

THE  MANTIRUM WORLD



HELL
on
EARTH

IN FIRE AND ASH - BOOK THREE
MELISSA HAAG

HELL ON EARTH

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*To everyone who has ever had to reinvent themselves to
survive,
you've got this. Revisions refine us.*

CHAPTER ONE

ONCE AGAIN, I FOUND MYSELF STANDING IN DARKNESS. Instinctively, I extended my hand in front of me and slowly shuffled forward until my fingers touched the smooth panel of a door with a modern knob. Rather than opening it, I felt alongside it for the switch.

The sudden burst of light blinded me, and I blinked several times at the wooden panel in front of me before slowly turning around and looking at my bedroom. The light blue quilt was neatly made on my bed. My latest journal sat on my nightstand, and the alarm clock showed how late it was here.

In Uttira, Maine.

Not in Hell.

With a flick of his wrist, Hades had fulfilled our contract and sent me home.

My chest tightened, and I hugged my arms around myself to ease the pain.

This is what I chose, I reminded myself.

But it wasn't what I wanted. Not anymore. I wanted Hades standing within touching distance, watching me, saying all sorts of things to hint at how much he adored and wanted me. I wanted to hug him again. Touch him. Seek comfort and know safety.

But all of that was gone now.

He was gone.

And I'd chosen that. He'd asked me to stay. Begged. But I hadn't listened. And why? Because a world that had never wanted me was now in danger?

In my heart, I knew that wasn't the real reason. Acknowledging it made the pain eating through my chest even worse. So I forced myself to admit the truth.

If Hades had actually wanted me, Ashlyn, I might have stayed.

Closing my eyes against the tears that wanted to fall, I leaned my forehead against the door.

"Mother?" Zotera called softly from the other side. "Do you wish to be alone?"

The sound of her familiar voice almost broke me. I jerked open the door and stared at the only remaining connection I still had to Hades.

Looking unsure and worried, Zotera stood in the dark hallway outside of my room. I threw my arms around her, grateful she was there.

"No," I said, answering her. "I don't want to go back to being alone." My voice caught at the end, and I hugged her even harder.

She hesitantly wrapped her arms around me in return.

"I'm happy you allowed me to come with you, Moth—Ashlyn. Your home is beautiful."

Knowing I needed to pull myself together, I nodded against her and took a calming breath before easing away. This was Zotera's first time away from Hell and Hades, and I didn't want her to feel as homesick as I was.

I managed a smile as I looked over my shoulder at the bedroom she was studying. How could it look so familiar yet so wrong at the same time?

"It's definitely different from the room I had in Hell, isn't it?" I asked.

"It is. I can see why you wanted to leave Hell."

The ache in my chest flared in denial, but I didn't contradict her. In the end, I hadn't wanted to leave Hell; I'd *needed* to leave it. And that difference defined how I felt about the place that had slowly grown on me.

Staying in Hell would have selfishly endangered the entire planet. Not that coming here was the definitive answer to preventing Hades from destroying the world in a fit of rage.

"We need to let Megan and the others know what's happened," I said. "Since I lost my phone, we'll need to leave the house. Hopefully, my car is..." I trailed off, remembering how I'd driven it to the academy the day I'd disappeared.

Without my car, it would be a long, dangerous walk to Megan's house.

My gaze flicked to Zotera's bare torso. No one in Uttira would bat an eye at nudity, but her weird skirt would draw attention we couldn't afford. Yet, so would I since I still wore the Grecian-style dress Hades had favored and all the jewelry I'd been wearing at the time.

"First, let's change. We need clothes that will help us blend in," I said.

She followed me to my closet and watched as I dug around for stuff that would fit her. She was taller and had more in the chest than me, so it took some creative thinking to come up with an outfit that wouldn't make her look ridiculous. The yoga pants that had been long on me fit her perfectly, and the oversized sweatshirt designed to expose one shoulder looked much better on her than the hanger it had called home since Adira provided it.

I nodded my approval at Zotera's bare shoulder while wishing I could have worn cute clothes, too, rather than the hoodie and jeans I favored. In Uttira, I didn't do provocative. I covered every bit of skin I could and kept my head down to avoid attention. Self-preservation won over fashion every time.

"Those clothes look so pretty on you, Zotera," I said as she inspected herself in the full-length mirror in my room. "I know

they're not the kind of clothes you prefer, but—”

“No. I love them. I didn't know clothes like this existed,” she said, running her hands over her hips. “They're so soft. This is the best gift I've been given.”

A new kind of ache grew in my chest. Both Hades and Zotera had been treated so horribly by Persephone and had only just started to heal. While I couldn't do anything to help Hades anymore, I would do everything possible to help Zotera have a good life on Earth.

“We'll get some more soft clothes for you,” I promised. “Feel free to look around while I change. We're safe enough in the house. It's warded to keep most everyone out.”

I closed myself in the bathroom and stood there for a minute in an attempt to calm myself. Too many emotions warred inside of me to leave the house safely.

It was your choice, I reminded myself. He begged you to stay. You could have ignored the fact that he didn't want you and only wanted a Persephone lookalike he could love.

A tear fell. Then another. I let myself silently cry and wondered if I'd been an idiot. Then, I pushed the pain and doubt aside and looked at myself in the mirror.

“Hesitation gets people like you killed,” I said softly to myself. “Learn from the past, but stay in the present.”

I nodded and studied my reflection. I looked the same as I remembered, only a bit more dressed up.

Piece by piece, I began removing the jewelry, setting each one carefully on the counter until only the armband remained. Since it was the first one he'd given me, I kept it on and slipped out of the dress.

The three rings Hades had created for the furies were tucked into the binding around my breasts. I hadn't put them there, which meant he'd sent them with me to give to them. Seeing evidence of his consideration created another bitter ache of longing. Why hadn't he been able to see me—Ashlyn—and love me?

Swallowing hard, I pushed the thought aside and finished undressing.

I wasn't sad to see the gown go, to feel the familiar comfort of underwear again. Flushing the toilet and using toilet paper was an absolute luxury. No matter how nice Hades had made that bathroom in Hell, it wasn't the same as modern plumbing.

After washing my hands, I tugged on my jeans, pulled the hoodie over my head, and pocketed the rings. I was so lost in my own little world that the bright flash of light filling the room confused me until I felt my skin tingle uncomfortably. It reminded me of passing through a ward.

My eyes went wide as it faded.

"Zotera?" I called, rushing from the bathroom. "Where are you?"

"Here!" she said from the front of the house.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Mo—Ashlyn. I was inspecting the wards."

I followed the sound of her voice and found her in the dark living room, looking at the curtains covering the windows.

She glanced back at me when she heard me enter.

"These switches on the walls in each room turn on the lights," I said, toggling the switch so she could see how it worked.

Her eyes grew wide, and she hurried over to try it herself. I grinned at her wonder.

"Just wait," I said. "There's a lot here I think you're going to love." I studied her happy expression. "The ward didn't hurt you, did it? I saw a flash."

She smiled at me and shook her head. "No. I'm fine. It won't hurt me."

While I was glad it hadn't, I was worried about what that meant. If the ward was that inconsequential to her, how would it ever keep me safe from the God of Death?

“We better go, Zotera,” I said. “Unless by some miracle my car’s in the garage, we’re going to need to walk.”

When I went to grab a jacket, I saw the car keys hanging by the kitchen door and knew luck was finally on my side. Someone had returned my car. Snagging them on the way to the garage, I gave Zotera a quick explanation of gas-powered transportation.

“This is wondrous,” she said, watching me start the engine.

She buckled and unbuckled, playing with her seatbelt as I backed out of the garage and passed through the ward. The usually strong tingle felt like an army of ants crawling under my skin, and I shuddered at the sensation.

Zotera noticed.

“Did it hurt?” she asked.

“No. Passing through the ward just feels weird. It’s been a while, and I guess I forgot what it felt like.”

“Ooh!” she said, turning and pressing her hands against her window. “There are so many homes here.”

“Yep. There are. I’m the only human on this block, though. Can you tell humans apart from other children of the gods?” I asked.

“Mostly,” she said, sounding uninterested as she leaned forward and looked up at the starlit sky.

“That is beautiful, Mother.” She sat back and looked at me. “Ashlyn.”

“I appreciate that you’re trying to use my name,” I said. “But don’t worry if you accidentally call me Mother. I won’t get mad. I know I look exactly like her.”

She made a slight sound of agreement but turned her attention to the world outside the car. I tried to imagine how alien everything must feel to her and couldn’t. Where I would have been terrified, she was simply in awe of it all.

The drive to Megan’s house didn’t take long and was thankfully uneventful. Since the lights were on inside, I didn’t

feel too bad arriving unannounced so late at night.

I didn't open my car door when I parked, though. Instead, I looked around the yard.

"What's wrong?" Zotera asked, watching me.

"The car is warded, but I'm vulnerable as soon as I leave it. So, I'm checking to make sure no one's around. I'll run and knock on Megan's door as soon as I'm out. She shouldn't take too long to answer. Hopefully."

Zotera giggled a little. "You don't need to run, Ashlyn. You're not vulnerable when you're with me. I promise to keep you safe."

I glanced at Zotera, who had repeatedly shown she didn't have a mean bone in her body. How many times had I run away from monsters in Hell while she did nothing but watch? Not that I held it against her or would ever point that out to her. I understood that Hell had different rules.

"I'd rather not risk either of us if I can help it," I said neutrally.

She just smiled and asked me to show her how to leave the car. She played with the handle, opening and closing the door twice before getting out.

As I'd warned, I left the car in a rush and raced to Megan's door to knock.

"Hold your pants!" Megan yelled from inside when I knocked a second time.

"Why do we need to hold them?" Zotera asked.

"It's just an expression," I said. "She means we should wait and that she's coming to answer the door."

"She expects you to wait?" Zotera asked, horror in her tone.

"She expects whoever is knocking to wait. She doesn't know it's me."

The door swung open, and when Megan saw me, the flicker of flames vanished from her gaze.

“Oh my gods,” she said. “Is it really you?”

“It is. Can we come in? Please?”

She grabbed my arm and yanked me inside, catching me and hugging me hard. I hugged her back. Before my time in Hell, I wouldn't have said we had this kind of friendship. After Hell, I didn't care. I just wanted a damn hug for everything we'd both gone through.

“How are you here?” she asked. “What happened? Is Hades asleep again?”

“No,” I said, pulling back. “He's not. I proved my humanity, and he sent me back with Zotera.”

I looked at Zotera and motioned for her to come inside too.

“Hello, Megan,” she said with an uncertain smile.

“Why did he send you here too?” Megan asked.

“Megan,” I said in a clearly scolding tone.

She shot me a sheepish look. “Sorry. I didn't mean it like that. Zotera, you're welcome here. I'm just trying to get caught up.”

“Father wanted me to have a chance to explore the human world,” Zotera said, drawing Megan's attention again.

The look I gave Megan warned her that was enough explanation for now.

“I'm really glad you're back,” Megan said, wisely not pressing further. “I'm sorry I had to leave you there.”

“It's okay. I understand why.”

Oanen walked into the kitchen. He wore a pair of sweatpants that hung low on his hips and nothing else. I'd seen him like that countless times and had, at one time, thought him very attractive. Now though, I only saw how he wasn't Hades. He lacked the extra broadness in the shoulders and a few more inches of height. And the golden glow. The sexy smirk. The dark hair and the intensely focused gaze.

The floor under my feet gave the slightest rumble before quieting, and I realized Oanen and I were staring at each other.

“Sorry for the intrusion,” I said.

“It’s okay. I heard we had company,” he said. “I didn’t expect to see you, though, Ashlyn. Welcome home.”

“Thanks.”

“What happened?” he asked.

“Hold on,” Megan said. “Before you explain, let me get Eliana on the phone. She’s going to want to hear this too.”

Eliana picked up on the second ring, sounding breathless.

“Is this a bad time?” Megan asked with a smirk.

“No. Not at all,” Eliana said at the same time Fenris, a werewolf I knew, said, “Yes!” in the background.

Megan chuckled and looked at me.

“Sorry, Fenris, but Eliana is going to want to hear this. Ashlyn’s back.”

“What?” Eliana said. “Are you serious?”

“Yep. She’s standing right here.”

“Hi, Eliana,” I said.

She started to sniffle, and I heard Fenris murmur something in soothing tones.

When the druids had accidentally sent me to Hell, Megan had been in New York with Oanen, and Eliana had been trying to get rid of her mother. Eliana, a young succubus struggling to embrace feeding as her kind fed, had still been very single. Obviously, a lot had changed in the weeks I’d been gone.

“I’m so sorry,” Eliana sobbed. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“You didn’t. I know it wasn’t your fault. The druids were amateurs. Obviously. And Megan already said they’ve been mind-wiped, so they won’t ever be able to use that spell again. It’s okay. I promise.”

“I actually called so that we can hear how Ashlyn got away,” Megan said over Eliana’s soft crying.

“Mother didn’t get away,” Zotera said. “Father sent her back.”

“Who’s that?” Fenris asked over the sound of Eliana’s soft crying.

“Zotera,” I said. “She’s a friend, and she’s the reason I’m back. I’m not sure how much Megan told you, but everyone in Hell thought I was Persephone. It turns out that I look *exactly* like her.

“When I arrived in Hell, I was alone in a dark room. Thinking I was still in Uttira, I left that room and started looking for an exit. Then I saw the first monst—uh, child of the gods. I ran in a blind panic and ended up ducking into a room with a skeleton clutching a key on a bed and another one chained to the wall at the end of the bed.

“I was only in there for a few minutes when the one chained to the wall started to move.” The picture of how Hades had looked filled my mind. “I panicked and ran again.”

“And Father followed,” Zotera said softly.

“Yeah,” I said. “He did. For a while, I stuck to the rules I knew—the ones I thought would keep me safe. I didn’t look at him or talk to him—stupid druids silenced me with their spell. Even without it, though, it was pretty easy not to. He wasn’t exactly sane in the beginning. But after a while, that changed. And once I figured out that I was in Hell and everyone thought I was Persephone, I had no idea how to get back to that room to prove the goddess was dead.”

“Please tell me you didn’t lead Hades to his dead wife,” Megan said with a cringe.

“No, Ashlyn didn’t know where the room was anymore. I led Father and Ashlyn there.”

“That explains all the earthquakes,” Megan said.

“Was it bad?” I asked.

The single, warning shake of her head said it had been.

“It’s not your fault,” Eliana said with a snuffle.

“I tried to keep him distracted,” I said.

“She did,” Zotera seconded, acting like my personal yes-man, which I really appreciated.

“So Hades saw his dead wife and just sent you back?” Megan asked. “No harm and no foul?”

“Pretty much. But only because of the deal I’d made with him. I’d proven my humanity by proving that I wasn’t Persephone, and he sent me home.”

Megan let out a long breath and sat at the kitchen table. “I guess we should be thankful we’re all still here. That could have gone way worse.”

She motioned for us to join her. Oanen sat next to her, and Zotera and I took the seats on the opposite side. The ground shook slightly again.

“Did you feel that too, Eliana?” Megan asked.

“Yeah. We did,” Eliana said.

“Which means we’ve only solved one of our problems,” Megan said, sounding frustrated. “We got Ashlyn back, but Hades is still a problem.”

“You shouldn’t speak so disrespectfully about Father,” Zotera said, looking worried.

“You think I should respect the god responsible for my mother abandoning me so she wouldn’t kill me? The one who gave me all these urges and anger without any instruction or guidance regarding what to do about it? No. I might be compelled to respect him when I’m in his godly presence, but I refuse to pretend I have any fondness for the god who made my life and the lives of the furies before me a living hell.”

Zotera looked down at the table with a hurt expression, and I reached out to hold her hand. She didn’t deserve Megan’s anger. Neither did Hades. That was all Persephone’s doing. But before I could explain, Zotera spoke.

“I’m sorry you suffered, Megan. Father tried to keep us all safe but sometimes failed.”

“He isn’t the god we’ve been told he is,” I said. “He protected Zotera and many others from Persephone. *Persephone* is a big part of the reason you’ve had a shit life.” I couldn’t absolve Hades of all blame. He’d agreed to each deal for whatever crumb of meager affection she offered. But he had tried to make amends.

“While I was in Hell, he made these for you and your mom and grandma.” I took out the rings and set them on the table. “He does care, Megan. A lot.”

Eliana lightly cleared her throat over the phone.

“Fine. Whatever,” Megan said. “We’re getting off-topic. You’ve spent time with Hades. What do we need to do to get him to go back to sleep? What will appease him?”

“Persephone, loving him and at his side. Forever,” I said.

“Yeah, well, that ship has sailed,” Megan said. “Anything else?”

“Thanatos’ head on a pike?” Zotera suggested.

“That would make me happy, too,” Megan said. “We still haven’t been able to find him, and Adira’s been hard to pin down too. She knows I’m looking for her.”

“I think Thanatos’ head on a pike is going to be harder than you think,” I said with a quick glance at Zotera. “He’s not just an immortal. He’s the God of Death.”

Megan’s oh-shit face worried me more than Eliana’s soft whimper from the phone.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Zotera is.”

“So there are two gods awake?” Fenris asked.

“Yes. One who wants to love Persephone and one who wants to kill her. Lucky me for being her identical twin.”

“And we have no idea why Thanatos wants to kill her?” Megan asked, looking at Zotera.

Zotera gave a quick head shake.

“As the God of Death, could he be the reason behind the banshees singing?” I asked, recalling what Megan had told me in Hell.

“Since the earthquakes have all been Hades—”

“Those are because Thanatos keeps trying to kill what he loves,” I said, interrupting Megan. “Or...you know what I mean.”

“I do. But he wasn’t trying to kill you when you went to that room, was he? According to our estimates, that was the first earthquake. When you woke Hades.”

I looked down at the table, struggling with my guilt. Megan noticed.

“Regardless of who triggered the singing,” she said, “we still need to know if Adira is actually working with Thanatos. And that’s what I want to ask her. Getting people to confess their sins is my specialty. So if she is, I’ll find out as soon as I can talk to her face to face.”

“Do I need to be worried about her?” I asked. Adira was one of the exceptions to the ward in my house. Whether she was invited or not, she could enter. The same went with Uttira’s new liaison.

“If Adira shows up, call me,” Megan said. “I can be there in seconds.”

“Two problems with that,” I said. “One, I don’t have a phone anymore. I lost it in Hell.”

“I can help with that,” Oanen said. “I’ll get you a new phone tomorrow.”

Another minute tremor teased my feet as I said, “Thanks. I’ll feel safer when I have a fury on speed dial.” The shaking quieted. “Is this common now? Constant mini earthquakes?”

“There are good days, and there are bad days,” Megan said. “Now that you’re here, I’m guessing there will be more bad than good. But seriously, I’m glad you’re back. I’d rather have you here and deal with tremors than have you still stuck in Hell.”

I forced myself to nod even though I didn’t agree.

“What’s the second problem if Adira shows up?” Megan asked.

“Adira can portal faster than I can dial. I’m guessing Thanatos will be able to as well.”

Megan made a frustrated sound.

“Don’t worry, Megan,” Zotera said. “I won’t let anyone take Ashlyn. I promise.”

Megan glanced from Zotera to me, doubt clear on her face.

“But even with Ashlyn safe, Father still seeks Thanatos. What are you doing to find him?” Zotera asked.

“Adira is our lead to getting more information about him. Since she’s continuing to meddle in Uttira’s affairs here and there, I’ve been focused on trying to find her. Grandma Grace is following leads to try to find out when exactly the gods disappeared, and Mom is visiting other stronghold councils to gauge who else, if anyone, Thanatos might have approached.”

“Father will be pleased to know you are doing everything you can to find the one who attempted to harm Ashlyn.”

“Do you think he still cares after finding out she’s not Persephone?” Megan asked.

Zotera glanced at me, her soft brown eyes locked with mine as she lightly squeezed my hand.

“Ashlyn was always honest with Father. She never claimed to be Persephone when she showed compassion and affection. He won’t forget everything she gave him and will protect her. Always.”

What he’d said before sending me back rang in my ears again.

This isn't the last time we will see one another, Ashlyn. I vow it.

“Can Hades leave Hell?” Eliana asked over the phone as if reading my mind.

“No,” Zotera said. “Father was bound to Hell by Zeus.”

“Well, that’s one good thing, at least,” Megan said. “Hopefully, now that Ashlyn’s out of Hell, Thanatos won’t have any reason to come after her. But, to be on the safe side, we’ll continue to search for Adira. Zayn’s brewing up another location spell. A stronger one this time that will work in all the realms, hopefully.”

“Good,” Eliana said. “But I don’t like the idea of Ashlyn going home by herself until then.”

“She’s not by herself,” Zotera said. “She has me. I will keep her safe.”

Megan leaned back in her chair and studied Zotera.

“No offense, but every time I saw you, you were either sitting at the foot of Hades’ throne or standing off to the side. Everything about you screams passive pushover. How exactly are you going to protect Ashlyn?”

“Like this,” Zotera said.

CHAPTER TWO

WHILE I WAS STILL BRISTLING AT WHAT FELT LIKE AN ATTACK on Zotera's character, she vanished beside me only to reappear behind Oanen.

She grabbed him by the throat, lifting him out of his chair and pinning him against the kitchen wall before I could blink.

Oanen and I both stared at Zotera in shock until I felt a sudden burst of heat from across the table. Megan's eyes were starting to flicker with flames, and I knew she was about two seconds from accidentally frying me.

"Run," Oanen rasped, seeing the same thing and grabbing Zotera's wrist as his face grew redder.

Zotera's free hand whipped out, palm facing Megan. The fire in Megan's gaze extinguished in an instant, even though Oanen still struggled in Zotera's grasp.

"Let him go," Megan said in her fury voice.

Zotera didn't move to comply.

I did, though. I flew out of my chair and pulled at Zotera's arm. It didn't budge.

"Zotera, stop!"

Her sad brown gaze met mine.

"Forgive me, Mother. I am only proving that I am worthy of protecting you. The griffin's strength is no match for mine. And even the fury must obey my will not to interfere. Do you believe me now? Do you believe I will keep you safe?"

“Yes,” I said frantically. “I do. Now, please put him down.”

Zotera’s gaze flicked to Oanen.

“Is he a past lover, Mother?” she asked.

“Ashlyn,” I said as the ground shook. “I’m not *her*, remember? And he’s not my past anything.”

Zotera nodded and released Oanen. He stood on his own two feet as he gasped for air. He didn’t look at Zotera or me but kept his gaze focused on Megan.

“You should go,” Oanen rasped. “Release Megan after you’re out the door.”

I looked at Megan. She sat in her chair, trembling as she glared at Zotera.

Ignoring Oanen’s order, I hugged Megan tightly even though she couldn’t move and whispered in her ear.

“Persephone tricked Zotera into being raped and then disfigured her face out of jealousy.” I pulled back and cupped Megan’s cheeks like I’d done to Hades so many times. “You and I have both chosen to be more than products of our circumstances. Give Zotera a chance too. Guide her. Please don’t punish her.”

Megan let out a shaky breath.

“Tomorrow,” she said. “For now, I need to cool down.”

I nodded, grabbed Zotera’s hand, and pulled her out the door with me.

“I’m sorry I disobeyed you, Ashlyn,” she said, following me meekly now. “I only wanted to prove that I can keep you safe.”

“I know,” I said, opening the car door for her. “But Megan is my friend. And Oanen is her mate. Hurting him just to prove you were stronger than both of them was selfish and unkind.”

Looking suitably sorry, Zotera nodded.

She was quiet the whole way home. When we pulled into the driveway and crossed through the ward, my skin crawled

to the point that I shuddered again.

“I just want to keep you safe,” she said finally.

“I know. And I am grateful for your protection.” I patted her hand. “We’ll find a way to make it up to Megan. She’s a fury. She would have been the first to know if your intentions were bad.”

She followed me into the house and watched as I hung the keys on the peg near the door.

My day, which had started in Hell, had taken a lot out of me. No, it had taken almost everything from me. My thoughts went to Hades and all the time I’d spent kissing him to prevent a catastrophe. I’d known, on some level, I would lose him once we reached that room. It just hadn’t been in the way I’d expected.

My chest ached painfully again, and I forced those thoughts away.

“Do you mind if I give you the full tour tomorrow?” I asked. “It’s been a really long day, and I’m looking forward to sleeping in my own bed again.”

“I don’t mind waiting, Ashlyn.” Zotera glanced around the kitchen. “Where would you like me to wait?”

Her words were the reminder I needed that I wasn’t the only one displaced. I couldn’t be selfish. Not with Zotera. Hades had just given Zotera her own bedroom before we’d left. Prior to that, she’d slept at the foot of Persephone’s chair. Did she honestly think that’s what I was asking her to do?

“Come on,” I said, motioning for her to follow me. “I have a double bed. Plenty of room for both of us for tonight.”

I gave her a spare toothbrush and smiled as she brushed her teeth for the first time in her life. Her expression was priceless when I gave her pajamas and again when I pulled back the covers and told her to get in.

“You wish me to give you pleasure?” Zotera asked uncertainly.

“What? No!” I said as the ground rumbled softly again. “I’m telling you there’s one bed, and we can share it to *sleep* tonight. Just sleep.”

Zotera clutched her hands in front of her so hard that her knuckles were white. I considered her, trying to figure out why.

“I know that everything here is different than you’re used to, but I’m not different, Zotera. I’m the same Ashlyn that I’ve always been. I’m not going to do horrible things to you or ask you to do horrible things for me.”

She nodded, but she was still clutching her hands.

“You’re not...afraid of me, are you?” I asked, that ache in my chest growing by the second.

Her gaze flew to mine.

“If you’d rather sleep on the couch,” I said quickly, “I’ll get you a pillow and a blanket. It’s okay. It won’t upset me. But I’d consider it a kindness if you’d sleep back here with me.

“Before I went to Hell, I was alone in this house for a month. I struggled to sleep at night. Some of the creatures here would tap at the windows to try to get me to come out. And once I was in Hell, sleep wasn’t any easier. I was afraid all the time.”

“Even when Father slept with you?” she asked.

“I was still a little afraid at first until I realized how much safer I was with him next to me than alone. And that’s all I want now, Zotera. The ground keeps shaking. I’m back in my cage where creatures can tap on my windows and try to lure me out. And I’m away from the one person who ever made me feel completely safe.”

The tremors slowly faded to nothing.

“Thank you for explaining, Mother. Ashlyn.” She lay down on her side of the bed, and I hurried to get in on my side.

The bed didn’t feel as comfortable as I’d remembered. Or maybe it was just how I defined comfort that had changed.

“If I roll toward you or anything, just push me away,” I said, remembering how I always woke curled up against Hades.



I woke curled on my side at the edge of the bed, knowing exactly where I was and who I was with. And who I wasn't with. The despair threatened to pull me under. Pushing it down, I opened my eyes.

Morning light was filtering into the room around the curtains, and I glanced at the bedside alarm. It was almost eight already. I looked at Zotera and grinned. She was sprawled out, half covered by blankets, and her mouth slightly open. Her hair tangled around her head in a crazy blonde nest, and she snored softly.

Slipping from the bed so I wouldn't wake her, I crept to the bathroom. The shower wasn't nearly as nice as the one Hades had made me in Hell, but having conditioner again was really nice.

The door to the bathroom opened before the water stopped.

“Mother?” Zotera called, sounding worried. “Are you all right?”

“Ashlyn,” I said as a gentle reminder. “And I'm fine. If you wait in the bedroom, I'll show you how to use everything in here as soon as I'm done.”

She let me finish in peace, which gave me time to consider how to make peace between Zotera and Megan. In the end, I decided their relationship was up to them. I'd already told Megan what she needed to know regarding Zotera's actions, and I knew Megan wasn't unfair. I could only hope that Zotera wouldn't make any other rash mistakes.

After I finished dressing, I found Zotera waiting on the neatly made bed.

She was quick to join me in the bathroom and marveled at each new thing I showed her. She loved flushing the toilet, and

I warned her not to flush down anything other than what came out of her and toilet paper. The shower didn't seem to impress her much, and I acknowledged that the ones we had in Hell had been better. She smelled every single bottle in the bathroom and grinned when I explained the purpose of the conditioner.

Once she finished her shower and was wearing her yoga pants and sweatshirt again, we went to the kitchen.

As soon as I opened the refrigerator, I knew we were in trouble. It was completely empty.

Of course it was. Why leave food in an abandoned house?

"I guess I'll need to request a food delivery once I get my phone," I said.

My stomach growled, and Zotera gave me a worried look.

"You shouldn't go hungry," she said.

"I don't want to, but I didn't think of food last night when we were talking to Megan and Oanen."

"I can—"

Someone knocked on the front door, interrupting her.

"Hold that thought," I said before going to look through the peephole.

Eliana stood on my front step, holding my snow shovel and two bags loaded with groceries. The food made sense. The shovel was a little weird.

As soon as I opened the door, her eyes began to water.

"No more crying," I said. "Now, get in here so I can safely give you a hug."

"I dare anyone to try to hurt you when I'm around," Eliana said. "I let it happen once. Never again."

She set aside the bags and shovel and hugged me. It was another first. I'd always liked Eliana, but I never forgot what she was. A succubus could be dangerous to a human. Especially physical contact. But I didn't pull away from her.

“I’m so glad you’re back,” she said with a final squeeze before retreating. “Mrs. Quill and I cleaned out your fridge after you disappeared, so I figured you’d need some supplies.”

“Your timing is perfect,” I said, closing the door behind her.

“Actually, I’ve been outside for an hour, waiting for your light to go on.” She shot me a sheepish look. “I didn’t want you to go hungry because of me.”

“I won’t let Ashlyn starve,” Zotera said from where she hesitated in the kitchen archway.

Eliana turned toward Zotera and, with a friendly smile, held out her hand.

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Zotera,” Eliana said. “Any friend of Ashlyn’s is a friend of mine.”

Zotera looked at Eliana’s hand and then at me. I nodded my encouragement and struggled with another pang when they shook hands. Poor Zotera had no basis for trust.

“What’s up with the shovel?” I asked, nodding to where it now leaned against the wall beside the door.

“I borrowed it for a location spell after you disappeared,” Eliana said. “Didn’t work for the spell, but I used it to keep your driveway clean.” She picked up the bags. “I have what we need to make a big breakfast and some brownies. The good kind, not the kind that sparkles all over the place.” Her eyes flashed black for a second.

“Uh, everything okay?” I asked.

“It’s getting there. I have so much to tell you.”

Zotera joined us in the kitchen, and as Eliana started sharing everything that had happened to her after I’d disappeared from the bathroom, she gave Zotera tasks. Little things like cracking the eggs and mixing the batter. But those little things were huge in Zotera’s eyes. I could see it, and Eliana could too. Persephone’s unloved daughter was being included in something normal and nice for the first time in her life.

Zotera was also hanging onto every word of Eliana's story. By the time the brownies were in the oven and we had our eggs and toast in front of us, Eliana had reached the sparkle-fest point of her story.

"I thought I was going to kill him," she said before taking a bite of jellied toast.

"It sounds like he wouldn't have minded," Zotera said. "I'd like to meet Piepen. Do you think one of his kind would mark me?"

Eliana set down her toast. "Trust me, Zotera. You don't want to be marked by a brownie. If you're interested in affection, go with a werewolf. Or a dragon."

"A dragon?" I asked.

Eliana shared what had happened to Kelsey, one of my fellow resident humans in Uttira. Then she relayed what Eugene was up to with one of the girls from the pack.

"I can't believe how much changed while I was gone," I said, half to myself, as the timer went off.

"Same," Eliana said. "I mean, I know nothing stays the same forever, but still. Everything just seems to be changing so quickly."

"You and Fenris?" I guessed.

She sighed and pulled the brownies from the oven.

"Yeah. We're staying at the Quills for now because I'm not a fan of his father, Raiden. But I know Fenris misses the pack. Eventually, we'll need to go back. And then what?"

Smiling, I took out the plastic knife I kept just to cut warm brownies cleanly. Waiting for them to cool was overrated.

"I remember a certain fury freaking out about the same thing while we made brownies at her house," I said as I cut the squares. "And look at how things turned out. Spend less time worrying about the future and more time living in the present."

"Ugh. You sound like Fenris," Eliana said with a playful eye-roll.

I grinned and handed her a brownie.

“Have some chocolate therapy while you think over our wisdom.”

“Zotera first.” She took the plate to Zotera and sat across from her. “I love desserts and heard that you don’t have much food variety in Hell. Try this and tell me what you think.”

Zotera took her first bite as I plated two more pieces. Her eyes went wide. She made a small sound, almost like a whimper.

“It’s good, right?” Eliana asked with a grin.

I sat and passed a plate to her. “These kinds of desserts typically aren’t allowed in Uttira, but thanks to Eliana, I know a place where we can get the sugar and chocolate.”

Zotera took another bigger bite. “Father needs to try this,” she said after she swallowed. “He would enjoy this very much.”

I felt the kick of longing and loneliness again, and Eliana glanced at me. Giving her a smile I didn’t quite feel, I took my own bite of self-soothing confectionery.

“Mags hasn’t been exactly welcoming lately,” Eliana said. “Call me if you need anything, and I’ll pick it up for you at a fair price. At least until Megan finds Adira.”

Her gentle reminder that the extremely limited freedoms I’d enjoyed prior to Hell—going to the academy and making risky runs for chocolate—were no longer options had me looking down at my dessert. I was more trapped than ever.

Eliana helped us with the dishes then left with a promise to return for another visit soon.

After I closed the door behind her, I wandered back to the kitchen to look at the food she’d put away. Zotera and I had enough to make lunch and dinner, likely with leftovers the next day. As long as Oanen kept his word about delivering the phone before nightfall, which I knew he would, Zotera and I would be fine.

“Are you still hungry, Ashlyn?” Zotera asked.

“I’m pretty full, actually.”

“Would you like to give me the tour now?”

“Absolutely,” I said, feeling bad I’d already forgotten.

Our house wasn’t that big. So I started with the garage, showing her the tools there. The snow would linger for another month or two, so I knew neither of us would need to worry about mowing anytime soon. But Zotera was fascinated by the machinery and improved “torture” tools.

“They’re for yard work,” I said for the second time. “No torturing, okay?”

She nodded and followed me inside where I explained all the kitchen appliances and gave her a warning about sticking things in the toaster.

Saving the living room and its one source of entertainment for later, I walked down the only hallway. She stopped to study Uncle Trammer’s picture on the wall before following me to the first door.

I hadn’t been in my uncle’s room since the day after he died when I’d put away his things. His bed was neatly made, and his uniforms still hung in his closet. The bedside table and alarm had a thin layer of dust on them.

I walked over to his window and opened the curtains, something I would have never done before going to Hell. It still wasn’t smart, but my uncle had lived with darkness most of his life, and his room needed light. Desperately. And fresh air.

Unlocking the window, I opened it wide.

“Help me strip the bed,” I said.

We did more than strip the bed. We washed all the bedding, which Zotera found confusing, and packed away his uniforms. She was quiet as we worked, listening to my stories of the past as we removed his things and dusted.

When I brought out the vacuum, I had Zotera’s full attention.

“It removes dirt?”

“It does,” I said. “Do you want to try it?”

Her enthusiasm to help in any way reminded me that I was all she had. And, if I were honest with myself, she was all I had, too. Eliana and Megan, the only two children of the gods I trusted in Uttira, had mates now. And the other humans were connected with Uttira in ways I’d never been.

Carrying a box from the room, I acknowledged how glad I was that Zotera had come with me. Hopefully, she wouldn’t regret her choice once boredom set in.

With my mind on Zotera and the sound of the vacuum running, I almost didn’t hear the knock on the front door as I set the box of my uncle’s things in the kitchen. I hurried to answer it, eager for the phone replacement and the additional freedom it would allow.

I quickly leaned in to check the peephole, expecting Oanen or Megan.

Adira’s icy blue eyes stared back at me. Her pale hair was perfectly brushed back from her face and twisted into a knot at the back of her head.

My mind went blank for a moment.

Adira. The driving force behind all the decisions made by the Council. The very woman potentially colluding with Thanatos.

My thoughts went from a crawl to a race. Why was Adira knocking? Somehow, she knew someone was in my house. She always knew things. Which probably meant she knew *I* was home. And if I didn’t answer, she would likely just portal inside. If I did answer, then what? A direct attack? Grab me and portal me to Thanatos?

Both those options seemed unlikely. If she wanted to do either, she would have just appeared inside and done either or both without warning.

I wished Oanen had shown up first with my phone. Then I could have called Megan.

But Megan wasn't there. I was. And I wanted answers.

The vacuum turned off in the bedroom, and I glanced over my shoulder at Zotera. She stood in the doorway to my uncle's room.

Lifting my finger to my lips to indicate that Zotera should be quiet, I motioned her to return to my uncle's room. Once she was hidden, I took a calming breath and faced the door.

I pulled it open and looked at Adira.

"Hello, Ashlyn," Adira said with a slight smile. "When your neighbors reported there was someone in this house again, I didn't believe it. It's a very pleasant surprise to see you're back. Megan told me you were working on a way to appease Hades and put him back to sleep. Were you able to do so?"

The typical non-aggressive yet no-nonsense Adira speech didn't put me at ease. It reminded me of the day she'd told me that my uncle had killed himself. She'd simply patted my hand and told me I had a choice to make. Stay in Uttira and continue to fulfill my responsibilities or go my own way... without my memories.

The conversation hadn't been cruel, just very Adira. Coolly distant. As a child of the gods, she didn't have much feeling toward humans in general. And because of that, I could see how she could be working with Thanatos. If she believed I was why Hades was awake and upset, she would do what was necessary to appease him and put him back to sleep.

"Does your silence mean you weren't able to?" she asked.

"I was sent back before I could," I said.

"How unfortunate," Adira said. "I had hoped Megan could produce the result she promised. The Council will be disappointed. But I am glad you have returned. The Roost hasn't been the same without you. Kelsey and Zoe have been unavailable for their assigned round for weeks."

"Yeah, I heard Kelsey found herself a dragon," I said, still trying to decide if Adira was someone I could trust or not.

“Precisely. It’s been a bit of a problem that we’re trying to straighten out. Until we do, I need you to resume your shifts. Eugene has earned some rest during your absence.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. She wanted me to resume my shifts? Shifts I thought had been stopped due to Megan’s influence?

“I just got back last night,” I said carefully. “I don’t even have a phone to call for help if I get into trouble.”

“We both know a phone won’t save you if you forget yourself at the lake. Three o’clock.”

“The lake?” I echoed. “Megan said—”

“Megan does not make the rules here,” Adira said, as coolly distant as ever.

The air behind her started to distort and shimmer with one of Adira’s portals.

“Speaking of Megan...was she already here with Zayn?” she asked.

“Zayn?”

“The druid she’s been using to help her with spells. Your home’s ward feels different.”

“That’s definitely something you should ask her,” I said. “I think she’s home right now if you want to pop in.”

A slight smile flickered on her lips. “You seem different too. More trusting of the creatures you know you shouldn’t trust. Be careful, Ashlyn. And don’t be late, or I will assume you would like to resign from your position here in Uttira.”

She turned and walked through the portal she’d created. A second later, the shimmer disappeared as if it were never there.

CHAPTER THREE

I CLOSED THE DOOR, FEELING FRUSTRATION AND ANGER AS MY mind raced.

“Mother? Are you all right?” Zotera asked from the hallway. “Who was that?”

Turning, I tried to give Zotera a reassuring smile.

“One of the people in charge of Uttira. She also runs the academy and coordinates the work schedule for the humans who live here,” I said evasively, not wanting to worry Zotera.

“Work schedule?” Zotera frowned.

“It’s not as bad as it sounds,” I said. “There’s no labor involved. Just a lot of sitting around, which I don’t mind. It always gave me a chance to get out of the house.”

“And she wants you to work again?”

I shrugged a little. “It could be fun with you there to keep an eye on me.” Because there was no way I was going anywhere without Zotera. Besides, if it were a normal shift, it *might* actually be fun.

However, my head and my gut were telling me that my upcoming shift at the lake wouldn’t be normal. Adira’s comment about my resignation hadn’t felt like a reminder of my place here but an ultimatum.

“What is her name?” Zotera asked, watching me with a knowing look in her eyes. She might be naïve, but she wasn’t stupid. She’d been there when Megan ratted Adira out.

“Adira,” I admitted.

The ground shook so hard that the glasses in the cupboard clinked together aggressively. I pressed myself against the wall, but the tremor faded as quickly as it had appeared.

I exhaled heavily and looked at Zotera, who was watching me.

“Every time it does that, I wonder what he’s doing. Is he sitting on his throne, listening to stories? Is he talking to Creon? Or is he still in that room, staring at Persephone’s bones, angry that we ever brought him there?”

I rubbed my face, forcing away the hurt I felt and the urge I had to cry.

“You haven’t eaten in hours,” Zotera said. “Show me how to prepare your food.”

Nodding, I followed her to the kitchen. Cooking with Zotera was a good distraction until I heard another knock on the door.

“I really hope that’s someone with a phone,” I said, not moving.

What were the chances it was Thanatos instead of Oanen? At least fifty-fifty with the way things had been going for me.

“Do you want me to answer it this time?” Zotera asked, noting my hesitation.

“No. It’s fine. The house is warded.” I didn’t let a smidge of my doubt show that the ward would be enough to keep Thanatos out. “Keep stirring so it doesn’t burn.”

I left her at the stove and went to check the peephole. When I saw Oanen, I let out a relieved breath and ripped the door open.

“Thank the gods you’re here. Come in.”

He took one step toward the door, and a burst of light exploded in front of me.

Oanen went flying backward and landed on my snow-covered lawn, skidding for several yards on his back.

“Oanen!”

Zotera grabbed my arm, stopping me from running out the door.

“It’s safer if you stay here, Ashlyn,” she said.

“But I think he’s hurt. Please, Zotera,” I begged. “We can’t let anything happen to him. He’s too important to Megan.”

She nodded. “I will check on him.”

I stayed in the house as she went to him.

“He’s breathing,” she said.

“Is he conscious? Does anything look broken?”

Oanen groaned, and Zotera tilted her head as she watched him.

“He’s very pretty,” she said.

“He’s very Megan’s,” I said. “So he’s not pretty. He’s just Oanen, a protector of those who can’t protect themselves. Just like Megan. Okay?”

Zotera nodded, and Oanen groaned again.

“Oanen?” I called. “Can you hear me? Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” he managed.

I wasn’t sure if he was answering one or both of the questions.

He sat up before I could ask, and I saw the blisters on his face.

“I don’t understand what happened,” I said.

“The ward protecting your house went off,” he said. He looked at Zotera. “Would you mind helping me stand? Carefully?”

She looked at me, and I motioned that she should.

“Just be really gentle,” I warned.

She helped him to his feet and waited until he let go of her before she released him.

“Thanks,” he said.

I reached my hand out, passing it through the ward. Nothing happened to me. Just that aggressive tingle under my skin again.

“Why would the ward go off like that?” I asked, looking at Oanen. “It’s only supposed to stop uninvited people from entering.” And I’d invited him in just like I’d invited Eliana.

“I don’t know,” he said, wincing slightly as he lifted his hand and offered the bag he still held to Zotera. “This is the phone I promised. It should still work.”

“Oanen, I am so sorry,” I said.

“It’s not your fault. Something must have happened to the ward.”

Adira had said the same thing. But she’d suggested Megan had her druid do something to it. However, if that had been the case, Oanen would have known.

It didn’t make sense that it had reacted to him so violently. Wards were only meant to dispel, not harm unwanted trespassers or those who meant me harm. Why him and not Adira? Of the two, it would be Adira who was more likely to mean me harm.

Which was why I hadn’t invited Adira in, not that she needed an invitation as a member of the council and trusted protector of the humans living here. But if she was working with Thanatos, could she have lost that inherent ability? Was it possible that, even with an invitation, the ward would have rejected her?

I wish she would have tried.

My gaze flicked to Oanen’s face.

Or had she tried?

“I need you to call Megan,” I said. “Now.”

“I’m fine,” he said. “I’ll just—”

“Prove you’re Oanen and call Megan,” I said. “Or Zotera will practice last night’s move again.”

Zotera's expression registered shock for only a moment before she dropped the bag she held and turned to Oanen.

"Okay," he said, holding up his hands. "I'm calling."

He cautiously withdrew his phone from his pocket and pressed the screen with his thumb.

I could hear ringing a second later.

"Hey, handsome," Megan said. "What's up?"

Oanen looked at me without speaking.

"Tell her to portal here," I said.

"Ashlyn?" Megan asked, hearing me.

"Yeah," I called. "Something weird is going on."

She appeared beside Oanen a second later.

"Is that really Oanen, or is that Adira?" I asked before she could freak out about his slightly crispy appearance.

"It's Oanen, and I'm struggling not to be angry," she said. "What happened?"

"It's the ward on the house," he said. "Ashlyn invited me in like normal—"

The ground trembled hard, almost knocking him off balance. Megan caught him around the waist.

"It didn't just prevent me from entering; it threw me back," Oanen said, holding onto her.

She looked at me. "Why did you think he was Adira?"

"She was already here this morning and told me I needed to report to the lake by three, or I'm out of Uttira. I couldn't think of any other reason for the ward to do what it did other than maybe Adira returned in disguise with the intent to cause me harm."

Megan's gaze flicked to Zotera briefly, who was still standing close to Oanen.

"I'll be right back," Megan said.

She and Oanen disappeared in a burst of flames, and Zotera looked at me with guilt.

“It’s not your fault,” I said. “Megan knows that.”

If anything, Zotera looked guiltier as she brought me the bag Oanen had given her.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “He heals quickly. He’ll be fine.”

She nodded and followed me inside. I left the door open and watched the front yard for Megan. While I waited, I looked in the bag and found a replica of my old phone. All the pictures of Uncle Trammer were gone, of course, but I had the same number as before. Oanen had already added four numbers. His, Megan’s, Eliana’s, and Fenris’.

While Zotera had nothing to feel guilty about, I sure did. And seeing the evidence of Oanen’s consideration just added to the guilt I felt. He’d been hurt trying to help me, and I’d threatened him on top of it.

Megan showed up on the front lawn after I pocketed the phone.

“I wish you would have had that sooner,” she said, nodding to the bag I held. “Do you mind if I come inside so we can talk some more?”

“Not at all. You’re welcome to come in, but I can’t make any promises that the ward’s acting right,” I said, sticking my hand through the ward. “It didn’t get Zotera or me, though.”

To my relief, she entered the house without any issues, and I closed the door behind her.

“I’m really sorry about Oanen,” I said, motioning her to the living room. “I know he wouldn’t hurt me, but when the ward knocked him back, I wasn’t sure what to think. After almost being killed twice and knowing Adira is talking to Thanatos...it’s hard to know who to trust when I know she can change her appearance.”

“I get it,” Megan said, sitting. “And I don’t blame you. You’ve been treated as inconsequential and expendable your

entire life here. I wouldn't trust the people around me either if I were in your shoes."

Hearing her say that helped, but only a little. "Oanen will be okay, won't he?"

"Honestly, I've fried him worse," she said, looking angry about it. "But he heals quickly and doesn't hold grudges. He knows it wasn't your fault. In fact, he asked that I tell you that and wouldn't let me leave until I promised him I felt the same way." She smiled slightly.

"I just wish I understood why the ward changed," I said. "It's never done that before. Adira noticed it too. She thought maybe you and your druid did something to it. But when Oanen didn't know, I figured it wasn't you."

"You're right. It wasn't me, and given the council's cavalier attitude about getting you back, I doubt it was them." She sent a quick text on her phone. "I'm going to have 'my druid' check the ward just to make sure it's doing what it's supposed to, which is to keep you safe. Mind if I stick around until then?"

"Not at all," I said.

"I wish I would have been here when Adira showed up. Did she come in when she talked to you?" Megan asked.

