looked up to see Hades looming over her. His obsidian eyes gave nothing away, but the quirk of an eyebrow suggested amusement.

“Lady Persephone?” He was looking at her as if she was a spectre.

“I thought I’d reciprocate your visit.”

“Are you always this popular with pets?”

“Only the three-headed ones.”

Hades’ lips twitched upwards in what might have been a smile.

A pale hand extended towards her. She took it without hesitation, finding his skin warm, a stark contrast to the cool ambience of his realm. Hades pulled her up with ease and they stood there, their hands intertwined.

His eyes bore into hers, so intense her breath hitched. In those bottomless eyes, she glimpsed something. Persephone tilted her head back to meet his gaze. She watched as he leant in and thought, just maybe...

A loud bark shattered the moment. They both jolted, turning towards the source of the sound, their hands falling to their sides.

Cerberus was a few feet away, all three heads tilted towards them. The middle head barked again, an impatient demand for attention. She laughed, bending down to pet the eager hound. Hades joined her, scolding the dog for being impatient even as he lavished attention on the dog.

The dog lapped up the attention, his tails wagging. Patting the dog gave her a moment to collect herself.

Hades straightened, looking at her with a furrowed brow. "What brings you to my realm, Lady Persephone?"

"I wanted to see you again. And... apologise if I was too forward at the masque." She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, peering up at him through her eyelashes. "I didn't see you after the fireworks. Did I make you uncomfortable?"

"Not at all. I confess I've thought of little else since I woke."

Persephone's heart fluttered at his admission. Trying to play it cool, she gave him a playful smile. "Well, I am quite the dancer."

He let out a low chuckle. The sound sent a pleasant shiver through her.

"Indeed. And quite the conversationalist. Speaking with you, seeing your garden. It was enlightening."

"As was speaking with you."

He regarded her. "Perhaps you might join me for a walk, then? If you can spare the time. I assure you, the reason for my premature departure is entirely Zeus' fault, and no reflection of our time together. Shall we?"

Oh goodness, Persephone felt she could collapse in relief at that. She had been so sure that Hades had left out of regret, not wanting to confront their almost-kiss. Everyone knew how much her father irritated Hades.

Emboldened, she smoothed her hair out, summoning flowers that immediately grew through her hair, the drought she had suffered before gone.

She almost snatched at him when Hades offered his arm, holding onto it with both hands.

“I’d like that.” She smiled, falling into step beside him as they strolled through the fields of asphodel. As they walked, Persephone found herself drawn to him, like a flower to the sun.

“Would you like to see where the flower grew?” Hades asked, gesturing towards the ashen field that stretched out on one side.

“Yes, please.”

They walked through the fields, arm in arm. It was perfection. Persephone only wished Hades was wearing a sleeveless robe. The bleak lines of the underworld were beautiful in their own way, the ashen fields stretching out into the horizon. A canvas painted in shades of grey and black.

Hades explained about his duties as ruler of the Underworld, the weight of responsibility he bore for every soul that resided here. Even those condemned to Tartarus were not neglected.

His words painted a picture of a god who bore his responsibilities with quiet strength and determination. She doubted many others cared to learn of the heavy toll he had been given.

She was staring so intently at Hades that she saw the moment his eyes widened, jaw slackening. His entire body seized up, pulling her to a stop as he stared ahead.

“It was just... there.”

Persephone turned to where he was looking.

Where Hades had claimed a lone flower grew, an entire patch of flowers had sprouted. A burst of vibrant colour disrupted the otherwise grey and black canvas of the Underworld. Roses, chrysanthemums, baby's breath... the very flowers that had perished in her shop the night before.

A sharp bark snapped her back. Cerberus jumped forward, rolling around in the flower patch. Tails wagging. One head was gnawing at a stem, another trying to bury its nose in the blossoms. She laughed.

“Hoi! Leave them be!”

Cerberus jolted upright, three sets of guilty eyes looking up at their master. She didn't think them too guilty, however; the stem was poking out of the left head's mouth, moving as he chewed it.

Persephone reached out, her fingers hovering over a cluster of blossoms. “Come on, you can do it,” she said, praising the blooms. Unlike that morning, these flowers responded to her coaxing, their petals unfurling. She felt a rush of warmth as she saw life among the death. A small vine grew from the patch, reaching for a nearby wall.



The vine continued its journey upwards, weaving an intricate pattern along the stone. It was like an eager child under Persephone's gentle coaxing. As she whispered words of life and growth to the plants, she felt a calm return.

“How?” Hades murmured, shaking his head.

“Life finds a way. Even here.” In a moment of reckless boldness, she took his hand, lacing their fingers together. His hand was so much larger than hers, but it didn’t make her feel small. She squeezed his hand. “Just as souls come here to heal, so too can the land. Nothing is ever truly dead.”

Cerberus let out a joyous bark, a large lily flopping out of his mouth.

“We should let the flowers be, or else Cerberus will consume them all,” he said. Cerberus whined but fell into step beside his master as they continued their walk. “I must admit, I’m surprised you came alone. Most would not dare venture here without an escort.”

“How could I fear anything within your remit?”

They walked on, hand in hand. She looked around, taking in the sparse alien landscape. There was a stark beauty to it. As they neared the palace, she noticed a single tree in the distance. It was laden with bright red fruit, the colour so vivid it was almost jarring against the monochrome surroundings.

She paused, pulling Hades to a halt beside her.

“Is this another recent addition?” she asked.

His eyes flickered towards the tree before returning to her. “No. That tree has been here since the Underworld was formed. Be careful not to touch it, and never to consume its fruit.”

“Why not?” She tilted her head up, studying him with a playful smile on her lips. “What happens if I do?”

“Its properties are more tied to the Underworld than Above. It has a magic that none of us understand, but none who have consumed its fruit have left this realm. Promise me you won’t touch it.”

“I promise,” she said, not wanting him to think her rash.

Her thoughts lingered on the odd tree and its vibrant fruit. Hades had been unusually vague about the effects of the tree.

Did he know himself? Or was this another way of bridging a gap between them?

Looking up at Hades, her doubts fell aside. His dark eyes bore into hers, a mix of want and hesitation in them. Seizing the moment, she stood on her tiptoes, and pressed a gentle kiss to his cheek. Hades eyes widened, but he didn't draw back. She could have sworn his breath hitched.

“Thank you,” she murmured against his skin before pulling back. “For showing me your world.”

With that, she turned and walked away, leaving Hades standing alone amidst the ashen landscape of his realm. Her heart felt heavy yet elated as she moved further away from him. She didn't look back. If she did, she might not leave at all.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Two weeks later

Persephone refrained from taking another trip down below. Not because she didn't want to. Gods alive, she wanted to. The buzz from her kiss on Hades' cheek had lasted days, and more than once she had imagined what might have happened, had she had the nerve to press her lips to his.

No. Because Aphrodite's latest advice lingered.

"Men don't want to be smothered. Let him want you. Want to chase you. Do you think Jimmy would want my company so much if I lavished him with attention?"

"You mean John?"

"They all merge into one, my dear."

Aphrodite's attitude might not be the same as Persephone's, but the principle counted. She hoped.

If Hades really hadn't appreciated her actions, he would have banned her like he had her father, the time he had tried to spike the river Lethe.

"You okay there, Persephone?"

She blinked up from where she had been cleaning the counter to see Maeve before her, lips quirked.

"You've been cleaning that spot for ten minutes. Go home. I'll close up."

"I'm fine, just lost in thought."

"That thought's been stuck in your head all day. Are you still moping around after your man?"

"No? Why would I be moping? I'm not moping."

"The lady doth protest too much."

“That’s a stupid quote.”

Glancing at the window, Persephone noticed a figure in black sitting on the bench opposite the shop. She sat perfectly still, her spectral frame ramrod straight as she stared at passersby. Few came near. Persephone noted that most veered away from the woman with ghostly white eyes. The goddess of witchcraft.

“Halloween was last month.”

“Huh?”

“Halloween? The pagan festival? Do those gods exist too?”

“Oh. Uh, we don’t interact.” Persephone tucked the cloth in her apron. “Perhaps you’re right. You’re sure you’ll be okay?”

“Yes, go. You never leave early.” Maeve shooed her off.

Tucking the last stray leaves into the compost bin, Persephone removed her apron, brushing the dust off her sleeves.

“Night.”

Pulling on her jacket, Persephone stepped out into the cool night. This late in the year, mortals were still out and about despite the darkness, heads down as they stared at the pavement, or their phones, or lists of items left to buy.

Hecate hadn’t moved from the bench, a light dusting of snow surrounding her. Where it met her hair or clothing, the flakes hadn’t melted, resulting in a cloak of white haloing the dark figure.

Persephone brushed the snow off the bench, sitting next to the Goddess.

“It’s a beautiful evening, is it not?” Hecate’s raspy voice echoed off the shop walls. One passerby jerked out of their phone-induced stupor, staring at the goddess. Hecate did not seem bothered, smiling widely to reveal sharpened teeth. “On your way mortal. It is rude to stare.”

The mortal hurried off, with what Persephone could swear were the words “bloody goths”.

“Snow wasn’t forecast for another week.”

“Don’t you think it makes everything cheerier, this way?”

“Only for those below twelve.”

Hecate waved a hand. “You win some, you lose some.”

“How may I help? I assume you aren’t here for a social visit?”

“The gods of the Underworld rarely make social visits.” Hecate leaned forward looking into the shop. Her eyes flashed, a bright white light filling the air. “Has Hades visited you today?”

“No?” Persephone frowned, looking to Hecate. “Why would you think he has?”

“He’s not in the Underworld.” Hecate’s eyes flicked to the side to look at Persephone. “He never left the Underworld until he started visiting you.”

“That can’t be true, he knows lots of places around here, outside of our relationship. He took me to...” She trailed off at Hecate’s smirk. “He hadn’t been there before?”

Was Hecate suggesting that Hades had searched for a restaurant exclusively for their meal? She could feel her heart pounding at the thought.

“Hades is as antisocial as one can get. His care for anything mortal begins at their death. Until you came along, that is.”

“I haven’t done anything.”

“No?” Hecate rose, holding out a hand. “May we talk, somewhere a little more private?”

“Oh, sure, uh,” Persephone took the offered hand, struggling to think of somewhere to take the goddess when her feet lurched beneath her, and the town faded into darkness. “Hecate?”

“I’m here still, don’t fret, little goddess.”

She staggered back, the pressure on her hand gone. The darkness around her warped and twisted, blinking lights

coming into view and disappearing immediately.

The walls seemed to stretch, the ceiling rising higher, and the floor sinking to her feet. Persephone stumbled, her hand reaching out to steady herself against the wall, but it wasn't there. She fell, bracing for impact, but it never came.

Instantly she was upright, and the floor spreading out before her. A mix of the eons before her; a modern kitchenette nestled within a library better fit for a monastery. Plush chairs from the mid seventies around a rock that looked better suited to stone henge than as a coffee table.

A fireplace crackled merrily from the ceiling, the smoke wafting around the room, but never in her breathing space. Herbs and oils lined shelves, dotted between the books.

Persephone blinked rapidly, trying to understand the room.



“Wine?” Hecate was reclined on one of the chairs, holding out a glass. What? Persephone looked behind her, but she could see only darkness.

“Please.” With tentative steps Persephone approached, relieved when the seat was solid beneath her. She took the offered glass, sniffing at the blood red wine, then took a sip. The flavours bounced on her tongue, full bodied and rich with a hint of blackcurrants.

“Delicious. Where are we?”

“My home. It seems to be in a playful mood today.”

Her eyes were drawn to a shadowy figure, coiled around the room. It looked like a snake until she realised the body was too long, the eyes too big. She shivered as it slithered towards her and draped across her lap. Its eyes gleamed.

“Who is this?” she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

“Oh, don’t mind him,” Hecate said. “It’s just one of my snakes. They’re enchanted to sense emotions; this one seems to like you.”

“Perhaps he would make a better guard than Cerberus. Certainly more intimidating.”

“Cerberus is intimidating when he wants to be. That you’ve seen a friendlier side...” Hecate’s head cocked to the side, a smug smile gracing her lips. “Perhaps it is more than Hades that is charmed by your presence.”

“He’s certainly charmed me.” She flushed at the thought of her presence having an affect on its denizens.

“Cerberus, or Hades?” Persephone’s blush deepened. “Come now, there’s no need to be shy. Anyone with eyes can see the chemistry brewing between you both. It’s like watching a storm roll in. All that tension building up in the air. I love it.”

“There isn’t much to tell. I’ve not seen Hades since the day after the celebrations.”

“My Lord Hades spent the night alone with the bottle and the dog. He made it quite clear he wasn’t defiling any innocents.”

“I visited in the, ah, afternoon. Has he been busy since?” She picked at a loose thread on her dress.

“That’s what I had wanted to ask you. As I mentioned, he has not left the Underworld this much since,” she cut herself off with a wry shake of the head, “well, in a long time. I have not seen him so taken with another.”

“He’s loved before?”

“Dear Persephone, we all have.” Hecate’s laugh was brash but warm. “There was only one, and it was nothing like your own courtship.”

A tray of cheeses was conjured from the air, floating to her.

“Have some. They’re good. Have patience with Hades, my dear. The wounds of love linger long in immortal flesh. But I think you are the balm our dour king needs.” She smirked. “And make no mistake, you will warm that cold bed of his soon enough.”

“Hecate!” Persephone cried, swatting at Hecate as a fresh wave of embarrassment overtook her. But she couldn’t help the laughter that spilled forth at the goddess’s audacity.

“He’s no different from any other man. He may have a fearsome reputation, but I am observant. I see when his eyes soften. When they dilate.” She leaned in. “He does not realise it, but he needs a strong woman who can challenge his insecurities.”

“No, I’m not sure...”

“Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it. Hades enjoys being the little spoon.”

“Is this what you really wanted me for? A sex talk?”

“No, that’s just a bonus.”

Persephone took another sip of her wine. There was something about it not quite like those she normally tasted.

“What type of wine is this? I can’t make out one of the flavours.”

“Pomegranate. One of my specialities.” Persephone almost spat out the drink, wide-eyed. Hecate laughed. “Oh darling,

your face! No, it's not one of *those* pomegranates. One doesn't consume those lightly."

"Have you?"

"No, no, that would be stupid. I enjoy my trips up above too much. I think the only deity I know besides Hades to have consumed it is Aeacus, and that was only due to Zeus' hounding for his son to live in Olympus."

"What happens when you consume the pomegranate?"

"Only the menfolk know what happens. I didn't see Aeacus for a few weeks, but he seems content."

That didn't seem too bad. It made sense that Hades was tied to the Underworld, but she had seen him plenty of times outside of its bounds. Aeacus, she hadn't seen in Olympus, but if he'd been trying to avoid their father, then that wasn't surprising.

The dark voice in her mind, the one that made her want to wreck vengeance against those unnecessarily rude to Roy and Kathryn, whispered. If she was tied to the Underworld, her mother could not pull her back...

"Thank you, Hecate. You've given me a lot to think about." She rose to leave, but Hecate touched her arm, halting her.

"Persephone, before you go," Hecate went to one of her shelves, pulling out a set of vials. "I heard that your abilities were going through some teething problems."

"Has mother been telling everyone about that?"

"No, nothing of the sort. It's something we all go through as we mature into our gifts. You know Pompeii? Yeah, that was awkward time in my life. I couldn't show my face in Olympus for centuries."

"That was you?"

"The message is that a few flowers withering isn't something to worry about. These should help." She handed the vials over. "They won't interfere with anything else you consume, just simple smelling salts to calm you down. We all act rashly when pushed into a corner."

“Thank you. This is all very nice but why are you helping me? We barely know each other.”

“I care for Hades, and he cares for you, even if he’s an idiot that can’t admit these things aloud. Now shoo, go continue your wooing.”

With a wave of her hand, Hecate’s house was gone, and Persephone was left on the street outside her shop. The snow had settled on the ground, soft footsteps surrounding her.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The next day Persephone returned to the Underworld, Hecate having assured her that Hades was holed up in his study reading papers. Some cookies baked by Emma were sure to brighten the day.

As she wandered, the breeze brought with it a familiar scent. She inhaled. Pomegranates. Without realising it, she had veered off the path, following the scent.

