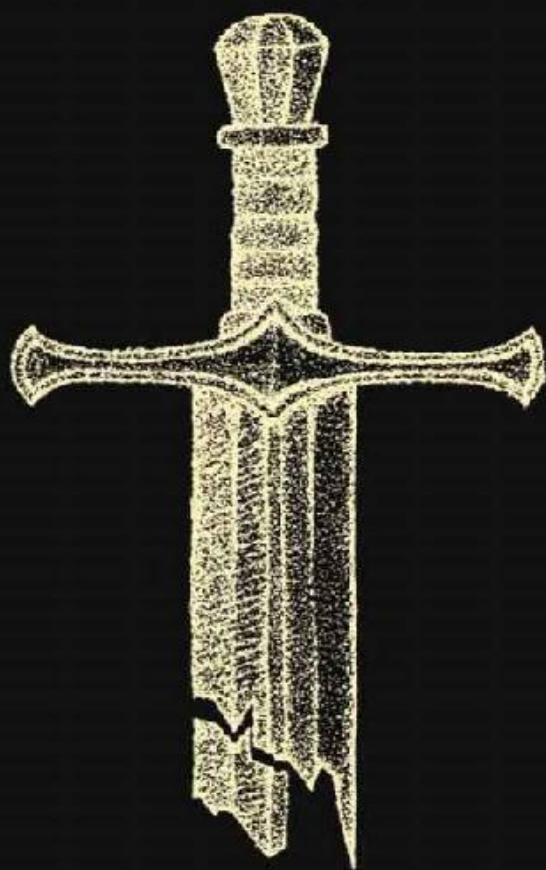


FOR THE  
LOVE OF THE  
GODS



BY RORY L. SCOTT

# For the Love of the Gods

Tempt the Gods #1

Rory L. Scott

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*To those who have ever felt misunderstood, I hope you find people who  
see you how you want to be seen.*

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# Chapter 1

## **Dominic**

There are no consequences for the gods.

Lying. Killing. Cheating. Whatever the indiscretion, there is no accountability for the divine. Public perception, maybe, but at the end of the day, it was a god's life source that kept the world spinning.

Without a spare to absorb the responsibility, that is.

Other gods, however, could seek revenge. Retribution for crimes committed, but only between themselves. It was rare that someone ever crossed those lines. When it did happen, and revenge was sought, no one stood in your way.

It was why I was standing here, lingering in the shadows of a goddess's home, watching her brush her hair.

I walked into her house at midnight without a single question. Two guards simply nodded at me as I stepped through the onyx fireplace in her living room. They were sitting on a simple couch, relaxed with their feet kicked up on a cedar table.

They saw me enter, but sat still as I walked through her sitting room and turned towards the bedrooms. I would have bristled at their clear lack of care for her protection if it didn't make my life easier.

I'd been here countless times, but not once in over five years. It was almost eerily unchanged, with art and sculptures in the same place, even though she had ruled this place for years. I walked down the expansive hallway and focused on quieting my footsteps and preparing to avoid any staff who might stop me. I was in no rush, and stalking prey was always better than a quick snatch.

I made it to the end of the hallway and was about to turn left towards the grand suite when I heard it. The soft sound of

music coming from the opposite end, from the right side of a new corridor.

It was a room I couldn't place from my memories, but she was in there. I could almost feel her presence on the other side of the wall.

The door was open, and I stepped through to find the lights off, save for the slight glow of a candle from what had to be the bathroom. I inched forwards, keeping to the shadows and settled myself next to a curtain. She was sitting at a vanity, raking a brush that looked like it was made of solid gold through her hair.

I almost stepped out of the shadows then, but stopped. I stood back for a moment and just watched her.

I didn't enjoy destroying beautiful things, found no joy in crushing flowers under my feet or marring a perfect painting. But her sculpted face, resting in a soft expression while she worked, wouldn't deter me.

Her movements were methodical, and her eyes were slightly glazed over with focus.

Another moment passed, and then she stopped brushing, her hand freezing in place so fast it practically reverberated. Her eyes snatched onto mine, cutting through the darkness with an uncanny precision. Her stare was piercing, holding onto me with such force it felt like she was in front of me, inches apart, instead of separated by a mirror.

She held on tight, until I clocked movement elsewhere in the mirror.

Her lips had parted slightly, in the way that they do right before speaking. I waited, curious what her reaction would be. Her norm was to contort her face into a bitter, hateful expression.

They twitched again, closing. She picked back up the hairbrush and returned to her task in cold dismissal, grabbing another strand of dark brown hair, a sweeping mass of strands that looked like ribbons of caramel in the candlelight.

I stood still, watching her eyes follow the brush.



She looked peaceful, without a care in the world that someone had all but broken into her home. A home that she was clearly alone in, with nothing but two guards and minimal staff to watch over her.

At least she was going to make this easy on me, but the thought passed through my body annoyance rather than triumph.

You would think that she would be a little more vigilant with her safety. I'd given her fair warning that this was coming, that the days she had left with a beating heart were few.

But here she was, her expression looking as peaceful as a lamb unaware that their shepherd was about to drag a knife across their throat. The muscles in her face were deceptively relaxed, because her back was stick straight, a robe that looked far too thin for the weather draped off her shoulders.

It was a chilly night, the windows open and letting a stiff breeze into the room and picking up a few strands of hair hanging down her back. The weather couldn't touch her though, not when her attention seemed glued to the last section of hair on the right side of her face.

I was content with letting her take her time. She would be dead by the end of the hour. Whether that was in two minutes or twenty, it didn't matter to me.

She dragged the brush down the bottom of her hair, adjusting the strands with her fingertips until they laid perfectly over her chest. The brush was next. She set it down slowly, steadily on the deep mahogany desk.

Her eyes drifted up, finding mine again, slicing through the shadows like a bright green knife.

“Are you here to kill me?”

*Yes.* The words were right there, gathering in my throat and supported by revenge five years in the making.

*Yes.* The only logical answer for a goddess I hated.

*Yes.* For a goddess who hated me.

One word, and yet it felt like bile in my throat as my vocal chords warmed up to answer her. Our eyes were still grasping onto each other, her body going stiffer with every moment it took that one fucking word to leave my mouth.

“Are you here to kill me?” She asked again, her voice interrupting the silence in all its annoyingly melodic glory. Her shoulder twitched as she said it, and my eyes dropped down to watch the movement trickle down her arm. The tremor went all the way to her hand, causing it to curl around the brush.

When the wind pushed the flame a little to the left, it illuminated her hand, holding the bronze hilt of a knife.

*Of course.*

Another reminder of why I was here tonight. She was a murderer, and if I didn't kill her she would kill me. I wasn't blameless myself, but I drew the line somewhere. She had no line, and she deserved to suffer for it.

She didn't deserve the quick relief of a knife dragged across the throat. She deserved slow, drawn out, merciless torture that drove her crazy. She deserved the type of revenge that took years to complete, a carefully crafted plan that required her to be right under my thumb to execute.

It was that very thought that coincided with a sarcastic, questioning eyebrow raise from the goddess in the mirror and what finally pulled one word from my throat. “No.”

“No?” she said with a laugh, turning around in her chair to finally face me.

“No, I am not here to kill you.” As I responded, a haphazard plan was forming in the back of my mind, my thoughts searching for the only logical way I could force her into my environment.

She stood, sending light flooding the room with a flick of her wrist. “Then *what*, pray tell, are you doing in my house at midnight?”

I stepped out of the shadows and started walking towards her. “I need a reason to visit an old friend?”

She scoffed as I approached, her head tilting back to keep my eyes with every step. “You and I were never friends.”

“Well, I was friends with your brother. The term applies to the whole family.”

Something flashed through her expression at that. Guilt, maybe. If she was capable of the emotion. “Okay, if we are such good friends, then you’ll have no problem telling me why you are lurking in the shadows of my room.”

“You caught me,” I lifted my hands in mock surrender, but I underestimated how close together we were standing. As they lifted, the backs of my hands caught the silk of her robe, brushing against it roughly. I forced myself to keep my eyes on her face, especially when the cold sent a shiver racking through her body. “I’m not here to kill you. But I have news that might.”

She steeled her shoulders, resetting herself. “News?”

I nodded. Smirked. “News.”

“*What* news?” she snapped, her green eyes flickering with a dangerous sort of annoyance at my unwillingness to make this easy. Her eyes were the color of envy. Fitting, as that was what put her at the head of her realm.

“Good news.”

Frustration joined the envy in her eyes. “Drop the vagueness, Pluto.”

I scoffed at the sharp bite of her tone. “Drop the attitude, Hades.”

The gods sometimes went by the title of their Houses, the same way a friend would call you by your last name as a nickname. For those who respected you, there was *always* Lady, Lord, or Noble in front of the name of your House. But between the gods and their advisors or friends, sometimes you’d catch a *Hermes* or *Vulcan* in place of their given name.

But like she said, we were never friends.

I focused my eyes on her face, readying myself to memorize her shocked expression. “You and I are getting

married.”

A little gasp left her full lips, parting them. *That* was a look I’d remember. “No.”

“You’d rather me kill you, Rose?” My plan wasn’t perfect, but I thought she’d prefer it to death. My preferences aside.

Her perfect eyebrows raised in doubt. “Oh, Dominic, that is assuming I’d let you kill me.”

I clenched my jaw. “We are getting married. End of.”

She laughed then, hoarse, sarcastic, and completely disingenuous. “You have officially gone insane.”

Rose so loved to sling epithets at me. She was creative with them, I’d give her that. But there were some she favored more than others.

*Insane. First use: Council meeting. Five years ago.*

“I would be insane if I was asking you to marry me because I claimed I loved you. This is an arrangement.” I returned, gesturing with my hands between us.

The look of exacerbation on her face threatened to pull my mouth into a grin. “Just fucking explain.”

I liked her frustration. It had everything to do with the prospect of driving her crazy and nothing to do with the way her nose was scrunching up on the bridge.

“The Fates,” I said, trying to sound casual despite throwing this plan together on the spot. “After everything that happened with Adrian, they don’t want to give anyone else a reason to assume that we are a bunch of murderous gods. We don’t have a good reason not to combine our powerlines. So they are making us do it.”

“*Making us?*”

“You want to be the person to tell the Fates no?”

Rose breathed in, her chest puffing out just enough to scrape my shirt. One of us must have stepped closer in the conversation. “Did they *specifically* tell you?”

“In the way they are capable of, yes.” They spoke in riddles and rhymes that were barely intelligible to the gods who still spoke Ancient Greek or Latin, let alone the rare human who found themselves in their presence. “They said that any unnecessary death would be punished.”

“And what if I don’t believe you?”

“Check for yourself, and then I’ll see you at Temple Orcus tomorrow night.” Rose could ask them all she wanted. The Fates only gave answers to those they favored, and brother-killers tended not to be on that list.

“Fucking hell, Dominic.” Rose turned around, running a hand through her freshly combed hair and around to grip the back of her neck. The motion caused the edge of her nightgown to drift up and something weird happened in my stomach. I shoved the reaction down, not willing to figure it out when I had just let impulse force me into a marriage I didn’t want.

“Don’t go cursing my name now.”

“Oh, I’ll do a lot more than curse you.”

“This is getting repetitive, don’t you think? Why don’t we try married bliss for a while?”

Rose snapped back around. “I’d rather die.”

“Bring that up with the Fates then.” I countered, crossing my arms over my chest. Rose’s eyes dropped for a moment before whipping back up to my face.

“You know what, I think I will.”

“Good.” I said, sounding falsely confident.

“Good.” Rose returned, huffing like a child in the middle of a tantrum. That was when I decided that this would be fun. Impromptu, unideal marriage aside, I would enjoy making her squirm and stomp her foot from frustration.

“See you tomorrow then?” I said, not bothering to fight the amusement in my expression. “Seven o’clock?”

Her eyes blazed as green as hellfire. “Fuck you.”

“So kind to your husband, already, Rose.” I reached up and squeezed her chin between my thumb and forefinger to punctuate my point. The look she gave me was nothing short of murderous, mixed with some shock, and I reveled in it as I stepped backward through a portal and back to the better side of our realm.

While we still had sides to compare, at least.

## Chapter 2

### Rose

I knew I'd face the consequences eventually. I knew that someone (Dominic) would exact revenge for my sins.

The dam hadn't broken—until now. It had been building. A quip about my track record here, a threat there. But I would have never expected retribution would come in the form of marriage. For the ever loving love of Zeus: *marriage*.

I woke up with a headache. Not part of the consequences explicitly, but an annoying cherry on top nonetheless. I should have guessed I would since the Fates had just turned my life into a new horrible, mind-numbing reality. I flipped onto my back and raised my left hand, as if there would be proof of the engagement I was apparently a part of sitting there.

But I found my fourth finger empty, and the open space seemed to mock me, reminding me just how much of a sham this *arrangement*—to use Dominic's word—was.

A shiver went through my body at the prospect of being married to him. The shock of finding him in my room at midnight was almost enough to permanently scar me, even though I had been expecting him.

It would seem odd to *expect* that someone like Dominic, a god with a realm full of the dead to rule, would show up in my room unannounced, but it was just one of the many scenarios I had prepared for. Poisoning my food, sending mercenaries after me, tackling me in the middle of a market, I had prepared for it all.

It was just natural, given a love of revenge was something both our families shared, and he had good reason to enact it.

Or he *thought* he did. There were a few people in my life who would fight me on that difference.

Regardless, him showing up when I was damn near on the verge of sleep and then slapping an engagement on me was enough to turn a girl to stone from the shock. I let out a huff, something I seemed to do a lot where Dominic was concerned, and sat up in bed.

I wasn't shackled to this marriage, not yet anyway. He let me call him on his bullshit, practically begged me to run to the Fates to prove that this marriage needed to happen. He was right, the Fates don't take kindly to those who have killed, or in their words *who interrupted their plans*, but they owed me.

I had made sure of that.

With a final sigh, I hauled myself out of bed and walked toward my bathroom. Once I stepped inside and caught myself in the mirror, I almost laughed. My hair was tangled beyond belief and the hollows of my eyes had more purple than normal.

At least it made my eyes look greener.

I picked up my hairbrush, the same gold one that I've decided to blame for this whole debacle. I lifted it to the rat's nest on my head, and as I began brushing, I was bombarded with more memories of last night.

The terrifying, electric feeling that coursed through my veins as Dominic watched me from the shadows. The fear that settled in my chest when I realized he intended to kill me. The unexpected relief when he said no. And worst of all, the shiver the rough scrape of his hands sent through me.

I could have kissed the Boreas heir for the chill wind she was spinning last night, because it made Dominic think I was cold, instead of realizing the horrible truth.

I refused to admit to anything other than distaste where Dominic was concerned through sheer force of will and petty revenge.

Dominic was massive, in height and build, standing half a foot above me, with a sleeve of tattoos on one arm and one on



the other forearm. I was sure there were more, having gotten a glimpse of something under the collar of the casual shirts he always wore.

He took his role of god of the Underworld seriously in only two regards: constantly wearing black and being an asshole. Other than that, he was quite annoyingly informal, well, but not overdressed, unless the occasion required it.

His build, combined with the light stubble that always marred his cut jaw and strong chin, gave off the impression he could pummel you.

But he was gorgeous in a roguish kind of way, his head full of dark blonde hair. His eyes were a brown so deep they almost looked black and contrasted against his tanned skin, and his lips were full and built for smirking instead of smiling.

He was gorgeous and he hated me as much as I hated him. He deserved every name I called him in my head and aloud. My sins aside, he was equally at fault for our torrid relationship.

Which was why I refused to roll over and accept this marriage without making damn sure the Fates were forcing us into this. Otherwise, I would be happy to sit back and wait for him to work up the courage to finally kill me.

Or for him to find someone from his realm who enjoyed silence and torture as much as him and hope she popped a kid out. The latter option seemed a much more distant possibility seeing as Dominic seemed to think of relationships as fondly as taking a running jump into Tartarus.

The last tangle cleared from my hair and I went through the motions of my morning routine as quickly as possible. I washed my face, applied serums and creams in a rush, and slapped on blush and mascara. I stepped into my closet and pulled on the first dress I put my hand on, a simple forest green dress that fell loosely down to the middle of my calf.

I normally indulged myself in a much longer routine, but I had Fates to see.

I turned out of my closet and took a step forward, the world splitting in two and a portal to the Fates opening. It was something I didn't even do consciously, a talent passed down through all godly families. My back foot joined the other on the damp gray floor and my bedroom faded away into space. I was left in a cold, wet room that would be classified as a dungeon if the Fates hadn't decided to call it home.

I steadied myself, taking a deep breath even though I saw them once a week. No amount of exposure could get you used to staring into their bone-chilling eyes. Their quarters were a little farther forward, through a knee-high bronze gate topped with razor-sharp spikes.

That was the thing about the Underworld, everything needed to have a deadly little spin. Even on a gate that was flimsy enough to bend and stopped a grand total of no one from barging into the Fates' space.

I pushed through it roughly and it hit the back wall with a small snap of sound that echoed loud into the hollowed-out dome. The Fates sat in their hovering chairs, an image I'd seen countless times, staring at the altar in front of them. It housed the tools they used to spin and cut lifelines—from their worn-down spindle to the fraying edges of the Book of Fate.

Not one of them lifted their heads as I approached, which in any other circumstance would have been a resounding sign to turn around and run home, but they stopped acknowledging me years ago. It was to be expected when I showed up every week like clockwork.

Except now, I was showing up on the wrong day, a fact that seemed to dawn on Clotho the moment it rattled across my mind. The Fates all represented a different stage in life, Atropos looking like a spry teenage girl, Lachesis like a withering old woman, and Clotho about middle age.

Clotho stared at me, waiting for the question she knew I had burgeoning.

“Why won't you let Dominic kill me?”

Clotho flinched. She was surprised, an emotion I didn't know she was capable of showing. Then again, I've only ever seen something close to pity in her expression.

My surprise at her surprise must have trickled into my face, because Clotho sat forward in her chair and explained, "That question is not the norm for you, Lady Hades."

"Oh, come on Clotho, I think we are on a first name basis by now." I was stalling and I couldn't place why. Not when marriage—again, for the love of Zeus—was on the line.

Clotho looked at me like she knew exactly what I was doing. "We have an answer to that question, when you are ready, *Rose*."

"I'm ready."

"Are you?" Atropos said, her young voice sounding somewhat shrill against the cold stone.

"Yes," I snapped. "Although, I am curious whether you are providing an answer based on kindness or if you consider this to be repaying the debt you owe me."

I'd normally never be that bold with them, as they had yet to fulfill the one request I had. Five years and a thousand favors later and they still refused.

Even then, I probably could handle a small dip into the debt I'd been building if it meant getting out of my engagement.

"This is payment we are entitled to give," Clotho said. The double meaning in her words did not escape me. They had categorically refused to fulfill my only other request. "Information precious as a gem should only be laid to rest in the sturdiest of platinum."

I clenched my jaw and my fists simultaneously. "Great, consider me platinum."

Clotho stood, stepping down to the altar like she was walking on steps, but to me it looked like she was walking in midair. Once there, she grabbed the Book of the Fates, opened to the exact page she was looking for in some eerie display of

power, and ran her hand down the page, absorbing the information.

I stood in silence as she returned the book to its resting place and moved back up to her chair. When she was seated, she gave me one last glance as if to ask me if I was sure.

