



PERSEPHONE

THE LOST I GODDESSES

ALESSA THORN

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AUTHOR NOTE

This novella is a fun story to bridge all of the current ‘God’s Universe’ into the next installment in this world, ‘The Lost Goddesses.’

If you haven’t done so already, I highly recommend you start with ‘[Asterion](#),’ as this Persephone novella is mostly inside jokes and wouldn’t be as fun as a stand-alone story.

PROLOGUE

Sing o Muse, of the new world birthed from the old.
Of death and rebirth. Of old gods that walk amongst
us, ready to face the world of men once more.
And of the new gods that are about to come into being.

Persephone stumbled out of the cool, air-conditioned clinic and into the humid Athenian spring air. She closed her eyes and took three deep breaths. Magic was swirling inside her veins, ready to attack the invisible enemy threatening her.

She opened her eyes and named three things she could see and three things she could smell. And she could smell *everything*—the flowers blooming in the small garden, greasy fried food from a nearby restaurant, exhaust from traffic, the sunscreen on a tourist who was busy taking a distance shot of the Parthenon.

Persephone's vision swirled. She sat on a bench under a tree and pulled her blonde curls into a ponytail to get them off her sweating neck.

This can't be real. Persephone had gone to the doctors for a Pap smear and a checkup because she'd been feeling off and ended up being told the most terrifying of news—she was pregnant.

How had it happened? Persephone smirked despite her rising panic as she thought of the many ways and positions that could have caused it. Then, the panic overtook her again.

Persephone and Hades had been together for years. Gods couldn't get STDs, and early conversations with Hades and Medusa had reassured her that the chances of becoming pregnant were so low, they were almost non-existent. Zeus had

been the most fertile of them all, which was why he had an army of divine bastards.

Persephone put her head in her hands and tried to breathe as another wave of nausea rocked through her. She placed a hand on the soft rolls of her tummy. She had gained a little bit of weight recently but assumed it was Hades's cooking.

Oh, fuck, how was she going to tell him? Did he even want kids? He was already a surrogate father to Asterion, Perseus, and Hermes. Not to mention the Titans and the rest of the Court. He had enough to worry about and look after as it was.

Persephone leaned back on the bench and looked at the green leaves above her. Everything had been going so well. The last year had been peaceful.

Thanks to Hermes, they had reconnected with the gods in Egypt, and Kema and Thoth had been staying in Styx to sort through all the books and artifacts they had recovered from Darius Drakos's horde.

Persephone had been helping run *Morning Harvest* and slowly bringing it and *Acheron Industries* together. She had enough to deal with as well.

Persephone didn't even know how she felt about being a mother. It wasn't something that she had ever considered. She had a terrible relationship with Demeter, and she had always feared passing her powers onto a child. Not that it was a problem anymore. With the help of Hades and Hecate, Persephone could now control her powers perfectly fine.

Would a baby inherit the same ones or be something totally different? She had no idea, and demigod children always had something extra. She only had to look at the members of the Court to see that. She was so fucking fucked. Her nausea vanished, and her stomach grumbled in protest.

"Pastry. All the pastry," she whispered.

Persephone walked through the twisting, colorful alleys of Athens until she came to a bakery she knew had the best chocolate mascarpone baklava in the city.

Persephone got a bag for her and one to take back to Styx with her before continuing her walk. The triplets always knew when she went there, and if she didn't bring any back to Styx, there was hell to pay.

Persephone ate her baklava and tried to let the sugar lift her spirits. It didn't work.

She thought about Demeter and wondered what she had been like before Persephone was born. Had she ever been happy? Persephone loved her life with Hades and the Court. She had friends and family with them that she'd never had before.

She pulled out her phone and contemplated calling Hecate. She always gave sound advice, but she never hid anything from Thanatos. As soon as he knew, Hades would know too.

She needed to tell him but didn't know where to start. Hades knew about all the awful shit Demeter had done to her. Things that meant Persephone still had to get therapy when she got triggered.

Would she turn into her mother if she became one? Persephone tried not to choke on the pastry in her mouth. She felt so...lost.

I don't know what to do.

A sweet perfume floated through the air, and Persephone stopped chewing. She could sense when magic was happening around her, and there was something strange...

Sweet child, come to me. I will give you refuge and guidance. The island of lost goddesses is here for all who are weary, a deep feminine voice whispered in her mind.

Who are you? Persephone replied.

Come and see for yourself.

In her mind's eye, Persephone suddenly saw an island shrouded in mist and magic in the middle of the Nile.

Now, *that* was a mystery. Kema had never mentioned a hidden island in Egypt, nor had Thoth. She really should tell Hades.

Persephone placed a hand on her stomach again. No, she wasn't ready to talk to him just yet. If she returned to Styx, he would instantly know something was wrong and wouldn't give up until she told him. She needed to know how she felt about the pregnancy before she could talk to Hades. He would never force her to do something she didn't want to do. She just needed some space to think.

Persephone didn't have long to consider her options when two large men appeared beside her on the street.

"Persephone Acheron, you're coming with us," one growled, pulling a gun on her and shoving it into her lower back.

Persephone tried not to smile. "Oh dear, if I must."

The back of the van was scattered with fast food wrappers and smelled like a dirty gym bag. Persephone sat on the metal floor with her hands and feet zip-tied. Her pale blue sundress was going to be stained from the mess she was sitting in, and it was just another thing to piss her off. She had gathered enough information from the two idiots who had grabbed her to know they were named Piri and Alcides.

“Look, lady, we have no intention of hurting you, but we are in a bind and need money. It’s nothing personal,” Piri said from the driver’s seat. He had dark curling hair and pale blue eyes. He looked tired and stressed.

“You must be in deep shit to think taking me as a hostage is a good idea,” Persephone replied.

“Yeah, we aren’t stupid. We don’t believe you and your husband are gods, so there’s no point in trying to scare us,” Alcides grunted from the passenger seat. He had messy, dirty blond hair pulled back in a short tail.

Maybe Medusa had done too good of a job hiding the footage of the day Styx was attacked and the Court had risen to defend it. How had these two missed Darius’s very public murder of Demeter, which he’d broadcasted all over Greece?

“You seem confident about that.” Persephone didn’t mind. Let them think she was helpless. It would make influencing them so much easier.

Hades could track her if she used magic to go to Egypt. Kema had taught her to make doorways as Hermes did. Hades

and Hermes had tried to teach her before that without much luck. Thoth had tried next but had given her such a long explanation about the structure of magic that she couldn't follow anything he had said.

Kema took pity on her, and they went out in Alexandria for a few drinks. By the end of the night, Persephone was opening doorways for herself. Hades could track her magic wherever she went, so the two dumbasses in the front were a solution to a problem she didn't know she had.

"You know you can't keep me in Greece. Hades will find me," she said, letting magic seep into her words. This was a trick she had learned from Circe. Piri looked at her in the revision mirror. The gold of her influence flashed in his eyes.

"We know, and we can't have Hades finding us before we get our money," he said and frowned. "We have a plane that will take us to Mykonos."

"Excellent, but I have a better idea. Let's go to Aswan instead. Egypt will be safer for you two when Hades finds out what you have done," Persephone replied, pushing a little more power into her glamor.

Alcides nodded and said dreamily, "Yeah. Egypt would be cool. I've wanted to go for ages."

"Great! Let's go!" Persephone shifted her weight to stop her butt from turning numb.

Was it ridiculous to go along with her kidnappers to avoid a difficult conversation with her husband? Probably. But she was hormonal and terrified, and a mysterious summons to a magical island felt like a great way to avoid all her responsibilities.

Piri sang along to the radio all the way to an airfield outside of the city. It was for smaller planes that were used for farming and light cargo. Persephone didn't fight them as they carried her to a small plane that only fit four people. She feared the life growing inside her more than the aircraft's size.

"You can fly?" she asked Alcides.

“Sure can. We use this one for spraying cotton fields and things like that,” he said, the gold of Persephone’s glamor burning in his eyes. He opened the door to the plane and helped her inside. He opened a small cooler and passed her a bottle of water.

“A little help?” Persephone said and lifted her hands. He pulled out a knife and cut her ties for her. Piri climbed into the passenger seat with a calm smile on his face. Maybe she had overdone the glamor a little? Persephone sipped the cold water and settled back in her seat as Alcides buckled her into a harness.

“I don’t suppose you have a sick bag on this bird? Just in case I need it?” she asked.

Piri passed her two from the front. “Here we go, Persephone. I always carry extra when I fly with Al. These smaller planes rock about in the wind a lot more.”

“Good to know. Thanks, boys.” Persephone settled back and tried to relax as Alcides started the plane. It was only when they were in the middle of a shaky take-off that a jolt of fear for her life slammed through her.

Persephone? Are you okay? Hades’s voice echoed in her mind, making her freeze.

I’m fine. Just got a fright from something. Persephone didn’t want him to worry about her.

Where are you? I can feel you moving away and fast.

Don’t freak out, but two idiots have kidnapped me. I’m fine. I have it under control and will be home soon. Love you! she replied.

Hades’s anger and confusion rocked through her, and she quickly slammed down her psychic walls, cutting him off.

“You better fly fast!” Persephone shouted over the noise of the plane. She was relaxing again when she felt another god pushing his way through her psychic walls like they didn’t exist.

Persephone, where are you off to? Hermes asked her.

None of your business. How are you even doing this?

God of liminal spaces here. You're on a plane. Figure it out. Are you okay, Aunty? Have they hurt you? Hades is freaking out.

Persephone swore and rubbed at her temples. She loved all the Court but had a soft spot for Hermes. She had been the one to save him from the cave he had been locked in, which created a special bond between them. Unfortunately, it made him nosier than the others too.

I'm fine, Hermes. I got kidnapped by some malakas after money. Well, kind of. I can get away when I need to. They haven't hurt me. I just need some space.

'Space' with some random kidnappers, not your husband and me, your favorite nephew. Hurtful.

You're not the boss of me. Neither is Hades. I've got this. Trust me. Persephone shoved him out of her mind and hoped he would respect her wishes. She put her head in her hands.

Hades would get over it. She just needed time to find the owner of the voice that had summoned her. And how did they know she needed help?

Five hours and two sick bags later, Persephone stumbled off the plane in Aswan's hot, dry heat. She was sweaty and crumpled and thought she had possibly lost her mind, but that wasn't going to stop her. Not much did when she was in a stubborn mood.

Persephone could feel the magic linking her to the mysterious voice, like a delicate silver thread attached to her chest tugging her forward. It was a siren song in her veins, mingling with the ancient power of Egypt itself. There, history blew in the sands, making Persephone's skin tingle.

It took a bit of glamor and a smile for the airport staff to ignore the appearance of a strange plane and get the guards to let them pass without asking for a passport.

Persephone recruited one of them to take her and her minions to the docks in their air-conditioned SUV. There, they found a man with a sailboat giving tours of the islands. He was done for the day, but Persephone persuaded him to take them out in his felucca for a sunset cruise. She had used the everyday magic of waving her credit card at him.

"Do you know where you want to go, lady?" the captain asked her.

Persephone pointed. "That way."

The man shrugged and did as he was told. She supposed he dealt with fussier, more eccentric people in his day job.

Persephone sat at the front of the boat on a cushioned mattress and took in the beautiful water of the Nile and the date palms and lilies that crowded the edges. She had only been to Alexandria with Kema and had longed to explore more. Work had kept her in Greece. It wasn't that she didn't enjoy the challenge of running such a large company. She did.

A small part of her wondered if there was a better way she could spend her time. She wanted to see more of the world, and that wasn't always an option when everything hinged on your decisions. If she became a mother, she would have to make some changes.

Persephone rested her hand on her stomach and tried not to freak out all over again that life was growing in there. Potentially immortal life. Hermes had confirmed her own immortality. Despite being a half-human, her demigod DNA ensured that she was immortal. It overpowered the human side of her completely.

Would the baby be the same? Or would she have to watch them grow old and die like a human? Would she be able to live through that?

Don't think about it just yet, she tried to tell herself and focused back on the shimmering light of the dying sun on the water.

After a while, Persephone could make out ancient structures on an island in the middle of the Nile. The thread of magic gave an insistent tug, and she hurried where the captain stood at the wheel.

"Hey, what is that over there?" she asked.

"That is Agilka Island. It is where the temples from Philae were moved, brick by brick, when the dam was built in the '70s," he replied in his smoothly accented English.

Persephone pointed to the part of a structure near the water. It had tall stone pillars that opened at the top like stone palms. "Can you pull in over there? I need... I need to see it."

"I don't know how much you will see. It's going to be dark in another thirty minutes or so," he warned her.

Persephone waved his concern away. “It’s fine. I just need to get there.”

Persephone let Piri help her down onto the small dock of the island. The magic was vibrating now, and she knew she was getting closer. Piri and Alcides followed her, kidnappers turned bodyguards. She almost felt bad for what Hades would do to them if he got his hands on them.

Probably throw them into the fighting pits of the Labyrinth just to watch them suffer, she thought. Hades could be reasoned with for most things unless someone was fucking with his family. He would be a good father in that way. Persephone just didn’t know how he felt about being a father. *His father had eaten him, after all.*

You didn’t even ask him how he felt before running away, an unwelcome voice said in her head.

Persephone *would* ask him. She just needed the right words first and to find out the owner of that damn voice that had broken through her mental wards like they were nothing. She could keep Hades and Hermes out, but not the mysterious woman who was summoning her.

Persephone walked up the dusty path to where the small, temple-like building stood on the water. The stones were humming around her.

“Curious and curiouiser,” she whispered.

“My lady, it’s getting dark,” Alcides said, looking around nervously.

Persephone ignored him. There was something odd about the temple. Something deeply magical that she couldn’t see. The last rays of the sun died, and the stars began to twinkle above them. Persephone walked to the edge of the temple before it hit the water of the Nile.

Where are you? she whispered to the dark water. A sudden mist began to rise from the Nile before a boat made of reeds drifted towards the shoreline. A tall woman stood on the boat, dressed in a simple kaftan of white linen.

Persephone walked down the steps to the water, her heart thrumming as the stranger approached. She had large dark eyes and straight black bangs, the rest of her hair cut at the shoulders. The boat tapped softly against the stone of the temple steps.

“Persephone Acheron, it is a pleasure to meet you at last,” the woman said, her wide mouth stretching into a smile. She was the owner of the mysterious voice. “Please come aboard. I’m sorry, but your male companions cannot come any further.”

“They were my kidnappers, not my companions,” Persephone said. She turned to dismiss them, but Piri and Alcides stared at the woman on the boat and back to Persephone. She realized too late that golden power was circling her left hand and shadows around her right. Her divinity was showing.

“What... What are you?” Alcides asked, lowering himself to his knees. The woman on the boat laughed softly, and Piri dropped before her.

“Looks like someone didn’t believe the gods still walked amongst them,” she said before offering a hand to Persephone. She took it and stepped onto the boat. She immediately sat down because she felt it was the wisest course of action. It had been a weird day, and it was getting more bizarre by the second.

“Why did you summon me? What is this place,” Persephone asked. The boat glided through the mist, and another temple-like building on an island appeared. Huge braziers burned bright on either side of the stairs that led from the water to the beautifully designed complex.

“I heard your cry, child. I felt how lost and confused you were and wanted to invite you to this secret place.” The woman smiled at her, and Persephone felt the ancient, deep power radiating off her. “This island is a refuge for all of those like us. Welcome, Persephone, to the Island of Lost Goddesses.”

Persephone's mouth went bone dry. "Who... Who are you?"

"I am the goddess of ten thousand names," the woman said, her eyes glowing golden with power. Delicate, ghost-like wings of indigo and purple unfurled from her shoulders. "But you can call me Isis."

Hades waited until sundown before he lost the last shred of his patience. Hermes had tried to tell him Persephone was fine. It didn't matter because Hades knew deep in his core that she wasn't.

Persephone hadn't been bothered by the humans who had kidnapped her. That was an annoying inconvenience, and she could handle them. It was something else.

For a start, Persephone had never purposely shut him out. As a rule, they didn't use telepathy unless they had to. Persephone had completely locked herself off from him for the first time in their relationship.

