



The Signature Dish

OF THE UNDERWORLD



GWYNETH LESLEY

The Signature Dish of the Underworld

Book 1: The Underworld Novellas

Gwyneth Lesley

Outspoken Ink Press

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*To those who never feel good enough,
who are fiercely independent in an effort to protect themselves from further
hurt – this one is for you.*

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OTHER BOOKS BY GWYNETH LESLEY

THE FEMME FATALE SERIES

(Greek mythology retellings with heartbreaking romances)

[Prometheus' Priestess](#)
[A Lifetime Kind of Love](#)
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PRAISE FOR THE FEMME FATALE SERIES

“Gwyneth Lesley is back with another heart wrenching story! (In a good way). So well written, so much raw emotion. I am in love with how the author can ... not “retell” Greek myths ... but she ‘continues’ the classic stories in a modern day setting. I cannot understand how she does this so well, but it works! Beautiful. Inspiring. Emotional. Challenging.” – *Taylor*

“Continuously so impressed at the way that Gwyneth can make her books so relatable. So much sadness, hope, and inspiration in these pages. Beautifully written and a genius blending with the myths. It’s truly amazing the way that the Femme Fatale series books have each taught me something about self growth or acceptance.” – *Monica*

“Third book in the Femme Fatale series and Gwyneth Lesley’s writing and storytelling still leaves me awed. Harrowing, passionate, vengeance & the ultimate vindication.” – *Steffy Smith, Historical Romance Author*

“The author has a wonderful way of building the story and the characters.” – *Sandra*

“I always read her books so quickly because they’re so easy to

read and so captivating that I don't want to put it down. I love
a myth based retelling that doesn't feel like I'm reading
something written hundreds of years ago." – *Rene*

GREEK GLOSSARY & TERMS IT MAY HELP TO KNOW

The Underworld: made up of three neighbourhoods; Asphodel Meadows, Elysium, and Tartarus.

THE RIVERS BORDERING THE UNDERWORLD

Styx – the river of hate that everyone travels from the mortal realms to the Underworld on

Lethe – the river of forgetfulness

Acheron – the river of pain

Cocytus – the river of lamentation

Phlegethon – the river of fire

THE INHABITANTS OF THE UNDERWORLD

Royals

Hades – God of the Underworld

Queen Persephone – Goddess of Spring and Queen of the Underworld

Charon – the ferryman that takes Souls over the river Styx and into the Underworld

Dionysus – God of Wine

Hecate – Goddess of Magic, Witchcraft, Ghosts and Necromancy

Plutus – Greek God of Wealth & Agricultural Bounty

Commoners

Araes – female spirits that are oath-bound to curse the newly-dead who have sworn false oaths in the mortal realm

Agathodaemon – serpent-like daemon

Keres – female death-spirits

Lamia – a vampiric demon

Nymphs: personifications of nature

Meliae – ash-tree nymphs

Dryad – oak-tree nymphs

Oread – mountain nymphs

Nereids – sea nymphs

Souls – newly-dead mortal souls

ITEMS YOU'LL FIND IN THE UNDERWORLD

Éos – a cash register of sorts

Ibrik – Rae's coffee pot

Kylix – a drinking cup that was a broad shallow bowl with two handles

Véa – the parchment with the underworlds daily announcements

Liquid palladium – mined from Tartarus, this replaces all mortal metal in the underworld

CHAPTER ONE: A watched pot

The first Soul to walk through the doors was Simon: a flabby flat-nosed phantom of a man who came to the bistro every day, at eleven every morning.

Rae already had a pot of warmed Ibrik waiting for him, served in Simon's favourite kylix; which was why he kept coming back day after day. She had different kylix's for each of the regulars she saw every day. It was the little things like that which made a difference to this place.

He sat at the table underneath the one domed window in the bistro, where he read the latest from the *véa*; the parchment with the Underworld's daily announcements. Rae watched as Simon smiled at something he read and lifted the cup to his mouth. The very act transformed the kylix into a mask; the painted eyes under the rim became Simon's, the handles his ears, and the round base became an open mouth. That way, those drinking were always conversing and looking at who they were dining with. It was a sign of polite society that separated the meadows from *other* places, like the drinking holes in Tartarus.

"Anything good in the *véa* today?" Rae asked when he was finished, refilling his kylix, this time with warmed spiced wine. Simon didn't have to ask – it was custom for him on the fifth day of every week to have a glass of spiced wine, as it had been for the five decades he'd been coming here.

"Just the usual. It's all about how Greeks and Trojans keep on coming to the Underworld. Apparently, Charon is overworked and the river Styx is still swamped, even with the new housing developments. Plus, there's turf wars in the suburbs about who gets to live where."

"You'd think they'd have realised that petty squabbles don't matter now they're dead."

"Ah, Hades will come sort them out. No one wants to face the wrath of a god, much less one they have to spend the rest of eternity with."

“If they don’t sort it out, they can expect him to make them drink from the Lethe and forget,” Rae warned.

“Apparently there are already hundreds of soldiers that are lining up at that river.”

“I’m not surprised,” she said. “I’d want the Lethe to take my memories of war too.”

“I wouldn’t.” Simon surprised her by saying. “I’d want to remember what I’d done. A life without memories would be an ache in your chest that would never leave once you were here.”

“Perhaps you’d forget that too.”

“I don’t think so. A life without a story – some part of your soul would remember that.”

Rae pursed her lips at that, nodded, and moved on to serve a nymph that had wandered in and headed for the counter.

By midday a steady stream of customers had trickled in, and the lunch hour rush had begun. Despite being an Arae, Rae’s reputation for some of the most delicious food in the realm preceded her, and even the pious creatures that tried to avoid even being *close* to her kind – for fear that she was one of the ancient originals evils not to be approached – came in for some of her baked goods.

The food cabinet was filled with many goods that had been adapted from the mortal recipes Rae had collected from Souls that had accidentally strolled into the bistro. They didn’t know why they ended up in this area of Asphodel Meadows, only that they had a compulsion to travel there, to see her. It was an invisible thread that tugged them to her – the Souls that had broken an oath, a promise, a vow, always sought one of her kind out; for redemption.

Endless, incessant, redemption.

When they asked what they could do, she asked them for a recipe.

Over time, she had gathered as many recipes as she could. Many of them had to be adapted to work with the ingredients

she could gather from the Underworld and its meadows. The cabinet was now stocked with the products of these half-earthside, half-underworld recipes. There was fig and spikenard leaf salad freshly tucked into homemade wraps that soothed fears, corn fritters served with a pomegranate and vinegar glaze that immediately filled the consumer with positive thoughts. Rae's filo pastries with fig and creamy goats cheese warmed the cold blood of Souls, while the pan-fried fish caught from the Lethe were stuffed with lotus flowers, dill and lemon, and made anyone eating it temporarily forget everything other than their latest task.

The meat that the mortals sacrificed earthside ended up down at the meat market in the meadows; cows, lambs and pigs all made for juicy sausage rolls wrapped in the thinnest layer of pastry Rae could manage to make. Not that Rae often managed to get any meat from the market – many of the vendors wouldn't sell to her for the same reason the pious ones tried to avoid her. It was one of those old urban legends that had spread, and Rae had become tired of trying to correct them. She figured if she could just *show* them what she could do then maybe she could change the narrative that Araes were to be avoided at all costs.

Not that everyone down here believed that, of course. When Rae did manage to get a butcher to agree to sell her the burnt bits that were so charred no one else wanted them, Rae caramelised them in such a way that everyone came in to try her 'sweet and savoury' sausage rolls.

This was why Rae focused her energy not on her pre-disposed destiny of haranguing oathbreakers, or correcting those of the old beliefs, but on her dream. She diverted all her energy to her beloved copper pots and pans in the kitchen at Geras' Grub.

The sweet section of her cabinet was just as impressive. Lemon and pomegranate seed muffins cleansed the palette. Apple ice, a fudge-like substance made from the juice of an apple and frozen in the depths of hell, was also a popular choice among the patrons. Big billowy lavender meringues gave a Soul courage before a speaking event, grapefruit and

pomegranate bliss balls gave them a healthy glow and complexion, and ambrosia gave ... an orgasm.

Rae's ambrosia had become the signature dish for "Geras' Grub: the little lunchtime bistro that's not to be missed." That was what the *véa* had called her dish in Rae's first food critic review, four centuries ago now. It was not the traditional honeyed version the gods up on Olympus drank. Instead, it was a cake slice made of yoghurt from goats milk, homemade marshmallows, honey, and biscuits all mixed together.

It wasn't often that there were any ambrosia slices left come the end of a lunchtime shift. That review had turned Geras' Grub from an old, dingy tavern that no one would be caught dead in, to a bustling lunchtime corner bistro that had a steady stream of customers. It was why the owner, Geras, kept her around. Well that and the fact he didn't actually *like* doing any of the work. He just liked the fruits of Rae's labour.

But today had been slower than most.

"Three ambrosias to finish off, Keres?" Rae asked the final table of ladies, who had been gossiping and cackling increasingly loudly throughout the lunch service.

The three females nodded and made general noises of agreement with one another.

"I should think we want three ambrosias and a bottle of golden wine," one of them said to another, refusing to look Rae in the eye. They wouldn't look, no matter what she did. But they would eat the food – and that was what mattered more to Rae.

"Of course," Rae nodded and headed back behind the counter to collect the wine kylix's and the golden liquid that Rae bought privately from one of Dionysus' acolytes.

"You know we're supposed to be locking up in an hour," Geras grumbled. "Not serving those Keres more wine and waiting around here."

"I'll wait for them and then lock up, Geras." Rae rolled her eyes when her back was turned, while she grabbed the cold ambrosia slices. "You can go home to your wife."

“Too right,” Geras grumbled, opening the éos, a cash register of sorts, which was filled with slips of parchment – tokens they were called – and pilfered through the ones collected for the day. As the owner, he got his pick of tokens first.

The coins that the dead travelled into the Underworld with only paid the ferryman, Charon, to carry them across the river from the mortal realm. Once they were here, Souls had to settle on what tokens they would like to trade. That way, rich mortals did not necessarily make rich souls. It was a clean slate, of sorts. Something their Queen Persephone had introduced after her time in the mortal realm.

On each token was a favour, or an offering, that the recipient gifted in reasonable exchange for the food, drink, and service of the bistro. Some daemons offered to guide the recipient to their dream jobs, others could make it rain on your patch of land (or that of an enemies). Some tokens offered love potions, success, windfalls, luck.

Just because it was the Underworld didn't mean creatures didn't still crave all the things they always had before.

Rae watched Geras with displeasure. His long, gnarled fingers and nails that looked like talons flicked through each token. When it got to a token Geras liked the look of, he would laugh wheezily to himself and pocket it. Rae had collected over two dozen tokens today, stocked the kitchen, and ran most – if not all – of the tables.