I nodded, unrest tightening my chest.

Her hand waved, and two brilliant threads of gold appeared across the room.

All of the breath left my lungs in a rush. The top thread was a bit longer than the other, but they were otherwise indistinguishable in color. They were sitting parallel to one another, perfectly straight, until about halfway through, where they began to bend down to meet in the middle, settling together in a knot that looked impossible to untangle.

Fated.

Dominic and I were Fated. Or at least our marriage was.

“Oh.”

“Your realms will unite to make one,” Clotho said, firmly. “We cannot allow your line to wither away into nothing. Dominic Pluto will be your husband.”

“I assume I have no say in the matter?”

“We get what we want eventually, through whatever means necessary. The only way to escape our control is to know your Fate.”

*Oh*, this time silently.

This was a massive wrench thrown into my plans. I lived by a set of simple goals: don't mess up my realm irreparably, build up what the Fates owed me, force them to concede to my offer. All of which hinged on keeping my half of the Underworld healthy. Tying it together with Dominic's wasn't an option.

Except it seemed the decision was out of my hands. Rejecting this and pissing off the Fates would dash any hopes I had of them finally caving.

“Okay.” I said, my voice coming out hoarse and resigned. I had to get out of here and regroup, replan, before everything I had worked for over the past five years crumbled to the ground.

“I see that Temple Orcus is preparing for a ceremony,” Atropos noted, confirming that they knew of Dominic’s plans and were doing nothing to stop it. That thought only made my chest clench even tighter in anticipation of this afternoon.

*Seven o’clock*, Dominic’s voice rang through my head.

I went through the next minutes of my life in a haze. It felt like I was watching my body go through the customary motions of thanking the Fates before I turned around and made my way back to the flimsy gate so I could return home.

As I did, there was a voice beckoning in the back of my mind that was trying to pull my attention to the list of things I needed to do to prepare my entire realm to merge with Dominic’s. But all I could do was wonder what type of debt the Fates owed Dominic for him to be considered “platinum.” Because the one I had built was damn near unpayable.

The only thing that would satisfy it in full would be another’s soul.

Or maybe they just liked him. Most people did despite his gruff exterior. And I was about to get intimately aware of why.

## Chapter 3

### **Dominic**

I was intelligent, I knew that. Quick-witted, sharp, smart, whatever the fuck you wanted to call it—I was worthy of the title.

But I'd never, *never* made a more idiotic decision than I had in proposing to Rose *fucking* Hades.

I'd left her palace in the early hours of the morning, barely able to string a thought together other than: you idiot.

There were so many things wrong with the situation I'd gotten myself into, blinded by a need for revenge. It was my family's fatal flaw, never able to let go of grudges against the people who had wronged us. Leading to revenge killings, revenge torture, revenge life-ruining. All of it.

That was the difference between Rose and I, I reminded myself. The one and only person I'd outright killed had murdered my parents in cold blood in a ruthless grab for power. My uncle deserved what he got.

Rose did the same, killing her brother and then keeping it a secret for a fucking week. I would never forget the cold, emotionless expression she carried when she walked into a Council meeting to inform us that Pine was dead.

But *marriage*. Man and wife. That was the necessary arrangement to dole out the punishment she deserved?

It wasn't inconvenient. In fact it solved a number of problems. That must have been the intelligent sector of my brain, the one functioning in the background while the angry, irrational part stole the show whenever Rose was around.

I was never going to marry for anything other than convenience, certainly not for love. It was the sacrifice for this role, this power. It was too dangerous to bring anyone into that hadn't grown up in the world of godly power struggles and ego.

Rose knew. That was one point in the favor of this fucking insane arrangement.

Rose was used to the dance for power and it gave me the proximity I needed to plan the most cutting revenge. Much easier to uncover what she loved and rip it away from her while we were living under the same roof.

It also solved the problem of our powerlines, of how long we could hold out until the Roman and Greek lines were forced to completely merge.

Adrian would probably love this. It would quell a number of his fears. Not to mention the endless enjoyment he would get out of this. He would have a host of—

“Hey, lover boy!” As if summoned by my thoughts (and knowing the extent of his power, that wasn't far off), Adrian's voice boomed down the hallway to my office.

“Office!” I yelled back, steeling myself for the shit-eating grin surely plastered on his face.

Adrian Zeus Jupiter waltzed into my office like he owned it. It was one of the few places he technically didn't.

As the king of the gods and god of the skies, nearly everything was tied in with his power. His life source sustained everything above ground, save the seas. Every step he took was a careful balance between making sure you knew how powerful he was and trying not to provoke anyone. His birth had done enough of that as it was.

Adrian stopped in the doorway and dropped into a dramatic bow. “I supposed my felicitations are in order, Dominic. You've found yourself a blushing bride.”

And *there* was the shit-eating grin. Adrian was built like a brute, with a tall, strong build. Outside of that, he looked

anything but, always clad in a perfectly pressed suit, fresh off a clean shave, and back straight.

His eyes were gray like a storm. You could literally see streaks of lightning in them, a fact he just loved to tell any woman he was trying to flirt with.

“How the fuck did you find out this quickly?” I asked, voice biting and tired. It was barely midday. The reach of his spies still shocked me at times.

Adrian shrugged like it was nothing. Maybe it wasn't. It took a lot to ruffle him, even now, he didn't have a hair out of place in a gray three-piece suit. “Temple Orcus was instructed to prepare celebrations for a wedding and a priest called in to help with the power shift.”

“That's *my* temple,” I said, leaning back in my chair. “They aren't supposed to tell you shit.”

Adrian sat on the other side of the desk, and said, “Well, I'm their king. Yours too, in case you forgot.”

“How could I when you so lovingly remind me every ten seconds,” I responded, sarcastic and not at all bitter. Adrian had the right to assert his authority, especially when he had been thrust into a brutal spotlight from the moment he was born.

The gods in both the Roman and Greek lines were always treated as famous in their own right, publicized as much as the human's celebrities and governments did. There was an air of mystery and authority around us all, knowing we controlled the way the world worked, from Adrian's control of the Upperworld all the way down to the Morpheus heir's control over their dreams, but left the volatile change of politics up to the humans.

In the years past, the appeal wore off a little, the humans content to push our ancient houses into the background out of resentment or fear or whatever they decided warranted a cold shoulder. But Adrian, in his infernal glory as the shaker of worlds, turned the attention back on the entire godly system.



It wore on him. Shit, I was at my wits end half the time with that nonsense and people cared about me only half as much as him.

Adrian's temper seemed to be eased by amusement as he said, "I need to find some enjoyment in this shit storm. And the look on your face is giving me exactly that."

I sighed, pushing back so I could drop my head into my hands and prop my elbows on my knees. "This is ridiculous."

"Really? I think it's brilliant."

"Do you now?"

"Oh, certainly," Adrian said. If he didn't cut the cheerful tone in two seconds I was about to punch him. "This makes my life so much easier. I was worried I'd have to speak at your funeral soon."

"You thought Rose would kill me?" I was so baffled I had to repeat, "Me?"

Adrian looked at me like it was an obvious answer. "You would have a fighting chance but she's an evil little thing. She'd get the jump on you and then bye bye Dominic."

"I hate you."

"You hate her," Adrian noted, raising an eyebrow at me in an expression of Fates knew what.

"That is also true." He was right, of course. And he hated her too.

The only person who might have rivaled Adrian's notoriety was Rose. The outcome of the Hades and Pluto powerlines was a subject of sick infatuation by humans, constantly betting over who would take power or fade out into oblivion.

The news of Pine's death and the fact that Rose was the one to end her brother's life spread like wildfire, burning into every corner of good society and launching her into infamy.

The gods were no secret to killing, but the story of a younger sister killing her own brother in cold blood and showing no remorse for the act painted a very clear picture.

Not to mention their father passed under mysterious circumstances not a week later. She was the perfect Lady Death, reflecting every stereotype and rumor about the heartless, evil ways of the Underworld.

“I must say I’m rather relieved to hear this,” Adrian said, letting a touch of sincerity into his tone. He was actually in support of this. “Marriage is much simpler than having to stomp out the anger from the other side if one of you dies.”

I nodded silently in agreement before Adrian continued. “Were you doing this just for my sake or do you have another motive?”

I leaned forward on my desk and offered the explanation I had decided justified this. “It’s rational.”

“Of course,” Adrian nodded in sarcastic understanding.

The fucker was going to make me explain this. “No one has made her pay for what she did to Pine. She just walks around in his house reaping the benefits.”

Adrian’s eyes narrowed slightly, his own anger at the loss of our friend building. “And you are going to be the one to make her pay.”

I nodded again, the necessity of this arrangement becoming increasingly clear.

“How’s that?” Adrian prompted, clearly wanting me to walk him through this. He was smart enough to work through it himself, but he was an ass and would make me say it.

“Destroy everything she loves,” I said, quickly, like it should have been obvious. “Seems simple enough to me.”

“And if she doesn’t love anything?” A fair question, given the chances Rose was actually soulless were high.

“Everything she likes, then.” Easy, rational, necessary.

“Well,” Adrian said, rising from his chair dramatically. “It seems like you have this all sorted out.”

“I do.”

Adrian dipped his chin once in agreement. “See you at seven then, brother.”

I scoffed, my eyebrows lifting towards my hairline in doubt. “You’re coming?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t miss this for the world,” Adrian said, sounding all too pleased with himself. “You owe me a hundred gold pieces if she tries to strangle you.”

“I don’t remember agreeing to that bet,” I grumbled.

“Funny, I did,” Adrian reached the door and turned back one more time. “One thousand if she tries to stab you.”

It was a bet I *never* would have agreed to, because he was going to win. Rose and I had never come to blows, not even close, but words as cutting as the sharpest Stygian steel were commonplace between us. Every time we—against our will—interacted, voices were raised and curses slung at the other within minutes.

We’d probably frighten the priest into an early grave with the content of our arguing tonight. At the *wedding* for fuck’s sake.

Feeling restless and more than a little annoyed, I pushed back from my chair and walked to the large windows behind my desk.

They allowed me a clear view of Purgatory, our one and only established town. It had become a force over the years, reluctantly shared by both houses and serving as a middle ground between the Upperworld and the true death of the Underworld.

Stones, spices, plants, anything that came from Purgatory was a precious commodity, creating a rather healthy economy and marketplace that sustained the humans who chose to enter into business here. It was a careful balance of magic. Stay too long and your life source would start to fade, take a step an inch too far from the city limits and your soul would never leave.

Beyond the town’s structure, the Underworld expanded infinitely on both sides, the fields that held souls stretching out

beyond conception and Tartarus's sucking black cloud looming in the distance. As it currently stood, you could see two separate tributaries, one Roman and one Greek, leading into the Styx.

Tonight, they would merge into one without any conscious show of my power. It was my life source that controlled such fundamental aspects of this power, and Fates knew what the actual mechanics were.

What I did know was that in a matter of hours I would be married, forever bound to Rose Hades—Pluto, soon enough—and destined to a life with her under my thumb.

## Chapter 4

### Rose

As I left the Fates lair, I stepped through a portal right into my kitchen instead of my bedroom. I had neglected breakfast or tea in my hurry to see if Dominic's insane plan was real, and the information I'd just been handed only made the jittery feeling in my stomach worse.

I appeared in my kitchen right in front of the stove and Max nearly fell off their stool in shock.

"Eight years working for you and I still am not used to that," they said as they collected themselves. Max was my oldest personal guard and a close friend. They had the kind of softness in their demeanor that was inescapable—their gray eyes, their gentle posture, the way they carried themselves all radiated kindness. I used to think they stuck around out of pity, but that feeling had been replaced after realizing they were just genuinely loyal.

"You hungry?" I asked, turning towards my pantry to start gathering materials for breakfast. I needed to calm myself down and cooking was the easiest way to do so.

"Always. Marcus stepped out to run a perimeter check, but he'll be back soon."

At that, I reached up and grabbed another bag of oats. Both Max and Marcus could take down food like it was their job and were constantly offering to take pay cuts in favor of a meal.

I started to prep the materials, making it about halfway through slicing an apple when I realized Max's traditionally chatty self was being abnormally quiet.

I set my knife down on the cutting board and turned to find their body hunched over the onyx marble counter, their chin resting in their hand and an expression of pure curiosity on their face.

“Yes?” I prompted, even though I knew what this was about.

“Where did you go this morning?”

I sighed and turned back around, picking up my knife to continue. If I didn't occupy the blade while I told the story it might end up embedded in the wall. It took me ten minutes to break down last night's little visit and this morning's developments, and at the end of it my hands were shaking as I finished stirring the oats in the pot.

Just as I finished, Marcus bounded back into the kitchen, catching the tail end of me saying, “So, I assume Dominic will have no problems with me keeping the palace.”

Marcus made eye contact with Max for a moment, and then turned to me, telepathically caught up on the conversation. They were siblings and their family was connected to a godly line no one could quite place, but telepathy was a common trait amongst their whole family.

“Ah, so that explains why Dominic was here last night,” Marcus said, dropping into the stool next to his sibling and making grabby hands at me. I placed a steaming bowl of oatmeal into his waiting hands and handed one to Max before responding.

“Thanks for that, by the way,” I said. They knew I could handle myself where Dominic was concerned, but a little warning might have been nice.

“You had it handled,” Max said through a mouth full of food.

“That fact aside, I almost had a heart attack.”

Both their backs went straight.

“It won't happen again,” Marcus replied, tone serious.

“It’s fine, really,” I said, waving a hand in dismissal. I meant it to be a joke, but the disagreement over my lack of staff was still a sore subject. They badgered me about once a week to hire more guards. Nothing had happened to warrant a higher level of protection. Yet.

“He wouldn’t have been so brazen if he thought you had a full guard,” Max argued. Here it was, *again*.

This conversation made my forearms itch. I popped up off the counter to start a pot of tea before I crawled out of my skin. “Yes, he would have.”

Max wasn’t satisfied. “You should still let us hire more guards.”

“I’m sure he can spare the extra staff, especially after we are married.”

“Not if they all quit,” Marcus countered. I tried not to flinch, but I could feel the muscles in my back constricting anyway. He meant no offense, just blunt and honest truth.

Most of my staff quit the moment I took the throne, and for good reason. Those who stayed did so out of loyalty or because they felt some duty to, and I had been okay with that. While there were rooms completely closed off because I couldn’t handle the upkeep, I didn’t want to force anyone to work for me.

Especially if it would only result in passive aggressive quips and muttered epithets like “murderer” at every corner.

“They won’t quit,” I said, twisting one of my rings around. “At least I hope not.”

“We will still be there,” Max offered through a soft smile.

“Thank you.” I was genuinely thankful. They had been some of my most supportive friends.

“What I do need you two for is an escort to Temple Orcus this evening.”

Marcus’s lips turned up in a rueful smile. “I bet Dominic got a priest and everything.”

I let out a sound that was half scoff, half laugh. “Oh, I’m sure he did.”

“Thea wanted to know if you wanted a dress.”

My head popped up so fast I almost spilled boiling water on my hand. “Um, no. I have one.”

Max laughed with their whole body, sending their short, tousled silver hair, the exact same shade as their brother’s, shaking. “Were you *expecting* to get married today?”

“No, but I don’t want Thea ruining her fingers trying to finish one in five hours.”

Thea was an amazing seamstress, and often used me as a mannequin. If she had even the slightest inclination I wanted a dress she would track down every ounce of lace she could and whip something together.

“Alright, then,” Max responded. “Take a second, and we will meet you by the door at a quarter to seven.”

“Okay,” I said, forever thankful that Max and Marcus could read my emotions as well as they did.

I tried to enjoy the rest of the day as best I could. I used to spend so much time in a stagnant state, refusing to find enjoyment in anything out of guilt. Now, I was in a better place to deal with it, a stance that would surely be sent off-kilter by Dominic’s presence, but I refused to let my life wither away in the way it once had. It was still my instinct to enjoy my time as if my days were numbered.

I drank two cups of tea and read. Then I spent a good hour trying and failing to get around a Fated marriage—the thought still hadn’t settled well—and decided that not pissing off the Fates was priority one and finding a way to keep fulfilling favors was priority two. That stressed me out enough that I cooked a ridiculously elaborate lunch of fish and lemon pasta that took up most of midday. It calmed me down a little, and when Max, Marcus, and Thea sat down to eat with me, the easy conversation set me even more at ease.

That was until the clock struck six and I realized I needed to get ready or I’d be late. I did my hair and makeup as I



always did, with the addition of a lipstick I knew would transfer all over Dominic if the priest made us seal the marriage with a kiss. A mix of sadness and guilt might have been the winning emotion that day, but my petty side was always there.

By the time I made it downstairs at ten till seven, Marcus and Max were waiting for me by the door.

“You realize that is a wedding dress, right?” Marcus noted.

“This is pink, not white,” I corrected. Marcus was hopeless when it came to fashion, and was convinced the only colors that mattered were gray, white, black, and blue.

His eyes were blue.

The dress was a light blush pink that *did* look white in certain lighting and I had chosen it specifically for that reason.

Dominic had to have ulterior motives for this marriage, or at the very least was as unhappy about it as I was. If me in a wedding dress drove the nail in a little further, then I’d take that opportunity. His pissed-off face was among my favorite expressions of his.

“Alright, let’s go.” It was now or never. My resolve and temper were already paper-thin.

Max nodded, opening up the front door. Traditionally, it would have led to a rocky path interspersed with moss, but today, in a twist of magic, it led directly to the entrance of Temple Orcus.

The temple served both the Pluto and Hades houses in the Underworld, and stood three stories tall. It was carved in the traditional style of most temples, the columns holding up a peaked ceiling were topped with swirling curves and ornate flowers.

A scene of a funeral procession was carved into the upper facade, with the accents encased in gold. The distinguishing factor of this temple was that the raw limestone that was used for most others was covered in a layer of rich black paint. The gold accents shone brighter against it, picking up what little light our dimmed and setting sun provided.

I stepped fully through the giant dark oak doors to find Dominic already there. He had the priest, as expected, one I recognized from his side of things. Next to him, standing like a best man would at traditional human weddings, was Adrian.

I should have known he would show up to this.

I walked up to them quickly, my heels clicking against the floor. I wanted the first word.

Of course, Dominic beat me to it.

“Oh, look, the demon arrived,” Dominic drawled when he saw me. He was wearing a suit for once. All black, well-tailored, and maybe, possibly, certainly making him look even more handsome.

Ugh.

My retort whipped out of my mouth. “Dominic, darling, I am much too sober to find your half-wit insulting amusing. Find me some wine and you can try again.”

“And *I* am much too sober to be in your presence at all,” Dominic snapped back. “But we have a wedding to get through. So be nice and drop your weapons.”

My eyes narrowed. “You are deranged—springing this on me, calling me a demon, then claiming I’m the one with an attitude problem.”

Dominic cheek twitched. “It’s merely a fact, Rose.”

“Oh, is this what we’re doing? Listing facts? Perfect.” A delighted smirk touched my lips as I lifted up my hand to start counting things off on my fingers. “You’re an asshole, a narcissist, and can’t use a sword for shit.”

Dominic shook his head in forced disappointment. “Now, that’s not fair to the rules of the game. Only two of those things were true.”

“Ah, yes, I’m sorry, Dominic. I meant dick, not asshole.”