"No. She didn't try. She just said what she had to say and then left in a portal."

Megan sighed. "Adira's played games with our lives since day one, but her meddling, no matter how rage-provoking, never ruffled my fury's feathers. I haven't had the chance to talk to her in person since she spoke to Thanatos, though." She glanced at me. "She knows how I feel about using humans to train the next generation. Yet, she came here to try to order you back to the lake. I don't like it."

"Me neither. It feels like a setup, but I'm not sure if that's because of my past experience with mermaids or because Adira's talking to a god who's trying to kill me."

"Well, according to Eliana, the mermaids aren't interested in causing trouble anymore. Apparently, they're willing to let

bygones be bygones and are holding the council to blame for the Oracle feeding on their kind,” Megan said. “So, as bitter as this is to say, I don’t think the mermaids are the problem.”

I almost smiled at her tone. The mermaids had given Megan a crazy hard time since she’d arrived.

“What changed their grudge-holding minds?” I asked.

“Eliana did while she was trying to find you,” Megan said with a wide smile. “She has this crazy cool succubus mind influence thing going on for her. But you know Eliana. She’s not the type to brag about her accomplishments.”

I nodded but was still surprised Eliana hadn’t mentioned that monumental mermaid-brainwashing feat while she was here.

“So the mermaids now hate the council instead of you, and Adira wants me, a newly reinstated council lackey, to go back out there for training? I still don’t see that ending well for me.”

“Agreed,” Megan said, looking thoughtful. “You just got back last night, and the first thing she says to you is to return to work? No question about Hades or any insight?”

“Actually, she did ask if I found a way to appease him then said it was a disappointment your methods hadn’t worked. Then she told me to get back to work and said, if I was late, she would consider it my resignation from Uttira.”

Megan’s eyes flickered with flames.

“So what do you think? Is Adira working with Thanatos?” I asked.

“It sure looks that way.”

“But then, why didn’t she run to him the second she heard I was home? I mean, if he still actually wants me dead, he would have just shown up on my front step instead of her, right? Maybe he doesn’t want me dead anymore. Or maybe she’s not working with him. Maybe Adira’s assignment is just to get me on the dock again to distract the mermaids from their council hate.”

Megan looked thoughtful for a moment.

“Distracting the mermaids would be a very Adira move,” Megan said. “But if removing you from Hell had been a solution to whatever Thanatos’ goal is, don’t you think he would have done that first? Instead, he tried to kill you. Twice. And then, when that didn’t work, he went to Adira and said you needed to die.”

The ground shook, and a car alarm went off outside.

“Give it a minute,” Megan said as I gripped my chair. “Most of them stop before they do a lot of damage.”

Doing my best to ignore the earthquake, I asked, “So you think Adira is trying to bait me out to the lake to kill me?”

“It’s hard to say. Like you said, there’s still a chance she’s not working with him and is just being her usual pain-in-the-ass self. But there’s also still a chance that she’s trying to bait you into the open so either she or Thanatos can do something.”

“It would make more sense for Thanatos to try something,” I said. “I mean, if Adira wanted to kill me, she would have when she was standing in front of me earlier, right?”

“It’s hard to say,” Megan said. “Adira knows breaking any laws would provoke my fury. She keeps her hands clean that way. So I’m with you and am betting it’s going to be Thanatos.”

A heaviness settled inside of me, and I glanced at Zotera. What would happen to her if something happened to me?

“You’re safe, Mother,” she said. “I won’t allow anyone to hurt you.”

“But what about you?” I asked. “When we were in Hell, you weren’t sure that Megan would be able to face Thanatos without getting hurt. I don’t want either you or Megan getting hurt trying to protect me.”

Zotera’s smile was blinding in its brilliance.

“Thank you for caring for me so deeply, Mother. Megan and I might be hurt, but death cannot touch us, Ashlyn. We will be fine.”

“Hold on. Are you saying I can’t die?” Megan said.

“There are always three furies,” Zotera said. “By Hades’ will and Zeus’ promise, it cannot be undone by any god or goddess.”

Megan grinned. “Well, that just makes this even better. You’ll do it, right?” she asked, looking at me.

I understood what Megan was asking me to do. There was a small chance I was being sent to the lake simply as a distraction for the mermaids. But there was an even larger chance Adira was sending me out there so Thanatos could kill me.

And Megan wanted me to be bait so she could face them.

What were my options, really? I didn’t want either of them hurt; yet, I knew I couldn’t hide forever. The idea of spending the rest of my days shut away in this house appealed to me as much as having all my memories stripped from my head.

Adira had taught me repeatedly that freedom always came at a cost. I simply needed to decide what I was willing to pay for it.

“I’ve lived so much of my life in fear. The idea of living long-term with even more fear—” I shook my head. “It’s not a life at that point anymore. So, I agree. I’ll go and see who shows up.”

“I don’t understand,” Zotera said. “Who are you agreeing to meet?”

I looked at Zotera, who had been standing beside my chair.

“I’m agreeing to go to the lake to try to bait Thanatos out into the open.”

Zotera’s soft brown gaze hardened as she glanced at Megan.

“Before you get upset, listen,” Megan said. “We both want to protect Ashlyn, and this is our chance. If Ashlyn goes to the lake and either Thanatos or Adira shows up, we’ll have an opportunity to end the threat to Ashlyn permanently. And if no

one shows up, Ashlyn still gets some time out of this house to enjoy some fresh air and the snow.”

Zotera looked at me again.

“And if something happens, then we’ll know for sure that we can’t trust Adira,” I said.

“Father would not want you to risk yourself,” Zotera said.

“Just being alive every day is a risk, Zotera. Accidents happen all the time. I could cut myself using a knife in the kitchen or get in a car accident on the way to the store. Locking myself away in this house might decrease the risk, but it would also be giving up on my hope for any measure of freedom to live my life the way I choose. Please don’t ask me to do that.”

Zotera sighed and nodded.

“Thank you. But if Thanatos shows up and it’s more than either of you can handle, I want your word, Megan, that you’ll do your fury thing and get out of there.”

“If it looks like anyone is going to die, I promise I’ll get us all out of there,” Megan said.

I glanced at the clock. It was just after two.

“We should leave soon if I want to be there in time,” I said, standing. “I’ll grab my stuff, and we’ll meet you there.”

“If it’s okay with you, I’ll tag along in the car just in case you run into any trouble on the way,” Megan said.

She waited while I dug out my uncle’s jacket for Zotera.

“I’m sorry I don’t have anything prettier for you,” I said, handing it to her.

“It’s very pretty, Ashlyn. Thank you.”

I could feel Megan watching us as we put on our things, and I glanced at her.

“Do you want to check on Oanen first?” I asked.

She shook her head. “He can feel what I feel and hates when I’m upset because he’s hurt. It makes him feel even

worse. I'll let him rest on his own for a while."

"I'm sorry he was hurt," Zotera said.

"Thanks," Megan said, relieving me.

I led the way to the car and got in behind the wheel. Megan didn't seem to mind taking the backseat as Zotera claimed the spot beside me. I was glad Zotera had as soon as we pulled out of the garage and her expression lit up.

"It's even more beautiful in the sun's light," she said. She took in everything outside the window and asked countless questions about Uttira and the people who lived there.

Megan helped me answer some of them, and soon, the two of them were carrying on their own conversation as I drove.

We arrived at the lake five minutes before three, and I parked in the snow-covered gravel area not far from the dock. The unmarred blanket of white between my car and the dock looked pretty, as did the iced-over shoreline.

"This brings back memories," Megan said. "Let's hope you don't go in today."

I heard a splash of water near the dock as I opened my door. When I looked, I could see the ripples from whoever had been there.

"The lake is filled with mermaids and sirens and other creatures," I said for Zotera's benefit. "Don't let them pull you into the water. Even if they can't kill you, it'll be freezing right now and not fun."

"I understand," she said, coming around the car to join me. "What should we do now?"

"You're not going to like this part," Megan said. "Ashlyn's here so the mermaids can hone their human hunting skills. So she needs to go to the end of the dock and let the mermaids try to coax her into that freezing cold water she just told you to stay out of."

Zotera slowly turned her head to look at me.

For the first time, I couldn't read her expression.

“It’s okay,” I said. “I’ve been bait for a very long time and know what not to do.”

“Have they ever hurt you, Mother?” she asked with deadly calm.

High-pitched laughter echoed from the water.

“They’ve tried, but I’m too smart for them,” I said.

The laughter changed to a hiss, proving that, while the mermaids might have changed their tune about Megan, they were still no friends of mine.

“Come on,” I said. “I better get set up so they don’t go crying to Adira that I didn’t follow the rules.”

Before my time in Hell, I’d hated going to the lake. Megan had argued that it wasn’t safe for me, and the Council had temporarily halted my shifts. After that, I’d started attending the academy where I’d run into a few of the mermaids. They weren’t cute like human cartoons liked to depict them. They looked more like sharks than minnows.

But I didn’t hate being back. As Megan said, it was time outside. Plus, I had Megan and Zotera with me.

I collected the pole and chair from where they were stored near the overturned boat and walked out onto the dock with Megan and Zotera. Zotera held the pole while I set up the chair. Then, she watched me cast the hookless line.

“You should use a spear if you want to catch one,” Zotera said

Megan snorted a laugh. “I like the way you think.”

Something hit the bottom of the dock.

“How long do we have to stay here?” Zotera asked.

“Are you getting cold?” I asked, concerned. “Do you want my hat?”

“No, I’m not cold. Only curious.”

“Until sunset,” I said. “So my winter shifts aren’t too bad. Summer sucks, though.”

My phone vibrated, surprising me.

I slipped it from my pocket and looked at the screen.

Adira: The session is ineffective with Megan's presence. She is hindering their practice and needs to leave.

I turned the phone so Megan could read it as I responded.

Me: You overestimate my influence if you believe Megan will listen to me. However, she did mention she was interested in speaking to you. Maybe you can help persuade her.

"Oh, you're good," Megan said.

"Thanks."

The line on my pole pulled tautly and then snapped loose. The pole bounced in its cradle and almost went into the water. Zotera caught it, so I didn't have to. The mermaids under the dock hissed their frustration.

"We have no quarrel with you, Megan," one said from below the decking. "Please leave so we can do as we were told."

"Eliana said you had a beef with the council for allowing the Oracle to continue to kill your kind." The water churned at those words, but Megan continued with more volume. "So why are you listening to Adira?"

"That's exactly *why* we listen, fury," the same voice said with growing anger.

A tail whipped up from under the dock, dousing Megan with a spray of icy water. Her eyes flickered red, and steam rose from her wet hair.

"Keep it up, bottom feeders, and I'm jumping in," she said.

"Can I jump in?" Zotera asked eagerly.

"Sure," a voice under the dock said. "Jump in. We'd love to play."

The flames in Megan's eyes grew.

“I think we should stay right where we are, dry and warm,” I said to both of them. “The key to this exercise is to ignore them. If you react in any way, you’re giving them what they want.”

Something hit the underside of the dock even harder, and the ground gave a brief tremble.

“Say that to my face,” a voice said.

I glanced at Zotera and gave her a reassuring smile. “It’s nice having friends with me. Next time, we should pack a picnic.”

“That’s a great idea,” Megan said. “Have you ever had pickled herring, Zotera? A dragon once told me that herring tastes almost like mermaid.”

Tails started hitting the boards underneath us. The boards bounced, almost knocking me out of my chair. Zotera held me in place as water bubbled up between the cracks. After a few moments, everything quieted.

“Fury, we’re willing to let bygones be bygones if you leave now,” a voice said from under the dock.

“Aren’t you forgiving,” Megan said sarcastically. “Don’t forget that I’ve never done anything to your kind unprovoked.”

“Neither have we. You started this by stealing our meal, which we caught fairly.”

“What meal?” Zotera asked.

“Me,” I said.

“Speaking of meals...I hear the taste of mermaids is addictive,” Megan said. “That’s why the Oracle can’t stop—”

Water erupted in front of us as a mermaid jumped from the lake. Green hair plastered her face but didn’t hide how her black gaze locked on Megan as she continued upward.

“Maybe you all forgave, but I haven’t. Time for a fish boil,” Megan said a second before flames flickered over her skin.

CHAPTER FOUR

I SCRAMBLED BACK OUT OF MY CHAIR, WELL AWARE OF THE heat she could throw when angry. My feet slipped on the icy, wet wood, and I pinwheeled my arms. Zotera caught me and watched Megan reach out over the water and grab the mermaid by the hair.

It hissed and swiped its claws at her.

Megan laughed and hit the mermaid right in the face with her free hand.

“Um, Megan?” I said as Zotera widened her stance to brace against the moving dock. I couldn’t tell if the motion was all due to the churning mass of bodies below or something more.

“Please let her go,” I said when Megan hit her again. “Oanen wouldn’t like you taking out your frustration this way.”

Megan paused, huffed out a breath, and threw the mermaid back into the lake like she was trying to skip a rock. A flurry of mermaids darted out from under the dock toward the one Megan had chucked.

“I really am sorry about what happened to Oanen,” I said, watching Megan stare after them.

“I seriously don’t know why anyone would want to kill you,” she said. “You’re *nice*. Just like Zotera. Well, according to my fury, she’s a little nicer than you, but you get the picture.”

Shock couldn't begin to describe how that little nugget of knowledge made me feel. Especially when I knew some of what Zotera had done. No, not Zotera. The things she'd done had never really been her idea or done out of malice. Everything had been for the love of her mother, a crazy, evil goddess who didn't deserve her daughter's devotion.

"Sorry for losing control," Megan continued. "You're right. I'm frustrated about what happened to Oanen, and he wouldn't be happy about what I just did." She flashed me a crooked grin. "But it sure felt nice."

"You land whale!" a mermaid shrieked. "Time to swim."

I watched a wave of churning water rush toward the dock. It heaved underneath us. Zotera's grip on me tightened, and she started pulling me along the dock toward the shore.

"I don't think so," a mermaid hissed.

The mermaid erupted from the water, diving for Zotera with her arms spread. The momentum of their collision ripped Zotera away from me and into the lake.

I stared at the spot for a moment then glanced at Megan. However, Megan wasn't on the dock either. Water boiled near the end where she'd stood.

Trusting what Zotera had said back at the house—that she and Megan would be fine—I bolted off the dock before one of the mermaids could knock me in. Panting, I reached land and whirled to watch more water explode upward from the end of the dock.

I opened my mouth to tell Megan to stop.

Something stung my back, just below my shoulder. Turning, I looked at the parking lot and saw nothing. Not even tracks in the snow. Rolling my shoulders, I tried to shake off the feeling, but that spot continued to sting.

I hurriedly tore off my jacket, and something long and thin fell to the ground. Like a troll-sized toothpick, the slim shaft of black metal was wickedly pointed on both ends. Reaching under my shirt, I swiped my hand over the spot that still hurt and looked at the smear of blood on my fingers.

A wave of dizziness washed over me, and I reeled back a step before I steadied myself.

Throbbing pain followed. It radiated from the spot through my ribs.

“Zotera!” I screamed.

She was in front of me an instant later, dry and radiating a level of rage I’d never witnessed before as she looked at the blood smearing the fingers of the hand I held up.

The earth shook violently beneath my feet.

“I think it was a poisoned dart,” I said, pointing at the black offender in the snow. “I feel dizzy, and the spot burns.”

She gently turned me and tugged up my shirt. I had a clear view of the end of the dock as Megan erupted from the lake in a cloud of steam. Her fiery wings extended out on each side of her as she carefully landed on the bucking planks. The wings disappeared as she raced toward me.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Someone shot me with that,” I said, pointing down.

She bent to pick up the dart that Zotera had ignored. The feel of Zotera’s lips against my skin shocked me, and I gave a yip when I felt her teeth lightly close down on my skin.

Abandoning the dart, Megan grabbed my arms and held me still.

“If it’s poison, it needs to come out,” she said, holding my gaze.

I nodded, trying not to panic. Whatever Zotera was doing didn’t feel great. But it didn’t hurt any more than the throbbing. My panic was less about the pain and more about trust. I liked Zotera but apparently hadn’t fully trusted her like I’d thought.

When Zotera stopped and stood, I struggled to stay upright as my insides went hot and cold.

“She tastes like mermaid,” Zotera said.

I glanced at her. “Please tell me you didn’t eat a mermaid.”

“No, Mother. I bit the one who bit me.”

She lifted her arm to show the ripped sleeve of my uncle’s coat.

“Are you okay?” I asked as the pain continued to throb through me.

“I am.”

“But you won’t be, Ashlyn,” Megan said, taking her phone from her wet pocket. She caught my doubtful glance at the device. “Don’t worry. Oanen made sure yours is waterproof too.”

She dialed and held it up to her ear.

“Ashlyn’s hurt. I need you at the lake.”

A shimmer appeared beside us, and Mrs. Quill stepped through.

“What happened?” she asked, looking from me to Megan to Zotera.

“Zotera, this is Oanen’s mom,” Megan said.

Megan held up the dart. “This happened. Zotera said it tasted like mermaid. Can you treat Ashlyn?”

“Of course.” She held out a hand to me and to Zotera.

Zotera glanced at me.

“I trust Mrs. Quill,” I said, hoping it wasn’t a misplaced trust. She was Adira’s sister, after all. “She’ll take us somewhere safer. Take her hand.”

A full-body sweat broke out before my fingers touched Mrs. Quill’s. A second later, we were in a bedroom. My knees gave out with another wave of dizziness. Zotera caught me before I could hit the floor.

The tremors from the lake continued, lightly rattling the bottles on the dresser as Zotera lifted me and gently set me on the bed.

“Here it is,” Mrs. Quill said, appearing beside me suddenly.

I hadn’t even realized she’d left.

“You need to drink this, Ashlyn,” she said, uncorking the vial.

She tipped it to my lips, and I swallowed. The potion burned my throat and made me gag.

“Keep it down,” she said, rubbing my arm. “It will counter the poison. Just breathe. Breathe.”

I focused on each inhale and exhale, shivering and fighting not to gag, while pain twisted in my middle and pulsed outward until I could think of little else but the last time I’d almost died of poison. Hades had saved me with a touch, taking away the pain as if it had never been.

My breath caught, and a whimper escaped me. Why had I left Hell?

“Mother,” Zotera whispered near my ear. “Please don’t cry. Remember how much you love this world.”

Did I? I thought I had, but I was just as unwanted here as I had been in Hell. At least in Hell, Hades had protected me.

But only because he thought you were Persephone, I thought bitterly.

The pain started to ease enough for me to feel the cool hand brushing over my sweat-soaked forehead. A shuddering sigh escaped me.

“Rest,” Mrs. Quill said. “When you wake, you’ll feel like yourself again.”



Someone gently shook my arm.

“I really need you to wake up, Ashlyn,” Eliana said. “Come on.”

“I’m up,” I mumbled without opening my eyes.

“You already said that, but you went back to sleep. Please wake up.”

At the desperation in her voice, I struggled to open my eyes.

Her face swam into focus, and she smiled at me.

“Hi, sweetie. Can you sit up too?”

“Sweetie?” I almost closed my eyes again, but she put an arm under me and hoisted me upright.

“I think you should allow her to rest,” Zotera said.

I swung my uncooperative gaze to Zotera, who was sitting on the bed beside me and holding my hand like she was afraid I’d take off without her.

“What’s going on?” I managed groggily.

“We’re getting a little nervous about how long this earthquake is lasting,” she said. “And I figured you’d rather be awake and know what’s going on if we have to move you. I didn’t want you waking up disoriented or afraid.”

I nodded in understanding. Eliana still felt guilty about her part in my trip to Hell, even though I didn’t hold her responsible.

“Okay. Help me stand. I’ll wake up more that way.”

The tremors teased the bottoms of my feet as Eliana helped me walk a circle in the room. It did help me wake up enough to register what she’d said.

“How long was I out?” I asked.

“Over an hour,” Eliana said.

And Megan had said the earthquakes were normally over in minutes. Why was Hades so angry?

As soon as I had that thought, my gaze swung to Zotera. She looked completely calm as she watched me closely.

“Are you feeling better?” she asked.

“I am.” I paused walking and looked at Eliana. “Would you mind giving me a moment alone with Zotera?”

“Sure.” She led me to the bed where I sat again. “I’ll check on Megan and be right back.”

I waited for the door to close before asking, “Is he watching me?”

“Yes.”

So he knew I’d been hurt and was upset about it. Knowing that created conflicting feelings in me. I didn’t want Hades to continue to shake the world with his anger. I didn’t want anyone to be hurt because of me. Yet, I couldn’t stop the bursting joy that he still cared. But was it because he liked me, *Ashlyn*, or simply because I looked like *her*?

Either way, I needed to reassure him that I was fine so he’d stop shaking everything. How was I supposed to do that long distance, though? From what I could remember about the pool, the sounds were garbled. He’d never be able to hear anything I said.

But when had reassuring him with words ever worked anyway? Distracting had.

“I’m going to take a shower,” I said, standing and pulling my shirt off in one fluid motion.

The rumbling immediately mellowed, and I fought not to grin.

No matter what Hades had learned, he was the same Hades...easily distracted by Persephone’s body. By *my* body.

My bra was off by the time I reached the bathroom door. The tremors stopped completely.

I didn’t linger in the shower or use the mirror to inspect the area on my back that still ached a little when I put on the clean clothes that were waiting for me. I didn’t want to call attention to it if he was watching as closely as I guessed he was.

“Feel better?” Eliana asked when I emerged again.

She and Zotera were waiting for me by the bed.

“Much better now that the tremors stopped. Was anyone hurt?”

“Not here,” Eliana said. “But injuries are broadcasting in the human cities. Mostly accidents. Loose objects falling from shelves. Stuff like that. A few buildings collapsed due to the prolonged tremors, too. The casualty numbers are still being tallied. We probably won’t know how many until later tonight.”

I appreciated Eliana’s straight honesty.

“Has the council said anything about the prolonged tremors? How are the other humans here doing?”

“There’s actually a meeting in progress right now,” Eliana said. “We can join them.”

“Is Adira there?”

Eliana smiled slightly. “No. Megan is.”

I was only a lowly human. I’d never been worthy of attending a council meeting before. My uncle had, though, as the official liaison for the humans in Uttira. However, he’d never returned home very happy after attending one.

“Sure,” I said. “I’m curious what is said in one of these meetings.”

“Nothing very useful usually,” Eliana said, leading us from the bedroom. “They tend to get distracted by inconsequential issues. For example, when they were supposed to be looking for you, they continually focused on my relationship with Fenris instead.”

“I can’t imagine that went over well with Megan,” I said.

“It didn’t. But don’t worry. I promise to make sure she keeps her cool when she’s around you. You’ve been hurt enough.” She gave me an apologetic smile.

I grabbed her hand to stop her for a second.

“I don’t regret it,” I said. “Even knowing that people are dying because I went there and woke a god, I don’t regret it.”

There were moments when it felt like I actually lived. It was scary and—” I shook my head, not sure how to describe it.

“Exhilarating,” Eliana said, studying me. “You care about Hades, don’t you.”

That dull ache flared in my chest, and she looked a little surprised.

“You care about him a lot,” she said. “I can feel it.”

I let out a breath and nodded. “Stupid, right? I know what he is. I know that every moment he was with me, obsessing over me, it wasn’t really me he wanted. It was Persephone. But the attention he gave me still got to me.” I gave a sad laugh. “I broke almost every rule when I was with him.”

Eliana wrapped me in a hug, and all the anguish I felt disappeared.

“Please stop beating yourself up for what happened,” I whispered to her before pulling away. “I had a measure of freedom in Hell that I never had here, and it was great.”

She returned my smile and nodded. “No more regret then.”

We continued toward Mr. Quill’s study and heard Megan’s voice from the hallway before we even reached the door.

“Hold up. Let me check the sky. Maybe a fuck will fall from the heavens so I have one to give you.”

Eliana hurried forward and tugged open the door.

Megan spun to look at us. The flames flickering in her gaze completely vanished between one blink and the next.

“I was only gone a few minutes,” Eliana said. “What happened?”

Megan gestured to the phone on the desk.

“I’m glad you’re there, Eliana,” Adira said, her voice coming from the device. “Megan needs to see reason.”

I glanced at Megan and saw a spark ignited in her gaze, but it died quickly.

“Reason about what?” Eliana asked calmly.

“That searching the seven realms for the answers we need takes priority over a council meeting regarding a single human life. The council is responsible for every person in Uttira.”

“Am I not a person in Uttira?” I asked.

The line was silent.

“So because I’m human, I don’t matter. Let me guess. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. Or, in this case, the one,” I said.

“Exactly,” Adira said.

Megan smiled and turned to the phone. “Bullshit. If that were the case, you wouldn’t have been laser-focused on Eliana’s sex life when the earthquakes were going on. Get your giant, frost ass here now so I can verify your intentions myself.”

A tingle of fear rippled through me at the sound of Megan’s fury voice, and I edged closer to Zotera.

“As I’ve said, I cannot,” Adira said.

Eliana crossed the room and hung up the call.

“If she doesn’t want to attend, then she doesn’t need to know the outcome of this meeting,” she said, looking at the other adults in the room.

I glanced at Raiden and the Quills, surprised to see all three incline their heads toward Eliana.

Mr. Quill met my gaze. “How are you feeling, Ashlyn?”

“Better. Thank you.” I looked at Mrs. Quill when I said it, and she smiled.

“If not for Zotera’s quick thinking, the potion likely wouldn’t have worked. Mermaid venom acts very quickly in humans.”

Megan crossed her arms and looked at the Council members. “Which is exactly why I said no more like the last time Ashlyn fell in. Back then, the Council agreed. So why would Adira tell Ashlyn to go back there?”

“The mermaid unrest against the Council has been growing in recent weeks,” Mr. Quill said. “Adira suggested they might calm if the council fulfilled its contractual obligations to the mermaids.”

Megan gave a dry laugh. “And you bought her bullshit? After Anwen left, I went fishing. The mermaids I caught all confessed to the same thing—if they poisoned Ashlyn, the Council would pass a law limiting the number of mermaids the Oracle could consume. Limit. Not stop. I don’t hold the mermaids responsible for what happened. I hold the Council responsible.” She looked at each one of them. “Unless Adira is acting independently?”

I understood then what Megan was doing. Dividing the Council.

“Adira doesn’t always share her goals, but her intentions have never wavered. Everything she has ever done is for the better of Mantirum,” Mr. Quill said to Megan before looking at me. “I’m sorry you were hurt, Ashlyn. Truly. And if we can find a way to save the world and spare you, we will do so. You have my word.”

A laugh escaped me. It sounded a little crazy and a little tear-filled.

“Wrong answer,” Megan said, pulling out her phone.

“I was just about to call, Megan,” the man who answered said instead of a hello.

“You said you were working on a powerful protection spell for a human, right? Any chance you have enough for two spells?” Megan asked, looking at me.

“I do, but the spell takes weeks to cast. I’m not opposed to casting it, but I’m not sure it’s necessary.”

“What do you mean?” Megan asked.

“The spell-work around this house is incredible. Impenetrable. It’s knocked me back more times than I can count.”

“Are you okay?” Megan asked, showing her concern.

“Yeah. I have my own wards, thanks to your warning. As long as your human stays home, she’ll be safe.”

“Thanks, Zayn,” Megan said.

“Anytime. I’ll keep looking into the rest.”

She pocketed her phone as Raiden said, “You’ve been working with the druid?”

“Yep. Got a problem with that?”

“He is responsible for the deaths of countless creatures and needs to be held accountable for those crimes.”

“And this Council is responsible for countless human deaths and needs to be held accountable,” Megan countered.

“Laws were not broken by either side,” Mr. Quill said diplomatically. “If they had been, Megan’s fury would know. I will try to convince Adira to return so you can question her, Megan. Until then, I agree with your druid that it would be safest for Ashlyn to remain in her home until we can find a solution.”

“What about Adira’s threat?” I asked. “She said that if I didn’t fulfill my obligations and resume my shifts, I would be removed from Uttira.”

Mr. Quill let out a troubled breath. “Technically, she would be within her rights to remove you according to the terms of the agreement you signed after your uncle passed away. However, given the circumstances, I believe that you should be confined for your safety. Allow me some time to speak with her.”

Disbelief stole any physical reaction to what he’d just said. Not Megan, though. She snorted and shook her head.

“Sure. You talk to her. When you do, make sure you mention how the shaking started when Ashlyn was threatened at the lake and only stopped once she was awake and feeling better again. We have been and always will be the gods’ playthings. If you damage my father’s favorite toy, he will not be pleased.”

She turned and started toward us. “Let’s go.”

No one spoke as we left the room. Megan slammed the door on the way out.

“Did they ask about Oanen?” Eliana said as we made our way down the stairs.

“Yeah,” Megan said, calming slightly. “Mrs. Quill’s been popping in to check on him. She promised not to mention the mermaid fight to him until he’s healed. She knows he’d try coming after me.”

“He loves you and wants you to be safe,” Eliana said.

I felt a spear of envy and remembered Hades’ obsessive need to keep me safe too.

Eliana took my hand, stealing my longing, as she said, “My car’s out front. I’ll drive you home.”

“Do you mind if we all go to your house, Ashlyn?” Megan asked. “I think there’s more we need to discuss.”

“Sure,” I said.

Twenty-five minutes later, we were all comfortably seated in my living room and sipping the hot chocolate Eliana had made us.

“Almost as good as Grandma’s,” Megan said.

“It’s her recipe,” Eliana said.

I watched them share a smile and realized how much I’d missed their company even though they hadn’t been in my life for long before I’d disappeared.

“How mad are you at your in-laws?” I asked Megan.

“Like everything in my life, it’s a love-hate relationship. I’m getting pretty good at those.”

“Except for Oanen,” Eliana said. “There’s no hate there.”

Megan snorted. “I’ll hellgate to you the next time he takes my phone so you can feel what I feel.”

Eliana grinned. “Mild annoyance isn’t hate, Megan. We both know he always makes it up to you.”

Megan got a far-off look, and Eliana’s eyes went black.

I quickly shut mine and focused on what Mr. Quill had said in the library. Confined. That's what he'd said. As if I were the problem and needed to be locked away. But wasn't I sort of the problem? The tremors had started when we'd reached the lake. But *before* I'd been threatened. Megan, Zotera, and I had been talking at the end of the dock. The very subtle tremors hadn't been enough to dissuade me from casting a line. But they'd definitely increased when the mermaids had started messing with us.

"Sorry," Eliana said, breaking through my thoughts. "I'm done. Are you okay?"

I cautiously opened my eyes and looked at her.

"No overwhelming urges to kiss you or invite you to spend the night with me," I said. "We're good."

Her relief was notable as I took another sip of soothing chocolate.

"I'll be more careful in the future, Ashlyn," she said. "I promise."

"Me too," Megan said. "No more distracting Oanen thoughts. Let's focus on Adira instead."

She set her cup aside and leaned forward. "I wasn't as forthcoming with the council as I could have been."

"When are they ever forthcoming to us," Eliana said with a shrug.

"Exactly. Which is why I stayed behind to find some answers after Mrs. Quill left with you. While the mermaids said that they were told to poison you, they couldn't confess *who* told them to do it. They remembered talking to someone at the docks but couldn't recall a face or a voice. It was completely gone, like they were mind-wiped.

"When I demanded that the mermaid or mermaids responsible for poisoning you confess, none of them did. And considering the dart we found, that makes sense."

"They like to use their claws," Eliana said with a nod.

“Yep. Surface wounds that are easier to treat. Instead, you were hit with a dart. A small injury but one that sent the poison deep,” Megan said. “According to Mrs. Quill, if Zotera hadn’t sucked out as much of the poison as she had, they likely wouldn’t have been able to save you, Ashlyn.”

I looked at Zotera.

For a split second, I thought I saw that flicker of absolute rage in her eyes again.

CHAPTER FIVE

“SO WHOEVER SET THAT UP KNEW EXACTLY WHAT THEY WERE doing,” Eliana said. “And not just with the poison. They had distractions ready for whoever accompanied you and were waiting with the dart as a backup. And none of it, including a fury-forced confession, clearly points to anyone.”

“Not true,” Megan said. “Adira’s the one who told Ashlyn to get to the lake. Even if she’s not the one who stuck Ashlyn with the dart or mind-wiped the mermaids, she’s not absolved of her involvement. And after her blatant refusal to speak to me in person, she can’t be trusted.”

Eliana looked at me and wrinkled her nose. “So, the safest thing truly is for you to stay home. I’m sorry. I know how you feel about that.”

“I survived isolation once. I’ll survive it again. I’m more worried about Adira kicking me out as soon as both of you are distracted with something else.”

“Adira’s very good at distractions,” Eliana agreed. “But you won’t be alone. You’ll have Zotera with you, right?”

We all looked at Zotera. Not a hint of anger lingered in her gaze now, only her normal cheer.

“My place is with Ashlyn. I won’t leave her.” Her expression fell, and her earnest gaze met mine. “I won’t be tricked again like at the lake.”

“The lake’s not your fault,” I said. “None of us was expecting the mermaids to do what they did.”

“You kept me from standing when you had Oanen against the wall,” Megan said. “Do you think you can stop Adira from taking Ashlyn if she shows up here?”

Zotera smiled. “I saw Adira this morning. Ashlyn is safe from her.”

“Good. Then, for now, sit tight,” Megan said, looking at me as she stood. “And if Adira shows up, I’m on speed dial. Any time. Day or night. Call me, okay?”

I nodded and walked them to the door. Megan left in a ball of flames on the lawn, and Eliana pulled away in her car after a wave goodbye. I closed the door on the day’s fading light and faced Zotera.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m hungry. What should we make for dinner?”

Zotera’s gaze lit up. “Lemon cheesecake.”

“I’m not sure we have the ingredients for that,” I said, walking to the fridge.

“I can change whatever you have into whatever we want, Ashlyn. Remember?”

Pausing, I looked at her with a growing smile.

“I could really go for that steak dinner again.”

She clapped her hands and beat me to the kitchen. I watched her take out a plate and set a single slice of bread on it. The bread changed into a full meal. The mouthwatering steak was back, swimming in its own juices next to a baked potato topped with some fancy blobs of butter and sour cream and a side of asparagus.

I accepted my plate and went to sit at the table while she turned another slice of bread into a cheesecake.

“Thank you for this,” I said, cutting into my steak. “I don’t know why I didn’t think of your ability to change things sooner. We wouldn’t have had to clean out my uncle’s room if I had. You could have just changed it.”

“I liked cleaning it and listening to your stories,” she said. “But I can change anything you’d like.”

“I’d like you to change the room into whatever you want. Whatever makes you comfortable,” I said.

I glanced around the house as I chewed my next bite.

“In fact,” I said after swallowing. “The whole house could use an update.”

Zotera nodded eagerly.

As soon as we were done eating and cleaning up our dishes, we went to her room. She changed it to an exact replica of the one Hades had created for her.

“I love the marble,” I said, touching a wall. “It’s so pretty.”

“Do you want me to change your room too? I can make it look like the one you shared with Father.”

My heart squeezed at the thought.

“I’d like that. Can you make the bed just a little softer, though?”

Zotera nodded and hurried to my door.

The second she was inside, it changed. The ceiling stretched away from us, towering overhead with arched openings closed with modern glass. I could see the stars twinkling in them. She didn’t add the open-concept bathroom to the space, but everything else was the same, from the golden disc on the wall by the vanity to the bed hangings. Which were the same red as the room where Persephone had died.

“Can you change those to a soft blue like the sky today?” I asked.

The deep red bled away to a tranquil light blue.

“Like that?” she asked.

“Perfect,” I said.

“Go look in the bathroom.”

I went to the door and squealed a little. Zotera had combined modern and medieval, creating an open-concept wet room in the now all-marble space. The shower with its curtain was gone. In its place, a wide gold arm extended into the room. The tiny holes released a light rainfall of water onto the river rock floor. In place of the porcelain toilet, a marble one waited with a golden handle that matched the golden fixtures on the marble sink basin.

“This is absolutely beautiful,” I said, sticking my arm into the falling water before testing the knobs to verify it turned off. Everything worked, and I grinned.

“If this had been my room all along, I don’t think I would have hated it so much,” I said.

“Do you want to change the rest of the house?” she asked.

“I do, but I think I’ll need some ideas.”

I led her out to the living room and turned on the TV. The reruns of old human shows weren’t that inspiring, though, so I sent Megan a text.

Me: Any chance you could talk the council into allowing me access to live TV?

Megan: On it.

She sent another one a minute later.

Megan: Turn the TV off and on again. It should work.

I did and giddily settled in to channel surf.

“I know there should be home improvement channels where they remodel people’s houses. Eliana told me about them. Those will give us some ideas.”

Instead of finding that, I hit a news station.

I wasn’t sure if Eliana had intentionally downplayed the truth or if she hadn’t known the full extent. All over the world, buildings had collapsed. Due to the frequent earthquakes, most places already had an established evacuation protocol so people had known what to do when the buildings started to go.

But not everyone had made it out. The global count was over one hundred thousand people.

In the background, while the news anchor spoke in the dust-clogged street, a child wandered, crying.

I felt my own eyes begin to water at my selfishness.

“Who cares if I’m not her,” I whispered. “If I’d stayed, this wouldn’t have happened.”

Zotera’s arms wrapped around me. “Please don’t cry. Father hates when you cry.”

I nodded and pushed down my guilt and sorrow. The past couldn’t be undone. I needed to focus on the present and ensure I didn’t give Hades any new reasons to lose his temper.

“Let’s watch something else.”

I eventually found a home improvement channel.

Zotera’s reactions and questions helped distract me for the next few hours. When I yawned and she suggested I go to bed, I shook my head and made myself more comfortable on the couch.



Waking up in my bed was a little disorientating. Especially when it looked nothing like my bed. It took a few moments to remember that Zotera and I had changed my room the day before.

In the early morning light of a new day, I looked at the empty place beside me. With the bed hangings and marble walls, it felt so wrong that Hades wasn’t there. I brushed my fingers against the pillow.

When I told Eliana I had no regrets about going to Hell, it had been the truth. But I did have regrets about coming home. What would my life have been like if I’d stayed and given Hades what he’d wanted? Would I really have slowly grown to resent him for loving someone else while holding me? Would I

have turned into his nightmare again like some self-fulfilling prophecy? Or would I have just let myself love him?

Sighing, I rolled onto my back and stared up at the wood canopy.

“Are you hungry, Ashlyn?” Zotera asked, her voice ringing in the room.

I sat up and looked around, wondering how she’d done it, until I saw an intercom box near the door.

Grinning, I got out of bed and pushed the button.

“Nice addition. Did you see these at the Quills’?”

“Yep. Anwen showed me how to use it in case I needed anything when she left the room. I made breakfast if you’re hungry.”

I looked down at the gossamer nightgown I wore, shrugged, and went to find her.

The house didn’t look like the home I remembered. It was like a mini Hell castle but with French country influences. And I loved every newly spacious inch of it.

“Zotera, this is beautiful,” I called.

“I’m glad you think so. I wasn’t sure you’d like it.”

“I love it,” I said, looking up at the rustic chandelier hanging in the living room. I ran my hand over the light-colored sofa and discovered it was as soft as it looked.

Turning, I faced the arched opening that led to a cozy French country kitchen complete with a fireplace and conversation seating with another room off of it for a much larger formal dining table. It was set for two.

“Did you sleep well?” Zotera asked.

I looked at her standing near the dual ovens as she tugged the tie on her apron and couldn’t stop my grin.

“Did you get any sleep? This is incredible.” I inhaled deeply. “It smells incredible.”

“I don’t need sleep,” she said with a shrug. “Do you like your pajamas?”

“I do. They’re very pretty,” I said, not mentioning how see-through it was or my lack of undergarments. “Did you carry me to bed?”

“You didn’t look comfortable on the couch.” She gave me a sheepish look. “And I really wanted to change the room without waking you.”

“I’m glad you got me out of the way. Waking up to this…” I waved my hand at everything. “It feels like I’m dreaming. A really good dream.”

She grinned and turned to open the oven.

“If you want to sit, I’ll serve you, Ashlyn.”

“Can I help carry anything?” I asked.

“No. There’s not that much.”

Our definitions of not that much were very different. She’d made us both cheese soufflés with spinach side salads topped with roasted beetroots, Granny Smith apple slices, watercress, bacon, and spiced walnuts.

I couldn’t eat fast enough.

“Where did you learn to make this?” I asked between bites.

“The television. It is a great source of information. It said I should use your phone to access great recipes. I wasn’t sure how, but Eliana helped me.”

I paused eating. “Eliana? Did she stop by?”

“No, I called her.”

I kept my expression carefully blank. “Could I see my phone?”

Zotera pulled it out of the pocket of the jeans she was wearing and handed it over. I checked the call log. She hadn’t called Eliana once but seven times throughout the night.

I set it aside, face down, smiled at Zotera, and continued wolfing down her creation. Thankfully, I knew how we could

make the late-night interruptions up to Eliana.

“How long did this take you to make?” I asked.

“A few hours. But now that I know what it’s supposed to taste like, I can make it again in moments. Would you like another?”

“I was actually wondering if we should invite Eliana and Fenris over for breakfast as a thank you for helping you.”

Zotera frowned a little, and I wondered if she’d caught on to why I’d made the suggestion.

“Father doesn’t like it when you’re near other men,” she said, explaining her frown.

“Oh.” I looked down at my plate, disappointed but knowing she was probably right that I shouldn’t tempt fate by being around another man while Hades was watching.

“Did I make you sad?”

Giving her a smile I didn’t feel, I shook my head. “No, you’re right. I don’t want anyone else to get hurt just because I want to show off what you’ve been doing.”

She tilted her head and studied me.

“I believe I’m wrong. Father didn’t get angry when we gathered to play games and tell stories. He only grows angry when you show another favor.”

“Oh, I know,” I said with a self-deprecating laugh. “I tried waving at someone in the bathing rooms, and he almost lost it. Just a friendly wave like this.” I waved at Zotera. “You saw Eliana do the same thing when she left last night, right? People do it all the time here. Well, not me because it’s dangerous to look at anyone. Honestly, it felt awkward and scary to do it in Hell too, but I knew your father wanted me to like everyone, so I was trying.

“It didn’t seem like a big deal to casually greet someone I recognized at the time. But looking back, I guess it makes sense that it was a big deal to someone starved for any form of recognition, even if it did mean nothing to me.”

“Why would you wish to show Fenris this house if he means nothing to you?” Zotera asked.

I tried to think of a way to answer that she would understand and not take it the wrong way.

“If your father thought you meant something to me, would he get angry?” I asked.

She quickly shook her head. “He knows you care for me. That’s why he wanted me to be with you.”

“How I care for you is how I care for Megan, Eliana, Oanen, and Fenris. I don’t see any of them in any romantic sense. They’re my friends. The only friends I have, really. And they want to protect me just like you do. The only way I can show them my appreciation for taking care of me is by talking to them when they need someone to talk to and inviting them to my home to offer them a meal.”

Zotera nodded slowly.

“I understand.”

“Now, having said that, I understand I’m not completely safe around them. None of them would intentionally hurt me. But, for example, if Megan loses her temper when I’m standing close to her, I could get burned. If Eliana gets hungry when I’m standing close, I could fall under her thrall.” I thought about the other two for a moment. “Honestly, I think Fenris and Oanen aren’t dangerous to me at all. They both only have eyes for their mates.”

I had a sudden thought.

“It’s like the spell Persephone did on herself not to see the male form. When a wolf or a griffin finds its mate, they don’t see anyone else.”

Zotera smiled widely. “Then we have nothing to worry about. Fenris won’t look at you, and you won’t wave at Fenris. I’ll invite them.”

She had my phone in her hand before I realized she’d even moved.

“Wait. I don’t think we should—”

My phone vibrated, and she turned it to show me.

Me (Zotera): Ashlyn loved the food and would like you to bring your mate over for breakfast.

Eliana: We'll be there in thirty.

Then my gaze lifted to the previous messages. Zotera hadn't just been calling Eliana. She'd been texting too. A lot.

And Eliana was still willing to come over in thirty minutes? She was either a saint or so sleep-deprived that she didn't know what she was agreeing to.

"I better go get ready," I said instead of commenting. "Can I have my phone back?"

"Of course."

She handed it over, and I hurried to my room, waiting until the door was closed to send another text.

Me: I'll talk to her about late calls.

Eliana: No, you won't. She was so excited to do nice things for you, and I was glad to help. Can't wait to see it all.

Shaking my head, I deleted both messages. Eliana was too nice for her own good sometimes.

It wasn't until I turned to go to my closet that I realized it wasn't there anymore. I went to the intercom.

"Do I still have clothes?" I asked.

"Oh. Sorry. I'll be right there to fix that."

Knowing I didn't have a lot of time, I closed myself in the bathroom and hoped my clothes would be there by the time I was done showering. Washing in my new shower was bliss, especially since Zotera had left the modern shampoo and conditioner. It was hard to hurry, and I had to force myself to turn off the water after I finished rinsing.

A scream ripped from me when I turned around for a towel and saw Zotera just standing there, staring at me. The hungry glint in her eyes evaporated in her shock. She quickly fell to

her knees and bent forward until her forehead touched the floor.

“Forgive me, Ashlyn. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“It’s okay,” I said, placing a shaky hand over my heart. “You were so quiet I didn’t know you were there. It’s no big deal.”

When she didn’t move, I wrapped a towel around myself and went to coax her to her feet.

“Seriously, I’m not mad,” I said when she continued to look dejectedly at the floor.

“But I saw the fear in your eyes. Fear of me.”

I rubbed her arm. “It was irrational fear and doesn’t count. I was thinking of how nice the shower was and wishing it could be longer, not that there might be anyone else in the room with me. I was startled. That’s all.”

She nodded.

“Please don’t feel bad,” I said. “If you feel bad, then I’ll feel bad.”

She sighed and finally met my gaze. “I will try not to feel bad.”

I gave her arm a reassuring squeeze. “Did you make me a closet full of clothes?”

She had. The closet was like another room entirely and had so many clothing options that I didn’t know where to look.

“Can you point me to jeans and a t-shirt?” I asked as I ran my fingers over a Grecian-style dress similar to what I’d worn in Hell.

“Here,” Zotera said, touching a shelving unit between the dress racks. She opened one of the drawers. “And here are the undergarments you like.”

“Thank you.”

She left me to dress, and I felt like a damn princess as I stood in the middle of all those clothes, trying to decide what

to wear.

Dazed but clothed, I left the closet and went to the living room, where Zotera had the TV on and was watching another cooking show explaining how to make a layered chocolate cake with ganache.

The doorbell rang, and Zotera popped up from her spot.

“I’ll make a cake for us next,” she said over her shoulder as she went to the door.

I caught a glimpse of Eliana outside with Fenris a few steps back before Zotera blocked my view.

“Hi,” Eliana said. “We heard what happened to Oanen. What are the chances Fenris will go flying too?”

“Fenris is safe,” Zotera said, stepping aside and inviting them in before I could say anything.

The ward didn’t react to either of them, which surprised me since I hadn’t actually invited them to enter. Zotera had.

I watched Eliana’s expression as she stared at my transformed house while slowly making her way toward me.

“Zotera, this is absolutely incredible. People would pay a lot for you to do this to their homes.” She spun a slow circle, taking it all in, and Zotera beamed with shy pride.

“People?” Fenris asked, his gaze dancing with humor. “Or us?” He glanced at Zotera. “Want to trade some cooking lessons for some home modifications?”

“You like it, too?” Zotera asked.

Fenris shot her an amused smile. “Of course I do. Eliana is in love with it, and I love everything she loves.”

Zotera gave me an excited look. “Can I have cooking lessons?”

“Absolutely,” I said.

“How did the soufflés turn out?” Fenris asked, turning toward Zotera.

“Let me show you,” she said.