Geras, meanwhile, had spent the entire time interrupting her tables with tales of his own life, and occasionally clearing a stack of plates. Rae couldn't figure out if he was lonely and his wife had stopped listening to him back home, or if he was just unaware that the customers did not want to talk to him.

But this was Geras' bistro. He got to decide who he talked to and which tokens he wanted to take. Rae was left with the rest. That was the deal they had made way back when she'd started here, desperate for a chance to be taken seriously as a cook. Desperate to make her dream come true.

Geras grinned at her. “I’ll leave you with these. I’m sure there will be something useful in here for a cursed one like you.”

Rae’s smile was tight. “Thank you, Geras.”

The fact was, she couldn’t afford to piss him off. He was one of the only daemon-run eateries in Asphodel that would have her. She had to have tokens to survive. Sure, no one would starve to ‘death’ in a place where death was the constant, but survival of the spirit was a different beast. Survival of the spirit meant you actually had to enjoy the existence you lived.

So Rae sat on the stool while the Keres cackled and gossiped, occasionally throwing her scorned looks when they thought she wasn’t looking, and painted a new scene onto one of the cracked kylix cups that needed a bit of love and attention. Rae was painting it sea-foam green – the colour of the ocean Aphrodite walked out of. Looking up every so often to check on the table and make sure they didn’t need anything from her, Rae continued her task dutifully and in painstaking detail. Finally the ladies got up to leave without so much as a goodbye, throwing their tokens on the table as if they were used serviettes.

The door squeaked shut behind the last of them and the bistro – who Rae had come to consider a good friend over the last four centuries – gave a visible sigh.

“I know,” Rae smiled, stroking the wooden countertop. “Another day done. Tomorrow we begin festival preparations though, so you should get some rest. It’s going to be a busy next couple of weeks.”

The door opened in agreement.

“Yes,” Rae agreed. “I’ll go home and get some rest, too.”

CHAPTER TWO: Vraveío Astéri

(The Greek Prize Star)

Every century in the Asphodel Meadows, there was the Vraveío Astéri festival, otherwise known to the locals as the Hades cook-off.

Asphodel Meadows was like any other city earthside, with suburbs and shops, roads and roadkill. Rae was always amused when she saw a screech-owl lying in the road. They lay there for a moment, then sat up dazed, before they went to hunt down whichever idiot had run them over.

Rae's suburb was a leafy district, home to more ash-tree nymph Meliae than anything else, but she loved it for its quiet understatedness. Her home was a cavern under one of the roots of the largest ash trees in the area. She merely had to take one right turn at the end of her cobblestone street, carry on straight for three hundred metres or so underneath the awning of ash tree leaves, cross the road, and then she was at the bistro.

Unlocking the tree stump door, Rae got to work setting up the kitchens for the day. This would be the year she would win the cook-off.

The rules were simple: the festival was held in the first year of every new century and ran for twelve days. During that time the contestants had to produce a festival dish – the ultimate showcase of the best produce and chef talent Asphodel Meadows had to offer to their queen, Persephone. Hades then presented the winning dish to his bride and queen. Hence why they all called it Hades cook-off instead of its fancy festival title.

Each century the festival had a theme and the dish had to include a key ingredient. This year's theme was The Kallistē Clash, and the key ingredient was apples.

The Kallistē Clash was still all anyone could talk about down here in the Underworld, even though it had been nine years since the clash had occurred. Hera, the Goddess of Marriage, Athena the Goddess of Wisdom, and Aphrodite, the

Goddess of Love and Beauty, had all been attending a wedding, when Eris – the Goddess of Discord – had thrown a beautiful golden apple inscribed with the words “for the most beautiful” onto the wedding buffet. According to the Greek gossip mill, the goddesses had squabbled over it so incessantly, Zeus had let a young mortal prince decide who was the most beautiful.

Now there were a whole host of starving Greek and Trojan soldiers walking along the Styx river and through the doors of the bistro.

All of this because Paris had chosen Aphrodite, who had promised him the love of the world’s most beautiful woman. It was a pity then that the woman in question, Helen of Sparta, was already married to King Menelaus. And so, when Paris had stolen her away on the ships, war had ensued.

The majority of the Underworld was happy about a good bloody war – it meant new customers. Business was good, the Underworld economy thriving. The only ones who didn’t particularly appreciate it were those of Rae’s kind – the Arae that were hounded by the newly-dead who had sworn false oaths in the mortal realm. The new arrivals – simply known as the Souls to locals – thought they would find absolution with an Arae, unknowing it was the deities job to take vengeance on them, however they saw fit.

Rae turned on Ibrik – a small brass pot with its long spout whistling as it heated Rae’s coffee blend on a small spherical gas element that the Souls always commented looked like a camp stove. Whatever that was.

The counter stocked, the Ibrik coffee brewing, Rae moved to checking the table set ups were perfect. She’d done them yesterday afternoon, but sometimes, when the bistro was being playful, it rearranged things. It was a little game they played together.

Just because she was only the supervisor did not mean she did not hold Geras’ Grub to the same standards as ... *other* restaurants in the area.

Each table was made of a dark wood, so brown as to be black. The cutlery was freshly polished palladium mined from deep within Tartarus, laid on brown linen napkins. In the centre of the tables were small plant cuttings that she had taken from her own garden over time, nourished with Asphodel soil, and encased in glass bowls. Watering each plant, straightening each piece of cutlery until it was perfect, Rae surveyed the place and nodded to herself. Yes, this would do for the day.

One day, Rae wouldn't just be the supervisor of this place – she'd own it. That was the dream. Perhaps with the prize tokens Hades offered with the festival, this would be the century it would finally come true.

Ibrik whistled.

“Yes, I know.” Rae chuckled, turning to her brass companion. “You're my biggest cheerleader.”

The brass pot rattled – an indignant protest.

“Oh? You aren't my biggest fan?” Rae widened her eyes at the pot in mock surprise.

At that moment, the door tinkled. There was no bell above the door, the greeting itself coming from the door as it opened, its voice singing through the air at whoever had walked through.

Rae turned towards it, and her surprise was immediately replaced with a scowl.

“What are you doing here?”

The agathodaemon slithered in, a cocky smile on his face. He reached the edge of the counter, opposite Rae, and grabbed a handful of pomegranate seeds from the offering bowl in front of the éos. The offering bowl was similar to what the mortals called a ‘tip jar’, though there was no need for tip jars in the Underworld, given that mortal currency didn't work here.

Instead, the offering was for their queen – the goddess, Persephone. The queen to their lord Hades, and the love of his immortal life. It was thanks to her that the plants in Asphodel Meadows now thrived as the mortal realms vegetation did.

Before that, the flowers had been in eternal death. Beautiful, but, with no hope.

Now, there was hope.

The agathodaemon opened that wide mouth of his and poured the pomegranate seeds down his throat.

“Are you drunk?!”

Taking from an offering bowl was as good as insulting the goddess herself.

“This early in the day? You think so little of me, my Rae of sunshine?”

“I think nothing of you, Garth.” Rae pinned him with a stare, one hand on her hip.

A look like that on a Soul would have worked. Instead, Garth laughed. Loudly.

“Liar. Besides, Persephone won’t miss a few. Not when she sees what I’m making in her honour for the cook-off.”

He was no mere mortal Soul. He was a daemon. Worse than that he was *the* daemon that people in the earthly realm paid libations to after a meal. They would smash their drinks on the ground, singing his praises and thanking him for the food on their plates.

“So,” Garth niggled at her. “What are you making for the cook-off?”

“None of your gods-damned business,” she grumbled.

“Of course it’s my business, Sunshine. You’re my competition.”

Rae tried not to smile at that, because for the last four centuries Garth and his restaurant just down the road from her – Zeus’ Watering Hole – had won the cook-off. Rae had never been to his restaurant but she knew why he was winning. It wasn’t based on talent. Garth won because of the libations. Every time a mortal ritually poured water, wine, oil, milk, or honey in honour of the gods – Garth grew in popularity. The

more popular he was, the more powerful he grew down here in Asphodel.

The fact that he considered her actual competition this year was a good sign.

“Why are you here?”

Garth let out a breath, his wavy dark hair blowing up before settling again around his oval face. The light hanging from the bistro highlighted the jade green tints in his otherwise black hair, making it look like snakes were hugging his skull.

Rae was about to tell Garth to forget the question, she was busy and he should leave, when Ibrik let out a low whistling howl in warning.

“Fine,” she muttered under her breath, turning and taking her friend off the element.

“Can I have a cup?”

“No.”

“I’ll tell you why I’m here if you’ll give me one.”

“I suspect you’ll tell me anyway.” Rae threw a shrewd look over her shoulder as she began to pour the coffee into a kylix.

It wasn’t that she disliked Garth. It was just ... unfair. It was unfair that the mortals paid him libations without knowing what it meant. It was unfair that he grew more powerful simply because people believed in him. It was unfair that he won the competition every year, and the prize tokens from Hades, when he didn’t even need them. Not like she did.

“I need a favour.”

Now he was just messing with her.

“What could a good daemon like you possibly need from me, a cursed one?”

“I need you to work in my kitchens tonight.”

Rae almost dropped the kylix holding the molten hot Ibrik coffee. “Excuse me?”

She turned to face Garth as he leaned against one of the tables. His corded forearms bulged, but Rae's eyes zeroed in on the fact that one of his wide hands had skewed the napkin just twenty or so degrees.

That was annoying.

"I need you to work in my kitchens tonight," Garth repeated, a smile in his tone.

Rae roamed her eyes over him, eyes still narrowed, as she watched his body language for an explanation. Garth was not a young daemon. He'd been in Asphodel since Rae was a new deity almost a millennium ago, but that grin on his face and the way his dark eyes twinkled gave him a permanent youth. The muscles in his neck were thick, which translated to a wide torso, a dark sprinkling of coarse black hair on his chest that was just visible from the short chiton tied over one shoulder. But it was his skin beneath his chiton that gave away he was an agathodaemon.

Every inch of him from the head down was made of snake skin rather than human flesh. It almost looked like a tattoo, and as he leaned back on the table further, crossing one leg over the other, the scales shimmered.

"Why?" Rae asked.

"Because my sous chef is ... unavailable."

"Unavailable?"

Garth shrugged. "We had a disagreement."

"What kind of disagreement?"

"He lost his head over something silly. It doesn't matter."

"That depends. Did he lose his head figuratively or literally?"

Garth grinned. "He had three. He could afford to lose one."

Rae laughed. "And people think I'll be the one to curse them if they don't like my food."

Garth continued to smile at her, his scales glistening under the swinging bistro light. Rae looked up and scowled at the

playful chandelier.

“Cut it out,” she told it.

The bulbs simply glowed brighter. Rae knew what it was getting at, the glow showering Garth in angel light.

“I know you’ve always wanted to work in a real kitchen. This would be your chance. Come play in mine.”

When Rae didn’t reply, he continued. “At the very least, you might get to see what I’m preparing for the festival tomorrow.” Garth wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“If I’m your competition, why would you give me that advantage?” Nothing in this place was done without calling in a favour later down the line. Not even from a good daemon.