“Not even a minute and you are already talking about my dick. Not very subtle, Rose,” Dominic chastised and I had to bite back a laugh.

He was witty.

I hated that about him.

“I’m surprised you know the meaning of the word, given you’re about as subtle as an explosive.”

“I’ll be subtle when I—”

“Alright!” Adrian interrupted from behind Dominic. “As much as I’ve enjoyed the show, let’s get this moving.”

Neither Dominic or I moved, just stared each other down.

“Start over,” Adrian said, clipped and full of authority.

Almost instinctively, I snapped into action.

“Hi, Dominic,” I said sweetly, drawing a smile to my mouth.

Dominic raked his eyes down my body, now that he had a second away from our bickering, and the dress that covered it. It definitely looked white in this lighting and the image sent his jaw clenching and an eyebrow raising. “Hi, sweetheart.”

I tried not to flinch at the nickname. He thought it was funny, calling me sweetheart when there was *nothing sweet about my heart*. His words not mine.

Max and Marcus said hello quickly, and I tried to keep the conversation cordial. Since Adrian said so, only because of that. “Wonderful day to get married, isn’t it?”

“Truly.” Something weird was happening to Dominic’s face. He was looking at me like I was on fire and he was trying to restrain himself from dousing me in water.

I ignored it.

I turned to Adrian. He looked like a king, there was no other way to describe it. With his tight shoulders, *I dare you* smile, and knowing gaze, he radiated pure and unwavering authority. “Adrian. Thank you for joining us.”

“Wouldn’t miss it.” His response came out so low and forced the words were barely intelligible. Typical. Dominic was more vocal with his distaste for me, but Adrian felt the

same. I was honestly still convinced the marriage was a ruse to get me alone with them so they could kill me.

I turned back from Adrian to find Dominic's eyes still on me. His jaw was pulsing with each consecutive clench and I had half a mind to tell him to stop before he cracked a tooth. He looked furious. His broad shoulders were pinched back, puffing out his chest, and his hands were clasped behind his back.

It kind of looked like he was holding his hands together to prevent them from going rogue and finding their way around my neck.

The image sent a grin curving through my lips.

Dominic noticed my change of expression, because of course he did. "Something funny?"

"Yes. You." I just couldn't resist, Adrian's warning be damned.

Dominic pushed his tongue into his cheek, considering. "You find me funny?"

"Hilarious," I said, narrowing my eyes a bit and taking a step towards him.

Dominic took a matching step forward. "Flattery won't save you."

*That* was definitely a threat. I could feel Max and Marcus tensing behind me. This was normal for us, they shouldn't be surprised.

The priest's voice cut off my burgeoning response.

"We are ready when you are," he said, gaze directed at Dominic. He quickly looked behind him to gain approval from Adrian.

He then turned his attention to me, something in Dominic's antsy demeanor raising a red flag.

"Are *you* ready?" he asked.

"She's ready," Dominic cut in brutally.

“Apologies, Lord Pluto,” the priest responded, folding his withered hands together in front of him. “I’ll need to hear the lady’s consent before we can continue.”

“Lady Hades,” Dominic said, looking at me with an expression that dared me to test the Fate we had both been dealt. “Are you ready?”

“I showed up, didn’t I?”

Dominic nodded and turned back to the priest so fast it created a small whirl of wind around him. “Great, let’s get on with it.”

The priest’s gray eyebrow pinched together even tighter. “I need an actual yes.”

Dominic said something that sounded an awful lot like *for the love of Jupiter* under his breath before his flaming eyes caught mine again.

What was I going to do? Say no? There was no way to escape Fate. If it wasn’t now, they would find a way to force us together in a year, two, maybe five. What mattered was that it *would* happen. I should just be glad we were both going into this knowing we hated each other instead of under the Fates-imposed delusion that we were in love.

“Yes,” I grated out, holding the priest’s gaze so he could sense the affirmation in my eyes.

Dominic reached a hand out to me without waiting to hear what the priest had to say. I grabbed it quickly, the dread that settled in my muscles was making me jumpy.

The second his large, calloused hand closed over mine, I had the realization that we’d never really touched.

He must have realized the same thing, because he pulled back a bit and stared at my hand in confusion for a fraction of a second before engulfing my palm. Dominic pulled slightly, bringing me to stand directly next to him.

It seemed like he grew half a head, standing that close to him. I was tall, for both a god and a human, but Dominic still had a good six inches of height on me.

Standing there next to him, I felt somewhat concealed. It aided by the way he was invading every one of my senses. I couldn't see much else besides him and the priest, the pressure of my hand in his was occupying all the nerves in my arm, his woody cologne was burrowing itself in my nose, and I could hear him breathing.

“Get on with it,” Dominic snapped through the silence. Holy Fates, this was tense. I felt on the verge of breaking.

The priest nodded, mumbling out an apology.

He began speaking Latin, the language Dominic's ancestors used. Mine used Greek, but every House was fluent in both.

The ritual the priest was spinning was elaborate and dramatic, his words lifting dust off the floor and blowing out candles throughout the temple. My hair was forced behind my shoulders on a cold wind, plastering the thin dress to my body. If I wasn't as steady on my feet as I'd been trained to be, I would have fallen over from the force of it.

This wasn't some simple feat, it was the colliding of two worlds. Almost three decades ago, Mila Zeus, the princess of the Grecian gods, and Cassius Jupiter, prince of the Roman gods fell in love. It was forbidden love and scandal and intrigue and everyone who knew thought it would end as a sordid love affair.

Except it didn't.

Mila got pregnant and they got married and months later Adrian Zeus Jupiter was born.

His existence shook our worlds to their core. When I was told the story as a girl, there was so much emphasis placed on the stupidity of his parents' actions and the “abomination” that was his birth. He was a raging asshole to me, but I never thought he deserved the blame he shouldered.

Gods and goddesses of every House, from the powerful down to the forgotten, freaked out. There were kidnappings and children dying and couples who were slaughtered before they could ever get around to having children. The divine

craved their power, and no one was satisfied with letting the other side win and for theirs to drift off into nothing.

It was particularly tense with the Hades and Pluto Houses. Two children born the year before Adrian's birth and one four years after, all of whom possessed seemingly equal power.

There were discussions early on between our families of this exact situation, betrothing Dominic and I. But my father was a power hungry monster who thought marriage was surrender and Dominic's parents didn't want anything to do with my family.

It was supposed to be a fight to the death. My brother was already gone, and I should have been next. It was the natural progression. My brother died by my hand, and Dominic killed me in revenge. I was never supposed to survive.

We were never supposed to be standing here, with Dominic looking at me through the whirl of dust surrounding us like he was regretting tying himself to a brother-killer.

He blamed me for the death of his best friend and he had a right to. But how he dealt with that blame was another story, that was the source of *my* anger.

I squeezed his hands a little harder, just to remind him that I was there.

"Yes, sweetheart?" He ground out, visibly fighting a flinch as my nails dug into the back of his hand.

"Nothing." I smiled so sweet it hurt my cheeks.

The look in his eyes could have lit a match on fire. It certainly had an effect on my own temper. This was fucking up *my* plans and he's the one who is pissed?

Oh, I needed to get out of here so fast, or I'd punch him in the gut.

The wind surrounding us dropped at once, startling me back to reality. I was too focused on trying to break Dominic's hand that I hadn't really paid attention to any part of the ritual.

We were married.

I walked into this willingly, and if we were Fated, it would have been forced eventually, but the shock of it all was still tough to deal with. Even if I did only plan on seeing him when it was absolutely necessary.

“It is complete,” the priest said, still in Latin, before switching back to the modern language. “Only death will sever this now.”

Someone laughed. Someone in that temple laughed, I was sure of it.

“Lord Pluto,” the priest nodded to Dominic, then turned to me. “Lady Pluto.”

Right. I was Lady Pluto now. I would never admit it, solely because the name belonged to Dominic, but I was somewhat happy to be rid of the Hades name. It only reminded me of my father and his cruel sneer and my brother and the fact that the title should have passed to him.

So Lady Pluto it was.

“Well,” Dominic said, turning me around with him so that we could face Adrian, Max, and Marcus. The three of them looked about as pleased as a child after dropping an ice cream cone.

“We will have dinner at my home to discuss this further,” Dominic said, tone completely absent of a question.

“Like hell we will!” My response barely audible as Dominic pulled me with him through a portal into his living room. I had the barest understanding of Max and Marcus jumping through behind him before I ripped my hand out of his hand, spun towards him, and yelled, “What the fuck?”



## Chapter 5

### **Dominic**

“What the fuck?” is not the question you would want your new wife asking you seconds after you got married.

It *was*, however, what I wanted Rose to be asking me. Multiple times, for weeks on end, as she slowly discovered the plans I had in store for her.

She was fuming, and it sent a wave of triumph through my chest. In fact, I didn't think I'd ever seen her this disheveled.

That isn't to say she looked bad. Rose was beautiful, a fact I often tried to ignore.

At little success though.

It was obvious. Her hair was long, hanging all the way down to the top of her trim waist. With green, almond shaped eyes that shone so powerfully the color made it past her dark eyelashes even when narrowed at me in accusation, she was disturbingly memorable.

Even something in the soft curve of her lips, never formed into anything genuine in my presence, was haunting.

I almost forgot what we were doing in that temple when she walked in, flanked by two guards, but surprisingly settled with the situation. I'd imagined her kicking and screaming, fighting all the way to the moment our lives were tied together.

And that dress. Of course she would show up in a wedding dress just to spite me. When I first saw it, I damn near ripped it off her then and there, but that would have required me to put my hands on her. With the fabric clinging to her body in every possible location, from her full breasts to the slope of her hips, that was not something I wanted to do.

Now, the poor thing was being crumpled beneath her left hand as she crushed the dress in her fury.

“You need to be more specific as to what you are mad about.”

Her eyes blazed. She tried like hell to stare down her nose, a nose I just now noticed had a bump over the bridge, but I was still taller than her.

“First, you break into my house,” she yelled. “Then, you force me to marry you. And next you turn into a kidnapper!”

*Kidnapper. New.*

“I did not kidnap you. I just ensured you would follow me.” Rose did not look even remotely satisfied with that explanation. “We do have much to discuss.”

“We are married. The Fates are satisfied. What more is there?” Her voice was rising to a near yell and her arms were flailing around her in frustration.

I was getting to her. Good. Now I just needed to make sure I could get her close enough to figure out what she loved—if she was even capable of the feeling—and promptly take it away from her.

“Marriage is a contract, is it not?” I asked, sitting down at the large table in my dining room. I waved a hand and food appeared. A simple spread, prepared by my chef Mary, that wouldn’t be too difficult to eat amongst our negotiations. “So, let’s discuss the terms.”

Rose raised a doubtful eyebrow at me, but silently moved to sit down. Marcus pulled out her chair for her and a sharp snap of duty sparked through my chest. Chairs would be my job from this point on.

Before I could unpack whatever the fuck that declaration was, Rose gestured her hands toward me in frustration.

“Your terms?” She prompted.

“Well, for one, seeing as it was rather simple to break into your house, as you’ve said, I have concerns about my wife’s safety.”

I didn't miss how she flinched at the word *wife*. Too bad, she called me every name in the book, so I deserved to call her wife.

She crossed her arms under her chest. I kept my eyes on her face. "I can handle myself just fine."

"Your ability to kill has never been brought into question." If I didn't know her as well as I did by now, I would have thought the way her neck tensed meant she was hurt by that statement. But she never shied away from reminding *me* what she was capable of.

"You really need to come up with more creative insults," she muttered, and I felt her foot brush mine under the table. I widened my legs. There was no way I was letting her kick me in the shin.

"Now that we live together, I have all the time in the world to practice."

Rose almost fell out of her chair. "We do not live together!"

"Hire competent guards and then we can re-discuss." My voice was firm, leaving no reason to argue.

She did anyway. "My guards are perfectly capable of protecting me."

Her guard, Marcus, if I remembered correctly, piped up from behind her. "You need his staff too."

"Marcus!" Rose yelled, snapping her head towards him in accusation.

"What do you mean?" I ground out.

He turned to Rose first, apology in his eyes. "You're right we are capable of protecting you. This is part of that."

Rose tipped her head back towards the ceiling and muttered something to herself.

Marcus turned back to me. He was built like a guard, full of bulky muscle. I had no doubt that he could protect Rose from a direct attack, but not from someone who snuck in behind his

back. “Our staff can’t cover the entire palace. There’s pockets of dead space that would make a breach all too easy.”

That was all I needed to hear. “We combine our homes. End of discussion.”

“No.” Rose kicked her foot under the table, snapping the wood of my chair. Right where my leg was a minute prior.

“I’m not arguing with you.” This was falling into place too perfectly. I needed to know where to strike first before I could fully formulate a plan for revenge.

“So what? You want me to play the dutiful wife?” She batted her eyelashes at me. “Could I get you some tea, darling? Maybe a foot rub? Or a knife to the gut. Your pick.”

I laughed. “Make it a back massage.”

“In your dreams.”

“Try nightmares.”

“Creative,” Rose said, sarcasm dripping from her tone.

I took a deep breath and resisted the urge to strangle her.

“We can table the topic of our houses,” I said, and at Rose’s quick expression of joy I added, “For now.”

“What if I have terms?” she asked.

“This is a negotiation. Please share.”

She took a deep breath and said, “I get to leave the house whenever I want.”

My mind went blank. I had no fucking idea what to say to that.

“And I don’t want anyone other than Marcus or Max accompanying me when I leave.”

“Okay...” I said, trailing off. This was odd.

Max must have thought it was odd as well, because they placed a hand on Rose’s forearm. When her attention reached them, they shook their head slowly, as if chastising her for bringing it up.

Rose's eyebrows pinched together and then she turned back to me. "I'm just saying that I don't want you to think that you control me."

"Trust me," I said with a laugh in my voice. "I have no illusions that I do."

Whatever she heard in that response eased her a little, but it did absolutely nothing to satisfy my curiosity. Was that what she thought marriage was? Overbearing control with no autonomy?

"Okay, now that I've conceded to two of your requests, let's return to mine," I said, grabbing my control of this conversation back.

Rose huffed. "I don't want to live with you."

"Do you have any *actual* reasons why you must live alone?"

She opened her mouth, but I cut her off. "Besides pure stubbornness or preference? You know it will be easier to handle breaches if there are issues merging our Houses."

Smaller power lines had merged in the years since Adrian's birth, either through marriage or from one deciding to end their line, but our marriage was dealing with a lot more power. The structure of the Underworld was changing, and it would only go off without a hitch in a perfect world. And this world was nowhere near.

"No." The word looked like it took a great deal of strength to get out. "I have no good reason."

"It's settled then."

I gave into the urge in the back of my mind. It didn't require any conscious use of my power, so it must have been a residual effect of our marriage. If our Houses combined, it only made sense for our literal houses to combine as well.

The ground started to rumble, and the walls began to shake. And then, almost without me realizing it, the entire sitting room changed. There were pieces of Rose's furniture that I

recognized from last night mixed in with my own. It looked like a pretty even 50/50 split.

Even my black leather couch seemed to combine with her light brown one to create a deep brown color.

“Great, now my furniture went to shit.” Rose had risen and was running a hand along the back of a chair that seemed to get the same treatment as the couch. She was petting it like a tiny dog.

“Redecorate, I don’t care,” I said, even though Rose speaking to furniture was tugging at the corners of my mouth.

Rose’s head popped up, some idea lighting up her eyes in worry.

“What do you think happened to the bedrooms?”

“Shit.” I needed Rose under my thumb, but not *that* under my thumb.

Rose took a running start towards the hallway, despite not knowing where the hell she was going. I grabbed her around the waist before she could get too far. It stopped her, but it also earned me an elbow to the gut. For that, I squeezed a little tighter, bringing her flush against my chest and legs.

Bad idea.

Her dress was so thin it felt nonexistent. My body broke away from my brain and could only process that there was this gorgeous thing wiggling her ass against my crotch. I released her before certain body parts could make their presence very known, but moved my hand up to her arm.

“I will show you.” I grumbled. “It’s getting late anyways.”

“It’s barely nine!”

I didn’t bother to bring up that Rose was whining like a child at bedtime. “Stay up and stare at the wall for all I care. But *you*”—I said, waving my finger in a circle near her face—“are in for the night, you little flight risk.”

Rose huffed again, but didn’t fight me further.

“Find Mary and have her send food up, please,” I told Max and Marcus, then directed them to go find Raiden, my own director of security, with a stiff instruction to discuss the logistics of combining our guards and staff. There would be no breaches on my watch.

With Rose in tow, sighing and muttering curses she thought I couldn't hear under her breath, I led us out of the sitting room and down the left hallway.

The structure seemed to be the same as my house before the merge. The location too, I could spot the moonlight reflecting off the bay my house sat on the shore of.

Where that left the bedroom would be a mystery solved soon. I spotted the familiar oak door of my suite after a staircase and two more turns down hallways. It sat in the middle of my—our—home on the very top level.

When it became clear which room I was headed towards, Rose jumped around me and made it to the door first. I cursed, but didn't stop her as she pushed open the door and walked in.

I tensed up as she entered my room like she had a right to. I didn't like people in my space. I spent a lot of time alone, and when I wasn't, it was with people that I *liked*.

My friends only ever went as far as the den on the other end of this floor. I rarely brought women back to my room, opting for theirs or literally anywhere else, but on the rare occasion I did, they never stayed over and were always too preoccupied to take in much of their surroundings.

Rose was certainly not a friend and sleeping with her was absolutely not in the cards. And yet here she was, raking her observant eyes over every piece of furniture in my room, from my four poster bed to the chairs and couch next to the old brick fireplace to—

“Nice bookshelf.” The bookshelf.

It covered the wall to the left of my bed, opposite the floor to ceiling windows and entrance to the patio. It was made of the exact wood that covered the walls in my library, but was

filled with books I chose instead of the relics and ancestral books that occupied those shelves.

Rose walked over to it, feathering a hand over the row of books in line with her shoulder.

“Don’t steal anything,” I warned from where I stood, leaning back against my now closed door.

Rose tossed me a devilish look over her shoulder. “Now I’m going to.”

“Do it. See what happens.”

“I like that challenge,” Rose decided, moving her hand to pick up a book. I shot off the door and she froze. Then she moved her hand back towards the book. I was in front of her in a second. We stood there, locked in a stare down, with her hand an inch away from a book I had just finished for what felt like an eternity.

She eventually dropped her hand back down and waved it towards me in a shoo-ing motion. “Okay, move. I’ll snoop later.”

I stepped out of her way before she could start hitting me in the chest. “It’s not that sneaky if you tell me you intend to do it.”

“Ah, but you don’t know when. Mystery intact,” Rose said, tapping her finger on her temple.

A laugh got stuck halfway up my throat. If I wasn’t so tense from her walking around my space like she owned it, I might have actually let it out.

She was witty and sarcastic, traits I would have respected on anyone else who didn’t have her track record.

It was somewhat of a surprise. This conversation was lasting longer than our usual exchange of cruel pleasantries and inevitable argument about Underworld decisions for the Council. The latter would surely continue now that we had to show a unanimous vote as one House.

Even though, come to think of it, I couldn’t remember the last time we actually voted in disagreement.



Whatever. She was still a bothersome little killer.