Persephone soon found herself before the tree, vibrant red fruits dripping from its branches. She had always loved pomegranates. Just one wouldn't hurt. She moved towards it...

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," came a gravelly voice.

Persephone turned with a start. An aged spirit with leathery skin and a shock of white hair stood there, leaning upon a gnarled staff. His eyes were flinty, his expression stern as he regarded her.

"I-I'm sorry." Persephone shook her head, trying to rid herself of the strange sensation that had consumed her. Her hand was outstretched, almost at the fruit without her intending it. "I didn't-I mean."

"Who dares enter my orchard uninvited?"

"I am Persephone, Daughter of Demeter. Who are you, milord?"

The man straightened up. "I am Ascalaphus, guardian of this tree. None may touch this tree without my say so. What do you want, goddess?"

"I don't know," Persephone admitted. "I just... I felt drawn here. I wasn't even thinking about it."

"Not all realms are so... forthcoming. My orchard has its own magic, tied to the land." He nodded to the pomegranate trees. "Only I can harvest the fruit."

“I can feel their power,” Persephone said. “It calls to me like a siren’s song.”

“That doesn’t surprise me, goddess of spring. The trees are a crossover between life and death. The living can come in, stay for a while, but the fruit binds us all here in the end.”

“Have you too partaken in the fruit?”

“I have.”

Persephone grasped on the information, desperate to find out what the fruit did. “What happened?”

“That’s between me and the Underworld. The trees listen.”

“Trees in plural? Are there other trees like this? Other life that grows organically in this realm?”

“Just one.” Ascalaphus pointed a crooked finger to the far end of the horizon, away from the palace. “Yonder lies the asphodel meadows, where common souls dwell after death. At their centre grows a great white poplar, sacred as the pomegranate. One bite of its leaves confers the gift of memory in death. Souls flock there, grasping at who they were. Some gifts bring naught but sorrow.”

“That sounds like a very lonely existence.”

“Some say it is better than the alternative: eternal oblivion.” Ascalaphus gave her a searching look. “You have a tender soul. You remind me of someone. A young nymph that lived here, eons ago.”

A nymph? Persephone couldn’t recall any mention of nymphs that once resided here. Was this the love that Hecate had alluded to? Weren’t nymphs immortal?

“What was she called?”

“Leuce... Aye. The Lord Hades fell in love with the sweet Leuce. For a brief, shining moment, his stern heart transformed.” The guardian shook his head. “But nymphs do not have the constitution of gods. When fair Leuce passed on, Hades wept diamonds and draped her in evergreen boughs. No matter the circumstances of their courtship, he loved her.”

Persephone bit her lip. She tried to imagine the intense passion between Hades and Leuce, and the acute pain of their parting. An irrational curl of emotion deep within her bowels that wanted to tear the nymph asunder.

“Does she not still exist here, within the Underworld? As all do in death?”

Hades would have mentioned that, surely. Would stay with his love, even if she were a shade.

“Leuce was as stubborn in death as she was in life. She refused to partake from either tree, denied herself the fruits that would tether her to these ashen plains. Then she drank from the Lethe, to forget. Her spirit faded, dispersed among the restless dead. Even Hades, with all his might, could not find her again.”

“Why would she refuse such a gift?”

“Gift?” Ascalaphus’s laugh was a dry rustle of leaves. “The pomegranate binds you here, roots you to the Underworld like a chain. The white poplar makes old pains linger. Some spirits prefer to lose themselves than be trapped in perpetual twilight.”

“But they were in love?”

“Lord Hades was in love. Leuce... I could never read that woman. No one would blame her for biding her time until she could escape, one way or another.”

“What happened?”

“When Hades loves, it consumes him like fire consumes dry wood. I warn you—his softness is a recent bloom. He was not always so considering of others.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hades’ affection for Leuce was fierce and all-encompassing. The rumours of her descent here are true. The stories that whisper of a god who took what he desired, without their consent.”

Persephone’s breath hitched. She knew Hades as reserved and thoughtful. The notion that he might have once acted so

rashly seemed at odds with his character. That he would act like her father. She recalled her mother's words, Demeter's fear.

"I can't believe that," she whispered.

Ascalaphus tilted his head. "Can you not? All the gods were grown from the same loins."

She stood silent for a moment, the weight of Ascalaphus' words settling upon her shoulders like a shroud. Her understanding of Hades clashed with this grim history. How could she reconcile the two?

Was this related to the story she had seen carved in the caves?

"Tread carefully, young goddess, for if there's one thing I've learned from watching over these trees, it's that even gods are not immune to fate's cruel whims."

How had Hades dealt with losing Leuce? Did it change him? She didn't want to think about it. Was she walking into the same thing? Would she become just another blip in Hades' long history? Or worse, would she end up like Leuce? Lost because she couldn't stand to stay in this place that filled her with so much awe?

Did Hades do what Ascalaphus implied? Did he take Leuce without her consent? But then, had Persephone herself not been just as cruel in her pursuit of love, carving the hearts of mortals into her gifts? How easily she had used her magic against potential rivals. Could she judge him for morals that the mortals imposed upon them?

They were all correct. Gods did not love as mortals did. She could not judge him without more of the story.

"Thank you, Ascalaphus. May I stay here a while? I need to think."

"Of course, Lady Persephone." He inclined his head. "I shall return to my duties."

Persephone sat down amidst the withered grass, stretching out and leaning against the wall. She pulled out her

sketchbook, the creamy blank pages beckoning to her. The orchard's stillness enveloped her as she drew, capturing the twisted boughs and swollen fruits in delicate lines.

Her mind quieted as she sketched, but occasionally her thoughts drifted back to Hades. She chewed on her lip, frowning, before she shook off the creeping doubts and refocused on the tree before her.

When her pencil became a stump, Persephone reached into her bag for another. Her fingers brushed against something round and firm—an earthly pomegranate.

She didn't recall putting a pomegranate in her bag. Had someone slipped it in without her noticing? She peered closer, giving it a sniff. It was a real fruit, vibrant and beautiful.

An idea sparked. Ascalaphus was a spirit, without the senses mortals or gods enjoyed. Even his sight and hearing were fractured. If the fruit looked the same, then...would it matter? But no, she couldn't risk it. The rules here were different, sacred even. On the other hand...



“Ascalaphus,” she called out, “might I borrow one of your fallen pomegranates? I want to get the texture right in my drawing.”

Ascalaphus stared at her before picking up a fallen fruit from the ground, one that hadn't burst open upon impact, and handed it to her with a solemn nod.

“If you consume it, I will know.”

“I promise I won’t.” She didn’t intend to *this* day, after all.

With Ascalaphus turned away once more, Persephone weighed both pomegranates in her hands. They were identical in heft and hue. A quick switch and no one would be any wiser.

She placed the earthly pomegranate where the original had been and tucked his gift into her bag. A pang of guilt, but this was for Hades. A gesture of kinship, a bridge between their worlds. No actual harm would be done. Right?

Satisfied with the exchange, Persephone returned to her drawing with renewed focus, immortalising the beauty of Ascalaphus’ orchard on paper.

Persephone placed her sketchbook and drawing supplies back into her bag, the illicit pomegranate nestled safely within. She bid Ascalaphus a fond farewell, promising to visit his orchard again, and made her way out from among the gnarled trees.

She would visit Hades later that day, perhaps, once the fruit was secreted out of the underworld.

As she walked along the craggy path back towards the gates of the underworld, her thoughts lingered on Hades and the secrets she had uncovered. She wondered if she would ever know him, layered as he was with millennia of history and heartbreak.

Lost in contemplation, a booming voice startled Persephone from her reverie. “Daughter! What brings you to these gloomy parts?”

Persephone looked up to see her father striding towards her, a smirk on his face. He was clearly drunk from the way he swayed.

“Father,” Persephone greeted him, schooling her features. “I was just admiring the sights of my uncle’s realm.” It wasn’t entirely a lie.

“Ah, my little Kore, ever the curious explorer,” Zeus chuckled, throwing an arm around her shoulders. The scent of ambrosia wafted off him. “Come, walk with me. Tell me of the goings-on in that quaint little shop of yours.”

Persephone held back a sigh, letting Zeus guide her along the path as he instead prattled on about the latest Olympian gossip instead. She hummed in the right places, her mind on the pomegranate in her bag. It was calling to her, more strongly than it had on her arrival.

“Father, I should go home” she tried interjecting.

“Nonsense!” Zeus waved a hand. “Plenty of time for that later. Now tell me,” he continued, “what’s all this I hear about you and Hades and a certain lake?”

Persephone froze, panic rising. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Zeus gave her a knowing look. “Come now, word spreads on Olympus. The Meliae were quite certain of it.” He elbowed her playfully. “Why else would you be down here? So, you and Hades, eh? Can’t say I’m surprised. He was always the dark, brooding type that made maidens swoon, even if he didn’t take advantage of it.”

“There’s nothing to tell, father.” Persephone’s cheeks burned at the crudeness of her father’s words.

“If you say so.” Zeus didn’t believe her. “Well, I think he’d be lucky to have you. You’d liven up this dreary place.”

Persephone shifted as Zeus continued speaking about her and Hades, his words teetering toward the inappropriate. As her father rambled on, she worried what would happen if word of her visits here reached her mother, Demeter.

“Father, please,” Persephone interjected, her voice strained. “There’s nothing untoward happening between Lord Hades and myself. We are acquaintances at best.”

Zeus waved a hand, nearly losing his balance. “Come now, no need to be shy!” His words were slurring. “Can’t blame my brother for taking an interest. Why, if Demeter wouldn’t cut off my balls I’d—”

“Father!” Persephone snapped, cheeks flaming in anger. She took a step back from his clinging arm, allowing him to stumble into an obsidian pillar. “You have had too much ambrosia. I think it’s best if I take my leave now.”

Zeus blinked. “What? But we were having such a lovely chat.” He reached for her again.

“I really should go, Father.”

“Father. Lady Persephone.”

Persephone thanked all that existed at the appearance of Aeacus. Perhaps there was some good in having thousands of half-siblings. As Zeus turned to greet Aeacus, Persephone discretely extricated herself from under her father’s heavy arm.

“I must be going now, Father,” she said, already moving away. “Lord Aeacus needs you for official business.”

Zeus made a noise of protest, but Aeacus cut in. “I’m afraid so, my lord. There is a matter requiring your urgent attention in Olympus. Hermes has sent for you.”

“Very well,” Zeus huffed, swaying as he drew himself up. “Attend to your duties, then. We shall continue our conversation later, daughter.”

“Until then.” Persephone gave a quick nod before hurrying away, not giving him the chance to stop her again. She could feel Aeacus’s sharp gaze on her back, but she didn’t turn.

Once she was back in the lush hills and streams of the Above World, Persephone allowed herself to breathe. Finding a quiet glade with aspen trees, she collapsed onto the grass.

Persephone reached into her bag, pulling out the pomegranate. She turned the fruit over in her hands, marvelling at the unblemished skin. Heat prickled at her cheeks, remembering Zeus’s words about her and Hades.

“There’s nothing between us,” she murmured to herself even as an unfamiliar swooping sensation took hold in her stomach. There were no physical intimacies between them.

She could call Hades a friend, nay, an acquaintance. A crush, certainly. “Not yet, anyway.”

Shaking her head, Persephone wrapped the pomegranate in a handkerchief before returning it to her bag. She would keep it tucked away safely, a reminder of her vow to Hades.

CHAPTER TWENTY- ONE

Days turned into weeks, the relentless pace of the Above World never slowing. Persephone trimmed and arranged flowers as she always had, but her thoughts were never far from that vivid fruit. Every time the shop door opened, she jumped, looking up with a mix of hope and fear.

Every night she'd stare at the fruit, lips brushing against the skin as she prepared to bite. Every time, she'd hesitate.

Why she hesitated, Persephone didn't know. Fear perhaps?

She half expected her father to retrieve the fruit, or one of Hades' allies. Or for the god himself to mention it when she went to visit him. But they never came. The gods remained silent. Olympus aloof and uncaring as ever. And so, with each passing day, Persephone's fear wilted.

In its place, curiosity grew. She wanted to know more about the world she'd stumbled into. She visited more often, exploring the shadowy lands, and uncovering its secrets; with Cerberus by her side. The inhabitants of the Underworld became familiar; she laughed with Ascalaphus over a drink of Stygian brew, debated philosophy with Charon during his breaks. Bringing baked goods to her new friends.

Hades himself was still an enigma, but she learned to read the subtleties in his tone, to understand the weight he carried. They talked amidst fields of asphodels and watched souls pass with quiet reverence for life's fleeting dance.

Lost in thought, Persephone found herself back at 'Blossoms of Elysium' one afternoon, hands buried in a mess of ivy and roses. The door chimed. Absorbed in her task, she didn't glance up.

"Welcome to Blossoms of Elysium. How may I help you?"

A soft snort answered her greeting. Frowning, Persephone looked down to find Cerberus before her, his tails thumping

against the wooden floorboards.

She burst into giggles. In his current mood, Cerberus was a shaggy St Bernard, complete with droopy eyes and tongues lolling out.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, as if expecting an answer. Cerberus merely wagged his tails harder.

She crouched down to greet him, scratching behind his ears as he nuzzled into her touch. Each head gave her a loving lick on the cheek, their tongues rough.

It wasn't unusual for Cerberus to drop by unannounced, but usually, it meant that either Hades or Hecate wanted something from her. Today, though, neither of them stood at the entry, waiting for her.

Persephone glanced towards the backroom as she heard her apprentices' voices approaching. While she adored Cerberus, his sudden appearance could raise questions or even panic among the mortals.

“Cerberus, I need you to try something for me,” she whispered, meeting all six of his soulful doggy eyes. “Can you take on a disguise, so the mortals don't get confused?”

To her surprise, Cerberus's form shimmered, his single body splitting into three identical dogs. Their shaggy black fur morphed to a tawny brown, floppy ears perking up. Each one regarded her with a lolling tongue and wagging tail, seeking her approval.



“Well, I suppose that works!” She gave each dog a good scratch in thanks.

The door chimed again. An elegant woman swept into the shop, already scanning the flower arrangements. One of Cerberus’s heads perked up, while the other two continued to squabble for Persephone’s attention.

“I’ll be right with you!” Persephone called over her shoulder even as she felt a cold nose nudging her hand. She rubbed the dog’s ears. “Be good, all right?”

Persephone approached the customer, recommending flowers she thought would appeal to the woman’s refined tastes. The customer settled on a display of white calla lilies and orchids. As Persephone explained their meanings, she kept one eye on the three dogs now exploring the shop. Two were

sniffing at the flowers, while the third made a beeline for a leafy potted fern.

“Ah, no Cerbi!” Persephone darted over in time to steer the mischievous dog away from digging into the soil. She led him back to the others with an affectionate sigh, glancing at the customer. “I’m so sorry. My new rescues are still in training.”

The woman smiled, charmed. “They’re darling. You’re so kind to take them in.”

As the woman talked about her own Yorkie, Persephone relaxed. She saw the customer out without further issue, but the next time the door opened, she wasn’t ready. Maeve staggered in, arms full of paper bags containing fresh sandwiches and salad. Her smile became alarm as two dogs came bounding up to her.

“Steady on!” Maeve exclaimed, teetering precariously.

Persephone sprang forward, catching Maeve before she fell. The dogs, oblivious to the commotion, wagged their tails and sat, waiting for a treat.

“Oh! Who are these beauties?”

“Sorry about that,” Persephone apologised with a nervous chuckle, grabbing the bags from Maeve’s grasp. “They’re a bit overexcited.”

As Persephone helped Maeve up and took the lunches, she scanned the shop. Only two dogs in view. Where was the third? Panic gripped her. The office—the pomegranate! Were they searching for the stolen fruit? Had Hades sent them? She made her apologies and hurried behind the counter.

The dog was sitting by the fridge, sniffing at something invisible but clearly tempting. When their eyes met, Persephone froze. His tail thumped against the floor, a hesitant beat.

“Oh no,” she whispered under her breath. If he sensed what lay hidden there...

“Afternoon Persephone!” One of her Saturday girls burst in. Seizing the opportunity, Persephone rifled through a drawer

and found a small bag of dog treats. Throwing to her employee, it diverted Cerberus' attention, who followed the bag with an intensity suited to a sniffer dog.