Garth shrugged. “Like I said, Sunshine. I’m short staffed. I need your help.”

At that moment the door opened, this time on a groan.

“Good morning Geras,” Rae said without even glancing towards the bistro entryway. It only ever groaned for its old, tired owner.

“Think about it,” Garth told her. He rose up off the table to his full height again, knocking the table setting even further askew, and turned towards the door.

“Geras,” he nodded at the other old daemon, who was hunched over, his bald head shining underneath the light.

“Garth,” Geras grumbled.

Then he was gone.

“Why,” Geras grumbled again, “have you not put the baked goods in the cabinet yet, Arae?” His pointed nose and chin drooped naturally towards the floor, until it looked like someone had attempted to melt his flesh off and had only half finished the job. It left him with a permanently displeased look on his face, often directed at Rae.

“Sorry, Geras. I’ll do that now.”

“And why isn’t this table set like the others?”

“I’ll get on that, too.”

Ibrik whistled out a sad song.

“Tell me about it,” Rae muttered.

CHAPTER THREE: An apple a day

...

It was four in the afternoon by the time Rae headed home, an hour later than usual. Along the way, she stopped as she always did at one of Hecate's stores, run by one of the witches devotees.

Like all potions and trinket stores that honoured their allegiance to Hecate, the walls were lined with bottles and potions of all shapes, colours and sizes. Herbs and dried flowers hung from the rafters, and the stones on the floor were warmed, leaving a beautiful – yet heady – aroma as the heat rose. Rae found she could never stay in one of these stores for long without developing a migraine. Despite that, she often visited as they had the only things that would take her dishes to the next level.

“Ah Rae,” the kind Oread, a mountain nymph as pale as snow with jagged cheekbones, smiled as Rae walked into the shop. “Are you ready for tomorrow?”

“I'm hoping you're about to tell me I am, Irid.”

Irid remained smiling, those grooves around her eyes reminders of her mountain lineage. They looked like permanent wrinkles. She, otherwise, gave no further answer.

“Well? Do you have it?” Rae asked impatiently.

“You have to know I do.”

Irid smiled further, then reached underneath her counter and produced a crumpled brown paper bag.

Rae's face lit up with excitement before she looked either side of her, making sure no one else was in the shop.

As Irid rolled down the paper bag, a golden apple began to shine on the dark marble countertop.

“Where did you get it from?” Rae breathed in awe, staring at it.

“From the Garden of Hesperides.”

Rae shook her head. “That’s not possible.”

The garden was, according to rumour, in a spot near the edge of the world under the power of the Olympians, and inaccessible to anyone else. Hercules had been the only one to get in, and even then he’d tricked a Titan into helping him. These apples – in the mortal realm – would be worth a fortune.

Down here, it was the thrill of getting one that had Irid agreeing to find it for Rae. That and the fact she also didn’t like Garth winning the festival every century.

“It is, and I did,” Irid said in that no-nonsense way of hers. “Well,” she continued, “Hercules did – and after that whole palava of giving them to King Eurytheus, only for Athena to return them to the garden again, it seemed fitting that one or two went missing ...”

“Thank you, Irid. Really.” Rae gently scrunched up the brown paper bag again to hide the apple from view.

“What are you going to do with it?” Irid asked, leaning forward on the counter slightly. Usually, Rae would let her in on her recipes, but not this one. Not this time.

“I’m going to eat it.”

Back home, Rae let herself in through the only tree door painted red in the meadows.

She dropped the keys on the wooden side table and rubbed the vines that had begun to curl up and around the mirror.

“Hello, girl. Good to see you.”

The vine purred in agreement.

Rae sighed and padded down the hallway, turning right towards a small kitchen. There was only enough room for a dining table that doubled as a desk under the window, where Rae sat doing the sums of how many tokens it would take to buy the bistro off Geras night after night. The kitchen island she loved to cook at overlooked the dining table desk. With only a little cupboard space behind her to store ingredients and

crookery, which had been chipped and repaired too many times to count, everything in this room had its place.

Rae took the golden apple out of the brown paper bag and set it on the table. She took a seat at the table and stared at it.

She had practised the dish for the festival a dozen times in the last week alone. It worked. The only thing she needed to check was that the consistency of the filling and the colouring would be a perfect match to the original apple.

But, what if, when she ate this apple – it invoked some sort of state of mind? What if she forgot what she was supposed to be doing? It would help if she had someone else here, someone who could keep her on track if something was to happen.

Rae had no one. She hadn't had anyone to help her for a long time.

She glanced up at the clock on the wall that hung above the concave arch to the hallway. It blinked at her with the eyes of old Chronus, keeper of time. Five o'clock in the late afternoon. She should spend the evening here, understanding the composition of the Hesperidian apple. The cook-off, after all, began tomorrow.

But the temptation to work in Garth's kitchen ... *that* was the stuff of legends. The fact that he considered her good enough to even offer work in his kitchens meant she might finally be getting somewhere. And, she might get a sneak peek at what his festival dish was, be able to get her head around what she needed to do to beat him this century.

If she was going to go, she had to get ready and changed now. It was likely Garth would expect her to work until well into the night – dining hours tended to run on a little longer down here. So she'd only get a few hours sleep between the end of the shift and getting this apple recipe exactly right. She could get it all done.

Couldn't she?

Shaking her head clear of self-doubt, Rae got up and padded across the hallway and into the other rooms in the house. The

first was a bedroom just large enough to fit a double bed shoved against the wall and a chest of drawers, both made of ash-tree oak. The latter was shoved against the end of the bed.

On the opposite end, by the headboard, was a door that led to the equally small bathroom. It had nothing more than the basic essentials that dealt with waste – toilet, shower, sink. Just because it was the Underworld didn't mean they didn't have plumbing.

Sewage was a real issue when you had Souls trying to drink from the rivers.

Turning the shower to scalding hot, Rae waited for the hornwort plants on the shower floor – all trimmed so as not to be prickly but exfoliating – to freshen up. Once they had turned from a dull to bright green, Rae knew it was the right temperature to step into.

She washed quickly. She was an Arae. That didn't mean she had some weird form, another common misconception by the Souls. The humans forgot – they had been made in the gods image. She was, technically, one of the “originals.” She had what the mainstream called a mortal body.

Ok, so hers was slightly curvier than most of her kind. Most Arae were tall and lithe. Others would suspect that Rae would be too but – surprisingly – staying on your feet all day did not help you shift the weight. Instead, Rae found she under-ate when she was working in the bistro all day then gorged on her own creations as she tested recipes over and over again at night. Besides, she just didn't generally have the disposition the others of her cursed kind seemed to have. Perhaps it was because she didn't hound those who broke their oaths by literally chasing them across the Asphodel plains.

Instead, Rae soaped heavy breasts, a stomach that still carried the angry red marks where her chiton cinched at the waist, wide hips and thick thighs. So she was slightly on the thicker side – that didn't make her slow. She was in and out of the shower within five minutes and redressed in a fresh white chef chiton.

She grabbed a jacket, the keys, and her purse carrying a few tokens (the rest she hid in a cookie jar in the kitchen for when she knew she needed them), assuming Garth was going to pay her for this favour tonight. Then Rae locked her red door, headed down her street, and turned right towards Geras' Grub. At the crossing she took a left, turning her back on the only job she'd ever loved, and walking the five hundred metres to *the* place to eat in town: Zeus' Watering Hole.

The legend, no doubt started by Garth, was that the name had come from the fact that Zeus himself had been spotted dining here when he travelled down from Olympus, on one of his rare visits. It made sense. After all, the two deities that got drinks smashed on the floor in their honour were Zeus and Garth. Perhaps the two had made a pact of some kind.

Rae took a deep breath as she looked up at the mauve neon sign.

She could do this ... she could do this ... she could do this.

She couldn't do this.

About to turn on her heel and go, a voice to her right stopped her in her tracks. "Hello, my Rae of sunshine."

"Garth."

There he was, leaning against the doorway to the right, which was clearly the staff entrance. The other door, the one Rae had been facing when she was looking up at the sign, was the customer entrance. With its big, black foreboding double doors, decorated with metal studs, the place screamed 'best place in town'.

Black and purple were the chosen colours of their lord and lady, Hades and Persephone, and this *was* the place that had won the festival every century since its inception. It was intimidating. Rae had half expected she would have been turned away by the maitre d if she had entered through that door, even though she had an invitation here tonight – albeit to work. It's why she'd turned away to leave.

But there was Garth, looking at her, *leaning* in that lazy way of his against the door frame, that cocky smile on his face as

he watched her.

“You came.”

“Well – what were you going to do without a sous chef?”
Rae grumbled.

Garth’s grin widened further. “I do so like when you’re grouchy. Come on, Sunshine, come and meet the team.”

CHAPTER FOUR: Kitchen ... nightmares?

Garth's kitchen was the stuff of dreams.

Rae watched as pots and pans flew overhead into chefs hands when they reached up for them. Knives did the dicing of vegetables themselves, even the dishes in the sink washed themselves – though there was a big, burly nymph of some kind overseeing the latter.

“When the humans adopted AI, we figured out a way for it to translate down here,” Garth told her. “AI and god-given powers are a heady combination.”

Rae was so busy staring at all the moving pieces as they whizzed around, pieces she would love to have in her kitchen, that when Garth stopped she almost bumped into him.

“Careful there, Sunshine. Can't have you being clumsy in my kitchen.”

Rae flinched at her first mistake.

Garth pretended not to notice and put one hand on her shoulder, gesturing to the chef in front of them. “This is Lexie. She's on the grill tonight.”

“I'm on the grill every night,” the voluptuous creature sent Garth a sharp look, her long canines glistening as she did so.

“You're a Lamia – a vampiric demon,” Rae blurted out. The minute the words left her mouth, Rae had to physically stop herself from flinching again at her faux pas. Of course, Lexie knew what she was. If it wasn't for Garth's hand still resting heavily on her shoulder, Rae might have tried to recoil into herself.

“Don't worry, *Sunshine*,” Lexie threw a smirk at Garth, “You aren't my type. I prefer them ... young. And male. Preferably warm-blooded.”

“And bleeding,” Garth muttered under his breath.

“I heard that,” Lexie quipped.

“I meant you to. Come on, *Rae*, let’s introduce you to the rest of our crew.”

The chef on fish duty was a tall and lanky male water nymph, named Yani. The other water nymphs – Nereids – in the team were also males. Rae could tell because their hair was always permanently wet. There was the big burly one she had seen supervising the dishes – Ross – and apparently the other one was out front as a bartender, called Savvas.

The pastry chef was a dainty ash-tree nymph named Melamene. Like Rae, her name was indicative of her kind. Rae watched as Melamene loaded some sort of cream that shimmered into a piping bag. It wriggled in her hand until it was full, and only then did Melamene move on to placing berries into a dark sauce.

“I’ve never seen a compote that dark before,” Rae noted.