I always knew Rose to be more quiet. Adrian, Pine, Lukas—the Poseidon heir—and I grew up together. It was almost implied as the heirs to the three strongest godly lines. Rose would be around when we would hang out with Pine at their house, normally tucked away in some corner, certainly not slinking around my room, running her perfect fingers over everything like she owned it.

Then again, I was five years older than her, and I'd never really paid that much attention to her beyond acknowledgment as a friend's sister. That was until she made herself *very* known by killing him.

I shoved down burgeoning rage, pushing it aside only to make room for curiosity. Her guard seemed slightly lowered.

That didn't stop me from being an ass. "I plan to do snoop too, once we figure out where your stuff went. Or do you not have anything? I'm sure the grave you sleep in is pretty snug."

Rose grinned, seemingly in spite of herself. I needed to figure out how to get her to show me a real smile. In preparation. For revenge. "It is surprisingly spacious, but I take up most of the space with solid gold pillows."

"Comfy."

"Like you wouldn't believe," she said, pointedly running a hand over the back of a chair. She was really trying to test me.

When it was clear I wasn't going to tackle her for touching my furniture—even though I had an overwhelming urge to—she went into the bathroom.

The moment she walked inside, she let out a blood-curdling shriek.

I plowed into the bathroom, half expecting Rose to already be dead on the floor with someone in a black mask standing over her. Instead, I found her sitting on the black marble countertop in between two sinks.

"Why the fuck did you yell like that?"

Rose smiled. Not at me, of course. At her own brilliance. “I think I figured it out.”

“And?” The urgency was still thick in my voice.

She gestured to the gray marble bowls on either side of her. “You didn’t have two sinks before, right?”

“No.” My question still hadn’t been answered.

“Then, I think my room is through that door,” Rose said, pointing at the door on the other end of the bathroom like that made even a little bit of sense. “Whatever magic it was that combined our houses must have liked the idea of his and her sinks.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Rose didn’t so much as flinch at my tone, even though it was inching closer and closer to murderous.

“See? Yours and mine.” When I didn’t drop the look of confusion from my face she added, “It’s a term designers use.”

“And why do you know that?” My shock was obvious.

“Quinn Hephaestus. He’s a fan of interior design.” She shrugged like that was entirely normal. “Did you not know that?”

“No,” I said through gritted teeth. I liked Quinn, but had no clue Rose knew him well enough to talk shop.

Then again, he was closer in age to her than I was.

My heart rate was starting to slow now that I was sure Rose wasn’t dead. I couldn’t make her life hell if she died. Especially not if she bit it before I could crack her cheery disposition.

She hopped off the sink, landing on the floor with the grace of a trained assassin.

“Okay, here goes nothing,” she said, placing a hand dramatically on the door knob. When she looked at me, I nodded, and that seemed to be the signal she was looking for.

The door swung open, revealing the same room that I’d been standing in mere hours before.

“See! Told you.” Rose looked positively triumphant.

I took my time looking around her room, taking in what I missed in the darkness last night. She had a huge bed, no grave or coffin in sight, that was covered in colorful pillows. There wasn't one consistent color in her room, but everything seemed to match the rich navy walls.

The layout was similar to mine, the furniture almost the same, but in a bright color. I had a deep gray couch in the same place that her dark green one rested.

My vision caught on the back wall, and the scattered rainbow that took it up.

“Nice bookshelf.” I stepped towards it, catching on to a few titles I recognized from my own.

Rose stepped up next to me, and when I turned towards her, her expression was serious. “You touch it, and I kill you.”

This time the laugh escaped my throat, scraping out roughly. “Does the same consequence apply with mine?”

“Yes, but only if you catch me doing it.”

“Deal.” That was easy. Now I had a justified excuse to torture her when her curiosity got the best of her.

Rose nodded in agreement, and I tracked her movements as she turned to scan her room. If my home had just been broken into bits to meld into hers, I'd be looking at shit to.

She shot back into the bathroom, and I trailed her quickly.

When I reached her, she had a deeply dissatisfied expression resting on her face.

“Why are you frowning like that?”

Rose shook her head rapidly. “This isn't going to work,” she said, waving her hands over the far left section of the countertop. It was covered in bottles and tubs of product, and I spotted the gold hairbrush from last night.

Nothing looked out of place to me. “I agree with you, but what in particular?”

“Nothing.” The response came out too quick to be true. She didn’t get to lie to me.

“Rose,” I warned.

Rose blew air out of her nose, turning towards me and back towards the sink three times before deciding to speak, the words rushing out. “I like my morning and night routines, okay! And I don’t want you ruining my peace. Especially if you are going to stand in the corner threatening to kill me like last night.”

That was...not what I thought she’d say. “I don’t recall ever threatening you.”

“You being a creepy shadow stalker would say otherwise.”

*Creepy shadow stalker. New.*

Rose was on a creative streak today.

I caught a shocked laugh before it was too late. She didn’t get to make me laugh twice in one night. “I will not creepy shadow stalk you. This is my bathroom too, you know? What if I like my routine?”

Her eyes did a little dancing thing over the stubble forming on my jaw, desperately in need of a shave, and then to the small pile of product in the corner of my side of the sink. Most of them were basically weapons, meant to keep my beard and hair under control.

“Fine.” The word was short, clipped. Compromise was clearly a new thing, but it looked good on her. Her cheeks flushed a vibrant pink in frustration.

That was a look I would be trying to replicate.

Rose let out a dramatic “ugh” before running back into her room.

Well, alright.

I needed a glass of whiskey and to have a conversation with Raiden, but I needed to get out of my suit more. There was a reason I never wore them. It smelled like the temple and an

intoxicating scent that I had a sickening feeling belonged to Rose.

I went back into my room, and even though it was visibly unaltered, it looked different. Shaking off the unsettled feeling, I went into my closet and changed into a pair of low-slung flannel pants and an undershirt.

I walked back into the bathroom, eyes trained towards the floor as I tried to rub out a kink in my neck. I wasn't alone, an experience I suspected I would get little of now that Rose slept infuriatingly close to me.

Rose was sitting in a chair she had pulled up the counter top, tying her hair back into a clip with teeth sharp enough to break skin. I'd have to search her things for weapons when she wasn't looking.

She caught my gaze in the mirror and held it, not backing down. I broke her envy-riddled stare to trail my eyes down her neck and shoulders, resting on a black silk nightgown thin enough to definitively outline her breasts. Her nipples were peeking through the fabric, growing harder under my scrutiny.

Blood was rushing with upsetting speed out of my head, and when I lifted my eyes to find Rose's trained on my chest and moving lower, I cleared my throat and moved toward the sink before things got out of control. I was not going to entertain any thoughts of her in a compromising position.

She probably bit when she kissed. The thought passed through my head with less revulsion than I expected.

I grumbled through splashing my face with water and some lotion, catching Rose's eyes only briefly as she smoothed a cream down her neck. I practically fled back to my room, snapping the door shut behind me. Having her in my space was fucking annoying.

Raiden could wait until tomorrow. Rose was giving me a goddamn headache and I needed to distract myself. I picked up the glasses on my bedside table and unsuccessfully read for thirty minutes before giving up.

I laid down, and started listing off ways to make her life absolutely miserable in my head, resolving to start the official plan tomorrow. Right after I burned every nightgown in her closet.

## Chapter 6

### Rose

I was going to burn every nightgown in my closet. Tragic, really. I loved every piece of clothing I owned. But those nightgowns would have to go if they threatened to give Dominic the wrong impression again.

*Yes*, his slow, calculated perusal had sent a flash of heat whipping through my body. *Yes*, maybe I wasn't even remotely cold, maybe I was rather feverish. *Yes*, I had to fight a full-body blush at the image of him in a thin white overshirt, finally able to catch a glimpse of the edges of a tattoo on his chest and the shadow of one on his side.

But that was *not* attraction. It couldn't be. I wasn't of the opinion you had to like someone to be attracted to them, but Dominic was so off-limits it was a joke. I was half convinced he was the embodiment of the punishment I deserved. Imposing, handsome, strong, and *wrong*. So, so wrong.

I just had to make sure I didn't humanize him. It would chip away at my resolve.

The chisel was hovering inches away from that very resolve last night. It was clear that he didn't want me anywhere near his stuff, but I couldn't help it. His room was interesting.

I mean, I could have guessed what it looked like.

He was brooding and dark and clearly thought he was smarter than half the people in the room. And his bedroom was all black and charcoal and dark wood, and that massive bookshelf screamed "I'm more well-read than you."

I did spot a few familiar titles, but that wasn't important. It also wasn't important that we had exchanged over ten semi-cordial sentences, a new record for us.

What was important was breakfast, and I was hungry. I slept surprisingly well for the first night in an unfamiliar house, with a sworn enemy across a shared bathroom.

Then, again, I kept my bed. *Thank the Fates.*

I could shove down my irritation with these new living arrangements, because as much as I hated to say it, Marcus had a point about my safety. I couldn't die from a mistake. Not yet anyway.

What I couldn't get over was a new room or losing my closet or bathroom. Luckily, my bedroom and closet were intact—including those godforsaken nightgowns. My bathroom was mostly the same, the design kept, but combined with Dominic's.

It was in that very bathroom that I went through my morning routine, expecting Dominic to barge in while I was in the shower. Instead, I spent twenty minutes in needed silence before dressing in comfortable pants and a tight shirt and stepping through my door.

Max was standing across the hall waiting for me. We greeted each other, and they offered to walk me down to the kitchen. I thanked them, grateful I wouldn't have to go stumbling around looking for it.

Max filled me in on the conversation with Raiden. They had decided to keep Max and Marcus as my personal guard and would be putting some of Raiden's team on watch for any issues with the power combination. It made sense, and I trusted them.

I did what I could to keep the realm running from the shadows. I wasn't exactly welcome as a public ruler. And I was really, really trying not to provoke anyone.

Max led me down a set of steps and around a corner into a bright, open room. Well, bright as it could be given both



Dominic and I's houses looked like a cliché of hell, covered in black marble, dark wood, and rich toned furniture.

I figured the room had been from Dominic's house, but it had my kitchen and all my furniture in it. It worked, the color of his walls picking up nicely on the large oak table and straight back chairs I kept around it.

The room ended in floor to ceiling windows and large doors, opening to a patio I was itching to sit on. The Underworld didn't mirror the topography of the Upperworld, it had a landscape of its own. Including a bay that folded in from the shoreline of the Oceanus. Technically a river, but as vast and wide as an ocean. The water from the bay fueled the Styx, but whereas that river was a dark gray and filled with souls, the bay was a brilliant dark blue, glittering in the dim morning sun.

I was definitely drinking my tea on that patio.

I stepped fully into the kitchen and dining area and spotted Marcus and Raiden sitting on stools by the countertop.

"Morning!" I greeted. "Good to see you, Raiden."

I hadn't seen him in a while, and I was actually quite happy he was there. I'm sure he and Belen, his husband and a close friend, lived in the house, and if that meant I'd see more of them, I was happy.

Raiden smiled, breaking his traditionally serious face into something inviting, and jumped up to give me a quick hug, wrapping strong arms around me. "Good morning, Lady Pluto."

I cringed at the title. "Are you required to call me that?" I asked as I stepped around to the other side of the countertop and Raiden sat back in his stool.

"Yes."

I wasn't sure if I liked the honorifics. "You never called me Lady Hades."

"I didn't work for you then. I work for Dominic and, now, for both of you."

Did Dominic make him call him Lord Pluto? I couldn't get behind that. "Please still call me Rose."

"No problem," he conceded, then added, "Lady Rose."

"Clever." My gaze dropped to the counter and then to the watch on my left wrist. It was late morning, but I didn't think breakfast had been served by anyone. And Marcus was doing his hungry leg bounce thing.

There were two explanations, one I preferred and the probable. I turned to Raiden. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Yes, Rose." Raiden was hesitant, his tan hands folding together on the countertop.

I smiled. "I don't want to intrude, but what does Dominic normally do for food?"

"Well, he has a chef. But, um, they are ill today," he answered. "They should be back to full health by tomorrow."

Marcus wouldn't meet my eyes. Alright, so they quit. That was fine. This was fine. Expected, even.

"Would they feel better sooner if they cooked for the staff, but not for me?"

Raiden's eyes dropped to the counter, giving me a view of his shaved head. "Yes, they would probably be okay with that."

I knew it. There was a slight chance they were waiting for me to eat, but I knew this was the real reason Marcus looked hungry.

"They have an industrial kitchen? And this one is open?"

"Yes, Rose."

"Brilliant then," I forced a smile to my face. I started cooking out of necessity and it had quickly become something I really enjoyed, but this still stung. "Don't worry today, Raiden. I have it covered. I cook for Max and Marcus all the time. Are you hungry?"

"Yes, starving." Raiden's voice still carried a bit of doubt.

“Perfect. Sit, enjoy,” I said, mustering as much false cheer into my voice as possible. They couldn’t feel guilty for something that didn’t affect me.

I decided to cook omelets, pulling out eggs, greens, mushrooms, onion, and goat cheese from my thankfully unchanged fridge.

As I began slicing the mushrooms, they began filling me in a bit more on what was happening. There wasn’t much yet, but there were sure to be issues with the transport of the dead. Dominic and I’s power was more removed than the gods who dealt with the concerns of the living, our roles gearing more towards guardian than patron. Even then, funeral rites and grieving were very much within the scope of our power, and everyone ended up in the Underworld eventually.

The conversation quickly moved from business to Marcus recapping a story about his weekend. I was halfway through sauteing the mushrooms and onions when the energy in the room shifted. My shoulders tensed and my back straightened at the same moment Raiden said, “Dominic.”

I lifted my head to find him standing at the entrance to the kitchen, assessing the scene in front of him with the intensity of a general stepping onto the battlefield.

I was having a good morning and he would not ruin it. So I forced myself to grin—he wasn’t getting a full smile out of me—and said, “Morning, Dominic.”

“Morning.” His response was short and clipped, but he stepped into the room. Towards me.

He was muttering something under his breath the entire way over. His first intelligible sentence came when he stopped mere inches away from me, crowding me near the stove.

“What is going on?” The question was spoken with a deep, sleep-addled grumble that sent my stomach flipping.

I tilted my head up to meet his eyes. His hair was sloppy and messy from sleep, and he had traded his night clothes for a tight fitting black t-shirt that left his tattooed arms exposed.

“I’m cooking,” I explained. “There is enough for you, so don’t get your panties in a twist.”

Dominic grunted in response, but didn’t move out of the kitchen. He slipped behind me and reached over my head to the cabinet to the left of the stove.

The kitchen felt so small. His woody, spiced scent was so powerful it completely blocked out the smell of the food. I kept my gaze trained on the very, very interesting task of watching eggs cook and tried not to calculate the inches between the side of my head and his huge bicep.

It was less than five.

He stepped to my side and began assembling the things he needed to make coffee. He used a stout gray pot that tapered in the center and came apart in three pieces. He packed in coffee, filled the bottom with water, and reached over me *again* to turn on the burner behind my pan.

I had half the mind to tell him to fuck off, but I kept my mouth shut when I noticed he had grabbed two mugs from the cabinet.

Dominic stayed in the kitchen, leaning back against the far counter so he could watch the coffee and intermittently grunt or give short responses to Raiden or Marcus or Max’s attempt at conversation.

He was not a morning person, o-kay.

I didn’t stay silent, but I didn’t participate in the conversation as much as I normally did. Dominic’s proximity was about to overload my senses.

The coffee pot started whistling, high-pitched and screeching, and I jumped. Dominic steadied me with a scorching hand on the middle of my back. His hand was huge, taking up the space between the small of my back and my lowest rib.

“Careful.” The word was still grumbly.

I just nodded, meeting his eyes for a moment before stepping back in search of plates. Dominic moved faster than

me, grabbing five off a high shelf and handing them to me. It was a casual, comfortable motion. Two words I'd never use to describe us.

I took the plates and loaded two omelets before setting up another in the pan. Dominic poured the coffee into two cups and handed a mug to me.

"Thank you," I said, wrapping a hand around the warm ceramic. Two, low-spoken words, were all that I could push out. Him helping me in the kitchen was too much. People didn't do things for me. Not without a responsibility to.

Dominic stepped around to the other side of the counter, taking his coffee and cologne with him, and I felt like I could think again.

Marcus was still telling his story as I finished up the last three omelets. He was a great storyteller, working in enough details and little quips to keep it engaging and bright. One of those quips earned a genuine laugh from me as I set the final plates down in front of Dominic and Raiden.

Marcus kept going, and I laughed a little louder. I caught Dominic's shoulders tensing from the corner of my eye. Maybe he didn't like eggs?

That thought stayed as I watched in trepidation as he lifted his fork and cut off a piece. He brought the eggs to his mouth and chewed them, slowly. I tensed. He didn't like them.

I was about to offer him something else when he brought his fork back down to the plate and chopped off a piece big enough to choke on and hauled it back up to his mouth.

He liked it. I was pretty sure. He was taking big bites but chewing them slowly, like he had to think about every movement.

I tucked into my own food standing at the counter. Everyone was silent for a bit, eating their breakfast. Raiden popped up out of his chair and rounded the marble, probably in search of seconds. I was about to direct him to the sixth omelet I'd made on the pan when he stopped and peaked inside my mug.

“Did you not get any sleep last night?” He asked, dark brows drawn slightly together.

“I slept fine.” I silently begged him not to push it.

He did anyway. “Then why are you drinking coffee?”

“I...um wanted some.” It was a weak ass excuse, but my brain wasn’t working at full capacity. I grabbed the mug, resigned to drink it, but Dominic got up and pulled the coffee out of my hand before I could take a sip.

“Tea?” It was one, guttural word that I almost confused for a grunt.

I nodded.

“How?”

“Black. Milk and some honey.”

He turned towards the kettle, and I stepped away from the stove. Dominic looked pissed. And over a stupid cup of coffee. His back muscles were bunched under his shirt, the tension never leaving as he made my tea. Or as he slid the mug in front of me and sat down with a scowl painting his face.

The scowl deepened with every consecutive word of conversation. And when Raiden looked at me and said, “You remember Dorian, right?” I heard the distinct snap of ceramic breaking.

Dominic had broken the handle off his mug. Why Raiden asking me about his brother was the final straw, I was about to find out.

“Everybody out,” I snapped, pining Dominic with a deadly stare to make sure he knew to stay right where he was. When the three guards scurried out of the room like dismissed schoolchildren, I asked, “What the fuck is your problem?”

Gone was the sharp-witted man from last night. Dominic was back to being the asshole I knew him to be.

“Where is Mary?” His expression contorted like the question tasted vile on his tongue.

“And who would Mary be?”

“My chef.”

Oh. That had an explanation, but I wasn't going to tell him the full truth. “She has been redirected.”

Dominic leaned back in his chair, his expression darkening as he folded his hands across his chest. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“She will stay on staff to cook for the rest of your household, and you if you choose,” I explained, trying to keep my tone nonchalant. “I'll continue to cook for myself and whoever would like to eat my food.”

He didn't like that excuse. “You can't just come in here and dictate people's jobs.”

“She won't be bothered. I wasn't here before, and she won't notice me now.” She didn't *want* to have to acknowledge me.

“Don't you have a cook of your own?”

“No.”

Dominic scoffed, stood and rounded the counter towards me. “Whatever. But I'm not letting you fuck with her job.”

“She gets to keep her job and I get to make use of this kitchen. It's a win-win.” My tone was sharpening. I was trying to cut off this line of questioning.