I followed them into the kitchen and watched Zotera's growing excitement at each bit of praise they gave her for her accomplishments. Fenris' over-the-top inhalations when Zotera removed the twin soufflés from the oven had me laughing.

His eyes rolled back as he took his first bite. Eliana shook her head at him but looked amused.

"You need to meet Eliana's dad," he said between bites. "He's an amazing cook. That's how I knew how to make one of these. But I swear his doesn't taste this good. He's going to want to learn your secrets."

"I want to learn how to make a chocolate cake layered with whipped chocolate mousse and chocolate ganache frosting. Does he know how to make that?"

Eliana was already texting. While she was distracted, Fenris switched plates with her and started eating her meal too.

"I can make another one," Zotera said. She touched Eliana's plate, and the remnants of Fenris' first meal, which weren't many, changed into another soufflé and salad.

Both of them paused and looked at her.

"How did you do that?" Fenris asked.

"No."

All three of them looked at me in surprise at my sharp word.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to sound like that. I just didn't want Zotera to tell you." I quickly looked at her. "I trust Eliana and Fenris. But after hearing Eliana's story and what happened yesterday, I don't trust the Council."

"I don't understand," Zotera said.

"My dad and I aren't on speaking terms yet after what he pulled," Fenris said. "And honestly, even if we were, I wouldn't share that information with him."

"The Council is too easily distracted by unnecessary details," Eliana said. "We'd have no reason to share anything

with them.”

“It’s not that,” I said. “I know you wouldn’t voluntarily share anything. But they already put spells on you and tried keeping you apart to get you to do what they wanted. It’s safer for both of you to know less about Zotera.”

Understanding filled both their gazes. Fenris flashed Zotera a smile. “You’ll be a woman of mystery, which will drive Adira insane. I like it. Keep your secrets, but please send Eliana pictures of your house so she can show her parents and the Quills.”

Zotera glanced at me for permission.

“Pictures are fine,” I said. They wouldn’t know how she accomplished what she had, only that she’d managed something extraordinary in a very small amount of time. Which would hopefully make them cautious around her.

Eliana picked up her phone and took a picture of Fenris wolfing down his third soufflé.

CHAPTER SIX

I WATCHED ZOTERA'S ENTHUSIASTIC WAVE AS ELIANA'S CAR pulled away from the curb in front of my house. Her smile when she turned matched my own. Breakfast with company two days in a row? I couldn't remember the last time that had happened.

"Do you think Eliana's dad will come over?" Zotera asked, jogging toward the house.

"It sounds like he's looking for something to do while Eliana's mom is at work, so I don't see why not."

Zotera's excitement radiated from her. "I'll go check our ingredients."

My phone buzzed as I settled on our extremely comfortable new couch.

Megan: Oanen's a little jealous he got zapped and Fenris got fed breakfast till he burst.

"What do you think of inviting Megan and Oanen over for a meal once Oanen's better?" I called to Zotera.

"I like that idea," she said. "We don't have enough chocolate left to make a cake. Can we get some more?"

I debated how to answer. Eliana and Fenris had taken turns answering Zotera's calls and texts last night, which is why Eliana hadn't been dead on her feet. But I knew they were both tired. Fenris had mentioned going home for a nap. So, I didn't want to ask them. And Megan was taking care of Oanen.

Typically, I would have sent a message to Adira when I needed something, but that was obviously out of the question too.

Leaving the couch, I moved to the kitchen to gauge Zotera's level of disappointment when I said, "We're not supposed to leave the house. Megan's taking care of Oanen, and we already bothered Eliana and Fenris enough for one day to ask either of them."

She paused her search. "I bothered them?"

"No, you didn't annoy them at all. What I meant is that we took up enough of their time for today. They're a new couple and want to spend time with each other."

Zotera nodded slowly. "Like father always wants to spend time with you." A sigh escaped her. "Sometimes I wish I had a mate."

"Why don't you?" I leaned against the counter and watched her give me a sad smile.

"Mother forbade it."

"Ah. Well, Mother's not here anymore, is she," I said gently. "Maybe it's time for you to do what you want."

Zotera shrugged. "I like spending time with you."

"I like it too. A lot. I would be going crazy without you here." I patted the marble counter behind me. "And the house wouldn't feel like the dream that it is without you."

Her smile brightened. "That's why we should get the chocolate ourselves. You're safe with me. I promise. I won't let anything distract me again."

I considered her suggestion. The car was warded, and I knew the Threadbare Trader was too. All I needed to do was get from the car to the store. And if it didn't look safe, we could always turn the car around and come back home.

"Okay. Let's go."

She squealed and hurried to put on her jacket.

She had just as many questions on this outing as the previous one, mostly due to us going to another part of town. When I stopped in front of the shop, I warned her not to get out right away.

We both looked around.

“I don’t see anyone, but stay where you are,” Zotera said. She got out and walked around the car to open my door for me. “It’s safe.”

I had one foot out the door when a truck suddenly materialized on the road. The roar of its engine vibrated my ribs as it barreled the last three feet toward Zotera. She put out her hand like she was bracing for impact.

The moment her fingers touched the grille, the truck transformed into flowers. The rainbow of fragrant blooms rained around her as a troll, no longer seated in his truck, skidded his ass along the road until he bounced and rolled.

I remained frozen where I was and watched him come to an unmoving stop.

“Is he okay?” I asked.

“Does it matter?” Zotera asked, not sounding like herself.

“It does if we want to know where he came from. Trolls don’t have the ability to suddenly appear.”

I pulled out my phone and called Megan.

“We need you at the Threadbare Trader,” I said.

Megan swore under her breath. “Just a second. I’m sorry, Oanen.” I heard clothes rustling and closed my eyes with a cringe, well aware of what I’d interrupted.

Megan appeared in a flash several seconds later, looking very disheveled.

“I’m so sorry,” I breathed.

Rather than look at me, she took in the flowers and the troll lying in the center of the road.

“What happened?”

“He was in a truck that just suddenly appeared and tried to run down Zotera. It was portaled here.”

She went to the troll, picked him up by the collar, and commanded him to confess. His whispered response was too quiet for me to hear, but based on the way Megan released him, I knew it wasn't good.

“He can't remember,” she said. “Just like the mermaids.”

Then she gave me a hard look. “Why did you leave the house?”

“I'm sorry. I just—”

Zotera stepped in front of me. “Remember your place, daughter of Hades. It is not for you to question Ashlyn.”

“Whoa. Wait,” I said, scrambling out of the car and grabbing Zotera's arm. “We don't turn on friends. Ever. Okay? Megan's only trying to keep me safe.”

Megan sighed and rubbed a hand over her face. “No, Zotera's right. I sounded like Adira, which is not something I ever want to do. Sorry.”

She glanced at the shop. “Chocolate run?”

I nodded.

“I'll go in with you.”

Mags was really quiet when the three of us entered and I asked for chocolate. Her gaze darted from me to Megan.

“Think louder for the fury in the back,” Megan said. “Who are you supposed to call if Ashlyn shows up?”

Mags blinked at Megan then handed her a piece of paper with a number on it.

“Who's it for?” Megan asked.

“I—” Mags shook her head. “I can't remember.”

“Seems to be a growing theme. Ashlyn wants some chocolate.” She nodded toward the back, and Mags hurried to disappear.

Then she dialed the number and put it on speaker.

“Hello?” a man answered.

“Thanatos? I have Ashlyn,” Megan said.

She shook her head at me during the beat of silence that followed, and I kept quiet.

“Who is this?” he asked.

“We’re at the Threadbare Trader,” she said.

“You have no idea what you’re doing, fury,” he said before the line went dead.

Megan swore and disappeared in a flash, only to reappear a few seconds later.

“He’s already gone,” she said.

Mags returned with a large supply of chocolate, which Zotera paid for by turning one bar into gold. Mags’ eyes lit with greed and gratitude.

“I will have more next week. Be sure to come back then,” she said as we left.

Megan rode home with us and waited until I pulled into the garage before disappearing again.

“You seem sad now,” Zotera noted as she followed me into the kitchen. “Is it because the troll was hurt?”

“No. Not that I liked seeing him hurt, but that’s not why I’m upset.”

“Are you angry with me?”

I hung up my jacket and shook my head at her. “I’m grateful you were there. I’m just feeling bad about interrupting Megan when she was obviously in the middle of something with Oanen. And maybe I’m feeling a little bad for myself. I’m happy that my friends have mates and are happy. Sometimes knowing that I’ll never have that makes me sad, though.”

“Why will you never have that?” she asked.

“My house is beautiful now, thanks to you,” I said, looking around. “But it’s still a prison. You heard Megan. I shouldn’t

have left, and I knew it. I'm not safe anywhere but here. What kind of person would I be to ask another human to live this kind of life with me? I can't do it. I won't. That means I get to live the rest of my life alone, in fear of the day that I make my last mistake. When I think of that, it makes me a little sad."

Zotera surprised me by hugging me. I returned the hug. It was good and comforting, but not the hug I craved.

"You're not alone, Ashlyn. You'll never be alone."

I nodded, grateful that Hades had allowed Zotera to leave Hell with me.

"I'm sorry you were almost hurt today. If you hadn't changed that truck..."

She patted my back. "Nothing would have happened. I promise." She pulled away and smiled at me. "I'll make you a chocolate cake. Eliana said that chocolate makes everything better."

I watched Zotera hurry to the kitchen. Rather than offer to help and rain on her happiness with my glumness, I drifted to the couch and turned on the TV. While she baked, I tried to lose myself in mindless television for a bit. However, my thoughts kept drifting to Hades. Was he at the viewing pools? Was he watching me? Did he still think I was Persephone?

Rolling to my back, I looked up at the ceiling and pictured Hades looking down at me. I closed my eyes and remembered his face. The intensity in his gaze. The adoration.

"Are you hungry, Ashlyn?" Zotera called. "I can make you the sandwich you like."

I sat up and pushed away the longing I felt for a god who was never meant to be mine.

Zotera and I ate lunch together, and I sampled the cake she'd made while we watched more home improvement shows. Her gaze didn't drift from the TV once over the course of the next several hours. Mine did, though. I saw the book I'd borrowed from Yanet on the coffee table. It had been an entertaining romance at the time, and I wondered if I would feel the same way reading it a second time.

I picked up *Blood and Bonbons* by Melissa Nicole and settled in to read. My phone buzzed with a message once I hit the third chapter.

The unknown number had sent a picture of the outside of the Roost.

I frowned and was about to say something to Zotera when another text came through. Eugene's profile was recognizable. The way his hands were fisting Eras' hair as he kissed the incubus wasn't. I bolted to my feet, already dialing Megan.

"The number you have reached is no longer in service or has been—"

I hung up on the recording and tried again, only to get the same thing. Giving up on Megan, I tried Eliana's number and listened to the same message.

"Ashlyn?" Zotera asked, watching me with concern.

"A human I know is in trouble, and I can't reach Megan and Eliana. I know this is absolutely a trap, but I can't do nothing, Zotera."

She studied me. "What would you like to do?"

"Save Eugene from being pseudo-willingly raped by an incubus."

"Okay." She went to put on her jacket, and I hurried to do the same.

My hands shook as I backed the car out of the garage, and my gut twisted with fear. The tingle of the ward helped remind me that I had no room for any emotions other than certainty.

We would save Eugene, and nothing bad would happen. I repeated it in my head as I drove toward the Roost.

"Eugene won't be himself when we get there," I said when we neared. "He'll be under the incubus' influence until we can redirect what he's feeling. That means you'll need to kiss him so we can get him out of there as fast as possible." I glanced at her. "I would do it, but we can't afford any more earthquakes."

She nodded. "I can kiss him."

“Thank you. Just be really careful, and remember he’s human, okay?”

“I’ll remember.”

“Can you try calling Oanen and Fenris?”

She did.

“It says the number isn’t working,” she said.

Cars were already parked in front of the Roost and halfway down the block. More filled the side parking lot. I killed the engine and waited for Zotera to come around and open the door for me.

“I’ll keep you safe,” she said softly.

My gut told me we wouldn’t be so lucky a third time, but I’d meant what I’d said. I couldn’t sit by and do nothing.

As she reached to open the red door, I averted my gaze to the ground. The thump of the music echoed in my ribcage, both welcoming and foreboding.

“You need to look for him,” I said over the noise as I followed her inside.

“I see him.” She took my hand and started pulling me toward the dance floor.

I tugged back when she would have entered the writhing mass of bodies.

“I can’t go in there. One mermaid cut, and I’m dead.” It wasn’t technically true. Not in the Roost. The ward prevented death, but it wouldn’t prevent the pain and suffering right up to the cusp of death.

The ground gave a light rumble as I turned us around and led us toward the back booth. It was empty except for Eugene’s backpack. Releasing Zotera’s hand, I slid into the booth and dug out a book from his bag.

“I’ll be safe enough here for a few minutes,” I said with a confidence I didn’t feel. “Make sure you punch whoever is making out with Eugene, okay?”

“I will,” Zotera said before walking away.

I lifted the book, shielding my face from view and potential darts, and started reading. I’d sat in this booth hundreds of times and survived, and distracting myself with a good story was the easiest way to ignore the creatures who would try to bait me. Yet, the thought that there might be someone else in the club who wasn’t interested in baiting but killing kept me from fully sinking into the story.

“I see you got my message,” Eras said beside me.

The sound of his voice sent a thread of relief through me. I realized my mistake the moment he leaned toward me.

“I can make you feel even better,” he said, his voice like a caress.

I focused on the words on the page, my breathing, and pushing away all emotions. It wasn’t working, though. I’d given him an in with the relief, and I could feel him feeding on it. I could feel how I wanted to turn to him and thank him.

And then my head was turning.

I fought it with everything I had, all while pushing away the fear that wanted to rise. If he had that emotion, he’d own me.

“How long has it been since I’ve tasted you, Ashlyn?” he asked. “Look at your master, Ashlyn.”

Keep your gaze down, Ashlyn, I screamed at myself even as my gaze lifted.

The trembling grew more pronounced under my feet as Eras took my hand and helped me stand.

“Time to worship me, human. On your knees.”

He reached for his zipper as my knees folded. Tears filled my eyes as I stared up at Eras in adoration. The hate I felt wasn’t enough to overshadow the love he was forcing me to feel. My hand lifted to assist his efforts to free himself, and I wanted to scream.

Instead, I moaned when my fingers touched him.

The glasses on a nearby table rattled.

I fought Eras' compulsion even harder, wishing I could claw out my own eyes rather than look at him for another second. Yet, I felt like I'd die if I looked away.

Was this how Hades had felt with Persephone? In a constant state of love warring with hate?

"Hunger for me," Eras commanded. "Need me."

I did both. Desperately. I could think of little else but how he would taste and feel. How I would do anything to make him happy.

Eras' hand fisted my hair, and he smiled down at me as he positioned himself near my mouth.

The building around us groaned, and the floor heaved under my knees. Eras looked away from me. I craved for his gaze to return even as I screamed at myself to get away from the incubus. If I didn't, we would all be in danger.

The woken god was watching.

And he wasn't happy.

"Hades," I breathed, trying to tell him to stop even while wishing he was there to prevent what I knew was about to happen.

An unholy roar filled the air. Eras released my hair and spun away from me. I reached for him, still caught in his spell of need even as I fought it. My fingers brushed his pants as he screamed and ran, and I fell forward onto my hands and knees.

My hand landed next to a black hoof. Lifting my head, I stared up at the horned, winged, monstrous version of Hades. His eyes glowed a brilliant red as he looked down at me, each heaving breath expanding his chest and moving his wings.

"Help," I whispered, even as I moved my hand to crawl around him. "Please."

He picked me up gently, his demon form melting away as I stared at the red doors Eras had fled through.

“This is the last time we kiss like this,” Hades said before capturing my chin and bringing my lips to his.

I cried because he wasn't Eras and tried to pull away. However, Hades didn't allow me a choice. He kissed me hungrily. Demanding my focus until I only thought of him. Until my falling tears were from relief.

When he pulled away, I was breathless and trembling. The sight of his familiar face was a balm to my soul, and the longer I stared, the calmer I became.

“You came,” I breathed.

“I did,” he said gently.

How could it only have been a few days since I last saw him when I felt so starved and desperate for his presence? Although he was still holding me, it didn't feel real. He couldn't be on Earth.

But if it was a dream, I didn't want to wake up.

I wrapped my arms around his waist and rested my head on his bare chest.

“I missed you,” I whispered, hugging him tightly.

Hades' hand cradled the back of my head, and his other rested on my waist, a comforting cage. The beat of the heart under my ear matched the thump of music still playing in the background.

“Uh, Ashlyn?”

The sound of Eugene's voice caused Hades' fingers to twitch on the back of my head.

“Father,” Zotera said.

I lifted my head to look at both of them. Or rather, just Zotera since she was standing in front of Eugene.

“I trusted you to keep her safe, Daughter,” he said.

It was like he'd slapped her. Tears welled in her eyes and slipped over as she ducked her head in shame.

Dream or not, I couldn't stand the sight of Zotera's pain. I reached up to caress Hades' jaw and reclaim his attention.

"Please don't hold her responsible for what happened," I said softly. "It was my fault."

His gaze swept over my face.

"I find no fault in you, Ashlyn," he said with a tender light in his gaze. "In every action and word, you are perfect." He lifted his head and looked around.

"Is this the Roost you spoke of? The place where you wished you could dance?"

"It is."

Using his thumbs, he gently wiped the drying tears from my cheeks.

"Would you like to dance?" he asked.

I couldn't stop my smile. What else could this be but a dream? The king of Hell told me I was perfect and asked me to dance after saving me from giving an incubus a blow job. A laugh escaped me.

"I would love to dance with you, Hades."

He studied me another moment, a slow smile curving his lips, and took my hand. I followed him to the dance floor and rested my hands on his shoulders. His eyes flickered red briefly when I started to sway to the beat. Then he mimicked my moves, his hips rubbing against mine.

The murmur of Eugene's voice had me glancing away from Hades, and I saw him trying to console a silently crying Zotera.

"Please tell her that you forgive her," I said, looking up at Hades. "You're the only parent who's loved her unconditionally. Don't take that away from her."

He exhaled heavily and leaned in to set his forehead against mine.

Eyes closed, he said, "Zotera, daughter of my heart, I could no more stay angry with you than I could hate your

mother.”

I waited until he opened his eyes to look at me.

“I’m sorry Persephone is dead.”

His lips brushed my brow, and he held me as we swayed in a much less sensual way.

My phone began to ring before the song ended, a layer of reality to an otherwise dreamlike moment. Hades gave me room to check it but didn’t release his hold on me as I answered Megan’s call.

“Hey, Megan.”

“Don’t ‘hey Megan’ me,” she said. “I know who you’re with. Are you okay?”

Hades’ expression hardened, and a second later, Megan stood next to us with a phone pressed to her ear. Her eyes rounded as her gaze bounced between Hades and me.

“As you can see, Ashlyn is well. If you wished to verify that, you should have appeared yourself, Daughter.”

Megan lowered her phone in uncertain silence, and I wondered if she could feel the tension radiating off of Hades as I could.

I poked him in the ribs. His shocked expression was almost comical.

“Can you blame Megan for calling instead of just appearing?” I asked. “You haven’t exactly made her feel welcome in your presence.”

Hades considered me, his hands moving on my back, before inclining his head.

“I apologize, Megan,” he said, glancing at her. “You are welcome in our presence.”

“And he promises not to do that hand wave thing anymore that makes you disappear like an unwanted step-child,” I said, caressing where I’d poked.

His gaze locked with mine, and I saw his shiver as he nodded.

“Okay. Thank you, I guess. Um, is Eugene okay?” Megan asked.

I tore my gaze from Hades and looked at Eugene. He was sitting on the table, and Zotera stood between his knees, kissing the daylights out of him.

“I told her she could kiss him to break an incubus’ hold,” I said.

“It’s working,” Eugene called when Zotera moved her mouth to kiss his chin and eyes.

Megan and I shared a glance. “I seriously don’t know how he’s survived,” she said.

I smiled slightly in agreement and looked at Hades, still trying to grasp how he was there. His hands warmed my back through my shirt, and I could feel the stroking movements of his thumb.

Megan cleared her throat. “Not to be the rain on the reunion parade, but how are you here, Father? I thought you were bound to Hell.”

Hades lifted a hand to feather his fingers over my cheek.

“I allowed myself to be bound to Hell with the promise of Persephone’s presence at my side,” he said. “The Persephone I knew has died. I am no longer bound to her.”

The tenderness in his gaze evaporated as he looked up at the balcony above.

Megan disappeared in a burst of flames and reappeared where Hades was looking at the balcony’s edge with her back toward us.

“Who’s on the phone?” she demanded.

She pivoted to look down at us with a scowl.

“Why did the gods need to give so many giants the ability to portal? It’s a pain in my ass.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

HADES CHUCKLED IN THE FACE OF MEGAN'S FURY. "MINE AS well. Come, daughter."

The space around us did that familiar bending inward, and in the next moment, all five of us stood in my newly decorated living room.

Hades' hands smoothed over my back as I braced mine against his chest to steady myself.

Megan turned a slow circle, looking around at everything, completely unfazed by the shift in locations.

"The pictures Eliana sent didn't do this place justice," she said. "This is beautiful, Zotera."

Zotera lifted her head from Eugene's face long enough to thank Megan.

"I'm pretty sure he's okay now," I said.

Eugene waved his hand at me before caressing Zotera's butt as she continued to make out with him.

I looked at Hades. "Is that okay?"

His gaze flicked from them to me. "Are you concerned for the human or Zotera?"

"Both, actually."

"Zotera knows how to love without cruelty. Allow her to enjoy his gentle affection."

Zotera lifted her head, looking at me with hope. “Can I keep him?”

“Whoa,” Megan said at the same time Eugene shouted, “Yes!”

“I’ll agree to let him spend the night, but he has to go back to his house in the morning,” I said, compromising.

Zotera picked Eugene up bridal-style and carried him back to her bedroom while kissing him.

Megan shook her head at me, and I shrugged.

“He was under an incubus’ influence for at least thirty minutes. A night with Zotera will help him forget whatever might have happened before we could get there.”

“Is that why you went to the club without calling me?” Although she said it nicely, I heard the reprimand.

“I did call you. And Eliana. And Fenris and Oanen. None of the calls went through. I got the same message that said the numbers were no longer in service.” Lifting a hand from Hades’ chest, I tossed her my phone so she could see the call history and the pictures I’d received.

“I knew it was a setup. Look at the pictures. But even knowing that, I couldn’t leave him to his fate, Megan. Some things can’t be forgotten. And if not for Hades’ timely arrival, I would have suffered the same fate.”

Hades’ fingers twitched against my back, and I absently stroked his chest, in tune with his mood.

“I’m glad you arrived when you did, Father,” Megan said. “But what does it mean that you’ve broken free?”

“I don’t know, daughter, but while I’m here, we will find those attempting to harm Ashlyn. Her safety matters more than my presence, don’t you agree?”

Turning away from Megan’s worried gaze, I looked up at Hades’ and found him watching me.

“I disagree,” I said. “How many cities will be destroyed because you’re here? How many people will die due to your

efforts to keep me safe?”

“Do their lives matter more than yours?” he asked.

“The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few,” I quoted.

Hades’ laughter contained centuries of bitterness and obsession.

“I am the many, Ashlyn, and I need you. If you wish to favor the humans and the creatures who have never shown you favor, it will be as you desire. Only those who seek to harm you will die at my hands or the hands of those I command.”

“Harm is too loosely defined. If anyone tries to kill me, fine. But if Megan decides to smack the back of my head because I went to the Roost and risked myself to save Eugene, I’m not okay with you killing her.”

“Uh, thanks for that, but I’m not dumb enough to try to hit you,” Megan said.

Hades flashed me a smile. “There. You have no need for concern.”

“Are you purposely choosing to ignore my point?” I asked, trying to step out of his hold. His arms tightened around me, and he pulled me closer until my cheek rested over his heart.

“It will be as you wish. Only those who seek to end who you are will die. No others.”

“Thank you,” I murmured, trying not to focus on how amazing his chest felt against my skin.

“Go attend to your mate, daughter,” Hades said. “We will discuss strategies in the morning.”

Megan nodded to him and glanced at me before disappearing in a blaze.

I tipped my head back and looked up at Hades. He looked exactly the same, which made sense since I’d only left Hell a few days ago. Yet, I felt differently toward him. More desperate. More determined to make him see *me*. To make him love *me*.

“You are mine, Ashlyn,” he said as if reading my thoughts.

“Am I? This still feels like a dream,” I said.

“How so?”

I eased out of his arms and studied him. His dark hair fell in sexy disarray around his head. His warm brown eyes watched me with an intensity that hinted he was seconds away from grabbing me and pulling me into his lap. He still wore no shirt, leaving the golden expanse of his lickable chest exposed to tempt me. Even his bare feet looked sexy. The old-time pants, not so much, but the way they rode low did.

“Ashlyn?” he said, coaxing me out of my thoughts. “How does this feel like a dream?”

“You’re here, using my name and telling me I’m perfect. Staking your claim. We both know I’m not who you want, though. You shouldn’t be here, Hades.”

He shifted closer to me, crowding my space and touching my throat gently. “I belong with you. Always.”

His words cut through me.

“You belong with her.”

“Do I?” His eyes flared briefly. “I fell in love with Persephone at first sight. She was walking in a field of flowers and basking in the sunlight. That version of her died quickly once we entered Hell, but before it did, she knew how to love and agreed to allow me to love her in return.”

His expression twisted with anguish and regret, and he briefly closed his eyes.

“With her, I was chained to a wall and left to die. You brought me back to life, Ashlyn, not Persephone. You, a mortal sent to Hell by mistake.

“I have many questions and very few answers. Allow me to stay with you. Please.”

Everything he said showed he knew exactly who I was... and he still wanted to stay with me? Ashlyn?

“What does that mean, exactly?” I asked.

He smiled slightly.

“I would like a chance to begin again.” He backed up a step, catching my hand as he moved. Bending at the waist, he brought my hand to his lips and kissed my fingers. “Never have I seen a beauty to rival yours. Call me Hades. Or your love. Whichever comes easiest to your tongue.”

I giggle-snorted and clapped my free hand over my mouth.

He glanced up at me with a slight smile tugging his lips.

“Never conceal your merriment from me, Ashlyn. Your laughter is joy and light.”

“You used to say blood would rain,” I said, needing to be sure this was real.

“When I mistook you for a goddess I once knew.”

I studied him intently. His eyes were clear of any madness and reflected only patience as he waited for me to decide.

“Does beginning again mean you’ll sleep on the couch tonight?” I asked, still unsure what he was asking.

He chuckled.

“My desire to be with you has only grown since you woke me, Ashlyn.”

“But that was when you thought I was Persephone.”

He cupped my face between his hands, his fingers teasing the skin as he slowly dipped his head.

“It grew with each sweet concession you made to free me from a past that had blinded me to what a future with you might hold. You, as you are right now, Ashlyn, are everything I want.

“Beginning again means I will not judge you by Persephone’s past actions. It means you are free to love me however you will, and I am allowed to do the same. I only ask one thing of you. Kiss me when you crave the feel of my lips against yours, but never again touch me without feeling to calm me. Please.”

The tormented please at the end wrapped around me. Standing on my toes, I removed the inches separating our lips and kissed him gently.

“I’ve never kissed you without feeling,” I said. “No matter how much I tried not to, I always wanted more.”

He groaned and reclaimed my lips, kissing me hungrily. My heart beat rapidly in my chest, and I gripped his wrist as he continued to hold my face so he could control me. And I loved every second of his demanding need.

Hades knew exactly who he was kissing, and he still wanted me.

When I was dizzy with the need for air, he broke away to kiss a path from the corner of my mouth down my neck. The things his tongue did to my skin didn’t help me regain my breath. I panted and clung to his shoulders as he worked his magic.

“Tell me you desire me as much as I desire you,” he said roughly between nips. “Tell me I fill your waking thoughts and that you dream of me when you close your eyes.”

Coherent thinking was a struggle, but I did understand that, although Hades got that I wasn’t Persephone, he was just as desperate to be loved as he’d been.

“I do,” I said.

“Tell me you need me.”

“Let me show you. Sit on the couch,” I said, nudging him again.

He willingly obeyed, taking me with him. Sprawled in his lap was one of my favorite places to be, but it wouldn’t accomplish showing how much I cared for him, only that I liked how much he cared for me. Yet, when I tried to stand from his lap, he didn’t want to let me go. It was like an octopus held me. I laughed and tipped my head back as he continued to nibble at my throat.

“I promise you won’t regret giving me some freedom,” I said. “A new beginning means trusting that I’m not trying to

get away from you, right?”

He growled and grumped but did loosen his hold with one last kiss to my clavicle.

I quickly slipped from his lap and grinned down at his scowl.

“Stay just like that,” I said.

The scowl stayed in place, but more importantly, so did the hands resting on the seat of the couch as I moved to stand between his legs.

His expression lost some of its surliness when I leaned forward and set my hands on his shoulders.

“Are you playing with me, Ashlyn?” The low rumble of his voice held a hint of warning.

“Define play,” I said as I slowly straddled his lap.

“You tempt me,” he breathed.

“I’ve always tempted you,” I said. “But you’ve never believed what I was doing was real.”

I carefully sat on his thighs. His face twitched with a partial snarl.

“Can I touch you?” he asked, letting the desperation he felt leak into his words.

“I was hoping you’d let me touch you for a bit without distracting me. If you’d rather distract me, though—”

“No. Touch me.” The demand was mixed with threads of need.

He closed his eyes when my fingers trailed over his cheek and didn’t move as I traced his brow and the bridge of his nose. He let me explore freely, and if he was disappointed that it wasn’t a sexual touch, he didn’t voice it.

Transfixed, I memorized every beautiful feature before leaning in and kissing his eyelids, the tip of his nose, and the corners of his mouth. The column of his throat begged for the same attention. His breathing grew more rapid, and he

shivered when my fingers circled the back of his neck and toyed with his hair.

“Do you want me to stop?” I asked.

“Anything you wish will be yours if you continue,” he rasped.

“No bargains. No deals. Just a simple yes or no. Do you want me to keep touching you?”

“Yes.”

The tormented word fed my need to soothe him. I stroked my fingers over his chest, showing him the tenderness and love he so craved. But I didn't kiss him there. I knew not to push my luck.

When I was done touching him, I wrapped my arms around him and hugged him close.

“A new beginning doesn't mean we can erase our pasts,” I said. “You've been lied to and tricked so many times that I know it's going to be hard for you to believe everything I say. So instead of telling you I desire you and think of you, I'd rather show you like this that I care.”

His arms wrapped around me, and the weight of one hand settled on the back of my head.

“Thank you, Ashlyn. I'd forgotten what a gentle touch felt like.”

My heart ached for him, but I knew he didn't want my pity.

Straightening, I looked down into his bright red, glowing eyes.

“Do you want to see the beautiful bedroom Zotera made me, or do you want to make out some more on the couch?”

He had me in his arms and in the bedroom a second later.

“Now it's my turn to touch.”

The moment my back touched the bed, my clothes disappeared.

“Uh—”

His mouth swallowed my impending protest until the heat of his kiss erased any objection. When he had me thoroughly dazed, he lay on his side next to me, feathering his fingers over my face as he studied me.

“Trust me,” he whispered, gently trailing the tip of a finger over my brow until I closed my eyes.

I floated in sensation, lost to his gentle exploratory touch, as he mimicked everything I’d done to him. By the time he reached my chest, I was breathing just as erratically, and I was desperate for more. Thankfully, where I’d held back and not kissed him, Hades showed no restraint.

The wet heat of his mouth closing over a peak branded me, and I fisted my fingers in his hair, tethering him. Lips, tongue, and teeth coaxed gasp after moan from my lips, and when his hand drifted down my stomach, I readily welcomed his touch there too.

His mouth released me with a pop.

“So sweet,” he murmured, moving to the other side. “So perfect.”

I whimpered and arched my hips against his firm caress. Need for more—more kisses, more touching, more Hades—stole my reason. I pulled at his hair until his mouth left my chest and claimed my lips.

He kissed me savagely, and I felt something hard bump against my fist in his hair.

He pulled back, panting. “No. This time will be different.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant and didn’t open my eyes to look at him. I couldn’t.

My eyes rolled back in my head as his skillful fingers returned to my folds and stoked my pleasure higher, demanding I find joy in his touch. As if I could fight it.

Hands shaking, I grabbed onto his shoulders and held on for dear life as the first wave of my release crashed through me.

“Yes,” he breathed, kissing my neck and face as I accepted everything he offered me.

When his weight shifted from my side and settled between my legs, not a single reason to deny him rose in my mind. I belonged to Hades. He could do with me as he wished.

“I have hungered for your nectar,” he said a moment before his mouth settled on me.

He drank from me gently, allowing the waves to recede. Waiting for my pulse to slow. Once it did, the softness faded. His hold on my thighs grew firmer, and his tongue more insistent as it dipped into me again and again.

“Please,” I panted, uncaring if I was begging. “More.”

I lifted my hips, pressing his tongue deeper in my need to feel more of him.

He vanished.

Stunned, I blinked at my empty fists, which had once again been gripping his hair.

Harsh reality returned, and I flopped back onto the bed to cover my face with my hands. What had I done? I cringed at how I’d been grinding against his face and pulled a nearby pillow over mine to hide the stain of my growing mortification.

How horrible had it been that he’d just vanished?

I groaned and rolled to my side as I caught my breath.

Maybe it’s not as bad as you think, I silently consoled myself. *The guy was used to knives as foreplay, after all.*

I cringed under the pillow and realized I’d been pulling his hair. No one liked their hair pulled. It had probably reminded him of Persephone, and, triggered, he’d bolted.

Damn my hands. No, damn my brain because the second he started touching me, I forgot everything.

Needing an escape, I hurried to the bathroom to wash away my embarrassment. It didn’t work, obviously, but I did calm down a little.

Starting over meant having patience. We both had a lot to work through. Once he came back, I would apologize for the hair-pulling and ask him to tell me to stop the next time instead of just leaving. Clear communication was the key to a successful relationship. I couldn't remember where I read it, but I knew it was true.

I put on a comfortable pair of pajamas and went out to the living room to wait, thinking it was a better spot for the conversation we needed to have than the bedroom.

However, once I left my room, I could hear the sounds coming from Zotera's room. I didn't begrudge her for having a good time, but I was a little worried for Eugene. What if he lost all rational thought around Zotera like I did with Hades?

I went to the door and lifted a hand to knock before realizing how dumb I was being.

My hesitation around Hades was due to my inexperience. Eugene hadn't struck me as inexperienced whenever I'd spoken to him. And it wasn't like Zotera had put some kind of mind control thrall on him.

Lowering my hand, I bit my lip and was about to turn around when the noise stopped, and the door swung open, exposing a completely nude Zotera.

"Is everything all right, Ashlyn?" she asked.

"What's going on?" I heard Eugene ask from behind her. "Where'd you go?"

"It's fine," I said quickly. "I'm sorry for interrupting."

I backed up a few steps, ready to flee.

Zotera moved into the hallway with me and closed the door behind her.

"You look upset. Did something happen?" she asked.

"No, it's fine. You should really get back to Eugene. He might think he did something wrong if you disappear on him." I paused for a second. "Everything is okay in there, right? You're not doing anything he doesn't want to do?"

She smiled widely. “He likes kissing as much as I do. But all over my body. He found a spot between my—”

“Okay, we’re good,” I said quickly, grabbing her shoulders and turning her toward her door. “If he does something you don’t like, just ask him to stop.”

“I know. He already told me. Thank you, Ashlyn.”

She disappeared into her room, and I pressed the back of my hand to my hot face.

“Did not need the details,” I said under my breath.

Rather than listen to their fun time, I returned to my room. I tinkered with the vials on the vanity, cautiously smelling each one. Nothing rancid hid in their gilded curves, only lightly floral and citrus fragrances. I found the scent I liked and dabbed it on my wrists even though I wasn’t going anywhere.

When Hades still didn’t reappear, I went to explore my closet. Either Zotera’s taste in clothes was wide, or she hadn’t known what I would like. Items ranged from formal dresses to yoga pants. Less of the latter and more of the former.

My fingers traced over the Grecian dress, and I thought of Hades.

He rarely left me for long. I could understand initially not visiting me after I came here since we were all under the assumption that he couldn’t. But now that he knew he could, why not return? Even if my hair-pulling had triggered him, it hadn’t been that hard. I had human strength. He hadn’t even noticed my efforts when I’d tried pushing him toward the couch.

Frustrated, I paced out of the closet.

While I wanted to respect his need for a little distance and time to sort through whatever was going on, I couldn’t sort through it until I understood what had happened. And until I could sort through it, I wouldn’t be able to sleep.

“Hades?” I called.

He appeared before me and crushed me to his chest with a hug.

“I didn’t mean to disappear,” he said. “You did nothing wrong.”

His hand stroked over my head repeatedly.

“Forgive me. I beg you.”

I pulled back to look up at him.

“Why did you disappear then?”

“I was reveling in the sounds of your surrender, then you were gone, and I was in Hell. Alone. With only your taste to keep me company. I did not leave willingly.” The almost crazed look in his eyes had me rubbing his back.

“Well, I appreciate that you didn’t make things shake while you were gone. Thank you for that.”

He made a face, which made me grin.

“What was that for?” I asked.

“I don’t want your thanks. I want you on the bed as you were when I was ripped away from your sweet nectar.”

“Would you be disappointed if I wanted to do something else?”

The frustration left his gaze.

“Anything you wish,” he said softly.

I eased out of his arms and took his hand to lead him to the bed.

He watched me pull back the covers.

“No sex. Just holding each other,” I said.

He waited until I was lying down before joining me. With my head pillowed on his shoulder, I idly ran my fingers over his skin.

“When you disappeared, I thought maybe I’d pulled your hair too hard.”

“Your love-tugs were exquisite,” he said. “I demand more of them the next time you allow me to drink from your cup.”

I turned my head toward his chest to smother my snort. I wasn't sure what was worse. The love-tugs or drinking from my cup.

His fingers tangled in my hair, gently stroking through the strands.

“I would never willingly leave this,” he said softly. “If I disappear again, speak my name, and I will return.”

I lifted my head. “Just like in Hell?”

He nodded.

It was exhilarating to know the king of Hell was at my beck and call.

“Won't you be missed if you keep coming here?” I asked. “You were only reunited with your children for a few days. I'm sure they want to spend more time with you.”

“Does my wish to spend my time with you not matter?”

I lifted my head to look down at him.

“Of course it does. I'm not trying to get rid of you. I'm simply trying to be considerate of your other obligations.”

His fingers lightly tugged at my hair until I tipped my head to the side. He leaned in to kiss my neck then pulled me back down to his chest.

“I can feel your exhaustion. Rest,” he said.

“I suspect you have another motive for asking me to close my eyes. Am I going to wake up naked again?”

He chuckled.

“You are wise and beautiful.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

I DIDN'T WAKE UP NAKED; I WOKE UP ALONE. STRETCHING, I felt his side of the bed and found it cold. While I wasn't sure if he'd left voluntarily or had vanished again, his absence didn't worry me. Now that I knew I could call him, time apart was probably healthy. Plus, despite what he'd said, I knew he probably had other things he needed to do, too.

So I got out of bed and used the bathroom as I normally would. After a very long and enjoyable shower, I looked over my selection of clothes.

Caught up in the vast options I had to choose from, I didn't immediately hear the soft sobs coming from my room. Once I did, I peeked out of the closet and saw Zotera lying face-down on my bed.

"What happened? What's wrong?" I asked as I grabbed the same jeans and t-shirt combination I always favored.

"I'm dying, Mother," she wailed.

I pulled the shirt over my head and hurried to her side as I shoved a leg into the jeans.

"What do you mean?" I asked, concerned but not panicking. First, she sounded sad, not like she was dying. Second, she told Megan they couldn't die.

"It hurts here," Zotera said, rolling over and tapping her left breast. "Carve out my heart. Please. I beg you."

I sat next to her with a sigh and brushed back the hair from her scarred cheek.

“Talk to me, Zotera. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I don’t want to return Eugene to his home. I want to keep him forever.”

“Eugene would also like to be kept forever,” he called from the other side of my bedroom door.

I rolled my eyes and looked at Zotera.

“Is this because I said he needed to go home in the morning?”

A fresh wave of tears started to fall from her eyes. “I don’t want him to leave.”

Eugene knocked on my door. “Can I come in? Please?”

Sighing, I left Zotera on the bed and went to talk to Eugene in the hallway.

“I’ve got to be honest here. I thought it would be *you* in tears this morning,” I said.

“No way. She’s great, Ashlyn. I mean, really great,” he said. “It’s breaking my heart to see her this upset. I don’t have a problem staying longer.”

“Hold that thought.” I opened my bedroom door. “Dry those tears, Zotera, and come out so we can talk about Eugene, okay?”

She was at the door and wiping her eyes two seconds later.

Did I see the way he reached for her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze? Absolutely. Just like I saw the hopeless adoration in her gaze. Neither would stop me from doing what needed to be done, though.

I sat on one of the posh living room chairs Zotera had made for us and waited for them to sit on the couch. Once they were comfortably leaning into each other, I ripped off the bandaid.

“An immortal named Thanatos is trying to kill me. I don’t know why. But I do know that Zotera saved me twice in twenty-four hours. When someone is in an immortal’s way, what do you think said immortal will try to do?”

Eugene sighed. “Get her out of the way.”

“I can’t die, Ashlyn. I’ll be fine,” Zotera said.

“You don’t need to die, Zotera. You just need to be far enough away from me not to save me. Just like what happened at the Roost last night. They used Eugene as bait and a distraction.

“How long do you think it would take Thanatos to realize you have a thing for Eugene and use it against you?” I asked. “What happens if you have to choose between my life and his life?”

Her tears started again, only this time, they tracked silent trails down her cheeks.

“I’m not saying you have to give each other up. I *am* saying you need to be smarter. Wait until we take care of Thanatos. After that, you can live with Eugene if you both want. Okay?”

Zotera looked at Eugene, and in that glance, I saw how much she was looking to him, a human, for guidance.

“I’d rather spend a few days without you than risk never getting to spend time with you at all,” he said.

She nodded, and I watched Eugene lean in to kiss her gently. The way Zotera pounced and had him pinned to the couch a second later startled me, as did the aggressive way she kissed him.

“Hey, Zotera, I bet Eugene is hungry. You should make him a soufflé.”

She popped up. “Yes. You shouldn’t starve yourself, Eugene.”

He slowly sat up as she scampered to the kitchen.

“Are you okay?” I asked, watching him closely.

He turned his head and gave me a dopey grin. “I’m pretty sure I love her.”

“Just don’t forget who her father is.”

“Right. Hades.”

Eugene stood and tugged on his pants before walking to the kitchen.

I shook my head and went to retrieve my phone from my bedroom. A string of messages was waiting from a group chat.

Megan: Ashlyn, the strategy meeting is for all of us, right?

Fenris: I call dibs on Oanen’s ruby slippers if Ashlyn’s house comes at him again.

Oanen: We should meet at Blayz. Adira knows Hades was at the Roost and is probably watching Ashlyn’s.

Oanen: Don’t worry, Fenris. I’ll still bring the slippers. I know you think your calves look better in heels.

Megan: I’m betting Eliana takes him up to a private room for a lap dance if he puts them on.

Eliana: Mom said we can use Blayz. We will not be using a private room.

Megan: So a public lap dance then? Looking forward to your moves, Fenris!

Fenris: I can’t decide if cutoffs go better with heels or bootcut. When are we meeting?

Eliana: Ashlyn’s call. But she’s probably preserving her sanity and ignoring this chat.

Megan: Lies! She loves us.

I was grinning by the time I caught up. Years of exclusion had been erased with one weird and funny group chat. Too bad all the messages had come through while I’d been talking to Eugene and Zotera.

“Hades?”

He appeared in front of me and immediately crushed me in a hug.

“Why did you not speak my name the moment you opened your eyes?” he demanded.

I tipped my head back to look up at him. “I figured you were busy.”

“I spent every moment away from you watching you in the viewing pool and yearning for your touch.”

I wrapped my arms around his waist.

“Does that mean you disappeared involuntarily again?”

“It does.”

“Okay. I’ll call your name the second you leave my side... as long as I’m awake.”

He nuzzled the top of my head and kissed my temple.

“You mentioned talking strategies this morning with Megan. Do you still want to do that?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“I’d like you to meet all my friends. The male ones and the female ones. Without hurting them. Please.”

His gaze locked with mine, and I saw a hint of tenderness there.

“I will not harm those you call friends.”

“Good. Then I’ll tell them we’ll meet them in a little bit.” I eased out of his arms to send the text but paused. “Oh. About Zotera. She really likes Eugene. A lot. She was crying because she didn’t want to send him home.”

“I know.”

“Right. Viewing pool. Sorry.”

He tugged me back into his arms, tucking me under his chin. “Never apologize. Only I beg for forgiveness.”

“We started over, remember? There’s nothing you did that needs forgiving. And my apology was just for forgetting about the pool. And for breaking Zotera’s heart with the truth that she can’t keep Eugene.”

Hades kissed my forehead. “You were wise to do so. She was distracted because of the human. Until Thanatos is gone, distractions cannot be allowed.”

“Maybe don’t say it like that in front of her, okay? And Eugene’s coming with us so they could have a little more time together.” I patted Hades’ chest, untangled myself from his hold, and sent the text.

Me: Can everyone meet at Blayz in twenty?

Megan: We’ll be there.

Eliana: Yep. We’re at my parents’ now.

Hades wrapped his arms around me from behind and set his chin on my shoulder.

“You speak with your friends with that?” he asked.

“Yes.” I twisted to look at him, bringing our mouths distractedly close together. “I lost my old phone in that room. It had pictures of my uncle on it.”

He hummed his acknowledgment but didn’t make a promise to get it for me. And I didn’t ask. I could only imagine how upsetting that room was for him.

“We should go to the meetup location,” I said instead. “It’s a twenty-minute drive from here.”

He shifted us from the bedroom to the kitchen where we interrupted Zotera making out with Eugene.

“Father,” she said, immediately taking Eugene’s hand.

“Your heart isn’t yet yours to give, daughter.”

“I understand,” she said with a quick nod.

“No more distractions after this.”

She nodded again, and Hades looked down at me.

“Where must we meet?”

“Club Blayz.”

“Think of it, and I will take us there.”

I thought of the derelict old mill on the outskirts of Uttira, a place I’d never actually visited but drove past several times with my uncle.

The room shifted around us, bending inward and reshaping inside an empty club. It looked nothing like I remembered from the outside. Although it was dark, I could see the svelte finishes and gleaming glassware behind the bar.

“This is Blayz?” I asked.

“Yep,” Eugene said. “There should be lights somewhere around here.”

The lights suddenly came on.

“It wasn’t me,” Hades said, tightening his hold on me as he looked around.

My phone buzzed from the group chat.

Eliana: The alarms went off, which notified Mom. She’s not spying. She just turned the lights on and the cameras off. We’ll be there in a few.

“It’s fine,” I said as I read. “It was Eliana’s mom helping us.”

Another message popped in.

Megan: Incoming!

I looked up just as a ball of flame burst to life to our right. It receded, revealing Megan and Oanen.

“Father,” Megan said formally. “This is my mate, Oanen.”

I felt Hades move behind me and looked back to see his nod.

Megan glanced at Eugene. “Glad to see you’re still intact.”

“Same,” Eugene said with a grin. “My night ended a lot better than it should have after I messed up at the Roost.”

“About that,” Megan said. “Why were you there?”

“Adira busted me breaking some rules and said it was restitution. I’ve gone there before with Ashlyn and thought I could handle it. I was wrong.”