Melamene looked up from her hunched over position and smiled at Rae. “You wouldn’t have. This one is a special blend. Right, Garth?”

“Right.”

Before Rae could ask more, Garth ushered her through the kitchen and out into the front of the pub.

“And this is where they all come to feast.”

The front of the pub, Rae suddenly realised, made this place look deceptively small. Because, before her eyes were four separate dining areas. The one immediately to her right was a lavish indoor garden, like a greenhouse room, thriving with the same plants that coated her shower floor, except here it was a feature wall. With the plants hanging overhead, Rae imagined it felt like dining in a lush forest garden.

“Most of our nymph customers prefer to dine in there,” Garth told her.

Opposite the garden room was another section with two feature walls. One wall was a floor to ceiling wine rack, with every kind and type of wine the gods and deities enjoyed imaginable. It was a statement of an establishment doing very well to have that many bottles on display. Then the

perpendicular wall confirmed who drank from those bottles, the area littered with carvings of who had come and dined here over the years. Rae couldn't see them all in detail from where she stood, but she'd put a prized token on the fact that all of the current twelve Olympians were on it.

Adjacent to what Rae called the 'wealth corner' in her mind, was a section that reminded Rae the most of the bistro. Directly behind her was a machine for the serving staff to put through orders. In front of her were benches for the customers to sit along, a total of twelve tables, and a coffee machine at the other end. Which was where a tall female deity was scolding an even taller, gangly young dryad as he attempted to make coffee.

Before Rae could look around and explore the fourth and final section of the restaurant, Garth called out.

"Nika, get over here. There's someone I'd like you to meet."

The Arae that walked towards her was the definition of perfection for her species. Lithe and elegant, where Rae was stout, the only thing she shared with the female Garth called Nika was the same hair and eye colour. Both were a pearl white, which was often why the mortals thought Araes haunted them. Though they did have other, cuter, features – like their little pointed pixie ears that stuck out beyond their hair. Rae's hair was usually tied in a low plait, so it didn't get in her way in the kitchen.

Nika's, by contrast, was a short sharp bob that accentuated her sharp cheekbones and perfect heart-shaped face.

"Nice to meet you," Rae said as confidently as she could.

Nika's thin lips thinned further and her eyes – pearl white with the lightest blue pupils, so light they were barely noticeable – narrowed.

"For the record, I don't think you belong here." Nika looked her up and down. "But Garth thinks you're worth a trial run for some reason, and he always get what he wants." Nika shrugged.

"Nika," Garth warned.

Nika smiled at him saccharinely before turning to Rae. "Let's see if you really can play with the big dogs."

With that, she sauntered off.

"Don't mind her," Garth muttered before she was out of earshot. "Nika can be a little ... prickly."

"You don't say."

He grinned at Rae. "Come on, let me show you the rest of the place."

The final section of the restaurant was a cosy little nook of four tables and then a long galley bar.

"We use The Nook for guests looking for a little more privacy," Garth explained. "Then the tables that you find in the galley are bar service only, but customers can still order food at the bar."

"The bar tables are numbered I take it?"

"Yeah, it will come through on the ticket. Don't worry, I run a tight ship here. Easy enough to follow once you find the rhythm of the place."

At that moment, a fireball exploded from a cauldron on the bar that was being manned by the bartender.

"Savvas!"

"Sorry, sorry. Just trying out something new for the festival, boss!"

"You want to try something new *now*?!" Garth groaned.

"Well I thought of it this morning, you see. Instead of dipping the apple ..."

"Ah, ah, ah! Don't reveal trade secrets just yet, Savvas. I want our little Rae here to experience the dish first. Get her to give me her feedback."

"You do?" Rae looked up at him, puzzled. This place was turning out more unusual than she expected. She'd *expected* them all to be hoity-toity, up themselves, winners. Not a team that seemed at ease with one another. It made her hesitate

slightly. Particularly when Nika had mentioned this was a job trial.

Surely, she'd been joking?

“Of course.” Garth grinned, as if sensing her hesitation – a crack in her hardened exterior. “But, for now, we have a dinner service to prepare for.”

Heading back to the kitchen, Garth clapped his hands together and everyone snapped to attention.

“Listen up, team. I know you’re putting your finishing touches on your preparations for tonight, but seeing as we have a new team member joining us for the evening, I want to remind everyone of how tonight is going to go.”

Rae gulped. She hoped it was inaudible.

“It’s going to be a slower night than usual. The festival kicks off tomorrow, so everyone is saving themselves for that. Slower does not mean sloppy, you hear me? You send a sloppy dish up to my pass and I will gut you myself, am I clear?” Garth smiled as he said it.

“Yes, Chef.” They all chorused.

“Now, because she doesn’t know how this is going to go, Rae here is going to be on the pass, plating for me. Help her out. Don’t waste her time letting her plate something that you know isn’t up to the standard I’d expect. Don’t let me down, and don’t think you can let it slide just because she’s a newbie. Got it?”

“Yes, Chef.”

“Well, then. Let’s have some fun.”

CHAPTER FIVE: A helping hand

If this was Garth's idea of slow, Rae was definitely out of her depth. This was why he'd recruited her, she realised. To prove she couldn't compete with him.

Sure, a few tickets had trickled in at the beginning, but the minute it hit seven o'clock – BAM – it was like everyone and their dog wanted to come in here.

"Don't worry," Garth chuckled as he saw Rae stare wide-eyed at the ticket machine as it spat out a flurry of three more tickets.

"We only have one seating tonight. Tomorrow it will be double this, maybe even triple if Nika can flip the tables like she usually does. You just have to ride the wave for the next hour and a half. You think you can do that?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Garth chuckled again. "No, you don't."

With his sleeves rolled up, Garth took the time to show her how he wanted each dish plated at the pass. One run through was all she got. Then Rae had to commit it to memory and replicate it to perfection for every other ticket. Essentially, it was copying and replicating how a dish was put together – something anyone could do if they were good with precision and paying attention. You didn't need professional training to do it, which was good, because Rae didn't have any qualifications beyond her own experience.

Side by side, they worked together in silence while surrounded by a crashing symphony of a kitchen team stretching its legs. Occasionally, Garth would yell out a ticket, the team would chorus "Yes, Chef!" and then he'd shout instructions or timings when he needed certain things sent up to Rae on the pass. Pots and pans whizzed and clattered overhead, while plates came back carried by the lanky waiter, Tomas, who Rae learnt was on his first training shift too.

"Here," Garth said quietly to her, as Rae hesitated to place a crab claw between the three oysters that finished off the Styx

seafood chowder. His hand covered hers as he guided her to pinch the tongs – that squealed in protest – and placed the claw directly in the centre.

“Oh hush – you like it,” Garth said to the tongs, before going back to his place on the pass and turning to Rae. “You have to do it with confidence, like you do for the dishes at Geras’. Don’t worry, you’re not going to mess it up.”

“In theory, I know that. In reality, these aren’t my dishes. It’s nerve wracking,” Rae muttered as she attempted to try again with the next chowder on the ticket.

Garth quirked an eyebrow at her as he realised what she meant. “You made all those dishes at the bistro? No one else helps you back in the kitchen?”

“Nope. I’ve never had help in my life. Not sure what to do with it if I was offered it,” Rae laughed.

The laughter quickly died when she caught Garth looking at her like she was a lost little deity, unsure of her place in the world.

“You’re doing great. Just ... trust yourself.”

Rae nodded and focused on the new plate that had slid into place, her jaw still clenched. A ticket waved its corner at Rae to remind her what dish she was supposed to be focusing on next.

“Right. Trust myself.”

It was hard, though. While Rae was used to sandwiches and baked goods, taking decadent ingredients and turning them into mouthwatering home comforts, Garth’s food was just ... Decadent, deserving of the capital D.

The Styx seafood chowder was made with squid ink, and managed to mix the smoky illusion of the river with the fresh seawater flavours, as Rae discovered when Garth asked her to sample its salt levels. It was served alongside warm loaves of bread that were so soft, Rae just wanted to dunk her head on them like a pillow. Those loaves came with self-buttering knives, but in place of butter was a saffron rouille that made Rae actually moan out loud.

Garth had grinned again at her for that reaction.

It was hard to choose a favourite main dish that Rae saw come and go from the pass. The goat's curry invoked feelings of rainy days in the meadow. Plus, it was one of the easiest dishes to plate in a deep bowl that had a large, rounded, white edge. Though there was something to be said for the fish that was the length of a table for six and stuffed with lemons, bunches of herbs and vegetables, bright red cherry tomatoes, and delightfully sharp capers, all drizzled over with warmed olive oil.

Although, the meats that Lexie had sourced – Rae didn't recognise the cuts or which animal the Lamia had taken them from, and she wasn't about to ask – were served on an *actual* mini crackling fire, where the customer got to cook the meat to their liking. Rae hadn't seen anything like that before.

"Fire's a waste of time," Lexie had winked at her, grabbing an additional piece of meat that wasn't up to Garth's standards on the pass and dangling it into her mouth, before swallowing it whole.

"If you say so," Rae had replied wide-eyed, scared to make a move.

Lexie had just smirked and moved back to her station.

By the time dinner service had begun winding down, Rae had a pretty good idea of which dessert was her favourite. The fig σορμπέ was light and creamy, it melted only when it came into contact with a creature's tongue, meaning it could be shaped on the plate into any form.

Garth told her to have fun with it – to create whatever shape she wanted. At first, Rae made a simple pink pyramid and balanced the fig beside it. Garth had merely raised his eyebrows and said, "Come on Sunshine, you can do better than that."

Letting out a little "hmpf," Rae set about getting a little more *creative*. She decided to mould the frozen treat into the shape of a small horse and had the horse bending down to eat from the fig itself.

This time Garth laughed. “Now *that’s* more like it! Service!”

The other two signature desserts weren’t as fun, but they were just as delicious when Rae sampled them. One was a pomegranate tart that was both tart in its nature and description, with the perfect golden crust. The other was a walnut soufflé – the biggest soufflé Rae had ever seen.

The skill and complexity in flavour palettes and techniques in this kitchen had shown Rae exactly what she was up against. And though her time in the kitchen had flown, that she’d survived a whole shift and held her own, she knew her one-Arae bistro couldn’t compete with the likes of this place.

Perhaps, she considered, Garth did deserve his reputation. Or perhaps this was simply what libations and belief got you. Power.

“You did well,” he said, as they all began to pitch in with the cleaning of the kitchen once service was over. Large buckets of soapy water and thick bristled brushes had begun busying themselves, but it was a rule of thumb that chefs were meticulous about their clean kitchens. They wouldn’t allow sentient objects to take on that responsibility alone, which was why everyone was on their knees, or balancing on benches, as they scrubbed the life out of the kitchen surfaces until they shimmered back at them; radiant.

“Thanks.”

“When we’re finished up here, there’s something I want to talk to you about.”

Probably to tell her she should drop out of the competition and stop wasting her time.