She quickly retrieved the pomegranate from the fridge, hurrying to the cold room where she nestled it amongst the herbal vials Hecate had given her. She left one of the vials ajar. Hopefully the potent scent would mask any lingering trace of the fruit.

Turning to leave, Persephone was faced with another pair of doggy eyes. Another Cerberus had appeared, peering out from behind the curtain. She fought to keep her shiver in check. Had he seen the fruit?

“Come on then,” she urged with feigned brightness, leading him back to re-join his counterparts in their playful masquerade among mortals.

Only to be greeted with chaos.

Muddy paw prints crisscrossed the polished wood floors. One of her employees, red-faced and breathless, chased after two of the dogs. Somehow a beagle had joined in.

“Careful!” she called, but her words were lost in the barking and clattering. Persephone rushed forward, sidestepping a fallen plant as she caught a flowerpot that threatened to topple.

Persephone groaned, lifting a hand to her lips to whistle. It echoed Hades' own call, a trick she'd learned during her visits to his domain. Instantly, all three dogs ceased their romping and spun to face her, their excitement replaced by rapt attention. The beagle was quickly scooped up and handed back to a customer.

Maeve stood to one side, arms crossed over her chest as she watched Persephone take control of the situation. “How did you do that?”

Without pause, Persephone motioned to the ground. “Sit.” The dogs obeyed, sitting in unison. Their tongues lolled out as they panted, eyes on her.

The shop was still, save for their breathing. Persephone sighed again and looked around. Pots were overturned, soil scattered, bouquets trampled. She shook her head and rolled up her sleeves. “Maeve, could you start by sweeping up this mess? And...”

“I can help with repotting these,” another employee offered, gesturing towards a group of uprooted plants.

Persephone nodded. “Thank you.” She knelt beside a fallen bouquet, picking it up with care. She turned to the three Cerberuses. “And you can stay and behave if you don’t want me to send you back to your daddy. No treats for you today.”

The dog gave a sad wag of his tail. She did not feel pity for him... she didn’t! Turning her head, Persephone forced herself not to give into the puppy dog eyes. Finding some blankets in the office, she laid them out in the corner of the room, telling the dogs to lie down. With several customers to fuss over them, the dogs settled.

If she asked Maeve to pick up some bones, well that was unrelated to the effectiveness of Cerberus’ pleading.

By the end of the day, Persephone was exhausted, leaning against the wall. Her arms hung limp by her sides, dirt and green stains on her fingers. It had been non-stop all day, finally slowing now that the evening was setting in and the last of her staff were going home. In this brief lull, she took a moment to breathe, the silence of the shop embracing her.

Cerberus lay at her feet, his three heads resting on each other and snuffling in slumber. Persephone closed her eyes, seeking solace in the quiet.

It felt like only seconds later when the bell above the door chimed once more. Sighing, she lifted her head, steeling herself to greet yet another customer. But it wasn’t a customer who entered. It was Hades.

His expression was frantic as he scanned the room. “Cerberus has disappeared. I can’t find him anywhere!”

Persephone arched an eyebrow at his tone. So flustered, so unlike him. She looked down at Cerberus, then back up at

Hades with a small smile.

Pointing down at Cerberus, Persephone saw how Hades' eyes lost the panic once he noticed his dog, safe and sound. With a flush to his ears, Hades coughed.

“My apologies for the mess,” he said. “I should not have let him wander into the mortal realm unattended. Not that he had permission.”

Persephone waved a hand. “No harm done. The shop was due a spring clean.”

“Nevertheless, thank you. I... uh, would you like to join me for drinks?” His ears were like a tomato now. “Tonight?”

Persephone blinked, taken aback by the sudden invitation. Her confusion must have shown because Hades quickly added, “I feel anytime we have interacted, it has been because of external forces, not our own choice. If you're free, that is. If not, I understand.”

She watched him shift from one foot to another—a stark contrast to his usually steadfast nature—and something inside her shifted too.

Persephone glanced between Hades and Cerberus, then released a breath she hadn't known she'd been holding. She got to her feet, muscles protesting from the long day. Cerberus snuffled, but didn't wake.

“Drinks sound lovely,” she said. “But only if you promise no more surprise visits from Cerberus—at least for a while.”

Hades let out a small chuckle, a sound so rare it made Persephone's heart flutter, and nodded in agreement.

“I promise,” he said, but the twinkle in his eye that suggested it might not be within his power to keep such an oath when it came to Cerberus's antics.

CHAPTER TWENTY- TWO

Why had he asked her that now? He hadn't planned for her saying 'yes'. Where did he take her? It had taken weeks of research to find that restaurant, and now he... Hades could feel his breath quickening at the thought.

"I know just the place." Persephone took his arm, her touch steadying his heart. "Shall we?"

She led him out the door into the bustling mortal street, the din of traffic and crowds pressing in on Hades's senses. He tensed, unaccustomed to venturing beyond the Underworld without good cause.

But Persephone's hand on his arm kept him anchored. She guided him to a cosy establishment, its aged brick exterior draped in coloured cloths. Inside, the dark wood interior and soft lighting reminded Hades of his own palace.

Hades hovered by the wine bar entrance, eyes roving over the room. He picked up no immediate danger, but he'd learned not to trust the more unsavoury mortals. Judging souls for an eternity exposed him to the very worst of mankind. And those who were just plain seedy.

His attention was drawn to a group of men in their forties, already drunk despite the early hour. They whistled at a passing patron. Hades frowned. He was used to this sort of behaviour from teenagers (or Zeus), but men their age should know better.

Hades turned to look for Persephone and caught sight of his reflection in the bar's window. His godly appearance remained the same, but the mortal glamour aged. Silver streaked through his hair, lines forming on his face. He looked more their age than Persephone's.

The thought gave him pause. Maybe he should change his appearance, take on a younger look to fit in better. No. Hades

dismissed the idea. That was Aphrodite's method, not his. Persephone had liked him as he was. If she would lose interest upon further acquaintance, better to find out now.

The doubt lingered as Hades joined Persephone at the bar, catching the tail end of a conversation that made his neck prickle. The bartender, a bold woman with a smirk, was leaning on the counter, watching him with interest.

"So, who's the daddy?" she asked, looking Hades up and down.

Persephone let out a peal of laughter. "Oh no, he's not my father. He's my uncle."

Hades' eyes widened. Uncle? Even he knew mortals viewed blood relatives as taboo. He could feel the bartender's gaze raking over him, her disbelief plain as day. Her smirk suggested she wasn't buying Persephone's story for a second.

"Uncle, eh?" The bartender's chuckle was rich with innuendo. "Well, I suppose family gatherings must be quite interesting."

Persephone gave her a sly wink before turning to Hades with a mischievous smile. He bristled at their shared joke at his expense, but couldn't quite summon any real annoyance at Persephone's obvious mirth.

"Yes," he said with strained cordiality. "Quite."

The bartender gave Hades another once-over before shaking her head and moving off to attend to other patrons. Hades exhaled, grateful for her departure. The warmth in his cheeks lingered uncomfortably. He wasn't accustomed to being the subject of such banter or scrutiny outside of Zeus.

Persephone was suppressing another fit of laughter. It was clear she found their little deception far more entertaining than he did.

"I don't understand why you found it necessary to tell her the truth," Hades said once they had moved away from the bar. "Even if it is not the same for us as it is mortals."

“I... well, the alternative wasn’t much more, well...” She flushed.

Hades’ brows knitted together in a perplexed frown. “I cannot see the humour in your deception, Persephone. Why introduce me as your uncle if not to elicit uncomfortable questions?”

Persephone’s cheeks were still tinged with the flush of suppressed laughter, her eyes dancing with mirth. “It’s just... well, you see, in the mortal realm, there’s this term—sugar daddy.” She bit her lip, trying to gauge his reaction.

“Sugar... daddy?” Hades repeated the foreign phrase, rolling the words over his tongue like unfamiliar fruit. “Explain.”

“It’s what some young women call an older man when he provides for them financially in, uh, exchange for certain... company.” Persephone’s explanation trailed off into an awkward mumble, and she avoided his gaze. “There’s the female equivalent too, Aphrodite is a sugar mummy to lots of the locals, supporting their studies.”

Hades’ mind whirred as he processed this new information. The concept was familiar to him. He was certain Zeus had given patronages to young mortals in such a fashion. But the casualness with which they discussed it, and the implication that he might be involved in such a transaction, was unsettling.

“So, this bartender assumed that I...” Hades struggled to finish the sentence.

Persephone nodded, a rueful smile playing on her lips. “That you were looking after me in more ways than one.”

A silence stretched between them, filled only by the low hum of conversation and clinking glasses around the bar. Hades sipped his wine, allowing its rich flavour to distract him from the absurdity of the situation.

“I see,” he said at last, his voice measured. “And this charade amused you?”

“I’m sorry,” she replied, her expression sobering as she sensed his discomfort. “I didn’t mean to make light of it, it

was just easier to do so than explain and extend the awkwardness. We will never cross paths again, after all. Mortals tend to not enjoy being corrected.”

“Let us hope we can avoid such misunderstandings in the future.”

Persephone reached out tentatively and touched his arm. “I didn’t intend to make a joke at your expense. I didn’t realise you were unaware of the term.”

“No harm done.”

Hades looked around for somewhere quiet to sit, away from the loud laughter and talk that filled the wine bar. The residual tension from their earlier run-in with the bartender had eased, but he wanted some privacy. As he led Persephone through the tables, he noticed the group of drunken men they had passed earlier were now leering at Persephone.

“Give us a smile, love.” One called out. Hades wanted to smite the fool. His hand tightened on Persephone’s arm.

Before he could draw forth his powers and send the mortal to Tartarus, Persephone stopped him with a subtle shake of her head. Her eyes sparkled with a mischievous glint that caught him off guard. “Trust me,” she mouthed.

Hades observed as a man went to grab his glass, only for it to slip out of his hand. Then he saw it. A thin vine slithered across the table, wrapping around the glass. With a swift motion, it pushed the glass over, spilling the drink onto the man.

The table devolved into chaos as the men blamed each other. None noticed the retreating vine. Hades fought down a smile at her cheek as they walked away from the scene.

“That was unnecessary...”

Persephone glanced up at him with wide-eyed innocence. “I do not know what you mean.”

“I’m sure.”

Hades directed Persephone to a small booth at the back of the wine bar. They settled into the cracked leather seats

opposite each other, her knee knocking against his under the table. Hades stiffened at the contact. When she settled, shifting, her leg brushed against his once more. Hades took a sip before speaking.

“I admit, I find myself curious what the goddess of spring might wish for her future.”

Persephone toyed with the stem of her glass, a small furrow forming between her brows. He wanted to reach out and touch it, stroking it away.

“Now the mortals don’t give us such a strict remit, I wish to have the freedom to live life on my own terms,” she said after a moment’s consideration.

Hades raised an eyebrow. “Without obligation or duty?”

“Oh, I didn’t say that,” Persephone laughed. “Just the ability to make my own choices. Grow my business here in the mortal realm, travel to far-off places, experience new things.” Her voice took on a wistful quality that made Hades’ chest tighten.

“And companionship?” He kept his tone light, despite the sudden racing of his pulse. “Surely you do not envision facing eternity alone.”

A pretty flush stained Persephone’s cheeks at the implied question. She traced a finger around the rim of her glass, contemplating.

“No,” she said finally. “Not alone. Many see me as a means to an end. A political alliance, a prize. I’m just glad father hasn’t married me off like he did Aphrodite.” Her lips twisted.

“I guess I dream of someone who sees me, not my title or job. What about you, Lord Hades? What does the future hold for the ‘King of the Underworld?’”

Hades paused. He had never considered her personal aspirations, despite having asked Persephone the question himself. His own goals had always been about keeping order and justice, looking after the souls in his care. But her words struck a chord, awakening desires he hadn’t felt in centuries.

“Much the same as you, I imagine,” he said. “Fulfilling my duties, ensuring the balance between life and death. But not in solitude.”

Hades swirled the wine in his glass, choosing his next words with care. “I once thought they predetermined my role to be solitary. But recent events have reminded me that even Death need not face alone.”

Her lips quirked, and he held his breath. The surrounding bar seemed to fade, leaving just the two of them.

Persephone leant forward, taking his hand, but a drunken shout shattered the moment. Hades blinked, pulling back as the outside world rushed in. Persephone gave him a wry smile.

Glaring at the patrons, Hades tensed as Aeacus made his way through the crowded bar. It was the first time Hades had ever seen the other god outside of the underworld. The god’s dour expression told him this was no casual visit. Aeacus hesitated upon reaching their table, his gaze flicking to Persephone.

“I apologise for the interruption, my lord,” he began. “But there is an urgent matter requiring your attention in the Underworld.”

Hades suppressed a scowl. “I believe Hecate declared you were more than capable of handling my absence. Has her smirk turned to cowardliness as I do not see her confessing her errors to my face?”

Persephone slid out of the booth. “I should let you attend to business.”

“No, please.” Hades raised a hand to forestall her. “Whatever the issue, I’m sure it will not detain me for long.” He shot Aeacus a pointed look. “Proceed.”

“There was an unexpected surge of souls requiring judgement. The influx has overwhelmed the normal process. Hecate bade me inform you right away.”

Hades sighed, biting back his irritation. This was why he hated leaving the Underworld unguarded. But Hecate was more than capable of managing in his absence. Aeacus was

probably just worried about her management style, rather than there being a genuine issue. Still, he'd have to see for himself.

“Very well,” Hades said after a moment's consideration. “Please inform Hecate I shall return to assess the situation.” He turned to Persephone with an apologetic look. “My dear, I'm afraid I must cut our evening short.”

“Don't worry about it. Will you... allow me to come with you?” At his raised eyebrow, she hurried to explain. “Just until you've fixed it, of course. I admit, I am rather curious to see more of your domain than just Cerberus.”

Hades hesitated. Would it be rude to ask it of her? He could use the company, and having Persephone with him would ease the irritation of ending their evening. If they played their cards right, they might resume where they left off.

If you want to.” He relented. The smile she gave him sent a strange lurching sensation through his chest. He gestured, and his chariot appeared, reinforcing the spell to allow a living goddess through. If Aeacus had any issue with bringing Persephone, he didn't voice it.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The chariot pushed through the portal into the Underworld, Aeacus and Persephone either side of him. Hades was hit by an onslaught of voices, bringing with it a headache.

The crossroads were in chaos - instead of the usual orderly lines of shades waiting to cross into the Lethe, there was now a milling, shouting crowd.

“I’ve been here for years!” one elderly man shouted. “It’s my turn to cross, damnit!”

“No cuts!” A woman pushed through the crowd, a wailing baby in her arms. “My son needs peace!”

Hades rubbed his temples, trying to think over the noise. This was more than an inconvenience. The spirits had to cross the Lethe to move on. Without Cerberus at the gates, there was no structure, no movement. The spirits were stuck, and news of the disruption would soon reach his siblings above. Zeus would be mocking, Hera condescending. Even Poseidon would laugh at him for losing control.

“What can I do to help?”

Persephone looked up at him, her soft face twisted with distress as she took the scene in.

“First, we need to separate them into groups,” he straightened up. Mortals feared him, but shades were different - he had mastery here. His will was absolute. Gently, he removed Persephone’s hand.

“We must comfort those recently deceased,” he told her. “The ones waiting to reincarnate need to line up, and those going to Elysium or the Asphodel Meadows should assemble near the gates.”

“You handle the gates and I’ll organise the groups.” She squared her delicate shoulders, ready to take command.

Hades sighed, looking out at the busy crossroads, shades wandering without Cerberus to keep them in line.

“How did things deteriorate so quickly?”

Aeacus, who shuffled his feet.

“Well, my lord, the Fates shifted the passages of time again while you were away,” Aeacus began. “So, what was a few hours above became a decade here below.”

Hades held up a hand. “I don’t want to know more.”

Together they approached the crossroads, where Persephone was already moving amongst the shades. Hades watched her soothe their fears with gentle words as she gathered the souls together.

“Hades?”

“Oh, yes. Lead on.”

As Persephone tended to the shades, Hades reset the crossroads’ magical boundaries, thrown off by Cerberus being missing. The gates and paths shifted back to where they should be.

“Has Cerberus returned?”

“Four years ago, yes. Only he—well, it was easier to not have him around.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Hades whistled sharply to summon his hound. Only when the dog bounded up to the river, Hades realised that the dog couldn’t settle on one form. The poor thing kept changing breeds as he tried to herd shades, apologise to Hades, and solicit pets from Persephone, all at once.