Megan looked at me. “Adira again. She’s avoiding me, told you to go to the lake, and manipulated Eugene. She’s team

Thanatos. I'm going to talk to the council about removing her."

"No," I said. "When you put pressure on her, she multiplies it. Eliana learned that the hard way. Go the opposite route. Disregard her instead. She made it sound like Kelsey and Zoe were out of her reach. If Eugene and I know not to listen to her, we'll be fine."

"Until she portals you where you don't want to be," Megan said. "She's done that to Eliana too."

"Is there a way to block her from entering our houses?" I asked, glancing back at Hades again.

"Yes," he said. "Consider it done."

"Sweet," Megan said.

The back door opened.

"We're in here," Megan called.

Eliana and Fenris appeared. Cute, little Eliana's gaze went to Hades and turned completely black. She froze then backpedaled a step.

"Whoa," Fenris said, rubbing her arm as he looked at Hades.

Fenris offered him a crooked smile.

"A lot of us wish we weren't made the way we were. If there's any way for you to tone down the lust you feel for Ashlyn, Eliana would appreciate it. She's not a fan of random feedings."

I twisted to look up at Hades. His gaze met mine. "Asking me to stop how I feel is similar to asking you not to breathe. Don't ask it of me."

"I'll be fine if we stay back here," Eliana said shakily.

She didn't look fine, though. She looked like she was struggling.

"We'll make this quick," Megan said. "To recap, Adira is on team Thanatos, and Hades will ward the human homes so

Adira can't portal inside. Now, what are we going to do to find Thanatos?"

"He moves as we do, daughter," Hades said.

"Too bad we can't slap a tracking spell on him," Fenris said.

"Oh, I like that idea," Megan said. "I'll check with Zayn to see if it's a possibility."

"And if it's not?" Oanen asked.

"We'll need to figure out a way to get him out in the open," she said.

"Me," I said.

"No." Hades' arms tightened around me, and I realized he was holding me in almost the same way he had in Hell to keep me from going after Megan.

Everyone else saw it too, and I could see how much it worried them. Except for Zotera and Eliana. Zotera was used to it, and Eliana could probably feel how much I loved his protective embrace. Or maybe just how much Hades wanted me. Either way, I needed to show all of them, including Hades, that I wasn't going to slip back into my puppet role.

I reached up and gently pried at his arms. He hesitated to give in. Shooting him a reassuring smile, I eased out of his hold and took his hand to stand beside him.

"Thanatos tried to kill me twice already when I was out in the open with you and couldn't. If Adira is working with him, he's using her to try to get to me when I'm less protected. Wouldn't it be better to face him directly instead of waiting for one of his tricks to work?"

Hades' eyes flared with a red light, and he surged, growing bigger for a second before shrinking again.

"He will not touch you."

I set my free hand on Hades' bare chest. "There is no reward without risk. I've learned that time and again. If we

want to free ourselves from the threat, we can't hide from it. Please.”

His gaze held mine as he gently touched my cheek.

A wave of lust unlike I'd ever felt before hit me hard. Lips parting, I inhaled and leaned into Hades' touch, running my hand up his chest to capture the back of his neck. He didn't resist me as I pulled him toward me.

“Let me love you,” I whispered. “I will worship you with my tongue. Feed me your—”

“Time to go!” Megan yelled.

The lust I'd been feeling vanished in an instant, and I jerked back from Hades' chest, realizing I'd been seconds away from licking him. And...I wasn't horrified.

I looked around and saw that Hades and I were standing alone in the club.

“What happened?” I asked.

“The succubus lost control,” he said, caressing my face.

“Is she okay?”

He studied me closely. “Are you not angry?”

“Angry? Why?”

“For begging to love me. For touching me in front of others.”

“I wasn't angry, but I'm starting to feel a little annoyed.” I tried to pull away from his touch, but he only drew me closer. “After what we did in the bathing pools in Hell, why would I get angry about asking to love you? I might have been a little embarrassed about licking you publicly, but I wouldn't get mad about touching each other in front of other people. That's just me, but we're not talking about *me* anymore, are we? We're talking about Persephone. And until you can get that through your thick, horned skull, maybe I don't want you touching me.” I poked his chest for emphasis. “Now, let me go.”

Megan reappeared in a flash beside us with her eyes covered before Hades could respond.

“Please don’t be naked,” she said. “I’m just a baby fury.”

“Clothes are on,” I said with one last scowl at Hades. “Is Eliana okay?”

“She’s freaking out but otherwise okay,” Megan said, lowering her hand. Her gaze locked on my frown. “Everything all right here?”

“Not really. Your father is annoying.”

Megan smirked and quickly tried to hide it with a throat clearing.

“So, about Eliana. She’s worried she accidentally put the whammy on you and that you’re going to want to have her babies.”

My frown faded as I realized I wasn’t having any of those feelings toward Eliana. I should have been. She’d worn nice clothes in front of me once, and it had been enough of a succubus pull that I’d tried to hit on her.

“No,” I said to Megan. “I actually feel fine. No interest at all.”

Hades’ fingers moved over my back.

“None?” he said with a seductive purr.

I narrowed my gaze at him.

“None. Do you understand how hurt I am? When you came back and called me Ashlyn and told me I was perfect, I actually believe you saw *me* and were interested in *me*.”

“I am,” he said, trying and succeeding in pulling my head down to his chest.

“Don’t force me,” I said, slapping my hand against his side.

He released me like I was a hot coal and got in my face.

“You will love me,” he snarled as the ground shook.

“Who? Persephone? She hated you so much she liked using a knife, remember?”

The ground shook harder.

“Um, Ashlyn...” Megan said.

“That’s right. Ashlyn. I’m *Ashlyn*,” I said, pointing at myself while glaring back at Hades. “I’m the one who takes showers with you and snuggles you at night. Me. If you keep comparing me to *her*, I’ll start refusing to say your name, just like she did. Is that what you want?”

The floor trembled under my feet.

“Stubborn. Spiteful.” He snarled at me again and spun away, shoving his fingers through his hair.

I grabbed his arm and turned him toward me. He didn’t flinch when I caught his ear between my fingers and tugged him down to my level.

“Love me!” I yelled in his face.

The shaking in the floor stopped abruptly. But not his shaking. He carefully cupped my face with unsteady hands and brought his lips close to mine.

“I do, Ashlyn. Goddess, help me, but I do. I will not lose you.”

“Then be smarter.”

He kissed me with a tenderness that I’d never felt from him before, then hugged me close.

“Forgive me,” he said softly.

“Always.”

“Yeah, so, um...I’m not really a fan of mommy and daddy fights. Let’s not do that again,” Megan cut in.

With a twinge of guilt, I looked at her.

“There’s zero point in trying to keep me alive if Hades believes I’m someone else. Pretending to be someone I’m not would be just as catastrophic.”

“I know who you are,” Hades said. “I will not mistake you again.”

“Good,” Megan said. “Now that that’s settled, can we get back to planning?”

“Should we bring the rest back?” I asked. “Wait. Where did you take Zotera and Eugene?”

“Eliana’s mom’s house. But don’t worry. They’re completely safe. Nicolette knows Eliana’s friends are off-limits. It would probably be better if they stayed there.”

I felt a surge of guilt for my part in making Eliana uncomfortable.

“It might be better for them but not for Ashlyn,” Hades said. “Everyone should return.”

I could see the doubt in Megan’s eyes a second before she disappeared.

“What do you mean it’s not better for me?” I asked.

“Despite what you may believe, I have been listening. You care for them, and their care for you helps you feel less alone.” Anguish flitted through his expression before disappearing. “I won’t repeat the mistakes of my past with you, Ashlyn.”

“Mistakes you made with Persephone?”

He nodded once. “Isolating Persephone for my own selfish reasons did not endear her to me. Enjoy the company of your friends. But never alone, I beg you.”

That anguish returned, and I knew he was talking about my male friends specifically.

“I won’t,” I said, wrapping my arms around Hades’ waist.

The burst of light to our right signaled everyone’s return.

“I met Jason,” Zotera gushed, completely oblivious to the rest of the group’s nervousness. “He is Eliana’s father and knows how to make many foods. He promised to teach me how to make whipped chocolate icing.”

I grinned at her excitement and glanced at Eliana's black eyes.

"Thank you for introducing her. And no, I'm not thanking you because I was hit with your mojo. I promise you don't have to avoid me."

"I would prefer if you didn't avoid her," Hades said.

Eliana wrinkled her nose at him. Hades. The god of the Underworld.

I snorted a laugh.

"I've never felt this much—" She shook her head. "Mom once had a party with thirty people. It doesn't even come close to this."

"The gods and goddesses were cruel," Hades said. "Aphrodite claimed she created her children to spread love. Instead, their appetites incited wars among men. She made Helen of Troy, a child whose beauty shook the hearts of men, in her exact image. You are exactly like Helen. She could no more change how she was made than you can."

Eliana's eyes returned to their normal brown. "Are you saying I look like Aphrodite?"

"Yes, but you have Helen's goodness, something that Aphrodite, for all of her beauty, never had. Thank you for searching for Ashlyn and caring for her wellbeing."

Hades hadn't ever thanked anyone that I could remember. But my suspicion died quickly. After all, when Persephone had been alive, she would have used any act of kindness as a means to hurt someone and torture him. Was thanking Eliana his way of reaffirming that he truly believed I was Ashlyn? Or was he still testing me?

"Speaking of Ashlyn's well-being," Megan said, "Hades agreed to use Ashlyn to bring Thanatos out in the open."

"I would prefer an attempt to track him, while Ashlyn prefers openly spending time with me," Hades said.

"Spells take time, and I don't think Adira and Thanatos are just going to sit around waiting until we're ready to face

them,” I said, defending my stance. “Yes, I agree that we should try to track him. But while we wait for that, I think we should also try to bait them out.

“The first time Thanatos appeared, it was in a crowded place. He used poison. The second time, Hades and I were alone, away from everyone else. Thanatos threw a knife. When neither of those times worked, he ran to Adira to try to round up help, right? So why should we stay on Adira’s turf where she has an advantage? Why not remove me from Uttira and Adira’s reach so that Thanatos loses his help?” I asked.

“It makes sense,” Megan said.

“The Council will never allow Ashlyn to leave,” Oanen said.

Menace laced Hades’ low chuckle. “I am the god of the Underworld. Your world shakes with my wrath. If Hell can no longer contain me, do you think the paltry ward surrounding this place can? We go where Ashlyn wills.”

“Right,” Fenris said. “But wouldn’t just randomly leaving with her tip Adira off that you’re on to what she’s trying to do? I thought we didn’t want to do that.”

“Does it matter if she’s suspicious once I leave?” I asked.

“It does if you don’t want her using the people you care about as leverage to bring you back,” Eliana said.

“Remember,” Megan said. “When you push, Adira pulls. It’s better to draw her out subtly. She’s still our link to Thanatos. If we can’t get to him, I’d settle for getting my hands on her.”

“As would I,” Hades said.

CHAPTER NINE

“SO IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU HAVE TWO PLANS,” EUGENE SAID, drawing everyone’s attention. “First, you’re going to contact Zayn to see if he can put a tracking spell on Thanatos. Which, by the way, if he thinks he can slap one on an immortal, putting one on a frost giant shouldn’t be a problem. The backup plan is to ask the Council’s permission for an outing. Shopping seems to be a common theme, and with Hades’ current style, it might be warranted. If Adira doesn’t take the bait to come out to play, then Thanatos will hopefully make a surprise appearance. That sound about right?”

“Stop listening in on the grown-ups,” Fenris said with a smirk.

“I don’t know how you’ve made it this long,” I said, shaking my head at Eugene.

He grinned at me. “I know how to make friends with the right people.”

Zotera put her arm around Eugene, hugging him close, and the goof wiggled his eyebrows as he pressed closer to her. I shook my head and felt Hades tighten his hold on me.

“I like the shopping idea. It’d be even more realistic if a certain succubus with a shopping itch did the asking,” Megan said.

“I’m not sure that’ll work. I don’t have my mark yet, which means we’d be going with Mrs. Quill.”

“Not necessarily,” Megan said. “Your mom can take you.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she said with a glance at Hades.

“Give your mom some credit, Eliana,” Fenris said. “She’s been supportive in everything you do.”

“Too supportive,” Eliana said. “And I wouldn’t last very long without you. There’s no way they’re going to let you out.”

Fenris grinned. “Want to bet?”

“Okay. For now, let me contact Zayn, and let Eliana talk to her mom,” Megan said, swinging her gaze to me. “Until then, are you okay with staying home and chilling?”

“I think we can manage,” I said.

“Thanatos will not wait long before he tries again. Make your plans quickly,” Hades said before the room did its bending thing, and he and I were alone in my house.

“What about Zotera?” I asked.

“She will escort Eugene to his home and ensure it is well-guarded against those who would use him to hurt you.”

“Good. That’s a big—”

Hades disappeared, and the house shook for a second.

“Hades?”

He immediately reappeared in front of me and enveloped me in a breath-stealing hug. I wrapped my arms around his waist and smoothed my fingers over his back.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I hate being ripped away from you.” He trembled against me. “I fear being unable to return.”

“Then I’ll find a druid to send me to Hell,” I said. “I promise.”

He exhaled heavily and nuzzled my hair.

“Better?” I asked after a minute.

“Yes.”

I glanced at the clock. “We’ll probably be home alone for another hour. Want to do something fun?”

He pulled back to give me a slow smile.

That smile was turned upside down five minutes later as I explained the purpose behind a television.

“Mindless entertainment derived by watching the joys and suffering of others. Do the humans believe they are now the gods?” he asked with disdain.

“Okay, no Friends reruns for you. How about some rugby?” I asked, spotting it in the cable list.

Hades watched the screen and slowly started to smile. I knew I’d found something entertaining when he leaned back into the couch and draped an arm over my shoulders.

“Many of the gods and goddesses resented Zeus when he ended the games. Olympus shook with their rage. Some even threatened to join Odin and fight his foes in the other realms.”

“Bet Zeus wasn’t happy about that.”

“He laughed and told them to leave. That they should experience the hardships they so loved watching the humans suffer.”

“What did they do?” I asked.

Hades frowned and shook his head. “I found it best not to embroil myself in Zeus’ petty fights with the other gods and goddesses.”

“Sounds like a smart choice. It must be really annoying to embroil yourself with the petty problems of man now.”

He slowly turned to look at me. “Are you mocking my speech?”

I grinned. “And how you view other people’s petty problems.”

The corners of his mouth tilted. “Teasing temptress.”

His hand curled around the back of my neck. “Deny me your lips.”

“Nope.”

“Deny me your touch.”

“Nah,” I said, running my fingers over his skin.

“Will you give me your trust, Ashlyn?” he asked with a hint of vulnerability in his gaze.

“You already have it,” I said.

His eyes glowed brightly for a moment, and under my fingers, I felt a surge of power. The room shifted around us, bending inward and filling with steam as it reformed.

Standing in Hades’ arms, I looked around the space, recognizing the marble tiles. They were the same that Zotera had used in my bathroom. But the wall in this place was inlaid with marble mosaics. Lions. Griffins. Water nymphs.

I turned my head in the other direction and saw a huge, steaming pool of water, a lot like the bathing pools in Hell.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“We’ve moved to the new space I created off your shower room. Do you need these?” he asked, tugging on the hem of my shirt.

“You want to take a bath? Now? In the middle of the day?”

“I want to bathe with you. Always.”

“It’s a distraction.”

“A very pleasant one.”

“What about Thanatos and Adira?”

“Neither can enter here. I’ve ensured it.”

“What if Zotera comes home?”

“She will wait for us to join her when we are finished.”

“But what about—”

“Ashlyn,” he said, pressing a finger to my lips. “If you do not wish to bathe with me, simply speak your disinterest. These concerns you voice are trivial in comparison to what you truly desire.”

I sighed as his fingers trailed over my bottom lip.

“No, I don’t need these clothes.”

“Then remove them,” he said. His gaze didn’t waver from me as he slowly retreated to a lounge that appeared behind him.

“You want me to undress for you?” I wasn’t sure if I should be worried or interested. The heat that filled his gaze as he nodded pushed me toward interest.

“Am I bathing by myself then?” I asked as I reached for my jeans.

He didn’t speak as I slid them down my legs and kicked them away. Transfixed, he watched me remove my shirt too. My pulse was racing by the time I reached behind me for my bra clasp. He leaned forward on the lounge, bracing his forearms on his legs, and made a pained sound as the bra fell away.

Hooking my thumbs in the band of my panties, I watched the way his throat worked with each hard swallow. He groaned and ran a hand through his hair as I eased the material over my hips.

“I love the way it feels when you watch me like this,” I admitted. “Like I’m the only person in the world.”

“The only one who matters,” Hades said absently, completely focused on what I was doing.

When my last bit of cover fell to the floor, I turned my back to him and used the steps to walk into the steaming water. It was deeper than the other pool, rising to just under my breasts. With my fingers skimming the surface of the water, I faced him.

“Now what?” I asked.

“Ask me to join you,” he said roughly. His hand gripped his pants like he was ready to rip them from his body.

“God of the Underworld and all that is good in my life, will you come bathe with me? Please?”

He closed his eyes and made a pained face. “My love. Call me my love,” he begged.

The sensual bubble burst around me, and I slid under the water rather than say what he wanted. The same words he’d wanted me to say when he thought I was Persephone. I understood that he didn’t think I was her and that he was simply starved for love. But I refused to use the words she’d once used. I already had her face as a constant reminder to him, I didn’t want to add my voice.

When I surfaced, he was in the water next to me, watching me closely.

“I’ve upset you,” he said.

“I don’t want to be her in any way,” I said. “She called you ‘my love.’ Don’t ask me to say the same. I don’t want to remind you of her. I just want to be me.”

He wrapped his arms around me, hugging me close. The delicious slide of skin against skin distracted me from any annoyance I felt.

Slipping my arms around his neck, I tipped my head back to kiss his chin. Then his jaw. He groaned as I worked my way toward his mouth and captured my lips for a searing kiss.

“Wrap your legs around me, Ashlyn,” he said. “Let me feel you.”

I didn’t need any more encouragement than that. We both groaned at the raw contact. He arched his hips, dragging his length against my center and sending bolts of pleasure dancing through me without entering me. There was so much of him. No matter how I moved, it never ended. Heat built inside of me with each textured drag.

He claimed my mouth again, swallowing my whimpers and sighs as he lifted my weight with ease, his fingers digging into my fleshy backside. When one wandering palm moved between us, I tore my mouth from his and arched back. The water and his other hand kept me afloat as his fingers mimicked how we were meant to fit together.

His heated gaze held mine until my eyes closed on their own. I could only feel the wonder of his touch and my need for more. I moved against him with growing eagerness.

“Yes,” he breathed.

His mouth closed over one peak, and that blissful state rose higher until he scraped me with his teeth.

I shattered with a strangled cry. Hades mumbled something, and in the next second, I was lying on my back beside the pool with my feet still in the water. My legs were over Hades’ shoulders.

“Again,” he growled before kissing me where his fingers had been.

I closed my eyes, willing to let him take me to that place again.

My hand drifted to his hair, but rather than wet strands, I touched horns. I lifted my head to look at Hades and struggled to breathe at what I saw. It wasn’t the horns or the red skin. It was the absolute hunger when he looked up at me without stopping his kiss that had me gripping a horn in each hand and groaning.

“I won’t hurt you,” he mumbled against me.

It took several seconds for the words he said to register.

“Yes,” I panted instead of “I know.”

I didn’t want to think enough to reassure him that everything was all right. I just wanted to feel. His mouth. His tongue. His hand that was teasing my core again.

Lifting my hips, I pressed against him.

“More.”

“Temptress. So beautiful. No. Wait. Patience. I will only give joy, not pain.”

“Shh,” I said, grabbing his horns more forcefully.

He groaned, the vibrations setting off a groan of my own in response. His finger did something insane, and I managed

half a strangled cry of rapture before I passed out.



A hand tapped my cheek.

“Not to be a pain in your ass, sleeping beauty, but where’s Hades?”

I blinked Megan’s face into focus, remembered what Hades and I had been doing before I passed out, and bolted upright.

“Whoa. Easy. You’re okay. Bad dream?” she asked as I looked down at myself with wild eyes.

I was fully dressed and lying in bed, not lounging naked beside my new bathing pool.

According to the bedside clock, a little over an hour had passed since Hades and I had returned home alone. My gaze drifted to the empty spot beside me.

“He’s not here?” I asked.

“Nope. I came in with Zotera. We found you sleeping here and checked the rest of the house for him. Nice spa room you have, by the way. Moderately jealous.”

My face flushed, and her grin widened.

“And now I know why the pool’s so big.”

“Can I add a pool to my room?” Zotera asked from the doorway.

“Sure,” I said. “How’s Eugene?”

“He’s sad without me and will miss my mouth.”

“Oh boy,” Megan said under her breath. “Hey, any chance you know where daddy-dearest is? We got permission from the Council to take you shopping in New York. We didn’t say anything about Hades. Just that you and Eliana wanted to do some sexy clothes shopping. Nicolette went the mile and said

she wanted Fenris to come along too so they can practice public feedings. That means a full outing.”

“Uh, I think Hades probably—”

He appeared just behind Megan.

I looked up at him and felt my face flush.

Megan noticed the shift in my attention and glanced over her shoulder. When she saw who was there, she quickly stood and backed up a step.

“Father.”

“Megan,” he said, nodding to acknowledge her but not looking away from me.

“We’ll leave you two alone for a minute,” she said.

“No.” I caught her arm. “If we’re going to go, we should go.”

I looked at Hades. “Megan and Eliana have already made the arrangements.”

“I know,” he said, holding his hand out to me.

The slide of my fingers against his felt indecent when I accepted his help to stand. Probably due to the heat in his eyes and the memory of his mouth on me.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

The flush staining my cheeks deepened, and he gave me a slow, knowing smile that curled my toes.

“You tempt me to forget, Ashlyn,” he murmured as he reeled me into his arms. “My view of worldly matters narrows until there is only you when you look at me so.”

“Maybe you should get rid of the spank-me-daddy look you’re giving him, Ashlyn,” Megan said.

Hades’ eyes flashed red as he whipped his head toward Megan.

“You will speak to her with deference.”

Megan's head bowed, but the way it shook told me it wasn't her doing.

"Stop," I said, pushing at him.

The tension between the two immediately broke. Her head lifted as his soft brown gaze shifted to me.

"Megan's my friend, not my subject or my daughter. As a friend who has spoken up for me and saved my butt countless times, she's earned the right to remind me of my responsibilities in her own way. And as the man who has mistaken me for his ex countless times, it's you who should tread carefully in how you treat the people I care about."

His expression was concerningly devoid of emotion as he studied me in silence.

"No one likes being controlled or manipulated, Hades," I said gently. "You know that better than most, don't you?"

He exhaled heavily and closed his eyes. I darted in and kissed his jaw.

"Please don't be angry."

"Angry?" he asked with a self-deprecating laugh. "How can I be angry? You correct the mistakes I make with stern words followed by compassion and a kiss. You fuel the fire that Megan's suggestion started."

"Suggestion?" I asked.

"And, Zotera and I are going to go wait by the front door," Megan said, leaving in a burst of flames.

What she'd said to set him off registered with her disappearance.

"You need to stop making everything about sex," I said. "Please. Especially when other people are around. It embarrasses them."

"Does it embarrass you?"

It didn't. I loved knowing that I was his entire focus. But I was smart enough not to tell him so. If I did, I doubted we would ever leave my bedroom.

“The world doesn’t just revolve around us and what we want,” I said instead. “We need to think about other people too. I don’t want to chase my friends away.”

He leaned forward suddenly and kissed my forehead.

“As you will it,” he said. “Come. Let us join Megan and Zotera.”

He didn’t portal us to the front of the house but walked with his hand in mine.

“I apologize for distracting us from our purpose and for interfering in your relationship with Ashlyn,” he said to Megan. “I ask your forgiveness.”

Megan looked like she swallowed a brownie. The flying kind.

“Where are we meeting?” I asked to distract her.

“Uh, Nicolette’s place.” Her gaze shifted from me to Hades. “If it’s all right with you, we’d like to drive there for appearance’s sake.”

I glanced at Hades questioningly and found him watching me.

“Do you not yet know?” he asked with a hint of amusement. “*You command me*. When others seek an answer from me, it is with your voice that I answer.”

I looked at Megan, not quite sure what to think of that. She shrugged slightly, showing she wasn’t sure either.

“I’ll drive,” I said.

The car ride to Nicolette’s was quiet, with Hades relaxed in the passenger seat of my car and Megan and Zotera in the back. My headspace wasn’t. I was nervous about what might happen even though I knew better than to let that emotion have any kind of foothold. I’d been out of Uttira less than a handful of times. The rules were different out there. More relaxed. At least they had been. My mind relentlessly ran through scenarios for all the different ways things could possibly go wrong.

By the time I pulled into the driveway of the house Megan indicated, I was ready to turn around and go back home. However, a middle-aged man opened the front door and waved cheerily before I had the chance.

“Who is he?” Hades asked coldly.

“Eliana’s father,” Zotera said. “He promised to teach me how to make delicious desserts that Ashlyn will love.”

Hades’ eyes flickered red.

“He’s also madly in love with Nicolette,” Megan said. “So much so that he doesn’t even see women as women.”

“Good.” Hades opened his door to get out, and we all hurried to do the same.

“Welcome,” the man called. “Come in.” He stepped back, and I saw the way his gaze flicked to Hades’ bare feet on the snow-covered ground.

Hades paused at the front of the car and offered me his hand. We walked into the house together, and I saw Eliana standing with Fenris, Oanen, and another woman.

“Hades, Zotera, Ashlyn, this is my mother, Nicolette, and my father, Jason. Mom, Dad, that’s Ashlyn, my human friend, and Hades, the god of the Underworld.”

“Nice to meet you,” Jason said, coming around to offer Hades his hand. Hades glanced from Jason to me.

“It’s a handshake. Something we do to say hello,” I said, reaching for Jason’s hand.

Hades grabbed my wrist before I could take it. Surprised, I looked up at him.

“Do not. I beg you.”

“Jason, my love, please come to me,” Nicolette said.

The worry in her voice drew my attention from Hades. She caught my eye as Jason joined her.

“Humans often view a touch as nothing more than a touch,” she said. “But you know that is not true for many of

our kind. I believe it holds even more meaning to Hades.”

I looked up at Hades again and found him watching me.

“I’ve lived my whole life worried that one wrong move would be the end of me. Let me have what little freedom I can, please.”

He made a silent snarl face before moodily mumbling, “As you will it.”

It took me a second to realize what was happening. Hades, the king of Hell, who’d repeatedly promised to lay the world at my feet, was doing his best to deliver even though he didn’t want to. And he was pouting about it.

I couldn’t stop my smile as I wrapped my arm through his.

The annoyance in his gaze shifted to tender affection at the contact.

“Thank you for understanding,” I said. “In return for your consideration, I’ll do this the whole time we’re shopping.”

“He’s not going like that, is he?” I heard Fenris ask in a not-so-quiet voice. “I mean, I know we’re going to do the whole Pretty Woman thing today, but I didn’t think we’d actually go for the kicked-out part.”

Oanen called Fenris an idiot under his breath and smacked the back of his head. Eliana’s eyes flickered black, but instead of aiming the gaze at Oanen, she gave Fenris a warning glance and offered me an apologetic smile.

“Where we’re going, a shirt and shoes are required. The nicer, the better if we want to blend in.”

I glanced at Hades’ bare chest, embarrassed that I hadn’t thought of it myself.

Hades’ heated gaze swept over my flushing cheeks, and Jason cleared his throat.

“Come on, Hades. I think we can find something of mine that will work,” he said.

Nicolette made a panicked sound and grabbed at Jason as he took a step away from her.

“Don’t worry,” he said, catching her hand and kissing it. “He loves a human just like you do. He knows how to be careful around us.”

I glanced up at Hades with a question in my gaze. He nodded slightly.

“I know how to take great care.”

The rest of us watched Jason lead Hades away, and Nicolette shot me a panicked look.

“I’ve never seen anything to lead me to believe Hades is cruel,” I said. “Not even a little. He won’t hurt Jason. He won’t hurt anyone.”

“Unless someone tries to hurt you,” Megan said.

“Or unless he’s angry,” Eliana said. “The earthquakes are no joke.”

“I know. And he knows too. He’s trying. The faster we find Thanatos, the sooner we can remove the reason for Hades to lose his temper.”

Hades and Jason reappeared a few moments later. Hades wore a white button-up paired with dress slacks and shining shoes. Collar open and sleeves rolled up, he didn’t look ridiculous. Far from it.

My lips parted as he prowled closer to me.

Lust hit me hard, and I struggled to breathe normally as he stopped in front of me. I glanced at Eliana, but her eyes weren’t black. This was all me then. I shifted my gaze back to Hades to look my fill.

“You like these clothes,” he said, that devilish smile making an appearance at my dumb nod.

He took my hand and guided it to his arm like I’d held it before.

Nicolette cleared her throat.

“Perhaps we should head out. I have a penthouse in the city that we can use to portal to.”

“Since I know where it is, I can take us all there,” Megan said.

“Your ability is limited to the children of the gods and human souls. The living cannot enter Hell,” Hades said, not looking away from me. “Go to the penthouse first. We will follow.”

I struggled to tear my gaze from his handsome face in time to see Megan and Oanen disappear. Hades’ lips brushed my temple.

A few moments later, the room folded in on itself and reformed into a svelte, modernly decorated, open loft space.

“Wow,” Jason said. “That’s impressive. You didn’t even touch us.”

“It does feel different than when Adira or Mrs. Quill portal us too, doesn’t it?” I asked, offering Eliana’s father a smile.

Jason nodded. “Less nauseating.” He looked at Nicolette. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Please make sure you keep me posted,” Nicolette said to Eliana. “I doubt it will take her long to contact me.”

“Who?” I asked.

“Adira,” Megan said. “We agreed ahead of time that Nicolette and Jason should stay here. Since Nicolette’s still being tracked by the Council, we figured Adira would notice that she’s not in Uttira and reach out to the Quills. They’ll share that Eliana and Ashlyn asked to go shopping again. Adira won’t think anything of having Fenris along.”

“Slightly offended here,” Fenris said.

“Am I being tracked?” I asked.

Megan hesitantly shook her head. “The tracking spells are expensive.”

“And a lowly human isn’t worth tracking,” I said.

“It works to our advantage, though. The only person she can currently track is Nicolette. And when Adira sees that

Nicolette is in the penthouse, we're betting she's either going to reach out to Nicolette or Ashlyn, the weakest links—no offense.”

“None taken,” I said, and Nicolette nodded in agreement.

“So I'll be sending Mom pictures of us trying on clothes that she can use to send to Adira to bait her in,” Eliana said.

“And while you four have fun, Oanen, Zotera, and I are going to hang back and watch over you at a distance,” Megan said. “Easy. Just like fishing for mermaids.”

CHAPTER TEN

I DIDN'T SHARE MEGAN'S CONFIDENCE BUT KEPT MY DOUBTS to myself as we all left the penthouse. As promised, I held Hades' arm. His hand covered mine, warming my cold fingers.

He studied me for a quiet moment.

"Eliana, may I request a favor?" he asked without looking away.

"Um, sure?"

"Would you feed, please?"

"On you?" she squeaked, sounding panicked.

"Your mate will do," Hades said.

I glanced at her in concern as her eyes went black. Then a wave of lust pulsed against my senses. Nothing crazy like in Club Blayz but just enough to cut through my fear and have me leaning into Hades.

"Much better," he said. "Thank you, Eliana."

"Man, I wish I could have gotten a secondhand hit from that," Megan complained.

"I miss Eugene," Zotera said.

Their conversation wrapped around me, soothing away the rest of my tension until the elevator doors opened and we left the lobby.

"Have fun, kids," Megan said, taking Zotera's hand.

Hades glanced at them as they walked away, and something shifted over his expression. Longing.

“You okay?” I asked.

“I never thought I would see this.”

“What’s that?”

“Our daughters together. Speaking. Friendly with one another.”

I threaded my fingers through his.

“Zotera is great, and I love having her with me. But she’s not my daughter, Hades.”

He nodded and stroked his thumb over my hand.

“Of course. Forgive me.”

“Mom arranged for a car,” Eliana said. “It’s over here.”

The “car” wasn’t a simple car. It had six doors but wasn’t a limo. Fenris opened the middle door for Eliana, and Hades, ever observant, opened the rear car door for me. I was surprised to see a bottle of champagne waiting in the center console between our two seats as the guys walked around to get in.

I leaned forward and whispered, “Are we supposed to drink this?” to Eliana.

She flashed me a quick grin. “It’s not required. I think Mom just wanted to ensure we were comfortable.”

“Are there snacks?” Fenris asked.

“I have an assortment up here,” the driver said before pulling away from the curb.

Hades watched out the car’s window with less wonder than Zotera had as we made our way to the first boutique on Eliana’s list. I knew from shopping with her the last time that she didn’t shop at department stores. The high-end places she chose catered to the very wealthy.

However, when I walked into the first one, dressed in my jeans, t-shirt, and standard winter coat, I didn’t draw any

looks. Not on Hades' arm. He drew them all. The first saleswoman turned toward him with a welcoming smile and an I'll-give-you-whatever-you-need look in her eyes.

"How can I help you?" she asked.

"You can help us, not him," I said.

Hades made a husky humming sound and stepped behind me to wrap his arms around my torso and nuzzle my neck.

Eliana cleared her throat.

"We're looking for cocktail dresses and something to wear to a meeting that says power but doesn't scream middle-aged businesswoman," she said.

The saleswoman, who was in her early twenties, nodded and led us to some chairs. She was smart enough to direct all her comments and questions to Eliana and me after that. While the four of us sat and sipped some sparkling water, which had Hades frowning, the saleswoman collected a few dress options.

The pieces she brought back for each of us had Eliana smiling.

She slipped into one of the little curtained areas in front of the chairs. I went to mine, but before I closed the curtain, I glanced at Hades, who looked completely relaxed, sitting a chair away from Fenris.

He didn't like it when I was out of his sight, and I really didn't want the curtain to disappear.

"No peeking before I'm done," I said.

He gave me a slow smile that didn't reassure me. I tugged the curtain closed and hurried to change into the first dress sans bra since it was an off-the-shoulder option. The form-fitting, jewel-toned, blue dress hugged every curve and showed my panty lines. Those were staying right where they were regardless.

When I stepped out, Hades' relaxed pose froze. His gaze heated.

Something bumped against the wall in the changing room next to me.

“Come to me, Ashlyn,” Hades breathed.

I wanted to. Really badly. But the look in his eyes let me know what he had in mind if I did.

“Do you like the dress?” I asked instead, smoothing my hands over my hips.

“Yes.”

Eliana opened her curtain. Her eyes were completely black when I looked at her in her pretty pink A-line dress.

“Fenris, can you take a picture?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said, taking out his phone. “It’ll look more convincing if you put your arm around Ashlyn.”

Eliana hesitated and turned her head toward Hades. “I’m afraid I’ll influence her,” she admitted.

“If you do, I vow to help her break free,” Hades said.

I snorted, knowing he was just looking for an excuse to make out with me. Sliding an arm around Eliana’s waist, I winked at Fenris and leaned in to kiss Eliana’s cheek.

He grinned as he snapped the picture.

“Really uncomfortable here,” Eliana said.

“You’re fine,” I said. “And so am I.”

I released her and held out a hand to Hades.

He immediately stood and took it, but before he could do anything, I turned toward Fenris.

“Can you take our picture?” I tucked myself against Hades’ side, wrapping one arm behind him and setting the other on his chest as I faced the camera.

“Got it,” Fenris said a moment later.

Hades reluctantly released me so I could try on the next one. He acted like that with each dress.

Transfixed. Obsessed. In need.

Eliana relaxed a little when I didn't show any signs of growing attachment toward her after each picture. By the time we finished, my phone was buzzing with messages from the group chat.

Nicolette: The frost beast just called to inquire why I'm not with you. I told her you were sending me updates and sent her the first picture of Eliana and Ashlyn. I hope Ashlyn gets that dress.

Eliana: We're about to move to a new store. It's too early to start carrying bags.

Nicolette: That's why you have the car, darling. Show Hades how it's done.

Me: The dress is 6k. If I can spend 6k, I'd rather take a vacation.

Nicolette: It won't look like a real shopping trip if you don't buy something. Besides, it's the Council's money. Have fun.

Megan: Get the dress so I can borrow it!

Eliana chuckled and told the saleswoman we wanted the first dress.

We left with the garment bag and went to the next store.

"Finally," Fenris said as he opened the door.

The space wasn't filled with dresses again but suits. This time, Eliana and I got to sit in the chairs as the guys were led away to private rooms in the back. When Fenris appeared, Eliana's eyes went black. He grinned at her.

"Bet you didn't know I'd look this good."

Movement to my right drew my attention. Turning my head, I looked at Hades in stunned silence. He was absolutely devastating in a fitted suit. The dark grey accentuated his soft brown eyes. I didn't realize I'd stood until I was a few steps away from him. His eyes flickered red.

"Don't stop," he said. "Come to me, Ashlyn."

I struggled to swallow and form a coherent thought.

“Remember what I said about doing things in front of other people?”

He gave me an annoyed look.

“Good. Then don’t take this too far.” I grabbed his tie and pulled him in for a kiss.

We both groaned. His hands fisted in my hair as he hungrily devoured me.

Someone cleared their throat. It barely registered. Hades and his touch were all that existed in my world.

When he pulled away and kissed my forehead, I leaned into him, trying to catch my breath.

“I would say she approves,” someone said.

“We’ll take both suits,” Eliana said, not sounding like herself. “They’ll wear them out.”

When I looked at her, she had her face buried in Fenris’ chest as he stroked the back of her head.

“She’s fine,” he said. “You just caught her off guard.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Eliana said.

After handing over the card for payment, Eliana went outside with Fenris, leaving Hades and me to finish settling the bill.

My phone buzzed.

Adira: He needs to return. He isn’t the answer to a better life.

Me: Do you have the wrong number? I don’t know what you’re talking about.

Adira: You’re playing a dangerous game.

Me: I’m shopping with Eliana in New York. No game. Council approved.

I did a screen capture and sent it to the group chat.

Megan: It's quiet out there. Also, Fenris, you look smokin' in a suit. Well done. Now do that thing where you pin Eliana's hands over her head against the wall. I bet she goes Fifty-shades on you.

Fenris: On it.

Megan sent a picture of Fenris pinning Eliana against the building. It had enough heat to melt my phone.

“Thank you,” the salesman said, handing back the card to Hades. “I hope you'll return soon.”

We walked out the door together and found Eliana and Fenris a few yards away, still kissing. I shivered lightly and turned to look up at Hades. Only, he wasn't there.

Confused, I looked around.

A man dressed in a dark ski jacket and knit hat stood across the street. The sunglasses hid his eyes, but nothing hid his familiar goatee.

Thanatos.

He lifted his hand.

My eyes went wide at the sight of the gun he pointed at me

“Hades,” I said at the same time a shot rang out.

The god of the Underworld appeared in front of me, blocking my view of the street but not the pain that exploded in my chest as it robbed me of thought. I stared at him with wide, panicked eyes.

Hades' expression filled with rage as he looked down at me.

I knew what he saw when he grabbed my arms. I could feel the blood bubbling out of me.

“Don't change. Don't shake,” I said, panting as I gripped him.

He ignored me, ripping his suit as he grew in size, and pressed a hand over my chest. His red gaze pinned me as I

struggled to breathe. The coldness creeping into my fingers left with the heat flooding my chest.

“Ashlyn,” I heard Eliana call frantically.

I drew a normal breath and leaned into Hades’ touch. He shifted his hold, crushing me with a hug.

Wrapping my arms around him, I trembled.

No, *I* didn’t. The ground did.

“I’m okay,” I said. “It’s okay.”

He shuddered in my arms, and I petted his bare back.

“Uh, I think we need to get off the street before someone notices,” Fenris said.

I pulled back and looked at Hades. His anguished gaze swept over my face.

“Hey, handsome,” I said with a small smile. “I can deal with women eyeing you when you’re dressed, but not naked. Can you put that delicious suit back on, please?”

He stared at me for a moment. Clothes appeared on him. The rumbling stopped.

“Handsome?”

“Extremely. I thought the white shirt with the sleeves rolled up was distractingly devastating, but the full suit is right up there with it. Do you think we can try on some jeans next?”

He blinked at me.

“And maybe some lunch if everyone’s willing to keep going?” I added.

He tore his gaze from me to look at Eliana and Fenris. Both were watching me with equally conflicted expressions.

“This isn’t the first time I almost died,” I said. “And it probably won’t be the last until we catch Thanatos.”

Fenris shook himself and lifted his phone. Mine started buzzing as he typed.

“So, poison, knife, and gun. What do you think he’ll try next?” I asked.

The ground gave a slight rumble.

“It doesn’t pay to get mad about it,” I said. “If we face it with clear minds, maybe we’ll be able to anticipate their next move, and it won’t hurt so much.

“It is not your place to suffer,” Hades said, leaning in to press his forehead to mine.

“It’s not yours either. I’m sorry I was hurt again.” I tipped my head to kiss his lips gently. “Do you want to go home, or will you let me see what you look like in jeans?”

He pulled back, considering me with a tormented expression.

“Megan says that they lost him,” Fenris said. “I think it will take him time to regroup.”

Hades nodded, and his gaze swept lovingly over my hopeful expression.

“We will continue,” he said.

At the next store, I realized the danger of my dream. Hades was beautiful when shirtless and sporting old-fashioned pants. But when he wore dark jeans with a black fitted t-shirt, my mind melted. The corners of his mouth tilted as he left the fitting room and prowled toward me.

“How do you prefer me?” he asked. “Casually dressed or —”

“In my bed.” My eyes went wide at what had just slipped out.

Hades threw his head back and laughed, wrapping his arms around me in a spinning hug.

“That is my preference, too,” he said against my ear.

He put me down and held my hand to turn me so he could view the outfit I’d put on. The dark grey French leather leggings were Eliana’s idea, along with the off-the-shoulder white and grey glittery top.

“You grace everything you choose to wear,” he said.

“What are you doing?” I heard Eliana ask.

I glanced over and saw Fenris texting.

“Sending Oanen notes. Hades’ lines are gold, and I figured Oanen could use all the help he can get with Megan’s temper.”

Eliana rolled her eyes and caught me watching them.

“You both should get what you’re wearing. You look great.”

Fenris’ phone buzzed.

“The kids are cold and hungry,” he said. “Should we ring up and head to the restaurant?”

My stomach growled its agreement, and Hades’ hand squeezed mine.

“Yes,” he said. “We should eat.”

Forty minutes later, we were seated in a classy restaurant and handed menus without prices.

“My dad would go nuts if he saw this,” Fenris said, taking out his phone to snap a picture of the menu.

“Put it away, Fenris,” Oanen said. “Your hick is showing.”

Fenris grinned and sat back, playing with his tie while arching a brow at Oanen’s plain clothes.

“You’re just jealous.”

Megan’s mood didn’t improve with their teasing.

“Portaling should be banned,” she said. “He was there and gone as fast as I could blink. We were *watching*.”

Eliana reached across the table again and set her hand on Megan’s. I watched the tension melt from Megan’s body.

“Seriously?” she asked in a much calmer tone. “What grudge does he hold against Ashlyn other than she looks like Persephone? If we knew that, maybe we could—”

Hades disappeared from beside me. Everyone looked at me.

“Thanatos was Mother’s lover,” Zotera said in a rush. Her frightened gaze met mine. “Mother made me promise never to tell. Call Father. Now.”

“Hades,” I said without hesitation.

He reappeared beside me and took my hand in his.

“Does that happen often?” Megan asked. “You disappearing? It happened right before Thanatos showed up.”

The waiter approached before I could answer. Fenris ordered two main dishes and told Zotera she could try both so she could make them for him later if they were good. The waiter gave Fenris an offended stare, which he ignored as he bragged about Zotera’s soufflé. The rest were quick to over-order too. It helped that we were eating at the Council’s expense.

Once the waiter left, Megan repeated her question.

“It happens frequently, but I’ve been watching the time, and how long he’s with me isn’t consistent.”

“And he always comes back when you say his name?” she asked.

I nodded.

“I really want to make a retriever joke,” Fenris said, “but my fur-bound alter-ego is telling me we suits need to stick together in respectability.”

Zotera giggled behind her hand as Megan held up her hand to pretend to squish Fenris’ head between her fingers. Oanen drew her hand to his lips, ending her mumbled threats until the food came.

Once the food arrived, we shared our meals and listened to Fenris’ entertaining food stories from his childhood. While Eliana and Hades ate just enough to be a part of the meal, the rest of us cleaned our plates. The food was that good and that minimally portioned. When the server came to offer dessert, we asked for two of everything.

Zotera was delighted with each bite of dessert she tried and promised Fenris she would make him anything we’d had any

time.

The food and company were so enjoyable that I never wanted it to end.

However, the desserts eventually ran out, and we asked for the bill. Fenris took another picture to send to his dad while Oanen paid.

“Should we follow you or meet you at the penthouse?” Megan asked.

I looked at Hades for the answer.

“Penthouse,” he said just before disappearing again.

“Hades.” He immediately reappeared.

“Is someone in Hell calling you back?” Megan asked, standing.

“My will is my own. Hell is the cage to which I’ve been leashed.”

“So you’re not quite free of Hell, and that’s why you keep getting pulled back?” Megan asked.

“That is a question I cannot answer,” he said, helping me from my seat.

While Megan, Oanen, and Zotera took the easy way back to the penthouse, the rest of us used the car. I appreciated the extra time since I needed to think about the little nugget of information Zotera had dropped at lunch. I could feel Eliana’s gaze on me several times during the quiet ride but didn’t acknowledge it.

The God of Death, Persephone’s ex-lover, was trying to kill me. Why? Because I *wasn’t* her or something else? What might have Persephone done to him that he’d want her doppelganger—me—dead? Probably some level of maiming or disfigurement. Hadn’t Zotera mentioned Persephone cutting off a certain male prized appendage? Although, I was pretty sure it had been Hades’ appendage.

The driver parked in front of Nicolette’s penthouse building, and Hades got out first to offer me his hand. He

waited until Eliana and Fenris joined us before heading inside.

Once we were in the elevator, Hades drew me backward into the circle of his arms and kissed my temple.

“Are we going to discuss whatever Zotera’s mother made her promise not to tell?” he asked once.

Eliana shot me a nervous glance, and I silently questioned how Hades knew. The viewing pool? But that was too muffled, wasn’t it? And why only that part and not the first part of what Zotera said?

“I think we need to,” I said. “But I haven’t figured out how yet since the topic is probably going to upset you, and you don’t like when I use kissing as a distraction to keep you calm, and I don’t like when you make things shake. So, I’m kind of stuck.”

“That’s easy,” Fenris said.

“Please don’t,” Eliana said.

“Don’t what?” I asked.

“Say something that will embarrass me,” Eliana said, wrinkling her nose at Fenris.

He leaned in and gave the tip a quick lick before grinning at me.

“Start out the conversation in the buff, and each time he gets upset, put a piece of clothing back on.”

“Your suggestion is both irritating and intriguing,” Hades said.

Eliana’s eyes flickered black, showing that Hades was definitely more intrigued than annoyed.

“I’m hoping to come up with a non-sexual solution so the whole group can be involved in the discussion,” I said.

Our phones buzzed.

Megan: Zayn’s here. He thinks he can make a potion, but it’ll require ingredients that Hades might not like.

Eliana wrinkled her nose again as we arrived on the floor.

When we stepped out into the hallway, I stopped us from going to the door.

“Zotera told us a little bit more about Thanatos in those few seconds you went missing at the restaurant. I’m guessing you missed that part in transit?” I asked.

Hades gave a single nod.