Instead Rae said, “You’re not leaving us to do the cleaning ourselves?”

Garth grabbed a fresh bucket. That sad look was back in his eyes. “Your boss isn’t very decent to you, is he?”

Rae snapped her mouth shut at that, but Garth wasn’t budging. “Is he?”

“He gave me a job. I’ve got nothing but gratitude,” Rae managed to get out between clenched teeth. Her tone, thankfully, remained neutral, though she began scrubbing her ‘patch’ on the pass more aggressively.

Garth left Rae to it after that. By the time the team was finished, Rae was so exhausted that she just grabbed her belongings that she’d put in the staff locker room before service had begun, and headed out the service entrance.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

Rae turned around, her shoulders slumped, her body exhausted from two back-to-back demanding jobs. “Home. I’m going home,” she told Garth.

“You didn’t think I was going to ask you for a favour and then not pay you, did you?”

He stepped forward, a token in hand.

“Oh, right. Yeah. Thanks.”

“Well, aren’t you going to read it?”

Rae glanced down at the parchment. “Dinner at Zeus’ Watering Hole.”

“It was the least I could do seeing as you helped us out tonight. And you held your own – just like I thought you would.” Garth crossed his arms and gave her a dashing smile.

“I don’t know about that. It’s too ... busy. I felt like I was barely getting the dishes ready in time. I was surprised you didn’t bark at me to hurry up, to be honest.”

It was a brush off, an intentional one. If Rae admitted she wasn’t cut out for his world then Garth couldn’t beat her to it.

“It’s not as scary as it seems.”

Rae raised an eyebrow at him as she scoffed. “You’re kidding, right? That place is the stuff foodies like me can only dream about. It was fun, but I’m better suited to the bistro.”

Another brush off. Another attempt to get him to admit that tonight had been a test she’d failed.

“But you didn’t dream it tonight. You lived it. You survived it. Why do you insist on playing small? On downplaying your natural skills and talent? What are you afraid of?”

“Why are you trying to push me into something I’m not cut out for? Are you deliberately trying to psych me out, is that it?!”

Before Garth had a chance to reply, someone else stepped out into the cool, dark air.

“Not bad for a first time, Sunshine. Not great, but not bad,” Nika acknowledged as she brushed past both of them.

“Thanks.”

And with that, Nika walked off into the twilight streets.

“Look,” Garth said, drawing Rae’s attention back to him. “Don’t listen to Nika. Use the token tomorrow night. I’ve got a special table set up. You could come and actually enjoy the first night of the festival, experience the other side of our place. Show you what you were a part of tonight. We can talk.”

Rae offered him a sad smile, shook her head, then turned and walked the same route home.

CHAPTER SIX: Late for a very important ... date.

The clock on the wall of her kitchen told Rae it was midnight, which meant she had five hours until she had to get up and start baking for the bistro. That meant she could either spend five hours nailing her golden apple recipe or she could spend just two on it, and then get three hours of rest before the day began.

Rae shrugged off her coat, threw it over the single chair, grabbed the apple from the table and went to work.

She woke up, seven hours later, with her face smooshed against goats cream.

“Oh no, oh no, oh no, oh no.”

Wiping her palm against her face, she stood from the table where there were two dishes – one the original apple with a bite taken out of it, the other her replica that she’d broken with her face – and hurried to the sink to wash off the remnants of food from her cheek.

Pots and pans littered Rae’s small kitchen. The wooden spoon was making a garbled noise, stuck in the honey glaze now firmly attached to the bottom of the pan. The remaining cream was gloopy when Rae needed it to be set, which wouldn’t happen if she didn’t get it in the fridge ASAP. She went to grab the pot and sling it in the fridge, but there was no space.

Usually Rae’s fridge *always* had space, there were days where she would have gone hungry if she didn’t have the leftovers from the bistro to rely on. But, with the festival coming up, Rae’s fridge was – for once – packed.

“URGH!”

Desperately trying to rearrange things, she wedged the pot between a bowl of goats cream and an unidentifiable block of something that Rae believed was once cheese. Slamming the fridge door shut, she looked around, trying to get her bearings.

There was dried lotus leaf ... *everywhere*, Rae realised. It was sprinkled across her bench, over her face, in her hair. She looked like someone had sneezed on her with glitter. Except it was a well-known fact that lotus leaf could drive anyone to lose their mind.

“Bugger it.”

She showered quickly, removing as much of the lotus leaf as she could, and ran out the door to work.

“You’re late.”

Of course the one and only time Rae would be late to open the bistro was the one and only time that Geras would already be there early.

“I’m sorry, Geras. It won’t happen again.”

“It better not.” He began to walk away to the backroom now that Rae was here, muttering something under his breath about how females walking out on him would get their comeuppance.

The day went from bad to worse from there.

Because Rae hadn’t had a chance to bake this morning, the only goods she could put in the cabinet were the leftovers from the stock cupboard. Luckily, she had enough ingredients prepared to make up the wraps between the few early-morning coffee stragglers. Her ambrosia was easy enough to whip up too, though it would need to set in the freezer for a few hours.

Still, after the mid-morning rush, Rae felt like wind nymphs had spun her into a tizzy.

“Not much of a selection here today, Rae. Trying to make us all hungry for the festival, are you?” Simon asked.

Rae looked at Simon, her head cocked to one side, puzzled. Why he was standing at the counter, in his slumped clothing that was one size too big for him? Simon never stood at the counter. He always just came in and took his seat under the window, then settled up his tokens when he was ready to leave.

Rae realised she hadn't served him his kylix this morning.

"Simon, I'm so sorry. I'll be right over with your coffee."

"Take your time. You seem a little out of sorts."

Rae offered a tight smile. "Festival jitters."

"Mmm," Simon replied half-heartedly, clearly not interested in anything other than his usual as he toddled back to his seat.

The complaints kept on coming. By midday, Rae had run out of the wraps that soothed fears, she only had two corn fritters with their positive pomegranate glaze left. There'd been no chance to make more filo pastries, and the fish dish was always her hardest sell. There was no end of grumbles that the sweet and savoury sausage rolls were out, and apparently daemons, nymphs and other deities in the area simply didn't want apple-ice or meringues today. Which left four slices of ambrosia and a handful of bliss balls, given that Rae hadn't had a chance to make a batch of fresh muffins today either.

It was a long time until two o'clock rolled around and Rae could shut up shop.

Dragging her feet home, Rae barely managed to shut her little red door before she was sliding her back down it and collapsing onto the floor in a flood of tears. Today had been an utter failure, and she was exhausted.

When her sobs eventually began to subside to hiccups, the vine wrapped itself around a box of tissues and handed them to her.

"T-th-thank you," she stuttered between sniffles.

A gentle tug.

"I know, I know, I'll get up. I always do."

A more insistent tug that hauled Rae to her feet. Then a push in the direction of the kitchen. Her home knew her better than she did – knew she would feel better after she got herself back to work. But returning to the bombsite she had left this morning almost deflated Rae back to her knees again.

“No,” she scolded herself. “Shake it off. Get it together, Rae.”

Drowning out the thoughts in her head by only focusing on the task in front of her, she scrubbed the kitchen until it was sparkling again. Benches were wiped, then washed and scrubbed with a soap and brush, before being rinsed with water. The palladium appliances were next, with an extra sheen of sparkle given to them with one of those tinctures Rae had gotten from a Hecate store. The fridge was tackled last.

She was not one to waste food, but the festival period was a strange time. She separated her food into edible and ‘not-sure-what-in-the-Underworld-that-is’ and then washed, soaped, scrubbed and wiped the fridge shelves and dirty dishes too.

Restacking the remaining food in containers and layering them according to purpose – fuel, bistro new recipes (?), festival prep – Rae was done. Then, only when it was clean, and Rae herself was freshly showered, did she mess it all up again.

The Vraveío Astéri festival officially kicked off tonight at six o’clock. Originally, the competition had only been for restaurants across Asphodel. With the population continuing to grow, and the festival popularity too, the offer had been extended to bakeries, bistros and cafes in the last four centuries. It gave Rae an extra day to prepare – which, this time, was a blessing in disguise. Usually, however, it gave restaurants the advantage: getting to wow with their showstoppers on the first night.

Rae glanced at the token peeking out of her bag on the dining table across the counter. It fluttered at her, flirting.

“I’m not going to Garth’s. Look how today turned out after yesterday. No, I need to stay here and prep my entry for tomorrow anyway.”

The rules were clear: you had to meet the brief, impress with your flavour and food combinations, *and* you had to have enough for whenever the secret judge came to visit.

In her first cook-off, Rae hadn't known about the secret judge. She had just *assumed* a judge would turn up on the first day.

She'd been incorrect.

They'd turned up on the sixth day, according to the score card she'd later seen in the *v&alpha* and cringed at. The judge hadn't had a chance to sample her dish – ambrosia was her entry that century – at all. “A pity,” the report had read, “because a loyal customer told me that Geras' Grub had sold out of them by day three. If only the chef had been more prepared.”

Rae had been prepared the next time. But she'd *still* come second to Garth. And the time after that. The time after that. This time would be different.

The competition ran for twelve days, which meant there was no way Rae was going to be able to prep every individual entry tonight. Even between her own home and Geras' place, she wouldn't have enough space to store all the ingredients that made up her dish. Instead, she'd make the first batch of apples today. Enough to get through the first three days of the festival, then reload at three more intervals. Due to the ingredients she was using, the only thing she could completely make now was the apple moulds anyway, which meant tonight's workload would be the heaviest.

Her entry dish had to be bistro appropriate and still hit the brief, so Rae had settled on an apple casing that she would first make in a caramelised honey mould before filling with a cream she had whipped herself from the goat milk provided from the same mountain it was rumoured Zeus was raised on.

The milk was heavier, making it easier to whip, but the process of separating the milk and cream took far longer than usual, meaning Rae had gallons of the stuff in palladium containers by the fridge.

Finally, two lotus leaves, cut to look like apple leaves, would sit on top of the apple.

That's what Rae had been deciding last night – whether to sprinkle the lotus leaf within the golden moulds, the cream itself, or have them resting on top. So, she'd taken a bite of the golden apple she was trying to replicate.

Last night's memories reappeared in Rae's mind like an old dream shaken awake.

The first bite had made her realise that the caramelised honey moulds she was thinking of using would be too delicate. To get that crisp consistency she was looking for, she would have to dip the moulds in an extra layer of warm honey right before serving so they didn't turn out brittle.

With the second crunch, Rae had realised that if the lotus leafs were placed either inside the cold filling or the warmed honey, they'd lose their primary nutrient: which held the ability to make the eater lose their minds. So that had determined the lotus leaf position as leafs that would balance on top.

Finally, as the juice of the apple seeped onto her tongue and into her bloodstream, Rae's eyes widened as she realised exactly how to make her competition entry a winner. She remembered feeling euphoric, as if she'd just been told the secrets of the gods. The sweet juices from the original apple had penetrated Rae's cerebral fluid, shot up into her brain, and swept away the fog of her subconsciousness. She knew exactly what it would take to win the cook-off. She simply had to trust the process.