“Did you threaten to fire her?” Dominic was angry, visibly. I was angry, too, but I tried not to show it. I tried to come across cold. Anger showed passion and passion showed that you cared.

“I did not threaten her.” It was an evasion, answer his question but offer no other information. It also stayed far enough away from the truth that I didn't feel on the verge of a heart attack.

The doubtful raise of Dominic's eyebrow didn't help the tightness in my chest.

“Any more complaints while we're at it?”

“Yes. Stay away from Raiden.”

I let out a bitter laugh.

“No. He’s a friend.” And I refused to lose any more of them.

Dominic looked resentful. “Why the hell are you friends with him?”

“Belen is Greek.” Something about his expression made me think he was surprised by that little bit of information about Raiden’s husband’s history. “I was friends with him before they got married. Became friends with Raiden afterwards.”

It was true. Belen was Thea’s brother and had grown up beside me. Another friend who stuck around after everything. He and Raiden were always kind to me. Too kind.

“And does he know who you are?”

“You mean does he know what I’ve done?” It always came back to this, didn’t it? The skeleton in a closet that had no doors. “Yes, everyone does.”

“So then I repeat, why is he friends with you?”

Dominic phrased that question intentionally. He trusted Raiden, and Raiden was surrounding himself with a murderer. That reflected badly on him.

I deflected the question, not wanting to reduce the role Belen and Raiden had in my life and certainly not wanting to explain that he didn’t think of me as a murderer. Even if he should. “Do you really have a problem with me having friends? A life? Or is it that you just don’t think I should have any fun?”

Dominic’s eyes blazed with fury. I’d gotten him there.

“You don’t get to kill Pine and then go on living your life like it never happened. You don’t get to be friends with *good* people. You took advantage of someone’s kindness once, who is to say you won’t do it again?”

I felt like I’d just been slapped. Because it was everything I was scared of. I was scared that I didn’t deserve kindness or friends. Scared that I’d repeat the same mistakes I’d made, the same ones that killed my brother.



I swallowed, trying to dispel the tightness in my throat. It was morning and I hadn't fully put up my defenses. Dominic's words got to me, and it was showing. My eyes were growing misty with each second I had to stare into his furious face.

"Well, I love it when breakfast gets interesting. But I must go," I choked out, moving toward the door.

Dominic's thick eyebrows lifted in the center, catching the strain in my tone like an expert fisherman. He moved toward me quickly, wrapping a hand around my upper arm, which took up an indecent amount of space. "Rose—"

"Let me go," I cut him off, shaking off his hand and putting space between us. "Now."

"No," He took a step towards me. I took a step back. "Not until you tell me why that hurt you. Is there something you aren't telling me?"

"Hurt me?" I asked, forcing incredulity. "You give yourself too much credit."

Dominic narrowed his eyes at me, seeing too much. "You're lying."

"No, I'm not. I killed your best friend. My own brother. That's the truth. Now get out of my way." I pushed past him, barely catching the shocked fury forming on his face. It was bold, to mention what I'd done that casually.

"Where are you going?" His voice sounded close, like he'd taken a step to follow me.

"Out!" I yelled, slamming the door in his face.

I ran out of there as fast as I could. My throat was tight and prickly, the first signal that I was on the way to a tremendous cry. When I felt like this, the only thing I could do was move. If I stayed still, I would end up in a dark, dark hole of my own guilt and grief and I wouldn't be able to pull myself out.

Especially not when I was thrown so off-kilter this week. I was married for Fates-sake. And Daphne, the one person who I could trust to tell everything to, to function as my sounding

board and call me on my bullshit and drink to commiserate with, was gone.

My brother. Daphne disappearing. Dominic being a royal pain in my ass. It was verging on too much.

But the only way was forward. It wasn't naive, bright-eyed optimism that kept me somewhat at peace. It was survival. There was so much death and cruelty and sadness that was unavoidable in the world, in my life. The only way to keep moving, even if I was doing so out of the expectation that my days were numbered, was to appreciate the little moments. Enjoy what I could, make the things that were just okay into something good because at least it wasn't explicitly bad.

I would be back to myself, to that mindset, tonight. But right now, I had to see the Fates.

The patchwork job that Dominic's magic had pulled on our palaces was confusing, and I hadn't had a chance to explore, but I found my way back to my room eventually. I changed into a simple black dress and heels and stepped right from my closet into the Fates' lair.

It was the same routine. I asked my question, they said no. I asked if they needed anything done, they directed me to the Styx. Apparently Charon needed some help.

Charon was truly immortal, the same person guiding souls across the Styx for a millennia.

The gods themselves were not actually immortal. We had power, but we lived and died like humans. The power was passed down through family lines, both through children and chosen heirs, our last names representing the first person to carry the mantle. Humans would assume I knew everything about how our world worked, but even I didn't know why there were unchanging pillars of power like Charon and the unstable dynamic of heirs for the gods.

I stepped onto the shore of the Styx moments later, my heels sinking into the glittering black sand of the river bank. I hopped onto a stone path before I could fall. Just as I did,

Charon appeared on the river in front of me, leaning against his oar at the stern of his boat.

“Lady Pluto,” he greeted, his thin lips pulling apart to reveal yellowing teeth. He may be immortal, but he looked old as hell.

“Charon.”

I stepped into the boat with as much grace as I could manage, and let him steer me down the river to one of the many entrances to the Underworld.

There was a young man running towards the gate—trying to escape—pulling a woman behind him with one hand while the other was clasped over his eyes.

I sighed in disappointment. One *failed* attempt-turned-myth and countless grieving lovers lost their lives trying to pull their dead partners out of here.

At least this one wouldn't require my power. I made quick work of it, stepping up to the couple and gently pulling the man's hand off his eyes. He looked terrified, as he should, with the goddess of death standing in front of him.

He cried, begged. I said sorry, fielded his requests. I felt for him, I really did. But he was dead the second he stepped foot in the Underworld and there was no cheating death. There was nothing I could do, despite how much I wanted to.

It was a lesson I clearly had not learned, but I was a god. The rules didn't apply to me like they did to humans. They had no power with the Fates, no ability to barter. I, however, could make them listen to me.

Eventually, whether it be a thousand or a million favors later, they would cave and finally say yes. I imagined that day often, when I would walk into that dungeon and ask, “Will you exchange my soul for my brother's?” and they would agree, setting things right.

I was able to corral the young man in minutes, and requested as kindly as I could that he follow me. He looked confused, I was asking him to turn around, the one thing he was not supposed to do. He hesitated, but eventually caved,

tossing a solemn look over his shoulder at the woman he came to save.

Moments later, they both moved, dragged by an unseen force to Charon's boat. I deposited two gold coins in his hand, paying their passage back, and watched as they drifted back down the Styx.

My heart squeezed, and I moved to flee the banks of the river before it consumed me.

It was the reminder of my own grief, of my own mistakes, that almost blurred my mind enough to keep me from paying enough attention to the wilted, decaying flowers under my feet. Roses and narcissus flowers that had been blooming, fueled by the last licks of life near the Gates days prior, but now lay dead and squashed under the pale sun.

I crouched, picking up a wilted flower in my hands, and watched it crumble into dust at my touch. It was sucked completely dry of life, as if poisoned. Dread pooled deep in my chest at the realization.

*Of course*, this would be easy. Nothing ever was in my life. The hopeful side of me, one that hardly came out, was praying that it was a result of some internal shifting of power beneath the Underworld. Maybe this flower bed was firmly sustained by me, and when my life was tied to Dominic's it lost its life.

But maybe, it was intentional. Breaches happened, whether it was someone seeking revenge for my sins or trying to pull a loved one back to life like the young man had. We were vulnerable right now, barely a full day into a world-altering new reality.

The only thing that could solve this was swift action. Motivated by a to-do list and more than a little fear, I stood and rushed toward Charon's docked boat, the clicking of my heels echoing through my head.

## Chapter 7

### Rose

“What are you doing?”

My foot slipped in surprise and I fell to my hands and knees, the rough rock at the top of the border wall cutting into my skin. I might have tipped over the wall and gone crashing into the ground had two broad hands not wrapped around my upper arm and calf.

I turned my head to the left to find Dominic staring at me with a look of confusion. I shrugged his hands off as I turned to sit on my butt and brush off the dust on my clothing.

At this height, my knees were level with his shoulders. He took a step back, but kept his hands planted on either side of my legs, and lifted those soul-stealing eyes to my face.

This close, I could see the detail of his stubble, lighter gold mixed in with the brown. The matching pattern of color in his hair, pushed off his forehead and held in messy strands.

“You scared me,” I said, wiping my hands together and fighting a wince at the sting. I didn’t break my skin, but there were angry red welts popping up on the heel of my hand.

“One: I’m surprised you can get scared. Two: what are you doing?” Dominic asked again, this time with his eyebrows drawn together in anger.

“One: sure can, you ass. Two: walking.” It wasn’t a lie. I *was* walking along the top of the stone wall covering the southern border of Dominic’s—and mine now, I guessed—home.

The discovery of the wilted flowers this morning sent panic coursing through my veins. I hadn’t sat down since for any

reason but to eat, covering as many sections of our territory as I could. The west bank of the Styx, where my home used to sit, now lay empty. The Asphodel Meadows had filled the open space, now home to wandering souls who lived an ultimately neutral life.

With something close to meditation, I could test the health of my power, searching for weak spots. When they were there, it felt like the sensation of a hollow stomach, deprived of food for too many hours. It happened when souls got restless or the magic in the gates on the Upperworld side of Purgatory got overwhelmed by the amount of foot traffic.

But in the blank space where my house used to sit there was *nothing* wrong. I wasn't exactly heartbroken to have lost it. It was my father's house, my mother's as well. I'd made it comfortable by sheer survival instinct.

The Fates were kind to me it seemed, as the parts of the house I did like seemed to mesh into Dominic's. My bedroom, for one, was untouched.

But that was overshadowed by the frustration of knowing something was wrong but not being able to find it. It was why I was here. *Walking*. At an hour before midnight praying I'd find an explanation.

"Walking to where?" Dominic's question brought me back to focus.

I opened my mouth to say spew an evasion, but Dominic cut me off.

"And don't try to make up an excuse. It's far too late for that."

I took a steadying breath, lest I knee him in the throat. I was perched at the right height for it. "I was checking the borders."

Dominic lifted an eyebrow, in a silent command to keep talking. My stubborn streak reared, but this was the one instance where I would set aside my refusal to let him win.

"It would be silly to think merging our houses would go off without a hitch," I said. And when it was clear that I was going

to continue talking, Dominic grabbed my hand and turned it palm up, so he could look at the scrapes on my skin.

I swallowed, trying to focus on the explanation I was giving instead of the way Dominic's thumb was resting on my wrist. "I found some dead flowers near the gates. Dead, like the life was pulled out of them. The land where my house was is just the Fields now. And there's nothing wrong as far as I can tell. But I figured it might be worse here, since power was added."

Dominic fell silent for a moment, his head tilted down towards my hands. His thumb caressed the inside of my wrist once, twice, sending twin tenses through my stomach. He shook his head, as if to physically throw out a thought, and then unceremoniously dropped my hands and plucked me off the wall.

Dominic's hands rested on my waist, taking up more room on my body than I cared to acknowledge.

"Well, let's get on with it then," he said, striding off along the wall. As he moved away from me, his right hand lingered ever so slightly, pulling and dragging across the thin fabric covering my hip.

I started after him, if only saving myself from another... touch from him. I was jumpy and nervous, still wound tight from our argument this morning and my thoughts had been twinged with something dark all afternoon.

His silence as we walked, both obviously doing the internal checks I had been completing all day, only worsened it. Dominic must have been losing a battle with curiosity, because after a minute, he spoke like the words personally offended him. "You know how to check your power."

It wasn't a question, it was a statement. One that I immediately took offense to.

Knowing the health of your power was something so basic, so intimate to being a god and for him to think that I would be so ignorant of that...

It reminded me exactly what he thought of me. And brought up the familiar urge to pick through every interaction we had before Pine's death that led him, and many others, to so easily believe that of me.

"Shocking, I know," I deadpanned.

Dominic's steps hitched slightly, his head turning down to look at me. "I would have hoped. Especially since your seat of power is so important to you."

My instincts were screaming at me to defend myself, to fight back. But he didn't deserve that. "That it is."

Dominic considered for a moment, and then, "We might be able to find a common ground, then."

"Oh?" The question was involuntary, my shock pushing the word out.

"We both...care. About this transition going smoothly, at least," Dominic said, the words coming out like each one required a great deal of thought. "We could work together."

"You want to willingly spend time together?" There was doubt clear in my voice. "What's next, being friends?"

Dominic's expression sobered immediately. "I have zero intention of being your friend."

"A partnership, then?" I could play semantics if that's what a normal conversation with Dominic was.

The tiniest muscle at the corner of Dominic's mouth twitched. The closest I would get to a smile from him. "That is what marriage is, is it not?"

"Dominic."

That warning got him back on track. "I presume most people will be in support of our houses merging. Some loyalists might raise an issue, but that will be easy to track."

"Not necessarily," I argued, before I could stop myself. I was *supposed* to be playing into the thoughtless, apathetic role he expected of me. But it was too late now. "Everything we do is under a microscope after Adrian."



I continued before he could defend his friend. “If humans think we are subjecting them to our every whim and desire, they will push back. You know full well we are still suffering the consequences.”

Dominic reluctantly nodded his head. “So we make sure no one suffers from this. Then they will have no argument against this marriage.”

My stomach dropped slightly, remembering the young man whose life was just lost. It didn’t matter that it was entirely a product of his own recklessness, attempting a feat that no one had succeeded in the last millennium.

But the media could run with a story like that. Posturing that he could have been the one to do it, if only the layout of the Underworld hadn’t changed without warning.

Not that any of that was true. When the Roman line manifested, they simply ruled alongside the Greek line in the Underworld. Our landscape hadn’t changed drastically since before any conscious mind could remember.

Even now, the only shift that I could tell was the expansion of fields barely half an acre.

But I didn’t dare bring it up, not now. “How do you propose we do that?”

“We need to put on a united front, for the humans and the other gods.”

“That’s a stretch.”

“Fine, the humans at least,” Dominic grumbled, lifting an arm up to squeeze his brows together. My face had been tipped up, trained on his or the mossy ground in front of my feet, since he’d lifted me off the wall. And even then, I had been too focused on the way his hand felt wrapped around my wrist.

Now, as he was pausing in a moment of pained frustration, I had the chance to see what he was wearing. I didn’t think I’d ever seen him this disheveled.

But now, he looked haggard. Not bad. Not even close. But a little haggard.

A few strands of his hair were falling over his forehead, practically screaming at me to push them back. He was in *sweats* and a long sleeve shirt that looked slightly wrinkled from a long day's use.

It humanized him in a way, creating a new facet to the stone cold image I'd had of him before this.

"Alright," I conceded, and then because my curiosity was never satiated, "If that makes your day any better."

Dominic's gaze fell down to me, his hand returning to his side, but his brows still pinched together as if his fingers were still there. "What makes you think my day needs to be improved?"

"You look..." I trailed off, settling for just waving my hand over him.

"Rose."

"Tired? Stressed?"

A small indent appeared on the lower side of his cheek. Some might call it a dimple. "Exhausted? Distressed?"

I cut the amusement bubbling in my chest—Dominic made a joke, I was almost shocked into laughing—by snapping back.

"If you are trying to impress me with your excellent vocabulary, it's not going to work."

Dominic's eyes flashed with something dangerous, responding inherently to the challenge in my tone. "What would?"

"I am not answering that." No way. I was not giving him ammo to make whatever effect he had on me worse.

He wasn't deterred, he only looked determined. "Fine, I'll figure it out myself."

I didn't want him knowing anything about me, *especially* not what turned me on. I changed the subject quickly. Cowardly. "Are we done here?"

Dominic, it seemed, was not ready to let me go. “As long as we can both agree that we’ve checked the entire perimeter and nothing seems wrong?”

“I only checked half,” I said, quickly. And then immediately regretted it for some reason. I didn’t think I was comfortable with him knowing I wasn’t completely helpless as a ruler. It was easier when he thought I was dumb and careless.

“I checked the other half,” Dominic said, tilting his head toward the north end. “That’s how I saw you on the wall.”

“And then scared me on said wall.”

Dominic took a step towards me quickly, as if physically moved by something. I tried to decipher the expression on his face and the only thing I could come up with was anger.

But that didn’t make any sense.

Before I could ask, to see what could cause the anger, Dominic spun on a heel and started back towards the house. His long strides moved him across the rocky ground quickly, and so I started after him at double the speed to catch up.

He was silent all the way back to the house, around the side, and up the stairs on the back deck touching the edge of the bay.

I was practically running after him. When he stopped abruptly at the door, I ran into his back, hitting muscle that felt like steel, before bouncing back.

Dominic kept one hand on the door knob, but brought the other to my wrist. For the second time that evening.

He jerked his wrist slightly, turning my reddened palm up. My hand shook. Well, was shaken. By Dominic.

He lifted my hand and shook it, as if to remind me of the scrapes. They didn’t even hurt, but he was treating me like I was walking around and dripping blood all over the floor.

“Don’t walk on the wall like that again.”

Oh, he didn’t get to tell me what to do. “What are you, my keeper?”

“No, your husband.” And before I could process that, “Because of that, I now have to care whether you die. We *both* have to name an heir. If you die because you trip or someone *scares* you again, then our powerline is fucked.”

I hadn't had time to consider that. That we needed to approve that together. We certainly weren't having children, and while a naming happened often, it required work.

We needed to do that. *Now*. Especially since I was pretty sure the volcano of my sins was about to erupt with the force of the Furies, likely taking me down with it.

I wasn't sure that would improve under Dominic's House name.

“I won't do anything inherently dangerous,” I said. Walking on a wall wasn't dangerous, and I wasn't going to let that be the baseline.

“Rose. No hurting yourself,” Dominic said, almost possessively. As if someone else reserved the right to hurt me.

My heart was beating way too fast, lingering from the quick pace of the walk and the urgency in this conversation.

I swallowed.

Dominic caught the motion of my throat, his eyes dropping to the base of my neck, to the open space between my collarbones. I'd taken off the necklaces I normally wore and it made me feel bare. That combined with the heat in his gaze made me feel indecently exposed.

Dominic didn't take his eyes off my throat as he asked, “Why is your heart beating so fast? Are you nervous?”

His voice sounded like it had scrapped over gravel on the way out of his mouth.

“I should be,” I said. “I'm not convinced I'm safe around you.”

He seized my eyes again with that same drilling intensity I'd come to realize was normal for him. “That so?”

“Yes.”

“That remains to be seen. But, based on how fast your heart is beating,” Dominic lifted his hand to the pulse point in my neck, brushing the back of his hand lightly over my skin and leaving a blazing flush in its wake, “Your instincts are screaming at you to run or fight.”

My heart was about to beat out of my chest. Whatever it was, fear or something else, my resolve was slipping, and fast. Especially when Dominic kept his hand hovering a millimeter over my skin, static heat radiating off him.

His chin dipped a fraction of an inch. I barely caught the motion in my periphery because he kept my eyes locked on his in an arresting stare.

I had the horrible, enticing thought that he might try to kiss me. The moment was ripped away in a second when a loud bang sounded from inside.