“Zotera seemed worried about you finding out,” I said. “And based on the hard time you had when you saw what happened to Persephone, I agree.”

Hades exhaled heavily and hugged me close.

“Your memory has holes in it,” I said softly. “Sometimes, you’re mentally present; sometimes, you’re stuck in the past. Persephone is the past, right?”

I pulled back to look at him.

“She is. You are my future, Ashlyn.”

I smiled slightly. “I really like hearing you say that, but what happens if you find out Thanatos is the one who did that to her? Will you forget about keeping me safe and go after him because of the past?”

“Never,” he vowed with anger edging his voice but not in the caress of his fingers along my cheek.

Capturing his hand, I turned my head and kissed his palm.

“I hope you’re right,” I said. “Zayn, the powerful druid that Megan knows, is here to talk about a spell to track Thanatos. Please keep an open mind and stay calm, okay?”

“As you will it.”

Hades held my hand as we walked the rest of the way toward Nicolette’s door. I wanted to believe that Hades wouldn’t flip out when he found out Thanatos was Persephone’s lover, but I wasn’t so sure. He was a jealous and possessive god when it came to me, her replacement. I felt a little sick with the realization that this news would test my place in Hades’ heart. How would I stand compared to Persephone?

Eliana entered the code at the door and let us in. Oanen and Jason, who stood in the living room area with their backs toward us, glanced over their shoulders at the sound of the door.

“Good. You’re here,” Megan said from beyond them. “Father, this is Zayn.”

Oanen and Jason stepped aside, giving us a clear view of Megan and the man next to her. His hazel eyes shifted from me to Hades.

The recently promised calm god went from hot guy in jeans to sexy demon with horns in less than a second.

“You will not take her from me. She is mine!” Hades roared.

Zayn snapped his fingers and disappeared.

Hades bellowed and vanished too.

“Hades!” I yelled.

He reappeared in front of me, a picture of pure rage, snarled—at me—and vanished again.

“Hades,” I said, getting angry myself.

Red skin, black horns, and spread wings appeared...and *disappeared*.

“Hades-hades-hades-hades-hades!”

He finally stayed put when he saw me angrily yelling his name. The building shook around us.

“Do promises mean nothing to you?” I demanded. “You *will* learn some control.” I poked him in his chiseled, red abs. “And you will not” – poke – “intimidate, scare, or try to hurt the people who are attempting to save my life.” I crossed my arms. “Unless this is your way of telling me that my life isn’t nearly as important to you as you’ve led me to believe.”

Chest rising and falling with each angry breath, Hades leaned down until we were eye to eye.

“You are *mine*, Ashlyn,” he snarled. “By Zeus’ decree, you are mine. It cannot be undone.”

“You’re making it really hard not to want to hit you right now. Zeus’ decree was for Persephone, not me. Now, please stop yelling at me and treat me with the respect you demanded Megan treat me.”

His seething gaze remained locked with mine as he took one breath then another.

Slowly, he returned to normal size with clothes. The suit this time. It didn’t help him look any calmer. More like barely contained savagery.

And gods, seeing him like that did things to my insides. I wanted him, and it broke me a little to know he was still so caught in the past.

Patience, I reminded myself. *Persephone broke him with centuries of torture. A few weeks of kindness won’t heal that.*

“I don’t know how to help you with whatever you’re feeling because I don’t understand what’s wrong,” I said gently. “And yelling at each other and losing our tempers isn’t going to change that. Talking will. Please. Talk to me, Hades.”

No one moved or made a sound as he hung his head for a moment.

“You are correct,” he said softly. “My memory *is* faulty. I don’t remember Thanatos or know why he wants to hurt you. I don’t know what happened to the other gods. You say the past shouldn’t matter, but I think it’s influencing our present.”

He lifted his head, and I saw the rage-filled fire banked in his gaze.

“I first saw Persephone in a field of flowers near Olympus. I hadn’t yet been tethered to Hell then. She was light and beauty and everything good. Her laughter touched me in a way that nothing else ever had. Zeus saw my interest and whispered his encouragement.

“In a time when we immortals fought amongst ourselves for power, I should have safeguarded my heart. Instead, I

allowed Persephone's mere presence to capture it completely. Zeus gave her to me in exchange for the shackles I once willingly wore."

That rage in his eyes burned brighter as he roughly ran his hands through his hair and gripped it by the roots.

"He said she was willing. He said that she loved me."

The building started to shake again, and I quickly cradled Hades' face in my hands.

"Zeus was cruel and lied to you," I acknowledged. "How does that relate to the present? Why did you yell at Zayn?"

"Zayn?" Hades said, releasing his hair with a dry laugh. "You mean *Zeus*."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I STROKED MY FINGERS OVER HADES' JAW AS I STRUGGLED with what he was saying.

“Zayn is Zeus?” I asked.

“I have forgotten many things, but I have not forgotten my brother's face,” Hades said, capturing my wrists. “I cannot count the number of times he has tricked me into doing as *he* pleased. No more, Ashlyn. I will not go back to the scraps he gave me.”

Hades captured the back of my neck, and he touched his forehead to mine.

Shifting my hold to his shoulder, I closed my eyes and tried to think of a way to help reassure him. If Zayn was a god, Megan would know, wouldn't she? And why would a god walk around pretending to be human when he could be a god? It didn't make any sense.

“Do you understand now?” Hades asked gently.

I pulled back to meet his tormented gaze.

“I understand why you've doubted everything. It's not easy to trust after you've been lied to. But you do trust, don't you? Megan's your daughter. Would your daughter ever work with Zeus against you?”

I saw the flicker of doubt in Hades' gaze.

“She wouldn't, right?” I coaxed. “Isn't it possible that, if I look just like Persephone and Eliana looks just like Aphrodite, Zayn might be who he says he is but looks exactly like Zeus?”

Hades held my gaze, and I watched some of that burning rage fade.

“It is possible,” he considered. “But do not ask me to believe three mortals with godly images in one place is a mere coincidence.”

“You’re right. It’s suspicious, and we need answers. We haven’t had any luck finding Adira or Thanatos, and baiting them in didn’t work much better. We can try that again, or we can try working with Zayn to see if he can help us. I think I have less of a chance of getting shot or stabbed if we go with Zayn’s help.”

Hades closed his eyes again. I could see he didn’t want to trust Zayn, and I understood why. But I didn’t see any other choice. We were dealing with another god. One Hades couldn’t remember when he could remember Zeus, Persephone, and Aphrodite just fine. Why couldn’t he remember Thanatos?

“It will be as you will it,” Hades said.

“Okay. Then, I’d like to work with Zayn, but first...”

I glanced at Megan and the others, debating between tough love or gentle when it came to the Thanatos discussion we needed to have.

Everyone was right where they’d been, watching us. Tension radiated from Nicolette, Eliana, and Oanen. Fenris looked relaxed enough, but the way he kept glancing at Eliana said it was a lie.

Megan caught my eye. She was watching me closely but didn’t look upset or worried.

“You look like you’re debating,” she said. “Don’t. Go with your gut, and do whatever you think is best. You have more power over the situation than anyone else.”

I had power? I wanted to laugh at the thought that I, the human who had almost died half a dozen times, had any power over anything.

“Tell me what you desire,” Hades said, watching me closely and proving Megan right.

I did have a measure of power, but only with Hades. With an idea forming in my mind, I took his hand and led him to a sofa. He didn’t resist my nudge to sit or question when I seated myself on his lap. He simply wrapped his arms around me and dipped his head to brush his lips against my neck. I let him have a moment before I spoke.

“I want to have a conversation about Thanatos, the God of Death.”

Hades stilled, and I twisted in his arms to look at him. “I won’t distract you with affection—I know you don’t like that—but how do you feel about confessions? Every five minutes that pass without anything shaking, I’ll tell you something.”

He tipped his head, considering me.

“Have you been keeping secrets?” he asked with a dark warning in his voice.

I barely suppressed a shiver as I held his gaze.

“They’re nothing bad.”

“Tell me one.”

I struggled not to glance at our audience as I thought of all the little secrets that I knew he’d give anything to hear. Things I wasn’t sure I wanted to admit to him, much less a room full of people.

When I remained quiet, he caught my chin in his fingers.

“Tell me,” he whispered.

“The first time you touched me, I shivered. But it wasn’t with revulsion like you thought. I wanted more.”

Hunger bled into his gaze, which dipped briefly to my mouth.

“I agree to your terms but in exchange for a truthful answer to a question of *my* choosing.”

“Done,” I said.

The barest hint of a smile graced his lips, and I knew whatever questions he meant to ask would probably embarrass me. But I was done hiding what I was thinking or feeling from Hades. If I wanted him to trust me completely, I needed to be completely honest with him.

So I cleared my throat and started the hard conversation I knew we needed to have.

“You agreed that the past is the past but that it might be influencing the present.”

He nodded.

“Then you got mad when you saw Zayn and said I was yours by Zeus’ decree. You said it twice.”

His hold tightened on me even as he scowled at me.

“You know what I’m going to say next, right?”

“You are not Persephone. You, Ashlyn, were never promised to me.”

I nodded and leaned forward to kiss his cheek.

“Thank you.” I threaded my fingers through his. “I am not Persephone. I am Ashlyn, the one here with you right now. The one who cares and knows how to be kind. I haven’t been cruel to you. Right?”

He reeled me in and hugged me against his chest.

“Never doubt who you are,” he said softly. “You are perfect.”

I hated what I knew needed to come next after all my talk of kindness and not being cruel. But I needed him to remember I wasn’t her when I verbally sliced his heart open.

“Don’t forget I’m not her,” I said, shifting on his lap to look at Zotera. “Repeat what you said at the restaurant.”

Her gaze shifted to Hades.

“Father will be upset.”

“Maybe, but he also knows that whatever happened is in the past. There’s no point in getting upset about it now. We

only need to know about it so we can figure out why Thanatos keeps trying to kill me.”

Zotera looked nervous as she played with the hem of her shirt.

“Thanatos was Mother’s lover,” she said quietly.

Hades didn’t react to the news other than to continue skimming his fingers against mine.

“Lovers don’t usually try to kill one another,” Megan said.

“Persephone wasn’t exactly nice,” I said. “She wasn’t really much for offering a tender touch.”

“Only for me,” Hades said bitterly.

“If that’s the case,” I said, “then Megan’s right. It doesn’t make any sense that he would want to kill her.”

“Jealousy, perhaps,” Jason said. “If he was her lover and you look like her, I imagine he wouldn’t like seeing you so close to Hades.”

I considered it for a moment and shook my head.

“I don’t think that’s it. The first time I saw Thanatos was in one of Hell’s hallways. He was surprised to see me. So was I. Hades wasn’t even there.”

“But you did call out to me,” Hades said.

“True. But is that enough reason for Thanatos to try to poison me?”

“Jealousy is immortality’s closest companion,” Hades said.

“You seriously think Persephone’s ex-lover, who hadn’t seen her in at least a thousand years, would try to poison me for saying your name once without even knowing why?”

“I do.”

That was some serious jealousy then. But it still didn’t feel right. Not after everything I’d learned about Persephone.

I glanced at Zotera, who was watching me with a hint of misery in her expression.

“It doesn’t make sense, though. If your mother did things to make Hades miserable, like taking lovers, why can’t Hades remember it? If she hid it from him, then she wasn’t with Thanatos to make your father miserable. So why was she doing it? Actual love? If it was, even if Thanatos was jealous, wouldn’t he try to win Persephone back instead of trying to kill her?”

Zotera’s expression turned more tormented.

“Am I right? Did Persephone hide her relationship with Thanatos from Hades?” I asked.

She nodded, and Hades’ arms wrapped around my waist tightened fractionally, but nothing shook. I tipped my head to look up at him.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“No. As you said, the past belongs in the past. I would like Thanatos to remain there.”

I absently patted Hades’ forearm to lend my comfort as I returned my attention to Zotera.

“Did Persephone say anything else about Thanatos?”

She glanced between Hades and me.

“She said that she was going to grant Father his wish to stay with her always.”

I thought of the way I’d found Persephone’s skeleton on the bed and his chained to the wall. The way she granted wishes sucked.

I slowly shook my head.

“That makes even less sense. Why choose death if she actually liked Thanatos enough to hide him from Hades?” Another thought hit me. “Why would she take any lover if she couldn’t see the male form?”

Hades hand stilled on me.

“You think Thanatos wasn’t her lover?” Megan asked.

“She told Zotera he was but kept it a secret from the person who it would hurt the most,” I said softly as my mind raced.

Why take a lover she probably couldn't even enjoy? She had to be getting something out of it. If it wasn't sex she wanted from the God of Death, then what?

All the pieces fell into place, and I felt sick with understanding.

“How I found you... What she said to Zotera about granting your wish to stay with her forever...” I said, looking at Hades. “Thanatos gave her what she wanted most. A way out. Death. It would explain why he keeps trying to kill me now.”

Hades shook his head. “Impossible. If the gods could kill one another, my brother would have ended my existence long ago.”

“No, I think Ashlyn's right. I think they found a way,” Megan said. “And not just for Persephone. All the gods and goddesses are gone. Well, except for you and Thanatos.”

Hades frowned again, and I felt another tremor pass through him. “It shouldn't be possible. The gods would never willingly cease to exist. And if Persephone and Thanatos found a way to end an immortal life, they would have ended mine, not hers. Without me, she would have been free.”

I huffed out a breath in defeat because he was right. Persephone would have tried killing Hades based on everything I'd seen and heard about her.

So we were back to where we were with more questions than answers.

“Any chance Zayn would be willing to give working with us another try?” I asked Megan. “We can speculate all we want, but that's all it is. Speculation. If we want answers, we'll need to ask the god who knows.”

Her assessing gaze flicked to Hades. “You haven't racked up that much calm time. I hope you have a long list of questions you want to ask Ashlyn.”

I tipped my head to look at him and caught the crooked tilt of his smile.

“I seek many truthful answers. Call your Zayn.”

“He’s not hers, and she’s not his,” Oanen said.

Megan shook her head at him and tried calling Zayn on speaker. It went to voicemail.

“Hey, Zayn. When you stop portalling around long enough to check your voicemail, call me back. Turns out you look exactly like someone Hades hates. That’s why he flipped out. He’s good now and would like to move forward with the tracking spell after you change your pants.”

She hung up the call with a smirk.

“How long do you think he’ll take to get back to you?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Lately, he’s been good about calling me back within a few hours of my messages. It might take him a little longer this time.”

Nicolette’s phone buzzed. She looked at it, and her eyes flickered black.

“What’s wrong?” Eliana asked.

“Adira’s trying to influence our return to Uttira. Apparently, allowing two unmarked children of the gods freedom in New York will only delay them getting their marks,” Nicolette said.

Fenris hugged Eliana from behind and wrapped his arms around her waist.

“Good,” he said. “New York is noisy, and we’re missing the trees we both love. We don’t mind if we’re not allowed to revisit it.”

Nicolette lifted her phone like she was going to send that message.

“No,” Eliana said. “Tell her I’m strongly suggesting she not tempt fate. My hunger is increasing, and Fenris would be

unbothered if I decide to feed properly as a real succubus should, whether it's here, downtown Uttira, or on pack lands."

"Look at you telling some read-between-the-lines truth, Chipmunk. So proud of you," Fenris said, kissing her temple.

"Oh, I like where this is headed," Megan said. "Make sure to send the full conversation to all the Council members so they understand the shit Adira's attempting to pull."

Megan's phone began to ring. She frowned at it as she answered on speaker.

"Hello?"

"Megan? This is Elizabeth, Zayn's sister. I think something's wrong with Zayn."

"Why? What's going on?" Megan asked.

"He's standing in front of me, but he's not solid, and I can't hear him. And he doesn't like that I called you. He's shaking his head and pulling his hair and keeps looking at the door. He's freaking me out."

"Can he hear you?"

"I think so."

"Put me on speaker."

"Okay," she said a second later. "You're on speaker."

"If you did something stupid and got yourself unalived, I'm going to be really angry, Zayn. Hades isn't after you. You look like someone he knew. Someone he would really like to get his hands on. However, he now understands you're not the same person."

"Did you say Hades?" Elizabeth asked.

"I did. Does Zayn look like he's listening?" Megan asked.

"He does. He's calmer."

"Good. Zayn, I'm hoping you just cast some weird spell to hide for the time being. Once it's worn off, call me. We still need you and have some new information to discuss."

"He's motioning like you should just say it now."

“Thanatos, the God of Death, was Persephone’s ex-lover. So we have an ex-lover trying to kill Ashlyn, Persephone’s lookalike. But she’s not the only godly lookalike. You look like Zeus, Zayn, and Eliana looks like Aphrodite. And before you get your panties in a twist, none of you are godly. I’d feel it like I do when I’m around Thanatos or Hades. We all think it’s too oddly coincidental that the only two gods awake are after the same human and that we have more questions than answers.”

“He nodded,” Elizabeth said. “And he’s holding up two fingers. Two hours? Yep, he nodded again. I’m guessing you’ll hear from him in two hours.”

“Okay. Thanks for calling, Elizabeth.”

“Thanks for answering,” she said before hanging up.

“Well, since we don’t want to go back to Uttira and fall into whatever trap Adira has planned, who’s up for racking up the credit card bill and ordering enough takeout to kill an elephant?” Megan asked.

Fenris sniffled. “I think I love you, Megan,” he said, wiping a knuckle under his eye.

Eliana and Megan grinned while Oanen stoically shook his head.

“I think food sounds lovely,” Nicolette said.



Almost an hour later, I scanned the array of open takeout containers in amazement. Fenris and Zotera had ordered something from just about every nearby restaurant that delivered. Italian, Greek, French, Pizzerias, Thai, Vietnamese, Ethiopian... If the pair could order it, they did.

Zotera tried a bite of everything, and when she found something she liked, she had me do the same. I found so many new foods to love and couldn’t wait for her to magic them for me again. Even with only a bite, though, I got full quickly.

Not Nicolette, though. The nibbles she was pulling from the delivery people didn't seem to be enough. She kept rubbing her stomach and frowning.

Jason answered the door for the most recent delivery and took the food while Nicolette paid and fed in the hallway. Eliana and Jason both watched Nicolette with concern as she returned.

"I'm fine," she said after closing the door.

"How many times did I tell you the same thing?" Eliana asked with a sad smile.

Her mom smiled in return. "I'll eat well once we return."

I glanced at Megan and saw she was checking the time too.

Nicolette's phone buzzed. When she glanced at it, she laughed.

"What is it?" Megan asked.

"Adira responded to the message I sent to the Council, stating she will happily provide Eliana whatever she craves upon her return to Uttira."

"All she has are words," Megan said. "She doesn't have the balls to show up here herself, or she already would have. Too bad you can't summon her like you can summon me, Father."

"She is Odin's to command," Hades said. "If she were mine, she would have already been begging for forgiveness at Ashlyn's feet."

Megan grinned. "Now that I'd pay to see."

"Does that mean the Council's going to withhold your marks?" I asked.

"What's a mark?" Zotera asked.

"It's this," Megan said, showing her hers. "Having a mark was the only way to leave Uttira and live free."

"Can I touch it?"

"Sure."

She ran her fingers over the symbol. “It’s old magic. Very pretty.”

“You can feel magic?” I asked.

“Yes. Father could give you a mark if you want one.”

Stunned, I looked at Hades. “You could?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Megan said before he could answer. “Everyone without a mark is tracked when they come or go. With a mark, anyone could take you out of Uttira at any time without it being noted.”

The burst of hope that had bloomed quickly shriveled and died.

“No one would dare take you,” Hades said softly, kissing my neck. “You are mine.”

“No, they would rather kill me,” I said.

Hades made an angry sound. I patted his leg.

Nicolette moaned and grabbed onto the back of the chair before slowly lowering herself to take a seat. I glanced at Eliana and saw she had her face buried in Fenris’ neck.

“You might want to refrain from touching his leg like that again,” Fenris said at my confused look.

Hades’ arms tightened around me.

“Hold your tongue or lose it, whelp,” he snapped.

Frowning, I tipped my head back and caught Hades’ gaze.

“Are you saying you would remove my *friend’s* tongue for being honest with me?” I asked.

The frustrated god stared at me for several beats before slowly shaking his head.

I grinned.

“You’re handsome and smart,” I said.

He disappeared from underneath me. My teeth clacked together at the unexpected drop to the couch. I scooted over a spot and called his name.

He reappeared beside me and tackle hugged me into the cushions.

Laughing at his open display of affection, I hugged him back.

The sexy smile that tugged his lips just before he kissed me erased thoughts of our spectators. I kissed Hades as passionately as he kissed me, and when he moved my legs so I was lying underneath him, I didn't fight it. Hell, no. I wrapped my legs around his waist and ground against his heat.

"I think we need to understand the rules for this type of situation," Megan said. "Do you want us to clear our throats? Give you five minutes? Leave quietly?"

I tore my mouth from Hades', not sure who to be more annoyed with. Myself for forgetting there were other people present, Hades because I'd warned him this happens and he wasn't supposed to start anything, or Megan for interrupting.

Hades kissed my forehead and grinned down at me.

"Ashlyn would prefer an interruption when we forget ourselves in the presence of her friends," he said as I untangled myself.

I pushed my hair out of my flaming face and glanced at my friends. Fenris, Eliana, and Jason were gone. Nicolette was staring at us with wide-panicked eyes, and Megan, Zotera, and Oanen looked nervous.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "I—"

"No, I'm sorry," Nicolette said. She looked at Hades. "Forgive me."

Confused yet again, I glanced at Hades.

He gave me a lopsided smile. "Your friend's mother was hungry. My sudden reappearance proved too tempting, and she fed...from me."

I was torn over how to feel about it. It was accidental, obviously. But I'd fought so long for Hades to see me as Ashlyn and not Persephone. All that sexual energy Nicolette had fed on belonged to me.

Hades watched me closely.

“What are you feeling right now?” he asked. “Answer me honestly. This is one of my questions.”

I sighed and looked at Nicolette. “I’m not angry, and I doubt Hades is either. He loves any form of affection but craves PDA like a goblin craves brownie wings. More, actually.” I turned to look at Hades. “I earned every bit of your affection for myself. You’ve yelled at me. You’ve scared me. You’ve tempted me beyond control—obviously. Me, not Persephone. So even though I know it was an accident and there was no harm to it, I’m crazy jealous that any of it was shared with someone else. It’s mine.”

His smile was radiant in its beauty. He plucked me off the couch and sat me on his lap. He kissed his way down my neck then caught my chin to turn my head and steal another kiss. His other hand rested just beneath my breast. Gods, I wanted him to move it so badly.

“You’re doing it again,” Megan said.

I pulled back and made a face at Hades.

“I’m not going to call your name for at least a minute the next time you disappear if you keep this up.”

He chuckled, kissed the tip of my nose, then released his hold on my chin.

“I will not allow her to feed from me again. I vow it.”

“It’s fine,” I said quickly, not wanting anything to happen because of an accident. “I didn’t tell you the truth so you’d overreact.”

“Then, what do you wish for me to do?”

“If it’s Eliana or her mom and I’m present, I’m fine with long-distance feeding. If it’s anyone else, no. You belong to me.”

His expression ignited with hunger.

“There is a bedroom free,” Nicolette said before Hades could pounce on me again.

I stood quickly and put out my hand toward Hades in a universal stop signal.

“You stay right where you are. I’m going to tell the others it’s fine to come out, and Zotera’s going to make us a checkerboard so you have something else to focus on.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

HADES WASN'T SO EASILY DISTRACTED BY THE GAME UNTIL HE played against Fenris. Loki's descendant had a quick mind and knew how to cheat without cheating.

"Has Ashlyn told you about lingerie yet?" Fenris asked.

The detailed description of what lingerie was and what it was for had distracted Hades enough to lose the round quickly.

"Have you ever played Twister?"

The explanation of the game hadn't sidetracked Hades until Fenris told him to imagine playing it naked.

"If Hades doesn't kill him, I might," Eliana said under her breath.

"He's fine," I said. "I trust Hades to keep his word. He knows how much having friends means to me, even if those friends might cross a few lines."

Hades lost that round too.

Then Megan got in on it.

"There are all sorts of fun games. Strip poker, for example."

Hades lost another game and didn't even mind a little.

He glanced over at me.

"Would you enjoy these games?" he asked.

My face heated.

"You can't even win at the one you're playing. Focus."

“This is one of my questions. Answer me honestly.”

I could feel everyone’s eyes on me. From my peripheral, I caught Fenris’ wide grin at Eliana’s all-black eyes.

“Yes, I would like to play naked games with you. But not in front of company, and not—”

The room bent in on itself, and when it solidified, I was in a bedroom with Hades. He captured my face, and I was leaning in, ready to lose myself in the hunger I saw in his gaze when a shred of reason kicked in.

I managed to get my hand up between us and blocked him.

He groaned behind my palm.

“I want. I need.”

“Me too,” I said. “I *need* you to stop thinking about sex. I want to live long enough for us to do all the fun things together that you’ve probably been imagining for the last hour.”

He licked my palm and released me.

“You tempt me beyond reason,” he said. “But it will be as you will.”

The room shifted again, and we reappeared in the living room. Oanen and Fenris were at the checkerboard, so Hades led me to the couch. He surprised me by taking the chair beside me.

“It is the only way,” he said before looking at Megan. “How much longer must we wait?”

She checked her phone. “Time’s almost up. Another ten minutes.”

Five minutes later, her phone rang. “It’s Zayn.”

She put it on speaker.

“Is now a good time?” he asked.

“Yep. We’ve been waiting,” she said.

“And everything’s okay?”

Megan grinned at the hesitation in Zayn's voice.

"Stop being a baby. You're losing street cred."

"No one says that anymore."

"I was trying to be relatable for you."

"I'm beginning to understand why no one likes furries."

While they bantered, Hades tugged me onto his lap and wrapped his arms around me.

"Are you going to show up or what?" Megan asked.

A second later, a blindingly bright light flared near one of the windows. When it cleared, the man from earlier stood there. He was staring right at Hades and had his fingers poised in a snap position.

"Chicken," Megan muttered.

"I apologize for my previous reaction," Hades said.

Zayn nodded slowly. "Do I really look like Zeus?"

"An exact replica," Hades said.

Zayn's gaze flicked to Eliana. "And Aphrodite?"

"Yes," Hades said.

Then Zayn looked at me, his expression troubled.

"It can't be a coincidence that there are three of us who look exactly like gods loosely tied together by the fates."

"Agreed," Megan said. "That's why we need to track Thanatos. He has answers we need."

Zayn looked down for a second. "Gods are powerful beings. The spells I cast, as you saw with the one you took to Hell, aren't potent enough even with the powerful ingredients I've used."

"But you can do it, right?" Megan said.

"It's possible. But I'll need something stronger than Eliana's essence."

Eliana made a face. “I’d really like to call it something else.”

“Love ju—”

Her hand landed over Fenris’s mouth with a crack. She looked completely shocked by it. He did, too, for half a second before she hugged him.

Megan cleared her throat. “What’s more powerful than the half-pint who just tried knocking some sense into her loose-lipped mate?”

“Hades,” Zayn said. “A god’s essence is the only thing that would be strong enough to attach a tracking spell to another god or a frost giant that can jump realms.”

All eyes turned toward us. Hades fingers stroked over my arm like they hadn’t just asked for his essence.

“You wish for Father’s blood?” Zotera asked.

Zayn made a panicked face and looked at Megan.

“Oh, no,” Megan said, shaking her head at Zayn. “I’m not explaining. I’m just a baby fury, and that’s my father.”

“There are many forms of essences,” Nicolette said to Zotera, saving Zayn. “While a soul, a last breath, or a dying being’s blood all have power, none of those would work in this situation. I believe Zayn is asking Hades for his sexual essence, not to be confused with his sexual energy.”

I saw understanding light in Zotera’s eyes. Then she paled and looked at me.

“Is there no other way?” she asked.

“Not unless you know where Thanatos might be,” Zayn said.

A memory struck me.

“Wait. What about Mount Olympus?”

“We already checked,” Megan said.

“No, I mean...Hades said that all gods need ambrosia and nectar, and the ingredients are only found in the gardens on

Mount Olympus. Maybe—”

Hades’ hand caught my chin again. I turned my head to meet his gaze.

“You have nothing to fear from me,” he said.

I frowned. “I know.”

“Allow me to provide what’s needed so we can end this game.”

I nodded slowly, wondering about Zotera and his reactions. They were both worried about Hades providing his essence. But why? I wasn’t sure it was something I wanted to ask, considering the present company.

“Okay,” I said. “I want the game to end too.”

Hades nodded his head.

“I have, um, vials,” Zayn said, clearing his throat.

Hades stood and set me to the side. Zayn reached into his long coat and produced several vials.

“One will suffice,” Hades said.

“Three,” Zayn said. “One for each tracking spell and one for another memory elixir, just in case the tracking doesn’t work. Megan said the last spell knocked you out. That means there are memories you aren’t able to access.”

Hades looked down at the three vials, grabbed them all, and strode out of the room.

“Do you have the other ingredients?” Megan asked Zayn.

“I do.”

“How long will it take?”

“A few days for all three. They’re not overly complex spells; they just require a lot of ingredients.”

I caught Zotera’s eye and motioned her over.

“When we were in Hell, you said that your father’s memories might be dangerous to me. Do you still think so?” I asked.

She slowly shook her head. “That was when I feared what he would do when he learned you were not Mother. But Father will do anything to keep you as you are, Ashlyn. He would never harm you.”

“You knew I was human?” I asked, shocked. “How? When?”

Zotera gave me a sad smile.

“Mother never looked at Hades like you do.”

That familiar ache returned to my chest as I looked at the hallway Hades had taken. I could guess how I looked at Hades—like a lovestruck human who didn’t know any better. Yet, I wouldn’t want to take back what had happened to my heart even if I could. It was his. Completely and permanently his.

The need to go to him prodded me to get to my feet. I didn’t listen, though. I knew what he was doing and didn’t think either of us could handle the outcome if I went to him now. Well, he would probably be elated. I wasn’t sure I was ready for the next step yet.

Hades joined us a few minutes later with three slightly luminous corked vials.

“Spells and tricks will not save you if you misuse this, druid,” Hades said.

“I understand.” Zayn glanced at Megan. “If there’s nothing else, I’ll get to work.”

“Go for it,” she said.

He disappeared with a snap of his fingers.

“Are we done for today, or do we want to try something else?” Megan asked.

“We’re done,” Hades said.

The room warped around us, and we reappeared in Nicolette’s living room.

“Thank you for your help in today’s efforts,” he said with a nod to Nicolette.

Since he seemed ready to leave, I didn't linger over any farewells. Without waving—I'd learned my lesson on that one—I called goodbye to the room at large and left with Zotera and Hades.

The ride home was quiet, and I kept glancing back at Zotera to see if she knew what was wrong. But every time I did, she would shrug.

As soon as I pulled into the garage, she got out of the car and hurried inside, leaving me alone with Hades.

I turned in my seat to look at him.

"Frustrated?" I asked.

"Beyond reason," he said.

"I'm sorry."

He sighed and finally looked at me.

"You have nothing to apologize for."

"It's not an apology. It's empathy. I'm sorry you're frustrated. I'm sorry you went through everything you have. And I'm sorry we aren't any closer to answers after today."

He stole my hand and kissed the back of it.

"Come. I wish to bathe with you."

I went from sitting in the car to sitting on the lounge beside the steaming pool. Hades was already in the water, his hair wet and his chin just above the surface.

"Will you join me, Ashlyn?" he asked.

"I will. But first, can we talk?"

He didn't get mad or pout. He just tilted his head like I'd said the most interesting thing ever.

"What would you like to discuss?"

"You," I said. "You've listened to stories about me, my hopes and dreams. But all I know about you is how everyone in your life mistreated you. What were your hopes and dreams before you saw Persephone and were locked in Hell?"

Hades swam toward the edge of the pool and rested his forearms on the ledge as he considered my question.

“Like most gods, I simply enjoyed my freedom after my father was locked away. Zeus’ interest in the mortals gradually drew the attention of the other gods.” Hades shook his head. “Not me. I hadn’t yet forgotten what it felt like to be controlled by another’s will and had no wish to act as my father had. Destroyer of worlds, gods, and men. I simply wanted to live in peace, away from all the manipulations.”

“What did you do while you were living in peace?” I asked.

He smiled slightly.

“I created.”

“What?”

“Everything I could. Plants. Animals. Children.” He sighed. “The other gods saw what I’d done and started creating children of their own. Where I created mine for companionship, they created theirs to torment men in the guise of helpfulness.

“Zeus was furious for a short span but realized his anger only spurred the gods to do more. He learned to ignore them, but I knew my brother well. He hated what they did to his favorite creation.”

“I don’t care about Zeus and his feelings. I care about you and yours. What makes you happy, Hades?”

“You do,” he said, melting my heart.

I stood and held out my arms. “Your turn to undress me.”

He surprised me by leaping gracefully out of the pool. Water cascaded down his body as he closed the distance between us and reached for my shirt.

“I thought you’d use your magic,” I said.

“I could, but I would prefer this.” He waited, watching for permission. When I nodded, he slid the shirt up my body, dragging his fingers over each newly exposed inch.

“I think I like this way better, too,” I said.

He smirked and eased the shirt off. As soon as my head cleared, he kissed me tenderly and reached for my pants. His gaze remained locked with mine as he nudged my pants down my hips. I braced my hands on his shoulders and leaned in to kiss his chin when he bent to help me step out of them.

“The thought of losing this drives me to madness,” he said. “Your gaze...the way you look at me...I can’t lose this, Ashlyn.”

I brushed my fingers along his jaw.

“You won’t.”

He made a tortured sound and buried his face in the crook of my neck. His hands didn’t stop their task. He unclasped my bra and pulled it out from between us. The skin-on-skin contact had us both groaning.

“I want everything you are. I want it more than I want my next breath. Yet, all I can have is a taste. Anything more and you would no longer be who you are.”

Understanding he was talking about what had happened to Persephone, I stood on my toes and lightly kissed his chin, jaw, and corner of his mouth.

“Let go of the past, Hades. Whether Persephone hated you because of sex or not doesn’t matter anymore. I’m not her, and everything we’ve done together has been amazing. Okay?”

He kissed me hungrily then pulled back to look at me like he couldn’t believe I was real.

“I’m fine taking our time getting to know one another before we go any further. Let’s wait until we’re both comfortable, all right?”

He nodded and took my hand to lead me to the pool. My last bit of cover disappeared on the way. I didn’t mind at all. Once he had me in the water, he held me close, lightly running his fingers over my back and dropping kisses on my shoulder.

“I liked today,” I said, understanding his need to feel close to me. “Spending time with you...doing normal couple things

like shopping and going out to eat...it was really nice.”

He groaned and hugged me tighter. I wrapped my legs around his waist and gently fisted the wet hair on each side of his head. His eyes flickered red when I tipped his head back to meet my gaze.

“Is that a good flicker or a bad flicker?” I asked.

“Good,” he said.

I leaned in and kissed him gently. He let me guide the kiss, keeping it sweet as I’d hoped.

“You should have never returned here,” he said when I broke away. “You are no safer here than in Hell.”

“You know why I couldn’t stay,” I said.

Anger flitted over his face, and he tried to look down to hide it. I kept a firm grip on his hair, though, and wouldn’t let him.

“Stop hiding what you’re thinking and feeling from me. Please.”

His expression turned slightly tormented.

“You don’t want to hear what I’m thinking and feeling,” he said.

“Please?” I followed the word with a sad little pout.

He looked at me with complete devotion.

“I can deny you nothing,” he said, sinking lower in the water so it brushed my shoulders and almost covered his lips. “I hate that you did not choose me.”

“I know. But I think I would have started to hate myself if I’d stayed. I’ve been ignored or used my whole life. The attention you give me...the way you look at me...it’s addicting. But I don’t want what’s meant for someone else. Staying and knowing I was just a replacement for Persephone...I think I would have started to resent you as she had. I didn’t want that for either of us.”

I could feel him trembling underneath me.

“I hate that you didn’t choose me...again. The affection you gave was nothing more than a distraction. Each touch you surrendered, you only did so to protect others. You would have never given me anything if not for fear and safety. You would have never come to me simply because the sight of me robbed you of breath and thought or that you wanted nothing else than to feel the whisper of my exhale against your skin. When you had the chance to choose again, you didn’t choose me.”

I looked into his tormented gaze and felt my heart ache.

“Does it matter the steps we took to get to where we are? We’re here. I’m in your arms willingly. It’s where I want to be. And I want nothing else than to feel the whisper of your exhale against my skin.”

He groaned, and I kissed his lips softly.

“This is what a relationship is,” I said. “It’s talking and building trust. It’s not giving up even when things get hard. Even when we’ve made mistakes. It’s being compassionate and understanding and trying again. It’s about forgiving. Will you forgive me?”

He stood abruptly.

“Plead sweetly for my forgiveness, Ashlyn,” he said, gripping my thighs and carrying me to the edge of the pool. “Let me hear those words fall from your precious lips.”

“Wait,” I said when my backside hit the cold tile. “Not like this.”

He paused, his gaze searching mine. “How?”

“The lounge.”

He leaped out of the water and carried me there. I stopped him again when he would have set me on the lounge.

“You, not me,” I said.

Frowning, he released me and slowly eased onto the lounge. The wariness in his gaze as he looked up at me was both thrilling and sad. I knelt beside the lounge, and a cushion immediately appeared under my knees.

“You’re right,” I said softly, taking his hand. “I should beg for forgiveness. I haven’t been sweet. You have.” I kissed the back of his hand. “You’ve protected me and cared for me when I couldn’t do either for myself.”

Holding his hand, I leaned in and kissed his chest.

“You tried so hard to make me happy with food, pretty jewelry, plumbing...” Every word I said was punctuated with another gentle kiss on his skin.

“I was grateful but continued to deny you the one thing you truly wanted.” The kiss trail dipped to his stomach. He shook beneath me and fisted his free hand in my hair. When I tried to place a kiss on his hips, he wouldn’t let me. The sound of his ragged breathing filled the steamy room.

“I love you, Hades,” I said. “So much that, when you’re not with me, it hurts. Please forgive me for not seeing that sooner. I don’t deserve you.”

He made a sound like a wounded animal. In the next instant, I was underneath him, and he was kissing me like a savage. Pleasure and hunger bolted through me. I arched against him, desperate for everything he offered.

“She is mine,” he said frantically when he tore his lips from my mouth. “Mine.”

“Yours,” I echoed as his hands moved over me, touching me everywhere and leaving me burning in their wake.

I grew bold enough to do more than touch his shoulders. My fingers explored every ridge and dip. He mumbled things I couldn’t catch, reminding me of his craziness from the beginning. It didn’t worry me, though. Even if he slipped for a moment, Hades would never hurt me. I knew that now.

“Love me,” I whispered before gently biting his earlobe.

“I do,” he said in a tortured voice. “Goddess help me, but I do. You are my torment and my salvation, Ashlyn. Without you, there would be no love. No reason for me to exist. I am yours. To love. To hate. To caress. To abuse. Yours and yours alone.”

I reached between us and grabbed his intimidating length.

“Mine?” I asked, slowly moving my hand.

He stilled. Completely. Not even breathing.

I tipped my head to look at him.

The golden glow had drained from his face, leaving it an unnatural pale.

“Hey,” I said. “It’s okay.” I removed my hand from him and cupped his face. “Whatever I did wrong, I’m sorry. Breathe, Hades. Breathe.”

He shuddered and buried his face in my neck as he held me tightly.

“I want. I need. Forego the flesh and bask in the affection. Affection is enough. A gentle touch is enough. A taste. Yes. Taste her.”

I ran my fingers through his hair as his mumbled thoughts fluctuated between his doubt that I loved him and that this was real and his wanting to possess me completely. It broke my heart a little that touching him intimately had returned him to the past. But then, why wouldn’t it? Persephone had only ever used sex as a way to abuse Hades.

“I do love you, Hades,” I said. “I don’t know how else to prove it. Will you kiss me again? Please?”

The words had barely left my mouth before he was back to that savagery that lit a fire in me. Tentatively, my hands returned to their exploration of his hips and backside, which only drove him wilder. Until I touched that part of him again.

He froze.

This time, I didn’t let go.

I wasn’t entirely sure but was fairly certain Hades couldn’t pass out from lack of oxygen. At least, I hoped that was the case.

He remained locked in place as I gently ran my hands over him, discovering the feel and shape of him.

“You’re safe with me, Hades,” I said softly.

A low moan rumbled through him when I reached his head, and he jerked into my hold. Hoping that was promising, I focused one hand there. He arched into my hands again.

“No. No,” he said. “Do not fall for the temptation. Blood will rain.”

I immediately stopped what I was doing, removing my hands from him completely.

“Who am I?” I asked, fighting the urge to shed frustrated tears.

He lifted his head and stared down at me with flames in his eyes.

“You are the one who can summon me from Hell. The one whose presence soothes me. A scent I cannot forget and would never want to. You are my sky. My light. My love. You are purpose and reason. You are everything. That is who you are, Ashlyn. Everything. And I will not lose that. Do you understand?”

I didn’t understand a damn thing. He sounded like he’d slipped back into the past but had said my name with the same tone he would have said “goddess” or “my love.”

Was he with me, or was he with Persephone? I just couldn’t tell.

“Maybe it’s time for us to put some clothes back on,” I said.

His expression went from earnest pleading to anger.

“Why?”

“Because I’m back to doubting you. Even though you said my name, I think you’re thinking of her. Do you know how that makes me feel? How angry would you be if you suspected I was thinking of another man right now?”

The room gave a deep rumble.

“Exactly, I said. “I’m jealous of a dead woman. I’ve tried everything I can think of to get you to see me, Hades, but your

mind keeps going back to her, and I'm tired of fighting that. If you want her, then go be with her."

I pushed at his chest, and he pulled me closer.

"No," I said. "You don't get to have what you don't actually want."

He growled and claimed my lips. I tried turning my head, but he grabbed my chin and kissed me until my resistance started to fade. Then his mouth left mine to trail down my neck.

Why did I give in so easily? I wanted to believe it was because he was a god and I was a simple mortal, but Hades never seemed to use his godly powers with me. Both times he had, it had been to make me speak, never to make me feel or do what I didn't want to.

His mouth closed over one peak, and I dug my fingers into his hair.

"Loving you hurts," I whispered.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

HE JERKED AWAY FROM ME LIKE I'D SLAPPED HIM.

“How? How did I hurt you?” he demanded. His gaze swept over my face, neck, and breasts. “Tell me, and I vow never to repeat it.”

“Not physically. Emotionally, Hades. You're confusing me. You're hot and then cold. Sane and then crazy. I wish I could have known you first. Before Persephone messed with your head.”

He studied me for a long moment, and I watched the panic fade from his gaze before he leaned in and kissed the tip of my nose.

“I wish for the same,” he said softly. “Forgive me for confusing you.”

He shifted us so we lay side by side on the lounge.

“Do you wish to talk some more?” he asked.

“Yes. I'd like that a lot.”

“What would you like to know?”

“Anything that will help me understand what happened just now.”

He exhaled heavily.

“The most painful time in my existence wasn't when my father devoured me, or when Zeus betrayed me, or any of the punishments Persephone dealt me. It was the moment I

realized how deeply I'd hurt her. The moment I'd earned her hate at the expense of my pleasure.

“But that moment wasn't the moment of my greatest mistake. No, that moment came after when, in my arrogance, I thought I could make things right. That I could bring her the same pleasure she brought me.

“She trusted me and allowed me another chance. And another. And another. She begged me to stop trying. I insisted.” He closed his eyes against the pain I saw in them. “I wanted her. Goddess help me, I could think of little else. When she outright denied me, I persuaded her to make a contract with me. She would allow me another try before I released her to her mother. And with each vain, coerced attempt, her hatred grew.”

He opened his eyes to meet my gaze.

I gently stroked my fingers over his cheek. “Thank you for telling me.”

He turned his head and kissed my fingertips. Then my palm and up my arm.

“You said we can take our time and wait until we are both ready.”

I nodded. “I wasn't pushing for more. I only wanted to touch you like you touch me.”

“I want to bury myself between your legs and find the pleasure I know only you can give me. I want it so badly I lose my hold on sanity. But I refuse to repeat my past mistakes.

“Let me love you as I have. Let me show you the joy you can find in receiving my attention. Please.”

I let him have his way and relaxed as he slowly showed me the joy I already knew he could bring. And when my pulse was racing and I was trying to catch my breath after shattering, I told him exactly how much I'd enjoyed it. The flush the experience brought to my face only deepened with my words, and when he asked questions about what I liked best. My answers started the game again. Only, this time, I encouraged him with praise or redirection.

My lungs stalled the second time I shattered, and I wailed loudly the third time.

When he tried to kiss me there afterward, I accidentally kicked him in the shoulder and knocked him off the lounge.

Shocked, I sat up and stared at him. Sprawled on the tile, he looked at me and burst out laughing. I grinned back and shook my head as I flopped back.

“We need to do something else,” I said. “I need a break.”

“Are you hungry?”

“I could eat,” I said, rolling to my side to look at him. “What did you have in mind?”

The slow smirk on his face robbed me of breath for a few beats.

“You wouldn’t survive if I put my mouth there,” I said, sitting up.

He stood gracefully, already wearing loose-fitting jeans, and offered me his hand.

“You are correct. I would not survive. The thought of it alone robs me of reason.”

He stood back and openly looked at me as soon as I was on my feet.

“Will you dine like that?” he asked.

“No, but I’ll wear that grey dress for you.”

It appeared on me. I could tell right away I wasn’t wearing anything underneath.

“And we’re eating with Zotera, right?” I asked.

Hades sighed. A shirt appeared on him as he nodded.

“It will be as you desire.”

My hair slithered up off my neck as we left the bathing room. A long mirror like the one in the store appeared next to the bedroom door so I could see myself before I walked out. My bare feet peeked out from beneath the skirt. The earrings Hades had made me hung from my ears, accented by the

swept-up intricate weave of braids. And the dress itself looked completely stunning on me.

Over my shoulder, I caught Hades' hungry gaze as he took in my reflection as well.

“Pretty,” I said. “But I think it’s missing something.”

He frowned slightly. “Speak what you need, and I will provide it.”

Instead of speaking it, I reached back and wrapped one arm around my waist and another just above my breasts so it looked like he was caging me. Then I tipped my head to the side.

“Kiss my neck,” I said.

Holding my gaze in the mirror, he dipped his head and used his teeth to scrape my sensitive skin.

“This,” I breathed. “I want a picture of us like this in our bedroom in Hell so you never forget who loves you.”

He groaned and turned me in his arms to kiss me ravenously.

The need for a break was the only thing that kept me from allowing him to steer me back toward the bathing pool.

“Food,” I said, tearing my mouth from his. “Really, really tasty food.”

He growled but took my hand and led me from the room.

Admittedly distracted by his backside, I didn't notice we had company until Hades stopped and pulled me to his side in the living room.

“Daughter,” he said with a slight nod. “I apologize for keeping you waiting.”

I looked from Megan and Oanen to Hades and back again.

“How long were you waiting?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Doesn't matter. You sounded busy.”

My mouth dropped open. “You heard?”

She smirked a little. “Pretty sure people in New York heard that last one.”

“Megan,” Oanen said in warning.

“Sorry,” she said, looking anything but sorry.

“I actually came here bearing important gifts.” She held up a familiar-looking bag. “The last phone we got was through the Council. Obviously, Adira messed with it so you couldn’t call me. These phones are under Grandma Irene’s name, and she paid a druid she knows to put a little anti-spell charm on them. One’s for you, and one’s for Zotera. Consider them backup phones, just in case.”

“Thank you, Megan,” I said, taking them from her.

“Irene,” Hades said. “She’s still here? On Earth?”

Megan nodded, and Hades frowned.