Hecate watched, not bothering to hide her amusement. Hades glared at her, but even he was finding it hard to keep a straight face as a yapping Chihuahua cross morphed into a bounding Great Dane, knocking over shades.

“There now. Let’s keep the passage clear for newcomers,” Persephone said to an elderly couple clutching each other. She

gave them a kind smile, guiding them towards the Asphodel Meadows gates.

Another young shade, a boy, stood at her side, looking miserable and adrift. “You’ll see your mother soon,” Persephone assured him, taking his hand. “Just wait here with the other Elysium-bound.”

A loud bark came, and Hades returned his attention to Cerberus. The paths had righted themselves, but Cerberus was now bounding around, impeding the spirits rather than herding them.

“Down, boy,” Hades ordered as his hound bowled into a line of shades, nearly toppling them. But at Hades’ sharp tone, Cerberus only yelped and changed form again. His three heads mewled in harmony as kittens bewildered by their oversized paws. Hades pressed two fingers to the furrow between his brows.

“Cerberus!” Persephone rushed over and knelt down in the dirt. “It’s okay, we know you’re a good boy,” she cooed. She petted each kitten as Cerberus nuzzled her, his tension easing as he gave her a hesitant lick. “You’re such a good boy. Don’t be anxious. That’s better now, isn’t it?”

The kittens mewed as Persephone stood, beckoning for Cerberus to follow her. “Shall we help sort the new arrivals next?” she smiled back at him, heading to the gates. Cerberus trailed alongside her.

And Hades followed, no less devoted.

The Lethe was overcrowded, the souls unable to partake of its waters. Memories were retained, some traumatic enough to cause the spirits distress even after crossing over.

Approaching the riverbank, Lethe emerged from the waters, looking distressed. Before the river spirit could start apologising, Hades held up a hand.

“Peace, Lethe. I know this is not your fault. But we need your waters to wash clean these souls.”

“There are so many shades lining the banks, my lord. There is no space for them to come in and submerge. And the

congestion has stirred up sediment. My waters run murky.”

The inability of the souls to let go of their mortal lives made it harder for Aeacus to organise them. Hades would have to widen the Lethe to clear the backlog. It was no small feat, not with the sheer number of souls still trudging along the paths from the crossroads.

“I’ll clear the blockage myself.” Hades closed his eyes and altered the landscape of his domain. A pool formed within the Lethe, providing a place for souls to stay while the water flowed.

Hades moved through the crowd of shades, and they parted for him. The shades’ lives echoed around them, a cacophony against his senses.

“You will all find peace. But decorum first, I implore you.”

The shades shuffled into line, lining the river’s banks. Hades glanced over to Persephone, who had joined Aeacus in managing the queue. Her gentle words and soft touches soothed even the angriest spirits. She met his eye and gave a brief nod before returning to her task.

Lethe worked tirelessly to settle her waters, murmuring apologies and spells that cleared the murk until they ran clear again. Hades observed her efforts with a nod.

Hecate emerged from a shadow near the gates. “The crossroads are settling. Your presence here has reassured them.”

With each soul that dipped into Lethe and emerged, clean and ready for either rebirth or final rest, Hades felt a little more tension ease out of him. The Underworld was recovering from its upheaval.

Persephone stayed with the ones who paused at the water’s edge, speaking softly. Just being near her seemed to give them strength. She didn’t just ease their passing; she gave these shades something he never could. A final touch of life before they surrendered it for good. As the last of the disoriented shades entered Lethe’s waters under Aeacus’ watchful eye, a sense of normalcy returned to the Underworld.

“Thank you,” Hades said to Persephone as she joined him by Lethe’s bank. Her smile was tired, but genuine.

“There is no need for thanks. We did what needed doing.”

As Cerberus settled back into his usual vigilant self beside them, the river Lethe flowed once more. Shades drank from her waters and let go of their earthly ties with peaceful sighs before moving on.

“We should reconvene. I will meet you both back in the palace.” Hades watched Hecate and Aeacus depart, fading into the shadows of the realm. He was now alone with Persephone.

Hades cleared his throat. There was more he wished to say, though the words did not come easily. “I was hoping...that is, if you are amenable...you might join me for dinner. Next week. There is something that I would like to show you.”

Persephone’s eyes lit up. “I would be delighted.”

Relief washed over him, though Hades simply nodded. “Excellent. I will send word with the details.” He turned to go, hesitating as if there was something more. But no further words came, so with an awkward half-bow, he took his leave.

As he walked away, a whisper carried on the winds.

“Lord Hades.”

Before him stood a shrouded figure, made of pure water; the embodiment of the river Styx. Her eyes gleamed bright. Hades could feel her powers wash over him, sinking through his flesh into his core.

“Yes?”

“I release you of your vow.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

One Week Later

Today was the day.

Persephone hummed to herself as she put together the latest order, arranging roses and lilies. Only a few hours until their first official date.

A week had passed since their last evening in the Underworld, where Hades had asked her to dinner. Now, as the day went on, she felt giddy with anticipation, unable to concentrate on anything else.

“You seem cheerful today,” Maeve remarked, watching Persephone dance around the shop.

Persephone grinned. “Hades is having me over for dinner.”

Maeve’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “An actual date? Not another of your ‘not-dates’ where you both beat around the bush and get nowhere?”

A faint blush coloured Persephone’s cheeks.

“A real date. I can’t stop thinking about it.” Persephone confessed, brushing back a loose curl from her face, “Every time we meet, I come alive. I go away and I yearn for more.”

“He’s that good?”

“Oh! No, I don’t mean like that. Hades jumps every time his leg brushes against mine. But I can feel it, that something big is going to happen. He sent details last night. He’s cooking, can you believe it? So, it has to mean something.”

“Why are you working? You need to get ready!” Maeve clapped her hands. “We’re closing up now!”

They raced to tidy up the shop, closing the shutters and throwing away any waste, rejuvenating any flowers that had wilted slightly during the day.

Maeve waited for her, putting together a floral wreath for her. With a grin, Persephone spun, her outfit shifting into something more suitable for the date.

“You look radiant,” Maeve said. “Hades won’t know what hit him.”

Persephone smoothed down her chiton, fingers trailing over the silk. It was simple yet elegant, dyed in an ombre that went from the sunny skies of the mortal realm to the deep shades that mirrored the Underworld’s starless skies. “Thank you. You’re an angel, Maeve. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“You’ve done the same for me.” As Maeve continued to style her hair, Persephone listened to her share the latest encounter with Emma.

“So, you’ve asked her out again?” Persephone asked, meeting Maeve’s gaze in the mirror.

Maeve’s cheeks flushed a soft pink under her freckles. “Well, sort of,” she confessed. “I told her about a food festival that’s happening next week, and she said she’d love to go.”

Persephone was about to ask about it when a gust of wind swept through the shop. Petals fluttered in the air and the scent of pollen intensified. The bell above the door tinkled as Hermes strode into the backroom, his winged sandals glinting in the last light of the day.

“Hermes,” Persephone stood up to greet him. “Have all the gods made it their mission to invade my workspace without prior permission?”

“Perse,” he replied with a cocky grin that felt somewhat off-kilter. “How wonderful to see you. You look ravishing.”

“You must be tired from your journey. Would you like something to drink?” She said through gritted teeth.

“A cup of nectar would be delightful.”

Persephone turned to Maeve, who was staring at Hermes’ shoes. “Maeve, could you—”

Before she could finish, Hermes flicked his wrist and Maeve slumped into the nearest chair.

Persephone rushed to her friend, checking her vitals. Breathing steady, heartbeat normal. Persephone pulled her eyelid open. Asleep, not unconscious.

“What did you do that for?”

“This is no conversation for mortals.”

The casual dismissal of Maeve’s existence made Persephone see red. Just because she was mortal didn’t mean she was disposable. Persephone strode up to Hermes, jabbing her finger into his chest.

“Maeve is not just some prop you can move around as you please. Tell me your message then get the hell out.”

“You know, Perse. If you’re looking for divine company, I’m always free for a dabble.”

Persephone stared at him, gobsmacked. The messenger god was almost as renowned as her father for his flirtations, but she hadn’t expected him to be so forward with her, even though they had never shared the slightest flirtation.

“I’m quite alright, thank you.”

Hermes chuckled. “You’re always so serious, Persephone.”

Persephone bit her tongue, forcing herself to stay calm. Hermes was good at getting under people’s skin, and she refused to give him the satisfaction.

“Did you come here just to irritate me, Hermes?” she asked. “Or is there an actual reason for your visit? I have plans.”

“Yes, I’ve heard. It’s all the talk in Olympus.”

“Then go back and gossip and leave me alone.”

“I came here on Zeus’ orders.”

“What does father want?”

“Your mother has been around Mount Olympus frequently, barraging him with complaints on your journeys.”

“It’s none of her business.” She’d known her mother wouldn’t approve of her and Hades, but she hadn’t expected Demeter involving Zeus. “Father’s already made it clear he’s all for me ‘getting some’. Has he changed his mind?”

Hermes shrugged “He said he doesn’t want to get involved if he can help it. It’s your life.”

Persephone sighed in relief.

“Your mother does have a point.”

“What business of yours is it?”

“No offence, but your choice in men leaves something to be questioned. Hades is, well, Hades. Not exactly the most fun out there.”

Persephone forced herself to remain calm. She’d heard this argument before. From Demeter, from Aphrodite, even from Hades himself.

“I am aware of our differences, Hermes,” she said. “Everyone feels the need to remind me of them, as if I forget my wits the moment I lay eyes on him.”

“You know, Perse,” Hermes’ voice cut through the air, playful, but with an edge she didn’t appreciate. “If you’re thinking of alternatives, I wouldn’t be such a terrible option.”

Persephone’s eyebrows shot up. She couldn’t believe this. She’d thought he was joking. “You, Hermes?”

“I could offer you the world, Persephone. The entire cosmos at your fingertips. Flight whenever and wherever you desire.”

“Get out, Hermes.”

“Oh. come now, Persephone. I was only—”

“No.” She cut him off, meeting his gaze. “I’ve entertained your impertinence for long enough.” She jerked her head towards the door. “Buzz off.”

Hermes rose, his easy manner replaced by an unfamiliar seriousness. He spoke, then stopped. “Look, before you get

yourself in a tizz, you should know. Demeter has entered the Underworld.”

“What? Hades wouldn’t allow—”

“He hasn’t.”

She felt like someone had pulled the rug out from under her. Her mother had never been one for boundaries, but this was a new low.

“Why would she?” Persephone trailed off, unable to finish her sentence as she grappled with the implications of her mother’s audacity.

“I thought you should know,” Hermes said, his gaze softening. He moved towards the door, his winged sandals stirring up a whirlwind of petals.

Persephone hurried to Maeve’s side as soon as Hermes departed, kneeling by her. She brushed away the stray strands of hair from her face. Her friend looked peaceful in sleep. “I’m sorry,” Persephone whispered. “You’ll be fine, I promise.”

Maeve shifted but didn’t wake. Content that Hermes hadn’t hurt her friend, Persephone straightened. She needed to find her mother or do something—anything—to stop the disaster she could see coming.

The room felt stifling and claustrophobic. Persephone gripped her arms, her nails digging into her skin as she tried to ground herself.

Her powers, already heightened from the conversation with Hermes, grew out of control, the flowers around her wilting and dying. She stumbled amongst the shelves, knocking over vases and sending petals flying as she hunted for the vial of smelling salts Hecate had given her. She sniffed it, the sharp scent of ammonia helping to ground her, but it wasn’t enough. She needed something more.

She needed something... Persephone’s gaze fell on the pomegranate at the back of her hiding space. Her breath hitched.

She reached for the fruit, her fingers brushing against the cold, smooth skin. Her mind flashed back to the Underworld, to the pomegranate orchard. To the warnings Hades and the guardian had given her. She'd promised him she wouldn't eat from the tree. But this was different, wasn't it? She wasn't going to eat it. Just... touch it. She needed to feel something. Her fingers closed around the pomegranate, and she pulled it out, cradling it to her chest. The fruit was cold, and she could feel the weight of the seeds inside. Her thumb brushed against the skin, and she felt the sharpness of the fruit's edges. It was real. It was grounding.

Persephone swallowed. If she ate the seeds, she would somehow be bound to the Underworld. To Hades. Forever. But it would also get her mother off her back. And she wanted to be with Hades. But not like this. Not under duress.

She clutched the pomegranate to her chest, feeling the weight of the decision she was about to make. She needed time to think. She didn't have that luxury.

With deliberate care, Persephone took her pruning scissors and carved a hole into the fruit. She raised the pomegranate to her lips and poured the seeds into her mouth. The tart seeds burst as she bit down, flooding her senses.

The juice trickled down her chin, rich and vibrant like blood.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Hades glared at the wheel of ambrosial cheese, holding a ruler out as he marked where each cut would go.

“If you’re going to clatter around and fret, take the day off.” He grumbled at the skeletal servants watching from the corner of the room. They scattered aside, moving their hovering to somewhere further away.

Hades smiled. Even now, they still feared him. But there was no malice in it. A healthy respect. Like him, the inhabitants of the Underworld were creatures of routine. The change disturbed him enough, and he was causing it.

Their lord in the kitchen? Unheard of.

Cerberus bounded into the room, tails wagging. He nudged Hades’ hand with one of his massive heads, sending the plate of cheese skidding across the counter.

“Down, boy,” Hades chided, scratching the hound behind his ears. “We have a guest this evening. You must mind your manners.”

Cerberus whined, settling back on his haunches. His dark eyes were alert, his gaze fixed upon the platter of meats nearby.

Hades shook his head. “Very well. But just a taste.”

He offered Cerberus a piece of the roast boar. Cerberus took it, all three heads tugging at the meat. As he did so, Hades continued to serve their dinner with the food of this world. Alongside the ambrosial cheese, there were plump fruits from mortal realm and freshly baked loaves of wheat bread.

It had to be perfect. His gaze lingered on each item he’d selected for Persephone: olives from her favourite grove in

Greece; figs she'd once mentioned she enjoyed; honey as sweet as her smile.

“Please take these to the garden.” He instructed the shades.

Preparations done, Hades leaned back and surveyed his work. His thoughts turned to Persephone.

It was true. Persephone's presence had affected him. He had to tell her, to confess his past and admit the dark and light that mingled within Persephone.

He could not hide his adoration.

“No, I will not be turned away!” A voice screeched through the halls.

Hades sighed; there was only one deity who dared cause such a disturbance in his realm.

“Demeter.” Hades turned, stalking down the corridors to his throne room, summoning his sword. He'd known this was coming. Demeter wouldn't let her daughter's visits go unaddressed forever. “Let her in,” he instructed the nearest servant. The shade disappeared in a gust of chilling wind.

Once alone, Hades groaned, slumping in his seat. Meetings with Demeter were always so tense, her biting words and frosty attitude unwarranted, even with their history. But he felt the need to let her in, to make amends, if only for Persephone's sake. Reluctantly he left his sword to the side.

Hades leant against his throne, the cold, black stone against his back, the chill seeping through his tunic, grounding him. He kept his eyes on the entrance to the Throne Room, watching Demeter storm in. The air crackled with her anger.

“You! You've set your sights on my innocent daughter, set to ruin her.”

Hades gripped the arms of his throne. “Compose yourself. You are a guest here.”

“A guest? You intend to hold my daughter captive in this gloomy abyss and call me a guest?”

“I have not forced Persephone into my realm, nor will I,” Hades rose from his throne. “She is free to come and go as she pleases.”

“Free? With you lurking, waiting to ensnare her in your web of lies and false promises?”

“I’ve made no false promises. We’ve both been perfectly honourable.”

“Don’t play coy with me, brother. I know gods, always seeking more. Admit it. You only want my innocent Persephone to warm your cold bed!”

Hades recoiled. He kept his voice low and steady. “You go too far. I am not Zeus. Nor am I the villain you imagine.”

Demeter opened her mouth to retort.

“Enough. You will not goad me into an argument. If you’ve come only to hurl insults, be on your way.”

He stepped towards Demeter. She tensed but did not retreat.

“Then what do you want with my daughter? You don’t expect me to believe you simply want to converse with her?”