Which was why Rae decided to do one final thing to her entry dish. She took the Hesperides apple that she had taken a bite out of the previous night and began to press the rest of the juice of it out.

She would store the juice in a vial and add just one drop to each apple as she piped the cream in. Whether it would replicate the effects or not, it was worth a try. Some part of her synapses zinged in agreement, as if they remembered what the knowledge in the apple had revealed to them.

It felt like a hunch, a knowing, an 'aha', a tug on the thread of life from one of the Fates themselves. Rae followed the tug

and got to work.

She was just about to turn the lights on in the bistro's kitchen for the day when there was a knock on the door.

"Who would be here at five in the morning?" she asked the walls.

They seemed to give her a little sigh, as if they, too, were still sleepy.

Rae padded to the door. Only to open it and find Garth there, hands in his pockets, on the street corner.

"What are you doing here?"

"You didn't use your token last night, and after what you said I was worried. I thought we'd be able to talk after the dinner service, but you didn't come. So here I am." He ran a scaly hand through dishevelled hair.

"I was busy," Rae chose to reply, keeping both arms crossed and wrapped tightly around her herself. It was chilly in the early morning hours. Hell, it was always chilly here. "That's why I didn't come."

"Too busy to eat?"

Rae scoffed. "I barely had time to breathe between doing a shift at yours and going back to the bistro. I was exhausted yesterday."

"I heard."

"You heard *what* exactly?"

"News travels fast down our little road. Everyone was coming in for lunch for a change, complaining you were out of everything. What happened?"

"I overslept," Rae grumbled, staring at her feet.

"You overslept?"

"I was working on my festival entry, alright?! Then I fell asleep in a mound of goat mush, and then I had to get that to

set, so there wasn't time to bake, which meant I was late, and ___”

Garth laughed, a loud, good-natured rumble. “Goat mush? What on the Asphodel green meadows are you making, Sunshine?”

“None of your business.”

“Well ... that's what I was here about actually.”

Rae stared at him a moment. “Huh?”

Garth smiled. “To be honest with you, we don't usually get such a busy lunch. Ever since you started at Geras' Grub, you put us out of the lunch service. I thought the least I could do was help you out for your cook-off prep, seeing as you helped me out so much.”

Rae went to open her mouth, but Garth held a hand up and stopped her. “I know, you don't need my help. But please. I'm starting to feel bad here, and I don't want people thinking I *deliberately* sabotaged a cursed ones efforts. It would be bad for my reputation. So, let me help? Let me prove I'm not trying to 'psych you out'. It'll put my conscience at ease.”

She knew he was deliberately baiting her, but for the life of her she couldn't think of a single reason to justify saying no to him. She *could* use the help.

“You have a conscience?” Rae muttered sarcastically, though she didn't really mean it, so she stood aside and let him enter.

“I do. And I haven't seen the bistro this quiet in ... a couple centuries at least.” He looked around, then threw a smile over his shoulder at her.

“Yeah, well, you might see it quieter later after the disaster that was yesterday.”

“I wouldn't be too worried about that,” Garth continued as he stepped behind the counter and began rolling his sleeves up as they entered the kitchen. “Everyone's allowed an off day. They'll be back today to see how you fare. They'll especially

want to see what you've created for the festival, if it's anything like your ambrosia."

"How do you know about my ambrosia?"

"Sunshine, *everyone* in Asphodel knows about it. It's the stuff of legends."

The kitchen lights flickered to life in agreement.

Across every available surface was a golden bauble in the shape of an apple that sparkled to life under the lights.

"Holy gods," Garth breathed.

"These are just for today," Rae explained, trying to scoot around him and then busying herself in the kitchen, trying to organise chaos. "They still need to be piped, then kept chilled, the honey warmed and the lotus leaves plucked and ready for presentation. Not to mention the usual dishes for the cabinet."

"Well then," Garth looked at her, eyebrows raised. "Where do you want me?"

Rae couldn't help but grin back. "How are your baking skills?"

She'd set Garth in charge of the sweets. Sure, it would have been easier to have him whip and set the goats cream, but Rae wasn't entrusting her entry dish to anyone. So, while she laboured over each individual apple; carefully piping the cream into the edges and then adding the apple juice drop, Garth was covered in flour.

Every so often he would turn to ask her how exactly she wanted something done when it came to the flavour combinations, and Rae would answer him without looking up from her work.

When she was done with the final apple for the day, she looked up from the dropper to find Garth staring at her, his arms crossed in front of a flour-bombed apron.

"What is *that*?"

Rae narrowed her eyes slightly, her lips quirked to one side, considering something. “You want to try it?”

Garth surveyed the apples in front of him. “Well, you can’t be wanting to poison the whole Asphodel meadow so ... sure.”

Rae tried not to break out in a grin. This was the perfect way to test if just a drop of the apple was enough to induce the effects she’d experienced from taking a bite.

“Hold out your tongue then.”

Garth took two steps towards Rae and then stooped down so that he was the right height for her to place a drop on his tongue, their eyes perfectly aligned. The eye contact made the act seem more intimate – uncomfortable – and Rae tried not to squirm away by focusing her attention on the dropper, on the pale golden drop forming perfectly on the end of it, then heavily dropping onto Garth’s forked tongue. She watched his eyes dilate, black pupils meeting shards of palest green, before returning to their normal sizes a minute later.

Garth took a moment to stand to his full height and cleared his throat. “Well.”

“Well?”

Garth looked around, looked anywhere but at Rae. “Do you still need me? I think I’ve done about as much as I can do to help you here. I should really get to the restaurant.”

Rae frowned. She’d expected him to comment on the flavour, or the reaction – because he’d definitely had *a* reaction – not ignore it completely.

“Uh, yeah, sure. I’ll be fine. Thanks.”

“Good.”

And with that, Garth strode from the kitchen. The lights dimmed ever so slightly.

“Oh, stop it.”

CHAPTER SEVEN: An ode to the most beautiful

The first official day of the festival would, to anyone else, have been a roaring success.

To Rae, it was adequate.

Sure, all of the apples sold. Customers had smiles on their faces. She even received compliments. But she'd spent the entire day so on edge looking for the secret judge – even though she *knew* how unlikely it was that they would turn up on the first day – that by the time the doors of the bistro were shut, Rae was deflated.

Plus, she admitted to herself now that she wasn't busy, Garth's reaction this morning had been bugging her all day. What had the clarity of the apple revealed to him?

Sighing, she took off her apron and got on with her closing tasks: washing Ibrik until he was squeaky clean, literally squeaking at her, the floors the same. Polishing the cutlery in blistering hot water and vinegar, putting away what little of the cabinet food was leftover, and now piping day two's apples.

And so the days continued. Rae, constantly on the lookout, was exhausted by the days end of going through the motions on high alert. Yet still, in her back of her mind was the knowledge from the apple that promised the cook-off would end in her favour, though not – the thought continued to niggle at her – the way she wanted it to.

How could it end in any other way but victory?

If her story wasn't going to be one of success, then surely that meant the theme of her life was failure, and that was unacceptable. There could be no other option, not that her mind could piece together. If she didn't have a story worth sharing, well that was worse than having a life without a story at all!

The fourth days were the worst, where she had to spend extra time prepping the remaining apple casings. The

caramelised honey was so delicate, peeling them out of each individual casing was a painstakingly slow task. But everything else ran smoothly, until Rae found herself finishing up the eleventh day of the festival with time on her hands for a change.

Finally, too exhausted to battle her mind, she accepted defeat and decided to go and see the dish that she knew was her main competition: Garth's.

His restaurant was as packed as ever. Rae dithered by the door, bracing herself from the chill by stuffing her hands in the pockets of her jacket. Something curled into the palm of her hand.

Rae pulled it out, curious, only to see Garth's token fluttering in her hand.

"How did you get there?"

The token curled into her palm again, snuggling.

"Alright, alright, I'm going in."

Rae took a deep breath and marched up to the door.

"I have a token," she told the door that was twice as tall and wide as her. Its knocker morphed into a smile before it threw itself open. The minute Rae was inside, she was accosted by the one deity she'd been hoping to avoid.

"Well, well. Miss Sunshine is back. Did you think Garth was going to hold a table for you every night this week? How presumptuous of you." Nika bit, rising to her full height and looking disdainfully down her nose at Rae.

Rae was about to apologise before she took a breath and said the only thing that was going to garner any level of respect with the Arae in front of her.

"I'm happy to take a seat at the bar, if there's one going, and order myself. If not, I'm happy to come back another night. There was no expiration date on the token."

Nika sniffed. "And piss Garth off? I'd rather be hounded by neanderthals. Come with me."

Turning on her heel, Nika led Rae to a small corner table in The Nook.

“You’ll obviously be having the chef special; Styx seafood chowder, slain and marinated goats curry, and Garth’s theikós for dessert – the crowning glory and our festival entry this century – An Ode to the Most Beautiful.” Nika informed her, as if she was rattling off specials to someone who hadn’t worked here just last week.

Rae had no idea what would constitute a theikós, but she knew if it was anything like the rest, it would be exquisite.

“Sounds great.”

Nika smirked at her again. “Oh, just you wait and see.”

With that, Nika sauntered off leaving Rae sitting by herself.

Usually, she would bring a book with her, sit and read in silence – at least the creatures in books didn’t seem to mind her company. But, she’d forgotten her book in the post-cook-off haze; had to now settle for people watching without seeming intrusive. Having a cursed ones gaze on you, after all, could be ... unnerving. It was the pale blue iris’ that did it.

No wonder Nika could turn tables so fast.

Luckily, Savvas came over at that moment with a large glass of golden wine and set it down on the table in front of Rae.

“Hello, Sunshine.”

“Savvas,” Rae smiled as she picked up the wine and saluted him. For some reason, the water nymph, with his neatly trimmed white and grey beard, didn’t annoy her by using a monika she hadn’t chosen. Instead, there was something melodic about the name on his lips – like the ebbing and flow of an ocean wave – that made Rae relax into her chair.

Well, that and the first sip of golden wine.

It was thick in flavour, though it held the consistency of any other wine. Hints of butter, honey, walnuts and apples crept through, until Rae finished savouring her sip and placed the glass back down on the table with a sigh.

“You like my homemade blend then.” Savaas, his arms folded, held a delighted smile on his long face that made his eyes twinkle.

“This is homemade?” Rae stared at the glass, then at Savvas in turn, shocked. “This could rival Dionysus’ acolytes.”

That had Savvas breaking out in a full-on grin before he bent down to conspiratorially whisper in Rae’s ear. “Perhaps, one day, I’ll tell you of my time in Dionysus’ vineyards.”

Before Rae could so much as utter a word of protest at having to wait to hear such a story, Savvas straightened, winked at her, and then made his way back to the galley bar.