“What was that?” We both said at the same time, turning our heads towards the door.

Dominic stepped away from me. “I think it came from the entry.”

He ripped open the door and took a step inside, with me quick on his heels. He turned around and pinned me with a serious expression. “Stay here.”

“No.” I’d been forced to learn to take care of myself and had gotten damn good at it.

Dominic didn’t fight me, but he kept pushing me behind him as we walked down the hall, stopping at each turn to make sure no one had come up and was hiding in the shadows. I only let Dominic lead because he knew a thing or two about that.

We made it to foyer and Dominic froze, shoving me behind him before I could fully catch a glimpse of the man pacing back and forth in our entryway.

“Lukas?” Dominic asked, shock ringing in his voice.

“Hey, man.”

I lifted up on my toes to peer over Dominic's shoulder and sucked in a breath. Lukas looked like hell. His sea green eyes were dim and his shoulder-length, wavy hair was tied up in a haphazard bun.

"What are you doing here?" Dominic's voice was concerned. It should have been. One of his best friends showed up unannounced, looking haunted.

"Is Rose home?"

I cringed at how rapidly Dominic's back tensed in front of me. I knew he wouldn't like this, but that didn't matter right now. Not when Lukas looked two seconds away from snapping.

I stepped around Dominic before he could stop me. "Right here."

Lukas released a sigh and nodded at the floor. "Great."

He turned and walked out of the entry with purpose. I knew exactly where he was going.

I turned to Dominic. "I'll be right back."

He wrapped a large hand around my upper arm, stopping my movements. "Where do you think you are going?"

"We have to talk."

Dominic's eyes narrowed. "Talk about *what*?" His tone was the same threatening command it was when he warned me away from Raiden.

"I'll explain later." I wasn't going to ever, not unless he pressed, but I certainly wasn't going to explain anything now. He could be pissed all he wanted, my—*our*—friend needed me.

He released my arm dramatically. "Fine."

I hurried down the hallway and around to the bottom staircase that I'd found in my explorations to lead to the gym, industrial kitchen, and staff offices. I could already hear the soft *boom* of Lukas's fist connecting with a punching bag in

the gym. It was loud as hell, which meant he was pissed as hell.

I stepped into the room and under the vaulted ceilings. The walls were lined with equipment from precious ancient swords to more modern items like the punching bag Lukas was currently pouring his wrath into.

I walked up to him slowly, placing a hand on his shoulder to stop him. “How are you doing, Lukas?”

He turned, giving me the glimpse of just one eye. “No talking.”

“Okay. I’m here if you want to.”

“I know.”

I backed away, and he turned to face me. I wanted to say something about how pale he looked, but I shoved it down. Lukas was the Poseidon heir and normally split his time between his underwater and seaside palaces. It was summer, when the sun would turn his skin into a deep, tan brown. He looked like he did in the winter, which meant he was holed up in his deep sea home.

Red flag as far as he was concerned, but he got a pass. His fiancée Daphne, my best friend, had left him a few months shy of a year ago with no explanation. I would have never guessed she would leave like that. As far as I knew her arrangement was a good one.

She’d known about her engagement since she was six—one of the many godly pairings engineered to avoid a fight. I thought she was okay with it.

Even if Lukas and her were just friends...She trusted me enough to talk about her feelings for Lukas, so why not this?

I thought she would trust me with anything, until she disappeared without a word.

It hurt, she was the person I’d counted on most after Pine, and she just left.

Lukas was dealing with betrayal. He’d come to me panicked the day she left, convinced she would have at least

informed me of her plans, but I had nothing to tell him. There was more to the story than I knew, because Lukas had turned into a distorted, angry version of himself since then. When things were dark, he would come to me and silently work the cobwebs out of his head through a fight.

I was game. I was trying to supplement my memories of training with good ones. And I liked Lukas. Even when swords clashed together or when he was angry, he never turned it on me.

That was the poison he chose today, as he walked over to the far wall and picked up a gleaming silver sword about three feet long. I spotted my blade, complete with a gold hilt, on the far end of the rack and grabbed it.

Wordlessly, we spared, the clanking of our blades the only sound in the room besides our heavy breathing. I didn't realize how much I needed to work off some tension. I didn't think it was one sided, but Dominic was never going to admit it.

We went at it for over an hour, until my arms felt boneless and my legs were burning. When Lukas stepped too far forward on a strike, leaving his side exposed, I had to pull back an instinctive kill swipe at the last minute. It offset my balance enough for Lukas to get the jump on me and kick my feet out from under me. The second my back hit the floor, I called it quits.

I looked up to find him smirking, clearly pleased with himself.

“Feel better?”

“Yes.”

I laughed. “Yeah, knocking someone on their ass will do that to you.”

Lukas cracked a smile, a tiny one, but a smile. Daphne would want him to be happy, wherever she was.

I decided to try talking to him again. “Lukas, we can talk ab—”



“Don’t.” He cut me off. Yep, seems about right where he was concerned.

“Okay.” I threw my hands up in surrender and he took one to help me up.

He re-racked the swords and thanked me, something he always did, and turned to leave. At least some of the cobwebs were tossed out. He made it to the door before stopping and turning over his shoulder.

“Rose?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Always, Lukas.”

“Why not just tell Dominic?”

I breathed in sharply. I trusted Lukas. I did. It was just... complicated. No one knew about the Fates, except Marcus. I couldn’t risk anyone trying to stop me or try to reason with me. The other half of the answer was, “It doesn’t change what happened. I won’t beg for sympathy from someone who so easily believed I was capable of cold-blooded fratricide.”

“Even if he still wants revenge?” Lukas asked.

“Even then.” Because I probably deserved it. “It’s late. Go to bed and you can try to convince me to change my mind later.”

I tried to sound light, teasing, but Lukas just nodded, his teal eyes shadowed, and then left.

A quick look at the clock made me realize it was midnight and I was a sweaty, tired mess.

I thought about going to find Dominic, but didn’t want to disturb him. I ran back up to my room and stripped off my workout clothes. I tossed on a robe in case Dominic was in the bathroom, but when I walked in, the door was closed and the lights in his room off.

We were supposed to be avoiding each other anyway. I turned on the shower, stepped under the spray, and let myself

have a moment's peace before I had to start all over again tomorrow.

## Chapter 8

### Rose

A heavy, clipped knock cracked through my office door five days later.

“Come in!” I called from my desk, just to see what Dominic would do.

Of course, it was him. He was the one person who could manage to knock angrily. Knock at all, for that matter. The only people who ever came into my office were Marcus, Max, or Thea, and *barged* was the best word for what they did.

Knocking wasn't even a passing consideration.

My door shot open forcefully, almost slamming against the back wall from the force of it. I straightened my back to find Dominic looking annoyingly put together and certifiably pissed.

“Yes?” I prompted. He hadn't been fond of speaking to me over the past few days it seemed. Not one word exchanged between the two of us. Hell, I'd barely seen him.

“What are you doing?” he asked, without any discernible texture to his voice.

“Looking over the marketplace registrations,” I responded plainly. I had decided I was done trying to conceal my concern for our realm. If pressed, I could pass it off as being power hungry and obsessed with keeping the Underworld running smoothly for my own gain.

Dominic didn't enter my office fully, just leaned against the door frame. He was a leaner. Against things, towards me. Just *leaning*. “And how do they look?”

“Normal. Good,” I said, the relief clear in my voice. “It’s not like Purgatory hasn’t been shared for years I just...”

“Wanted to double check,” Dominic finished for me.

I sighed, feeling strangely hesitant to reveal something about my personality. My true personality. “Yes.”

“Hmm,” Dominic said, his low grumble skating over my arms and pulling goosebumps in their wake. “We are similar in that regard, at least.”

“Oh thank the Fates, I was worried we’d never find something in common.”

“We share a last name,” Dominic returned. “That’s two.”

The easy banter between us was odd for any reason, but we hadn’t spoken since Lukas had visited. I had a feeling the polite conversation was covering something darker.

“We could go see it for ourselves,” Dominic asked, startling me into standing.

“Together?” I asked, dumbfounded.

“Together.”

“Um, why?”

Dominic barked out a laugh. Not too loud, though, and carrying an easy lilt of humor. “It would be good to show a united front. And we could see for ourselves if the information in those registrations reflect reality.”

I nodded a little uneasily. I avoided Purgatory as much as I could. Every time I was there, it felt like walking along the mouth of a volcano while it was steaming and rumbling with lava that would erupt right into your face.

“Unless you have a reason against it,” Dominic said, catching onto my hesitation.

“No, I think that’s a good plan,” I said quickly. I would rather shove down my nerves than give Dominic more reason to believe I was spinning a web of lies.

I was still thinking about what Lukas had asked me. I could tell Dominic what really happened, but I didn’t think he

deserved that truth. He had been so quick to believe that I was capable of that, even though we'd barely known each other.

More than that, he had been one of the biggest enablers of my sordid reputation. When Lord Death himself thinks you've done something inexcusable, people tended to follow. With the Upperworld's love of drama and infatuation with the politics of the gods, I'd become the goddess everyone loved to hate.

But I could set aside the pit of fear in my stomach for a moment. If shit went wrong with the merging of our houses, it would be pinned on me. Explaining it was the Fates' idea would come far too late.

"Let's go now?" I asked Dominic, stepping around my desk.

Dominic nodded then moved aside, gesturing for me to walk past him. "After you, sweetheart."

I looked up at him, having to tilt my head back more than I was used to. "You're hilarious."

Dominic smirked. "Glad you're finally figuring that out."

"Walk?" I asked Dominic as we went down the main staircase, the ghost of his hand at the small of my back. It was a short walk, maybe ten minutes to the edge of the marketplace, but we had the ability to get there in a second, stepping through a hole in space.

Dominic nodded, opening up the grand door for me. It seemed it would just be the two of us. No one to cut the tension.

It was the height of June, the weather artificially warm to match the climate of the Upperworld. But having been raised in the Underworld, the dim sun felt as strong as the warm caress of the real one.

I tipped my face up on instinct as we began walking, letting my eyes close for a second.

When I opened up my eyes, Dominic was looking at me weird.

"Yes?" I asked, feeling itchy under his scrutiny.

“Nothing,” he said quickly. A little too quickly.

I let it go. Acknowledging that he was looking at me with something other than disdain would force me to admit to doing the same and that would be...unwise.

We walked in silence to the gates. On our side, the gates were thin, black wires, sparsely decorated with skeletons and bones. A big, screaming warning not to step through them unless you wanted to die.

Because Purgatory was not fully dead nor alive.

The silence seemed comfortable for Dominic, a man of few words or whatever, but I was about to burst out of my skin. I enjoyed silence, but not when I felt it was awkward. And this—us—was awkward.

I forced myself to keep a lid on it though, all the way through the gates, where two guards nearly tripped over themselves at the sight of us. We made it to the main marketplace soon after. When we did, Dominic broke the silence. “What did Lukas want?”

“What?” I asked passively, too busy smiling at a young girl who looked terrified.

“You said you had to *talk*,” Dominic gritted out.

*Oh*. Right. “He needed to work off some stress,” I said truthfully. Lukas might say something to him and I didn’t want to be caught in a lie. “And I’m the best person to do it.”

“*Excuse me?*” Dominic looked like his eyes were going to burst out of his head.

I tried to swallow my laugh. He obviously thought that meant Lukas and I were sleeping together. I wanted to let him sit in his horror for a little before calming whatever boiling emotion caused him to react that way, but before I could, we were interrupted by a gasp so loud it sounded like a scream.

“My goodness!” A shrill voice of an older woman pulled Dominic and I apart from where we were standing chest to chest. The woman rushed up to us from the door of her store.

She was middle aged and wearing an apron that had to be as old as she was. A very familiar apron.

She wiped her hands on it, clearing them of flour. “It is an honor, Lord Pluto.”

Dominic smiled. A half smile that toed the line between cheeky and genuine. “Pleasure’s all mine.”

A blush crept over the bodice of her dress. Dominic had that effect on everyone it seemed. Not that it surprised me. He was so potent.

“Who is this?” She said, turning to me with a curious glint in her eyes. It was almost scandalous for Dominic to be so openly in public with a woman. A half second later, though, her eyes hardened as she recognized me.

“Oh, Lady Hades. A pleasure.” The words lost all of the warmth they had when she was speaking to Dominic.

“Hello, Laurel,” I said, not at all surprised at her reaction to me. This was an old game between us. “It’s Lady Pluto, now.”

“Oh, how...lovely.” Her disdain was obvious, with no regard that my husband was standing right there. She probably thought he agreed. And she’d be right. “Well, I would be honored if you visited my shop. I just baked a fresh batch of bread this morning.”

Dominic just *hmm*-ed in assent and ushered me in front of him. I breathed in to steady myself, but instead got a whiff of something buttery and delicious.

“It smells lovely,” I commented, bringing a kind smile to my lips. I might fight Dominic back, but kindness was the path I chose with my patrons. And Laurel was *Greek* for god’s sake.

She ignored me and went behind the counter to retrieve the bread. I took a moment to look around the store, taking in the interior that was reminiscent of a village town in the Upperworld. Limestone bricks. Soft, earthy colors.

I dragged a finger along a wooden work table, pausing for a second over a jar of fig jam that looked amazing, and turned to

find Dominic staring at me. Observing.

He looked pissed and I had to fight a laugh. I hadn't planned on letting him sit and think there was something between Lukas and I for so long but this was just too funny.

I stuck my tongue out at him. He looked scandalized for a moment and then chomped his teeth lightly. I laughed softly, then turned back to Laurel as she came back around the counter. She was carrying a long, thin loaf of bread, golden and bubbly with rosemary sprinkled on top.

I couldn't hide my excitement. It looked *delicious*. "Is that a focaccia?"

Laurel looked at me like I was stupid to even ask. She turned her shrewd expression to Dominic. "Lord Pluto, do you like focaccia?"

Dominic crossed his arms and breathed out, like a dragon trying to clear its snout. "I'm afraid I don't know what that is."

His tone was obviously rude, but Laurel didn't bat an eye. She extended him the grace I never deserved. "It's a type of bread, see?"

Dominic didn't uncross his arms, just leaned forward slightly to get a better look at the pan.

"It looks like the one you made a few days ago," he said, looking at me. I didn't even realize he'd noticed.

Laurel looked like she was going to open her mouth and say something like *you think yours is better?* I cut her off before she could. "I'm sure Laurel's is better than anything I could make. How much for a loaf?"

It was an effort not to drop my smile as she responded tersely. "Ten bronze pieces."

Dominic's jaw dropped open slightly and his brows pinched together in shock. It's not like either of us expected charity, but there was always some pushback. A dance where they would say it would be an honor to give us something and we would smile and say "thank you" but insist on paying.

But, no, not with me. With me, she expected me to pay.



I handed over some of the coins I kept in the pocket of my dress, brushing her calloused hand and causing her to jerk back slightly. “Thank you, Laurel.”

Dominic turned quickly and strode out the door without a goodbye. I scurried after him and Laurel called as we left, “Good to see you, Lord Pluto.”

Outside, Dominic’s body was strained under his casual black t-shirt and he was pacing back and forth. When he saw me skip down the steps of Laurel’s shop, he stopped and the look in his expression made me freeze in my tracks.

“What?” I asked.

“Are you trying to piss me off today?”

“That is my general intention, yes.”

Dominic licked his teeth. “Well, you’re doing a hell of a job of it.”

I walked up to him until I was close enough to see the soft lines on his face. “Glad to know I haven’t lost my sparkle.”

“You have an uncanny ability to be jovial at the most inappropriate times.”

“Some would say that’s a laudable trait.” Then I turned, flicking him with the wash of my hair and began walking.

Dominic’s long strides caught up with me immediately. He bent down as we walked, nose sloppily brushing my hair and the shell of my ear. “Whoever said that would be an idiot.”

I stopped abruptly and turned towards him. “Color me stupid, then.”

Dominic chuckled and I could feel the hot breeze too close to my face. “Don’t act like you aren’t smart. Humility isn’t a good look on you.”

“Be careful, Dominic,” I said, shocked at the intensity of the teasing lilt in my own voice. It almost sounded flirtatious. “That almost sounded like a compliment.”

Dominic’s voice rumbled in his throat as he warmed up to respond. “We came here to check on things, not stand in the

middle of the street wanting to strangle each other.”

I pouted dramatically. “But I was having so much fun.”

Dominic’s eyes narrowed, his gaze lingering somewhere between my chin and nose. “Start walking.”

“Spoilsport,” I tossed over my shoulder as I took off down the street.

“Wench,” Dominic shot back, at my side again.

The tightness in my throat I felt in Laurel’s shop had eased some at our bantering. There was even a pleasant expression on my face as we walked.

A bit of a crowd started to gather, people coming out of their shops as we walked along the main street, lined with shops. The structure of the town was still fairly medieval, only built up enough to support basic trade rather than the full-scale services of the Upperworld.

People balked when they saw us, not unused to seeing their gods but respectful of the power and authority we held.

Dominic got appreciative glances and polite smiles.

I got fewer smiles and glares that ranged from annoyed to outright combative.

For those who did smile at me, I tried to give them a genuine one in return, silently thanking them.

Dominic seemed to know everyone, or at least pretended to. I could feel every nod of his head. We were pressed closely together in our walk, not embracing but clearly together.

I gave him the benefit of the doubt and assumed he did, in fact, know these people. A grace that was hardly extended to me.

There were people who didn’t blame me, likely the ones who were smiling kindly at me. It was the people who were scowling who prevented me from sharing any details about what happened. I was embarrassed that these people had so easily accepted a cruel version of me, self-conscious of how I’d presented myself to make them think that.

If that was their baseline, they would only turn the facts of what happened in the most negative spin, doubling down on the blame.

I'd admit to being scared. Scared of the people who had seen me grow up and seen me rule with an even hand since I'd ascended the throne confirm every horrible thing my father tried to cultivate.

It was the ultimate act of kindness, of trust, to give someone the benefit of the doubt despite a rumor or accusation or situation you didn't witness. No one gave me that. So yeah, I'd at least extend it to Dominic that despite how callous and hard he sometimes seemed, he cared about his people enough to recognize a face.

As we turned a corner onto the wider street, lined with stands instead of established shops, the mass of people seemed to double.

Most gave us a wide breadth out of respect, but it was getting harder to do so as the morning market expanded with people looking for goods.

I looked up to Dominic to see if the crowd affected him like it did me. I could feel the heat radiating from his exposed arm, especially when it brushed against my own, but I couldn't tell if he was tense from residual annoyance or something else.

I stared at the hard line of his jaw, helplessly, for a second too long. Long enough that I couldn't see someone approaching, someone coming too close. He shoulder-checked me as he passed, jerking me back with a stinging pain through the right side of my body.

I stumbled into Dominic, moved by the force of his passing.

"Woah," he steadied, pressing his chest to my back and two hands into the curve of my shoulders. I moved my head up and around to look at him. Seeing mostly the underside of the chin, but also the valley between his eyebrows as he searched for the person who'd hit me.

I placed a hand on his jaw reflexively. “It was an accident.” And it was to anyone who looked on. I hardly ever got physical assaults, but I’d just gotten married to their perfect god. Maybe people were getting bold.

Dominic tampered something close to skepticism, but only repositioned me on his right. I started walking again, hoping to slow my racing heart.