“I enjoy Persephone’s company. She is insightful and engaging. We have conversations I find enlightening.”

“I wasn’t born yesterday, Hades. I understand the desires of men.”

“I don’t deny my attraction. I’m not blind. But I haven’t laid a finger on her without her permission.”

“Her consent or not, a goddess of life has no business cavorting in this bleak abyss with death himself!”

Indignation sparked, and along with it the desire to call upon the ‘bleak abyss’. He forced it down. This wasn’t about him, or his pride. This was about Persephone.

“Persephone chooses to be here with me. I won’t take that autonomy away from her or belittle her judgement.”

“Agency or not, it ends now. She is my daughter, bound to



me and the world above. You will relinquish this twisted fascination with her.”

“Persephone can make her own choices.”

“You dare defy me? I decide who Persephone associates with, not you.”

“Neither of us decide that. Persephone is not yours to command or contain, like one of your blossoms. She is a goddess, free to choose as she sees fit. Demeter, your anger blinds you. Have you listened to a word I’ve said?”

It was clear she hadn’t. Vines had begun to creep from her legs across the stone floors towards him. Unlike Persephone’s blooms (which thankfully were absent in this chamber), these were dark, prickly, and intent on hurting him.

“I won’t let you poison her mind and drain her life-force in this abyss. Zeus may be content to forget your sins, but I am not.”

“You know not what you talk about.”

“Oh, I do, brother mine. I remember what happened to Leuce, what you did to her. I will not have my daughter stolen away here for eternity!”

Demeter's words echoed through the hall. Hades clenched his fists as a vine reached him, crumbling it to dust.

"That was different."

"Different?" Demeter laughed. "You took her from her life and brought her here! She withered under your care until there was nothing! She died in this place, away from sunlight and life. Persephone wouldn't even have the escape of death!"

"You go too far. Leuce's fate was a tragedy," Hades said. "One I have atoned for centuries. But do not think to compare her to Persephone. They are as different as night and day."

"Night and day. How apt for you, lurking in eternal darkness, to covet a being of light."

"Your bias is clouding your judgement. Persephone is more than you give her credit for. She views this place differently to you."

"And how does she see you, I wonder? Does she know of your past? Your proclivities?"

"She knows me as I am, not as you claim me to be," Hades said. "I have never lied to her or evaded a direct question."

"Then maybe you should confess instead of hiding behind pretty words to keep her in the dark. I will tell her everything – you mark my words, she'll despise you."

With that, Demeter stormed out of the Throne Room, her skirts swishing and the heavy doors slammed shut behind her.

Hades blinked at the space Demeter had occupied. He could barely remember the excitement and hope he'd felt when preparing for Persephone's visit, only a mounting sense of unease.

Had he been fooling himself all along?

Only he remembered the sacrifices, the arrangements Persephone had put on his altars.

He remembered Persephone putting flowers in his hair, her delicate fingers threading the stems. She would talk to him as

she did it, her voice soft and kind, explaining the significance of each blossom.

He saw her kneeling before his shrines, placing bloody hearts in offering to him.

She left flowers in his home. Their scent lingered long after she was gone. This wasn't pity. It was her way of showing she saw past his fears and insecurities.

No. He had to move forward, to reassure her of how he felt.

He had to allow himself this chance at love.

CHAPTER TWENTY- SIX

The Underworld loomed before Persephone, more vibrant than she had ever seen. A pulsing energy thrummed beneath the ground, as though it acknowledged her and was glad she was back. As if it were adjusting itself. She could feel the earth straining to push up, strange buds bursting from the soil.

She felt the energy. The gentle coolness against her skin, not cold but soothing.

She could hear the lingering thoughts of each shade she passed, remnants of their lives. A beautiful waterfall, running through fields, a brother lost, a baby born. All washed over, and she relished in them, even the darkest. They were lives lived in a wonderful fashion.

Caught in the thoughts, Persephone was halfway through the palace when she noticed that the shades who usually slipped through the shadows were moving jerkily, looking around as if waiting for something to come.

Persephone stopped before one. “What’s wrong?”

The shade hesitated, wavering like smoke.

“Has something happened?”

“An intruder, my lady,” a faint female voice tickled the back of her ear. “One of great power, who swept past all defences. She demanded an audience with our king.”

“What did she require of Lord Hades?”

“I do not know, my lady. Your name was mentioned frequently, however. The intruder was displeased.”

Displeased was probably an understatement if she knew her mother. The knot in Persephone’s stomach tightened as she imagined Demeter storming through Hades’ realm, disrupting its peace with her anger.

“Did you hear anything else?”

The shade shook her head. “I was not privy to the conversation. They ushered her into the palace.”

“Is she still here?”

“No, my lady. She left with the same chaos by which she entered. Our lord has refused to allow anyone in his presence since then.”

“Thank you.”

That wasn't promising. Unwilling to take any risks that Hades was hiding, Persephone pressed her fingertips to her lips and whistled, replicating the same deep, eerie noise Hades did. It reverberated around the halls until she heard a faint scraping sound, followed by a deep rumble. Cerberus burst into view, scrambling on the floor as he slid to her.

“Good boy.” She patted his head as he nudged her hand. Persephone knelt down and buried her fingers in his thick fur. “I need your help, Cerberus. Can you take me to your daddy? Can you take me to Hades?”

At the mention of his master's name, Cerberus perked up, nudging her cheek. Once he was satisfied with her attention, he turned and loped off down the halls.

They continued through silent halls until Cerberus stopped at an ornate door etched with depictions of souls being judged before a throne. He whined, looking back at Persephone.

“Thank you, Cerberus. Wait for me here.”

The hound settled on his haunches as Persephone nudged open the door.

Hades, god of the Underworld, normally so composed and controlled, was pacing back and. His dark robes swirled around him, a scowl marring his otherwise smooth features. He was lost in thought, unaware that the door had opened.

She watched him for a moment, her heart twisting at the sight of his distress. Giving him a moment to collect himself, she moved back, retracing her footsteps, but louder this time.

As she passed into the room, Hades had straightened, trying for a casual smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Persephone. I didn't expect you so soon. I'm not ready. I, I had planned to—dinner isn't ready."

"I can come back later?" She replied with a wry grin, remembering their meeting in her shop, what felt like eons ago.

"No, no, I didn't mean it like that." He sighed, brushing his hair from his eyes. "I had hoped to compose myself. You deserve bet—"

She refused to let him finish that sentence. Striding forward, she grabbed Hades by the edges of his chiton, pulling him down to meet her gaze.

"Hades," she said. "I know mother was here. Whatever she said, it's untrue. She means well, but her gaze is too narrow. I deserve nothing from existing. I want you, Hades. I want to be with you and to spend time here and—"

"It is easy to say that in the protection of solitude, but in the bright light of day—"

"I will declare it from the rooftops." She attempted to inject humour by adding, "provided it isn't raining, then maybe just from the doorway of my shop!"

"I shall keep an umbrella ready to shelter you."

Up close, she could see every micro expression that flickered across Hades' face, the way the tense frown eased, and his eyes softened, warm browns showing within his gaze. She could feel his breath on her lips. Before she could lean in, press a kiss to his mouth, Hades straightened, holding out an arm for her to take.

"I have something to show you." He shifted his weight from foot to foot as he spoke, his breath ragged.

Persephone took his arm, moving close into his side as Hades led her down a series of unfamiliar hallways. Cerberus padded along merrily.

“You look beautiful today, Persephone. The dress and,” he gestured to her hair, “hair, have you done something different with it?”

“Maeve works wonders.”

“No, I mean... it looks darker?”

Persephone checked her reflection in the hallway mirror. He was right; her golden curls were darker now, with streaks of caramel. It fitted in better with the Underworld.

“Maybe it’s the lighting?” She shrugged. “I’ve never been one for glammers, but I don’t dislike this.”

“It suits you.” Hades stopped at a door etched with delicate floral patterns. “We’re here.”

He opened the door to reveal an enchanted garden unlike any she had seen before. It was impressive and beautiful in its own right. Despite the lack of natural sunlight, it was teeming with life. Luminescent fungi illuminated the entire area, casting the area in a soft blue and purple glow.

The tug she had been feeling since entering the Underworld tightened, pulling her forward. She explored, Hades and Cerberus trailing behind.

A brook meandered through the garden, its crystal-clear water glimmering under the unearthly light. It sang a soft lullaby as it flowed, a soothing sound that made the whole place feel even more magical.

The garden wasn’t just fungi and water, though. Shadows flitted around the space, dancing in the light. They seemed to be part of the garden itself, shifting as if choreographed.

At the heart of it all was a picnic blanket spread out on a lush patch of moss, filled with luscious foods and ripe fruits. Hades guided her towards it, his hand warm against the small of her back.

“This is amazing. I’ve seen nothing like it.”

“You would not imagine the number of books I had to go through. Maeve was a great help, too.” A dusting of pink graced his cheeks at the admission.

So that was why he had been leaving the mortal realm so frequently. She made a mental note to interrogate Maeve about it all later, to see how she had pulled this off.

“Here.” He gestured to a blanket spread out on the floor, covered in platters and plates. “Please, take a seat.”

Persephone’s stomach rumbled, reminding her she’d forgotten to eat in her excitement for the date (bar the pomegranate, of course). Before them was a mixture of familiar and unfamiliar dishes, some inspired by her mortal world, and some not.



With a sheepish smile, she reached for a plump olive. One of her favourites. The fruit was firm beneath her touch, and she popped it into her mouth without a second thought. The familiar taste filled her senses, but it was wrong. Duller. Not as

vibrant as she recalled. She chewed, frowning as she swallowed.

“Is everything alright?”

“Yes, yes, bit into the pip, that’s all.”

She reached for a slice of fresh bread and bit into it. Again, the same thing happened. The bread tasted like ash in her mouth. Persephone set the bread aside and trying the ambrosia-infused cakes next. But they tasted wrong too.

Desperate, she grabbed one of the strange dishes, some sort of Underworld food that resembled a wobbling jelly made from the glowing fungi. She paused, then took a small bite. It was actually quite nice. The taste was rich and multi-layered, unlike anything she had ever experienced.

Persephone’s eyes widened as she took another bite, and another, until her plate was empty. She moved onto the next dish, a dessert. The chocolate was rich and smooth, with hints of coffee and spice. The honey was smoky, floral. She cleaned the plate.

When she looked up, mouth still full of the last bit of honeycomb, Hades was watching her with unconcealed amusement.

“Enjoyed the food?”

“It’s delicious. Please give my compliments to the chef!”
When Hades turned red, she grinned in delight. “It was you?”

He mumbled something, hurriedly standing and holding a hand out. “I have one last thing to show you.”

Persephone took the offered hand, letting him steer the conversation as he led her to a small shrine at the top of the brook. Water seemed to come from the small hole, cascading down into the garden. On the shrine were six gemstone flowers. They sparkled in the otherworldly light, their thin petals reflecting reds.

Looking more closely, she could see the details; thin veins running through the petals. Openings at the stem, as if they were valves.

Hades' response to her offering.

"You... how? When?"

"Persephone, I care for those who visit my altars, who think kindly upon death. They may be long forgotten by mortals, but I pay attention when people visit."

Her brain couldn't process it. He... but he came and visited the shop to ask for more information. He asked her what the flowers meant, as if he did not know who sent them!

"Why didn't you say so earlier?"

"And say what?" His hand caressed her cheek, thumb moving in reassuring circles. "I didn't want to scare you off. You used to look at me with these enormous eyes when you talked about it, like you didn't dare to hope. And if I'm being honest, I wasn't ready to admit how I felt, either."

Something wet smeared across her cheek. Was she crying? Persephone blinked rapidly, trying to clear her sight.

"I wanted you to know that I see you, Persephone. Just as you saw me. I see your passion for life and beauty. I see your determination to make your own choices, regardless of what others may think. I also know that life is not all beauty. That life is dangerous. That the most beautiful plants are poisonous. There is more to you than the delicate bloom others want to see."

Her heart ached at his words. He saw her as the person who could embrace his darkness as her own.

"I've always known you existed, Persephone," Hades continued. "You didn't need to leave offerings to make me notice you. I didn't want to make the same mistakes I had before. You were young, and we are immortal. We have all the time we need."

The tears came then, but Persephone didn't bother to wipe them away. Instead, she reached for Hades, hugging him tightly. He returned the gesture, cradling her against his chest. She felt safe in his arms, like he would never let her go.

“I have you, Persephone. I will protect you as long as you want me to.”

“Hades.” She pulled back, looking up at him. Her vision blurred beneath the tears, but she could still see his luscious red lips, the way they pouted when he thought too hard. She reached up, smoothing his brow. She didn’t quite meet it, stroking his hair instead.

Rising to her knees, Persephone went to press her lips to his. They had scarcely made contact when she felt herself fall deeper into his hold. The flowers were spinning? There were two Hades? The tug she felt from the Underworld continued to hold, pulling her eyelids down.

CHAPTER TWENTY- SEVEN

Hades closed his eyes as the soft lips of Persephone grazed his, the gentle pressure of the kiss everything he had imagined—then the weight was gone, and replaced by a figure slumping in his arms.

He watched in horror as Persephone's eyes rolled back in her head, her skin turning deathly pale.

“Persephone?” Hades stared down at her, unable to believe how this had all gone so wrong. He clutched her tighter, hands moving to support her body as he shook her. “Persephone, wake up. Persephone!”

Her skin was too pale, the healthy glow of her skin fading. Each breath ragged and strained. Her chest rose and fell as she fought for consciousness, and Hades counted each one, a macabre lullaby.

Her heartbeat was quick, erratic.

He felt helpless. He ruled over the dead; he was no healer. His powers were for judgement and punishment, not for restoring life!

“Cerberus, get Hecate.”

With a yelp, the dog bounded off, vanishing mid-bounce. Hades held Persephone tighter, his hand against her cheek. She was getting colder. Hades shrugged off his jacket, draping it over Persephone.

“Shhhh, it's okay. It's okay, I promise.” He murmurs, hushing the whimpers from Persephone. Red liquid trickled down the side of her mouth, and he brushed it away. It was watery. Not blood.

“I'm not into threesomes Hades,” Hecate's voice called out before she materialised. Her demeanour shifted, the goddess

dropping to her knees beside him. “Shit, Hades, what happened? Is that Persephone?”

Without waiting for an answer, her long fingers traced over Persephone’s forehead, and she murmured an incantation.

“I don’t know. I swear, I don’t know! She was fine. One minute we were talking, and the next—”

His head swam as Hecate fed a potion to the goddess in his arms. He could feel the weight of her hand in his, the warmth leaving her. He focused on that, on the steady beat of life still in her. He didn’t look away, from the slope of her cheek, the shape of her lips, committing each feature to memory.

Then Persephone’s body jerked, a cough tearing through her. A single pomegranate seed was expelled from between her lips, landing on the stone floor at Hades’ feet.

That small, innocent-looking seed was the source of their predicament.

“Hades, you didn’t...?”

“Of course, I didn’t! I’m not an idiot!” Grasping the seed, Hades sniffed it, rolling the fruit around his finger and thumb. It wasn’t a trick. “You can inspect the food for yourself; there is nothing there! Why would I do that?”

He pressed his fingers to her neck, feeling for a pulse. It was there, but faint and growing ever weaker. “What’s happening to her?”

The sorceress passed her hands over Persephone’s body, her brow furrowed in concentration. “A connection has been made. The two worlds are fighting over her spirit, and her body isn’t coping with it.”

Hades stared at Persephone’s pale face, her closed eyes and still body. He had brought her here, shown her his realm. And now it was destroying her.

“There must be something we can do.”

“She consumed a pomegranate seed. You know I can’t undo that.”

Sorrow turned to cold fury. He wouldn't let the Underworld take her. Not without Persephone consenting to it. Holding Persephone close, Hades stood. His power surged, sparking in the air.

“I am Hades, Lord of the Dead. You will obey me.” His voice echoed across the realm. “Release her from this deal you have thrust upon her!”

There was no response.

“Has she been to the tree?”

He could see it in her gaze, the accusation. She thought he had done this on purpose, that he had somehow tricked Persephone into eating the fruit. But he hadn't. He wouldn't.

“I didn't give her the fruit. When I do, it won't be under false pretences!”

“We need to get her back to Olympus,” she said, her voice grave. “Maybe there's still time to change the current path... Assuming you want to?”