What had he done? Hades went over the past few days and weeks, but they had been fine. Apart from being busy with work and Thoth and Kema's visit to help them catalog their new library, they were good. So what had Persephone so spooked?

Hades took his phone from his pocket and called Medusa.

"What's up, boss?" she answered brightly.

"Make sure you and Perseus have clothes on. I'll be there in five minutes," Hades replied and hung up.

Instead of opening a magical door, Hades went slowly from his office at the top of Acheron Tower, down with the elevator, and across to Serpentine Tower. By the time he got to Medusa's penthouse, he only needed to knock once, and

Perseus answered the door in a pair of paint-splattered jeans and a T-shirt.

“Uncle, are you okay?” he asked, his scarred face going from welcome to worried.

Hades couldn't lie to him. Perseus was legally blind, but he could see auras clear as day, especially those of immortals. Hades didn't know what was giving him away and didn't care.

“No, I'm not. Something is happening with Persephone, and I need Susa to help me find her,” Hades explained, stepping inside.

“Yeah, Hermes mentioned it. He's here too,” Perseus warned him. He and Hermes had started painting together once a week. It was strange to see two of Zeus's sons not trying to fight each other. They both got along with Asterion too, which meant Hades's suspicion about Zeus always being the problem with the family had proven true.

Hades realized too late that he was interrupting something more than painting night. Thoth and Kema sat with Medusa at her huge desk in her office. Thoth was frowning at the screens, his bronze eyes troubled and his shoulder-length dark hair a mess from pulling on it.

“Let me guess, you're trying to convince him that digitization of the new library is a good thing,” Hades said, smiling despite his worry.

“Ohh, don't get Feathers started,” Hermes replied, appearing by his shoulder. “This is about categorization, not digitization. I take it Persephone hasn't turned up yet?”

Hades shook his head. “No. Medusa, I need you to put a pin in this and help me.”

“It's good timing. I needed a break,” Kema said, stretching her arms over her head.

“I still don't see why this is necessary when I have a photographic memory. We don't need a catalog. I know what books and relics we now possess,” Thoth argued.

Kema got to her feet and kissed her consort on the forehead. “Because we don’t have your big, beautiful brain. We need the catalog so everyone else can search for things. Come on, let’s raid Medusa’s fridge for a snack.” She tugged a grumbling Thoth to his feet.

Kema was a new niece to the family, and Hades found her delightful. She could light any room she went into, just like Persephone. It was probably one of the reasons they got along so well. Kema patted his arm on her way past.

“Don’t worry, Uncle H. I’m sure Persephone is fine and working something out in her head.”

“Thanks, Kema. Take Hermes with you. I need to talk to Susa,” Hades said.

“Hey, don’t be rude. I’m here for emotional support,” Hermes complained.

Kema just took his hand. “Come on, Grandad. It’s time to make me something to eat.”

Hermes’s face screwed up in horror. “What did I say about calling me Grandad?” Technically, Hermes was her grandfather many times over, but it got too complicated.

“Well, I call Thoth ‘Daddy,’ so you’re just going to have to deal with it,” Kema said, wagging her eyebrows at her beloved.

Thoth looked flustered and embarrassed, but Hermes was too busy making gagging sounds to tease him about it.

“If Medusa can’t find Persephone, I have a few good tracking spells I can try. She won’t have gone far enough that I can’t find her,” Thoth told him.

“Thank you. I appreciate that.” Hades still couldn’t believe the ancient god had finally been brought back to Greece, but he had reconnected with Set and Anubis, and both of them were making sure Thoth didn’t become too anti-social again. Hades suspected the true lure had been the promise of the library’s contents and wanting to please Kema.

Medusa rubbed her hands through her curling red hair. “Stop lurking in the doorway, Hades. Tell me what is going on. Hermes only said that Persephone had kicked you both out of her head but didn’t say why.”

“I don’t know why either,” Hades said and sat in Kema’s chair beside her. Medusa had been his friend for a long time, so he took a shaky breath before admitting, “I don’t know what I did to make her want to leave me.”

Medusa’s snakes hissed in alarm. “Hey, woah. Persephone isn’t leaving you. She’s just...having a moment. It happens to the best of us.”

“She was fine when she left for Athens this morning. Nothing seemed off. She said she had some meetings. I need you to get into her calendar and find out who they were with,” Hades said, crossing his arms.

Medusa tapped away on her keyboard. “She shared her calendar with me ages ago, so let’s look. Hmmm, not work meetings. She did have an appointment with a gynecologist for her yearly check-up around lunchtime. One second, I’ll bring their details up.”

Hades failed to keep up as she plunged into her digital world. To Medusa, the internet was another kind of cave, and she was at home in its shadowy crannies.

In less than five minutes, she had hacked into the CCTV on the clinic’s street and was scrolling through the black and white footage.

“There she is! Freeze it,” Hades said, pointing at the screen. His sunshine girl was standing outside the clinic, looking unwell and afraid. Hades fought back the frantic feelings coursing through him. What was wrong? What had they done to her?

“Okay, so you’re freaking out, but as a woman, let me tell you, no one likes going to the gyno. We all feel like shit afterward,” Medusa said quickly. She zoomed in as two men appeared. “Let’s see who these guys are.”

“Who cares? They are fucking dead men walking for putting their hands on my wife,” Hades growled. He would watch the light die in their eyes, and... He peered closer. “Did she just glamor them? Look at their faces.”

“It looks like she’s used them for a lift,” Medusa said, choking back her laughter. “She is resourceful. Makes you wonder who is kidnapping who in this situation. Let’s see where they go.”

Medusa got their license plate number and began to track them, using the traffic cameras. Hades resisted the urge to pull his hair out in frustration. Why hadn’t Persephone come to him? He wasn’t angry so much as hurt. They could always talk to each other about things. He rubbed at the pain blooming in his chest.

“They are at the airfield, and it looks like they used a light aircraft to leave Greece. Damn, their flight path wasn’t recorded.” Medusa muttered under her breath a few times, screens and maps changing so quickly, it made Hades dizzy. “All planes can be tracked with PSR and SSR, so by the looks of things, they went to...” She made a few more quick clicks. “Aswan, Egypt.”

Hades rubbed his face in frustration. “Why take a plane when she could just open a doorway to it? And why Egypt?”

“You can track her if she used magic, but it will take longer to track her by human methods,” Thoth said, returning to the office. “Medusa, can you find where she went after the airport? Was it to a boat?”

“I’ll try and find out, but I don’t have the same kind of access outside of Greece,” she said and focused back on the computer.

Hades frowned at Thoth. “Why do you think she got onto a boat? What’s in Aswan?”

“If my hunch is right, she’s not staying in Aswan. She’s heading further down the Nile to Agilka Island,” Thoth replied.

Hades glared, and Thoth frowned back. He was too old to be intimidated by the likes of Hades.

“I have her getting on a day cruise felucca, and that’s where I lose her. I’ll find the identity of her kidnappers and see if they managed to keep hold of their phones. If Persephone didn’t want to be found, she would have gotten them to dump them,” Medusa said, not looking up from her screens.

“Please, Thoth, tell me where my wife has gone,” Hades asked. It was as close to begging as it got. He would beg if he had to. For Persephone, he’d do anything.

It was frustrating because unless Thoth felt in a sharing mood, no one could get a damn fucking thing out of him. Thoth seemed to be fighting an inner battle before finally blowing out a frustrated breath. “I think she has gone to see Isis.”

“Woah, Isis? I thought you guys didn’t know where she was?” Hermes said, pushing in beside Thoth to get into the office.

“I’ve always known, but I’ve respected her request to be left alone. She separated herself from the world for a reason, and I wasn’t about to go against her wishes,” Thoth replied.

“But why would Persephone go to her? She never knew Isis,” Hades replied, scratching his head.

Hermes poked Thoth in the ribs. “Out with it, Feathers. This is a family matter now.”

“Call me Feathers again, and I will feed you to Ammit,” Thoth threatened. The snake tattoo on his arm came alive to hiss at Hermes. Thoth turned back to Hades. “Isis runs a sanctuary for goddesses who need help or guidance. If Persephone heard her call, it’s because she needed one or the other.”

Hermes rubbed at his bearded chin. “If Aunty heard a call like that, she would have investigated. She’s too curious and fearless for her own good when she wants to be. What do we do? Or should we do anything about it?”

“I will go to this island and see for myself,” Hades said, getting to his feet.

Thoth shook his head. “Not possible, even for the likes of you.”

“Explain.”

“Firstly, it’s goddesses only, and you don’t qualify.” Thoth shrugged. “Secondly, it’s not in the physical plane of existence. You will never find it without Isis’s blessing.”

Hades’s shoulders dropped as his worry and fear for Persephone knocked the air out of him. “So what do you suggest I do?”

Thoth’s eyes glowed bronze. “Do you love and trust your wife?”

“Yes,” Hades answered without hesitation.

“Then leave her the fuck alone. She will come home when she wants to.”

It didn’t comfort Hades in the slightest. He didn’t like feeling so powerless.

Persephone, please, sunshine, come home, he sent out, but all he got back was silence.

Persephone crashed as soon as she stepped into the temple the previous evening. Isis had promised her answers in the morning and showed her to a set of rooms. Persephone had fallen face first on her bed in her dirty dress and hadn't moved all night.

Bright sunlight through the gauzy white curtains finally brought her out of her deep sleep.

The first thing Persephone noticed was the quietness. She heard waves and a few birds chirping but no cars, boats, people, or planes. It was a true and eerie silence. She had only experienced something similar when she went to Elysium with Hades. Her stomach growled hungrily.

"Yeah, yeah, baby, I hear you. We need to get clean first," she grumbled back and then felt like an idiot. She found a dark fuchsia maxi dress left for her over a chair, with a belt and a pair of sandals. The dress was made of the softest cotton that would battle against the warm Egyptian heat.

Were they still in Egypt? Persephone wasn't so sure. She felt cut off from Hades and everyone else. She cringed at how angry he was going to be at her. She had been so scared and shocked the day before, she knew she hadn't been thinking clearly.

Persephone found a bathroom and had a long shower. The soaps smelled of blue lotuses and roses, and the sweet scent relaxed her.

She had found Isis, or Isis had found her. Tahirah, Anubis's consort, had said that Isis was missing and hadn't been seen in Egypt for centuries.

How had Isis remained hidden on her island all this time? She tried to remember what she knew of the goddess.

Persephone knew the story of how Isis had been the one to put Osiris back together and resurrect him. She was the mother of Horus and had raised Anubis. She was the goddess of magic, as well as many other things.

Persephone had felt the power radiating from her the previous night. Only Thoth and Set felt similar in strength. It was so deep and ancient that it made Persephone nervous and a little awe-struck at the same time.

Once she was clean and dressed, Persephone felt steadier. She tried not to touch her stomach again. Apart from the nausea and tiredness, she didn't feel any different. Maybe Isis could advise her because she was a mother and had done a fine job with Anubis.

For the first time, Persephone wanted to talk to her mother. That feeling lasted long enough for her to remember how Demeter always used to tell her that having Persephone had ruined her body during and after pregnancy. She stopped her shoulders from curling inwards as the memory sliced into her.

Persephone had known from the cradle she wasn't the daughter Demeter had wanted. She could never figure out why she had her to begin with.

It's okay. Demeter's dead and can't hurt you anymore, she told herself. She missed Hades. He would always hug her when she felt her mother's shade kicking her ass. Tentatively, she reached out for him and found a psychic wall in the way. The wards around the island kept the world out. She was on her own.

Persephone took a deep breath. "Okay. Breakfast first, then find Isis."

Persephone walked through the stone halls of the complex and marveled at everything she saw. It looked like one of the

ancient stone temples had been fully restored or had never fallen into disrepair.

The tall pillars were carved with scenes of animal life along the Nile. On the walls were carved and painted stories in murals and hieroglyphs she couldn't understand. There seemed to be no end to corridors and rooms.

It was the smell of hot baking bread that Persephone caught onto and ended up following. She could easily get lost in the temple for hours, but her stomach was missing Hades's cooking.

Persephone hoped he would understand when she finally talked to him. She had been scared after the clinic, and the fear was creeping up on her again.

Feminine voices joined the smell of cooking food, and Persephone stepped into a large kitchen area. Two women were sitting on wooden benches next to a long table. A third was pulling bread rolls from a wood-fired oven. She wore a shift dress, the color of ox blood, and had a leather belt around her waist. Dark hair hung in a braid over her shoulder, and warm brown eyes lit up at the sight of Persephone.

"Ah, here is our newcomer. Isis said one of the Greeks had joined us," the woman greeted.

"Hades is going to be shitting himself," a tall blonde woman said from her place at the table.

Persephone raised a brow. "You know my husband?"

"We have met. I'm Bellona," she replied before pointing to the lean brunette on the opposite side of the table. "This is Laverna, and that's Ashirah. Sit down, princess."

Persephone did, and then the name started to ring an alarm in her head. "Wait, you are Bellona, Set's friend? The Roman war goddess."

Bellona laughed, a husky sound that would bring a man to his knees. "I am her, but I'm not Roman. I'm more Sabine than Roman. Laverna is pure Roman."

“And proud of it. Goddess of thieves, cheats, with a dash of the Underworld just for fun,” Laverna said with a mock bow.

“It’s nice to meet you both,” Persephone replied with a smile. “Wait, what about Minerva? Wasn’t she a war goddess?”

Bellona’s eyes narrowed. “Minerva was a goddess of wisdom. The Romans slapped the war title onto her when they tried to synchronize us with the Greek gods, and she got landed with Athena.”

“Poor Minerva,” Laverna said and clicked her tongue. “The war title never sat well with her because if one is wise, there is no need to start a war.”

Bellona waved her hand dismissively. “I took care of the war side for her. Enough of the past. I want to know what lies Set has been telling about me,” she said and refilled her coffee.

“The story of you fighting naked in Beirut because you lost a bet isn’t true? Because I liked that story,” Persephone said.

Laverna choked on her juice as she started to cackle. “Tits out, guns ready. Sounds like you.”

“That story is true, but a bet is a bet. What can you do?” Bellona only shrugged before her smile turned wicked. “I can’t believe Hades finally got himself a consort. It was a long time coming. How did he fuck it up so badly that it made you come here?”

Persephone blushed. “Hades didn’t do anything. This was all on me. I panicked and heard Isis calling to me, and then I wanted to investigate.”

“Here, eat something. You need it for the babies,” Ashirah said gently, putting fresh rolls and honey before her.

“Babies?!” Persephone squeaked.

“Well, that explains it,” Laverna said. “She’s freaking out.”

“I thought there was only one.” Persephone put her hand on the bump of her stomach. “There can’t be two in there.”

“I am a mother goddess, my dear. Trust me, you are having twins,” Ashirah said and patted her on the shoulder. “Eat. You will feel better.”

Persephone pushed down the rising panic, bit into the fresh bread, and groaned. “You must be a goddess. Holy shit, this is good.”

“I’m glad you like it. There’s plenty more where that came from. Immortal children grow quickly, so you will spend the next few months eating nonstop,” Ashirah said, putting a plate of food next to the bread.

“Few months?” Persephone asked around a mouthful.

“Yes. Your pregnancy will only be about three months because of how quickly gods mature.” Ashirah frowned at Persephone’s apparent confusion. “You know nothing about this, do you? Wasn’t your mother immortal?”

Persephone swallowed. “She was, but she didn’t prepare me for any of this. The only time she mentioned being pregnant with me was to follow it up by saying how much she regretted it.”

Bellona clicked her tongue in irritation. “Demeter always was such a fucking bitch. It’s a surprise you turned out so good.”

“Let’s not be reduced to name-calling,” Ashirah chided gently. She laid a hand on Persephone’s arm. “You are here now and can ask me anything you wish.”

Persephone didn’t want to bring up the pregnancy again while eating. The shocks kept coming, and she would lose her appetite altogether.

“Why did Isis refer to you as the Lost Goddesses?” she asked instead.

“We aren’t lost, baby goddess,” Bellona huffed. “We are hidden safely in the hearts of all women, just waiting for the moment they need us. They only need to reach inside and pull us free.”

Persephone studied the silvery scars on Bellona's strong arms and hands.

"You are there when a woman needs to wage war on someone?" she prompted.