“It shouldn’t be possible.”

“Nothing’s impossible when you’re determined enough,” Megan said.

“Or stubborn enough,” Oanen said under his breath.

She quirked a smile at him.

“I know it’s early, but would you both like to stay for dinner?” I asked.

“Hell, yes,” Megan said. “Zotera’s been in the kitchen since we got here. She left the stove long enough to invite us in *then ignored us like a pair of unwanted friends*.” The last part, said louder than the rest, was enough to elicit a response from the kitchen.

“You *are* wanted friends!” Zotera called.

“Because you like me or because you just want me to bring food to Eugene?” Megan called back.

Zotera appeared in the opening of the kitchen. The apron she wore was still perfectly immaculate.

“Both?” she said uncertainly.

Megan grinned at her. “I’m just giving you a hard time.”

“It’s what Megan does best,” Oanen said.

I laughed lightly and started for the kitchen.

“What are you making for Eugene?”

“Something from scratch. That means I’m making it with my own hands.”

“Got it,” I said.

The kitchen smelled divine when I entered.

“A soufflé?” I asked.

She nodded. “I never got to make him one.”

“I’m sure he’s going to love it.”

“What would you like for dinner?” Hades asked, wrapping an arm around my waist.

“Surprise me. As long as it doesn’t come with any appendages or a head,” I added quickly.

“Kind of a weird request,” Megan said.

“No, it’s not,” I said, glancing back at her. “One of the first meals he made for me was a pig’s head. Shriveled eyes, lolling tongue, and everything.”

Megan made a face. “Not sure I’m hungry anymore.”

“Is it no longer considered a delicacy?” Hades asked Oanen.

“Nope. If you want to win your way to a girl’s heart, you have to discover her trifecta of sweet, salty, and savory. Megan’s are peanut butter cups, pizza, and burgers.”

“Pizza counts as salty?” I asked, sitting at the table.

“It does in my world,” Megan said.

“What foods will win your heart?” Hades asked me, and I knew he was completely serious.

“Honestly, I don’t know that I have favorites. I like trying new things.”

“Then let’s go out for dinner,” Megan said. “Just the four of us after we drop Zotera off at Eugene’s for a little while.”

I looked at Hades to see if he was willing, and he nodded.

Zotera squealed in excitement, cleaned up her mess in a blink, and checked the timer on the oven.

“I’ll be right back,” she said, rushing from the room.

“Where do you want to go,” I asked Megan as we waited for Zotera.

“Grandma Irene told me about this great place in Italy. I’ve been dying to try it. It’s early here but right on time for late dinner there. Got another dress I can borrow?” she asked.

Hades waved his hand at her, and her clothes changed from jeans and a t-shirt to a replica of the dress I wore but in a deep emerald green. Oanen’s clothes shifted to a complementing brown suit that was identical to the deep blue one Hades wore.

“Damn,” Megan said. “I like this.”

She lifted her skirt to show her bare feet as Zotera hurried from her room, wearing a lightweight spring dress that clearly showed her natural braless state. Zotera paused then turned around and ran into my room. The cute shoes she brought back somehow looked like they were the correct sizes for both Megan and me.

Hades waved them onto our feet.

“That’s a missed opportunity,” Oanen said to him as Zotera went to the oven.

Megan grinned. “This skirt is so long you wouldn’t have seen anything if you’d put them on for me anyway.”

“I just like touching you.”

I could feel Hades glance at me and smothered my smile.

“No taking them back off,” I said. “You’ll have to wait until next time.”

He frowned at me, and the grin I was holding back broke free.

“I’m ready,” Zotera said, interrupting the moment.

I glanced at her by the stove where she was holding the soufflé. She radiated excitement.

“I’ll be right back,” Megan said, disappearing with Zotera.

“Please make me aware of any other opportunities for touching tonight,” Hades said to Oanen.

Oanen nodded, and Megan reappeared, grinning.

“Eugene was definitely happy to see Zotera and said not to rush our date.”

Hades’ arm wrapped around my waist. “Are you ready?”

“What are the chances no one notices what we’re doing?” I asked.

“Fifty-fifty,” Megan said.

I glanced at the three of them and decided I could live with those odds.

“Let’s go.”

Megan and Oanen left first. The room bent around me and reformed as a sidewalk on a quiet street. The air was warmer than in Maine, which wasn’t saying much since we had snow, but still chilly.

“It’s not far. I figured we could walk a little,” Megan said. “Better than attracting attention by appearing on a busy street.”

The walk to the restaurant was short but fun. Oanen tipped Hades off that walking behind us could be just as enjoyable as walking beside us, which had Megan grinning and hooking her arm through mine.

“Go ahead and enjoy the view,” she said over her shoulder. “This dress didn’t come with any underwear.”

Oanen groaned. She laughed and added an extra sway as she walked.

“I’m glad you said yes to this,” she said, patting my arm.

“Me too.”

With her heat keeping me warm, we reached the restaurant before I started to shiver.

Hades held out my chair for me—a bit of advice from Oanen—and took the opportunity to drop a kiss on my shoulder.

“This dress is perfection on you,” Hades whispered.

I turned my head, bringing our mouths close. His gaze flicked to my lips, and it was all the encouragement I needed to steal a quick kiss. When I pulled back, one hand stroking his cheek, I could see the hunger in his gaze.

“Thank you for the help,” I said. “But you should sit down now.”

The hunger in his gaze only grew.

“Temptress,” he murmured before taking his seat beside me.

He disappeared.

“Hades,” I said quietly.

He immediately reappeared in his chair. The woman at a nearby table dropped her fork with a clatter. Megan smiled at me.

“Grandma said this place has the best bread. I hope you’re hungry.”

The woman looked around in confusion before looking at her wine glass. When she picked up her water to take a long drink, Megan had a coughing fit. Oanen settled her down with a few whispered words.

The food was amazing and the conversation relaxing. Oanen and Megan talked about their plans for the house and her grudge toward Elbner, the goblin who had made it look too welcoming in their absence. Then she talked about her grandma Irene, which led to a discussion regarding Grace and

Paxton's progress on finding clues regarding Thanatos and where the other gods might have gone.

"The records they're finding are vague at best," Megan said.

Hades disappeared again, and I quietly said his name.

"Exactly an hour," Megan said. "I checked the time."

"But it's not consistent," I said.

"I believe it is," Hades said. "It's an hour from the last time you spoke my name."

He frowned suddenly and turned around in his chair to look out the window on the other side of the room. At least, I thought he was looking out the window until I saw a shimmer on the glass that winked out.

"What was that?" I asked.

"I believe we're being watched. It's time to leave," Hades said.

Oanen waved down the waiter to pay, and Hades took my hand.

"Go ahead," Megan said. "We'll get Zotera and see you back at the house."

Instead of teleporting us there, Hades helped me stand and led me toward the exit. When the door opened, the room bent around us and solidified into my living room.

"Do you know who was watching?" I asked.

He shook his head, and I wrapped my arms around him to hug him tight.

"Thank you for tonight. It felt like a normal date, something I thought I would never experience. It was really nice."

He kissed the top of my head and held me.

"We will ask Megan and Oanen to do this again," he said. "Very soon. Perhaps more shopping too. I enjoyed seeing how you look in these modern clothes."

I tipped my head back. “Same.” He kissed me lightly.

“Were you serious about what you said in the restaurant? That you disappear an hour after I say your name?”

“Yes. Tonight, I will know for certain. My name can be the last word from your lips before you rest.”

I nodded and kissed his chin. That turned into a lot more kissing until Megan, Oanen, and Zotera appeared in the living room with us.

“Sorry,” I said breathlessly as I turned my head to look at them.

Megan shrugged with a slight smile.

“Seems to be the thing to do when two people are alone.” She took Oanen’s hand. “Ready to go home, bird-boy?”

“Very,” he said.

They disappeared, leaving us alone with a glassy-eyed Zotera.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

She nodded slowly and focused on me.

“I understand now why men were forbidden. I cannot stop thinking of Eugene and the joy he brings me.”

“It’s okay. I get it,” I said. “Hopefully, we find Thanatos soon so you can spend more time with Eugene.”

“I would like that very much,” Zotera said. “Good night, Mother. Good night, Father.”

She drifted toward her room, and I glanced at the clock.

“It’s a little early for bed. Do you want to watch a movie with us?”

She shook her head and disappeared inside her room.

“Is she okay?” I asked.

“She is discovering the joy previously denied her. She’s confused, afraid, and hopeful.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because that’s what I felt when you started treating me as you are.”

I kissed him softly again and led him to the bedroom.

While I changed into some comfortable loungewear in the privacy of my closet, Hades made himself comfortable on my bed. And by comfortable, I mean he removed his jacket and tie, opened a few buttons, and rolled up his sleeves. The casual pose with one leg off the bed and one knee bent where he rested his forearm brought me up short.

A slow smile tugged the corner of his mouth.

“You are so dangerously beautiful,” I said. “I keep asking myself if what I feel for you is real or if you’re somehow making me feel this way.”

He stood and prowled closer.

“How do you feel?”

“Desperate to touch you. Needy for your touch.”

He made this sound that reminded me of a purr but with an edge to it. Like he was two seconds from grabbing me. My pulse picked up, and I retreated a step.

He faltered.

“No,” I said. “I’m still yours. Come get me.”

His eyes flared brightly, and his size surged briefly as he continued toward me. I backed myself right against the marble wall. He caught my hands and pinned them over my head. I grinned even as I struggled to catch my breath.

“You are dangerously beautiful,” he said before kissing me ruthlessly.

I arched against him, trying for more contact as our tongues collided. With Hades, I was so far over my head that it didn’t matter anymore if I was drowning or not. He was the only air I needed. The new reason for my existence.

The shirt I’d just put on was removed. Hands freed, I gripped his shoulders and cradled his face.

“I need,” I whispered against his lips. “I want.”

He groaned and picked me up, wrapping my legs around his waist.

“I hunger,” he said roughly.

“Then feast.”

He made a tormented noise, and his shape surged again as he carried me toward the bed. His shirt ripped down his back and over his shoulders. My feet couldn't stay hooked around his waist, but I didn't care. I loved Hades in either form.

Looping my arms around his thick neck, I used my teeth and tongue on his red skin.

“She tempts me,” he said on an exhale.

“She does,” I agreed. “Get rid of these clothes, and I'll tempt you some more.”

He started to shake. Then so did the walls.

I pulled back and looked at his closed eyes and tormented expression.

“Hey,” I said softly. “It's okay. We're okay.”

“Not like this,” he said raggedly. “Never like this.”

I stroked his cheek as he wrestled with whatever demon from his past that currently tormented him.

“I'm here with you,” I said softly. “And I'm not going anywhere. Talk to me. We'll get through whatever this is together, okay?”

He groaned again and set his forehead to mine. Slowly, he began to shrink.

“It's too dangerous when you show your need for me,” he said. “I have no control.”

“You seemed pretty controlled to me, just now. Well, minus that little tremor.”

He made another pained sound.

“Forgive me.”

“There’s nothing to forgive.”

“You don’t understand,” he said, lifting his head.

I studied his expression, trying to decipher what he meant.

“Then tell me.”

“When you show your need for me, I can think of little else but sheathing myself in your glory and finding my pleasure.”

I shrugged a little. “I’m pretty sure it’s not unusual for men to start thinking like that when making out.”

“Men,” he said. “Not a god. If I forget and lose control while I’m inside of you, you will bleed. You won’t be Ashlyn. You will be *her*.”

Understanding hit me hard. Hades was big as he was now. I couldn’t imagine when he shifted into his devil form. If he did that while inside of me...

I slowly untangled my legs from his waist, and he let me down, watching me warily.

“You’re right. I could get hurt. I’m glad you were with it enough to think of that and let things cool down. But that shows control, Hades, not a lack of it. Have some faith in yourself. I know you’re not going to hurt me.”

He gave an angry laugh, and I caught his face in my hands.

“Hey, the past is in the past, and it can’t change. All you can do is learn from it and move forward. You learned from what happened with Persephone, and you won’t make that mistake again. I know it.”

He let me pull him down for another kiss. It was sweet and gentle and coaxing. He didn’t stand a chance.

“Clothes off,” I said.

They disappeared, and I ran my hands over his chest.

“How about a nice bath before bed?”

He didn’t tug free of my hold as I led the way, or resist when I pushed him backward into the pool.

A slight smile tugged at his mouth when he rose, water cascading down his beautiful body.

“Catch me,” I said before jumping. He did, but his hold slipped, and it turned into another make-out session. This time, I kept myself in check, too, better understanding his fears.

We stayed in the water until my fingers pruned. With a snap, he dried us both and carried me to the bed without clothes. I watched him, waiting to see what he had in mind. He simply got under the covers with me and held me.

“I hunger for the release I can find in your body, but this is what I craved for an eternity. This. Holding you in my arms. You welcoming my touch. Looking at me. Smiling at me. This is enough, Ashlyn. It will always be enough.”

My throat tightened with the emotions I felt. With Hades, I was loved, protected...safe. With Hades, I was everything.

“I love you,” I whispered.

“Love inadequately describes what I feel for you. Every breath, every beat of my heart, every thought is yours, Ashlyn. Without you, I don’t exist.”

I turned in his arms so I could look at him and traced my fingertip over his brows.

“Every breath, every beat of my heart,” I repeated. “Every thought is yours, Hades. Without you, I don’t *want* to exist.”

The pain and wonder in his expression tore at me, as did the single tear that tracked down his skin.

“Rest,” he said softly, “and call my name when you wake.”

Safe in his arms, I closed my eyes.

It felt like only moments had passed when a loud boom filled the air. I bolted upright in a dark room lit by a bright flash from the outside.

“Hades,” I said.

He appeared beside me, touched my cheek, and disappeared.

Zotera came rushing into my room, and I grabbed the sheet to hold to my bare chest.

“What’s happening?” I asked.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“SOMEONE TRIED BREAKING THROUGH THE WARD,” SHE SAID.
“Don’t worry. Father will find whoever it is.”

She went to my closet and got me a set of pajamas without me asking.

“If he catches Thanatos tonight, can I go to Eugene’s?” she asked hopefully. “His taste no longer lingers in my mouth.”

Sometimes, she said things that sounded so much like Hades.

“Let’s wait and see what happens rather than get our hopes up,” I said, pulling the shirt over my head. She turned on the light while I shimmied my shorts on under the covers.

The house gave another shuttering boom, and I looked at Zotera. Anger flashed over her expression.

“You’re not thinking about going out there to confront whoever it is, are you?” I asked.

The rage vanished, and she shook her head.

“No. My place is here with you.”

As I grabbed my phone from the nightstand, I saw it wasn’t even midnight yet.

“I’m going to call—”

Zotera’s hand closed over mine. “Trust Father. He will keep you safe.”

Another boom shook the house.

“I know he will. I was just thinking he might be able to use a little help.”

She gently pried the phone out of my hand. “Let’s go watch some TV so you don’t distract Father.”

I frowned a little but followed her from the bedroom. Would Megan really have been a distraction instead of a help? Doubtful. Otherwise, Hades wouldn’t have sent her after Thanatos in the first place.

Zotera grabbed the remote and guided me toward the sofa. A cooking show turned on a second later.

“Why would Megan be a distraction?” I asked.

“She wouldn’t be,” Zotera said. “But considering the looks Oanen was giving her, she might be distracted if you call her now.”

“Oh. Right.” I stared absently at the cake on the screen. “But getting Megan to come over and help isn’t the distraction, then what is?”

Zotera looked at me blankly.

“You said we should watch TV so I don’t—”

Another boom and flash of light shook the house.

“So I don’t distract your father,” I said, purposely not using his name. “How would I distract him?”

“By worrying,” Zotera said, taking my hand. “He doesn’t like it when you worry or are afraid. Should I make this for your breakfast?”

Understanding that she was trying to distract me, I focused on the show and talked to her while waiting for the next boom. The neighbors had to be awake with all the noise. But no one came to knock on the door to complain. Not in Uttira.

So I pretended to calmly watch a cooking show as I periodically watched the time.

Before the hour ran out, Hades appeared in the living room. His bare red chest heaved with every angry inhale as he

ran a black, claw-tipped hand through his hair. The horns gracing his head gleamed in the light cast from the television.

“Hey there, handsome,” I said, standing. “Looks like you could use a hug.”

“Say my name.”

I smiled slightly.

“I would like you to hug me before you leave me, Hades.”

He let out a great exhale and opened his arms. I wrapped my arms around him and held him close.

“Was it one person or two?” I asked.

“One.”

“You know Megan wouldn’t mind helping.”

“Zotera was right. She is with her mate now and would be distracted if we pulled her away.” He leaned in to kiss my forehead. “I will return soon.”

I dropped my now empty arms to my sides and went back to the couch.

“How had he known what I said to you? Could he hear it from outside?”

Zotera looked at me and slowly shook her head. I could tell by her expression that she didn’t want me to ask anything else, so I focused on the TV until my eyelids grew heavy. Then I got up to get a drink of water.

Hades appeared behind me and hugged me from behind. It felt good enough to melt into his hold for a few moments.

“Are you done?” I asked.

“Yes. Thanatos vanished again.”

“Will you stay with me until I fall asleep again?”

“Yes.”

“Will you tell me how you knew what I said to Zotera while you were still here on Earth?”

The room shifted around us and solidified as my bedroom.

“Speak my name, Ashlyn, so I may stay with you longer.”

“Hades,” I said, pulling back the covers. “Start talking.”

He got into bed with me, taking the big spoon position, which allowed me to play with his hand as he held me.

“I can see and hear what Zotera sees and hears.”

“Since when?” I asked.

“Since I sent her to Earth with you.”

“Does she know?” I needed to be sure.

“She does. She willingly agreed to help me protect you.”

I thought back to all the strange looks I’d caught from Zotera and some of the things she’d said and his promise before I left Hell.

“Did you know I would be able to summon you here?” I asked.

“No. It’s never happened before.”

I felt him tense behind me and gave his hand a light tug.

“Relax. I know what you meant. Persephone wasn’t able to summon you to Earth before, but somehow I can.” I twisted to look at him. “Why can I summon you?”

He kissed my forehead. “I have no answer, but I believe Thanatos does.”

I snuggled against Hades again and closed my eyes.

“What do you want to do tomorrow?” I asked.

“Anything you wish.”

“I want to make you breakfast and then go somewhere you want to go.”

He nuzzled my neck.

“I love the feel of your lips on my skin,” I said with a content sigh. “When I say your name in the morning, that’s what I want first. Then I’ll cook for you.”

He groaned a little and did something to my neck that caught all my attention.

“I’m not going to fall asleep like this,” I said, turning in his arms.

“Then stop speaking. Each word you utter fans the flames of my desire to possess you in every way possible.”

“Did you just tell me to shut up and go to sleep?”

The way he looked at me like he knew it was a trap to agree was hilarious. I kissed the tip of his nose.

“Good night, Hades.”

Closing my eyes again, I snuggled against him and didn’t say anything else. His fingers stroked my back through my shirt, and I slowly drifted off.

Thoughts of Hades followed me into my dreams and stayed with me until I woke again.

The bright sunlight filling the room had me smiling and stretching. I opened my mouth to say his name but debated using the bathroom first. Then, I realized he was probably watching me now and would likely watch me in the bathroom too.

“Hades.”

He appeared in the bed next to me and immediately leaned in for a kiss. He got my palm.

“Give me three minutes,” I said. “Then I’m yours.”

For a change, I was faster and slid from the bed before he could grab me. I laughed all the way to the bathroom.

“I dislike doors,” he said from the other side.

“I know you do,” I called. “But I like privacy sometimes, and you like me enough to give me what I want. Why don’t you spend the next three minutes thinking about what you want me to make you for breakfast instead of hovering on the other side of the bathroom door?”

He grumped a little and then fell silent, allowing me the time I needed.

Several minutes later, I reemerged and saw him lying on the bed with his hands behind his head. As he turned to look at me, I took a running start to dive at him. His shocked expression as he caught me was everything, and I laughed as I kissed him. My humor faded in the face of the intensity with which he returned it.

I tore my mouth from his.

“I want to make you food.”

“You said you would make me whatever I wanted to eat,” he said, flipping us so I was on my back. “There is only one thing I crave.”

I couldn't stop him, and I didn't want to. Breathing his name as he feasted ensured he stayed right where he was until he'd wrung every ounce of pleasure from me.

“I was hoping you would kick me away again,” he said when I only twitched after a kiss to his very favorite and extremely overstimulated treasure.

“Can't. No energy. Someone forgot the human needs food first thing in the morning.”

He slid up my body and held my gaze.

“Are you attempting to provoke my guilt?” he asked.

I slowly smiled. “Is it working?”

“Yes, and it makes me uncomfortable.”

“Oh, my poor baby,” I said, reaching up to smooth back his wild hair. “I wouldn't dream of making you uncomfortable.” I trailed my hands down his chest and ran my fingers along the waist of his jeans.

“And now you seek to drive me mad with wanting?”

I leaned up to nip his neck and give him a hickey. He groaned.

“I think that’s working too. Is this uncomfortable too? Should it stop?”

“Deviant. Seductress.”

He wrapped his arms around me and rolled again so I was on top. Straddling his hips, I sat up and rocked against him.

“What else do you want to call me?” I asked.

“Mine,” he said. “Just mine.”

I gave him another love mark just above his heart for that one.

“So are you going to let me cook for you this morning, or are you going to keep me in this room forever?”

“Both are tempting options. I’m struggling to choose.”

I helped him decide by playfully pinning his hands over his head and bolting from the bed. It didn’t matter that he let me escape to the bathroom again. It was still fun feeling his fingers brush against my back as he tried to “catch” me.

After I showered alone, I walked out with a towel covering me. Hades made a face at it, and it disappeared. I made a face at him.

“You can’t just get rid of stuff you don’t like.”

“I wish I could,” he said mulishly. “Then Thanatos and Adira would be gone, and I would be free to take you wherever you pleased.”

I shook my head. “Nope. Today is about doing things that please you. Did you have a fun morning so far?”

“Very.”

“Good. Now you can choose what I wear as long as I’m appropriately covered.”

He tilted his head at me, his gaze sweeping me from head to foot before a very skimpy pair of shorts and barely there crop top covered me. No undergarments.

I held my arms out and did a slow turn, feeling the cheeky cut of the shorts as I moved.

“Do you like it?” I asked.

His answer was to pin me to a wall and kiss the daylight out of me again. My stomach growled, and he set his hunger aside for mine.

We left the room together, and I loved the feel of his fingers intertwined with mine.

“Did you decide what food you wanted?”

“All the foods you know are new to me. So I will happily accept anything you make,” he said.

“Good morning!” Zotera called cheerily when we entered the kitchen. She was already at the stove.

“What are you making?” I asked.

“Spinach and mushroom omelettes with feta. They should be done in a minute.”

“They smell great, and I definitely want one,” I said. “Mind if I make us some pancakes to go with it?”

She made room for me and watched me whip up the batter from scratch.

“The key is just a tablespoon of sugar,” I said. “That, along with an unhealthy slathering of butter and syrup, is heaven.”

Hades leaned against the counter, watching me raptly. I flashed him a smile as the first few pancakes browned. He created a gold platter out of thin air for me to use for the first batch and carried it to the table. Zotera set everything and had our omelettes done by the time I finished.

I buttered a pancake for Hades and poured syrup over the top. Then I cut a bite and held out the fork for him.

“Give it a try,” I said.

He took the bite and chewed thoughtfully, his gaze never leaving mine. I purposely cut another bite from the pancake and ate it with the same fork.

The flicker in his eyes wasn't a surprise. I knew Hades well enough to understand what he wanted. What he enjoyed.

He didn't care about the pancake or how it tasted. He cared that I'd made it just for him. He cared that I'd taken the time to cut a bite and feed it to him. He absolutely loved the intimacy of sharing it and the fork.

No one had ever shown him this level of familiarity and consideration.

As I'd told him once before, he wouldn't be happy if I'd simply given him my body and nothing else. He wanted more from me. And I wanted to give it.

"So, where are we going to go after this?" I asked, handing him his fork so I could start on the omelette that Zotera had made.

"There is an island I remember that I would like to see again."

"Okay. Then that's where we'll go."

"Am I going?" Zotera asked hesitantly.

"Of course," I said. "We wouldn't leave you home alone."

"Would you prefer to spend more time with Eugene?" Hades asked.

"Yes, please," she said quickly.

I glanced at Hades. "So, just the two of us? Is that smart?"

"Do you doubt my ability to protect you?"

The edge in his voice had me rolling my eyes. "Eat your pancake, Hades, before I take it back for being prickly."

He scowled at me and quickly took another bite while I poured myself a glass of milk and made a mental note to reorder groceries since we were almost out.

"And for the record, I don't doubt you," I said. "However, when there's two of them and one of you, I know that creates a limitation. Instead of chasing down whoever you see, you'd need to stay with me, which prolongs this limbo we're in."

"Wisdom and beauty," he said with a sigh. "Shall we ask Megan and Oanen to accompany us?"

I picked up my phone to send Megan a quick text.

Me: Are you up for another potentially dangerous double date day?

Megan: Hell yes! We'll be there in fifteen.

“Megan and Oanen agreed,” I said, setting my phone down and grinning at Zotera. “You’re off the hook. Should I let Eugene know to expect you?”

She shook her head. “I like surprising him.”

We had breakfast finished and cleaned up and a grocery order placed for later by the time Megan arrived. She hellgated Zotera and another omelette to Eugene’s house and returned while shaking her head.

“Never thought I’d see someone more affectionate than Fenris.”

“What happened?”

“She jumped on Eugene and kissed every inch of his face before he knew what was happening. Once he knew who was attacking him, he just stood there and grinned.”

“He’s living his best life,” Oanen said. “Who wouldn’t love that level of affection?”

“I’ll let Fenris know you said that,” Megan said with a smirk.

“That’s just mean,” Oanen said with no heat.

“Are we ready?” she asked. Her gaze caught on what I was wearing, and she looked down at her jeans and jacket. “Am I overdressed?”

“I have no idea where we’re going,” I said, taking Hades’ arm. “Today’s a Hades’ day. His pick.”

“That explains the shorts. Which you rock, by the way. Eliana would be ecstatic,” Megan said.

“Doubt it,” Oanen said.

She shot him a look. “Why? They’re super cute.”

Oanen snorted. “No, they aren’t cute. They’re hot. And if you were wearing them, my thoughts would be focused on one thing. What do you think Eliana would be feeling from Hades right now?”

Megan looked at Hades, who was wearing a small smirk of his own.

“Oanen is wise,” Hades said. “Are you ready, daughter?”

He didn’t wait for a yes before the room collapsed around us and solidified into picturesque rolling hills. The strong afternoon breeze whipped my hair into my face and robbed all my exposed skin of heat.

“More clothes, please,” I said. Jeans immediately encased my legs, and a warm hoodie and windbreaker covered me.

“Better?” Hades asked, hugging me from behind.

“Much. Thank you. Where are we?”

“This is Crete,” Megan said. “Oanen and I stopped here during our self-proclaimed honeymoon.”

I twisted to look at Hades. “I’ve always wanted to see Crete. Show me what you remember.”

He glanced around. “There was a village here with a monument to me.”

I saw the disappointment in his gaze and wanted to hug him.

“There’s a village nearby and a museum there. Maybe they have something.”

We spent several hours exploring both and saw some really cool remains of the time when the gods were still worshipped. Hades was pretty quiet, only commenting when the details on any given artifact were inaccurate. I could only imagine how it felt to realize everything you’d known was long gone.

“I wish to see Mount Olympus,” he said when we left.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

The area around us twisted in on itself in answer. It solidified as the side of a mountain for only a moment before another room appeared around us. Bright white marble, like it was lit from the inside, and mosaics depicted humans in their everyday lives. Sorrow. Struggles. Triumphs. Death. It was all there. At the front of the oblong space sat a very large, empty chair.

Hades stared at the empty throne for a long time as he held my hand in silence. The three of us gave him the time he needed to process what we'd been telling him all along. The gods were gone, except for Thanatos and Hades.

Without saying anything, he teleported us to another room. And another. They were all beautiful but all very empty. On a balcony overlooking the distant sea, we watched the sun dip below the horizon.

"I'm sorry, Hades," I said softly.

"And I am not," he said, pulling me into his arms in front of him. "The gods cared little for me, and I cared little for them. You are all that I need."

My stomach growled again, reminding me it was lunchtime back home.

"I know just the place," Megan said.

"Lead, and we will follow."

They disappeared, and a few seconds later, we met them in another quiet back street. She led us to a restaurant that wasn't as fancy as the previous night. The open eating area had bench seating tables.

Megan ordered for all of us. Things I'd never heard of. Saganaki, which was long, thick cuts of fried cheese drizzled with honey and chopped pistachio, for an appetizer, along with Dolmades, which were tender grape leaves wrapped around a herbed-rice stuffing. Both were delicious. And for the main course, we had Moussaka, which was eggplant, potatoes, and meat with a creamy yet tomatoey sauce. It reminded me very vaguely of a lasagna. I loved every bite and sat back with a groan when I finished.

“So good,” I said.

“Agreed,” Megan said. “But the night is still young. Want to go somewhere else?”

I looked at Hades hopefully, not yet ready to return to the house.

Warmth crept into his gaze, and he gently caressed my cheek. His head jerked to the right, but when I looked, the area behind us was empty.

“We are being watched again,” he said. The street faded away into nothingness and reformed as another beautiful mountain vista but in a much warmer place.

“Where are we now?” I asked.

Hades shrugged.

Megan unlocked her phone and opened an app. “The international plan I have on this thing doesn’t always mean that the GPS works, but it’s saying we’re somewhere in Mexico.”

“You need a satellite phone,” Oanen said.

“Are they waterproof?” she asked.

He frowned at her, and she grinned.

“What are we doing here?” I asked, looking at Hades.

“It’s another place I remember.” He turned and looked around. “Another village that is gone.”

“I can feel people that way,” Megan said, pointing.

“It’s not a good thing if you can feel them, is it?” I asked.

She shrugged a little. “I might need to take a quick side trip, but it’s not the worst.”

“Thank you for all that you do, daughter. The tasks given to you are not an easy burden to bear for a lifetime.”

“No, they’re not. So, why’d you give them to us?”

“Long ago, I sought to help my brother. The humans fascinated him. Their complex simplicity. When the other gods

created creatures to torment humanity, I created the furies to reap the souls of those who had been too corrupted by them. He thanked me for my help by granting me Persephone and caging me in Hell.”

“No good deed goes unpunished someday,” Megan said. “But it’s not always like that. We don’t know what happened to the other gods, but you’re still here. I’ve found that second chances usually happen to people who really deserve them. Don’t mess up this round.”

Hades hugged me close. “I won’t.”

“Now, let’s go explore,” she said.

After a quick wardrobe change into something more suitable for the warmer weather, which required a picture that Megan could send to Eliana, we hiked down the mountain a bit and wandered into a sizable town. Megan did have to make a quick run to Hell, which Oanen wasn’t too happy about, but she returned with a smile.

“It’s so much prettier down there now,” she said. “Love the soul fields. They look much happier. Not the guy I just dropped off. He’s in a room.”

“What happens to them in the rooms?” I asked.

“Nothing,” Hades said. “They have nothing to see or do and are simply left with an infinite amount of time to reflect on the lives they have led. Most feel anger for a very long time. If it ever turns to regret, they are taken to the rivers to decide their fates.”

“So that’s why it’s not overcrowded,” Megan said just before a food vendor caught her eye.

“Look! Fried chicken!” she yelled with a laugh as she dragged Oanen toward the cart.

“Hades.”

I turned to look at who had said Hades’ name.

Thanatos met my gaze as Hades roared beside me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“HADES-HADES-HADES-HADES,” I SAID AS THANATOS disappeared.

Breathing heavily, Hades turned to glare at me.

“I know it is a trap, Ashlyn.”

The space around us bent inward and solidified into my living room. His angry scowl remained in place, and I touched his arm in concern.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to—”

He hauled me into his arms for a breath-defying hug.

“I’m sorry, Ashlyn. I gave you cause to doubt me. Protecting you is more important than chasing Thanatos. Always.”

I nodded and hugged him back.

“Will Megan and Oanen be okay?”

The pair appeared in my living room a moment later.

“He’s gone,” Megan said, her eyes glowing dangerously as she dialed her phone.

“Good timing, Megan,” Zayn said. “I was just going to call with an update.”

“Please tell me you have the tracking spell ready.”

“Um, no. I don’t. But I can confirm that it will be ready tomorrow evening. Same with the memory spell.”

I could see it wasn't an answer that Megan wanted, but she still thanked Zayn for his time and effort before hanging up.

"Then, one way or another, tomorrow night, we end this," Megan says. "If the memory spell doesn't give us the answers, the tracking spell and some confessions should."

"How does knowing why Thanatos wants me dead end it?" I asked.

"Fine, you're right," Megan said. "It probably won't be the end-end. But once we know the problem, we'll be able to find the solution. Personally, I think Thanatos just needs his ass handed to him. And if Hades can remember where all the gods went, then maybe Thanatos won't be able to hide from him so he can get thoroughly spanked."

Hades fractionally relaxed around me.

"Does your mate treat you well, daughter?" Hades asked.

The flames in her eyes sputtered out. "Yes. Why?"

"You seem overly focused on spanking."

Oanen coughed a laugh and covered his mouth.

"Okaaayyy," Megan said. "Not having that conversation with you. I think I'm going to go get Zotera now. You two have a good night."

She and Oanen disappeared, leaving Hades and me alone.

"There's still a lot of time left in this Hades-day," I said. "What would you like to do now? Should I make you something special for dinner?"

His gaze heated, and I shook my head at him.

"That can be dessert."

He surprised the hell out of me by growling playfully and throwing me over his shoulder.

I laughed all the way to the kitchen where he set me down and told me to hurry so he could feast.

Megan reappeared with Zotera while I was still grinning at him.

“We’ll see you tomorrow. Call if you need anything,” Megan said before leaving in a flaming whoosh.

“Would you like me to make dinner?” Zotera asked.

“I’ll make it tonight. Can you check the front door to see if our grocery order is here?”

She left to do that while I started pulling out ingredients for simple sandwiches. Hades magicked up some of the bread we’d eaten in Italy, which I paired with fresh ham from the grocery order, some gruyère cheese, Dijon mustard, and mayonnaise.

“Now, the sandwiches you made for me in Hell were amazing, but wait until you taste these,” I said.

I took my first bite and made happy sounds. As I’d guessed, it was phenomenal. Hades smiled a little as he watched me chew then took his first bite. His expression completely changed, and I grinned.

“Told you. So good, right?”

Zotera enthusiastically agreed as she ate hers.

“Anyone else want a glass of milk?” I asked.

Both Zotera and Hades declined so I poured one for myself and happily ate my meal.

My phone buzzed with a group chat.

Eliana: Lauv’s brother just called me. She and the other druids who cast Ashlyn to Hell have been missing since last night. They never go without leaving word. He thinks something happened and reported it to the Council. Guess who told him not to worry about it?

Megan: Fucking Adira. Related? Absolutely. Ashlyn, if you disappear again, we know where to look now.

I wasn’t sure how I felt about the messages. Did I like that Adira was trying to send me to Hell again? No. But would I mind being in Hell again? Also, no.

I glanced at Hades and found him watching me.

“What would happen if I’m sent back to Hell?” I asked.

“Happen?” he asked.

“Would I ever be able to come back to earth again?”

“Of course,” he said.

“Without having to have sex with you?”

He studied me for a long moment. “Without sex. I will not plead or negotiate for your affection, Ashlyn. It is sweeter when freely given.”

My heart ached at how far we’d come.

“Thank you, Haaa.” The strangled wheeze that came out instead of his name surprised me. I cleared my throat. “Sorry. Not sure what that was.”

He leaned in and kissed my forehead.

“Mortals get sick easily with temperature changes. Jason explained it to me when he showed me his vast selection of clothes. I should have taken more care dressing you this morning.”

“The outfit was cute, so I didn’t mind,” I said.

My clothes immediately reverted to the cheeky shorts and crop top.

“Are you finished eating?” he asked.

“I am.”

He portaled us to the bedroom, and my clothes completely vanished.

Another wheeze came from my throat when I tried to say his name. I coughed and shook my head when he gave me a concerned look.

“I was only going to say that Zotera shouldn’t be stuck cleaning up dinner on her own. And we haven’t spent much time with her lately.”

“Zotera will understand,” he said, leaning in to kiss my clavicle. “Will you let me taste you?”

“I can’t imagine a time I would ever say no to that,” I said with a grin.

He led me to the bathing room, which seemed to be his favorite place. I surprised him by running and jumping in cannonball style. When I popped up, he was beside me in the water.

“How big was the splash?” I asked, wiping my eyes.

“Impressively big,” he said, smiling.

“You want to try?”

“Considering the way your delicious bottom hit the water first, I’ll decline.”

“Worry it’s going to hurt your unmentionables?”

“You can mention them anytime you like. I’m simply afraid I will empty the pool when my enormity makes contact.”

I laughed so hard I cried. He held me through my fit, chuckling with me.

“By the gods in every realm,” Hades said softly as I quieted, “I love you, Ashlyn. You are my heart.”

I kissed his lips tenderly. “I love you too, Haa.”

Frowning, I cleared my throat and tried again. Only a wheeze of air came out.

“I can’t say your name,” I said, fighting not to panic. “Why can’t I say your name?”

He portaled us to the living room, fully clothed and dried. I looked at the clock, trying to figure out the last time I’d spoken his name.

“We were eating the sandwiches when I said it. I know it. So maybe thirty minutes ago?” I turned to Hades and cupped his face. “Promise me you won’t shake things if I can’t call you back right away. Okay?”

“I swear,” he said, kissing my forehead.

“What’s wrong?” Zotera asked, standing in the entrance of the kitchen. She had the plates in her hand.

“Ashlyn can no longer say my name. Is that her sandwich?”

“Yes.”

“Take a bite and try to speak my name.”

She did and said Hades without a problem.

“You think the food was spelled?” I asked. “Why would they spell it instead of poisoning me?”

“Because I would simply heal you. The only time I am not with you is when you sleep.” He looked at Zotera. “Try the milk.”

Zotera took a drink, made a face, and made a familiar wheezing sound.

“It was the milk. I could taste the spell before I tried speaking your name.”

“Can we undo it?” I asked.

Hades laid his hand on my throat. It glowed brightly for a moment, and I felt my vocal cords heat. And heat. My eyes went wide at the increasing burn until a scream ripped from me. The tiny-knives-in-the-throat feeling that I’d experienced with the poison didn’t come close to the slicing pain I felt.

“Stop! Please stop,” I begged. The heat disappeared, and Hades held me as I cried.

“Forgive me,” he whispered. I didn’t answer as I clung to him.

The lingering pain faded to the point I could wipe my tears.

I tried saying his name and couldn’t.

“It didn’t work,” I said.

He slowly shook his head. “I stopped before I could remove it.”

“Could you remove it?”

He smoothed his hands over my hair. The way he held my gaze told me that he could have removed it, but it would have hurt. A lot.

“We will find another way,” he said.

With a flick of Hades’ hand, Megan appeared in front of us. It looked like she’d been mid-Oanen kiss based on the way her arms were wrapped around nothing and her head was tipped back.

She jerked a little and looked around. The flames that had ignited in her eyes extinguished when she saw us. She dropped her arms to her sides and cleared her throat.

“Father,” she said with an incline of her head.

“I apologize for interrupting your time with your mate,” he said. “The milk delivered to Ashlyn today was spelled. She can no longer speak my name to summon me.”

The flames in her eyes sparked with her anger.

“I can call Zayn and see if he can remove it.”

“No, I believe the spell is attached to her soul. Removing it might kill her.”

“What do you want me to do?” she asked.

“Find a way to break the bonds of my cage permanently. Work quickly. I feel Ashlyn’s life will depend on it.”

She nodded, and he waved his hand again to send her away.

He caressed my cheek. “Those who wish to hurt you have a plan that requires removing me from your side to ensure its success. Do not fall for any of their traps. Stay here where you are safe. No one is more vital to the survival of this world than you. Never forget that.”

He pressed a kiss to my forehead and led me to the couch. He held me until his time ran out, and he disappeared.

I sat there, alone, staring at nothing, my mind too numb to do anything more than wonder “Why me?”

My phone rang. It was Adira. I didn't answer.

"It's like she knows he's gone," I said to myself.

"Here," Zotera said, reminding me that she was still with me. When I turned to look at her, I saw she was holding out a slice of chocolate cake. "I made it with magic, so it's safe."

I gave her a tired smile, accepted the cake, and patted the cushion next to me. When she sat, I looked her in the eyes.

"I'm fine. Sad that you're not here with me, but fine. Thank you for keeping your word and not making things shake. I know you don't like being away from me. I'm sorry your day ended like this. We'll try again when things are better."

I smiled slightly. "And thank you, Zotera, for being so willing to help take care of me. I don't deserve the way you keep putting my needs before yours, and I hope really soon you'll be able to stay with Eugene as long as you want."

She hugged me, careful of the cake.

"I like taking care of you and miss you when I'm with Eugene," she said.

"I miss you when you're with Eugene too. Even when your father was here to keep me company."

She smiled and motioned for me to eat the cake. I leaned into the couch and watched the show she turned on.

My phone rang several times, but other than glancing at the number, I didn't do anything about it.

I finished my cake and stood with a stretch. "You know what we should do? Since we're going to be stuck in here for a while, we should make a game room like we did in Hell. Have you ever played basketball? I've always wanted to try. It looks fun."

Someone knocked on our door.

Zotera glanced at me. I shook my head and put a finger to my lips, then quietly went over to check through the peephole.

Adira's cold blue gaze stared back at me.

“If you want to know how I knew Hades was gone, you’ll need to talk to me. Open the door, Ashlyn.”

I glanced back at Zotera and found her standing behind me. She shook her head.

While I agreed that opening the door would be a foolish thing, I also remembered the way the ward had first reacted to Oanen and how Adira hadn’t entered. She obviously wanted to talk to me. Enough to call several times then show up when I didn’t answer. And she not only knew Hades was gone but knew I’d wondered how she’d known, which meant she was watching me.

Everything she did was from a distance, though. Why? Because she was afraid to get close or because she couldn’t get close?

“Please don’t get me,” I said softly before turning to open the door.

Zotera’s hands settled on my shoulders as I faced Adira.

“The door’s open. Talk.”

“You’re not going to invite me in?” she asked.

“I’m tempted to watch you fly off the ward, but for the sake of courtesy, I’ll refrain.”

She gave me a disappointed look.

“You have three seconds to say something meaningful before I close the door.”

“Spells to track us or bringing Hades’ memories back won’t provide the results that Megan hopes for.”

I started to close the door.

“Zeus caged Hades in Hell for a reason. As a human, you were never meant to go there. He was never supposed to wake. We allowed you to view Mount Olympus so you would understand the problem, Ashlyn. The gods aren’t supposed to be alive anymore.”

“That’s not meaningful,” I said. “It’s propaganda.”

Adira flashed me an annoyed look.

“Are the hundreds of thousands dead propaganda? Those happened because the god of the Underworld is awake.”

“No, those happened because someone tried killing the girl the god of the Underworld adores.”

“We both know you are not that girl. She died thousands of years ago. Don’t mistake his affection, Ashlyn. He will hurt you as easily as he could hurt every other human on this planet.”

She was really annoying me now.

“How do you know? You’ve never talked to him. You don’t know him.”

“And you do? The kisses and pleasure he draws from your flesh are nothing, Ashlyn. Any succubus or incubus here could do the same. Do not mistake that for affection.”

I silently counted to three in my head.

“Why are you here? To convince me he doesn’t love me? Do you think that I’m suddenly going to fall to my knees and beg you to kill me? My life has been a string of shitty experiences up until I went to Hell, Adira. If I was going to give up, I would have done it before that. I’m not the quitting type.”

“I’m here to try to get you to see reason. Hades cannot be freed from Hell.”

I tilted my head at her as I suddenly understood.

“You know he told Megan to find a way to free him, and it scares you.”

“It should scare us all.”

“Why? Because Thanatos said that Haa is bad? What if Haa– isn’t the bad god? He never tried to kill me. The only times he shook the world were due to misunderstandings or an attempt on my life. What did Thanatos tell you that convinced you this thoroughly?”

“It’s not what Thanatos told me. It’s what he showed me. A memory of a conversation he had with Persephone. She was adamant that Hades never be allowed to wake again. That if he did, the world would fall. The banshees’ cry verified that.”

I sighed. “Their cry verified death and destruction. Both have already happened.”

“Not on the scale they predicted. What we’ve witnessed is only a precursor.”

“Again, you still haven’t said anything meaningful. Why are you here, Adira? Why do you care what I believe or don’t believe?”

“Because your life is tied to Hades. In order to put him back to sleep, you must die.”

I snorted. “Good luck with that.”

When I started to close the door, Adira put her hand out like she was going to stop it. The barrier sparked, but she didn’t fly back. Her skin started to sizzle, she made a pained sound but didn’t stop pushing forward.

Zotera pulled me back and stepped around me in one fluid motion.

“Not today, frost giant,” Zotera said. With a touch, she sent Adira flying backward into the snow-trampled front yard. Adira didn’t lose her footing like Oanen had. She landed on both feet and looked at me.

“Have you asked yourself why, yet, Ashlyn?”

“Why what?”

“Why you were able to travel to Hell when no other living human can? Why does Hades answer *your* summons?”

Megan appeared suddenly beside Adira.

Adira’s eyes went wide, and a portal shimmered to life beside her. Megan grabbed Adira and flipped her away from it. Unfortunately, right into another shimmering portal.

Megan swore a blue streak, and snow melted around her. She caught me watching and waved a hand at me.

“Give me a minute.”

“Take as many as you need,” I said.

Standing beside Zotera, I watched Megan pace the snow to cool off and thought of Adira’s parting comments.

“Is it true?” I asked, looking at Zotera. “Am I the only human who’s been to Hell alive?”

She gave me a small nod, and her expression shifted slightly, turning angry.

“Please don’t keep the truth from me.”

The anger fled. “I won’t,” she said with a smile.

I glanced at Megan. “Ready to come in?”

She joined us inside, and once the door was shut, I started talking.

“Adira said that my life is connected to Haaa—the god of the Underworld. That’s why I need to die. To put him back to sleep. She said I’m the only human to have been to Hell alive and the only one who could summon him. Whether she’s right or not, if that’s what Thanatos believes, I’m as good as dead.”

Megan made a sound of frustration. “It gets worse. I didn’t feel a hint of wickedness from Adira. Which means she’s following the laws of immortals and men and that she believes what she’s doing is benefiting others.”

“I’m glad we at least know that much. Your timing was perfect. How did you know we needed you?” I asked.

“I didn’t. Hades summoned me directly to him and said you needed me; then he sent me back to you. Usually, when he sends us back, it’s to where we were.”

“Handy,” I said with a glance at Zotera. “Thank you.”

“Uh, why are you thanking her?”

“Father can see what I see and hear what I hear,” Zotera said.

“Okay,” Megan said with a glance at me. “How long did we know that?”

“I just learned about that recently. He’s not the only one watching though. Adira and Thanatos are watching too. She knew what I said in this living room. And they were watching us at Mount Olympus.”

“So you’re not safe here anymore?” Megan asked.

“Ashlyn’s safe,” Zotera said. “The ward will only allow her close friends inside.”

“Wait, *you* changed the ward?” I asked.

She shot Megan an apologetic look. “I didn’t know Oanen was a friend.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Megan said. “We all make mistakes. What do we do then? I think it’s fair to say Ashlyn lost her ability to call Hades for a reason. They’re planning something.”

“Yeah, he said the same thing before he disappeared. And apparently, Adira was here to attempt to convince me to go along with my immediate death.”

“I’m not a fan of that general idea,” Megan said.