“Of course, I do! I will not bind her to me over this quirk of fate!”

“Then we need to consult with your family. Apollo is the only one versed enough in this ancient magic.”

Hades rose, adjusting Persephone in his arms. He gathered his power, the darkness of the Underworld coiling around them. In a blink, he transported them to Mount Olympus.

They materialised in a large courtyard, the bright sun reflecting off the polished marble. The temple of Apollo stood in the distance, with its gold pillars and high ceilings. It was a place of learning and medicine, with scholars and priests dedicated to Apollo. He held onto Persephone, wanting to shield her from view. Maybe her presence was also a shield for himself, a way to not focus on the outside world. To ignore the eyes that followed them.

Apollo stood in the doorway, beckoning them to follow. They moved through the busy temple, dodging groups of scholars in discussion and priests going about their business.



In a side room, a low couch was set up, complete with cushions. Hades eased Persephone down onto it, his hands lingering on her as he straightened.

The goddess seemed so fragile, her skin almost translucent in the soft light filtering in from the windows above. Apollo set his hands on either side of Persephone's head. The healer closed his eyes and focused.

The minutes dragged on. The longer it took, the more Hades fretted. What if the damage was permanent? What if he had condemned Persephone to a half-life by bringing her here? Guilt twisted in his gut. He should never have let her enter the Underworld, no matter how much he had wanted her here.

Apollo withdrew, face void of expression. Hades tensed, bracing himself for the worst. "Well?"

"Her spirit is being pulled between worlds. The cause, I do not know, although I am sure you do." Apollo shook his head. "If she remains this way, she will fade until there is nothing left."

Hades' chest constricted. He moved to Persephone's side, taking one of her limp hands in both of his own. Her skin was like ice. Her hair had darkened further, a chocolate brown against the mint upholstery.

"An entire fruit," Apollo said. "She's consumed an entire pomegranate; there are hundreds of seeds within her."

Hundreds of seeds... That was no mistake then. No cruel trick of fate.

“Hades. It wasn’t just you she asked about the fruit. I thought nothing of it. But now, with this.”

You couldn’t eat an entire fruit by accident. She had eaten it. She had disregarded his warning to her.

Why would she do this?

Why would she disregard his warnings so readily?

“Can you remove them?”

Apollo’s hands moved over her body, tracing paths of light that glowed against her pale skin.

Questions spun in Hades’ mind. Had there been more to it? More to her taking the fruit?

He dropped Persephone’s hand.

“Monitor her,” Hades instructed Hecate.

“Yes, my lord.”

He left before she could ask more. He needed to know why Persephone had eaten the fruit. Because Hades was sure of one thing: Persephone was not a fool. She had not done this by accident.

For how long had she been playing him?

Moments later Hades marched through the shadowy plains of the asphodel, ignoring all other until he reached the orchard.

The tree, a lone figure amidst the desolation of the Underworld, stood tall and proud. Its branches, laden with blood-red pomegranates, swayed in the breeze that didn’t exist here.

“My Lord Hades,” the guardian of the tree, Ascalaphus, stuttered, bowing low. “To what do I owe this unexpected visit?”

“Has Lady Persephone been near this tree unaccompanied?”

“She visits this area frequently,” he admitted. “She brings offerings from the above world for me. Cakes from a bakery near her mortal home. I never leave her unattended however.”

Hades tried to school his features. From the widening of Ascalaphus’s eyes, he failed. Persephone had been visiting his realm without his knowledge, sneaking around behind his back. Why?

“Has she ever taken a fruit from this tree? Left with one?”

“No, my lord. The only time she was near one was when she drew a fruit already fallen. I ensured the skin was unbroken, no seeds able to spill out. She returned it to its rightful place once finished. I was there myself and watched her the whole time.”

Hades breathed out sharply, relief flooding him. Then he caught it. An odd, decaying smell that didn’t belong in this field. He strode over to the fallen fruit. Amongst the vibrant red pomegranates was a decaying husk.

“She held one?”

“Only for a few moments, my lord.”

Hades picked it up, the skin crumbling in his hands. “When was this?”

“Oh, uh, this must have been shortly before the whole incident with the Lethe began. She’s been since, to show me the drawings. She’s quite talented, my lord.”

Bitterness filled Hades’ mouth as he looked at the rotting mortal pomegranate. He was sure now. Persephone had brought the mortal fruit to replace this one. She could have consumed it at any time.

Why had it only affected her now? Had she eaten it right away? Or had she waited until today? The fruit had impacted himself and Aeacus differently, so he couldn’t be certain.

Had she done it to defy her mother? He felt a surge of anger, and underneath it, hurt. Had his initial assumptions been correct all along? Was this all some game to her? Some way to assert independence and spite her mother at the same time?

He stormed back to the palace without another word. Persephone's playful deceit had invaded his realm. Everywhere he looked, he saw her, memories of her laughter and smiles. Everywhere her flowers bloomed, now more vibrant than ever. He barged into the room where the ledgers were kept. Aeacus fell off his seat in surprise.

"Bring me the entry records." Hades snatched the ledger out of Aeacus' hands and flipped through the pages. The first time Persephone had come to his realm had been long ago, before he had given her official permission. And since then, she had visited regularly, often spending hours in his world without his knowledge.

He remembered the way she had looked at him, the brush of her lips against his cheek. Was it all an act? Making him think there was something between them, only to snatch it away? What was she planning this time?

"She played me for a fool. All this time I thought..." Hades turned to Aeacus, struggling to keep his voice impassive as he pointed to the records. "Did you not think it necessary to inform me of this intrusion?"

"I thought you knew, my lord," Aeacus raised a brow. "You did not hide your fondness for the young goddess. Why wouldn't you allow her there?"

"She lied," Hades snapped. "And you believed her."

"In my defence, you can sense when gods visit and usually throw them out yourself."

Hades sighed and rubbed his temples.

"Remove her from the records."

"My lord?"

"Do it." Hades slammed the ledger shut. His palace felt suffocating. He had guarded himself for so long, unwilling to let anyone in. And the first time he had relinquished some of that caution, it had exploded in his face.

What was he to do now? Confront Persephone when she awoke? Demand an explanation? Part of him wanted to retreat

behind his walls again, to close himself off as he had before she came blazing into his world. But the memory of her in his arms, vulnerable and helpless, gave him pause.

“I am not yet ready to see that woman again. Let Hecate know. Demeter’s child is not to enter the realm.”

CHAPTER TWENTY- EIGHT

Persephone blinked, three rooms overlaying each other. She blinked again, trying to focus. The room was blurred, but she recognised the pale greens, the bright splashes of colours. Flowerpots came into focus.

She was in her room on Mount Olympus? Sunlight streamed in through the open windows, conflicting with the exhaustion in her bones.

What happened? She remembered in pieces - eating the fruit, her date, the garden, the confession, the kiss. Falling into Hades' arms.

Persephone's chest ached. The fledgling connection she had built with the Underworld, the fragile understanding she had with Hades, felt severed. There was something missing.

She needed to find Hades, needed to explain. The pomegranate. It was a stupid, impulsive move. But she just wanted to understand him better. To share in his world. Did he know? Did he realise? Why would he leave her here unless he'd rejected her?

Figures flitted in front of her, forcing her back down, fussing over her. As her vision cleared, she saw several of Apollo's Nymphs in her room.

"Stay reclined, my lady," one cooed, hands as soft as a spring breeze on her shoulder. But the world was spinning, the sweet scent of flowers turned cloying and oppressive. Beneath it was something else, a lingering scent that she couldn't put her finger on. "I will fetch Lord Apollo."

Persephone shook her head, dislodging a petal from her hair. It floated down before her eyes, desiccated and colourless. Her hands crashed against her head. One by one, she pulled at the blooms nestled amongst the curls.

Each had rotted.



Her breath hitched in her throat. Her fingers, usually so vibrant with the life force of spring, only crushed the brittle petals into dust. Her magic bubbled under her skin, raw and frantic, but nothing happened. The flowers remained dead.

A gasp tore itself from her lips and she stumbled back from the nymphs. The room tilted around her. She was spring; without this part of herself, what was she?

Panic surged through her veins like poison ivy, quick and suffocating, clawing its way up to choke off any rational thought.

Her eyes flitted around the room, seeking answers. Near one of the nymphs was a mirror, the glass reflecting her pale, drawn face. Her hair was dark brown, limp, clinging to her face. The nymphs exchanged worried glances. One stepped forward, trying to guide her back to the bed.

“No!” Persephone pulled away from the nymph’s grasp.

“Please, Lady Persephone,” the nymph pleaded. “You must rest.”

She shoved past the nymphs, staggering to the door. Her legs were like lead, each step sending agony through her. She pushed the doors open, spotting a familiar face.

“Hecate.” She allowed the woman to support her. “Why am I here? What happened?”

“You don’t remember? You collapsed, convulsing. Seeds fell from your lips.”

“I...” The icy dread. Her hands were shaking. She looked down, memories surfacing. Hermes visiting. The threat of her mother’s interference. The pomegranate she’d been keeping in the cool room, just in case.

“The pomegranate.”

“Just one seed is enough to tie a person to the Underworld. To consume hundreds is unheard of.”

“But I,” A lump caught in her throat.

“You’ll be alright,” Hecate reassured. “Apollo is doing his best to expel the fruit.”

She felt numb, the weight of her actions settling in. One fruit. One fruit had caused all this. One fruit had taken her powers. One fruit had changed everything.

“I don’t want them expelled!”

She collapsed to the floor, the cold stone offering no solace. Hecate knelt beside her, placing a hand on her shoulder, but Persephone could hardly feel it. Everything was spinning, her world slipping away.

“Persephone,” Hecate whispered, but her voice seemed far away.

Her vision blurred with tears. Persephone blinked, trying to focus.

“Hades?”

“Is back in the Underworld. He was very concerned about what happened.” Hecate reached out, brushing hair from Persephone’s face. “I’ve never seen him so scared.”

“I didn’t mean to worry him.”

“Hush now, we know. Let’s get you back in your room. Apollo is on his way.”

Persephone let Hecate lead her back into her room. They'd changed the sheets, taken away the dead flowers. Everything looked normal. They were trying to cover up what happened, what she had done. Persephone tried to turn away, to go to Hades, but Hecate's firm grip held her, steering her to the bed.

It was only when they wrapped her in warm blankets that she realised how cold she felt.

"Persephone," Apollo greeted when he finally entered the room. The calm and joy that radiated from the god felt foreign against the dread that clawed at her insides. For a moment, it gave her respite.

"Lord Apollo," she returned, trying to rise but finding her limbs numb.

"Please," he chuckled, "no need for formalities here. Stay resting."

Apollo pulled up a chair, sitting beside her bed. For a moment, neither spoke. Then Apollo turned to her, leaning forward, elbows resting on his knees.

"Tell me, child, what do you remember of the events leading up to your arrival here? What do you remember about what you consumed whilst in the Underworld?"

Persephone stared down at her hands, twisting the sheets between her fingers. She remembered the food, the strange tastes and textures that had delighted and confused her. But how to explain without Apollo making assumptions?

"Hades provided a bit of everything. Old favourites, and delicacies from the Underworld. Strong flavours, rich and earthy." She glanced up at Apollo's kind face. "Lots of mortal food, too."

"Though my tastes changed. I couldn't stand the foods I used to love. They were too bland, too mushy, not substantial enough."

"Go on."

"I thought perhaps my powers over nature were being influenced by the Underworld. That spending time there was

altering me in ways I didn't understand.”

“Did you consume any fruit?”

“Not while in the—” She cut herself off, realising what Apollo was implying.

“You are certain Lord Hades offered you nothing to eat or drink that you did not recognise?” he pressed.

Persephone bristled. “Hades didn't force or trick me into eating anything. He gave me food I'd said I liked, and I chose what I wanted to eat out of the foreign items.”

“Are you sure there was no coercion? No one would judge you.”

“Question my account if you must, but do not sully his reputation on baseless suspicion and gossip alone.”

The god leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest as he studied her with an unreadable expression. Persephone could see the scepticism in Apollo's eyes, despite her protestations. She balled her hands into fists at her sides. Apollo didn't believe her. He seemed to think that Hades had somehow coerced or tricked her into eating the pomegranate.

“Hades is many things, but he is not a trickster or a manipulator.” She wouldn't rise to his bait, no matter how hard he tried to sow doubt. She knew the truth. Hades had been nothing but upfront with her. No deceit, no manipulation. Just... kindness and consideration. She was the only one being dishonest here. “I understand your scepticism, Lord Apollo. But you were not there.”

“Forgive me. In my eagerness to understand this affliction, I may have overstepped.”

“I would like to be alone.”

Standing, Apollo retrieved several ornate flasks, passing her one. “Drink this first, please.”

Wanting to get this over with, she took the offered flask, downing the potion. The liquid was viscous, sliding down her throat and sticking to it.

“You need to take these potions at the same time as the pomegranate was consumed for the next week. Go for an approximate time if you are uncertain. Your body digested multiple seeds. We can only hope that the tether won’t permanently bind you to the realm. Then we can discuss severing the link.”

“Sever it? No! I don’t want it broken!”

“Dear Persephone.”

“I wasn’t tricked into this – I chose it.” She attempted to rise once more, only to be held down. “I want to go back there.”

“There might be an issue with that.”

Persephone spun to find Hecate once more in the doorway, face tight and lips thin.

“What do you mean?”

Hecate crossed the room, taking her hands. “I don’t know what’s transpired between you and Hades, but Aeacus has just sent word. Hades has banned you from entering the Underworld.”

“No! No, I need to see him.” Persephone tried to stand, but she felt dizzy again. The potion. She glanced at Apollo, but there were three of him. With a sigh, she sat back down on the bed, staring at the ceiling. “I need to see him. I need to explain.”

CHAPTER TWENTY- NINE

Three Weeks later

Hades strode through the halls of his palace, glaring at anyone who came close. He tried to focus on the parchment in his hands, reviewing the latest figures from the Asphodel Fields, but the numbers blurred together. All he could think about was Persephone. Her radiant smile, her musical laugh, the way her nose crinkled when she concentrated.

And her betrayal. She had stolen from him, lied to him. He had opened up his realm to her, shared parts of himself he rarely revealed, and she had taken advantage of it. Nay, she had betrayed that trust. He crumpled the parchment. Why? Why would she do that? What made her think she could bind herself to his realm without his say? What right did she have to invade his land with reminders of spring?

He snatched a rose that was trying to bloom on his door, crushing it in his gloved fist.

The questions plagued him as he worked. His eyes wandered to the window. Outside, the dark fields of Asphodel were now speckled with tiny white flowers. Persephone's work, no doubt. He scowled, conjuring shadows in an attempt to block them out.

A knock at the door interrupted his fruitless efforts. "Enter," Hades called out, straightening in his seat.

Aeacus strode in. "My lord, the construction of the new wing is ahead of schedule. Did you want to inspect—"

"Later," Hades said. "If it can't wait, I trust you to deal with it."

Aeacus shifted his weight. "Very well. I have also heard from the gatekeeper that—"

“I said later!” Hades snapped, his temper flaring. He had no desire to know if the girl was at his door once more. His shades and the dog kept telling him every single damn time she would stand at the border of their realms, and he could do without the constant reminders.

He *knew* that she was there. He knew every time she went to his shrine, leaving apologies. He knew each bloody flower arrangement she left at his door.

Aeacus stiffened and gave a curt bow before exiting.

“Aeacus, I—” Hades scrubbed a hand over his face, grateful the lieutenant stopped. “I’m sorry. I’m not up for visitors. Make sure no one else comes.”

“Yes, my lord.”

With a huff, he tried to focus on work again, only to notice a thistle growing through the cracks in the wall.

“Bloody flowers.” He stood, leaving the paperwork behind to stew on his balcony. He couldn’t focus with her on his mind.

Maybe his throne room would be better. He could pace there, at least. But then Hades saw. The room was full of nightshade and amaranth. Their scent was sickly sweet. Hades blinked. When had his palace turned into a greenhouse?

Hades swiped at the flowers, tearing them from the soil. They dropped to the ground, but the stench of decay lingered. It wasn’t sufficient. Hades straightened, leaning on his desk as an unwelcome thought occurred to him. Was this her trying to communicate? A messy, haphazard effort at connection?