"Women understand war better than men." Bellona drained her espresso in a quick shot. "Men fight for misplaced glory. Women have to fight for their fucking lives every goddamned day."

Persephone couldn't argue with that.

"Women know what's worth fighting for," a new voice said, making Persephone turn. The newcomer also wore red, though a brighter shade than Ashirah's. Her black hair was out in flowing ringlets. She kissed Ashirah's cheek before sitting down.

"This is Miriam, but we call her Magdalena. She likes to meddle," Bellona said, but not unkindly. "Watch her. She is all peace and love and pathetically sappy."

"Love is the only thing worth having and worth fighting for," the other goddess replied with a slight shrug.

"We were just telling Persephone here why we aren't lost," Laverna said, refilling her cup. "I only come here for the peace and quiet, not because I'm lost. Also, the food is good."

Ashirah blew her a kiss. "This feels right, all of us here in the kitchens where women have always gathered. It helps to reiterate our point about not being lost too. Many thought I was lost when the fanatical kings destroyed my trees and left only their stone pillars to Yahweh at their temples. When my artifacts and worship were wiped clean from their scriptures. I wasn't gone then. I just moved from temples to the open sky in the high places and away from prying eyes.

"Yahweh became faceless, confined to a stone room in a temple to only talk to a single high priest. Me? I was in the homes, in the kitchens, as women baked effigies to honor me and prayed to me when their birth pains became too much to bear. I'm still the queen of heaven. I'm sacred wisdom, and all I need to do is wait for the patriarchal religion to burn itself

out, and the old ways will return. They already are because the humans are pulling too much evidence for me out of the ground. The old lies can't hold up anymore."

Persephone stared at the powerful woman beside her, the faint threads of her divinity glowing like rubies in her eyes.

"I believe you. I suppose in Greece, it's a little different. Hades and the Court didn't want to hide anymore," she said before eating a piece of mango.

"Which begs the question, why do you?" Laverna asked, toying with a thin-bladed dagger.

"I'm not hiding. Not really. I don't know how I feel about the baby—babies—oh shit, what am I going to do?" Persephone said, her appetite vanishing once more.

Ashirah put an arm around her. "Whatever you do, it's your body and your choice. You don't think Hades would be happy or a good father?"

"He would be a great father. Have you met the triplets? That's not mentioning how he looks after all of Zeus's bastard sons. Hades is already an amazing father." Persephone swallowed back her unexpected tears. "I worry about whether or not I'm going to be a good mother. Demeter resented me so much. She fucked me up in so many ways. I never want to make a child feel like that."

"You wouldn't be like her. Not in a million years," Bellona reassured her. "You care about others. Set told me you saved Hermes's crazy ass in the middle of a fight and wouldn't leave without him. Demeter never would have done that. You have a kind heart. I can tell."

"Ah, you see. Even a war goddess can sense it," Magdalena teased.

"I understand kindness," Bellona replied, her full lips curving into a smirk. "It's peace I don't understand."

"And yet, I know for a fact that you once felt peace in a single kiss," Magdalena replied, calm and knowing. "Love always wins. Especially when the kiss of an angel is involved."

“I should never have told you that! It was one stupid kiss,” Bellona hissed like an embarrassed cat. “That’s the last time I’m getting drunk with you. You can’t let anything go.”

Magdalena’s smile widened. “Some things shouldn’t be let go of.”

“Hmm, this conversation can be.” Bellona got to her feet. “I have a sex trafficking ring to break up. Good luck, Persephone. Stand your ground with Hades and fight for what you want. Don’t let Magdalena fill your head with any more sappy nonsense.” Bellona headed for the door, her dress shifting into black tactical gear.

“Stay safe. I love you, sister,” Magdalena called.

Bellona laughed like it was a threat. “Fuck you.”

“Nice to meet—” Persephone said, but the Sabine goddess of war was already gone.

Ashirah sighed. “I wish you wouldn’t provoke her like that, Miriam.”

“Someone needs to. Otherwise he will be dead, and she will regret it forever,” Magdalena replied unapologetically.

Dazed by the goddesses interacting and the revelation that she was having twins, Persephone could do nothing but take whatever happened next in stride.

Persephone ate another roll, and the churning feeling in her stomach finally eased. Minutes later, Isis appeared and gestured to Persephone. “Come walk with me.”

Isis led Persephone out of the kitchens and along the shaded walkways. The day was warm, with a light breeze off the water. There were gardens and orchards planted between the building and the greenish blue water of the Nile.

“Can I ask you a question?” Persephone said as they walked through the lines of date palms and pomegranate trees.

“You can ask me anything you like, Persephone. It is why I brought you here,” Isis replied, reaching up to stroke the ripening fruit.

“Why have you hidden yourself away on this island? Anubis misses you, and after his trials, he could have used his mother,” Persephone said.

Isis started. “What do you mean his trials?”

Uh oh. Now, you put your foot in it. Persephone ended up telling Isis everything as they walked through the gardens.

She told her about Pandora creating Pithos to use against the Court and of Darius Drakos wanting to become a god himself.

She spoke about Set finding Ayla and then reuniting with Thoth. Isis laughed long and loud when Persephone told her that Thoth had fallen in love with one of Hermes’s descendants. Together, they found Anubis and restored his *ka*.

Isis had no more smiles when Persephone explained about the Duat crumbling and souls and other creatures escaping in Anubis’s absence.

“And where was Osiris in all of this?” Isis asked, her voice very soft.

“From what Tahirah has told me, Osiris did fuck all to help the Duat. Anubis was so furious that he confined him to a palace in Aaru.” Persephone hesitated before adding, “Osiris wanted Anubis to find you and convince you to return to him. Apparently, one of the excuses he used to let the Duat crumble was that he thought it would force you to return.”

Isis held up a hand for her to stop. “I need a minute.” She sat down on a stone bench that looked out over the water. There was such sadness and rage in her eyes that Persephone looked away.

“I had no idea this was happening. I didn’t feel...” Isis broke off and cleared her throat. “I haven’t scryed in a long time to see what was happening in the world.”

Persephone sat beside her and took her hand. “None of it was your fault. You had your reasons for wanting to hide yourself here.”

“They don’t seem like good ones now.” Isis brushed a stray tear off her cheek. “I was so tired. You are such a young goddess in years and power. I was still heartbroken over Osiris’s betrayal with my sister. I was so angry at how Egypt fell to the Romans. I was no use to anyone. I decided to retreat. That was when I realized there were others like me. Goddesses were being forced from their sacred temples and groves. Ones who had been so mistreated by those who used to love them. I found a new purpose here because of it.”

Persephone dared to squeeze her hand. “It is a wonderful place. No one, least of all me, would ever try to make you leave it. I just want you to know the world has changed so much since the Romans. There are many new wonders that you might enjoy, and I know for a fact Anubis, Set, and Thoth would all like to see you again. All three of their consorts are lovely women.”

“I will think about it. I’m happy for all of them, as I am happy for Hades finding you,” Isis replied.

“Finding me, kidnapping me, either one,” Persephone said with a soft laugh. “I didn’t think anyone would love me like he does.”

“Then why were you so scared?” Isis pressed gently.

Persephone placed her hands on her stomach. “I’m not scared of Hades. I’m scared of me.”

She showed Isis her hands, letting magic curl black and gold around them.

“Life in one hand and death in the other. What if I lose my temper and accidentally kill my babies by grabbing them with the wrong hand? What if my magic hurts them before they are even born? I know Hades will be a good father and that he will rise to the challenge like he always has. But me? I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“All mothers feel this way.” Isis took Persephone’s right hand, and the darkness swirled around her fingers. “You wouldn’t harm anyone with this simply by losing your temper. You know the cost involved in taking a life, and you wouldn’t do it by accident. Children have a way of letting us fix the hurts of our past. Your mother wound is so deep that you are letting it cloud your judgment on the matter.”

“I know that, but I also don’t know how to fix it,” Persephone admitted.

“When Nephthys left Anubis to be eaten by jackals, I had a choice. Did I let my rage and pain towards my husband and sister cost the life of an innocent child, or did I try to help him?” Isis let her hand go. “When I found him, I had a moment, the briefest flash of ‘Should I kill him?’ It was one of the worst moments of my life. Then, this filthy, half-wild boy smiled at me, and I knew I could never go through with it. Anubis was how I healed my wound. He was the blessing in the whole horrible mess. I’m not saying it would help you to have these children growing in you, but it might. Born gods are so rare, and when they come about, it is because the world will need them and whatever abilities they will have. All of Zeus’s sons you have in your Court are blessings, are they not? And they were the ones he never wanted.”

Persephone stared out at the water and tried to process Isis's words. "Ashirah said that they will grow fast. How can I keep up with children that mature so quickly?"

"You ask for help. They will have a village of gods to help raise them. Hecate and the others will ensure that they can harness whatever power they wield as they grow. There has been so much hurt with the gods in the Court that children might bring joy and new beginnings," Isis said, her eyes flashing with magic. The hair rose on Persephone's neck. Had she made a prediction?

When Isis said no more, Persephone tried to imagine two young gods running about with the Court watching over them. Hermes would teach them all sorts of mischief, and Medea, Circe, and Hecate would show them how to wield their magic. Charon would show them how to drive and Medusa how to use technology better than any of them. Erebus would teach them to cheat at cards, and Thanatos would show them how to fight honorably. Asterion and Ariadne would undo his hard work and show them how to fight dirty.

The more Persephone thought about it, the more she knew Isis was speaking the truth. Even the Egyptian gods would dote on them like uncles and aunts.

"You are right. I already have a village that would help them," Persephone said, her eyes filling with tears. "They wouldn't grow up alone and scared of who they are like I did. I... I think I want them. I just needed to get used to the idea. I need to talk to Hades. Ah, hells, he's going to be so mad."

Isis laughed. "Not a lot makes Hades mad. He will be shocked but will rise to the occasion. He always does. Rest for tonight and look at going home tomorrow. Speak with Ashirah and the others if you are worried about the pregnancy. You have support here too."

Persephone was hugging her before she could check herself. To her surprise, Isis hugged her back.

"I'm so glad you came to me, Persephone. Always know that you are welcome here," Isis said, stroking her hair. "There

are plenty of mothers that can take care of you too and help mend what has been broken.”

Persephone sniffed. “Hades says that you make your own family.”

“He was always the wisest of his brothers,” Isis replied fondly. “He married you after all.”

Hermes had always loved Egypt. He loved the magic and the heat and the excellent beer. He never considered going there a bad idea, especially now that he knew that Thoth wouldn't smite him for fun. Well, Thoth would think twice about it in any case.

Going to Agilka Island to try and find Persephone seemed like a bad idea. Hades wouldn't be satisfied until he verified whether he could reach Isis's island or not. Hermes wasn't about to let him go by himself. He was surprised Thoth decided to come though.

They had left Kema and Selene at the house in Alexandria. If Hades did incur Isis's wrath by trying to tread where he wasn't welcome, both Thoth and Hermes wanted their beloveds far from there.

Agilka Island was full of beautiful old temples that made Hermes feel his age. He remembered walking amongst them when they had been in their glory days and in their original positions. Still, it was nice to see what was there. Hades didn't seem to notice any of it.

"I would like to reiterate that this is a bad idea," Thoth said from where he walked beside Hades.

"I heard you, and you are welcome to leave." Hades stopped walking and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to snap at you. I just need to know for sure that's where Persephone has gone. I can't handle..." Hades cut

himself off before he could show weakness. It didn't matter. Everyone knew Persephone was his weakest spot.

Unless she's pregnant, Hermes thought to himself. He had seen the footage of Persephone outside the clinic and was surprised no one had considered pregnancy.

Hermes wasn't about to mention it to Hades, even as a stray thought. He might still be a little crazy, despite the curse Zeus put on him being broken, but Hermes wasn't a total idiot. Losing Persephone was already too complicated for Hades to process. Adding in the possibility that she could have a bun in her oven, Hades would tear the world apart to get her back.

"You are suspiciously quiet," Thoth said, stepping beside him. "You wouldn't be hiding anything, would you?"

"Me? Why would I do that?" Hermes asked, making his eyes big and innocent.

Thoth glared. "I hate how much you look like Kema when you do that."

"I know," Hermes crowed.

The sun was setting, and the humans were all piling onto boats as the temples and monuments began to be closed up for the night.

"How did Isis convince you to keep this island a secret for so long? Anubis is going to be pissed when he learns about it."

"Anubis has no reason to be. He knows Isis as well as I. He would rather die than break a promise to his mother. He will understand why I felt I had to do the same. She didn't want to be disturbed," Thoth replied.

Hermes cocked a brow at him. "So what you're saying is your magic isn't strong enough to break whatever wards Isis has around the island?"

"I know what you are doing, and it won't work," Thoth replied. The bristling in his shoulders told Hermes it absolutely *was* working. "I've never tried to disturb her peace, and Isis has a lot more than wards protecting her." Thoth

glanced at the rising moon and away again. “Hades won’t find his way there without trouble.”

Hades was in front of them and ignoring them both. He stopped at a part of a temple with steps leading down into the dark water.

“She was here, and her trail ends,” he said and sat down on the top step. Hermes sat down next to him and conjured three beers.

“There are worse places to be in the world,” he said, handing out the drinks. They all needed one. The three gods sat and stared out at the water.

“Do you think she is okay?” Hades asked, his gray eyes troubled.

“Persephone can take care of herself,” Hermes replied, looking at Thoth.

“Absolutely. She is strong and very resilient,” Thoth hurried to add. “Also, Isis will welcome and adore her.”

“But will Isis give her back to me?” Hades grumbled and drank a mouthful of beer.

“I am not keeping her away,” a woman said from behind them. Hermes almost leaped out of his skin and spilled beer all over his hand. Isis was standing behind them. They scrambled to their feet.

“Hello, Isis,” Hades said and bowed deeply. Isis held her hands to him, and Hades took them in his own. “Is Persephone with you?”

“She is on my island and is well, Unseen One. Enjoying the communion of the other goddesses in my care,” Isis replied. She beamed at Hermes and Thoth. “I see you have brought trouble with you.”

Hermes bent to kiss her cheek. “Nice to see you, gorgeous. It’s been too long.”

“It has been an age.” Isis moved to embrace Thoth. “I have missed you. I hear you have finally found yourself a consort.”

“Kema found me,” Thoth replied with a smile. “I’m sorry that I couldn’t deter these two from coming here to disturb you.”

“I knew Hades wouldn’t stay away for long.” Isis let Thoth go. “Persephone is missing you and will return to you soon.”

“Do you know why she ran from me in the first place?” Hades asked, poorly hiding his hurt.

Isis rested a hand on his cheek. “She was scared of herself, not of you. It’s not my place to say more. She will tell you everything. She just needs to know what she’s going to say.”

Hermes bit his tongue to stop him from asking any inappropriate questions. If Persephone was going to be back soon, it would be better if he kept his mouth shut.

“Anubis misses you,” Thoth interrupted them. “You should see him with Tahirah. It would make any mother’s heart glad.”

Isis let out a small sigh. “So Persephone tells me. I will come and visit all of you soon. It... It has been too long.”

“As much as I hate to admit it, maybe the humans need you again too,” Thoth commented and rubbed his chin. “They need something to believe in again, and you were always so easy to believe in. They are forgetting how to cope, how to live, and how much magic is in the world. The stars are moving, and the age of Pisces is ending. It would be a good time to return. The birth of a new age is always an interesting time.”

Isis considered Thoth’s words even as Hermes tried to imagine how weird it would be if humans were openly worshipping them again. Hades and the Court had their own kind of strange celebrity, but Thoth was right. It was an exciting time to be alive.

“Please don’t camp here for the night, Hades,” Isis said. “Persephone will return to you in the morning. I have no doubt about it. Go with Thoth and Hermes now. Trust me when I say Persephone is safe in my care.” She kissed them all before her iridescent wings wrapped around her, and she was gone.

Hades stared at the water, and Hermes put an arm around his shoulders. “Come on, uncle. Let’s go and see what excellent alcohol Thoth has in his cellars.”

“I might even let you drink some,” Thoth said, opening a doorway to Alexandria.

Hermes had to physically turn Hades away from the water. He went through the doorway as enthusiastically as a man going to the gallows.