“Me neither. Will you be able to bring the potions, spells, whatever they are to your father when they’re finished?”

“I’ll check.” She sent a quick message off to Zayn.

“I don’t want to leave you alone tonight,” Megan said when she finished. “How do you feel about a big family dinner and some games?”

“I’d love it.”

She sent another text via the group chat.

Megan: Game night at Ashlyn’s. Be ready for pickup in ten minutes.

Oanen: Ready now since you left me. Without warning. Again.

Megan cringed.

Megan: Blame my father’s summoning. I can’t ignore it.

Oanen: You could have called immediately.

Megan: Explanation will be given in person.

Fenris: I want to be present for that!

Eliana: We can be ready in five.

Megan looked at Zotera.

“You’ll be okay here for five minutes without me?”

“We’re safe, Megan. I promise,” Zotera said.

Megan gave me one last look and vanished in flames.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“LET’S MAKE A NEW ROOM FOR THE GAME SPACE,” ZOTERA said, turning toward the living room wall that backed my bathroom.

A door appeared.

“How big should we make it?” She glanced at me in question.

Whether she was doing it to distract me or she truly didn’t fear anyone getting in, I went along with it.

“Same size as in Hell,” I said. “But we’ll only use half of it for the games you already know. The other half, we can do a basketball court. I bet Fenris and Oanen know how to play. Megan, too, actually.”

They showed up just after I had Zotera change the ceiling height to match my bedroom and create wood flooring.

“What’s going on here?” Eliana asked.

“We’re making a game room,” Zotera said.

I could see the questioning way Eliana was eyeing the massive space.

“A quarter of it will be a table for board games and a pool table. Another quarter for other games.” A bags set appeared along with a ping pong table, skee-ball machine, and shuffleboard before I finished speaking.

“I was thinking we could make a basketball court on the other half of the room,” I added.

Fenris gave a girly squeal and jumped into Oanen's arms. Oanen promptly dropped Fenris. Or tried to. The shifter had to be part cat with the way he got his feet under him.

"Don't pretend you're not excited," Fenris said.

"He's still mad I disappeared," Megan said.

"No, I'm still mad I haven't heard the explanation for why you didn't call as soon as he sent you back."

Fenris leaned toward Zotera and whispered, "Popcorn." She smiled at him.

"It's Adira's fault," I said. "She showed up at the house. Haa—summoned Megan to send her here. As soon as Megan saw Adira, they fought on the lawn. Then Megan came inside so I could tell her what happened. Once she understood what was going on, she sent the text message."

Fenris munched on the popcorn Zotera had magicked for him, watching Oanen expectantly.

Megan did the "See? What she said," gesture, which didn't seem to earn her any points in Oanen's eyes.

"Adira got away?" Eliana asked.

"My fury didn't hand Adira her ass," Megan said, visibly annoyed. "Adira's wickedness wasn't even a little blip on my radar."

"Before Megan showed up, Adira told me that my life is connected to Haa—the god of the Underworld. That there's a reason why I'm the only human to ever see Hell alive and can summon the god of the Underworld. Of course, she didn't *say* the reason. Only that there is one. And she also said there was a reason Zeus chained the god of the Underworld to Hell, but didn't spill that one either."

"She also admitted that she's been watching us," Zotera said. She frowned a little and glanced at me. "Do you think she watched when I drank Eugene's nectar?"

Fenris dropped his popcorn. Oanen turned away to inspect the ceiling. Megan outright grinned at me. Eliana was the only

helpful one in the bunch. When I looked at her for an answer, she smiled slightly and took Zotera's hand.

"I don't think she did, sweetie. Don't even let that thought bother you."

"It doesn't. I think it would excite Eugene more. He likes when I look at him while I—"

"Hey, Zotera," Fenris said loudly. "I bet I can find a picture of the basketball courts on my phone. Want to see how to make a hoop?"

"Sure," she said cheerily. While she followed Fenris to the other side of the room, Eliana gave me a look.

"I know," I said. "I'm going to need to talk to him."

"I don't think that's advisable," Megan said. "Father would not be happy with any part of that conversation. Oanen should talk to Eugene."

Oanen gave Megan a sharp look.

"What?" she said. "Do you want me or Eliana talking to him about his sex life?"

He sighed. "I'll deal with it. Explain to Hades why he owes me after I do."

He walked away to give Zotera and Fenris pointers.

"Is it true?" Eliana asked. "Adira's been watching you?"

"Haa— felt someone watching a few times, but I never saw anything. Maybe it was just Adira. Maybe it's both of them. But Adira repeated things that I said here, in this house, when no one else was around."

Eliana huffed out a breath. "I don't like the idea of her watching you."

"Same," Megan said. She glanced at Zotera. "Hey, if you made it so they can't get in, can't you amp up the ward to keep them from watching too?"

Zotera thoughtfully considered the house.

"I think so."

She crossed to the nearest wall. Power lightnined out from her fingers, spreading out in a web of blinding light. A deep rumble like thunder vibrated in the air, and my ears popped like I'd entered a vacuum. Eliana opened her mouth wide and made a face. Megan tugged at her ears. The light receded, taking the pressure in my head with it.

My ears rang, and I cleared my throat.

“Thank the gods,” Eliana said. “For a second there, I thought I'd gone deaf.”

Megan looked around.

“It is crazy quiet in here.”

“No one can hear or see inside, but we won't be able to hear or see outside, either.”

“Meh,” Megan said with a shrug. “I'll take it. Now, who's playing skins? Me and Oanen or Fenris and Eliana?”

Oanen and Eliana were quick to say neither, and I learned that Oanen and Megan had no clue how to play. Fenris mostly fooled around. But Eliana knew all the moves and rules.

“Pfft. Don't forget I spent my formative years outside of Uttira,” she said.

“Yeah, but basketball? How? You're so little,” Megan said.

She shrugged lightly. “It was a lit playground, and the older boys didn't mind that I watched.”

Fenris' slow grin had her blushing.

“I can't help what I am,” she said.

“And I don't want you to. Come here for a hug, Chipmunk, and show me how good you are with this ball.”

Eliana was a great teacher, and once everyone knew what they were doing, the competition was fierce. As the only human, I was knocked down a few times, but each time, the friend who'd knocked me down was quick to pause and help me to my feet. And just as quick to keep playing.

It was the best evening I'd ever spent with friends in my life. And when Fenris started to get hungry, Zotera prepared a feast for us in the kitchen. Some of the foods were ones we knew and loved. Some were from Hell for the others to try.

Midnight rolled in too quickly. And with it, an explosion of light that shook the house.

Megan's eyes flared. "Be right back."

She disappeared, and Oanen took a calming breath.

"I hate when she does that. She doesn't even know what's out there."

"It's Thanatos," Zotera said. "But don't worry. The God of Death won't touch Megan. He'll run."

Another light show sparked and sizzled along the walls.

"My house won't start on fire, will it?" I asked, setting down my slice of pizza.

"It won't," Zotera said. "Does anyone want any dessert?"

"I like how nothing gets you down, Zotera," Fenris said.

The words were barely out of his mouth when an explosion came from the front door. Zotera's head whipped toward the sound, and I saw the fire spark in her eyes as chunks of wood flew past the kitchen's arched opening.

Oanen started to stand.

"Sit, Oanen," Zotera said, sounding very unlike her normal cheery self. "My daughter will be upset if you're hurt."

Zotera strode toward the opening just as a small object rolled along the floor in front of her. She bent down to touch it just as Oanen shouted a warning.

Bubbles exploded in the air around us.

"What the..."

Fenris looked around then back at Zotera as another canister rolled into my home and another. She moved quickly, touching them all, and then sprinted out of view toward the door.

Oanen tried to stand again but couldn't. Neither could Fenris. Eliana could, though. She hurried to the opening and peeked around the corner.

“Adira,” she said softly, slowly straightening. “Come to me, my pet.”

Fenris swore under his breath and tried to stand again.

Making a face, I slowly stood. I knew it was probably the worst idea ever, but I couldn't just sit there. My friends were doing everything they could to protect me. I owed it to them to have their backs as much as I was able. So I crept toward Eliana as she turned fully toward the door, showing me her profile.

She was in full seductress mode as she glided toward the door.

I peeked around the corner and saw a silent war outside. People I didn't know were trying to throw things through the open door. Zotera was standing in front of them, channeling some wicked power that was turning everything into flowers, butterflies, and bubbles.

In the midst of the fighting people stood Adira. She wasn't paying attention to me or Eliana but directing the people around her.

Making a face, I rushed around Eliana, grabbed her face, and planted a chaste kiss square on her lips.

It had the effect I'd hoped. Eliana jerked back and gave me a look, her eyes flickering between their normal color and black.

“Are you sure you want to go after Adira?” I asked. “She'll make your life hell.”

Eliana smiled. “She knows not to try. I'll be okay.”

She glanced out the door, and I turned to see Adira had finally noticed us.

Her gaze locked on me for a moment, but when her gaze met Eliana's, Adira started talking fast to the people around her.

“Stay with Fenris and Oanen,” Eliana said with a slight purr to her voice. “I’ll be right back.”

Smiling, she glided past me toward the door.

Adira yelled something, and a shimmering portal opened beside her. She disappeared through it, and there was a mad exodus as the men and women with her fled as well before Eliana reached the door.

“Crap on a cracker,” Eliana said.

“Something wrong, love sponge?” Fenris called, sounding amused.

I wasn’t amused. I was worried.

“She got away again,” Eliana said.

“Where’s Megan?” Oanen asked.

I glanced from him to the narrow view of my front yard through the open door. The trampled snow was full of falling flowers and a few scorch marks, but only Zotera remained.

She watched the portal wink out of existence and turned toward the house.

“I can’t see Megan,” I said to Oanen. “But everyone left with Adira through her portal, so maybe she followed them.”

A very naked and bloody Megan suddenly appeared beside Zotera. She caught Megan by the arm to steady her. The fury didn’t look anything like her usual strong, easily-provoked self. She looked exhausted, which probably had a lot to do with the cuts scoring her arms and legs and the blood she was losing.

Eliana rushed out the door as I stared with my mouth open.

“What’s happening?” Oanen demanded.

Realizing he was watching my expression, I tried to look a little less shocked as I watched Megan shake her head at Eliana, pat her arm, and say something I couldn’t hear. Then Megan just disappeared again. No flames this time. Just gone.

“Um, I’m not sure,” I said slowly. “But Zotera and Eliana are coming back in. I think they’ll be able to explain.”

Blood smeared Eliana’s arm where Megan had touched her. It was the first thing that Fenris noticed.

“Zotera, let us go,” he said.

He sprang out of his chair a second later and rushed to Eliana.

“It’s not my blood,” she said. “It’s Megan’s. She was hurt, and Hades was summoning her.” She looked at Oanen. “She fought his call to come back here so she could tell you she’s fine and will be back as soon as she can.”

“How badly was she hurt?” Oanen asked.

“A few cuts, that’s all,” Eliana said.

While Eliana wasn’t wrong, she was absolutely downplaying it. The cuts had been long and deep. And there’d been soot marks on Megan’s skin, which probably explained where her clothes had gone.

Oanen glanced from Eliana to me.

“What isn’t she saying?” he demanded, his eyes glinting gold.

“Oanen, you’re your own worst enemy at times,” Eliana snapped before I could even decide how to answer. “Megan was hurt, and she disobeyed a summons from her father to come here to reassure you. A very noble yet foolish gesture on her part. And you’re nitpicking my answer because you want to find something to be upset about. Don’t.”

The last word was said with an unnatural firmness, and I watched Oanen’s golden eyes instantly change to blue.

He looked at Eliana in surprise, and she burst into tears and covered her face.

Fenris shook his head at Oanen like he was disappointed in him, and I felt completely lost regarding what was happening.

“This one’s on you, man,” Fenris said, stepping away from Eliana.

Oanen sighed, stood, and wrapped Eliana in a hug. It was the first time I'd ever seen the two of them hug like that.

"It's okay, Eliana. I was due for that."

I caught Fenris' gaze and gave him a "What's going on?" gesture.

"Eliana just pulled a mind control whammy on Oanen," Fenris said. "My guess is that he'll stop being as annoyed with Megan over fury stuff. He'll probably still get mad if she leaves her cereal bowl on the counter, though."

"Or brushes her teeth like she's trying to make constellations on the mirror," Oanen said. "I'll call it even with you, Eliana, if you can get her to stop doing that."

Eliana laughed through her tears and shook her head. "I'll talk to her about it, but that's it."

"I'll take it," Oanen said with a final pat.

Megan had mentioned Eliana's unique ability to persuade, but I hadn't fully understood the extent. Now that I did, I also understood why Eliana had wanted to confront Adira. Too bad she hadn't reached her in time.

I grabbed my broom to clean up the mess inside while Zotera fixed the front door, replacing it with something much sturdier that wouldn't succumb to human warfare.

"They're really leveling up their game, aren't they?" Fenris asked, holding the dustpan for me. "Who did Adira have with her?"

"I don't know," Eliana said.

"Other children of the gods," Zotera said. "Many different children."

"Well, at least they weren't human," I said. "I was a little worried that's what they were when they started throwing grenades."

I tossed away the wood shrapnel rubbish and sat at the table to finish my slice of pizza. It was still good cold. The others joined me.

“Does anyone want dessert?” Zotera asked.

“Pfft. You already know the answer to that. Buffet me,” Fenris said.

Half of the food on the table changed to desserts. Oanen ate a little but mostly watched the clock. I knew he was worried and looked at Zotera.

“Any chance he can have his mate back soon?” I asked.

Zotera’s eyes flickered with a hint of Hades’ flames as she shrugged.

Eliana’s phone started to ring. She frowned and answered with a cautious hello.

“Zayn? Hold on. Let me put you on speaker.”

She did.

“Is Megan there?” he asked.

“No, Hades summoned her,” Eliana said. “Why?”

“There are a dozen people outside of my home, trying to get in.”

“Is one of them a woman wearing a grey and blue tweed jacket with her hair in a bun?” Eliana asked.

“Uh, yeah. How did you know?”

“That’s Adira. She was just here at Ashlyn’s, throwing grenades with a bunch of other people.”

“What a pain in the ass,” he said.

“She is,” Fenris agreed. “Are you going to be all right?”

“Yes. They won’t be able to—”

We all heard a big boom before the line went dead.

I glanced at Zotera and wished she had the ability to portal like Hades and Megan. But even if she did, I doubted she would leave me to help Zayn.

“Zayn’s smart,” Oanen said. “He can evade Council Enforcers like they’re nothing. He’ll be able to handle Adira.”

Adira and a mob of bomb-wielding children of the gods, though? I wasn't so sure. Zotera and Megan had barely been enough to fight them off. How would one druid deal with them?

More than anything, I missed Hades just then. If he were there, they wouldn't have attacked the house like they had. Or, if they had, they wouldn't have done it for very long.

Almost twenty minutes later, Megan appeared just as suddenly as she'd disappeared. Clothed, thankfully. But she looked as angry as Hades on a no-touchy day.

"She took the memory potion," Megan said, staying right where she was, which was by the kitchen sink.

"Rewind," Eliana said. "We need more context."

"Hades called me back to Hell to heal me." She glanced at Oanen. "I'm one hundred percent good as new."

Oanen nodded. She frowned and watched him for a second. When he didn't say anything, she continued.

"Well, when Hades finished, he said Zayn needed my help and sent me there. I appeared in front of Zayn's house in his very human neighborhood that looked like a damn warzone. Adira and her people were there, throwing grenades and stuff at his house."

I could feel the surge of heat radiating from Megan from where I sat.

"She knew what she was doing. She opened a portal. A rush of people came out. The wickedness of that group overwhelmed me." She glanced at Oanen. "You know how I get. I couldn't even think of Adira with them there. So, I forced a confession from the two closest and took them to Hell."

"It never takes long, but by the time I got back, the front door was blown open. Something I've never seen before had Elizabeth in its arms and bolted out the door with her, launching itself into the night." She slowly shook her head. "No wickedness. None whatsoever. But it radiated death and menace."

“A dragon?” Oanen asked.

“No. It had huge grey wings—nothing like a dragon’s—and it had a human body while flying. Like I said, nothing like I’ve seen before. Anyway, I thought about going after Elizabeth until I felt the wickedness in the house. I followed the last two to where Zayn was trying to fight Thanatos and Adira.”

Megan looked down at her feet, which were slowly scorching my new kitchen floor.

“He was slowly losing, obviously. And if I wouldn’t have —”

She let out a frustrated breath. “As I grabbed the final two wicked souls, I saw Adira grab a vial from Zayn’s workbench. When I returned to the house, Zayn was there alone. The tracking spells were destroyed, and the memory spell is gone.”

The room fell to silence.

“Breaking the tracking spells makes sense,” I said. “They don’t want to be found. But why take the memory spell?”

“Exactly,” Megan said, looking at me with concern. “Until we find Adira or Thanatos, don’t try to say Hades’ name. No matter what happens, don’t.”

Zotera’s warning that Hades’ memories could be dangerous to me rang in my mind as I slowly nodded in agreement.

Oanen stood and went to Megan. “We can’t change the past. Let go of your anger so you can hug me.”

She gave him a funny look. “Where’s the lecture?”

“For what?”

“For taking off without you again.”

“You can’t exactly help that, can you.”

She leaned around him and looked at the rest of us.

“Who is this, and where’s Oanen?”

“That’s Oanen,” Zotera said. “Eliana just told him to stop looking for reasons to be upset with you.”

Megan's gaze bounced between Oanen and Eliana.

"It was an accident," Eliana said with a cringe.

Megan's smile bloomed to the point I saw gums. "Best accident ever!"

She jumped up on Oanen and wrapped her legs around his waist.

"Want to take me home, bird boy?"

"Is it safe for us to leave Ashlyn?" Eliana asked.

"Hey, I'll be fine," I said quickly. "Go home. Rest. I have Zotera."

After what we'd just endured, I was ready to let Zotera build a bunker for us to hide in forever, just so I wouldn't see Megan hurt like that again.

Megan hopped off of Oanen and flashed a wicked smile at us all.

"I just had an idea."

"We couldn't tell," Fenris said.

"I doubt we'll get any rest if we stay here. Zotera, you could do statues, right? Can you make a look-alike of yourself and Ashlyn? Not real but something soft and easy to move."

Zotera gave a slow nod. "I think so."

"Eliana, send Mrs. Quill a message that there was an attack on Ashlyn's and that we'd like to sleep at their place."

"Oh," Fenris said with a laugh. "I like how you think. Adira won't attack her own sister's place."

"Don't put anything past her," Megan said. "That's why the dummies are going with us."

"If Adira shows up, won't she know to look here once she sees the dummies?"

"She won't get close enough to know. Trust us."

Fenris nodded as Eliana sent the text.

“I like this idea,” Zotera said before hurrying from the kitchen.

She created our lookalikes out of two blankets. Both were freakishly real.

“Not sure how I feel about that,” I said.

“Don’t worry,” Megan said. “I won’t let anyone sleep with you.”

I shook my head at her and watched Fenris and Oanen carry our lookalikes out to the car.

“Are you guys going to be okay?” I asked.

“We’ll be fine. Get some sleep. The fates only know what kind of crap Adira and Thanatos will pull once they realize what we’re up to.”

I helped Zotera clean up after the others were gone then went to get ready for bed. Zotera was waiting for me when I got out of the bathroom.

“Do you want me to sleep with you again tonight?” she asked.

“You don’t mind?”

She smiled and shook her head. “I don’t mind.”

When we were under the covers, both staring up at the ceiling, I sighed.

“It’s been one day, and I already miss him like crazy,” I said quietly.

“He misses you too.”

“Can you hear him?”

“No. I know him. You do too. He’s watching and listening and thinking of nothing else but you.”

“That kind of makes me feel sad. I don’t want him to be alone again. Do you think the other children are trying to get his attention? Has Creon had a break from writing down names? I wonder if everyone’s still bored and wandering the halls.”

Zotera turned to look at me.

“You still care even though you’re not there anymore?”

I smiled slightly. “I do. I don’t know why, but I do.” I thought about it for a minute. “No, that’s not true. I do know why. Because they all looked sad and lonely, and I know how that feels. It’s awful. I wouldn’t want anyone to feel like that.”

The phone on my nightstand buzzed, and I held it so Zotera and I could read the group chat together.

Megan: Ashlyn wants popcorn.

Fenris: On it.

Megan: No making out in the kitchen! We want food!

Eliana sent an eyeroll emoji.

“Looks like they’re all set up,” I said. “How am I supposed to go to sleep? I feel guilty that they’re being decoys while we’re here.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“IF FATHER WERE HERE, HE WOULD TELL YOU IT IS NOT YOUR place to feel guilt,” Zotera said, rolling to face me.

I faced her.

“Guilt. Fear. Loneliness. Sadness. I feel all of that when he’s not with me.” I let out a long breath. “It’s crazy how much I want to be with him. I’m regretting not staying, Zotera.”

“I know,” she said, giving me a sad look.

“But I think I would have regretted staying too. That’s what doubt does. It makes us question if things would be better if we’d made different choices.”

“You’re making the right choice to stay here tonight. Your friends will be fine.”

“Are you saying that just to comfort me or because you mean it?”

“I mean it. They’re smart. They have power. And they have each other.”

I nodded, knowing she was right.

“Close your eyes, Ashlyn. You need rest. Please. If you don’t sleep, Father will be upset, and he’s been doing well, hasn’t he? The ground hasn’t shaken once.”

She was right. Hades had been doing amazingly well without me there.

A small thread of doubt wormed its way into my mind. Was he keeping his word, or did he simply no longer care as

much as I thought? I squashed that thought as fast as it started.

Hades needed me as much as I needed him. Just because the earth wasn't shaking didn't mean he was waiting patiently or being idle. He'd find a way to come to me again even if I didn't summon him.

With that thought, I closed my eyes.

Maybe it was the long day or the absolute silence in the house but whatever the case, I drifted off without realizing it and woke to the sun streaming in through the windows above.

I stared at the light while my sluggish brain got going.

The decoys. Right.

I reached for my phone.

It was after nine in the morning, and a string of messages waited in the group chat.

Eliana: Grabbing drinks.

Oanen: Any seltzer water?

Fenris: Are you 90?

Me: Just his palate. He over-salts already too.

I frowned and checked the time on my so-called response. Obviously, Zotera had been responding again.

Fenris: Don't worry. The popcorn is perfectly salted.

The next message was two hours later.

Oanen: We have Ashlyn.

Eliana: Megan went after Thanatos. Tell me if you see Adira.

Me: Stay safe. Please.

Eliana: We'll be fine. Just stay with Fenris and Oanen.

That was it. I flipped back the covers and hurried from my bedroom. The rest of the house was quiet.

"Zotera?" I called, trying not to panic.

"Kitchen," Megan called.

Surprised to hear her voice, I hurried to the kitchen and found Megan sitting on the counter, watching Zotera make some actual French toast.

“I just read the texts. What happened?” I asked.

“We successfully deflected Thanatos and Adira again. They both portaled into the game room. Despite the entertainingly awful movie Eliana had picked out to watch, we were ready. Oanen and Fenris both shifted to protect you and Zotera. You were both adorably asleep, by the way. Fenris, that freaky furball, had a blast opening and closing your eyes.

“Anyway, I went after Thanatos. He disappeared as usual. Eliana stayed behind to deal with Adira, who only lingered long enough to tell Eliana that she needed to think of the people she loved. Then she disappeared.

“But the whole thing was caught on video, which Eliana had been smart enough to set up. We showed it to Mr. and Mrs. Quill. They asked if I’d felt any wickedness from Adira. Once I said I hadn’t, they were pretty quiet about the whole thing. I know they’re not happy, but I also know they’re not going to do anything unless I can report some wickedness.”

Her phone started ringing.

“Eliana,” she said, answering it on speaker.

“Megan,” Eliana said in a panic. “She’s at my parents’ house!”

Megan immediately disappeared.

Zotera met my gaze.

“I can’t do this anymore,” I said. “I don’t want the people I care about to be hurt trying to protect me. Call me home. Please.”

The house shook slightly, and I saw the flash of rage in Zotera’s eyes.

“He can’t,” Zotera said. “He never could command you to his side.”

“So I’m stuck here? I can’t go back?”

“Can the druids who sent you to Hell send you back?” she asked.

“They were mind-wiped. Wait, they’re missing too,” I said, remembering Eliana saying that. “But I think Zayn knows how they sent me back.”

“Then, when Megan returns, we’ll ask her to ask for Zayn’s help.”

I watched the time on my phone slip by. Thirty minutes later, Megan appeared out of breath and angry.

“Adira tried taking Jason. Mrs. Quill showed up in time to stop her.”

“They fought?” I asked.

“No. Mrs. Quill said, ‘Find another way.’ And Adira actually listened and disappeared. I’m so glad I don’t have a sister. I probably would have punched mine in the throat if she was pulling the shit Adira is.”

Zotera laughed like it was the funniest thing she’d heard. I didn’t think it was funny. I found the whole situation sad. Adira wouldn’t be harassing any of them if not for me.

“Can Zayn send me back to Hell?” I asked.

The hint of humor in Megan’s gaze left as she turned her head toward me.

“You want to go back?”

“It’s safer for everyone if I’m there.”

“For everyone but you,” Megan said. “Hades can’t chase Thanatos when you’re down there. You’ll be the sacrificial fish in a barrel.”

“Aren’t I already?”

“No, you’re not. You’re here, safe with Zotera, while Zayn and I are working to hunt down Thanatos. Give us some more time. Zayn thinks he has enough ingredients left for another tracking spell.”

“Why not send me to Hell until a tracking spell is ready? Your father can send me back here any time.”

“Do you really think Hades will let you go again if you return?”

“Does it matter?”

“It matters to me. And Eliana and Fenris and Oanen and Eugene and Kelsey and Zoey. We’re not ready to say goodbye forever.”

Was I willing to say goodbye forever to spare them? My heart said yes, even as it ached at the thought of losing friends I’d only just found.

“A few more days, then,” I said. “But can you ask Zayn to be ready, at least?”

“I will. I better get back to Oanen. Call me if anything happens here. If I don’t answer, call Eliana and Mrs. Quill. Okay?”

“Okay. Does Adira still think I’m with the others?”

“Hard to say. We’ll keep you posted.”

Megan disappeared from my kitchen.

“Are you hungry?” Zotera asked.

“Sure,” I said, even though I wasn’t.

Zotera and I ate breakfast together; then I went to shower and dress. I didn’t look at the bathing room. It made me miss Hades too much. That ache in my chest returned, and I rubbed there as I left my bedroom.

Zotera was in the living room, watching more home improvement shows.

I didn’t think I’d be able to sit and watch TV while worrying whether everyone else was okay. So I sat next to Zotera, facing her. She immediately focused on me.

“There has to be something we can do,” I said.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, honestly. I was hoping you’d have ideas.”

“I don’t want to see any of them hurt. And the best way to ensure that is to protect you. They know that too. That’s why they’re doing what they’re doing.”

“But what are they doing? Playing decoy. Why? What does Adira have planned? They took away my ability to say his name then stole the memory potion. If they wanted me to call him, why take that ability away from me? Adira has a plan. She always seems to know what’s going on. So what’s she really trying to do? Why go after Eliana’s dad? He has nothing to do with any of this.”

Understanding hit me.

“Oh gods...she can’t get to me because of all of you, so she’s going to find a way to pull you all away from me.”

I was already dialing Megan.

“Adira’s trying to find a way to stop you and Eliana from protecting me. That’s why she went after Jason.”

“I’ll head back to Eliana’s parents now. Jason doesn’t have a mark. I can hide him somewhere, and Eliana can—”

“That’s what she wants, Megan.” I closed my eyes against the pain I felt. “Please. Send Zayn to me. Please.”

She didn’t answer for so long that I looked at my phone. The call was gone. When I tried again, I got the message that the number was no longer in service. Same with Eliana and Mrs. Quill.

I hurried to my bedroom, where the spare phone was waiting, and dialed Megan again.

“Hello?” she answered.

“It’s me,” I said. “I think she’s blocking calls on my other phone.”

Megan swore. “I’m with Jason now, taking him somewhere safe.”

“I don’t think she’ll go after Jason again. Who else do you care about?”

“Adira wouldn’t touch Oanen and can’t touch my mom or —shit. Grandma Irene.” The line went dead for a moment then came back. “Grandma?”

I heard someone answer.

“You need to pack a bag, Grandma,” Megan said.

“What about Eliana?” I asked. “If Adira can’t go after her parents, who would she go after?”

“I would say Fenris, but Eliana put some hoodoo on Adira so she can’t touch him. I’ll call her and find out. Thanks for the heads up.”

“Be careful,” I said. “Saving me won’t be worth anything if you lose the people who matter to you.”

“You matter too, Ashlyn. You always have. Don’t ever forget that.”

She hung up, and I looked at the phone for a long moment.

“Is Megan all right?” Zotera asked.

“She is. She’s making sure that her grandma is safe and is going to call Eliana to see who Adira might go after next in an attempt to distract her.”

I pocketed my phone as my mind raced.

“Once Adira thinks they’re distracted, she’s going to make her move here,” I said.

Zotera reached out and held my hand.

“You’re safe here.”

“But they’re not.”

She didn’t have anything to say to that.

“There has to be something we can do,” I said.

“Leaving here is exactly what Thanatos and Adira want us to do,” Zotera said. “And sacrificing yourself to save your friends will not protect them in the end. You know that.”

I understood what she was saying. If anything happened to me, Hades would likely lose his grip on reality and destroy the

world.

Zotera led me from the bedroom and took a left in the living room to head for the game room.

She did her best to distract me for the next hour, asking questions about the games, making bets if I could win against her, and creating pretty new things to add to the room. I tried my hardest to focus on her and not on what was happening outside my house, but I wasn't entirely successful.

When my phone chimed with a new message, I almost dropped it in my hurry to read it.

Megan: Grandma, Nicolette, and Jason are safe. Zayn broke Nicolette's tracking spell.

Fenris: Eugene is safe and understands not to answer the door or phone. Leaving now.

Eliana: Vedar, Kelsey's dragon, understands what's happening and will keep Kelsey and Zoe safe.

Megan: Oanen? How are your parents?

"Can a dragon stand up to a god?" I said, glancing at Zotera.

"Dragons were made to mock Father's other form. They are among the strongest creatures made, second only to the furies. Thanatos would not have an easy time defeating a dragon. He would choose an easier target if possible."

"Which would be Eugene?"

Zotera gave me a worried look.

Me: Eugene is the weakest target.

Megan: Stay where you are!

I frowned at the text.

"Did she really think I was going to leave?"

Zotera looked at me and gave a small shrug. Then she held up the basketball.

"Will you help distract me from my worry, Ashlyn?"

“He’ll be fine,” I said. “Megan won’t let anything happen to him.”

She bounced the ball to me, and I embraced distracting us both. Zotera was taller, faster, and way more competitive. She ran circles around me and made three baskets in rapid succession. I paused, bending to put my hands on my knees.

From where I stood, I saw the flash of light from the living room and straightened.

Megan and Eliana stood just inside the door.

“Megan?” I called.

Her head whipped toward me.

“Thank the gods,” she said.

“What’s going on?” I asked, hurrying from the game room.

Zotera was right on my heels.

“Oanen’s missing,” Megan said. “He was at his parents’ and just disappeared. Fenris too. He left Eugene’s, but his car is still in the driveway.”

A sick feeling settled into my stomach.

“We came straight here,” Megan said.

“But what about—”

Eliana shook her head. “It’s just like you said. It’s a trap to pull our attention from you.”

“Adira won’t let anything happen to either of them,” Megan said. “Relax.”

I couldn’t, though, because I knew we weren’t just dealing with Adira.

“Do you think Adira will have any say?” I asked. “You said she couldn’t touch Fenris. Doesn’t that mean this is Thanatos?”

Eliana paled a little but didn’t waver. “We’re staying.”

“Think you can magic me some pizza?” Megan asked Zotera. “I need some comfort food.”

I followed them to the kitchen, my steps dragging.

“Did you ask Zayn about sending me back home?” I asked Megan.

“I did,” she said as she grabbed a slice of the pizza Zotera had made. “And he said he can do it, no problem. So don’t worry. Okay? Everything is under control.”

I nodded and forced myself to sit next to them.

Fifteen minutes later, both their phones buzzed.

Megan and Eliana shared a look.

“Ignorance is bliss,” Megan said.

Eliana slowly nodded. “But ignoring the problems doesn’t make them go away.”

Megan sighed and looked at the text.

Her fury exploded outward in a flash of flames. If not for Zotera, her quick reflexes, and her magic, I would have been barbeque. I stared at the flames churning inside the bubble Zotera had placed around Megan.

“You are not alone,” she said calmly as Megan screamed her fury.

It seemed to get through to Megan, who fisted her hands and closed her eyes as she took one shuddering breath after another.

Instead of looking at her phone, Eliana slid it to me.

“It would be better if I didn’t lose control,” she said.

I checked the text and found a picture of Oanen and Fenris tied back-to-back in a boat. Oanen looked like he’d had his ass handed to him several times. His lip was bloody. His nose was probably broken. And he had several cuts that I could see through his torn shirt. Fenris didn’t look much better. He radiated an anger I’d never witnessed in the playful wolf as he glared at whoever was taking the picture. He was just as banged up, but it looked like it was healing faster.

The text with the message said, “The Oracle thanks you for her snack.”

I looked up at Eliana.

“Fenris and Oanen are at Lake Uttira. They’re tied in a boat, and based on the ripples in the water and the text message, I think the mermaids are planning on taking them to the Oracle.”

Eliana’s eyes flickered black as she looked at Megan.

“Adira would never allow the Oracle to eat Oanen. He’s family.”

Megan’s gaze flicked to me.

“I didn’t think she would allow Oanen to be beaten either, but she did.”

“You should go,” I said. “Before they get too far out into the lake.”

“That’s what they want,” Megan said angrily. But I knew the emotion wasn’t directed at me. “They want us to go running around like we’re chasing our own tails so they can get to you. Not going to happen.”

My Council issued phone buzzed.

Adira: Are you really going to allow your friends to die for you? Save my nephew. Please.

I turned the phone to show the others. Megan swore up a blue streak for two seconds then went oddly quiet.

“I hate when you do this,” she said, sitting calmly.

Eliana smiled slightly. “No, you don’t. Or you wouldn’t have sat next to me. We need to keep a level head about this. We’re not without options. You can hellgate to the island and warn the Oracle not to harm the guys.”

Megan shook her head. “I don’t need to. She’s smart. She knows what would happen to her if she ate my mate. I will burn everything she holds dear.”

“Then their threat is empty,” Eliana said.

Megan considered that for a moment. “So how do we turn this to our advantage? They can’t see inside this house, right? How will they know when we show up at the beach?”

“I’m betting they bribed the mermaids again,” Megan said, answering herself. “They’d do anything to stop the Oracle from killing their kind forever, even risk my wrath.”

It was weird to see her sit there, talking about it all so calmly.

“So then we show up there, and what? The mermaids call Adira, which would give Adira and Thanatos the all-clear to try to get in here?” Eliana asked.

“That’s my guess,” Megan said.

“Then let’s do the opposite,” I said. “Let’s *all* take my car to the beach. Then Thanatos and Adira won’t be showing up where you aren’t.”

Megan was already shaking her head before I finished.

“I agree with Megan. I think that’s a bad idea,” Eliana said. “It feels like that would be playing right into their hands.”

“So does doing the same thing and expecting different results,” I said. “Each time, we wait for them to attack, then Megan always tries to catch them. Nothing good happens.”

“What do you propose, then?” Megan asked. “If we take you to the lake, you’ll be out in the open.”

“Out in the open doesn’t have to mean defenseless.” I looked at Zotera. “Can you put me in a bubble?”

Her gaze bounced between Megan and me. “Yes, but they don’t last long.”

“It only needs to last long enough for Megan and Zotera to get Thanatos while Adira plays hide and seek with Eliana.”

Eliana’s eyes went wide. “That’s it. Megan, we need to go to my bedroom.”

“I’m not sure I’m ready for that next step in our relationship yet,” Megan said with a smirk.

“Cut it out, or I’m stealing all your emotions. We’ll be right back,” Eliana said, taking Megan’s hand. They disappeared in a flash.

My phone buzzed again.

Adira: Haven’t enough lives been lost for you, Ashlyn?

“Her soul will find no rest if Father ever finds it,” Zotera said, reading over my shoulder.

Megan and Eliana reappeared.

“Here,” Eliana said, thrusting a necklace at me. “Put it on and think about how much you want to hide.”

I took the necklace and slipped it over my head.

Zotera blinked at me.

“Mother?”

“She’s still there,” Eliana said before I could say anything. I looked down at my hands, which were still very visible.

“You can’t see me?” I asked.

“When you’re ready to be seen again, just think about coming out of hiding,” Eliana said.

I did, and Zotera threw her arms around me. “I thought you left,” she said.

“I was sitting there, totally visible,” I said.

“Only to you,” Eliana said. “We can’t see you or hear you. Fenris had that made for himself. We can use that to hide you in plain sight.”

Megan grinned. “Time for a road trip. The four of us are going to leave in your car, like you said, and go to the lake. Likely, Adira and Thanatos are nearby, waiting for a report from the mermaids, who will only see three of us. Adira and Thanatos will attack the house, and we’ll go get the guys. Easy.”

“I hate when you say something will be easy,” Eliana said. “It never is.”

“Where’s your sense of adventure?” Megan asked. “You’re driving, by the way. I’ll take shotgun. Zotera, I want you to sit in the middle in the back. Ashlyn, you sit behind Eliana.”

I agreed, relieved we were going to do more than just hope their mates would be fine, and hurried to put on my jacket and boots.

As soon as I was ready, I thought of hiding. Zotera’s eyes flared with rage when I disappeared. I touched her hand so she would know I was there, and she smiled.

“We should play hide and seek in Hell,” she said. “I bet Father would love it.”

I wasn’t so sure about that. Hades didn’t like being away from me for a second. Although, he might like the random ghostly touches. I grinned thinking of it and decided Zotera might be right.

She slid toward the middle of the car seat and waited for me to close the door.

“Don’t buckle,” Eliana said. “It’ll be a giveaway. Zotera, just be ready to protect her if anything happens while we’re in the car.”

My skin crawled as we passed through the ward, and I looked back at my house.

Adira stood on the roof and watched us leave without any expression. No one spoke in the car as Eliana navigated to the lake.

I really hoped that Megan was right. That this rescue would be easy.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE TIRE TRACKS FROM OUR LAST VISIT TO THE LAKE WERE undisturbed. The shoreline was a different story. Scuff marks and large swathes of gravel showed the struggle that had happened there. The temperature inside the car went up a few degrees.

“Don’t make me start stealing already,” Eliana said softly.

“Stay in the car,” Megan said. “I don’t think this will take long.”

Megan got out and went to the end of the dock. I could hear her through the closed windows.

“You have fifteen minutes to return our mates before I turn this lake into a fish boil. Starting now.”

A mermaid flicked a wave of water at Megan. Steam rose from her.

“I promise you, there will be nothing left for the Oracle to eat if anything happens to our mates.”

The air between Megan and us started to shimmer.

“Not today, frost beast,” Eliana murmured, opening her door. “Come to me, Adira. It’s time to heed your master.”

The hand that had started to appear from the portal immediately disappeared. Eliana laughed outside the car and closed the door on us as Megan continued to watch the water in front of her.

Why had Adira tried portalling here? Had she already figured out that I wasn't home? The new front door should have held.

I glanced at Zotera, who was calmly watching both Megan and Eliana.

"Fourteen," Megan called. "I've always wondered if you come out as babies or tadpoles. Guess we'll find out soon."

I could hear the mermaids screeching their anger from the car.

A man appeared on the shore between Eliana and Megan. He'd lost his salt and pepper goatee, which made him look a little younger. He still looked sickly, though.

"Thanatos," Eliana said, looking at him.

Megan turned too. He immediately disappeared.

Why was he here? They were supposed to be at the house, trying to get to me.

"Thirteen," Megan called.

"That wasn't a minute," a mermaid yelled back.

"Time flies when you want to have fun," Megan said. "And I'm ready for some fun."

Adira appeared on the other side of the dock from where Thanatos had appeared. This time, she didn't retreat when Eliana called her name.

My mind raced, trying to understand what Thanatos and Adira intended by targeting Megan and Eliana here instead of being at the house.

"I am more proud of you than you know, Eliana," Adira said, standing her ground. "You have turned into a powerful creature capable of leading our kind in the future. But you still don't understand the sacrifices leaders need to make."

The words had me wondering if they were truly trying to remove my friends.

“Then teach me,” Eliana purred. “Sacrifice yourself to my hunger.”

I could feel a tug on my middle and lightly touched the back of Zotera’s hand. The contact grounded me.

Adira tripped forward a step then stilled, visibly fighting Eliana’s pull.

“Give yourself to me,” Eliana beckoned.

“Twelve,” Megan called, focused on the water at the end of the dock.

Thanatos reappeared in his spot and glanced from Megan to Adira to Eliana.

“Release her, succubus, or suffer,” he said.

Zotera placed her hand briefly over mine and got out of the car.

“Hello, Thanatos,” she said, closing her door. “Father asked me to give you a message.”

She shot a bolt of power at Thanatos that hit his chest with a crack. He flew back and landed on the iced-over shallows. The ice broke on impact and he fell into the water. When he stood again, he shook with his rage.

“You dare strike me?” he demanded.

“I dare,” Zotera said, throwing another bolt.

He disappeared and reappeared behind her. She pivoted and sent another bolt at him. He vanished, reappearing behind her again but farther away.

Megan chose that moment to do the same. Thanatos’ eyes went wide the second her arms wrapped around him from behind.

“Let’s play,” she said a second before she portaled, disappearing from the snow-covered beach.

Everything was happening too fast. I fought to keep calm in my fear and worry for my friends.

“Kneel,” Eliana commanded Adira.

Shaking with resistance, Adira turned her head toward the lake.

“Fight for your freedom,” she called.

Eliana let out a sultry laugh as a mermaid jumped out of the water, shifting from fins to feet. Then another and another. They ran toward Eliana.

“What happened to love?” Eliana purred as Zotera moved closer to protect her. It wasn’t necessary, though.

The mermaids turned on one another and started making out.

“Delicious,” Eliana said. “You should join them, Adira.”

Thanatos reappeared out of nowhere and grabbed Eliana from behind, placing his hand over her eyes. Zotera grabbed him and ripped him away from Eliana as light bloomed from his palm.

“You seek to blind me?” Eliana said.

She moved in a way that made it hard to breathe as she beckoned to him. “I will take everything you are and remake you into mine.”

I scanned the area for Megan as Adira, free from Eliana’s focus, created a portal.

Adira didn’t leave yet. She watched Thanatos turn on Zotera and Eliana with a snarl. Energy crackled from him, spidering out along the ground.

“You have no idea what you’re doing,” he said. “You cannot undo what’s been done.”

Zotera created a bubble around Eliana a second before a bolt of energy flew at her.

The energy rebounded at the same time Adira stepped into the portal. It flew back at Thanatos and almost hit Megan, who suddenly appeared behind him. She dove to the side.

Adira appeared in the car beside me.

“I won’t apologize for doing what I must,” she said, turning toward me.

My eyes went wide as she grabbed my hair and forced my head back. I cried out and grabbed for her hands. She tipped a vial into my open mouth. I choked on the bitter liquid as it burned and struggled not to cry. I didn’t want to die by poison. That shit hurt.

“It’s done now,” Adira said. “Remember why you cannot live and let the choice be yours.”

Still coughing, I grabbed the door handle and spilled out of the car while thinking I needed to be seen.

Zotera was there, grabbing me as the ground shook beneath my feet.

“Mother,” she said. “What happened?”

“A vial,” I wheezed.

The burning in my throat was fading, replaced by a thousand needles piercing my mind.

I clutched my head and cried out. The shaking beneath me grew harder.

Megan yelled Thanatos’ name. Zotera’s hands left me. Voices echoed around me—or maybe just in my aching head. The pain there grew.

I closed my eyes against it and saw flashes of light behind my eyelids.

Agony, unlike anything I’d felt before, knocked me sideways. The snow on my cheek was a small point of relief in the anguish twisting through me. The echoes in my head grew louder and louder, and the flashes dancing behind my eyelids became bright white light.

I stood in a field of small yellow flowers and tipped my head back to enjoy the sun’s warmth on my skin. Mount Olympus was beautiful, but I favored my mother’s gardens over those smooth stone halls that echoed with the other gods’ laughter.

The gardens offered peace and tranquility. Warmth and the soft scent of summer blooms.

“Persephone,” my mother called.

I turned toward her, my heart filling with the love I felt for the goddess I called mother.

“Child, why are you out here alone? Do you favor no one?”

Smiling, I shook my head. She’d been trying to get me to choose a lover among the gods for several mortal weeks now.

“Come now. Surely Ares? Eros? Apollo? They are all pleasing to the eye.”

“Not to the mind. They play their games with mortals and spare very little of their attention for anything else. When I love, it will be wholly and without reservation for one who will give me the same.”

“But—”

I took her hands in mine. “Let me love as I will love, Mother. Please.”

She studied me for a long moment then nodded. “You are too beautiful to wander alone now. If you wish to visit the gardens, I will accompany you.”

Humoring her, I nodded. Yet, the very next sunrise, she was summoned to Zeus’ bed, and I was left alone. Once again escaping the halls of Mount Olympus, I sought out Mother’s gardens. The butterflies were just emerging from their cocoons. I watched them and laughed as they took flight.

I felt his presence but didn’t immediately turn to look. When I did, I was blinded by his dark beauty. His gaze unwaveringly held mine as he crossed the field.

He didn’t speak as he lifted his hand to touch my cheek gently. Without a word, the yearning in his gaze stole my heart.

“What is your name?” I asked.

“Call me ‘my love,’ and I will grant you anything.”

My heart fluttered in my chest. "My love?"

The desire in his eyes grew.

"Will you grant me a kiss?" I asked.

His kiss was sweet and warm like the sun itself.

He walked beside me that afternoon, quiet in my company. When the sun set and it was time to return to my mother's side, we parted with another kiss.

For a moment, my realities overlapped. I felt the longing for Hades then and my longing for Hades now as I lay in the snow, shaking with pain. White light pulled me under again.

The earth trembled and parted in my mother's garden. Hades emerged, his eyes blazing as he strode toward me.

My mother screamed her denial when she saw him. Vines lashed out of the ground, wrapping around his arms and legs, but they all quickly withered and broke. When he reached me, he held out his hand.

"Persephone."

His name on my lips set my heart racing.

"Do not touch him, my child," my mother yelled, running toward us.

I looked from her to his hand, hesitating. Why didn't my mother want me to be with him?

"Forgive me, my love," he said. Then he picked me up and threw me over his shoulder.

He leaped into the gaping maw, and I looked up to watch it close as we fell. My mother's tear-stricken face was the last thing I saw.

We didn't land but appeared in a massive hall that reminded me of Mount Olympus. I barely paid it any attention.

"I want to go back to my mother," I said.

Hades stroked my cheek, his expression a mix of anguish and need.

“Of course. Before I return you, may I show you my home?”

I hesitated to agree. Then his fingers wrapped around mine, and I nodded my acceptance.

The first room he led me to was a beautiful bathing chamber. A table sat near the water's edge, boasting every fruit known to the gods. I popped a pomegranate seed into my mouth and enjoyed the burst of sweetness and tartness as I dipped my fingers into the tempting water.

The pools at Mount Olympus tempted me, but Mother had never let me bathe with the others.

I looked at Hades. “May we enjoy the water before we return?”

“Yes,” he breathed as his clothing disappeared.

He was beauty itself, endowed with a size that would have Aphrodite lusting after him. I smiled as the idea that I could have a god that other goddesses craved pleased me.