“No.” She had made her choice. Better to close himself off than be hurt again. Better the cold comfort of solitude than the betrayal of false hope.

Hades straightened, his emotions locked down. He left the office, flowers drooping. There was work to do. He would throw himself into his duties.

Hades left the throne room, footsteps resounding in the empty corridor. He didn’t have a destination, just away. Away

from the floral scent, away from the memories.

He had nearly reached the palace gates when a voice called out, “Going somewhere, my lord?”

Hades closed his eyes, jaw tightening. Of course, she would seek him out, denying him even a moment’s respite.

“I wish to be alone, Hecate.”

“So Aeacus informed me. And yet, here I am.”

“Here you are.”

“Walk with me.” Hecate linked her arm through his, steering them towards the path that led through Elysium’s fields.

Hades bit back a refusal, knowing it would be ignored. Once Hecate had decided on a course of action, very little could deter her. They walked in silence through the peaceful meadows filled with heroic shades. Hades kept his gaze fixed ahead, jaw tight, ignoring his companion, though her presence grated.



After some time, Hecate prompted, “You cannot avoid speaking of her forever, old friend.”

“I can endure an eternity of silence if I must.”

“Would that make you happy?”

“Happiness is not among my domains. My darling brothers never considered that when they rendered me down here.”

“But it could be, if you let it.”

Hades’ pace halted. That persistent flame of hope flickered inside him once more. He smothered it, quickening his stride.

“The time for possibilities passed when she made her choice to steal any choice from me.”

“Did it?” Hecate challenged. “Or did you retreat behind your walls as you always have?”

“I will not expose myself to further pain.”

“In doing so, you may lose the one being who could stand by your side protecting you from it.”

Hades cleared his throat, wanting to brush aside talk on the girl. “How are things in Olympus these days? I assume my siblings are keeping themselves occupied with gossip?”

Hecate’s eyes twinkled, making Hades uncomfortable. “Oh, absolutely. Apollo has taken up the lyre again, to everyone’s chagrin. Ares and Hephaestus had a heated argument about the design of a new armour. Athena had to step in before it turned physical. And Aphrodite...”

Hecate kept talking about the Olympians, relishing in the gossip, but Hades was only half paying attention. His eyes drifted to the asphodel flowers still sprouting along the path, no matter how many times he brushed them away. He couldn’t shake thoughts of her, try as he might.

Unable to endure it any longer, he interrupted Hecate’s account of Dionysus’ latest revelries. “And Persephone?” he asked. “How does she fare? Did Apollo expel the seeds?”

Hecate raised an eyebrow. “Why don’t you ask her yourself? You’ve had plenty chance to speak with her.”

“She made her choice. I made mine. Now I would know how she fares. Did they expel the seeds?”

“The last time I saw her, Persephone looked tired. Not her usual bright self.” She raised a hand to stop Hades’ next

question. “It wasn’t physical, just... sad. She keeps trying to get here, but she’s turned away, and her spirits further sink. I wonder why.”

“And the seeds?”

“Apollo is still working on it. It seems separation weighs on her,” Hecate added. “She regrets the harm she has caused.”

“If that is so, perhaps she should not have bound herself without my consent.”

“Perhaps not,” Hecate allowed. “But you cannot deny that a bond now exists between you, like it or not.”

Hades’ hands clenched. “I did not ask for such a bond.”

“No. But the fates weave as they will. The question is, what will you do now that it is woven?”

“I am content to ignore it and allow her to deal with the repercussions of her actions.”

“That’s not even a good lie, Hades. You don’t look so good. There are bags under your eyes.”

Hades made a dismissive grunt.

“Cerberus mopes about the palace, looking forlorn. He misses her, too. Did you forbid him passage above?”

At the mention of his beloved guard dog, Hades blinked and glanced away. After a moment, he admitted, “I cannot refuse the mutt anything. He is trying to stand in solidarity with me.”

“You both feel her absence.”

Hades drew a shaky breath. “Yes, I miss her. Her vibrancy, her joy. I thought after Leuce I would never feel such emotion, and now my nature has turned on me. It is cruel.”

A splatter of golden light broke his reverie, the messenger god stepping between the realms. He gave them a jaunty wave, seemingly oblivious to the mood.

“Greetings Lord Hades, Lady Hecate.” Before either could respond, he held out a sealed scroll. “Urgent message from

Zeus.”

With a muttered oath, Hades snatched the scroll and broke the seal. As he scanned the contents, his expression darkened.

“Damn Zeus and his games. Demeter too. The woman has the gall to involve me in another one of her ridiculous trials.”

He crumpled the parchment in his fist. “Who does she think she is, passing judgement on my domain? I will not be scolded like a child. And to bring Aletheia into this! I am not the one known for lies!”

Shadows coalesced around him, drawn to the heat of his anger. Hecate placed a soothing hand on his arm.

“Peace, Hades,” she soothed. “This tribunal concerns Persephone, does it not? Perhaps it is a chance to see her again.”

Hades’ rage faltered. He drew a sharp breath as longing and hurt warred inside him.

“See her. Aye, so her mother can berate me for imagined slights whilst that wilting blossom regards me with deceitful eyes.” He closed his own against the stab of anguish those words elicited.

Hecate opened her mouth to speak again, but Hades held up a hand. His face closed off, the moment of weakness disappearing behind a blank mask.

“I will deal with this nuisance. Inform Zeus I will attend, if only to silence Demeter’s caterwauling.”

He turned to leave, only to pause and half glance back, bitter. “The next time either goddess attempts to meddle in my affairs, they may not find me so accommodating.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Zeus looked up from the scroll on his desk, looking between them all with ridiculous glasses perched on his nose. Hades tapped his foot, wanting this farse to be over.

“According to Apollo, Persephone’s condition has stabilised, although she remains weak. Any traversing to Olympus severely worsens her symptoms, so he has suggested she remain on the mortal plane.”

Hades gritted his teeth, forcing his expression neutral. He was glad the girl would be okay, but it didn’t resolve their current problem. And now the rest of the pantheon was sticking their noses in.

“The seeds of the pomegranate have bound themselves to her, and the healers are unsure how to sever the connection. There may be no way to sever it.”

Demeter whirled on him. “Do you have nothing to say for yourself?”

Hades held his tongue, seething. He hadn’t offered Persephone the pomegranate. The girl had done this to herself.

“Peace, sister, let us determine the cause before casting blame.”

Hades wanted nothing more than to leave and go to bed. No more chances taken, no more risks, no more cracks in the armour. Perhaps a bottle or three of wine.

“Perhaps we should postpone this discussion until Persephone herself can join us?” Hera suggested.

Hades glanced at Hera, acknowledging her intervention with a slight nod. The goddess had a knack for cutting through to the core.

“I am more than capable of determining what she needs while she is ill.”

Zeus let out a breath, brow furrowing. “Demeter,” he rubbed at the bridge of his nose. “That’s not the point. We’re not here to argue. We’re here to find a solution.”

“How can we find a solution when he—” Demeter jabbed a hand at Hades, “—cannot tell the truth to save his life.”

“Do not judge me without warrant. Summon Aletheia if you must. You already threatened when ordering me here.”

“Perhaps we should. Speculation will do us no good.” Hera picked up a mirror, whispering into it. Mere moments later, the sound of robes announced Aletheia’s presence. Hades looked up to see her enter the room, a wraith in white. She kept her eyes on the floor as she floated over to Zeus’ throne.

Zeus cleared his throat. “Lady Aletheia, we seek your wisdom. May you turn your gaze on Lord Hades?”

Hades had been through this several times. The woman herself was perfectly charming, when she chose to socialise, but there was always something disconcerting to have someone see you so completely.

She lifted the veil, turning her all-seeing eyes upon him.

“Hades, did you provide the pomegranate fruit to Persephone or encourage her to partake of it in any way?”

“No.”

Aletheia’s head tilted to the side as she considered him. Her eyes flashed a bright white.

“He speaks the truth.”

Hades didn’t turn to see how his siblings reacted. Let them think what they would. He owed them no explanation, no justifications. They could not refute that he spoke the truth.

“Let us move forward in determining how best to proceed.”

“Do you require my eyes any longer?”

“No, no. You may go.” Zeus waved a hand. “Thank you.”

Aletheia inclined her head, looking up directly in Zeus’ direction.



“You should have more faith in your brother, my king.” Aletheia replaced the veil, and glided from the room.

“I believe you owe me an apology, sister.”

Zeus sighed, resting his forehead on a hand. Demeter went to speak, but Zeus quietened her with a look.

“So, you promise,” Zeus began, “that you had nothing to do with Persephone consuming the pomegranate?”

“I did not.”

Demeter couldn't contain her outburst any longer. “Did you lead her to it? Even if you didn't make her eat the fruit, did you show her the tree and leave her to it? Did you exploit her curiosity?”

Hades grit his teeth. “She saw the tree first. I told her not to eat it when she asked. Have a higher opinion of your daughter. She's the only one who knew what she was doing when she consumed that fruit.”

“She is a child. She didn't understand what it meant.”

“She is a grown woman. Millennia old. Have you even spoken to her? About more than forbidding her going to see other people?”

“This isn't productive.”

Hades swallowed a retort, glancing at Zeus before returning his gaze to Demeter. Her eyes shone with unshed tears as she rounded on Zeus.

“Look at what’s happening above, brother!” she cried. “Crops are dying, plants are withering! The mortal realm is being ravaged because you are allowing her to be trapped in this hell.”

The blame was being shifted onto him again, yet this time Hades wasn’t sure it was undeserved. He had allowed Persephone into the Underworld after all, allowed her the possibility of seeing the tree.

“Demeter, let’s discuss this rationally. Anger and accusations will not help our daughter.”

“Don’t patronise me, Zeus! I know you. It would not surprise me if you sanctioned this, content to sacrifice your own flesh and blood for convenience. The crops above are dying, the mortal realm ravaged, yet you do nothing!”

Ironic, considering he had done just that. Hades chose not to bring it up.

“I understand your concern. We will address the issue and find a solution. But blaming Hades or me is not fair.”

“He’s brought darkness and death into the mortal realm, Zeus! We depend on life, on growth to exist! We can’t survive if the balance is disrupted. You’re king of the gods, Zeus! It’s your duty to maintain balance and order!”

“Death is a part of life, Demeter; do not forget that. You speak as though you are the only one affected by what has happened.” All eyes turned to Hades as he continued, “Persephone’s touch has not left my realm unaffected. If death is bleeding into the mortal realm, then growth that was never fated has bloomed in the Underworld. Flowers growing, sustenance being made. It is not the way of things in my realm. It is disturbing the rest that the deceased deserve.”

Zeus shifted in his seat, clearly disturbed by Hades’ revelation. He cleared his throat before speaking, “That is indeed troubling.”

“It isn’t natural.” Hades agreed. “But that doesn’t mean it is wrong. Death and famine occur all the time in the mortal realm without my influence, do they not?”

He turned to Demeter. “Sister, I understand your worry for Persephone. But she is not a child. She has proven her strength and resilience time and time again. I didn’t lure her to the Underworld. She came willingly. She didn’t ask for permission. I didn’t force her to eat the pomegranate, she did so of her own volition. If we’re discussing consent, why not ask if she had my consent to take from my realm?”

Demeter flinched. Hades felt little sympathy as he watched the realisation dawn on her face. He pressed his advantage.

“You claim your daughter is an innocent child under my sway, but she entered my kingdom of her own volition, again and again. She wandered where she willed, even into places I forbade.” His voice softened. “Does that sound like a coerced captive to you?”

“I... no, but—”

“Zeus urged me to leave my realm to appease the gods’ curiosity. You pushed me into this chaos.” He felt a bitter satisfaction at Zeus’s uncomfortable shift in his seat. “I would not have needed to speak with the Lady Persephone had you not demanded I looked into the offerings.”

“What does that have to do with this?”

Hades clenched his fists at his sides, feeling an overwhelming urge to shake some sense into his brother. But he held back; there were lines even he wouldn’t cross.

“You asked for this, brother. Don’t play innocent now. I was happy to ignore the gifts she sent until you made us talk.” He turned to Demeter. “I won’t be blamed for decisions I didn’t make.”

“I don’t understand my daughter anymore, or what she wants. But the Underworld is no place for someone so full of life.”

“Perhaps once that was true. But much has changed, thanks to your daughter. She sees value there I never have. I will not

stand for deception, however, not even from her.”

Demeter’s face crumpled at his words, tears glittering in her eyes.

“I did not seek this outcome, but I will not apologise for fate’s hand in it, or actions that are beyond my control. I trust you will all find a resolution.”

His eyes flicked from Demeter’s tear-filled ones to Zeus’ unreadable expression. He grit his teeth.

It was Hera who broke the silence that had fallen over the room. “The fates. They hold the thread of every life in their hands, mortal and divine alike. If there is any knowledge of how to rectify this, it would be with them.”

“I just want my daughter back.”

“She never left you. You were pushing her away with your smothering,” Hades straightened, smoothing out his robes. “I shall consult with the fates. Please excuse me. I wish to go alone. If there’s a way to sort this out, I’ll find it.”

CHAPTER THIRTY- ONE

The entire shop was dead.

Persephone knelt before a fading rose, its petals brown and curling. She picked it up, focusing, willing her divine power to flow. The flower twitched in her palm, a moment of life before it wilted.

With a scream she threw the rose across the room.

Everything was going wrong. This wasn't how it was meant to be. Hades had accepted her and said he knew about the offerings. Now he wouldn't even allow her entrance to his realm. What had changed whilst she was unconscious?

“Persephone? Are you in there?”

She jolted at the knocks. On the other side of the shutters, Persephone could see Maeve's blurry form peering in.

How could Persephone explain this to her? The cheerful chime of the shop's bell, the lush bouquets, the sweet scent of living flowers, all of it was gone. In their place, silence and the faint odour of decay. The longer Hades refused to see her, the more she feared that she had offended him somehow.

“I-I'm fine,” she called back, her voice strained. “Just waiting for some stock. I-I think we might need to close the shop for today.”

A beat of silence. “Alright, love. If you're sure.”

Persephone leaned her head against the door, eyes closed. She didn't want Maeve to see the shop like this. To see the life drained from their creations. It was a desolate sight that made her chest ache. Like she was losing a part of herself with each wilting petal, each browning leaf. With each day that Hades refused to see her.

“Is there anything I can do? Call clients? Get you a cuppa?”

“I,” her voice faltered. She couldn’t bring herself to lie, but the truth seemed impossible. Best to not let her see. She cracked the door open, handing over the shop book. “Thank you.”

She was grateful that Maeve did not look behind her, taking the book and leaving with the efficiency and sensitivity that she knew the woman for. Closing the door, Persephone slid down the frame.

Something had changed within her since she’d consumed the pomegranate seeds. And it wasn’t just affecting her; it was seeping into her, disrupting the delicate balance of life and death she had always maintained.

Could Hades sense it? Did he know what she’d done? Had Apollo told him?

She didn’t know what to do.

Persephone closed her eyes and took a deep breath to steady herself. A knot of anxiety twisted in her.

She couldn’t hide away forever. Someone else would come looking for her. But how could she face them like this? When everything she touched now seemed to shrivel and die? When her purpose in life was gone?

She looked down at her hands, turning them over. They looked the same but felt... wrong. Was this her now? This unnatural decay that drained the life from everything she touched?

A soft whine. From behind a pile of pots first one head, then two, then the third came out. Two still had pots on their head, soil and dying plants hitting the floor as they bounded over. In seconds she was engulfed with dog and dirt, Cerberus’ heads all fighting to be the one to lick the tears off her cheeks.

She couldn’t stop the watery smile that came. At least one creature still sought her company.

“Hello, boy,” she allowed the dog to lavish attention on her, the action a balm against her heavy heart. The dog’s steady warmth and unconditional affection soothed her frayed nerves.

Stroking him, she watched the faintest bit of yellow come back to the petals of a sunflower.

“Did you do that?” she asked. Cerberus ignored her, scratching at the floor as he turned around, finding a comfy spot to rest. Each of his three heads were on her body and legs, a supportive weight that grounded her.

Persephone leaned into his furry bulk. She knew she couldn’t avoid reality forever. She would have to resolve this somehow.

A knock at the door. Cerberus’ ears pricked up and he gave a low growl in warning.

“We’re closed.”