Hermes glanced across the water. *Come home soon, Persephone. Or we will all suffer for it.*

Kema and Selene sat in Thoth's kitchen, drinking gin and tonics and eating pistachio cookies that the house's magic always offered Kema when she was stressed out. She shuffled her deck of cards to keep her hands busy. Thoth still wasn't back with Hades and Hermes, and she didn't like it.

"They are going to be fine," Selene said, reading her too easily. She finished braiding her hair and tied it off. "Hermes will make sure Hades doesn't do anything too rash."

Kema stopped shuffling. "Have you actually met Hermes? If Isis has managed to hide herself on some kind of magical island, you know both Hermes and Thoth will want to know how. They won't be able to help themselves."

"I wasn't worried until you said that," Selene complained. Her braid finished, she sipped her gin and tonic. "Are you going to pull some of those cards or just keep playing with them?"

"I'm debating the merits of it. I have suspicions, and if they are confirmed, I don't know how I will keep my mouth shut," Kema replied. She reshuffled the deck.

Ever since she had been learning more about her magic with Hermes and Thoth, her cards had been doing strange things. The pictures would change as they pleased, and sometimes they told her things she was better off not knowing.

Kema screwed up her eyes and flipped the top card. The Empress. She was sitting on a throne in a flowing gown with a

crown of flowers on her golden hair. She had a rounded belly and breasts and a cornucopia of riches at her feet.

“Well, shit,” she muttered.

“What? What’s wrong?” Selene asked, peering across the table at the card. “Oh. That looks like...”

“Persephone. I know. Shit. Notice anything else?” Kema held up the card to her.

“She’s pregnant,” Selene gasped and then looked about her in case Hades somehow stood behind her. “Holy crap.”

“You see? This is why I was reluctant to pull a card!” Kema said and quickly shoved the card back into the deck.

Selene chewed on her lip. “We can’t tell anyone until she does. Dark hells, it’s starting to make sense why she ran. I would have done it as well, just to think things through.”

“You say that like Hermes wouldn’t track you down instantly. He could’ve found Persephone and gone straight to her. He didn’t because she asked him to give her time.” Kema drained her gin. “Thoth told me it’s Hermes’s way of being polite.”

“Hermes would know if I was pregnant straight away. The caduceus would tell him. Poor Persephone. I wonder why she didn’t come to me or Ayla. We are the medical professionals in the family!”

Kema shook her head. “You saw that footage of her outside the clinic. She was freaking out and obviously not thinking clearly. Besides, this family gossips worse than a bunch of aunties. She left because she didn’t want everyone in her face while processing. She was smart.”

Selene got up to refill her gin and tonic. “We need to keep this to ourselves.”

“Agreed. I’m not going to tell Hades. I like Alexandria the way it is...” Kema stopped talking as she sensed Thoth’s magic burning through the air. The feel of it still made her heart beat fast and her breath catch.

Hades appeared through the door before Hermes and Thoth. Her lover gave her a concerned look. He always knew when she was hiding something. She grinned at him and looked him over with interest to distract him. Not that she had to pretend. It wasn't just Thoth's magic that still made her breath catch. A tiny tick in the corner of his mouth was enough to tell her that he knew it too. She tore her eyes away from him and looked back at a forlorn Hades.

"What went wrong? You look like you've been kicked in the balls, uncle," Kema said.

"Something like that. I'm going to have a shower," Hades replied, his voice low and subdued.

"You know where your suite is. The house will have fresh clothes for you," Thoth said, and in an awkward display of affection, he patted Hades on the back. Kema's mild concern for him ratcheted up. Thoth must have been really worried.

"Don't take too long. You need to help me raid Thoth's cellars. Who knows what monsters he has protecting them?" Hermes called after him. He grabbed another two beers from the fridge, and they all waited until Hades had gone before turning on each other.

"What happened?" Selene asked, tugging Hermes into the seat beside her. She ran her hands over him, checking for wounds. She had given up full-time nursing years ago, but Kema figured there were some things that never changed. Selene was the nicest person you could ever meet until someone tried to fuck with Hermes.

"I'm fine, Lady Moon," Hermes said, kissing her forehead. "Isis came to see us on the island."

Thoth sat down next to Kema with a tired sigh. Under the table, his hand took hers. "What did you see in your cards?"

Kema leaned over to check Hades wasn't lingering in the hallway. "I pulled the Empress, which had changed to Persephone's likeness."

"And she was pregnant," Selene said, slapping her hand over her mouth.

“I knew it,” Hermes and Thoth said at the same time.

“You knew?” Kema demanded.

Thoth shrugged. “It was just a guess. Isis is a mother goddess. Persephone had a bad relationship with her own, but she would have wanted a person with that energy to talk to. It wasn’t hard to put two and two together.”

The roar of a motorcycle echoed from the back of the house, and Kema rose to get an extra two beers. Set and Ayla came in with smiles on their faces until they saw everyone sitting around the table.

“Why the grim faces? Something to do with Persephone running off?” Set asked, taking the beer from Kema. He hugged her, enclosing her in his scent of spicy desert air, leather, and a touch of grease. He wore his usual T-shirt, jeans, and scuffed boots, his long hair pulled back in a lazy ponytail.

Ayla looked windswept and gorgeous, as usual. How she managed not to get helmet hair from being on the back of Set’s bike never ceased to surprise Kema. She never looked sweaty or dirty.

The only time Kema dared to get on the back of Set’s bike, she returned with snarls in her hair and the feeling of sandy grit in her teeth. It had been lots of fun joy riding until she found an irate Thoth waiting for her.

“You really shouldn’t phrase it that way, love. Persephone is upset, but she will be back,” Ayla chided Set gently, taking her beer.

“How did you two find out?” Hermes asked and sent a glare in Thoth’s direction.

“I never said a word!” Thoth shot back.

Set grinned. “Bellona called me. Said she had met Persephone in Egypt but wouldn’t say where.”

“She’s with Isis on a magical island no one but lost goddesses can get to,” Hermes said. Set’s bottle slipped from his fingers, and Thoth caught it with his magic before it hit the floor.

“Isis is back? We need to tell Anubis,” Set said, taking back his beer.

“She never left Egypt,” Hermes replied, and Kema kicked him under the table. “What? Everyone else knows that Thoth kept it a big secret.”

“Why are you like this?” Thoth snapped at Hermes. “Do you need me to check if Zeus’s curse is back? Because you seem to be more insane than usual.”

“Just tell him, Feathers.”

Kema squeezed Thoth’s hand to keep him from booting them all out of his house. Thoth gave in with a growl of irritation and told Set and Ayla about Isis, the island, and Persephone.

By the end of it, Set was rubbing at his temples. “I hope this magic house of yours has a fully stocked fridge because I’m going to need to cook something to deal with this stress.”

“You better plan on cooking for a crowd because I think we need to get Anubis over here,” Ayla said, chewing on her lip.

Set nodded and pulled out his phone. “I’ll call him.”

“Should we bring more people here tonight? We are going to overwhelm Hades,” Thoth argued. Kema could see his social battery vanishing before her eyes.

“Hades is a heartbroken, volatile death god right now. If he decides to lose it, only Anubis has the power to contain him,” Set said, getting to his feet and heading into the courtyard. He put his phone up to his ear. “Hey, Tahirah, are you two busy? We have a situation...”

Kema got up again. She could see the twitch in Thoth’s eye, which was never a good sign. “Hey, handsome, can you give me a hand? I want to make sure the house has built enough rooms for everyone tonight, and the magic feels a bit funny.”

“What do you mean *funny*?” Thoth asked, but Kema was already tugging him to his feet.

“I’ll show you. Come with me,” she insisted. “This lot will be fine on their own for a bit.”

Toth followed with a confused look on his face. “I would feel if the magic wasn’t working properly, Kema.”

Kema dragged him through a door that ended up being a cupboard of books Toth had probably forgotten about storing. She pushed him up against the door and kissed the noise of surprise right out of his mouth. Toth’s hands slid around her waist and pulled her up against him. Kema didn’t stop kissing him until the tension in his body softened.

“You okay?” she asked, pulling back from him to catch her breath.

Toth rested his face on the soft slope of her neck. “They never stop arguing. Everyone is acting so offended that I never told them about Isis. I couldn’t break my promise to her. They didn’t see how broken she was before she retreated to that island. I thought she was going to destroy herself. I didn’t...”

Kema pressed a kiss on the blooming lotus tattoo on his firm bicep. “You were worried about her because you care. That’s nothing to be ashamed of. The others are shocked, as Anubis will be. They will get over it.”

“And if they don’t?” Toth asked, lifting his bronze gaze to hers.

“Then they pout for a bit and leave us alone for a few months,” Kema said, nipping his bottom lip. “Come to think of it, there might be some benefits to having you all to myself.”

Toth’s hands slid to her ass and gave it a firm squeeze. “Don’t turn me on before a family dinner. It’s a cruel and unusual punishment.”

“You love that about me. You will *really* love what I have in mind to do to you later if we can get through this dinner without any fights,” Kema said and waggled her brows at him.

Toth hummed and ran his lips over hers. “Depends. What do you have in mind?”

“Get through dinner, and you’ll find out,” she replied.

“Cruel and unusual,” he repeated, kissing her again. “Thank you for distracting me and pulling me into a strange cupboard I forgot—I’ve been looking for that!” He pulled a book off the shelf behind her. “It belonged to the House of Wisdom in Baghdad and...”

Kema laughed softly and put a hand over his mouth. “Don’t get distracted, my love.”

An echo of power shuddered through the house, and Kema knew Anubis had arrived. Thoth tucked the book under his arm so he didn’t misplace it again.

“I love you, you know that?” he said, running a thumb over her cheek.

Kema grinned wickedly. “Sucker.”

“Move,” he said and gave her ass a tap. “Let’s get this over with so I can take you upstairs and make you orgasm until you cry.”

Kema’s hand paused on the doorknob as her brain stopped working. “You know what? I changed my mind. I’m sure they can live without us.”

Thoth nudged her forward. “Too late. They are your family.”

“And yours!”

“You invited them here. See what happens when you tell people where you live? No wonder Isis stays on an island no one can get to,” Thoth said, and twisting his fingers with hers, they reluctantly left the cupboard. Kema could only hope Persephone came to her senses soon, or she would go to Isis’s island and bring her back herself.

Persephone strolled through the library and lightly touched the books and scrolls stacked on the shelves.

What Thoth wouldn't give to get his hands on these? she thought with a grin. Maybe he already knew they were there.

"Are you looking for anything in particular?" Isis asked, appearing unobtrusively at her elbow.

"I wouldn't know where to start. Where did all these come from?" Persephone asked.

Isis ran her fingers over the smooth, dark wood of the shelves. "Some of these came from Edfu, others from my temple in Philae. Those older still were written by me after the Great Floods. Ma'at and Thoth wrote a part of the collection. There are few written by authors and philosophers the world has lost. Ashirah has written about her worship, because she knows all her sacred books and history have been destroyed by men seeking to control the narrative. As is the way through all of women's history."

Persephone's heart ached. "I'm glad some of it survived. Maybe a time will come when humanity needs it once more."

"That is my hope." Isis slid her arm around Persephone's as they walked through the stacks. "Now, do you have questions for me about the babies?"

Persephone had been thinking about it all night. "How long do you think the pregnancy will last?"

“From what I have seen in other goddesses, about three months. Divine children grow fast. It can be catastrophic if they are not guided as much as possible during this time.”

Persephone didn't like the sound of 'catastrophic.' "How do you mean?"

"Imagine a teenager having a tantrum, and they have the power over water. They don't get their way, and suddenly, the Nile has flooded and killed thousands," Isis explained. "Guidance, Persephone. They must be in control of their abilities. My advice is to keep them in Elysium until they have that discipline. The humans are doing enough damage to the Earth without the help of a god."

"When you say they will grow fast, how fast?"

Isis shrugged. "At least three times faster than a human. The Court will be able to tell you their individual experiences with it. They can differ."

"Perseus and I are half-human and developed at a normal speed. I mean, I got breasts when I was about eleven, but I wasn't suddenly in a fully adult body," Persephone argued.

"These children of yours will only have a small amount of humanity in them. Your power has only grown since Hades made you his consort. Your abilities are dualistic and extraordinary. I doubt there will be a single 'normal' thing about the children you create. They will be utterly unique."

Persephone rubbed her tummy. "Utterly unique. Do you hear that, babies? Being unique doesn't mean fifty heads like the Hekatonkeires."

Isis laughed softly. "I don't see a chance of that. I'm glad that you have decided to keep them."

"I'm scared shitless, but I know people will help me. I'm not alone. They won't grow up broken and unloved like so many in the Court did," Persephone said. She had stayed up late the previous evening, watching the moon on the water and thinking through all the pros and cons. "The only thing left to do is talk to Hades about it."

“He misses you,” Isis said, and seeing her confused expression, she explained. “He was at Agilka last night with Hermes and Thoth.”

“Oh no. Were they polite? Hermes didn’t try to undo your wards or anything, did he?”

Isis smiled and shook her head. “No. From what I gathered, they were there for emotional support.”

Persephone swallowed the hard lump in her throat. “How mad is Hades?”

“He didn’t seem mad at all. Just worried and miserable without you.” Isis touched the silver blue lotus flower pendant on her necklace. “I can’t remember what it felt like to be loved like that.”

Persephone didn’t know what to say to make her feel better about that. She knew what she had to do though. “Will you take me to him?”

Isis nodded. “Of course I will.”

Time didn’t work the same way on the island. Persephone had said goodbye to Laverna, Ashirah, and Magdalena in the sun, then she got onto Isis’s reed boat and sailed into the dusk light.

Agilka Island looked abandoned as they came near it. Persephone spotted one lone figure leaning against a stone pillar with his arms crossed. Her heart double-timed as Hades walked to the water’s edge and held a hand out to her. Persephone took it, and he helped her from the boat before assisting Isis.

“I promised to bring her back safe and sound,” Isis said, breaking the awkward silence.

“Thank you, Iset em Renu Nebu,” Hades replied and bowed to her formally.

Isis turned to Persephone. “Is there anything else you wish to ask me?”

Persephone quickly leaned in and whispered in her ear. Isis tilted her head back and laughed so loudly that Persephone

blushed. “Oh, that’s perfectly safe to do.”

Still chuckling, Isis took off her silver necklace and held it to Persephone. “Take this with you. If you have problems when your time is upon you, snap the pendant, and I will come to you. Good luck to you both. Treat your wife well, Hades. Otherwise, next time, I might keep her.”

“My wife will be lucky if I ever let her out of my sight again,” Hades replied, his voice like gravel. Isis grinned, kissed Persephone’s cheek, and returned to her boat.

“What did she mean about *your time*?” Hades asked, finally turning to look at her.

Persephone swallowed and shifted her feet. Hades lifted her chin with his finger until she had nowhere to look but his eyes. Her own started filling.

“I’m pregnant,” she whispered. “With twins.”

Persephone had never seen the expression that crossed Hades’s face. He was shocked to his core. It seemed to pass in the blink of an eye because he suddenly grabbed her tight.

Shadows exploded around them, and Persephone barely had time to realize what was happening.

They fell through a doorway into nothingness, and then she was standing in Hades’s bedroom in the palace in Elysium. A table and chairs were in one corner, and a large bed was covered in blue and black linen. Soft rugs of the same colors decorated the stone floors.

Hades sat her on the bed before carrying a chair from the other side of the room and sitting in front of her.

“Say that again,” he said. Gone was the human guise that he regularly wore. He looked the way he did when they took on Darius Drakos, fully divine and fully pissed. He wasn’t wearing his armor, but his hair was longer around his shoulders, and he was wearing a black and silver *exomis* with shadows curling about his feet. Persephone was scared and turned on at the same time. It sucked how much she wanted to crawl into his lap and stay there.

“I am pregnant with twins. I found out a few days ago, and I freaked the fuck out, which, to be honest, I still am,” she said in a hurried burst. “I heard Isis summoning me to her island, so I convinced the two *malakas* who tried to kidnap me to take me to her.”

“Why didn’t you come to me?” Hades asked, his tone hurt.