Dominic slid his right hand up to the base of my neck as we made our way through the mass of people. I imagine he meant it to be silently chastising me for my clumsiness

I *expected* it to be a grating hold. But while Dominic was exchanging respectful glances with shop owners, the feeling of his hand on my neck was doing nothing to slow my heart, it was making it beat twice as fast.

There was a voice in the back of my head that reminded me that I normally turned to my right at this point to buy... something. Something, but I just couldn’t remember what. My thoughts had abandoned me, my mind centering so intensely on the back of my neck that I couldn’t even make out the items being displayed at each stand.

Not when his hand was filling the entire width of my neck, resting right at the spot where it connected to my spine. His palm was on fire, hot enough to brand my skin and send a bolt of sensation right down my back. With every slight shift of his hand, his scars and calluses brushed up against my skin, causing every hair on my body to stand at attention.

I had to physically restrain myself from shivering, especially as his thumb began moving slowly over my shoulder in barely-there caresses. I was sure he wasn’t consciously doing it, just absently moving that maddening finger over my skin, sending fire sprinting down into every corner of my being and turning me into a molten mess.

My vision kicked back in at the sight of a gradient of red, yellow, and green. I blinked a few times, clarity returning so that I could see the display of bell peppers on one of the last stands in the morning market.

I normally went to another patron, one who smiled, but I must have missed him in my Dominic's-hand-induced haze.

I stopped, earning a slight squeeze on either side of my neck.

“Can we stop here?” I asked Dominic.

“Yes,” he grumbled, dragging his hand off my skin and leaving goosebumps in his wake. I prayed he didn't notice the effect he had on me.

I walked up to the stand, offering a greeting that garnered no response.

“I'll take two of each, please.”

The older man had a mass of muscle, and I went to ask him how long he'd been farming, but his stony expression stopped me in my tracks. Instead, I gave him a closed lipped smile as he reached for the peppers, almost eclipsing them in his large hand.

“Rose!” Dominic barked from behind me, tearing my attention away from the stand.

I turned to find him gesturing between two bottles of wine. One red, one white. I nodded toward the white. Better for what I had planned to cook that week.

“Lady Pluto,” the man said irritably. I turned to see him shaking the back impatiently, holding out a hand for payment in the other. I dropped enough coin into it, then softly grabbed it.

Walking over to where Dominic was hauling a 12-bottle case of wine onto his shoulder—surely given for free—I asked, “All done?”

Dominic nodded. We walked to the open archway at the end of the market, leading to a cobblestone path that would wrap back around the road to our palace.

As we walked through, I opened the paper bag to inspect my new peppers and consequently let out a shriek. The bag dropped to the ground, one of the green peppers rolling out onto the stone. Along with an impressively sized spider.

The next sound I registered was the rattle of wine bottles as the case slammed to the ground. And then, “Go get new ones.”

“No,” I argued. “I’ll just wash them at home.”

“Like hell you will,” Dominic snapped, bending to pick up the bag. “Stay here.”

“Dominic.” It sounded like I was begging.

“Stay *here*, you little flight risk.” And then he was stomping off towards the stand. I could still see it from where I was, and my cheeks colored with embarrassment when I saw Dominic shove the paper bag towards the man.

My peppers were replaced faster than I could blink and Dominic was in front of me barely seconds later.

“Let’s go,” he said, striding off towards the gates like he couldn’t wait to get out of my presence.

We made it through, still at least half a mile away from our home when I broke the silence.

“Well, I would consider that successful,” I said, trying to diffuse some of the tension. “Everyone seemed to be proceeding as normal.”

Dominic raised an eye in doubt of my assessment. “That seemed more chaotic than normal.”

“But nothing wrong with the power,” I returned, relief evident in my tone.

Dominic stopped, as if my words forced him to. “Are you *happy* with how that went?”

“What?”

Distressed. That’s how he looked. “That man let you walk out of here with a spider. He should have triple checked that fucking bag. It was so crowded someone shoulder checked you. That woman ignored you to flirt with me in that store.”

Oh, he had it so, so wrong. That spider was intentional, the man who pushed me: intentional, the ignoring: pointed and intentional.

Bold, too bold, but intentional.

“It’s not surprising, Dominic. They don’t exactly like me.”

Dominic’s eyes narrowed, his arms crossing over his chest and defining his biceps. “Like has nothing to do with this.”

I did my best to keep my eyes on his face.

“Respect then. They don’t afford me the same respect they give to you.” It was the polite version of the story. One that didn’t even touch the extent of people’s disrespect. But I wasn’t going to be the brutal hand of retribution and drive the nail into my coffin.

My reputation was that of harsh, cruel death. I was trying to leave one behind that reflected how I really felt about my realm. That death could be beautiful, that I could create a home for those to rest in after a long life.

And I wasn’t going to achieve that by squashing dislike under my foot.

“You should be happy about that, Dominic,” I continued. “I would expect you to revel in people disrespecting me.”

Dominic stepped into my space, bringing his strong nose close enough to touch mine. “You don’t know what I revel in.”

I felt my chin tip up ever so slightly, pulled into combat. “Enlighten me.”

“Maybe I do like disrespect,” Dominic postured, his form so imposing it almost eclipsed the sun behind his head. “Maybe *I’ll* disrespect *you*.”

I laughed incredulously. “I’d like to see you try.”

“Wrong time, wrong place,” he drawled in response.

“Oh, I think outside is the perfect place for some disrespecting.”

Another rumble from his throat. “Careful, Rose.” The words were a threat that sent my heart racing and my skin buzzing. “You won’t like what happens when you make me snap.”

“Don’t you see, Dominic? That’s exactly my goal.” And just because I’d grown to love his shocked expression, I tapped him twice on the chest and disappeared through a portal. I left him there in a yellowed grass field with delicious shock on his perfect face, trying to ignore the fact that his chest felt like steel.

For some reason, that thought felt more dangerous than the lingering tightness in my chest that those three incidents were enough to finally snap the camel’s back.



## Chapter 9

### **Dominic**

Rose was right to be nervous. To be doubtful of her safety around me.

Because that little devil was keeping secrets.

A surprise investment in her power.

The same stress and plan I had about the integration of our Houses.

Not to mention the absolute insanity that was her walking on top of an unstable, crumbling wall like she had not a care in the world for her safety. Barely a word from me and she went tumbling, making me watch her scrape her pristine skin and act like it didn't hurt.

Whatever the *fuck* happened with Lukas—*my* best friend—the other night to have her running into the bathroom at half past midnight, sounding breathless and tired while jumping into the shower.

Her walking around a marketplace with her head held high, either consciously or unconsciously ignoring the looks people gave her.

It was those secrets that kept me motivated, kept me invested in observing her.

And soon, I'd know where to start planning.

After she left me standing in that field like a fool, my blood hammering in my veins from the chaos at the market place and Rose's suggestive tone.

She was such a little minx, looking up at me with her bright green eyes and suggesting that *outside is the perfect place for*

*some disrespecting.* Rose had no idea how close I was to grabbing her right there and showing her exactly what I wanted to do when she pissed me off like that.

There was a very effective way to shut her up, and the thought sent a shiver down my spine. And not in disgust. I had to physically shake off the thought, redirecting the energy building in my chest to something useful.

Instead of heading back to the house, I turned back to the marketplace and walked right back to Laurel's shop. I intentionally avoided the stand with the peppers, seeing as I had the strangest urge to clock the man who'd let a spider into Rose's vicinity in the face.

Spiders would be a good addition to my own list for revenge. But that was *my* list.

He didn't get to do that to Rose.

I did.

The moment Laurel saw me approaching her door again, she straightened and walked around the counter, her color deepening.

I pushed through the door and she immediately sprang into action, asking me if I wanted to try a new batch of the bread she'd made earlier. I shook my head, crossing my arms over my chest. Laurel was being far too animated, especially when she had been so short with Rose.

"I'm here to buy this," I said, picking up the jar of jam Rose had stopped over earlier. A good excuse for being back that didn't give Laurel the wrong idea.

"Oh, for your wife?" Laurel sneered.

My head jerked back slightly at her boldness. I knew Rose wasn't popular, obviously, but Laurel was crossing a line. Rose was still a god.

"Yes, for my wife," I said, shoving the glass container towards her. I didn't make it a habit to be explicitly rude, but it was coming too easily today.

“So, when did you two get married?” Laurel tried to ask casually as she moved behind the counter to grab some other supplies, but she tripped over the last word.

“A week ago.”

“I was speaking to my friend who runs the shop next door after the announcement. Neither of us knew you were engaged,” Laurel said. Damn, she was bold.

“It was a short engagement.” Yeah, barely a day.

“Don’t tell me you two are in love?” Laurel asked a second later.

“Is that a problem?” I asked roughly.

Laurel paled a little, but answered honestly. “It’s just an unexpected pairing.”

“Care to explain?” This was potentially good territory. Give me a better view of how Rose interacted with her patrons. I’d never quite been able to figure that out when our realms were somewhat separate, but now, I could.

“She is a killer,” Laurel said, nose scrunching with disgust. “And you are very honorable.”

“It is not a secret that I killed my uncle, Laurel,” I returned before I could stop myself. It almost sounded like I was defending Rose. And I didn’t do that.

Laurel raised a rounded shoulder. “I figured you’d view it differently.”

“If I did, I wouldn’t have married her,” I bit out. A lie, but Laurel was pissing me off. I’d told Rose she was on thin ice with me, but this was a different type of irritation.

“Oh,” Laurel said, her small mouth opening. “I didn’t know.”

“Now you do,” I snapped. Then corrected my tone as best I could. “Think what you want. But I never want to see you treat Rose like that in front of me again.”

Laurel went pale. “Lord Pluto, I apologize. I meant no disrespect.”

Good. Because disrespecting Rose was my job. Mine.

I let out a low grunt in response, then plucked the bag she'd put together off the counter, resolved to find another source to get my information from. I didn't want to hear another thing Laurel had to say about Rose.

"Thank you," I grumbled as I pushed out the door into the weak sun.

I stomped back to our house, pounding my feet into the ground like that would do anything with the frustration in my chest.

It didn't work. Not for the entire walk or into the house or up to my office. I shoved the bag in some forgotten drawer in my office, not wanting to look at it.

Rose didn't know I'd gotten it and what she didn't know wouldn't hurt her.

The restlessness didn't abide, so I pushed out of my chair and started walking down the hallway without a plan until I saw Raiden.

Perfect.

"Raiden," I called, flicking my hand toward me. Raiden walked over, his soldier's gait traveling swiftly down the hallway.

"How can I help you, Dominic?" Raiden asked sarcastically in response to the bite in my tone.

"What happened to Mary?" I asked. I'd laid off asking until now. I wasn't sure what to do with the glimpse of pain Rose let slip into her eyes after our fight in the kitchen, but now my anger barreled right through my hesitation.

Raiden regarded me for a moment, then said, "Don't know. She spoke directly to Rose about reducing her hours."

That didn't satisfy my curiosity for a moment. "I'll go ask her myself, then."

"Can't do that," Raiden said, stopping me. "She's off for the week."

I flicked my tongue over my bottom teeth and into my cheek. “Great.”

“Why do you care?”

“I don’t want Rose messing with my staff.” I didn’t want her doing shit that knocked me off kilter any more than she already had. Just by looking at me and pulling her lips into that close lipped smile.

“You think she’d do that?” Raiden asked, looking skeptical. Right, they were *friends*.

“I don’t know what she’s capable of,” I said. “I learned that lesson a long time ago.”

Raiden’s expression hardened. Barely there, but noticeable.

“In fact,” I said, “You seem to know a lot about her.”

“Belen,” Raiden explained by just mentioning his husband’s name. “She’s always been kind to him.”

A point in Rose’s favor. I pushed past that. “And Lukas?”

Raiden blew out a laugh. “Her best friend’s fiancé.”

Right. Lukas kept suspiciously quiet about Daphne’s disappearance. I’d always thought there was something going on, more than their arrangement, but he’d never copped to it. But he looked worse and worse every time I saw him.

Maybe Rose was keeping Daphne’s secrets too.

I let out a biting laugh. “Right. I’m sure they are just two peas in a pod.”

“Why don’t you ask Rose?” Raiden suggested.

“Maybe I will,” I said, then excused myself. I’d uncover that information from Rose slowly. She’d get suspicious if I all the sudden started asking about her life.

She didn’t trust me. She was smart for that.

I didn’t trust her either, but that didn’t stop the image of her chest, heaving with the force of her irritation after our spat, her breasts pushing over the neckline of her tight shirt, from forcing its way to the forefront of my mind.

Or the way her face looked, with her eyes closed and chin tipped toward the sun.

Or the feel of the soft skin of her throat under my hand.

Or the flutter of her heartbeat in her neck, the slight part through her lips when my hand brushed her collarbone.

Or whatever. The point was the day was fucked.

## Chapter 10

### Rose

“Well, isn’t this cozy?” was the first sentence Dominic directed at me the next day.

I was wrapped in a blanket with a book in hand on the settee closest to the kitchen. I was enjoying a peaceful, Dominic free day. The constant back and forth felt like winding one of those children’s toys higher and higher, heavy with the risk of exploding.

I looked up from my book to see him leaning (*again*) against the door frame, crossing his arms over his chest in a stance that was so indecent it was enough to make the blanket feel oppressive on my skin.

Especially when combined with the intensity of his stare, like he was trying to catch every minute expression and thought on my face.

I shifted a little, but refused to take the blanket off. He didn’t get to ruin my peace. “It is cozy, thank you very much. I’ve been trying to get up and make tea for the past hour, but I can’t bring myself to move.”

Dominic walked up to me, staring down at his immense height, hands on his hips in mocking judgment. “You’re weird.”

“Thank you,” I said, winding the blanket a little tighter. I had the itchy feeling on my sternum of a forgotten task, which was why I’d come down to the kitchen in the first place.

Dominic spun on his boot and headed into the kitchen. He yanked open the fridge brutally, like he didn’t know his own strength.

“Careful, strong man,” I said, eyes on where his back flexed under his black t-shirt. Where it bunched against the band of his black jeans low on his hips. “You’ll break the door.”

“Sit there and be quiet,” he shot back, slamming the door closed with the cream in his hand.

I listened. Only because he was filling up the kettle. Five minutes later, he was back in front of me with a cup of tea in one hand and his own coffee in the other.

He shoved it towards me with the most force he could without splashing the tea everywhere. I wedged my hands out from the blanket and grabbed it. The color was exactly how I’d make it.

Guess he remembered that.

He stared at me as I took a sip, the tea just on the right side of hot. Dominic took his own sip, not breaking eye contact. I took another one. He took another one.

I was enjoying whatever weird game this was when Raiden came bursting into the kitchen, pinning us with an accusatory stare.

“What are you two doing?”

“Having an afternoon beverage?” Dominic responded, taking another sip with his eyes locked on the rim of my cup, where it was pressed to my lips.

Raiden muttered something from somewhere behind Dominic. I couldn’t see him with Dominic’s head eclipsing the light in the room and shrouding me in comfortable shadows. “Any plans for getting ready at some point today?”

“Ready for what?” Dominic asked.

Raiden cursed, “These two,” right as the domino fell inside my head. *Shit.*

“It’s Council weekend,” I said. Once a month, the Roman and Greek gods met at Olympus, Adrian’s home (read: fully formed town) to go over issues and generally make sure the



humans weren't planning to topple the whole system in retaliation for Adrian's birth.

Most of the time it was only a meeting, but sometimes, there was a party preceding it. This month, Corrina Aphrodite was throwing one. Thea had been so excited about it she'd been putting together a dress for me for a month.

I *never* forgot stuff like that. Well, maybe I did now. With Dominic breathing down my neck and staring at me like a puzzle he wanted to solve.

"That's tonight?" Dominic cringed. We never really interacted at these things. He was too busy lounging in the corner with a glass of whiskey in hand and talking to Adrian and Lukas. It was semi-intentional on my part. I never hid away from the gods I called friends, but I would place myself out of Dominic's line of sight to avoid the stifling force of his hatred.

And, yes, to avoid getting into an argument that broke a few priceless crystal tumblers. Jason Dionysus still hadn't quite forgiven me.

"Tonight," Raiden confirmed. "And both of you are going."

"Together?" I asked, my question echoing with an odd deepness. One look at Raiden's amused expression over Dominic's shoulder and I realized we had spoken at the same time.

"Well, seeing as this is the first public appearance of Lord and Lady Pluto, yes."

"This is a private party. No need to put on a show," Dominic said, sounding relieved.

"Don't worry, Dominic," I snapped, odd annoyance at his disdain curdling at the base of my throat. "No one is under the impression we are in love."

Moving my expression to Raiden, I asked. "What time do we have to leave?"

"Eight," Raiden responded

“Eight!” It was already late afternoon and that meant I had to get ready. Now.

I jumped up, tea balancing precariously in one hand and sprinted out of there. I was followed by the sound of a full, rich laugh that brought back those damn goosebumps. Their presence made me think this was the first time I’d heard Dominic truly laugh.

It was throaty and full and unrestrained and tightened my chest.

Or maybe that was just the strain from my sprint up the stairs. I burst into my room to find Thea sitting on my couch expectantly, twirling a dark curl around her fingers.

Thea was more settled in her skin than anyone I knew, her movements always fluid, never unsure. She sat on my bed like a cat lounging in the afternoon sun. “Took you long enough.”

“Sorry,” I huffed, bent over at the waist.

She laughed, evaluating my heaving form in the doorway. “You forgot, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “I’ve had a lot going on.”

Thea nodded and pointed at the chair in front of my vanity, ushering me over there. I enjoyed doing my makeup, but I couldn’t style my hair in the slightest. Thea, on the other hand, was a miracle worker and the only person to turn my slightly wavy hair into something manageable.

It had become a tradition for us, catching up while she did my hair. I didn’t tell her, but it was comforting. I didn’t get a lot of situations where people did something for me, and it always made me feel calm. It would also probably put me to sleep if Thea’s lively voice didn’t keep me on my toes.

“Tell me about it,” she said as I dropped into my chair. “This week has been a mess.”

*Shit*, I knew someone would start causing trouble. “Is everything okay?”

Thea caught my panicked expression in the mirror. “Yes, yes, down girl. It’s just an adjustment, but everyone is being

nice.”

“Good.” My shoulders dropped inward a little, relief flooding my body.

“This location change is pretty great though. The bay is warm enough to swim.” Thea loved the water, and I felt good knowing this had at least given her closer proximity. “Dominic has some hot guards, too.”

By the gleam in her eye, she definitely had a crush.

I smiled at her in the mirror. “Story, now.”

Thea explained that one of Dominic’s newer guards was gorgeous, tall, and hilarious—her three qualifications for any new love interest. Into her, too, obviously evidenced by the fact that he could barely string a sentence together in her presence and had asked Max about her.

“No Jason?” I asked, curious as to the status of her relationship with the god of wine from the Greek side. They’d been causally sleeping together, but she seemed hesitant to move it forwards.

“We aren’t exclusive. Besides, I saw him looking real cozy with a girl from his court the other day.”

She waved a hand in dismissal, but I reacted protectively, loyalty to her pushing out a threat.

“If he fucks you over,” I warned. “I’ll send a Shadowwalker after him.”

Thea laughed as she wrapped a strand of my hair around the curling wand.