“It’s your mother. May I come in, Persephone?” Her mother’s voice called through, soft and cautious and so unlike her. Persephone was used to Demeter materialising inside her shop, not showing this level of courtesy. Sniffing, Persephone shuffled aside, keeping her hold on Cerberus.

“Yeah,” she mumbled, pressing her face into Cerberus’ fur. “It’s unlocked.”

Persephone watched her mother from behind a veil of black and white fur, fear pooling in her stomach. She knew Demeter would not react well to what had transpired.

“Oh. His dog is here.”

“I’m sorry,” Persephone muttered. Her hand still rested on Cerberus’ fur, seeking comfort in the familiar texture.

“Oh, darling.” Demeter’s stern expression softened at her daughter’s words. She moved towards them, kneeling down on Persephone’s other side, and took her hand.

Persephone glanced at their joined hands, then back to her mother. She noticed the deep lines around Demeter’s eyes, and something else. Fear? Regret? She couldn’t be sure.

“I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

Demeter gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. “I know, darling.”

The floodgates opened. Her chest heaved, her sight blurred, and she could no longer hold her emotions back. With a sob, she leaned into her mother's embrace, seeking solace from the storm of emotions raging within her. And for that moment, Demeter held her daughter close, offering what comfort she could amidst their shared heartache.

"Shhh, it's alright," Demeter soothed, stroking Persephone's hair. "We'll figure this out."

"I didn't want it to end like this. I thought I was showing Hades my devotion. That I wasn't afraid. I didn't get the chance to tell him how I feel."

"I know."

Persephone swallowed, her throat dry as she prepared to confess everything. "Mother," she began. "There's something I need to tell you. I... I need you to listen. Listen to what I'm saying."

She took a deep breath, waiting for her mother to nod before speaking. "Those offerings to Hades that have been causing such a stir over the last few centuries? They were me."

Demeter opened her mouth, but Persephone squeezed her hand, begging for silence. "I needed to get Hades' attention. He lets no one into his realm and... and so I needed him to come to me. I didn't hurt anyone, I swear! The mortals had already passed on. I just wanted to show him I wasn't afraid."

"From the moment we met, I fell for him. Hades was kind to me and made me feel seen. And once he came to the shop, and we shared more time together, my feelings deepened from a crush to something that's so much more."

Now she had started, she couldn't stop. It all came out in a rush, a torrent of admissions and secrets she'd kept bottled up for too long. She told her mother about the courtship, about Hades opening up to her, about feeling beautiful and loved for the first time.

"And then," she faltered, looking down at her hands clasped in her lap. "Then you started interfering. When you forced your way into the Underworld, intending to part us... I

couldn't let you stop me. I knew the pomegranate was connected to the Underworld, and so I took one, keeping it safe. That day, I consumed it here in the shop before going for our date."

He didn't know. Of course. Persephone wanted to bang her head on the wall. He didn't know what she had done, then she had fallen ill. He had found out about it without knowing her reasons behind the action.

She winced. Without the context, it looked like blind theft.

"Hades didn't know. He didn't know I had taken the fruit. He didn't know I had eaten it until I collapsed. I betrayed Hades' trust and stole from him. I hadn't thought of it that way, but now I see the consequences. He refuses to see me, and I've ruined everything. I don't know how to make it right."

"I'm so sorry, Mother. I never meant for things to spiral like this. Please help me fix this."

Persephone raised her head, dreading what she might find. But... her mother was gazing at her with an unfamiliar warmth. The hand on her cheek was gentle, a touch devoid of the usual strain that characterised their interactions.

"I know," Demeter said. "I know how it feels to want something so much that you're willing to risk everything for it."

"What?" She met Demeter's eyes, seeking some kind of explanation.

"I made a similar choice once. Before you were born, I was young and stupid... and madly in love." She hesitated.

"His name was Iasion," A smile playing on her lips. "He was a mortal man. Handsome, charming. He made me feel alive. I'd never felt that way before." She reached out, her fingers ghosting over the edge of Persephone's face.

"But it wasn't meant to be. He was mortal and I... I am a goddess. I would have given up everything for him, my position among the gods, my immortality, even my dignity."

Persephone could only listen as her mother confessed. She had never heard this before, never considered that her mother might have a painful past.

“He died. A fever. He was gone in a blink, and I was alone, with nothing but the bitter taste of regret. I went down to the Underworld to find him, but it was too late. He had entered the Lethe and had no recollection of me. I don’t think I have ever forgiven my brother for allowing it. Even if it was Iasion’s choice, I always felt Hades could have done something.”

Persephone’s heart ached at her mother’s pain. She took her mother’s hand. Demeter squeezed it, smiling sadly.

“I’m not telling you this to put you off,” Demeter said, “but to remind you, we have to be careful. We’re powerful and we’re immortal. But we’re not invincible. I didn’t want you to make the same mistakes I did. I didn’t want you to be hurt like I was. A god’s love is all-consuming and poisonous and deadly. But it can also be beautiful. I was so focused on you being hurt by your emotions that I didn’t consider the alternative.”

“I know you didn’t mean for any of this to happen, my sweet Persephone.” Demeter conjured a handkerchief, handing it over. “And I’m sorry that I exacerbated the situation.”

“Mother,” Persephone sniffled. “I... I don’t want to lose Hades. I’m scared, Mother. Scared that he thinks the worst of me now. He is right to, but I want to make it better.”

“My darling, fear is a natural part of love. But it is also what makes it so beautiful and worth fighting for.”

“Where do I start? I can’t even get into the Underworld to speak with him, and I doubt he would come if I made an offering.”

Cerberus jumped up, licking her face. Persephone laughed, pushing him off and wiping the drool on her sleeve.

“I think that is something I can help with.” Demeter rose, offering her hand to help Persephone. Her eyes were red, and Persephone wasn’t sure if it was the story or the dog that had caused the reaction. “He is not currently in the Underworld. If

the fates have willed your communion, then he shall still be there.”

“Mother?”

“Come, child.” Demeter glanced down at Cerberus, tongues lolling out and tail wagging. “The dog can come too.”



CHAPTER THIRTY- TWO

Hades was slowly going insane. He had been stuck in the Morai's cave for what felt like weeks, listening to the three ramble on about everything from fishing forecasts to the weather. No hint to solving his predicament, and it would only get worse.

“Cloaked in shadows, the heart finds solace,” Clotho did not look up from the thread she spun, the eternal thread glinting despite the absence of light. “Yet love's light yearns for dawn.”

“Like water in cupped hands, it seeps through cracks unseen.”

“And only when one accepts death's embrace can life bloom,” Atropos concluded, snipping the thread. It vanished in a whisper, dissipating into the air.

“Would you mind putting that into plain speech?”

“Two souls entwined by threads of fate, a union blessed yet cursed by hate,” Clotho ignored him.

Lachesis picked up the thread. “Dark and light shall meet halfway, but without trust comes decay.”

“Only with care and compromise will the bud of love arise.”

Hades furrowed his brow. He had been listening to their cryptic mutterings for a whole day, but still couldn't make sense of them.

“I do not understand,” he said, trying to keep the frustration from his voice. The fates could smell weakness. “How does this help Persephone break the connection?”

“The maiden fair sought forbidden fruit, now her fate with death holds dispute...”

Hades sighed. More riddles. He thought of pressing them further, but knew it was futile. He closed his eyes.

Clotho chuckled, a sound akin to grinding stones that sent shivers down Hades' spine. She turned her rheumy eyes towards him and smirked.

It did nothing to soothe Hades' fraying nerves.

“Why do we have to wait until sundown to do something? This is urgent enough to warrant immediate action, surely.”

The Fates glanced at one another, their single shared eye darting between their faces. “The threads are still weaving.”

“The pattern is not yet set.”

Hades grit his teeth in frustration. “But the girl—Persephone—her fate hangs in the balance. We cannot delay. We must free her.”

The Fates turned back to their looms, continuing their work as if Hades had not spoken. “Patience, Lord Hades. You still do not see the full picture.”

“If you told me more than poetry, perhaps I would.” Hades let out a breath, resuming his pacing. He wouldn't get any more out of the sisters until they were ready.

He paced, his footsteps echoing off the stone walls. What was he to do? Sit around while Persephone's fate was up in the air? Regardless of his feelings towards the goddess, he had to make sure she was safe.

Glancing out of the cave's narrow window, he checked the sun's position. An hour until sunset. Hades gritted his teeth. Why were they intent on making him wait? What good could possibly...? He groaned, recognising the oldest ploy too late.

They were stalling for time.

As soon as the realisation came, footsteps echoed through the chamber, revealing Demeter and Persephone. He braced himself, uncertain how to react. He wasn't a coward and yet every fibre screamed for him to run, to avoid this confrontation. He wasn't ready. He didn't want to ever be ready. But he couldn't move.

Out of the corner of his eye, Hades saw Clotho wink at him. It seemed he could not leave until this unexpected meeting had played out. Bloody fates.

Swallowing, Hades nodded as the goddesses entered. "Sister. Lady Persephone." His gaze lingered on the younger goddess. Still pale, as if she had never seen the sun, but the colour had returned to her cheeks. Her beautiful hair was now midnight black, as dark as Hecate's. Her eyes were red-rimmed as she looked at him.

Hades wished he could melt into the shadows. He had not planned what to say to Persephone when they next met. How could he express the turmoil of emotions she stirred within him?

It turns out he didn't need to.

Persephone fell to her knees, her small hands clutching his robes. Those bright green eyes were brimming with tears. Her voice was a whisper. "My Lord Hades, I'm sorry."

No. This wasn't right. To witness Persephone on her knees, pleading for mercy, made his stomach turn.

"Don't." He reached out, helping her to her feet. "Persephone. You're a goddess. You don't kneel."

He felt her tremble beneath his touch, and it sparked a protective urge. This close, Hades could see her every expression. He saw the way her eyes wobbled, and his chest ached at the idea that she might fear him now, after all this.

"Persephone," he urged again when she attempted to speak. "You don't need to beg."

"But I..." she began, only for him to cut her off with a shake of his head.

"No," he repeated. "We are equals, Persephone. You do not grovel like a supplicant. I am many things, but I am not one to take out my frustrations on another. You need not fear my ire."

"You have every right to be angry with me, my lord."

"I am angry. Your mother says I forced you, but I warned you about the pomegranate. Why did you eat it? Why did you

steal it? What were you hoping to achieve?"

Persephone flinched, shrinking into herself. "I... I didn't mean to deceive you." She pulled his hand towards her, placing it on her chest. Hades clenched his fist, unsure of what to do with it. "I care for you. I did what I had to do to get your attention, to make you understand you are more than a passing fascination to me. You speak of my choice, and yet never wanted to see that I chose this fate of my volition. I want this. I want you. I thought if I created a bond between us, you wouldn't cast me aside."

"I wouldn't abandon you." He winced. Even as he spoke the words, he knew her assumptions about him were accurate. If left to his own devices, he would have pushed Persephone away, afraid to let someone in.

"You could have asked me," he tried again, voice rough. "I would have found a way, if you had told me plainly what you wanted."

"And have you turn me away again for my own good? I know you, my lord. You would have found a thousand reasons it could not be so."

She stepped closer, chin raised defiantly. He could see her bare feet touching the tips of his shoes. "I had to take matters into my own hands. Tie myself to your kingdom by whatever means necessary. Only then would you accept my desires are the same as your own."

"Persephone, I..." He faltered, at a loss for words. What could he say to such a declaration? That care motivated her actions for him? That he was not deserving of such devotion? "You should not have endangered yourself so. I cannot claim to be worth such a sacrifice."

"You are worth everything to me. How do you not see that?"

"Persephone..." Her name escaped him in a ragged whisper.

Persephone's hand grazed the side of his face, caressing his cheek. He leaned into the touch. Then, with a decisive pull, his

head was brought down to meet hers, their lips crashing together.

He froze, staring at her wide eyed, as her lips moved against his, curling into a smile. It was warm... her hands were warm on his face, holding him, showing him. Hades' eyes fluttered shut, and he surrendered himself into the moment, following wherever Persephone led.

“The threads are woven, the die is cast.”

“Oh my,” Hades jerked, seeing Demeter watching them, aghast. In the moment, he had entirely forgotten that Persephone's mother and the fates were even there.

“Through her actions, the bond is fast.”

“United by fate's design at last,” Atropos concluded, “never again to be unbound.”

Hades tensed, tightening his grip on Persephone's hand. This was what he had been afraid of. Persephone's impulsive actions binding them together, leaving him no say in the matter.



Whatever doubts plagued her mind, she stood firm in her conviction. Hades envied such steadfastness. Whereas she had taken action, he had allowed fear to paralyze him. No longer.

“You speak of binding yet offer no insight into freeing Persephone from the Underworld’s grasp. There must be a way to maintain the balance between our realms without condemning her to my kingdom.”

“The maiden sought the fruit of her own volition,” Clotho intoned. “She forged the bond herself, fully aware of the consequences.”

“If my daughter is trapped there indefinitely, the Earth will become barren. We need life and spring.”

“There must be a solution that satisfies all parties involved.”

When the fates began to speak again, the rhymes were gone, but each phrase was still a riddle, unclear to his ears.

Clotho began to spin a long silver thread, entwining it with a golden one.

“To achieve balance between two disparate realms is no simple feat. Yet it may be done, provided those involved share a unity of purpose.”

Lachesis picked up the thread. “Let the maiden spend six months in the Underworld, that she may grow accustomed to its ways. And six months above, to nurture the Earth’s rebirth. The maiden may not travel between the realms within these times, less she perish to the bond.”

“A clean divide. Equal time in each domain,” Clotho added. “Thus, she may retain her ties to both life and death. But the path will not be smooth.”

Atropos raised a gnarled finger. “Three challenges shall arise during her time below. Trials to test the bond between death’s master and the maiden fair.”

“Only by overcoming such adversity together may your relationship mature and find harmony.”

“What happens if we fail?” Persephone asked.

Hades tensed. He should have known there would be consequences for failure. There always were when dealing with the fates.

The three sisters turned to Persephone, their single eye focused intently upon her. “Should you fail the trials ahead,” Clotho rasped, “your essence shall fracture.”

“No longer belonging fully to either world, you will drift, scattered, unable to find purchase or peace.”

Hades’ throat went dry, and he had to resist the urge to pull Persephone to his side. The thought of her bright spirit shattered and lost was too terrible to contemplate.

Persephone paled but lifted her chin bravely. “And if we succeed? What then?”

“If the bond endures each trial,” Clotho rasped, “you shall be granted a choice.”

“To walk the path of unity eternal, two souls entwined by love’s decree.”

“Or cast asunder the fruits of fate, and follow solitary roads once more,” Atropos finished, snipping her shears in the air.

There was no choice. They had to do it.

“We accept your charge,” he declared. “Tell us what we must do.”

The sisters cackled, a grating, mirthless sound. “The tale begins, the threads entwine.”

“What fate decrees, none can decline.”

Atropos raised her shears in an almost gleeful gesture. “Let the trials commence.”

With the pronouncement made, the cave vanished, leaving him, Persephone, and Demeter standing in an empty plane.

“That wasn’t quite what I expected.”

“When have the fates ever done what we expect?” Demeter sighed, looking between them. “If they have decreed this, I suppose I cannot fight it.”

“Those who fight fate only suffer.”

“What will you choose, when the time comes?” Demeter asked.

“Only the fates know.”

Hades knew it wasn’t the answer Persephone desired, but it was the only one he had to give.

CONTINUE THE JOURNEY

OF HADES AND PERSEPHONE

AUGUST 2024

IN

SURVIVING THE UNDERWORLD

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Hopeless romantic, jack-of-all-trades, master of some.

Eve Singleton is an up-and-coming author known for her modern takes on Greek mythology, delving into the complex romances and relationships between the characters. Based in the UK, Eve has been writing stories since she was young, driven by a burning need to get the vivid tales in her head down on paper.

When she's not crafting her next novel, Eve indulges in her love for drawing and exploring new creative hobbies, finding inspiration in these artistic pursuits.

Eve Singleton's work is not just about retelling ancient myths; it's about providing a comforting, affirming escape that resonates with the hearts of her readers, reminding them of the timeless nature of love and human connection.

She is also a great believer in exploring your creativity, and so if anyone wants to make fanfiction or fanart of her works, she is delighted to see what fans make.