“Because I needed to figure out how I felt about it without you or anyone else in the Court getting in my face about it! It’s my body and my life. You know how I feel about mothers, and I had to figure out how I felt about becoming one myself. You...” Persephone took a deep breath and tried again. “You make me want to give you whatever you want. I love you more than I love myself, Hades, but in this case, I had to choose *me*.”

Hades leaned back in his chair. “I understand. So what did you decide to do?”

“I want to keep them. I know it’s not what you expected and that it’s going to change our entire lives. I’m still terrified for them and me. But I want them,” Persephone replied, her hands crumpling the skirt of her dress. “Will you say something?”

Hades reached out and brushed the tears off her cheeks with his fingertips.

“I love you more than I love myself as well, baby,” he said, resting her forehead against hers. “I’m scared too. I never thought this would happen to me, but I’m happy about it.”

Persephone looked up in surprise and saw that he was smiling at her. “My beautiful sunshine girl, how could I not be? Anything you bring into my world is a blessing, and these children will be the same.”

“I thought you would be mad,” she replied, running her fingers through his hair.

His eyes narrowed. “Oh, I’m furious about you running away and hiding from me, even if I understand. The babies, I’m happy about. I thought you were leaving me.”

It was so rare for Hades to show how vulnerable he was, even to her.

“I’m so sorry I made you feel that way. It wasn’t my intention. I barely knew what I was doing until I had done it. You are the best thing in my life,” Persephone said, wrapping her arms around him and pressing her face into his neck. Hades lifted her off the bed and settled her into his lap, where she belonged.

“If I ever make you unhappy, you will tell me so I at least have the opportunity to change my ways,” he murmured against her hair. “You scared me half to death. I apologize in advance for the tyrant I’m about to become for your safety. I can’t... I can’t lose you, Persephone.”

“What if the birth is bad, and you have to choose between me or them?” she whispered.

Hades’s grip on her tightened. “That won’t happen. If it does, the answer is always you. *Always*. I can live without a lot of things, but not you. I wouldn’t even want to. I’ve done it before, for so very fucking long, and I won’t do it again.”

Persephone pressed herself closer to him, her heart so full it made her speechless. He always had a way of making her feel more cherished than she ever had in her life before. There was nothing she wouldn’t do to keep his heart safe and in her care.

“I love you so damn much.” She kissed him until they were both breathless. Then she took his hand and put it on her stomach. “Are you sure you are okay with this? I know you already look after so many people. The Court...”

“Are all old enough and smart enough to look after themselves. They will see these children as theirs too, just so you know,” Hades grumbled. “They will interfere as much as possible.”

Persephone laughed softly. “I know. It takes some of the pressure off us. I’ll have to decide what to do about who will run the companies when we aren’t there.”

“We will figure it out. I’ve probably been hanging onto it much longer than I need to. Styx is safe and stable enough for me to take my hands off it for a while,” Hades said and nibbled on her ear. “I’ll have to find other ways to keep them busy.”

Persephone hummed, her body clenching up in the most delicious of ways. “Like changing nappies?”

Hades chuckled. “I’ll assign that task to whoever is pissing me off that day. The babies will be out of that stage quickly anyway.”

“Isis and Ashirah told me. I’m scared of how fast they will grow.”

“They will, but we will handle it. What else did Isis tell you?” he asked, a glimmer of heat in his gray eyes.

“That I can still fuck your brains out,” Persephone replied, making him smile wickedly.

“You always ask the most important questions,” Hades said, twisting her hair around his fingers and giving it a slight tug. “A good thing, too, because I need to remind you who you belong to and reinforce exactly why running away from me is a very, very bad idea.”

Hades's hands were shaking; they had been since he had gotten Persephone back, and he couldn't make them stop. The relief to have her in his arms was so palpable that he could breathe again for the first time in days.

He kissed his way down her soft throat, smiling as she squirmed against his stubble but didn't move away. She smelled of flowers and the incense of Isis's temple. He wanted to rub himself all over her to get his scent on her again, like he was some kind of beast. That's what his fear had reduced him to. Hades moved his hand up her smooth, round thigh, and Persephone shifted to straddle him.

Despite her words that she wasn't going to leave him, the fear and shock of it was still riding him. He needed to touch her everywhere, to be inside of her, and to feel her heart beating next to his.

"I do love it when you don't wear pants," Persephone said with a naughty little grin that he adored. Her hands were already doing some exploring of her own. He was hard before her fingers wrapped around him, and he never got tired of her touch.

"I should fuck your pretty throat hoarse for the stress you've caused me," he only half teased.

"What a coincidence because I want your dick in my mouth right now," she replied, slipping out of his grip. He widened his legs as she moved between them.

Hades couldn't stop the smug smile that danced over his lips. Nothing made him feel like a king as Persephone did when she was on her knees before him. She licked her full lips, knowing precisely what to do to tease him. Her hand wrapped around his dick at the base and gave it a hard squeeze.

"I missed you too," she said with a wink and sucked his crown.

Hades's fingers twined in her loose hair, his body burning in seconds. "My beautiful queen." Her free hand went under his clothes to stroke over his chest. Impatient by the restriction, Hades's magic made their clothes disappear.

Persephone lifted her mouth long enough to whisper, "Show off," before returning her mind-altering assault on him.

Within moments, Hades's self-control was hanging on by a thread. He looked over her gorgeous body; her breasts were fuller, and her belly had the sweetest little bump.

She squeezed his balls just enough to make him groan. He thrust harder into her mouth, his hands gripping her hair tight. He had forgotten who was meant to be punishing whom because her mouth, tongue, and teeth were sin itself.

"Fuck, Persephone," he stammered, his breath ragged. She flicked her tongue against him before deep-throating him and turning his blood to fire. He was coming before he could warn her. Persephone drank it down, sucking him until he became too sensitive. She kissed his still quivering stomach muscles.

"Forgive me for running away yet?" she asked, and he purposely narrowed his eyes because she looked like the cat who got the cream.

"Not even a little," he said, hauling her off her red knees and onto the bed. She let out a delighted giggle. She knew he wasn't angry with her. He never could be because she was his everything. He ran his hands possessively over the rounded curve of her hips to her full breasts.

"Careful. They are a bit sensitive," she warned him with a sparkle in her eyes. Hades wasn't in a mood to be merciful. He

lowered his mouth to their soft curves, his long fingers gently squeezing harder and harder until she was squirming and panting. He sucked on her nipples and breasts until they were covered in his marks again. Only then did he begin to feel a little better.

Possessive, old monster that you are. He didn't care. She was his, and he needed them both to feel it. He pushed her feet up and spread her thighs.

“So fucking wet already,” he purred with approval. He kissed her soft mound once before running the tip of his tongue over her.

“Hades...” Persephone whimpered, her hands gripping his dark hair.

Dark hells, he had missed that sound, her taste, the feel of her soft, sensitive pussy against his mouth. Hades feasted on her, unable to contain everything he was feeling and wanting. His hands gripped her silky thighs, holding her wider for him and stopping her from wriggling away. He thrust his tongue into her, needing more of the musky sweetness that was hers alone.

Persephone. His immortal love. His perfect sunshine girl. She began to shake, and he looked up long enough to see the bright flush that raced along her skin. She came with a strangled shout of his name. This was his Elysium.

Persephone's body was thrumming like she was one long pulse of energy. Her magic was leaking everywhere in hazy gold and black light. Hades curled a finger around one of her shadows and gave it a playful tug that had her whimpering. This was the chaotic dark god she loved best, the one who no one ever got to see but her.

Hades kissed his way back up her body before taking her panting mouth in a searing embrace that left her dizzy. He moved back from her with a dark grin, grabbed her by the ankles, and lifted them on either side of his neck. He slid his hard dick into her slow enough to make her gasp.

"Oh, fuck, I missed you so much," she said.

Hades held her hips tight to him, letting her adjust. He gazed down at her with such love and longing that she almost couldn't take it. He kissed the insides of both her ankles with a sweet tenderness that vanished seconds later as he thrust harder and harder into her. He had her legs locked to his chest so she could do nothing but lie there and take whatever he wanted to give her.

"Promise me you won't run away like that again," he growled.

"Don't... Don't tell me what to do," Persephone gasped.

Hades snarled wordlessly, pulling out of her and flipping her onto her knees. Persephone gripped the sheets to keep her head up as he plunged into her hard enough to make a guttural cry burst out of her throat.

Hades gripped her hair. “Promise. Me.”

“I promise...that I will always come back?” Persephone panted. A hard hand came down on her ass, and she squeaked in surprise.

“Try again,” he said, smacking her other cheek before squeezing it hard.

Persephone’s pussy clenched, and she was coming with a shaking sob before she could say anything at all. Hades brushed the hair back from her face, holding himself tight to her as she shook around him.

“How about I promise to tell you where I’m going next time?” she said.

“You do want to make me insane,” Hades muttered and nipped the back of her neck. He began moving once more, slow and deep, which made her glad they were in Elysium, where there was no chance of anyone accidentally hearing her groan like a whore.

“Hades,” she said, grabbing him by his hands that were on either side of her head. “Never doubt that I’m yours. No matter what happens. I’m not going anywhere.”

Magic infused her words so he would know just how much she meant them. He turned her head so he could kiss her as he came hot inside of her. His breath was panting against her lips, and his eyes were all silver.

“My queen, my perfect fucking sunshine,” he whispered, his voice filling with his divine power that left her heart and body seared with magic, binding them closer than any two beings could be.

Afterward, Persephone lay on her back with Hades’s head on her chest as she told him about Isis’s island full of goddesses and all they had said. She stroked his soft hair and finally felt at peace for the first time in days. Hades rested his hand on her belly.

“I hope you two aren’t going to be as much trouble as your mother,” he whispered.

Persephone smiled. “Yes, you do.”

“Better you than me.” Hades lifted his head and kissed her ribs over her thrumming heart. “I have a request, and I’m not playing.”

Something in his tone made Persephone rise onto her elbows. “What is it?”

“I don’t want to be a tyrant, but I would like you to stay for the last two months of the pregnancy here in Elysium. As Isis said, my power here is the strongest, and I... I can’t risk losing you. I haven’t seen you for two days, and I almost lost my mind.”

Persephone brought him close and kissed him. “I promise I’ll stay here, Hades.”

“Really? I expected more of a fight,” he said uncertainly.

“I want what’s best for the babies and for me. Besides,” Persephone said, flopping back onto the ridiculously soft pillows. “I could use a holiday, and I doubt I will get one when the twins arrive.”

Hades put his head back on her chest. “You won’t be alone. I fully intend to be here by your side for whatever you need. I could do with a holiday myself, and there’s no paradise without you in it.”

“Smooth,” she teased lightly and hugged him a little tighter. Everything would be okay, just as long as he was by her side.

As it happened, everything was not okay. Ten weeks later, Persephone didn't walk. She waddled.

"I'm as big as a house," she complained, her thighs chafing. "The souls here are going to think one of the primordial giants has crawled out of a cave to devour them."

"You are being dramatic. I think you look lovely," Hecate said, looping Persephone's arm around hers as they walked.

It was another sunny day in Elysium, and Persephone was headed to the warm, salty pools down at the ocean. She never went anywhere alone anymore, and today's escort was Hecate. The triplets and Hades were back in Styx, working tirelessly to make sure the companies could be run in Persephone and Hades's inevitable absence.

"My ankles are the same size as your waist," Persephone grumbled.

"That is factually untrue."

"How do women do this for nine months at a time? Why did I agree to this?" Persephone needed to bitch about it to feel better, but for the most part, she stood by her decision to keep the babies. She was uncomfortable every second of the day now, and she could only tolerate it because she knew it wouldn't be much longer.

The souls in Elysium smiled warmly at them as they walked through one of the villages. They tended to keep to themselves and never approached the goddesses at all unless

invited to. Elysium was like walking about an ancient Greek town with better views, lush gardens and trees, and its own ocean.

The most modern part was the villa Hades had built for Persephone during her convalescence. It was next to the ocean, like their house in Styx, because neither wanted to be away from it. The warm, deep salt pools were a short walk away, and Persephone went there every day.

A woman dressed in black was sitting next to a marble herm at the crossroads, waiting for them. Persephone had found it hilarious that there were small statues of Hermes in the Underworld when she had first arrived.

Hades had explained that most of the humans in Elysium were from ancient times and that herms were used as signposts to show them the way. Hermes had tried to convince her that rubbing the dick on the statue was good luck. Persephone thought Hermes was just being Hermes until Medea pointed out that humans actually used to believe it.

“I didn’t expect to see you today,” Persephone said and kissed the other woman’s cheek in greeting. Medea had become less intense since getting her revenge on Darius Drakos. Erebus claimed it was because of all the orgasms she was now getting. Medea had threatened to turn him into a toad for his nonsense, but everyone knew she didn’t mean it.

“I was bored and wanted to swim. Also, Hecate claimed that you might want to complain to someone who has been pregnant and can sympathize,” Medea replied, a smile dancing about her lips.

Persephone raised a brow at Hecate. “Is my complaining getting to you that much?”

“She might be able to offer a suggestion on how to fix your swollen ankles,” Hecate replied, a mischievous gleam in her eyes.

“There’s no fixing it,” Medea replied bluntly. “Not until the babies are out of you. Get Hades to rub them for you.”

“He does every night because I’m sore everywhere.”

Persephone thought Medea would be the last person to offer help and advice regarding her pregnancy. After seeing her own children murdered, Medea rarely talked to anyone about them. When she learned Persephone was pregnant, she offered to help her in any way that she could.

Medea still felt like she owed them all a debt for rescuing her from Darius and then giving her the opportunity to kill him. Persephone was just glad to see her smile once in a while.

The three women walked down the small path and onto the glittering sands.

“Hades really likes to outdo himself with the weather here,” Medea commented, tilting her face to the sun.

Hecate laughed softly. “I think you will find the weather matches whatever Persephone wants that day.”

Persephone nudged her with her shoulder. “I don’t think that’s true.”

“It is. You remember the huge storm last week because you were having a bad day?”

“I...” Persephone paused and realized Hecate was right. “I never would have put that together. That man.” Persephone’s heart expanded, thinking of such a touching gesture.

“He wants to make it easier on you. Are you missing running the company at all?” Medea asked.

“Not really. It was always Demeter’s, which is why I was starting to move it under Acheron’s banner in the first place. It’s only been four weeks. I’m sure the holiday mode will get tiresome,” Persephone replied.

She was actually feeling guilty about not missing it more. She thought she would resent not having control over it or that oversight that made her feel the rush of doing good deals. She didn’t. If she wanted to work, she oversaw things in Elysium. She had offered to check in on Pandora, but Hades had forbidden her from going into Tartarus. There were things there that could break someone’s mind, and they would happily suck her brains out for fun if Hades weren’t with her. She hadn’t pushed it.

Elysium was beautiful, and she was enjoying going through the library there. She was starting to see why Charon had so many books. The dead had many stories to tell.

The rock pools were surrounded by trees and were fed from underground springs and an inlet in the ocean. It was the perfect temperature that wasn't harmful to the babies and the only relief Persephone could get. They stripped off their clothes, and Hecate and Medea helped her down the slippery rocks and into the water. The salt content was high enough that she bobbed weightlessly.

"There are worse places to be," Persephone said, rubbing her hands over her swollen stomach. One of the babies kicked her in the ribs, making her gasp.

"I love you, but if you do that again, there's going to be trouble," she threatened. Medea and Hecate laughed at her. Medea had brought down an amphora of wine with her, and Persephone scowled as they passed it between them. She missed wine.

"Don't pout. Those kids will be out of you soon enough, and you'll have your body back," Hecate said, noticing her sad face.

Medea laughed loudly. "Don't lie to her. Her body is never going to be the same again." Medea pointed to the stretch marks amongst her other scars. It had taken her a long time to be comfortable showing them to anyone, and Persephone knew she still struggled with them some days.

"Those are there because they appeared before your immortality kicked in," Hecate replied. "Persephone is an immortal. She will bounce back."

"I'm not too worried about them just yet. Hades won't care," Persephone replied.

"He won't. If anything, he gets more doe-eyed every day. It's kind of pathetic, really," Hecate teased.

"Clearly, you and Thanatos have no clue what you look like around each other."