Rae sat there, sipping her wine, watching the other patrons from her corner in The Nook. There was only one other couple with her in this section of the restaurant – they looked like two lovers that had been reunited after death had torn them apart. There were crystalised tears falling down the old woman’s cheeks, as her lover cupped her wrinkled cheeks and wiped them away.

The age you left the mortal realm was the age you remained down here. It used to be that death would rejuvenate a Soul’s form into youthfulness, but – surprisingly – it had been Queen Persephone that had insisted that rule be changed, according to the véα reports. She said that there was beauty to be found in the age of all things, that those who resided in the Underworld should not forget it.

Watching the old lovers, Rae had to agree. There was something beautiful about it.

The young waiter, Tomas, interrupted Rae’s thoughts by presenting her with the Styx seafood chowder. He wavered slightly, as if his arms were not strong enough to hold up the plate the dish was balanced on, and for a moment Rae was convinced she was going to end up wearing the chowder as it began to wobble and slosh precariously. After what felt like forever, he managed to place it down – his arms shaking as he held two other dishes to deliver to another table – with only a splash on the outside rim.

Rae wasn't going to complain about that. Instead she said, "Still enjoying working here?"

"Oh, uh, yes. It's just- it's a lot to learn. I don't think Nika is very happy with me." Tomas winced as he said her name.

"I don't think she's ever very happy with anyone."

Tomas let out a nervous chuckle. "No, I suppose you're right."

"Though don't let her catch you agreeing with me," Rae replied, deadpan.

Tomas gave her another nervous chuckle at that, out of politeness more than anything Rae suspected, and then left her with some mumbled reasoning that he needed to get the other dishes to their guests.

Rae nodded and turned to the chowder in front of her.

The dish was as delicious as she remembered.

When her chowder was finished, Rae turned her attention to other guests in the establishment, not wanting to intrude further on the lovers in their corner. From her table, she could also see the galley bar clearly, and watched Savvas talk to a middle-aged male Soul who was perched on a bar stool across from him. They appeared to be friends, Savvas laughing good-naturedly at a joke the male Soul had said.

Wherever he had hailed from in the mortal lands must have been hot, because even as a shade of his lookalike human form, he was still darker than most other patrons in the bar. Though race was less-so a factor when you were dead in these parts. Much more prejudice was put on what *type* of deity you were.

Nika chose that moment to interrupt Rae's dark thoughts with the goat curry.

"You know, I can't think why Garth calls you sunshine with a scowl like that."

"Well," Rae said, picking up the spoon ready to dive in, "how often do you get told to smile for the morons hounding *you*?!"

Nika gave her a hard stare and then laughed. Actually laughed. It was a shrill shriek that had Rae tensing in place.

“Point conceded, Sunshine. Enjoy.”

Pleasantly surprised with herself, Rae let her shoulders relax as the warmth of the curry and something else invaded her insides. She continued to watch the patrons come and go, all with smiles on their faces that said they were leaving with full bellies and happy with themselves.

Of course, that warmth in her belly turned to anticipation when it was not Nika, but Garth, that bought out the final dish for her to try.

“I wanted to see what you thought of my festival entry yourself,” he said, as he placed not one but two plates in front of her. One was a clean white plate that held a single, bright green apple. The other, Rae discovered as Garth lifted the lid, was a small black cauldron, the size of a kylix.

“What do I do with it?”

Garth pointed to the folded piece of paper that sat in front of the apple.

Rae picked it up, flicked it open and began to read.

An Ode to the Most Beautiful: Queen Persephone

Pomegranate: Latin translation: an apple with many seeds

Dip this apple in the cauldron, as our Queen dipped her toe into the Underworld, and fall in love with our world all over again.

Raising an eyebrow, Rae took the apple by its stalk and dipped it in the miniature cauldron. A gasp fell from her lips as she pulled it back out again.

The apple was a stunning, gleaming, ruby red.

“How did you...?”

“Keep going,” Garth told her, his chin now propped up on his palm, his elbow on the table as he watched her.

Rae took the sharp knife that accompanied the dessert and went to slice a section of the apple. The skin of it was hot to the touch, so she balanced her nails delicately against it as the knife cut through the apple like butter, smoke beginning to curl out of the apple in a wonderful show of culinary skill, and

Pomegranate seeds spilt out.

Taking the spoon, Rae scooped up a collection of them and brought them to her lips. Flavour exploded on her tongue. The darkest compote – probably the one she had seen Garth’s pastry chef perfecting when she’d been in the kitchen – held levels and depths of taste that made it feel like Rae was travelling down into the Underworld for the first time. Each pomegranate seed was a step further down into the abyss, but as light as a woman’s – Persephone’s – footsteps. It was the perfect combination of heavy and sweet, the smokiness of whatever Garth had trapped inside the apple before you cut it releasing this velvet-like sauce that complimented both the compote and the seeds, the flesh of the apple, and the coating on the skin from the cauldron.

It was ... a masterpiece.

“What is the sauce?” Rae asked, a small frown between her eyebrows as she tried to place it.

“Think of it as dried ice meets goats milk that was creamed.”

“Goats milk that was creamed?” Rae said slowly, realisation dawning on her as she sat back in her chair and folded her arms. “I wonder where you got that idea from.”

“I confess,” Garth braced his arms on the table and leaned forward in a whisper, “you gave me the inspiration for that. We changed the sauce recipe on day two of the festival as a result. Your take for this century’s cook-off was excellent. I had one of the waitresses grab us a collection of your apples and bring them back here for us to sample the day your dish came out. What you did with that lotus leaf was genius. And whatever was in that vial ... I don’t know what it is or how you got it ... but it’s what told me to make this version of the

sauce.” He nodded at the sauce still spooling out of Rae’s apple. “So, I have to thank you for that. In fact, I’d like to thank you by offering you the position of sous chef here, permanently.”

He looked at her like the offer was genuine. The *audacity* of the agathodaemon!

“You stole part of my idea, and now you want to offer me a permanent job?!”

“I didn’t steal. I was inspired.”

“And you think that will make me want to work for you?”

“Well, you can’t want to work for old, gnarled Geras for the rest of your immortality. I thought you wanted the job when you agreed to the trial run the other night.”

“You’re unbelievable. You didn’t even tell me it was a job trial!”

Garth frowned. “I don’t understand why you’re getting upset. Ok, so I didn’t tell you it was a trial run. You still did great work, though. You inspired me to do great work. And now I’m offering you a job where we could do great work together. No one would even come *close* to touching us in the cook-off if we were on the same team. I know you’re not usually one to look for help, hell even teamwork, but cutting off that pretty nose of yours just to spite your face seems awfully silly, Sunshine.”

“STOP calling me that!”

Now people were looking.

Garth cocked his head at her. “I still don’t understand why you’re upset.”

Rae nudged her chair back. “No, well, Mr-wins-this-every-century, you wouldn’t. Excuse me.”

She rose from her chair and walked towards the bathroom, barely managing to keep one foot in front of the other.

CHAPTER EIGHT: Early morning markets

Each step caused another tear to fall. Rae blinked rapidly in an effort to keep them at bay as best she could until she was in the bathroom stall, all alone.

There, she collapsed onto the toilet lid and wept.

Garth was going to win the cook-off. Again. There was no doubt about it, that dish was the best thing she'd ever eaten *and* it was the cleverest homage to Persephone that anyone could have come up with while staying on the brief. As much as she wanted to say that Garth had sabotaged her cook-off efforts, she knew that was a lie. Never could she have hoped to pull something like his dish off.

So why had the apple made her feel like she could win?

That was the real kicker. She'd been so sure that this time she had *it*. If she hadn't been so foolish as to test the apple essence out on Garth, to make sure it worked, he wouldn't have got the idea to create that sauce. Because it was that sauce that pulled it all together. The individual components were amazing in their own right, but it was that piece of magic that had really sealed the deal, as well as the flavour in. No pun intended.

Perhaps Rae had been lying to herself all along. Perhaps she had convinced herself of something, and used the juice from the apple as an excuse. An excuse to justify herself not working *harder, smarter*. Losing, *once again*.

Eventually, she managed to concede to herself that sitting on the toilet seat wasn't going to change that. Garth was going to win this century's festival, and she was going to have to spend another hundred years scraping by working for Geras. She could either mope about it or just crack on with it.

She chose the latter.

Wiping her face clear of snot and tears, Rae exited the stall and splashed her face with ice cold water from the taps that

sung as they let the water run through them. When the splotches on her skin returned to their normal pale colour, and Rae was confident no one would be able to tell she'd been crying, she turned the taps off and headed back out to the restaurant.

Her table had been cleared, and her jacket was no longer hanging over the back of her chair. Turning towards the bar, she caught Savvas' eye. In return, he gave her a look that was both sad and expectant.

"Nika put your coat away. You'll have to go and find her for it."

Rae nodded, for some reason feeling chastised. "Thanks."

She wandered about the sections of the restaurant, checked the area where deities dragged on fire sticks outside, before figuring Nika must be in the staff section. She was about to enter through the staff entrance when she heard raised voices.

"You can't forfeit the competition!" That sounded like Nika's voice, Rae was fairly certain of it.

"I can and I will." That was definitely Garth's.

"What, for her? You just want to hand it all over to *her*? After everything all of us have stuck with you for. Why, Garth? Tell me why," Nika demanded.

"Because she deserves it."

"She deserves it?" Nika laughed, but it was a cold sound. "You've basically given her a free pass to come and join the team, and now you're going to let her win the cook-off. You know how hard all of us work to make sure that you win that every time. You know why we *have* to. You're willing to throw all that away, throw all of the team's hard work away, because she ... deserves it? Or because you want to sleep with your little Rae of sunshine?"

Rae's eyes bulged wide. Slamming herself against the outside wall of the restaurant, she continued eavesdropping, trying to keep her laboured breathing as quiet as possible, even though she was freezing without her jacket.

“You’ll watch the way you speak to me, Nika. This is still my restaurant. It’s my call. I’ve made my decision.”

“You’ll ruin us, for her.”

“We’ll find a way through this, we always do.”

“Not this time, Garth. This time you’re about to spit in our faces and ask us to smile while you do so.”

“I’ve helped each and every one of you when you asked me. Now, there’s a talented Arae out there who is barely getting by, who deserves a break like the rest of us got, and I’m damn well going to make sure she gets it. Surely, you of all deities should understand that, Nika.”

“You know what I understand, Garth? I understand the books. I look at them, just like you, every night when we close. I see how many tokens you send off to Zeus. Fifty percent of them! All because your *stupid* great-great grandfather agreed to that ridiculous libation tax with him! Who the hell agrees for libation power in exchange for fifty percent of their profits?! And *don’t* even get me started on the fact that Zeus never pays his bill when he’s down here. The cook-off token prize is the *only* thing that has kept this place afloat the last five centuries. You know it, I know it, the whole team knows it. It’s why we work so hard for you. You’re willing to throw all of that away, just for her to catch her break?”

“Yes, I am.”

Nika sighed. “You can’t help the poor by getting poorer, Garth.”