My skin heated at the hunger in his gaze as I allowed my gown to drop to the tile.

“Do you wish to bed me?” I asked.

He closed the distance between us and kissed me with a passion he'd withheld in his previous kisses. It consumed me. Heated my blood. My hands wandered to his chest. His drifted over my limbs.

He picked me up and carried me into the warm waters, then backed me toward the edge. His kiss became more demanding, and his teeth caught my bottom lip.

My breath caught at the discomfort, and my hands stopped petting his chest. They started to push. I turned my head.

“I want to go home,” I said.

“You are home, my love,” he said.

He reclaimed my lips with a heated kiss that had me forgetting my mother and any reservations I had. I kissed him back, and he made an animalistic sound.

“Do you swear to be devoted to me?” I asked against his lips.

“I swear.”

I bit his lips like he’d bitten mine and felt him shiver with desire.

With my hips pressed against the tile, he reached between us. He took what I offered, but it wasn’t the paradise I’d been led to believe. I cried out in pain as he groaned in pleasure.

My nails bit into his skin as I struggled to breathe.

“Yes. You are mine,” he said, moving.

A whimper escaped me. He howled and changed, growing larger. The view of his wet red skin as I tore in a million ways burned into my mind.

I gasped in gulps of cold air at the remembered pain and Hades’ anguish when he’d realized I hadn’t been making happy sounds as he’d thought. And I remembered everything after. His care as he’d healed me. His desperate pleas to allow him to make it up to me. I’d believed him.

He tried a thousand times to show me the beauty of loving another, but there was never any joy in it for me. Only pain. So much pain.

I stared at the god who’d promised to give me the world but had given me nothing but misery and darkness.

“No, never again,” I said. “Take me home.”

“I vow I can bring you joy. One more chance, I beg of you.”

“Have I not bled for you enough? Return me to where I belong.”

He silently snarled in frustration and ran his hands through his hair.

“You are where you belong,” he said.

“No. I belong in the light I love with my gentle mother, who I haven’t seen in months. Return me, Hades. Now.”

“You are mine,” he bellowed, making the ground shake.

“Yours?” I said with a scoff. “I belong to no one.”

“By Zeus’ decree, you belong to me,” he said angrily. “You are mine.”

“You lie.”

I cried into the snow as the memories came rushing back. Hades hadn’t lied. Zeus had sold me, ripped me from the world I’d loved, and condemned me to Hell so he could retain the power he had.

With each blinding flash of pain, more memories were unlocked of a life I never knew I’d lived. And with each one, the hate for Hades grew. He was relentless in his pursuit of me and bargained at every opportunity to win another chance to bring me pleasure. All I ever found was pain, though...until I started giving it.

Oh, the joy I felt seeing Hades in anguish.

I laughed against the snow and slowly righted myself, once again in the mortal world I loved. A fury, one of Hades’ favored daughters, fought with Thanatos nearby.

My hate and anger swelled. I would make the god of the Underworld suffer for *my* pleasure through her.

She jolted hard and looked away from Thanatos. Our gazes met across the clearing. I saw the surprise in her eyes, followed by the rage, and smiled.

“Eliana!” she yelled. “Stop me.”

Eliana...the name struck a chord, sending a shard of pain through my right eye and into my head. I whimpered, and the

ground shook violently beneath me.

Aphrodite, a goddess who'd never given me any consideration, stepped in front of me to block the fury. The goddess wrapped her arms around the detestable creature as if hugging her.

“Confess,” the fury demanded.

I laughed.

“To what, abomination? To taking the joy from your life as it was taken from mine? If you have issue with your fate, speak to your father.”

“Breathe, Megan,” Aphrodite said.

Megan...the name sent another shard of pain through my head.

My past and my present overlapped in nauseating contrast.

“Persephone,” Thanatos yelled. “Remember why you are here.”

His words echoed in my mind, stirring more memories.

Broken, I walked the halls of Mount Olympus, leaving a bloody trail for all the gods and goddesses to witness. Each angry step echoed on the smooth stone beneath my bare feet. Yet again, I'd earned my freedom at a price, but I'd bargained well this time.

The halls rumbled with Hades' anguish at my continued suffering, and I smiled as I made my way to my mother's rooms. Hades deserved every measure of torment he endured and more. Fisting my hands, I entered the outer chamber of my mother's verdant Mount Olympus paradise. One I once called home over a millennia ago. My heart ached for all that I lost.

The low rumble of Zeus' voice reached my ears when I entered her inner chamber but quickly quieted at my approach. The pair turned to greet me, but my mother's welcoming smile turned to a cry at the sight of my blood-

soaked skirt. I didn't look at her. I focused on Zeus, the god who had condemned me to my hell.

"Where is my greeting, oh mighty Zeus, beloved god of all?"

His expression clouded for a moment then cleared. He turned and kissed Mother's temple.

"I will leave you to visit."

He walked past me, and the cursed god dared heal what I'd bargained to maintain.

Free of the pain, I spun and called a blade to my hand. My mother caught my wrist when I was about to throw it at his retreating back.

"Daughter, hold your temper, and hear this good news. Your freedom is within reach."

I turned toward her.

"How?"

"Zeus tires of this existence. He seeks an end that will protect his precious humans. To do so, he needs support. I've promised mine in exchange for your release from Hell."

My breath caught on a sob, and I threw my arms around my mother.

"I can finally return to you?" I asked through my tears.

When she said nothing, I pulled back to look at her.

"Can I not return to you?"

The vines in her room moved to cover the entrance to her inner chamber as she led me to a cushion.

"True freedom comes at a price. I will need to give all that I am, and Zeus will give all that he is, to set all the gods free to be added into the mortal pools controlled by the fates. We will be reborn to atone for the offenses of our immortal lives."

While I did not want to be parted from my mother again, the idea that I would be forever removed from Hades' presence made me want to laugh and spin with joy.

Mother's happiness did not match mine.

"Two gods will be spared," she said.

"Who?"

"Thanatos, the God of Death, to ensure the spell's completion, and Hades."

"Why Hades?"

"Hades never tormented mankind but sought to shelter and care for their souls until the fates sent them back to the mortal plane. He created the furies to protect the humans from those corrupted by the other gods' children. And although he had the power to rule Mount Olympus, he never sought to overthrow his brother. Zeus believes Hades has already suffered as much as any mortal and does not see a reason to cast him into the mortal pool when his absence in Hell would only create more mortal suffering."

"Hades has suffered?" I asked in disbelief. "What of my suffering?"

My mother held me as I shook with my rage.

"Hades has not yet known real suffering," I said. "But I vow he will."

I left my mother and spent several days slowly wooing Thanatos. The reclusive god did not seem interested in the pleasures of the flesh initially, but I showed him the joy he could find in my arms. With him, I felt little pain but no joy. I hadn't taken him as a lover for that. He was a means to an end I was due.

Within months, I gained Thanatos' love. When I returned to Hell, I hid my relationship with him from Hades. He visited me often, finding solace in my arms while my bitterness and desperation to escape grew. Almost a year after I'd taken him to my bed, he confessed what Zeus wanted him to do and said he was working on a way to spare me.

I embraced my moment of victory and wept pitifully, begging Thanatos to allow my death so I could be free of Hell but asking for his help to ensure Hades' suffering. I endured

Thanatos' tender affections and promises to find me in each of my mortal lives. Keeping my hopes that I would never be found again to myself, I agreed with false passion and started planning Hades' end.

We couldn't end the god of Hell's existence, but we could link his life to mine. He would feel every moment of my anguish as I slowly died in his presence. And once my essence left my body, his would bleed away, bringing him to the cusp of non-existence.

On the snow-covered shore, I came back to myself and laughed wildly. Everything had gone beautifully. I'd died with a smile on my face, listening to Hades' pitiful pleas for forgiveness.

“Accept my kiss, my love,” Thanatos yelled. “When you are reborn, I vow I will find you. You will not spend another lifetime alone.”

Turning my disdainful gaze toward him, I laughed.

“Love? I have no love.”

The ground shook violently, and my insides churned with the hint of something forgotten.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MY LAUGHTER CAUGHT IN MY THROAT AS A BALL OF WHITE pain exploded in my head, knocking me backward. I rolled to my side and vomited at the rush of memories that came with the pain.

The mortal pool. My soul reborn again and again.

So many lifetimes.

I wasn't Persephone or Ashlyn but a battered leaf caught up in a hurricane of infinite mortal lives.

I was the infant abandoned in the gutter, unwanted and unloved. The child beaten by its harsh mother. The young woman abused by her father. I was the neglected wife. The forgotten spinster. The stoned, unwed mother. I was the relieved widow and the neglected grandmother.

Life after horrible life filled my head, and with each one, Megan's begging cries for Eliana to stop her grew quieter.

A sob caught in my throat at each painful existence I'd endured.

In every life I had lived, I had suffered every mortal tragedy and very little joy. Any hint of love I'd found had been quickly and brutally removed. Betrayed. Unwanted. Abused. Over and over.

An all-consuming loneliness dissolved the hate that had filled me only moments ago, and I cried pitifully.

Why did no one love me? Why was I so unworthy?

My head throbbed painfully in time with my pulse as I tried to make sense of everything.

Persephone's mother's words filled my mind again.

We will be reborn to atone for the offenses of our immortal lives.

Thoughts from all my past lives collided in my head. All the times I'd wondered why I was miserable.... Why I was so unloved... Why I suffered so much while others led happy lives...

All that I'd suffered was due to the grave offenses I committed against a god who had tried so hard to love me but who had been so unloved himself that he didn't know how.

I'd abused him. Hated him. Hurt him in every way imaginable, but he'd never once given up on me. He'd loved me unconditionally, even at my worst.

His familiar face rose in my mind. The face that Persephone knew—twisted with his desperation for love. The face that I knew—smiling with laughter as I tickled his feet.

My heart broke with new understanding of what I'd done, and my head dropped forward as I sobbed.

“Ashlyn!” Zotera yelled. “Mother!”

I sobbed harder, recalling how many I'd wronged. The ground shook beneath me as Thanatos appeared before me. He grabbed me by the shoulders and lifted me to my feet as if I weighed nothing.

His lifeless dark eyes swept over my face.

“You remember, my love? Tell me you remember.”

“I remember,” I said, choking on a sob.

“Then die. I beg you. Undo what you've done.”

Undo? There was no undoing the terror I'd rained down on Hell during my time there.

“It can't be undone,” I said.

“It can.” His fingers bit into my hair on the back of my head, keeping me in place as he started to lower his mouth to mine.

“The pain will be brief,” he said.

A memory surfaced of another time he’d said those words. It had been the first time I’d lain with him, and the memory of it had me flinching. I didn’t love Thanatos, and what I’d done with him repulsed me in so many different ways.

Megan appeared behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist. They disappeared in a burst of flames that left my skin hot.

Panting and disoriented, I looked around the shore. More mermaids had emerged, and I watched Zotera backhand one that was trying to come at me. Adira was once again fighting Eliana’s thrall.

I covered my ears as thoughts continued to collide. I was no one; yet, I was many. A lost goddess without a home. Alone. Abandoned. Unlov—

An ache grew in my chest for the one person who *had* always loved me. Who had never left me even when he couldn’t be by my side.

I looked at the rippling waters and knew only one safe harbor to weather the storm raging in my mind.

“Hades,” I breathed just as Thanatos reappeared in front of me.

“No!” Thanatos yelled, reaching for me again.

Hades materialized next to me and grabbed the God of Death by his throat.

“You dare touch what is mine.”

Hades’ fist connected with Thanatos’ nose, and I heard the crunch. I barely registered the devastation of that one before Hades landed three more in rapid succession.

A thousand whispering voices in my head overlapped with one message.

This isn't just.

“Wait,” I said, setting my hand on Hades’ back.

Chest heaving with his rage, he turned to look at me.

“I remember,” I said. “I remember it all.”

Hades howled in pain like the time I’d taken a knife to his chest and cut out his heart. My tears, which had slowed, started falling faster.

“No, no, no!” he said. “You are not her. You are Ashlyn. You are kind and good.”

“I am not only Ashlyn. I’m also Persephone and a thousand others.”

“You are mine!” Hades raged.

I understood then that he didn’t care what name he used to address me. I was simply his. Always and forever.

A sob caught in my throat for what I’d done to him.

“My love. Forgive me,” I managed in a choked whisper.

He waved a hand, and everyone disappeared except the two of us.

He stared at me, his wary and slightly unhinged gaze sweeping my face, and I understood why.

“I remember the first time I saw you as Persephone,” I said. “You found me in a field filled with flowers. I remember thinking how handsome you were.” He stepped closer and held my face, wiping at my tears with his thumbs. “I’m the reason you suffered, Hades. When I discovered that Zeus intended to cast all the immortals down to Earth, except for you and Thanatos, I used Thanatos to find another way to make you suffer.

“He is not to blame. I am. I can’t tell you how sor—”

Hades set his forehead to mine.

“No apology need ever fall from your lips,” he said roughly. “Goddess, I wronged you. You were owed every ounce of suffering I endured.”

I shook my head against his.

“No, Hades. You are owed love and understanding. And if you’ll let me, I’d like to keep giving you both.”

He wiped at the fresh wave of my tears, and the space around us shifted. We stood in the bathing pool room at my house.

“Will you allow me to care for you?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, still crying.

My clothes vanished, and he picked me up to carry me into the warm water. I hadn’t realized how cold I was until the heat surrounded me. Then, he just held me through my tears as the memories continued to settle into place.

Slowly, the throbbing in my head faded, and my breathing calmed.

“I was so filled with hate that I didn’t see,” I said without lifting my head. “But the lives I lived without you have opened my eyes.” I lifted a waterlogged hand to run my fingers along his skin and saw the way he shivered.

“I see where we went wrong. If you don’t want an apology, I won’t give it. Instead, I’ll give you a promise. Even though I remember, I won’t live in the past. There’s nothing there but pain. We both made mistakes and paid for them. Can we start over?”

He gently caught my chin between his fingers and tipped my head back to meet his gaze.

All the uncertainty I saw there threatened to start my tears again.

“Slowly,” I said. “Simply. Like this.

“Hi, my name’s Ashlyn. I was a not-so-great goddess in one of my many past lives. My favorite color is sky blue. And I think you’re the most handsome man I have ever seen.”

Hades swallowed hard several times before he spoke.

“My name is Hades. I’m the god of the Underworld. My favorite color is the color of your eyes. And I know you are

the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.”

My throat felt tight as I gave him a small smile.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Hades.”

He released my chin to hug me and press a kiss on the top of my head. I brushed a kiss over his heart.

“I thought I would lose you,” he said softly.

“You did. For a very long time, you did. But I found my way back to you, and you showed me what you tried so hard to show me the first time. Your love.” I rubbed my face against him to try to hold back the tears that wanted to start again. “Thank you for loving me unconditionally. You’re the only one who ever has.”

“Please end this pain, goddess. I beg you,” he whispered, his voice raw.

“You’re right. I said the past was in the past, and here I am, dwelling in it. Let’s get dressed. I need to brush my teeth and ___”

The sudden shift from snuggling against Hades in the pool to standing beside it was a bit disorienting. But I didn’t mind the jeans and the comfortable sweatshirt I wore, my minty fresh mouth, or the way he still held me. I pulled away enough to see he wore dark jeans and a black t-shirt.

“Thank you,” I said, holding out my hand to him. “I feel more like myself again.”

Everything still felt so confusing, though. I said I was Ashlyn, but I didn’t fully feel like Ashlyn anymore.

Hades leaned down and brushed his lips against my neck. I closed my eyes, letting the sensation ground me, and realized Hades had always had the answer for who I was.

“You never doubted, did you?” I asked.

“What?” he asked, continuing to nibble at my sensitive neck.

“Who I was,” I said, wrapping my fingers around his biceps to steady myself.

“No. From the moment I woke, I knew you.”

His teeth scraped my skin roughly, and I shivered. My thoughts drifted to what was next for us, and what I’d forgotten hit me.

“Where are the others? Is Megan okay? Eliana? Oh, my gods! Fenris and Oanen. We have to go back to the lake!”

He teleported us, but instead of the lake, the living room solidified around us. Everyone was there. Zotera, Eliana, Megan, Oanen, and Fenris.

Fenris had Eliana snuggled on his lap, and the two were sharing one hell of a kiss that I could feel all the way to my toes. Oanen had his arms wrapped around Megan from behind. She had her head turned to glare at Adira, who sat calmly next to Thanatos in the archway to the kitchen. The pair were tied to black, stone chairs with luminescent rope. Zayn and Zotera stood behind them.

“Are you okay?” Megan asked, spotting me first.

“Am I okay? Are you okay? What happened? How did Oanen and Fenris get here?”

“Don’t ask,” Oanen said.

His words broke through Megan’s glower enough that her lips twitched with a partial smile.

“They broke free of their bonds, and Fenris rode Oanen home,” she said.

“Why did you have to say it like that?” Oanen asked, closing his eyes and shaking his head.

Fenris broke away from Eliana’s kiss long enough to shoot Oanen a grin.

“I’ll let you ride me any time you want to keep it fair.”

Eliana shut Fenris up with more kissing. I knew it wasn’t only kissing. She was feeding like she was starved. And considering what she’d been doing at the beach—holding Megan back—it made some sense. But I was still fuzzy on *why*, though.

Megan was watching me when I looked at her again.

“What happened out there?” I asked.

“You drank Zayn’s memory potion.”

“I kind of figured that part out when I started remembering all my past lives. I was talking about why Eliana had to bear hug you and why she’s starved right now.”

“Sorry,” Eliana said, tearing away from Fenris.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Hades said, his arms wrapping around me from behind. “You spared my daughters and Ashlyn from untold anguish with your selflessness.

“As for Megan’s response to you, it’s a bit complicated. My daughters were made to judge mortals, not immortals. However, when you remembered who you were, you became a mortal version of Persephone, carrying all of her wrongs.”

I cringed and glanced at Megan, knowing Persephone had done more than her share of bad things to be dragged to hell.

“Don’t worry,” Megan said. “You’re back to barely a blip.”

“How?” I asked.

Hades kissed the back of my head. “You said you lived a thousand mortal lives. If my daughter no longer feels the weight of your misdeeds, it means all you endured in those lives tipped the scales in your favor.

“As you said, you are no longer Persephone or Ashlyn but a combination of both.”

I tipped my head back to look at him. “And that’s how I was finally able to call you, wasn’t it? Being not just Ashlyn anymore freed me from the spell?”

Hades nodded.

“We’re still trying to figure out why any of it was even necessary,” Megan said, casting a dark look at Thanatos and Adira. “Maybe you can help convince them to talk, Father.”

“They don’t need to,” I said. “I remember everything.”

Thanatos gave a relieved smile, and I felt a swell of pity for him.

“She lied to you,” I said, meeting his gaze.

“She?” he asked.

“Persephone.”

“You mean, you.”

I shook my head.

“You said you remembered.”

“I do. But I’m not Persephone anymore. She’s a part of me, but she isn’t me. My mortal lives—this life—changed who I am. I understand compassion, humility, real suffering. And I understand love better than Persephone ever did.” I looked at Thanatos with sympathy. “She never loved you. She used you as a means to make Hades suffer. And I am so sorry for that.”

Thanatos stared at me for a long moment; then his gaze dropped.

I looked at Adira and everyone else in the room.

“Where do I even start?” I asked, thinking back on what I knew. “After the gods locked away the titans, they experienced peace under Zeus’ influence. It was short-lived, though, as the gods and goddesses began to realize their powers were unequal. Some began to conspire, seeking the high seat for themselves.

“Hades wasn’t interested in any of that. He was content to guard Tartarus and support Zeus. However, Zeus needed a way to ensure he would stay content. That’s where Persephone came in. Zeus saw Hades’ interest in her and made an offer to Hades he couldn’t refuse.”

Hades’ hands twitched around me, and I caressed his arm in comfort.

“Persephone didn’t know Zeus gave Hades his blessing to take Persephone to Hell to be his forever. The first time they met, she thought Hades was handsome and liked spending

time with him. They'd only met a few more times before she was taken to Hell and loved by a god who didn't quite understand how to love. She became...twisted through many mistakes and misunderstandings. She hurt a lot of people, and in the end, she was so desperate for a way out.

“When Demeter told her she was helping Zeus strip the other gods and goddesses of their immortality and power in exchange for Persephone's freedom from Hell, Persephone was happy for half a second. Until she found out that Hades was being spared.

“Of all the gods and goddesses, Zeus felt that Hades had done nothing deserving of the punishment of being thrown into the mortal pool manipulated by the fates. Persephone was livid.”

I glanced at Thanatos. “That's when she started pursuing you. She only wanted your help to ensure that Hades would suffer while she died. She promised you that she would be yours in the next life while praying you would never find her.”

Thanatos looked so devastated, and I truly felt bad for him.

“Zeus and Demeter sacrificed their power to change the terms of immortality. Rather than living one infinite life, the gods and goddesses would be infinitely reborn as mortals to experience lives filled with the misery they bestowed upon mortals as gods.”

I looked at Eliana. “You aren't made in the image of Aphrodite. You *are* Aphrodite reborn as the very thing she used to torment mankind. But what you were in a past life isn't who you are now, Eliana. Each life, we are free to choose how we respond to our suffering. That's what Zeus wanted all the gods and goddesses to understand and why he was so fascinated with humans. We have the resilience to rise above vast suffering if we choose.”

My gaze met Zayn's.

“So I'm Zeus?” he asked, his expression a mix of humorous disbelief and shame.

I shrugged lightly. “You are who you choose to be. Persephone had no love for Zeus, but knowing everything I do, I think he tried to be fair and just. He tried to protect the people he cared about. It just didn’t go the way he had planned all the time.”

“So the gods are really gone?” Megan asked. “Then why is Thanatos here?”

“Hades was left behind to care for mortals in their afterlife. Thanatos was left behind to ensure the spell’s completion. That’s it. Thanatos cannot create like the other gods could. He can only remove mortal life, and even then, it’s limited to when the fates allow it.”

“What about the fates?” Fenris asked.

I shrugged. “They’re entities that guide humanity without bias. They exist like wind and rain. They just are.”

I focused on Thanatos and Adira again. “Hades doesn’t need to sleep again. And the banshees’ cries were likely due to the two of you trying to kill me. Which I suggest ends now.”

Thanatos bowed his head in acknowledgment while Adira held my gaze.

“Are you plotting again?” Megan asked. “Seriously, when are you going to be done already?”

“I believe I can finally be done.” Her gaze swept over all of us. “On behalf of Uttira’s existing Council, congratulations on your ascension. We look forward to the upcoming transition.”

“Getting a straight answer out of her is like milking a troll,” Fenris mumbled.

Eliana and I made the same ‘ew’ faces.

“He’s right,” Megan said. “Not about the troll—I wouldn’t know anything about that—but about getting a straight answer. Just say what you mean for a change.”

Adira’s smile widened. “I look forward to seeing how long your forthright way of dealing with issues lasts, Megan. I suggest all of you give careful consideration to who will fill

the lead Council position. Likewise, I would caution you against putting Megan in charge of the Academy. She will end up condemning more students to Hell than helping them graduate.”

“Yeah, I’m about two seconds from sending you there,” Megan said, her eyes flickering with her annoyance.

“Anwen and I have been waiting a very long time for the next Council to rise. Centuries, in fact. We teach our young that humans are prey when the truth is that these strongholds help keep us safe from them. During a time when humans captured and killed so many of us, Anwen and I went to the Oracle for help.

“She gave us the answers. Build these strongholds. Give our young a safe place to grow and learn. To teach future generations how to take control, we would need to show them what it feels like to be controlled. She said it was the only way to ensure the next Council would have the strength to lead us into a future where we might co-exist with humans.”

Megan narrowed her gaze at Adira.

“Let me guess the price for her helpfulness. All-she-can-eat mermaids for the rest of her life?”

Adira nodded.

“She is allowed to feed on the mermaids without recourse, and I gave up my ability to have children of my own. Nothing is without sacrifice, Megan.”

I threaded my fingers through Hades’, thinking of everything everyone had to sacrifice to get to the point we were at.

“So you’re telling us what? That you were a pain in our asses because you knew this was going to happen?” Megan asked, her eyes glowing brighter. “You wanted to almost destroy the world?”

“My only goal was to bring together the people we needed to save it,” Adira said. “You know I’m not wicked, Megan. I’ve simply pushed you and meddled in your lives in hopes

that you would choose to become the best version of yourselves as possible.”

“I don’t care if Megan thinks you’re wicked or not,” I said. “You tried to help someone kill me for a cause you thought was just. I get it. You were trying to save people. However, the fact that you didn’t involve the other Council members in your decision tells me you knew on some level that what you were doing was questionable. You say that they’re ascending to be the next Council members that the Oracle told you to expect? Then start trusting them. Work with them. Listen to them.”

“Them?” Adira replied, looking at me. “A Council takes many members. Who better to ensure the rights of humans than a human?”

Hades kissed the side of my neck, distracting me for a moment.

“We can decide that later,” Megan said. “What we need to decide now is what to do with these two?”

“Thanatos can choose between Tartarus or a vow,” Hades said.

“The vow,” Thanatos said immediately.

“Very well,” Hades said, releasing me.

“You vow to ensure Ashlyn’s continued mortal life—this life—without altercation in mind or body until you cease to exist. And if Ashlyn should perish, you vow to find her in her next life and bring her to me.”

“I vow it,” Thanatos said.

The gods nodded to one another, and they both glowed a little brighter for a moment. Then the ropes fell away from Thanatos.

Hades looked at Adira.

“You were supposed to be her guardian. The abuse she suffered under your care is unforgivable.”

I stepped forward and set a hand on his arm.

“It’s unforgivable? How I was treated as a human was a just punishment for how I treated you for a very long time... whether you agree with it or not. So, while she did horrible things, she also did good things.”

Megan groaned. “And that’s why she’s not wicked.”

Adira smiled.

“I think she should step down from the Council and just focus on the Academy under the guidance of the new Council,” I said. “Oh, and she should also have to submit to a tracking spell and be unable to leave the Academy at all for six months so she can understand what that level of confinement feels like.”

“Agreed,” Megan said.

“Same,” Fenris, Oanen and Eliana said.

“I agree,” Zayn said. “I can have a barrier around the building within two days. Until then—” he blew some dust into her face. “Sleep.”

She immediately closed her eyes and slumped in her chair.

“You have no idea how much I’m loving this,” Megan said. She glanced at Oanen. “Sorry, not sorry.”

“I understand,” he said. “I’ll call my mom and ask her to take her back to our place until the Academy is ready. Mom will keep an eye on her.”

We all agreed.

“Can I go visit Eugene then?” Zotera asked.

“You may, daughter,” Hades said.

I smiled at him before looking at her. “Oanen wants to go with you. He wanted to talk to Eugene about something.”

Oanen made a grumpy face while Fenris roared with laughter.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I WAVED GOODBYE TO OANEN, MEGAN, AND ZOTERA, WHO were the last ones to leave, and turned to find Hades watching me with an indecipherable expression.

“Sorry. I forgot about the no-waving rule. I promise I was mostly waving to Zotera and Megan though.”

“I understand,” he said.

Yet, he didn’t move to close the distance between us. He just continued to watch me even though he’d been touching me non-stop since the moment he’d reappeared at the lake. The absence of his touch made me feel starved and desperate for contact.

“Are you mad?” I asked.

“No.”

“Then why are you being weird?”

A small sad smile curved his lips.

“I’m afraid to believe this is real. Who are you, Ashlyn?”

I understood then why he was holding himself back.

“I’ve told you so many times to leave the past in the past, but now that I remember everything, you’re worried I won’t be able to leave our mistakes there, right?”

His expression turned tormented, and I crossed the space between us to cup his cheek.

“You don’t want apologies from me, so I won’t give them. I’ll give you the truth instead.

“I *do* remember, Hades. I remember all the pain and the fear. I remember the all-consuming anger. It would be hard to forget any of that when we’ve given each other so much of it. But remembering it will serve us, Hades. We will never forget what we did wrong so we can move forward and do what’s right.

“We’ve made so many mistakes together in the past, but we never worked through them together. That’s what I want to do with you now. Move forward. Together.

“You want to know who I am? I’m yours, Hades. Just yours.”

He groaned and wrapped me in his arms. Rather than give me the passionate kiss I expected, he pressed his lips to my forehead. We stayed like that for several long minutes, simply holding each other.

“I was serious about starting over,” I said, trailing my fingers over his skin. The script beneath my fingers started to glow, and I tipped my head back to meet his gaze. “Is there any chance you would consider getting rid of these contracts so we can?”

I saw a flicker of doubt and fear in his gaze. Caressing his jaw, I pulled him down for a sweet kiss that he allowed me to lead for a change.

“These contracts were the start of Persephone’s resentment,” I said softly. “I am not Persephone. I’m the countless versions after her who don’t want you to carry that burden anymore. Give me a chance to prove you can trust me. Let’s remove them all.”

He tightened his hold on me, and I wanted to kiss him again, to comfort him, but I didn’t want to sway him.

“As you will it,” he said finally.

All the script rose from his skin at once, twining around us in golden threads.

“Instead of making something for me, will you create a ring or maybe a hoop earring for each of your children? Something I can give them when we return so they know I’m not the goddess I once was?”

Hades’ expression faltered, and I saw the hope and fear in his eyes as the pieces started to spin into existence and fall to the floor around us.

“I know it’s going to take time for you to believe this is real. Just keep giving me chances to prove it, okay? I swear you won’t regret it. What should we do first to test that this version of me is here to stay?”

“Bathe together,” he said.

“Done. But not here. I’d rather use a pool in Hell so you don’t disappear in the middle of something again. And then tomorrow, I want to come back to Earth to have dinner with my friends somewhere.”

Hades grabbed my face and studied it with an almost crazy light in his eyes.

“How long will you stay here?”

“How long will *we* stay here?” I corrected. “I go where you go, Hades. And Hell is your home, so it’ll be mine too. I just don’t want to give up seeing my friends forever.”

“You won’t,” he said earnestly, pressing a kiss to the corner of my mouth. “I vow it. Will you grant me your permission to summon you?”

“Always,” I said.

The room around us folded away and solidified as a steaming bathing room in the Underworld.

I could hear the low murmur of voices echoing nearby, and flashes of Persephone’s memories teased my mind. They felt like mine but distant with almost a movie-like quality. Torn from the home she’d known, she’d been afraid of so much. Just like I had when I’d first arrived. But then Hades had hurt her. And after that, she’d shied away from him and any displays of public affection. Something he craved so badly.

Which was why he'd always wanted to bathe with me. Yet, instead of choosing a pool where the rest were, he'd chosen one close to the other bathing rooms. Somewhere we still might be discovered but somewhere still private enough to appease me too.

I glanced at the opening to our room then at Hades. He watched me closely, waiting for my reaction. I unbuttoned my jeans, trying for casual even as his gaze heated.

“So I finally understand how I was able to call you to me even on Earth. Do you want to know even if it might touch on the past a little?”

He didn't immediately answer as I shimmied out of my jeans.

“Hades?” I prompted. “I was hoping we could talk while we bathed.”

“Yes,” he said quickly. “Yes. Tell me how you can call me to Earth.”

“Persephone surrendered her powers so you would be bound to her mortality. That means you were bound to each one of her—my—reincarnations.” I kicked my jeans aside and tugged my shirt off over my head. “It created a new tie between us. Since the tie itself is infinite, I'm guessing that's why you can only remain on Earth for a mortal hour from the time I last call you.” I smiled softly and shrugged as I reached back to unclasp my bra. “Everything has a price, right?”

“And what is the price for this?” Hades asked, his hungry gaze fixed on what I was doing.

“Patience and understanding,” I said without hesitation. “We're both going to need to give a lot of it in the days to come, I think.”

He twitched when I tossed my bra to the side but didn't close the distance between us.

“I'm feeling a little lonely right now and don't like it,” I admitted. “I don't want to be apart from you anymore, Hades. For at least a century. So get over here, and start touching me.”

The rest of our clothes immediately disappeared as he closed the distance between us.

“Much better,” I said, trailing my fingers over his skin. It made me a little sad that it didn’t glow, though.

“Why do you frown?”

“I miss the glowing,” I admitted. “I didn’t like the contracts, but they were pretty.”

An idea hit me.

“It should say, ‘Ashlyn loves Hades’ right here,” I said, tracing the spot over his heart. “And maybe here, it could say, ‘Hades belongs to Ashlyn.’” His abs twitched under my fingers.

“Yes,” he groaned. The words immediately appeared, and I smiled.

“I’ll keep thinking of more to add.”

His mouth covered mine in a possessive kiss, and he picked me up. Willing, I wrapped my arms and legs around him, threading my fingers in his hair as one of his hands braced my backside and the other gripped the back of my head.

“Mine,” he rasped, walking me toward the water.

“Yours,” I agreed, going back for more kissing.

He groaned as I rubbed myself against his hard length. The heat inside me built, and when he pulled back and asked if he could taste me, I almost nodded.

“I’m willing to be caught swimming naked with you and even making out, but I don’t think I’m ready for public debauchery. Not yet.”

“Not public then,” he said before his lips reclaimed mine.

He let us sink deeper into the water, and I didn’t think anything of it until I felt his fingers caressing my folds. Knowing what he wanted, I didn’t try to stop him; I embraced it, allowing him to draw the sounds from me that he so loved.

And when the pleasure ripped through me, and I cried out, he was groaning in my ear and leaving love marks on my neck.

“Father?”

The hesitant query was laced with concern. I lifted a limp hand from Hades’ back and threaded it into his hair again as I opened my eyes with a small smile. My face flamed with my embarrassment, but I ignored it as I met Hades’ heavy-lidded gaze.

“I love you, Hades.”

My words carried and bounced around the room.

The satisfaction in his expression was fleeting. He kissed me hungrily again as his fingers, still inside of me, began to move anew.

I knew whoever had asked for him wouldn’t linger when they realized he was busy and let myself enjoy the sensations.

My fingers were pruned by the time I screamed his name with my second release. Exhausted, I let my head fall forward to his shoulder. The water immediately vanished, and something soft tickled my skin as he carried me.

“Did he hurt Mother?” I heard someone whisper.

I forced myself to lift my head and saw that Hades had teleported us to the throne room. A good number of his children were already there. They barely caught my attention, though. The room and the transformation it had undergone demanded most of it.

The beautiful marble walls served as a gleaming backdrop to all manner of plants now. Tables were scattered along the side of the room with short stools. The path leading to the thrones was lined with Zotera’s creations. Her bed to the side was gone, and instead, a new beautiful stool carved with twining vines waited next to my chair.

“She doesn’t bleed,” someone else whispered, drawing me back to their concern.

“I’m fine,” I said. “Your father didn’t hurt me.”

Hades glanced down at me, his gaze skimming over my face.

“You should probably kiss me to prove that everything’s fine,” I said.

He stumbled. I grinned like the love-struck human I was, and he threw his head back and laughed before kissing the daylights out of me.

When he lifted his head again, we were seated on his throne with me in his lap. I looked down at the Grecian gown I wore. No underwear, but a band around my breasts just like before.

I sighed contentedly and leaned into him.

“Your father has gifts for everyone,” I said, my gaze sweeping over Hades’ children. I saw a lot of faces I recognized. Most of them watched me warily.

I tipped my head to glance at Hades. His gaze met mine, watching...questioning...waiting. And in it, I saw the absolute devotion that had always been there and I knew would always be there.

Gently, I pried his arms from around my waist and stood. When I offered him my hand, he accepted it and stood too. I brought his fingers to my lips and kissed them as he watched me. As they all watched me. Then, I turned to face his children.

“I won’t apologize for what Persephone did to you because I’m not her anymore. However, I will do everything in my power to help you heal and move past what she did to hurt you.

“Hell is your home. It’s our home too. Let’s fill it with light and laughter and friendship.”

Hades’ fingers tightened in gratitude around mine.

“And if you see me kissing your father, know that it’s filled with love. It will never again be filled with hate.”

“Come receive the tokens of peace your mother asked me to make for you,” Hades said.

They looked stunned by the large bowl filled with rings and small hoop earrings, and it took a few beats for the first brave creature to approach.

“Which would you prefer?” I asked. “A ring for your finger or a hoop for your ear?”

“Whatever you wish, Mother,” the man said, his gaze flicking briefly to Hades.

“Then we’ll let the fates decide,” I said, covering my eyes with one hand and reaching into the bowl with the other. The first piece I touched, I withdrew. I handed the man a ring and offered a small smile. He quickly retreated, and the next person stepped forward.

Word spread, and the hall filled quickly. The conversation in the space slowly increased, as did the celebratory mood.

“Can I have something to drink?” I asked, glancing at Hades.

A table immediately appeared beside me. It wasn’t rustic like he usually materialized but something from the modern world. It generated a lot of questions, and after selecting a glass of fruity wine, I was able to enjoy watching Hades talk to his children while I continued distributing the gifts.

When I finished, I made conversation with a woman I vaguely recalled. I didn’t try to remember how or why. Persephone’s mistakes were her own, not mine. I would learn from them, but I wouldn’t let them rob me of the second chance we’d all been given. So I talked about the short time I’d spent on Earth and explained why Zotera wasn’t with us.

“She met a human on Earth that she wanted to spend some more time with,” I said.

“And you allowed her?”

“Yes. But she promised she wouldn’t hurt him, and my friends will make sure he doesn’t do anything to hurt her.”

“What are they doing then?” the woman asked.

My face flushed.

“I apologize, Mother. I didn’t mean to anger you.”

“I’m not angry,” I said. “Just a little embarrassed. I’m pretty sure Zotera and Eugene are having sex at this point. Probably a lot of it.”

The woman blinked at me and burst out laughing. Then she immediately sobered to stare at me.

“It’s true. Zotera seems to love him,” I said. “I’m sure she’ll have a lot to tell you when she returns. Oh, and the food she can make. We should have a banquet tonight with some of the things your father tried.” I turned to look back at him and found him just a step away, listening to our conversation.

“What do you think? A banquet and some stories?” I asked.

“Yes!” someone called out.

“We want to hear what happened on Earth!” another called.

I smiled at Hades and lifted my brow in question.

“As you will it,” he said.



Tired, I snuggled against Hades as he carried me to our bedroom.

“It was a good night,” I said softly.

“It was,” he agreed.

Everyone’s uncertainty had faded during the hours we’d spent together feasting and sharing what had happened on Earth. They all knew that I wasn’t the version of Persephone they remembered. That I was human now, without power but loved by the man they called Father. Not one of them had shown a shred of maliciousness after that bit of news, for which I was grateful.

The door opened at our approach, and I saw that he’d changed it again for me. It was a mix of modern and old, just

like back home. The shower was larger, and there was an opaque glass concealing the toilet now. A way for him to see me yet give me privacy. I snorted a laugh at that but didn't complain.

He placed me on the bed then made me giggle by flipping over me to reach the other side. I rolled toward him and settled into my place on his shoulder.

"Can I choose how you wake me up in the morning?" I asked sleepily.

"Nothing would please me more than to wake you the way you wish."

"Good. I want to wake up naked while lying on top of a naked you. Good night, Hades."

I smiled as I fell asleep to his whispered, "temptress," and smiled even bigger when I woke up just the way I'd wanted.

"Mmm. I like this," I said, rubbing my cheek against his smooth chest.

He groaned, and I felt his claw-tipped fingers gently scratching my scalp. Grinning, I lifted my head and met his glowing red gaze.

"How long have I been sleeping on you like this?"

"Since the moment you closed your eyes," he said, his voice rough. "I didn't know when you would wake."

"I'm not sure if you're a very smart man for planning ahead or one who likes to torture himself." I trailed my fingers over the sharp lines of his changed face. "May I kiss you and end your torment?"

He hissed out a pained sound and coaxed me closer with his hand buried in my hair. I brushed my lips lightly over his before pulling back.

"I'd like to have a private moment before we shower together."

He groaned, and his hands fell to his sides as he closed his eyes. I chuckled and started to slide off of him. I wasn't

thinking of our positions when I moved. Or rather of his size difference. But what poked me in the backside had us both very aware of my mistake in seconds.

“Sorry,” I whispered when he winced. “I didn’t mean—”

I found myself inside the opaque square with the toilet. Alone. Hades’ hands pressed against the outside of the square, blotches of dark red against the milky white.

“You have seconds, Ashlyn,” he said. “Hurry.”

“But I want to brush my—”

My mouth was immediately minty fresh and clean.

“Seconds which are fading quickly,” he said.

He removed his hands and gave me a few moments to myself. When I emerged, he didn’t look any calmer. His hooves clacked against the floor. I didn’t feel a shred of fear, though, as I turned to the shower.

“Bathe with me, Hades. Then let’s check on Zotera.”

“Our daughter is fine. She is allowing her human some rest while she cooks for him.”

I paused, testing the water, and looked over my shoulder at the god of the Underworld in all of his winged magnificence.

“Can we still go back to Earth together to see my friends?” I asked with an edge of worry.

His expression softened. “I will not deny you time with your friends. If you wish to see Zotera now, I will take you there.”

“Not right this second. We can return to my house first and send messages to everyone so we don’t interrupt anything. Now, are you getting in here, or are you going to magic yourself a seat and watch me wash?”

“Temptress,” he muttered again.

“Lonely, sad temptress,” I said with a fake little pout.

He was holding me tightly a beat later. I could feel his fear and desperation.

“Wait. I was teasing, Hades. I didn’t actually mean I was sad or lonely. I just wanted you to join me.”

He exhaled into my hair, and I felt him slowly shrink.

“Allow me to wash you,” he said.

“My body is yours,” I said.

He groaned, and I saw the flicker of red light in his eyes as his skin started to change right back.

I grinned, already looking forward to our future together. It likely wouldn’t be easy, but I knew we’d figure it out this time around. We had plenty of history to teach us the right way to do things without hurting one another.

EPILOGUE

HADES KISSED MY NECK AS HE HELD ME CAGED IN HIS ARMS, facing the mirror.

“This is way too fancy to wear to a brownie’s birthday party,” I said, watching Hades’ reflection.

In the years since I’d returned to Hell with him, our love for one another had only grown deeper. He still craved every morsel of my affection, and I craved his constant attention. Which made it hard to say no to the beautiful dress he’d created for me.

“I disagree,” he said, trailing a finger over my bare shoulder. I shivered and tried to ignore the yearning he was creating.

“Hades,” I said, trying to keep a reasonable tone, “If the neckline of this dress dipped any lower, you’d see my pubic hair.”

I felt an immediate tingle in the aforementioned area.

“Problem solved,” he said. “I do like it when you insist on going bare.”

“That wasn’t a request for grooming. It was a request for common sense. We’re going to be with my friends. Half of them are male.”

Hades dipped his head and nuzzled my neck again.

“And all mated with eyes only for their mates,” he said. “I have nothing to worry about.”

His teeth scraped my skin, and I almost forgot what I was saying.

“What if they invited someone who isn’t mated?” I asked.

Hades jerked his head up, and red flared in his narrowing eyes as he met my gaze.

“Are you attempting to provoke my jealousy?” he asked.

“No, you big red hug-muffin, I’m trying to prevent it.”

“Hug-muffin?” His expression of distaste almost made me laugh. “You know I don’t like that pet name. Fenris still uses it when he sees me.”

I did laugh then because Fenris had been the one to suggest it. Hades scowled harder.

“And I don’t like a jealous husband,” I said. “I just want to relax with my friends today, and I can’t do that if you dress me like this.”

I held out my arms, purposely creating a larger gap in the material covering my front. My right nipple peeked around the fabric, and Hades hummed in appreciation. I batted his hand back before he could reach his partially exposed treasure.

“You’re going to lose one of your love tattoos if you don’t start seeing some reason,” I said, torn between annoyance and my growing desire for the handsome man dressed in a dark blue suit hugging me from behind.

Hades frowned at me. He treasured each glowing word of love that adorned his skin. Any threat to remove them, he took very seriously...even though I technically had no power to do anything to him.

“That’s it. You’ve left me no choice,” I said.

The dress immediately vanished, and I glanced down at my jeans and t-shirt. When I looked up at Hades, he stood a few steps away, wearing the black jeans and t-shirt I found irresistible.

I turned slowly to face him and bit my lower lip, loving that he always gave me what I wanted, knowing I would do

everything to give him what he wanted to. Which was me, happy. Willing. And madly in love with him.

“Dammit, Hades. Now, we’re going to be late.”

He shot me a crooked grin. “Which is why I was trying to get you to wear the dress.”

“Clothes off and get on that bed,” I said.

He chuckled, and I found myself naked and straddling him on the mattress.

“I’m giving us fifteen Earth minutes and not a second more,” I warned.

He nodded, already gripping my hips.



We appeared in Megan’s front yard, dressed plainly and slightly out of breath the allotted fifteen minutes later. I leaned on Hades for a moment, still shivering with the aftershocks.

The sound of conversation and laughter came from the other side of the house.

“Wicked man,” I murmured.

“Temptress,” he whispered against my ear before nipping my neck. “I can still smell me on you.”

I moaned and turned my head to kiss him deeply.

“How long must we be here?” he murmured against my lips.

“Behave, and I’ll make it worth both our whiles,” I said.

“Every moment with you is worth my while,” he said.

I smiled against his lips and trailed my fingers along his jaw.

“I love you, Hades. Thank you for loving me back.”

“Always, Ashlyn. You are my everything. Forever.”



Thank you for reading *Hell on Earth*. If you want to hear more about Kelsey and her Dragon, check out *Royally Dragon Bound!*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for reading *Hell on Earth*, Ashlyn's contribution to the Mantirum world! Your love of books helps keep me writing.

A very special thank you to my amazing proofreading team. Jackie, Mirjam, Roxanne, Dawn, and Heather, thank you for your patience, your keen insights, and the long hours you spent combing through my words. These stories wouldn't be the same without you.

I hope everyone enjoyed this completion of my Hades and Persephone retelling as much as I enjoyed writing it. Some of the content in this book was a little more mature than any of my previous books, but considering the age of the god we were dealing with and his absolute need for her love, I felt it was realistically warranted.

At one point, Ashlyn says to Hades, "Thank you for loving me unconditionally. You're the only one who ever has." If you're wondering about Uncle Trammer, well, he *did* love Ashlyn, but she never really felt loved unconditionally by him because of her circumstances and the way he chose to end his life instead of staying with her. But she did know that he loved her.

If you're wondering about the missing druids, don't worry, they're home safe and sound again. Adira just hid them away so Ashlyn couldn't use them to get back to hell.

And how did you feel about Adira's big reveal? All that BS she put them through was to test and train them to take

over. So, there's a new generation of Council members in town. Can you guess who's not the leader? HAHAHA!

Hopefully, all your questions were answered. If not, let me know.

While there may be more books in this world, I can't say when that will be. Just make sure you keep an eye on my newsletter for any announcements.

Until next time, happy reading!

Melissa

MORE BOOKS IN THIS WORLD

MANTIRUM WORLD TRILOGIES

Of Fates and Furies

Fury Frayed

Fury Focused

Fury Freed

By Kiss and Claw

The Howl

The Hunt

The Hunger

In Fire and Ash

Going to Hell

Raising Hell

Hell on Earth

STAND ALONE TITLES

Royally Dragon Bound

OTHER SERIES

ALSO BY MELISSA HAAG

JUDGEMENT OF THE SIX SERIES (AND COMPANION BOOKS) IN ORDER:

(more shifters to make you “grr”)

Hope(less)

*Clay's Hope**

(Mis)fortune

*Emmitt's Treasure**

(Un)wise

*Luke's Dream**

(Un)bidden

*Thomas' Heart**

(Dis)content

*Carlos' Peace**

*(Sur)real***

**optional companion book*

***written in dual point of view*



Other Titles

Touch

Moved

Warwolf

Nephilim