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Hecate purposely changed the subject to magic and different potions that Persephone could use to help with the birth.

“It’s the only thing I’m worried about,” she admitted, her hand drifting to Isis’s blue lotus pendant that hung around her neck. She never took it off.

“It will be okay. You need to remember that even when you feel like dying,” Medea replied. She must have sensed Persephone’s unease because she switched the topic to the archaeological digs she was funding in ancient Sumer. She was looking for evidence of stone tablets hidden by the legendary Apkallu sages.

Her interest in powerful objects left behind by the gods and other magicians hadn’t dimmed since Darius’s death. They all knew what kind of damage humans could do with artifacts that they couldn’t control. Medea had continued hunting, and Hermes had resumed going through his years of research on where other gods might be hiding. He didn’t know if he wanted to make contact with them, but he wanted to know where they were in case they ever had humans turn on them.

Persephone swore as another leg kicked down hard inside of her. “Come on, give me a break, guys.” She swam to the edge of the pool to get some water to drink, and another sharp pain shot through her.

“Fuck.”

“Persephone? Are you okay?” Hecate was beside her in a blink, helping her out of the water and wrapping a robe back around her.

“I don’t feel so good,” Persephone said, leaning behind a rock and throwing up her breakfast. Hot slickness rushed down her legs.

“Help,” she moaned.

Medea pulled Persephone’s hair back as she vomited again. “Hecate, send word to Hades. Persephone’s water just broke. The babies are coming early.”

Hades stared at the numbers on his screen and pulled a face. “Can’t someone else take care of this?” he asked.

Charon, Thanatos, and Erebus sat on the couches in his office.

“You need to sign off on this last lot of accounts before authority passes to Niklaus,” Thanatos replied. Niklaus was going to be babysitting most of Acheron while Hades was with Persephone and the children.

Dany was running Argos, and she would keep an eye on their companies with Niklaus beside her. Dany was family, and despite her age, Hades trusted her more than any other human. Medusa and Asterion would also be running Styx in his frequent absences.

Hades thought that letting control of the company go would feel like he was having his teeth pulled out one at a time. He was finding that the opposite was true. Like Persephone, he wanted the break.

“You are the boss, and you made the rules,” Charon commented, a coin flicking idly across his knuckles. “You can just walk away, you know. Who would stop you?”

“He’s got a point, even though it would be a dick move and Medusa would hunt you for sport for dumping outstanding messes in Dany’s lap,” Erebus added. They all paused at that thought.

Hades cleared his throat. “Good point. What do I need to sign exactly? And why are you three sitting here?”

“Babysitting duty. We are getting in the practice,” Erebus teased. There was a time when none of them would have dared to smart-mouth him. Hades was getting soft.

“Don’t listen to him, Master. We want to keep you company in case you need us. Hecate and Medea are with Persephone. Circe and Selene are having lessons,” Thanatos replied.

“So you are saying you’re all bored and decided to harass me.” Hades made a few clicks on his computer and printed out the pages he needed to sign. He had gotten to page three of ten when golden magic sizzled in the air, and Hermes appeared.

“Here’s trouble,” Charon said.

“Why do people keep saying that when they see me? I’m a fucking delight to be around. I also thought you all might like to know that Persephone just went into labor,” Hermes replied, twirling the caduceus. Hades dropped his pen and got to his feet.

“Hermes, forge my signature on the rest of those pages. Don’t look at me like that. I know you know how. Erebus and Charon tell the others. Thanatos, you’re with me,” Hades said, and they all scrambled.

Hades opened a door to Elysium and went through it. His heart was racing too fast, and panic was coursing through his veins. They stepped out of Styx and into the atrium in his new villa. Cerberus bounded across the marble floors to him, tail wagging in greeting.

“Where is she?” Hades asked. Cerberus whined and took off through the house. He didn’t need to follow the dog because a heart-stopping scream echoed down the hallway to them.

“Maybe we should stay here?” Thanatos said uncertainly. “I’m quite certain men aren’t welcome in this kind of situation.”

“I need her to know that I’m here if she wants me,” Hades replied. He hurried down the hall, leaving Thanatos to calm down Cerberus. He opened the door to the room they had set up as the nursery.

Gold ichor mixed with faint traces of scarlet blood stained the sheets of Persephone’s bed. Hecate was wringing out a cloth in a basin, and Medea held Persephone’s hand tightly. His wife was covered in a linen sheet and looked miserable.

“Look, Hades is here,” Medea said, waving him over.

Hades swallowed back his panic and fear at seeing his wife in such agony. He moved to the side of the bed and took Persephone’s other hand.

“Hades,” she whimpered, pulling him into a hug.

“Hey, sunshine girl,” he said softly. “I came as soon as Hermes told me. What can I do?”

“Go back in time and convince me to use birth control,” Persephone replied against his chest. “I’m scared.”

“Don’t be. We are all here to help you,” he crooned softly.

There was a tap at the door, and Hermes stuck his head in. “It’s okay, everyone. I am here to help.”

“Get the fuck out of here, Hermes, or I swear I will smite you!” Persephone shouted at him, shadows and gold pouring out of her as her dread side rose. Hades had never seen Hermes move so quickly. He vanished, the door slamming behind him.

“The caduceus could help if...” Hades stopped talking as Persephone glared at him. “Okay, no Hermes.”

“He will only get in the way and faint when we need him,” Medea said, placing a wet cloth on the back of Persephone’s neck.

Hades kissed Persephone’s hand. “Tell me what I can do?”

“Just stay. I don’t know, but I have a bad feeling. Something is wrong,” Persephone said, putting her hands on her stomach. Hades put his hands on top of hers.

“Nothing is wrong, my love. You can do this,” he said and kissed her belly.

Persephone groaned, and fresh tears tracked down her cheeks. Hades was helpless to do anything but be there for her.

Hades was a wreck the following day, and Persephone was still in labor. The entire Court had ended up in the villa to offer moral support. This meant they were all in the garden drinking Hades's wine and enjoying themselves. He stumbled out into the sunshine and collapsed into a chair.

"Here, drink this. You look like you need it," Ariadne said, placing a full glass of whiskey into his hand. "How's Persephone?"

"She's asleep, but I don't think it will last long," Hades replied and had a big mouthful of the whiskey. He was exhausted, so he couldn't imagine how Persephone felt.

"It's normal. Don't worry," Selene said, joining them. "You should try and sleep too."

"I can't. I'm too nervous and worried," Hades replied.

Erebus came over with a plate of food and placed it on the small table beside him. "At least eat something."

"And drink this," Circe said and tossed him a small vial.

"What is it?" Hades wasn't dumb enough to drink anything a sorceress gave him, no matter how much he liked and trusted her.

Circe gave him an exasperated look. "It's an energy potion. You need it to boost you if you're not going to sleep."

Hades uncorked the vial and downed it. It was vile, so he quickly chased it with another mouthful of whiskey. Whatever

was in it worked fast because the fog cleared from his brain, the fatigue left his muscles, and his appetite returned. He picked up the plate of food. “Thank you, Circe. And all of you. I don’t know how I can help her.”

“You can’t fix everything, uncle,” Asterion said, carrying a chair and placing it beside him. “This is Persephone’s show.”

“She’s going to do great. Selene said it’s normal, so it is,” Ariadne added, moving to sit in Asterion’s lap.

“She should summon Isis,” Hermes said and smiled apologetically at Selene. “I love you, but this is a divine birth. Isis will be the one who can help the most.”

Hades ran a hand over his face. “Persephone doesn’t want to bother her unless she has no choice.”

“Persephone isn’t in the right frame to decide that,” Hermes replied.

Hades grinned. “I dare you to tell her that.”

“Hermes is right,” Circe said, and they all stared at her. “I know, I know, words I never thought would come out of my mouth. Persephone is all messed up by Demeter, and in her mind, she doesn’t want to be a burden to the new mother figure in her life.”

Hades put his drink down before he dropped it. “I haven’t even thought of that.”

“You’re excused from not thinking straight right now,” Charon said. He kissed Circe’s temple. “My lady love is right though. Go and summon Isis, Hades.”

Hades didn’t want to disturb Persephone, but a few minutes later, Medea appeared. She looked as exhausted as Hades felt.

“She’s awake and asking for you,” she said. Erebus held out his arms to her, and she all but collapsed into them.

“Rest for a while,” Hades suggested.

“Just close my eyes for a second,” she murmured against Erebus. He gave Hades a stern look, and Hades knew they

were all right. He kept his whiskey and headed back down to the nursery. Hecate had moved Persephone into a deep clawfoot tub.

“I’ll stay with her. Go and eat something,” Hades suggested.

Hecate nodded. “Call me if you need me.”

Persephone had her eyes closed, her head leaning against the lip of the tub. Tears were falling down her cheeks.

Hades sat on a chair beside her and soaped up a cloth. He began to wash her arms, and when she leaned forward, he went to work on her back.

“I’m s-sorry,” Persephone said, her tears becoming sobs. “I thought I could do it. It’s taking so long, and I’m doing it wrong.”

“You’re not doing anything wrong, my love.” Hades ran his fingers lightly over her face. “Don’t apologize to me about something that is beyond your control. They are just being stubborn. I told you that they will take after you.”

Persephone opened her eyes to glare at him and then managed a pained laugh. She winced. “Oh, fucking shit, damn it. Don’t make me laugh.” Hades used the distraction to unclip the necklace from her throat.

“I’m sorry. We aren’t waiting anymore,” he said, snapping the pendant in half before she could protest.

Hades was connected to the Underworld, so he felt the moment Isis approached its boundaries.

“Hold on. She’s almost here,” Hades told Persephone. She hadn’t fought him about the pendant because she was too exhausted. He was sure Persephone would later.

Hades lifted her from the bath, dried her with a soft towel, and wrapped a robe around her. Hecate had returned and had stripped the bed again.

“I can feel Isis moving towards us,” she whispered to Hades. “Others will feel this birth too, Hades. You must be ready to meet anyone who arrives. There hasn’t been the birth of any gods for so long. You might end up with more than just the Egyptians.”

“Fuck, I hadn’t thought of that. It’s never something I had to deal with,” Hades replied, pushing his hands through his hair.

“Go and greet Isis because I can’t,” Persephone said from her nest of pillows. “I’m okay, Hades. You don’t need to hover.”

Hades leaned down to kiss her softly. “I will return soon. I love you, sunshine.”

“I know you do,” she replied, a spark of her usual mischief amongst her misery.

Hades returned to their adjoining rooms for a quick shower and a change of clothes. If other gods were coming, he had to

make sure they were ready for them.

Hades sent a silent summons to the triplets, and by the time he finished dressing, they were waiting outside his chambers.

“We need to prepare for the arrival of other gods,” Hades said, and they made their way through the villa.

“I expected the Egyptians, but who else?” Charon asked.

“I don’t know, and that bothers me. We have no enemies left that I know of, but everyone else has either ignored us or been hiding.”

Thanatos crossed his arms. “Do you think we should be ready for hostility?”

“No one is dumb enough to try and attack Hades in his realm,” Erebus argued, his shadows dancing about his feet. It was a sure sign he was ready for a fight should it come.

“I really don’t know. Zeus had the most children, and I don’t know how it was handled,” Hades admitted.

“Usually, a party and a lot of ass kissing,” Hermes said, walking over to join them. “You came to my big day.”

“Only because I wanted to see the child with big enough balls to steal Apollo’s cattle and force Zeus to recognize him into the pantheon.” Hades could see the man before him as a gangly youth with a cheeky smile. He was still far too clever for his own good.

“Some days, I think I would have been better off staying with the sheep,” Hermes replied, half joking. “What do you need from us, Hades? Everyone else has gone to bed for the night.”

“Come with me. Isis is about to arrive,” Hades replied.

Night had fallen, and the sky above them was a surreal galaxy of stars in a dark purple, blue, and black sky. Two stars were falling toward them.

“She’s brought a friend,” Hermes commented. The stars became winged goddesses, and they landed lightly in the

garden. Isis's iridescent wings tucked close into her body before disappearing. The other goddess had wings of black and ruby. She was darker skinned than Isis, with her black hair in braids and dressed in red robes.

"Isis, thank you for coming," Hades said, and all the Greeks bowed to her.

"How is Persephone?" Isis asked.

"She's struggling. I would have summoned you earlier, but she wouldn't allow it," Hades replied. He looked at the other goddess.

"This is Ashirah, who knows Persephone from the island," Isis introduced.

"It is a pleasure to meet you at last, Unseen One," Ashirah replied. "Don't worry for Persephone. I have birthed many gods and goddesses, and none were easy."

"We will all worry about Persephone regardless," Hermes replied. "It's good to see you again so soon, Isis. You know Anubis and the others will be able to sense you here."

Isis smiled and patted him on the cheek. "Thank you for your concern, little one, but my time in exile is over. Now, Hades, take us to your wife."

Hades turned to the triplets and Hermes. "Please set the defenses for the underworld just in case we have hostile visitors." They all nodded and vanished.

Hades tried not to flinch at Persephone's cries inside the villa. He opened the doors to the nursery, and Isis and Ashirah entered. Instantly, the room filled with calming power that caused a lump to appear in his throat. Rhea had never been soft with him like she had been with Zeus. He had seen mothers but had never felt that energy for himself until that moment. It radiated from Ashirah and Isis, blanketing the room in comfort.

"Isis," Persephone sobbed and took the other goddess's hands. "Help me."

Hades looked at his struggling wife, and helplessness overtook him again. “Do you want me to stay?”

“I love you, but no. You distract me too much,” Persephone said. Hades kissed her forehead.

“I’ll be close if you change your mind,” he said, letting Ashirah hustle him out. Hecate followed, swaying on her feet.

“They can handle it from here. Go and rest,” Hades told her and inclined his head to her. “Thank you for your help as always.”

“I don’t know how much help I was. Those kids are fighting over who is coming out first,” Hecate replied, giving him a tired smile. “You are going to have your hands full.”

“When don’t I?” Hades said. He found a couch to sit on, and Cerberus jumped beside him and laid his three heads in Hades’s lap. “Looks like we can do nothing but wait, boy.”

Hades was so tired and anxious that he didn’t notice Hermes until he sat beside him on the couch and handed him a whisky.

“You are going to be a good father, uncle,” he said, putting an arm around Hades’s shoulders.

“How do you know? I didn’t exactly have good role models,” Hades replied.

“I know because you were always more of a father to me than Zeus was. You remember that day the Olympians first accepted me, and you probably saw Zeus showing me off and bragging about how clever his new son was. You didn’t see him pulling me aside and telling me to expect nothing more from him, that my role was to serve him as the king of the gods, and that if I ended up betraying him, I would meet the same fate as Prometheus.”

Hades’s tiredness faded as fury turned his ichor molten. “That fucking piece of shit.”

Hermes smiled. “You see that reaction? That’s how I know you are going to be a good father. You protect those under your care. It’s why I used to spend as much time down here as

I could. Even when I was bat shit crazy and broken, you and Persephone took care of me and didn't give up on me. You are already good parents to all of us," Hermes said, squeezing Hades in a half hug. "You saved all of us and gave us a home. You got this, uncle. Trust me."

Hades let himself be comforted and sipped his drink. "Will you wait with me?"

Hermes nodded. "As long as it takes."

Hades must have dozed because when he woke, it was to Isis's soft touch on his arm. Hermes was snoring softly beside him with Cerberus curled up at their feet.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Hades murmured, rubbing his face.

"Nothing is wrong. Your children are waiting to meet you," Isis whispered.

Hades got up slowly to avoid disturbing Hermes and followed Isis back to the nursery. His hands were shaking, and he couldn't remember being so nervous.

"We will leave you to be with your wife. We have given her something that will speed up her healing, and combined with her natural abilities, she will be fully well again after a good sleep," Isis said, opening the door. "Congratulations, Hades."

"Thank you, Isis, for coming when you promised." Hades opened the door to the nursery and walked over to where Persephone was propped up on the bed.

"Hades, look how tiny they are," Persephone whispered. Hades climbed into the bed beside her and kissed her.

"I'm glad you are okay."

Persephone snuggled closer to him, and he finally dared to look at the tiny gods suckling at her breasts.