Before she could hear any more, Rae forced herself to head back inside and ask Tomas to fetch her jacket instead.

Rae wriggled around in an uncomfortable silver dress. The awards show envelope that had spat through her house door yesterday was welcome, it meant she was a finalist again, but she hadn’t realised until this moment that meant she had to go to the show and lose in public ... again.

When was enough going to be enough?

There was no way Garth had been serious about pulling out of the festival. Nika would have talked him out of it, Rae was sure of that.

“Can you believe we’re at another one of these things?” Geras said, interrupting Rae’s thoughts, as he handed her a glass of bubbly wine the colour of peaches. “Not that you ever win this silly little thing you insist on competing in anyway.”

“Can we just go in and get it over with?” Rae muttered, putting the untouched glass back on one of the moving side tables that was going around collecting and dispersing drinks.

“Come now, Sunshine. You should be celebrating! It’s an awards night!” Garth appeared in front of Rae and Geras, smiling that suave smile of his, his hair slicked back and a tux sharpening his look.

Rae was about to berate him – wondering where he’d come from and why he’d been eavesdropping – when another tall, white daemon schmuck waddled up to the group.

“Geras, of Geras’ Grub?” he said.

“Yes,” Geras smiled, the smile taking up his whole face in a maniacal way.

“My name is Plutus, I’m an Olympic investor. If you and your—” a glance at Rae, “cook win tonight, I’d like to discuss making you an offer.” He handed Geras a card, a vigorous handshake passed between them, and that was that as Plutus wandered off to go schmooze another schmuck.

“Well then,” Garth clapped his hands. “Shall we head on in to the awards?”

Geras nodded, striding ahead of them. Garth went to follow, until Rae grabbed his elbow and tugged him back towards hers – hard.

“What the hell was that?”

“What the hell was what?” Garth feigned an innocent look.

“Why is an Olympic investor getting Geras’ hopes up?”

“Is he?” Garth raised an eyebrow at her. Then he placed his hand on the small of her back and nudged Rae into the awards show with him.

“And the winner is ... Rae from Geras’ Grub!”

Rae barely remembered being pulled up from her seat by an ecstatic Geras. Or being pushed towards the stage by an over-enthusiastic Garth. She didn’t remember the judge handing a sack of tokens, so heavy it felt like a sack of potatoes, or the delight on Queen Persephone’s face when Hades presented her with Rae’s dish to try.

It all felt like a surreal, slow-motion, dream.

One which was announced in bold lettering across the top of the véα the next morning: GERAS’ GRUB TAKES TOP SPOT IN Vraveío Astéri! There was a brief paragraph talking about the “smart hire” Geras had made in bringing Rae into the fold “to bake out back”, and how he had generously – out of the kindness of his heart and not his pocket – backed Rae to win every century.

The picture was one of Geras standing outside the bistro, arms raised triumphantly. Rae wondered when the photo had been taken. When had they come to talk to Geras?

Of course, there was also a paragraph dedicated to the dish that had won it all. Rather surprisingly, there was a sentence or two from Geras about how he had come up with the inspiration for the winning dish and, with the help of Rae, perfected it.

But there was no mention of the grand-champion daemon, or why he had chosen to pull out of the cook-off. It hadn’t even mentioned that he *had* pulled out of the cook-off.

“I see you went and won this thing!” Simon commented, as normal business resumed and Rae served him his morning kylix of coffee.

“It would seem so.” Rae offered him a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. The feeling of winning wasn’t what she

had expected, Garth's overheard confession from nights ago still sitting heavily on her conscience.

"They given you your prize tokens yet?"

Rae nodded.

"They've already spoken to Geras too, by the looks of things! I mean I practically saw him skip out the building when I went by my walk earlier. I swear that old boss of yours looked like a frog, he was leaping so high!" Simon kept talking.

Rae couldn't imagine Geras as anything but hunched over, but sure enough, an hour later when the door groaned open, he was practically skipping on long legs that seemed to have grown several inches overnight.

"You're not going to believe it! That investor signed with me! ME!" Geras blurted out to no one in particular, as he headed to where Rae was pouring the cold coffee out of Ibrik to replace with a fresh batch.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me, Arae! Thanks to my ingenious bet on you, and that marketing with the interview in the *véa*, the Olympic investor signed with me this morning!"

"As in, to franchise the place?"

"What?" Geras looked around at Simon, then the few other occupied tables, then back at Rae. "No! He bought me out! I'm free!! Can you believe it? With enough tokens to last me ... well, I don't know how long!"

"But, Geras, remember our original agreement? You said if I ever won, you would let *me* buy you out of this place and take it over," Rae stressed, that heavy feeling on her chest suddenly coming back to settle like a doom cloud.

"Oh, poosh. Even with those winnings, you wouldn't have been able to offer me as much as this fellow. Besides, now you can keep those winnings for yourself and still work here. I told them you would stay on."

"You did?"

“Well, where else are you going to go? This place made you famous! You have a name for yourself. Now, people will actually *want* to come and see you. Buck up!” Geras boomed as heartily as he could, offering Rae a clap on her shoulder that had her bones shaking.

She was surprised at the strength of him.

“This is everything you’ve dreamed of.”

“Yeah,” Rae agreed softly.

Geras let out another whoop of delight, as he moved back around the counter. “I’ve got to get my things. Time to go off exploring, before my dreaded ex-wife comes and tries to score some of these investor tokens off me. If she comes looking, you tell her I no longer own this place and you have no idea where I’ve gone. You hear me?”

“Geras, I have no idea where you’re going or exactly what is going on right now.”

Geras chuckled. “Atta Arae.”

The door tinkled when he left.

“So?”

Rae looked at Simon, sitting under the domed window, at the table he sat at every morning at eleven. As he had been every day for the past five decades. “So?”

“What now?” he asked.

Rae sighed, flipping an unruly teatowel over her shoulder. “Now, we crack on with the lunchtime rush.”

Rae’s stomach growled the minute the last customer left the bistro.

Geras had decided to leave right before the *height* of the lunch rush, which meant she’d had another day where she’d been behind the tidal wave of customers. With Geras gone, and no sign of the Olympian investor yet, there was once again no one to help her.

Not that Geras had been much help anyway, she supposed.

Now ... now she was so tired she could barely stand. Her feet ached and she felt faint as she went about cleaning the place down. The bistro helped as much as it could, knowing how exhausted she was, but Rae found herself missing the sentience of Garth's cleaning equipment. In fact, she found herself resentful to even be in this position.

Who worked for something their whole lives, only to feel like a failure, a fraud, a cheat, when they got it?

Barely managing to drag her feet around, Rae somehow found it in her reserves to carry herself home, shut the door, and make it to her fridge. Where there was one of her golden apples waiting for her.

"I'm not sure I can face eating you right now."

The fridge pushed the shelf out to greet her, the apple sliding with it.

"Alright, alright – I'll eat."

She took the apple, placed it on a small side plate, and stood in her small kitchen while she cracked the honeyed casing of the apple with the side of a teaspoon, and wondered what she was going to do with the winnings now that her plan for them had fallen through.

The crack of the golden edge was exactly how she wanted it, even if there was no warm honey casing. The goats cream was the perfect consistency. Rae moaned in agreement at her own flavour combinations before her pupils dilated as the final drop of Hesperides apple landed on her tongue.

And, right then and there, she knew why everything had unfolded as it had.

And, right then and there, came a knock on the door.

She walked back out into her small hallway just as her house opened the door for her, to see Garth standing out in the rain, on the cobbled street under the awning of ash trees.

Rae stood there a moment, her mouth hanging open, a half-finished mouthful still in her mouth ... just. She closed her

mouth, swallowed, and tried to think of the words she wanted to say.

What she came up with was, “How did you know where I lived?”

“I’ve seen you walk back from the bistro once or twice,” Garth shrugged, a heavy droplet of water falling onto his face from the leaves above.

“You’ve been following me?”

“No, I was making sure you got home safe,” Garth scoffed. “Anyway, that doesn’t matter. I came to congratulate you on your big win, Sunshine.”

The vine gently took the plate and teaspoon away from Rae, which was when she began to wring her hands nervously. The vine gently pushed her toward the door.

Before she could get a word in, Garth continued. “Look, you won it fair and square. You were right, I should have done my original dish off its own merit, not used the influence of yours to change it. But you had to know – I need you to know – that I thought I was doing the right thing.”

Finally, Rae had the words. “Like you thought you were doing the right thing by pulling yourself from the cook-off so I could win?”

For the first time ever, Garth narrowed his eyes at her. “Who told you that?”

Rae shrugged. “I have my ways.”

Garth shook his head. “Nika,” he muttered under his breath, the wind nymphs barely carrying his words to Rae’s ears.

“It wasn’t her. I just ... I know.”

“You ... *know*.”

“I do. And I know you need the winnings to keep your place open. So I want you to take them.”

“I can’t take those from you.” Garth shook his head incredulously, causing his hair to fly around his head and

water droplets to lash out, like a dog drying themselves off. “I won’t.”

“You didn’t let me finish. I want you to take them, and then I want to take you up on your job offer of the sous chef, too.”

“You ... want the job? The sous chef job?!”

Rae smiled at him. “Yeah. My plan for what I was going to do with the winning tokens fell through, and I figure I may as well use the tokens to keep a place I *actually* want to work in open.”

“They’re your winnings. I can’t take them.”

“Well, if you don’t I’ll have to stay working at Geras’ Grub for some ruddy Olympian investor who probably doesn’t know the difference between a baster and a basting brush, so you may as well...”

“You’re hired,” Garth interrupted her.

Rae snapped her mouth shut then immediately opened it again.

“Wait ... I am? And you’ll take the tokens? Hold on a minute, that was far too easy to get you to agree. What’s the catch? If you think-”

Garth grinned. “Get some sleep, Sunshine. You and I have an early morning at the markets.”

WANT MORE?

If you’d like to see Garth and Rae’s relationship develop or you’d like a peek into the life of a different character, [leave a review here](#) with what you wish to see in the underworld novellas ... and influence what happens in the next instalment of the series!

Pre-order book two in The Underworld Novellas:

[Taking Orders in the Underworld.](#)

While you wait, visit: www.gwynethlesley.com for Rae’s secret cabinet food recipes that can all be made with some

mortal adjustments!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gwyneth Lesley loves to write modern-day Greek myth retellings with heartbreaking, steamy romances. Her first series: *Femme Fatale* is a mixture of standalone books, following the archetypes of seven different women with untold ties to Greek mythology.

You can read the first three in the series here:

[Prometheus' Priestess](#)

[A Lifetime Kind of Love](#)

[Madonna: Medusa's retelling](#)

She is also working on a duology retelling of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*: *Odette's Vow* and *Odysseus' Promise* penned for a 2023/2024 release.

As reviewers say, her work is: "Definitely recommend[ed] to people who have never read any Greek mythology and are looking to expand their reading palette."

Learn more at <https://www.gwynethlesley.com>