One was a boy with dark hair and a streak of blonde in his forelock. The other was a fair-haired girl with a streak of black. Hades went through a thousand emotions he couldn't name.

Hades wrapped an arm around all of them before gently kissing their sleeping heads. “They are perfect, just like their mother.”

Persephone ran her fingers over the soft, dark blue fabric of her dress and double-checked her breasts hadn't leaked any milk on it. Her body felt strangely unbalanced without the weight of the twins inside of her.

Thanks to Isis's potion, she had woken up after a long sleep without any pain lingering in her body. Hades had still been with her, staring at the babies with the same kind of shock, awe, and love she had seen the night before. Persephone knew precisely how he felt.

"You know you don't have to do this if you want to keep sleeping," Hades said. He was sitting in front of the baby's basket where they were both sleeping.

"I have only seen the inside of this room for days. I need to get out and see my family," Persephone reassured him. She put her arms around his shoulders and kissed his cheek.

"If you get tired or you want me to tell them all to fuck off, I will. I don't care who else shows up," Hades replied. They had already received word from Thoth that the other Egyptians would arrive soon. Persephone was happy that Isis had decided to stay to see them. They had all missed her, and Persephone could see why. She felt better as soon as Isis walked into the nursery. She could make you feel like everything would be okay no matter what.

There was a soft tap on the door before Hermes stuck his head in, looking nervous. "Is it okay to enter? Or are you still in a smiting mood, Aunty?"

“Come in,” Persephone said, laughing softly. She moved across the room to open the door wider. She hugged him tight. “I’m sorry for yelling at you.”

“Don’t be. I wanted to see that you were feeling okay. I can give you a check over with the caduceus,” Hermes replied, the golden staff appearing in his hand. He was trying to help, so Persephone gave him a nod. Hermes’s golden magic tickled over her, and the lingering twinge she had in her lower back disappeared.

Hermes winked at her. “Good as new.”

“Do you want to see them?” Persephone asked, looping her arm around his.

“Only if Hades...”

“Get over here, Hermes,” Hades demanded without any heat in his voice.

Grinning, Hermes dashed over to Hades’s side and peered over his shoulder.

“They are pretty damn cute, I can admit. Damn, it’s been such a long time since I sired anything that I forgot how small they are,” Hermes cooed. He brushed the blonde forelock on the little boy’s head. “I like this. They both already have such attitudes. What are their names?”

“Melinoë is the girl. I always loved that name,” Persephone said, staring at the fair-haired twin.

“Love it. I bet she’ll be a delightful little nightmare like her mother,” Hermes said, kissing Persephone’s cheek. “And the boy?”

“Zagreus,” Hades said, his finger being lightly clasped by his son.

Hermes’s brows shot up. “That was one of Dionysus’s names.”

“I know. He was one of my favorites, and I could never find out what happened to him,” Hades said sadly. “I liked the name.”

Hermes squinted at the sleeping baby. “You better not cause as much trouble as your namesake, kid.”

“You say that like you weren’t right beside him,” Hades chuckled. He looked up at Persephone. “I suppose we had better bring them out and let them be fussed over by everyone else.”

“You’ll get them back again,” Hermes assured him with a pat on the shoulder. “This is a good thing for all of us, I think. Feels like new beginnings.”

Hades picked up the basket with one hand and held out the other for Persephone to take. She reached up on her tiptoes and kissed him.

“Now, now, don’t start that, love birds,” Hermes said, opening the nursery door for them.

“Later,” Hades whispered to Persephone, making her laugh.

Hades had said he’d left the party preparations to Hermes and the triplets, but she hadn’t expected so much to have been put together in such a short time. A pavilion of dark blues had been erected in the gardens. Couches had been brought in, and an area was created for Persephone to sit with the children. They must have thought she was still sore because it had an absurd amount of pillows and other soft cushions to sit on.

The Court was already waiting for them, and they all rushed in to hug Persephone and ogle the sleeping twins. She didn’t know how they could stay asleep with the racket everyone was making.

“Now, you can have this,” Ariadne said, passing Persephone a violently pink cocktail.

“Maybe one,” she replied, hugging Ariadne and taking the drink.

“Congratulations on making cute ones. They don’t look like squishy-faced, angry old men,” Ariadne said.

“Really nice, my love,” Asterion groaned in exasperation. He bent down to kiss Persephone’s cheek. “Ignore her. She

only understands children if she's teaching them how to knife fight."

Ariadne grinned. "I'll also teach these two how to knife fight when the time comes."

"You will have to get in line. They must learn about their magic first. They both have it radiating off them already," Hecate said.

Medusa elbowed her way in between them. "You will all let them be children first and let me teach them fun stuff like video games."

Persephone laughed at all of them arguing about who would teach the children what. She shared an amused look with Hades, who was talking with the triplets. They were looking in the basket with confused expressions like they had never been around babies before. Persephone supposed they hadn't. She slipped through the crowd and over to her husband.

"What's going on? You boys look like you're plotting something," she said.

"Not plotting," Thanatos replied with a slight grin. "We are just confirming with Hades whether or not we can start letting the others in."

"The others?" Persephone asked.

"We have some gods at the borders requesting entry to see the children. Romans," Hades replied. "Bellona is being particularly threatening."

"Bellona is here? Let her in, for goodness's sake. It's fine. The more the merrier," Persephone said.

Charon clicked his tongue. "You say that now, but we have to be careful not to get a fight on our hands."

"They will behave, or I will throw them out," Persephone said, hands going to her hips.

The triplets turned to Hades.

“What are you looking at me for? You heard my queen,” Hades said, waving them off.

Persephone put her arm around his waist. “You know I hate people calling me that, but it kind of turns me on when you do it.”

Hades smirked. “I know.”

Hades knew that any gods who thought starting shit in Elysium was a good idea would meet the full force of his Court. That didn't mean he wasn't cautious when gods began to appear in the gardens. The triplets were on guard while pretending they weren't. Hades took up a place at the pavilion's door to greet newcomers.

Bellona arrived first with a wide grin. "Hades. Been a while."

"Bellona, nice of you to come. Persephone mentioned she met with you on Isis's island," Hades said, and they clasped each other's forearms. "Set will be glad to see you. He is also on his way."

"Good! Well, now, this looks like quite the party. Who would have thought an old dog like you had a few tricks left," she teased and shot him a dirty wink before heading inside. Hades watched as his Court made her welcome, but everyone looked ready for trouble. Ah, his wonderful family of monsters. Bellona seemed to find it amusing and went to see Persephone.

The following two Romans arrived simultaneously, glaring at each other as they tried to reach Hades first. The goddess of thieves had only become slier and more wily-looking since Hades had last seen her.

"Laverna, thank you for coming," he greeted and kissed her hand. "Try not to steal too many things while you're here."

Laverna placed a hand over her heart. “Me? I would never steal anything from you, Hades. Maybe from Hermes just to piss him off, but never you.”

“You should watch her all the same,” a tall god said as he joined them. He had short, dark brown hair, neatly groomed stubble, and amber eyes. His suit was black and bespoke, just like the rest of him. The Italians always dressed to impress. “You can’t trust the rabble around expensive things, Hades.”

“Play nice, Romulus,” Hades said and shook his hand.

“I will if she will.”

Laverna glared up at him. “I happen to be a friend of the mother! Why the fuck are you here? No one invited you.”

Romulus smiled, and Hades could almost see the wolf under his skin wanting the fight. “New gods have been born. I’m here to show respect. Something you could do with a lesson in. I’d be happy to teach you if you ask nicely.”

Laverna smiled and fluttered her lashes at him. “With *respect*, you can eat my ass, dog breath.”

“It’s not an insult if I know it’s something you will enjoy,” Romulus shot back with an equally charming smile. Laverna only rolled her eyes and walked into the tent to see Persephone.

“I see you two still haven’t become friends,” Hades said with a soft chuckle. “Are you sure Rome is big enough for the both of you?”

“She has the underground. I have the surface as it has always been. We try to stay out of each other’s way,” Romulus replied. He bowed to Hades. “I had best go and introduce myself to your lovely lady wife.”

Hades watched him melt into the crowd and shook his head. Some things never changed, and the gods of Rome clashing with each other was one of them. A whisper of an ancient presence had Hades whirling back around. A woman dressed in black and dark purple stood at the garden’s edge. She looked hesitant, something he’d never seen on the face of

the goddess before. Hades walked across the bright green grass to where she was lingering.

“It looks like quite the party,” she said in greeting.

“It’s nice to see you, Eris. Won’t you come in?” Hades asked and offered her his arm. Still, she hesitated. “Don’t worry. Your curse doesn’t work here.”

“Are you sure? It’s one of the few times where I don’t want to cause chaos,” Eris replied. “You all seem so happy.”

“I want you to come and see my children. You are welcome here,” Hades assured her and smiled when she took his arm. “I know better than to leave you out of any party.”

Eris chuckled. “Don’t worry. I didn’t bring any apples of discord with me.”

“We have plenty of that with Laverna and Romulus already,” he replied.

Eris sighed. “They need to fuck and get it over with.”

Hades laughed loudly, and they crossed the gardens into the pavilion. Eris got a few curious looks, but Hades lifted a brow in warning, and Medusa came forward with an extra cocktail.

“Eris! It’s been forever,” she said, kissing the goddess on the cheek.

“Medusa. Still turning men into stone?”

Medusa shrugged. “Only the ugly ones. I managed to catch myself a cute one, though.” Eris cackled and let Medusa pull her away to meet Perseus and Dany.

Hades was about to join the others when another god arrived, and his world shifted on its axis.

“It can’t be...” he whispered as the god appeared through the gardens. He was as tall as Hermes, but his skin was darker. His long, curling black hair and beard had a few flecks of gray in them. He wore a wine-red shirt with two buttons open below decent, and his smile was as bright as ever.

Dionysus.

Hades opened his mouth to say something to his nephew when something gold flashed by him. Hermes threw himself at the other god, shouting, “Big brother!”

Dionysus caught Hermes and squeezed him tight. “You weigh a ton, baby boy.”

“Where the fuck have you been?” Hades demanded, pushing Hermes out of the way to take a better look at his lost nephew. Dionysus’s aubergine-colored eyes sparked with mischief as he shrugged his broad shoulders.

“Lately, I’ve been on a vineyard in Teos in Turkey. Before that, I’m not sure. I was having another episode, so probably everywhere. What have I missed?” Dionysus asked.

“You still get the wandering madness Hera cursed you with? Even though she’s dead?” Hermes said, putting a hand on his brother’s shoulder. Dionysus nodded. “Don’t worry, we will figure out how to break it. We are professional curse breakers these days.”

“I would like that. I wasn’t sure I was feeling the change correctly. Babies? Who would have thought,” Dionysus said, grinning at Hades. “I bet your wife is an absolute stunner.”

Hades’s eyes narrowed. “She is. If I catch you hitting on her, there will be trouble.”

“Would I do such a thing?”

“Yes,” both Hades and Hermes said at the same time.

Dionysus only laughed at them. “From the looks of things, plenty of other beauties require my attention. Oh, look, here comes one now.”

“Who will introduce me to the latest of Zeus’s kids? Don’t look so surprised. We have a whole gaggle of them inside, new boy,” Ariadne said, looking him over. “Which one are you?”

“I’m Dionysus,” he replied and kissed her hand. “And you are?”

“Ariadne,” she said with a smile.

“You know, I knew a girl called Ariadne once...”

A large hand smacked Dionysus’s arm, and he let go of Ariadne’s hand with a hiss. Asterion looked him dead in the eye. “No touching.”

“Well, fuck me, it’s the bull of Minos,” Dionysus said, staring up at him with a grin. He turned to Hermes. “Who the fuck else is at this party?”

Hermes wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “Everyone worth knowing, including some new brothers.”

“Lead the way. I need to see this kid of Hades’s.”

“Kids,” Hades corrected. “We had twins. Melinoë and Zagreus.”

“You named him after me?”

“In my defense, I thought you were dead because you never bothered to come and see me,” Hades replied with a disapproving frown.

“I wasn’t dead, just crazy.” Dionysus hugged him again. “I missed you too, uncle, and I’m happy for you. The babies are already bringing change and chaos in the air.”

“The chaos is Eris, but don’t disappear again. We need to talk,” Hades replied. He watched Dionysus and Hermes enter the tent, followed by shouts of greeting and ‘Oh, fuck, we are in trouble now.’ Hades couldn’t stop the bubble of laughter that rose out of him. He didn’t notice Isis approaching him until she was beside him.

“I don’t think I’ve seen you look so happy, Hades,” she commented.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been this happy. How did I build such a family?” he said, looking at the crowd all talking and enjoying themselves. “I once thought I was the most cursed god ever to live, and now, I have all this.”

Isis squeezed his arm. “You deserve happiness after all you have suffered.”

“So do you, Isis. I can feel Thoth opening the pathways here. Are you ready?” Hades asked her.

Isis nodded, but she still looked nervous. “Will you wait with me?”

“Yes. I need to be here to greet them.” The words were barely out of Hades’s mouth when Thoth’s magic scorched the air, and the Egyptians came through. Anubis took one look at Isis and lifted her in a hug.

“Mother, you are here,” he said, squeezing her.

“My baby, put me down so I can look at you,” Isis replied. Anubis placed her back on her feet, and he took her face in his hands. Tears appeared in Isis’s dark eyes. “My boy. Still so beautiful.”

Anubis smiled. “This is Tahirah, my consort.”

And so, the introductions began.

Set squeezed Isis too. “I’m so happy to see you. Don’t stay in exile anymore.”

“I won’t. Thoth can’t keep secrets anyway,” Isis teased.

Thoth huffed. “I can, too! They never found you until you summoned Persephone. They have all been bitching about me keeping it a secret too.”

“Thank you, Thoth.” Isis kissed his cheek, and he stopped grumbling and introduced her to Kema.

Hades was so caught up in conversation, he didn’t sense the shift in the air until the doors to the Duat opened, and Osiris appeared through them.

“How the fuck did he get here?” Set growled.

“He’s still a god and would have felt the babies too,” Hades replied.

Osiris bowed politely. “Lord Hades, congratulations on the birth of your children.”

“Thank you, Osiris,” he replied, wondering what to do. He didn’t want to offend Isis, but it was too late to turn the other god away.

“I see you have my wayward wife in attendance too,” Osiris said, his eyes fixing on Isis.

“Ex-wife,” Thoth corrected.

Isis’s shoulders only straightened. “Osiris, I hear you let the Duat crumble.”

“I was trying to get you to come back! I was desperate for you to give up this hatred and finally come and talk to me,” Osiris replied.

“I have nothing left to say to you,” Isis said.

“Please, give me a moment—” Osiris made to grab for her, but the biggest god Hades had ever seen caught his hand. He wore a black and silver embroidered *entari* robe and had murder on his face.

“Try to touch her again, and I will scatter you in so many pieces that even Isis won’t be able to put you back together again,” the strange god said, his pale eyes glowing with menace. His long black and silver hair lifted as his power built in the air around them. Hades readied himself for a fight.

“Threaten me all you want, but Isis will never be yours, no matter how long you pine for her.” Osiris yanked his hand out of his grip, and the doors to the Duat re-opened. He cast a warning look back to Hades. “I hope your wife and children are more forgiving than mine, Serapis.” He disappeared through the gates, and Hades quickly re-set the protections around Elysium to ensure he couldn’t return.

Isis collided with the new god and hugged him tight. “Khonsu.”

“Did he hurt you?” he asked gently, enfolding her in his embrace and cupping the back of her head with his large hand.

“No,” she replied, not letting him go. “Where have you *been?*”

“You seemed like you wanted to be alone, but I have been watching over you as always,” Khonsu said.

Thoth sidled up to Hades. “I *told* you she had a protector. He would’ve messed you up before you could have even reached the wards on Isis’s island.”

Khonsu was older than all of them, and when his ancient eyes turned to him, Hades fought the urge to bow. “I apologize if I made a scene on this happy occasion.”

“It wouldn’t be a family gathering if there weren’t at least one,” Hades replied. “You are welcome here, Khonsu.”

Hades left the Egyptians all talking amongst each other and wove his way through the crowds until he found Persephone. She pulled him close and kissed him.

“What was that all about?” she whispered.

“Osiris showed up. It’s okay; he left again.” Hades held her close and breathed in the silky scent of her. “How are you?”

“Surprised that so many have turned up, but happy. Dionysus is an absolute charmer,” Persephone commented, glancing in his nephew’s direction. He was laughing with Selene, Hermes, and Laverna.

“He better not have hit on you,” Hades said, and Persephone smirked. It was a smirk that everyone got when Dionysus flirted with them. Unbelievable.

“He seemed very touched that you named Zagreus after him. Called him little Zag,” Persephone replied. She gently guided Hades back onto the couch. “Sit down. You are starting to look overwhelmed.”

Hades sat and she gave him a baby for each arm because Persephone always knew exactly what he needed. All the

noise and gods laughing and bickering melted away as he stared at the little miracles.

“Better?” Persephone asked, sitting down next to him.

“Better,” Hades replied. He looked out over the crowd of gods before him. “Our family has grown even bigger today.”

“I know, but it’s nice to see them all. You brought us all together, after all.”

Hades looked back at the babies. “They are going to grow so quickly. We will need to keep them here for as long as possible. Their powers...”

Persephone silenced him with a kiss that lingered until all his stress faded. She placed her head on his shoulder. “We will figure it out together, just like we always do. You will teach them everything they need to know about being good little gods.”

Hades bent down to kiss the heads of both babies. He whispered conspiratorially, “The first thing you need to learn, my children, is that your mother is always right.”



THANK YOU FOR READING! If you need more ‘Gods Universe,’ don’t worry; BELLONA is coming soon in 2024.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I believe that all monsters and villains deserve their happy endings. I prefer my clothes black, eyeliner winged, and books full of hot romance.

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IRONHEART



1.

Our history is written in the blood of the holy, the stone of beasts, and the curses of gods.

- Kitezhd Codex

Zori stood in front of a wall of glass windows and watched the snow fall over Moscow. She looked down at the street, waiting for the black town car to arrive, which would mark the beginning of her two weeks of freedom.

Come on, Maxim, leave already, she thought, hopping from foot to foot.

She needed to get out of the penthouse that she'd been locked into for days. She didn't like the memories of that place, crowding around and constantly trying to drag her under.

Zori's earliest recollection of being there was of Maxim taking her by the shoulders, looking deep into her eyes, and saying, "*Magic is not real, Zoria.*"

It was something he had repeated often, especially after her mother's suicide.

Some people would have told their four-year-old ward that her mother had been turned into an angel and flown to heaven. Not Maxim. He was a scientist who did not believe in anything other than what he could see under a microscope. Instead of an easy, comforting lie, Zori had gotten the truth.

Your mother was my best friend, and I cared for her deeply, but she was sick in her mind, and she killed herself. You carry the same sickness inside of you. Always beware of voices in your head that aren't your own, Zoria.

Like Zori would tell him if she did hear anything. Doctor Maxim Bogrov wasn't exactly God's chattiest person, but he had done his best with raising her and keeping her from dying. He had devoted his life to studying the brain disease that had eaten her mother's sanity away.

Zori had been taking his cure since she was fourteen to make sure it never happened to her. Now at twenty-six years old, she was beating the odds.

That was why whenever she got the chance, she escaped Maxim's security team and went to cause some trouble. She was on borrowed time, and she had to make the most of it in any way that she could.

Maxim had a conference in England for two whole weeks, and Zori was going to escape the building if it was the last thing she did. It was infuriating being locked up like a child.

Zori was planning on celebrating her first night out in months, and fuck, did she need it. A dying girl couldn't live on vibrators alone, and with any luck, she would get a few hours of freedom to find a big Russian boy with long hair and lots of tattoos to fuck her blind before Maxim's men tracked her down.

Zori checked the street beneath them again, impatient to get her night started. Her anxiety was up, and she needed to dance and fuck it out of her system. Still no car.

"Hurry the fuck up and leave already," she grumbled.

Zori fidgeted with the necklace she always kept hidden in her bra. It was a pendant with a woman holding a skull in one hand and a bundle of twigs in the other. She didn't know what it meant. It had belonged to her mother, and she had given it to Zori the night she had died.

Zori had memories of her mother, telling her stories of fairytales and magic and saints, but she couldn't remember

who the lady on the pendant was meant to be. She carried it for luck and because it was the only thing Zori had left of her mother. Maxim had gotten rid of everything else. She made sure she kept it out of sight.

Zori sighed and stared out at the city of her birth and her mother's death. They hadn't been back to Moscow since her mother had jumped from the balcony on the other side of the penthouse.

After they had left Moscow, Maxim had promised to look after Zori, and they had lived all over the world. She'd had new teachers and tutors in every country they had lived in. She spoke Russian, English, German, and French fluently. She had a voracious mind, and Maxim had made sure to keep it busy.

She hadn't been allowed to go to public schools or universities, and with the way they moved, there had been no point. When she suggested that she get a job, it had been shut down immediately. Her job was to stay alive and help Maxim with his research.

It wasn't that she was ungrateful to him, but God, she was lonely. He was rarely around, and when he was, it was to make sure she was healthy and was studying whatever new thing had caught her interest. They weren't close in the way she had read other families were, but he was all she had.

The building they were now in was Maxim's main research facility in the Tverskoy District. Like all the other places they had resided in, Zori always had her own apartment-sized rooms, like some kind of princess in a tower.

Or a lab rat in a pretty cage, she thought gloomily and pressed her forehead to the cold glass.

It was why Zori made sneaking out of the buildings they lived in an art form.

Outside, snow was falling again over the city in steady drifts. They had spent the last few months in a warm, tropical climate, so seeing snow again was beautiful.

Zori stared out at the night, her heart fluttering strangely in her chest, yearning for something she couldn't name. All she

knew was that she wasn't going to find it in her cage.

Down on the street below, Maxim's black Mercedes pulled up, and she saw him climb in. She held her breath as it pulled from the curb to take him to the airport, and a grin spread over Zori's face.

"Finally!" She rushed to her wardrobe and pulled on a black low-cut top, her corset, and harness.

Zori might have been a shut-in, but she had full internet access and a weakness for online shopping and music. She had already found a club three blocks away and was going to make sure she blended in. She pulled on her leather pants and boots and went to check her make-up in the bathroom.

Zori had naturally Nordic silver hair and full lips like her mother's. Her blue eyes she got from a father she had never met. She unraveled her braid, letting the waves fall down to her breasts, and painted her lips red.

Zori pulled on a black fur coat that came to the back of her knees before she cracked open the door to her bedroom. It was almost 11 p.m. when the building's security teams changed over, and the daily cleaners left. If she timed it right, she could blend in with the group of people leaving.

It wasn't like the cleaning staff knew what she looked like, and if anyone asked, she would say that she had been working in the labs or offices on another floor. No one would ask. No one ever did because Maxim's staff was so big, there was always a new face.

The new security guard she had encountered that day certainly hadn't known who she was when she flirted with him and stole his key card off his belt.

Amateur, she thought and grinned. Really, someone should have warned him.

Zori had learned if she wore a tight enough top, she could pick most men's pockets.

Zori took a deep, calming breath, slipped out of her bedroom, swiped the card on the fire escape door at the end of the hall, and stepped inside. It was freezing cold, so she pulled

on her leather gloves and hurried as fast as her boots would take her.

She'd learned from Maxim's other buildings that he never installed cameras on the fire escape stairs. Why? She couldn't guess other than he didn't want to pay for them. He might have been a scientist, but dear Uncle Maxim was also a businessman and didn't waste money on things he didn't need.

Zori's legs were jelly by the time she got to the ground level of the building and into the staff room where men and women were pulling on heavy coats and gloves.

Zori pulled the hood of her coat down further before joining the back of a group of women talking loudly about one of their daughter's new babies and how fat and sweet she was.

Zori's heart pounded as they moved through the underground parking lot and out of the staff door. No one stopped her or called her name as she followed the women down the street in calm steps. They rounded a corner, and she was free.

Zori tried not to do a victory dance, but there was a definite skip in her step as she followed the map on her phone. *Almost there, deep breaths.*

Zori heard the club before she spotted the door to it. Two bouncers stood on either side of it, smoking cigarettes. It was still early, so there wasn't a line yet. They both looked her over, and she threw them a flirty smile as they opened the door.

"Have fun, baby," one of them said.

Zori winked at him. "I always do."

The music was loud, and the club was dark, just the way she liked it. Zori left her heavy fur coat with the coat check and let the heady beats draw her down the hallways. There was a bar on either side of the dance floor and shadowy alcoves everywhere. The decor was black and silver with candles melting on tables and along the bar. It was full of people but not so packed that she would have to wait forever for a drink. It was *perfect*.

Zori let out a happy cry and allowed the pull of the dance floor to take her away.

2.

Zori stamped her feet, trying to push out all her frustrations into the movement. The music was loud enough that when the cry of anguish and helplessness broke free from her, it blurred into all the other sounds.

This was what Zori had needed for months—the physical release of not feeling like the patient, the dead girl in waiting, the burden child of a man who wasn't interested in being a parent but had taken on the task anyway.

She was still panting heavily when a tingle spread down her spine and a hand closed on her hip.

“Are you okay?” a deep voice asked in Russian by her ear. “You look like you were getting crushed in this crowd.”

“I'm fine,” she replied in English. She swore and repeated herself in Russian. She turned slowly, still moving with the beat, and let out a startled squeak. “Damn, you're tall.”

The man's face was sharp in the flickering lights. Straight black hair fell to his shoulders, and blue gray eyes shone in amusement. He was *exactly* what she needed, thank all the saints.

“Thank you. Are you sure you are okay?” He was frowning in concern, and she really couldn't figure out why.

Zori took the chance. “I could use a drink. Can I buy you one...”

“Vladik,” he replied, his bulk already parting the crowd to lead her off the dance floor. “And I’ll have a vodka.”

“Of course,” she said, lips twitching into a grin. “I’m Zori.”

She headed for the closest bar. With a light touch of his fingers on her back, Vladik made sure he didn’t lose her in the throng.

Zori’s heart fluttered with adrenaline every time he grazed her bare skin. It had been over a year since her last one-night stand in New York, and the physical contact was jarring her in all the best ways.

Zori squeezed her way in at the end of the bar and gave the guy behind it a little wave.

“What can I get you, beautiful?” he asked, tugging on his lip ring as he stared at her tits.

“Two vodkas on ice,” she called over the noise, passing him the cash. The bar tender’s smile lost some of its shine when Vladik moved to take one of the vodkas. They moved out of the crush of the bar to one of the shadowy alcoves.

“*Na Zdorovie,*” Zori said, tapping her glass against his before they both took a drink.

“What accent am I hearing in amongst your Russian?” Vladik asked in English. Zori’s panties melted a little at his own deep accent.

“All sorts. I’ve lived in a lot of places. I’ve only just come back to Moscow from three years in America,” she replied and let out a small laugh. “It’s the first night out I’ve had in the city actually.”

“First night and all alone?” Vladik smiled, making his stern features soften. “It’s just my luck I found you.”

“Or mine,” Zori said, looking him over from his lace-up leather boots, black jeans, and shirt. He had enough stubble that it would burn deliciously against her skin.

Vladik was staring back at her just as intently. “I like these little straps.” He looped one of his fingers under her leather

harness, stroking down it and lightly grazing the top of her breast.

Zori's breath stuttered. "You do?"

Vladik's eyes darkened, and he gave the strap a tug. "This harness makes me want to clip a lead to you and make you my little puppy."

Zori's pussy clenched, and she quickly had another mouthful of vodka. "You haven't even kissed me yet. I need to assess whether I *want* you clipping a lead to me."

Vladik tugged on the harness, bringing her closer. "If you wanted to be kissed, puppy, you only needed to ask." He tilted her head up and pressed his full lips to hers. It was a soft, tasting caress that had her rising up on tiptoes to meet it. She opened her mouth for him, and a deep growl vibrated through his chest.

Zori was suddenly pressed up against the wall, his leg between hers and his tongue sweeping into her mouth. Zori's hands dug into his shirt, and she kissed him harder, her teeth nipping against his lip. She was on fire, her heart pounding in her ears. He smelled crisp like a winter forest with a spice that she didn't know the name of.

"Fuck, puppy, you are delicious," he said, voice husky as he kissed along her jaw line. "I want to kiss you everywhere." His lips sucked against her ear lobe, and she ground herself against his leg. He chuckled softly. "Sensitive ears? Good to know."

His hands dropped to her hips and pulled her up against him as he kissed down her neck. Zori whimpered, her senses overwhelmed and pussy aching. She shouldn't have been this turned on by some making out and light grinding, but damn, she wanted more.

Vladik's hands slid up her corset. "Can I touch your pretty breasts, puppy?"

"Touch me anywhere," Zori stammered, her own hands tightening on his shirt. No one could see them in their

shadowy nook unless they were really looking. She was fast becoming too horny to care.

Vladik lifted her up as if she weighed nothing. God, she loved strong men. She wrapped her legs around his waist, her hands moving over his chest. He had some thick muscles under his black T-shirt that she would love to get to know better.

Vladik's mouth took hers again, and Zori gasped as he cupped one breast, his thumb brushing over her nipple. He pulled back from her with a wide grin.

"Your nipples are pierced?" he asked and tugged at the small hoop through her top.

Zori let out an involuntary moan, her legs clenching around him. "Y-Yes. Fuck, that feels good."

"I have to taste them, puppy. Please let me," he said, and the hand still on her ass gripped her tighter.

"Yes, do it," Zori panted, her hands going around his neck and into his silken hair. He lifted her higher with one hand, the other one tugging down the side of her top and bra.

His mouth fixed over her nipple, and the soft, wet heat of it made Zori cry out. Fuck, it felt too damn good.

Her fingers tightened in his hair as he toyed with the piercing, sucking and tugging in a way that sent little shock waves straight to her clit. She was going to come with her pussy untouched if he kept it up. She needed to get him into a bathroom stall and get his dick inside of her before she ran out of time.

Vladik's fingers snagged on a chain, and her mother's necklace came free. He stared at the pendant, curiosity and confusion on his face. "What's this?"

"Nothing. Just a good luck charm from my mother," Zori said, taking the necklace from him and shoving it into the pocket of her pants.

Vladik cupped her cheek, his eyes searching her face. "You are not what you seem, my puppy."

“I’m exactly what I seem, and that’s a woman who really needs to be fucked, so if you want to continue this in the bathroom, I’m—”

“Zoria, it is time to go home,” a deep voice said behind Vladik. Zori jumped and quickly made sure she was covered. “Sir, please put her down before I make you.”

Vladik lowered Zori to her feet but didn’t let her go. He moved to reveal Anton, Maxim’s head of security.

Vladik’s lip curled. “She’s not going anywhere that she doesn’t want to.”

“*Zoria*, you had your fun. It’s time to go home. Dr. Bogrov is expecting your call,” Anton said firmly.

Vladik went to move, but she grabbed his arm. “Don’t. It’s fine, Vladik.”

Zori gave his hand a squeeze before moving around him and going to Anton. He somehow already had her coat and put it around her shoulders.

Zori swallowed hard and looked back at Vladik. His eyes were troubled, but his face was stone cold. “It was nice to... Nice to meet you.”

She turned away, her heart clenching, and let Anton lead her out of the club. There was no point in fighting. She’d learned that long ago.

Outside, the snow was falling heavily. Anton opened the back door of an SUV, and she got in. Vladik came out of the club entrance, and she gave him a small wave, helplessness crashing over her. She just wanted one night of freedom.

“You could have taken longer to find me, Anton. Let me have some fun for once,” she said, hating how sad she sounded. In the past, he’d given her at least three hours.

“I’m sorry, Zoria, but Moscow is a dangerous place, and I couldn’t risk it,” Anton replied. “Dr. Bogrov has enemies in this city, and he would never forgive himself if he lost you.”

Zori doubted Maxim would notice she was gone, but instead of saying it, she leaned her head against the glass and

said nothing.



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SET

THOTH

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THE LOST GODDESSES

PERSEPHONE

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THE WRATH OF THE FAE

KISS OF THE BLOOD PRINCE

HEART OF THE WINTER PRINCE

WINGS OF THE NIGHT PRINCE

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