It was a helpful, but smaller aspect of my power. I could conjure figures made of smoke and pure death and pull them practically out of thin air. It came in handy for shitty exes. One of Thea’s ex-boyfriends was a royal pain in the ass, but he got his payback in the form of a willowy, black surprise spooking him so badly he jumped off a boat fully clothed in front of his seedy friends.

Thea and I caught up more, and she pressed about Dominic, but I didn’t really have much to offer her.

“I don’t know. I don’t trust him for shit, but—”

“He’s hot.”

I gasped, offense forming on my face. “That was not what I was going to say!”

“You were thinking it.” I didn’t drop my shocked expression, because I *had* been thinking it. Thea thankfully moved on before I could admit to it. “Right, what were you going to say?”

“I was going to say that I think he’s starting to figure out I might not be as much of a cold hearted bitch as he used to believe.” The act was easy to keep up in short bursts, but when he was so much in my space, it got tiring to keep fighting him. Keep fighting a lot of things where he was concerned, actually.

Thea scrunched her eyebrows together. “And that is a bad thing because?”

“I don’t like him.”

Thea tipped her head back and laughed, “Sure you don’t.”

“Thea!” She was not letting me win today.

“Don’t shoot the messenger,” Thea lightly scolded, waving the curling wand at me in warning.

I caught a glimpse of a clothing bag hanging off the door of my closet behind her in the mirror and took a moment to thank the Fates for the chance to change the subject.

“The dress,” I said, jerking my chin to the bag.

Thea shot me a look that said she caught onto that less than subtle subject change, but this was her craft, she’d talk about it at even the subtlest hint someone was interested.

She looked back whimsically over her shoulder. “This beauty took me three weeks to make.”

Thea made quick work of the rest of my hair, speedily but artfully spinning soft curls through it. When she was done, she ran towards the dress in excitement.

I followed, giving her a moment to dramatically present the dress, this was always her favorite part. Thea unzipped the bag in a flourish, then lovingly reached in to pull out the dress.

I gasped when I saw it. “Oh, Thea, it’s beautiful.”

It was *stunning*. The gown was composed of a deep, rich purple gauzy fabric that would allow the light to shine through and show my legs. There were purple gems and crystals sown into the bodice and down to fan out at about mid-thigh.

“Some of my best work, if I do say so myself,” Thea said, as she reached over and physically lifted my stunned jaw.

“It is gorgeous.” I reached my hand out to feel the material, already excited to put it on.

Thea read my mind. “Ready?”

“Please.”

I stepped into the dress, threading my arms through it, the material touching every part of my body but the unclasped back. A tingly feeling ran through my body as I looked at myself in the mirror. This was a good color on me.

Except the tingles got worse until they turned into a scorching burn and I yelped, jumping out of the dress.

“What the hell?” Thea’s concerned voice rose behind me.

My vision was slightly blurry from shock and residual pain, but I blinked a few times and caught myself in the mirror. My breath got caught in my throat and my eyes burned.

My body was covered in an ugly, red rash from my shoulders down to my stomach. Thea’s hand hovered over my shoulder, hesitant to touch me.

“What happened?” Thea asked, urgently.

I blinked back tears. “Probably a bad reaction to the dye.”

“I use that dye all the time.”

“Weird.” I knew what this was. It was fine.

“Rose...”

“Let’s just try another dress,” I said, trying to move past the pain and prevent tears from falling. “You can tell Max and Marcus what happened and they will figure it out.”

Thea wasn’t happy with that. “But this has only been in my room and yours. That means someone broke into one of them.”

I knew I should be scared, but I knew this was coming. Yes, everyone’s hatred of me had been fairly contained, limited to rude quips and distasteful looks. But tarnishing their blameless, perfect god through marriage might have been the motivation they needed to finally do something with their hatred.

Hell, for all I knew it was Dominic, finally deciding to punish me for what I’d done to his best friend.

“We don’t know that,” I told Thea, my voice regaining some of its strength. “I will tell Max and Marcus. I’m sure Dominic has cameras to check.”

“Okay,” Thea said, resigned. She always disagreed with how easily I dismissed the hatred. Maybe she was right, maybe I should have put my foot down years ago. But I knew that any retaliation would only dig my grave deeper, wider. Easier to push me in and bury me under my sins.

I grabbed Thea’s hand, squeezing once in silent confirmation that I was okay. Even though my chest and stomach was burning like a bitch. “Besides, now I get to break out that black dress you are always begging me to wear.”

The doubt didn’t leave Thea’s eyes, but it softened. I was still frustrated, and she thankfully let the subject go.

“I’ll take it down to Max and Raiden after you leave.” Thea went into my closet and returned a minute later carrying the black dress in question.

It was long-sleeved and form fitting, the fabric starting at my collarbones and flowing down to gather in a rich midnight pool on the floor. It was gorgeous from the front, but my favorite part was the back. It was completely backless, the

hem trailing the line from the edge of my shoulder down to my lower back.

It would hide the burns but still show some skin, and it really was a dress I loved. After applying a soothing balm to the burns, Thea helped me into it and nothing scorched my skin this time. She stayed as I finished my makeup and threaded my earrings through my ears. The last touch was a necklace that looked like a simple chain pressed to the base of my neck, but fell over my shoulders and connected in the middle of my back.

“Beautiful,” Thea said as I took in the finished product in the mirror. I felt good, despite the nerves from earlier. It was skilled repression, to not let the reminder of my crimes get to me. But I needed to put on a brave face tonight.

I felt even better after Thea almost threw a shoe at my head when we couldn’t agree on which pair of heels to wear, finally settling on a pair of strappy black ones that tied up my leg. And after she refused to let me apologize for not wearing the dress she’d made and crushed me into a hug.

Dressed with a few minutes to spare, she ushered me out of the room and split off in search of Marcus and Max with the dress in hand after a quick hug.

I continued down the steps by myself, finding Dominic and Raiden waiting at the bottom of the stairs. Dominic’s eyes went black as he swept them over my body, dragging a path of heat through every point they touched.

“You look...” Dominic trailed off, seemingly trying to find a synonym for not horrible.

“I think great might be the word you are looking for.”

“Great. You look great,” Dominic finally got out, taking a step towards me.

“I do hope you didn’t just say that so I would tell you that you look great too,” I said as I traced my eyes over Dominic’s black suit and up to his pushed back hair.

He never wore suits. His normal t-shirt was traded in for a crisp white button down that deepened his skin a shade and

made him look even more handsome. His suit was tailored perfectly, straining just enough over his arms and thick thighs to define them.

“You think I am that calculated?” Dominic asked, fingers flexing over his thigh.

“Depends on the day,” I shrugged, and then, “You do look good, though.”

Dominic’s eyes flashed and I held his stare, curious what he was going to do. But then he shook his head and the desire I thought I’d seen there dimmed.

Back to normal.

Dominic offered me an arm, even though the chivalrous act looked painful. I took it, wrapping a hand around his tense bicep. A bicep that was perfectly carved out and taunting me from under his suit jacket.

Raiden was our only guard today, the whole cavalry unnecessary when we were going to another god’s home. I greeted Raiden and he gave me a quick squeeze on the shoulder before scolding us both for making *him* late. Apparently the guards had some pool going for who would show up last and Raiden was not about to lose money. He practically pushed us out of the door, and I was holding onto Dominic for dear life.

We stepped through the front door right into Corrina’s entry way, and were immediately greeted with the sounds of chatter and music. My ears perked up when I heard the distinct melody of one of my favorite songs, and played on piano, which made it even better.

“What?” Dominic asked, studying my face as I took in the sound.

“It’s—”

“Ah, the happy couple!” Corrina interrupted, calling us from the entry to the ballroom to our left. She was beautiful, in an alluring, captivating way that everyone in her House appeared. She had rich auburn hair that made her brown eyes look like freshly made caramel, and her cherry red dress was



falling off her full curves delicately. She also had the biggest heart, open and eager to give love.

“Corrina.” Dominic greeted, tipping his chin down as she approached.

But she ran right to me and pulled me into a hug. I didn’t miss the shock on Dominic’s face.

I smiled as she rocked me back and forth in a tight embrace. “Hi, Corrina.”

“Hi, doll,” she said through a blinding smile, before turning to Dominic. “Hi, Dominic, nice to see you. I’m going to steal your wife now.”

She grabbed me by my free hand and pulled me away, forcing my hand to trail down Dominic’s arm. He grabbed my hand for a moment before Corrina gave me a yank and tore my hand from his rough, calloused fingers.

When she got me through the doors and placed a glass of red wine in my hand, she grabbed me by the shoulders and said, “I want to know everything. Now.”

I laughed behind the rim of my wine glass. “Don’t get too excited, it’s an arrangement.”

Her eyes flashed with delight. “Ooo, I love a friends with benefits storyline.”

I shook my head quickly. No, no, *no*. “We are not friends and we are certainly not sleeping together.”

“Why? You are both hot and he is staring at your ass.” I wasn’t going to tell her that I knew that. Dominic clearly followed us into the room because I could feel his gaze pinned to my backside. Thank god for the wine or the color building in my cheeks would be unexplainable.

“We have an interesting history, if you don’t remember.”

“Oh, whatever.” Corrina meant it kindly. She was my age, and was never friends with Pine. To her, to the gods, indiscretions weren’t that bad. Humans didn’t understand what power did to you the same way the gods did. It was why everyone who didn’t know Pine was still pretty nice to me.

Death and killing were more common amongst them, viewed as collateral instead of an unforgivable wrong.

But living in the Underworld, seeing what untimely death did to people, there was a different code to live by. It was why my staff quit, why Dominic thought me the devil. I knew the pain it caused people alive and dead, and did it anyway.

Corrina thought death was romantic, viewing sacrifice and grief as the purest expression of love. I wished I could see it that way.

“Really, nothing is happening,” I insisted when she gave me a little shoulder shake.

“Well, when something does, you tell me first.”

I laughed. “Will do.”

We finished catching up, and then more and more of my friends came up to say hello. It was good to see them, but I was somewhat distracted trying to track Dominic’s movements through the room. I felt his eyes on me occasionally, and every time I looked back, he looked more and more pissed.

People kept approaching him, offering their congratulations, I assumed. They would offer him a hug or a clap on the shoulder, talk for a few minutes, and then filter off. I was worried that my friends would start to spill information about me. Specifically, stories about me. These were my friends, and we had fun, but Dominic didn’t need to know that.

I kept the two worlds separate. I didn’t want to give him more reason to think Pine’s death didn’t affect me. Not that I trusted him with that information anyway. He was too observant for his own good. If he knew what happened, he’d soon find out my plan and do something stupid like try to stop me.

I wanted to pin down someone who had spoken to him, and figured Julian Mars was my best bet. He was a gossip, especially after some whiskey. I spotted him by the bar and approached, hoping a dance would clue me in on why Dominic looked ready to kick over a candle and burn down Corrina’s beautiful home.

# Chapter 11

## **Dominic**

I had a short list of things that irritated me.

Those who use others to get their way, no matter the expense.

People shrieking when they saw me.

Rose's insults. They were grating enough to earn a spot on the list.

Insects.

Shitty alcohol.

But people knowing more about my wife than I did was now firmly on the top of that list.

First, Raiden knew she drank tea instead of coffee. Why she took the coffee I had offered instead of correcting me was something I'd figure out by myself. Unless someone decided to inform me first, which was clearly a fucking pattern.

I learned that she can cook a meal good enough to almost knock me off my chair through goddamn leftovers of a dish made for other people. Maybe someone would tell me what I had to do to get her to make a meal just for me.

Sebastian Apollo informed me that green was her favorite color. Light green, not the deep evergreen of her eyes.

Lukas knew her drink order. Red wine, dry. Unless they had white wine from the northern part of the peninsula, from a Bacchus vineyard, then a glass of that.

He also knew that she makes pancakes on Saturdays. And that he'd be at my house tomorrow to eat them. He offered no

explanation for why he showed up at my house near midnight asking for Rose.

According to the gossip that was Sabina Minerva, Daphne had brought Lukas to Pancake Saturdays without warning anyone and by the end of it, he and Rose had seemingly set aside their differences.

Corrina knew that she'd "surely" be on the patio to watch the sunset.

Jason Dionysus knew that Rose had the best recommendations for god-safe restaurants in the Upperworld. What he could not tell me is how frequently she goes above ground.

Everyone seemed to know that she loved music. Anything with piano, according to Julian Mars, who also informed me he would be stealing a dance. If she let him. No one asked me how I felt about that.

Everyone also thought it fitting to inform me how great Rose looked tonight. That I fucking knew.

She always looked good—beautiful. But when she walked downstairs in that dress I almost lost every ounce of self-control I had. It was tight, highlighting every dip and curve of her body, and the color made her eyes shine like emeralds. It took everything in me not to rip it off of her, to lay her down on the staircase and sink my teeth into those pretty thighs of hers.

She looked stunning and every glance I snuck at her throughout the night only pushed more blood from my brain to my dick.

I also knew that her skin was silk soft and she smelled sweet but rich like vanilla and roses. Rose smelled like roses, because of course she fucking did.

I knew that her breath hitched whenever I touched her. And that she was trying to hide the effect I had on her.

I knew that she had a perfect cupid's bow that taunted me every time I looked at her.

I knew that she was hiding something from me, burying it under hostility. But there was warmth there, and it drew me in like the urge to run your finger through an open flame.

The bartender she was talking to seemed to know that too. He was laughing and trying his mighty best to flirt with her.

In fact, everyone seemed to know that. People would talk to her and leave smiling. She was smiling too, full-bodied and blinding.

She'd never smiled at me like that.

I needed to know to make her smile at me. I needed to know more about her than all of these random gods who had no claim on her. *I* was her husband. I needed to know her better than she knew herself, to get under her skin and figure out how her brain worked.

Then, I told myself, I would start planning my revenge.

But, before that, I needed Julian to remove his hand off her lower back before I rendered it no longer functional.

## Chapter 12

### Rose

Julian's excitement when I agreed to dance with him made him look like a puppy who had just been promised a slice of meat. Despite being the patron god of war, primed to slaughter on the battlefield, Julian's disposition was rather mild. He was more lap dog than wolf, all sparkling eyes and kind grins.

He had a mischievous side too, but it only came out on a few occasions. It seemed, unfortunately, that this was one of them.

"Julian, what are you doing?" I asked as he pulled me an inch closer to his body.

"Your husband is staring," he said, turning me into a spin so I could find Dominic's eyes. I'd felt his gaze on me the entire night, raking down my limbs and snagging onto curves, but I had tried not to hold his stare for too long. The rare glances I got were increasingly deadly, darkening like the pits of Tartarus.

Our eyes connected again, and this time I was assaulted by a stare that was steeped in dark emotion. It was somewhere between jealousy and rage, either angry that someone else was dancing with me or that I had the audacity to dance at all, the killer that I was.

Dominic was standing in the corner, ignoring whatever Corrina was telling him. His hand was clasped tightly around a glass tumbler full of whiskey, his hands so large you could barely see the cup behind it.

Having his attention so focused on me, especially when it was fueled with anger, made my stomach bunch with nerves.

The feeling made my hand curl a little tighter over Julian's shoulder, drawing Dominic's attention to it.

Even from this distance, I could see his nostrils flare at the movement. I clung a little tighter, just to see what he would do. As if possessed, he slammed the tumbler down on the table next to him, shocking Corrina into silence.

I felt Julian's head turning next to my face and forced myself to break Dominic's gaze so I could look at him.

"I don't think jealousy is an emotion I've seen from Dominic," Julian noted casually.

"It's not jealousy," I defended, too quickly to be believed. "He's angry I'm enjoying myself."

Julian turned me again, so that I was facing away from Dominic. I wasn't free from his attention though, I could feel it searing like a brand at the spot where Julian's hand rested on my back under the waterfall of my hair.

"I think it is, Rose," Julian said, skepticism glittering in his hazel eyes.

"What did you guys talk about?" I asked, remembering the reason I had asked him to dance in the first place.

Julian opened his mouth to answer, but cut himself off when he saw something approaching from behind. Julian never cowered, courage to face one's foe was literally in his blood. But he blanched slightly as the dark presence approached.

"Beat it." Dominic's voice boomed from behind me, crashing into my personal space and invading every one of my senses with *him*.

I whipped around, finding him looming and glaring daggers at Julian.

"Dominic!" I snapped. He was being rude for no reason. Well, he was always kind of rude, but still.

Julian didn't move a muscle, keeping one hand resting on the middle of my back and the other clasped around my outstretched hand. Good, he was just about to tell me what he

and Dominic had been talking about and I needed that information.

“Mars, will you please beat it so I can dance with my wife,” Dominic said, his tone implying that there was a second half of that sentence and it was *or I will physically remove you*.

Julian released his hands in dramatic surrender and took a step back. “Sure thing, Pluto.”

“Thank you.” It was a grumble that was forced past his lips for politeness sake only. Dominic stepped into my space, taking Julian’s spot, and laid his hands where Julian’s had been. Only Dominic’s hand settled a few inches lower on my back. My bare back. So much electricity and heat radiated between my skin and his I was sure there would be a brand in the shape of his hand when he removed it.

“Fucking finally,” Dominic grumbled under his breath as he took the lead to move us to the sway of the music.

I raised an eyebrow at him. Apparently we had to work up to full, intelligible sentences. “What was that?”

Dominic pinned me with that accusatory stare he so loved to use with me. “Were you even going to try to dance with me?”

“Well, I thought about it. But isn’t it kind of bold for the woman to ask the man to dance?”

There was something so rich, so enticing in the horror on Dominic’s face as he said, “Not if they are married.”

“Right,” I said, nodding my head in faux understanding, “Because we are the example for married couples everywhere.”

If looks could kill, the one Dominic gave me would have me laying on the floor in a pool of my own blood. He left me bleeding as he looked at something behind me. “What did Julian want?”

“First of all, I approached him.” Dominic’s head shot back to me so fast, I moved my hand from his shoulder to the base



of his neck to steady him before he got whiplash. His skin was hot with rage. “Calm down, that’s not what I meant. I walked up to say hello and then he asked me to dance.”

“How quaint.” The words were clipped, brutal.

“It’s not like you weren’t busy.” Busy standing silent and brooding in conversations he would normally engage in.

“Those conversations weren’t particularly fun.” Point: proven.

“And why is that? Their inability to deal with your cheery attitude?”

I was clearly losing my mind, because I thought I saw the corner of Dominic’s mouth twitch up. “It was the topic of conversation.”

“And what was that topic?”

“You.”

“Me?”

“You.”

*Fuck.* “What did they say?”

Dominic considered me for a second, running his eyes over every corner of my face, leaving me waiting with baited breath. “Everyone here seems to know a lot about you.”

“They do,” I said, the tension in my voice endangering my composure.

“Why?” Dominic’s question toed the line between genuine and doubtful.

“Well, you see, when two people are friends, they tend to have conversations. And in those conversations, they normally share personal information.”

Dominic spun me around to avoid Corrina’s dramatic dancing, pulling me flush to his chest. I winced from the contact, my burns still fresh.

“What was that?” Dominic asked, clearly catching my reaction.

“The dress is kind of uncomfortable,” I lied. I was *not* about to tell him what had happened earlier. I still wasn’t over it, the situation pushed down to be dealt with at a different time. It wasn’t urgent, not when stuff like that happened all the time.

Dominic tipped his head down to look at the dress, catching a glimpse of my heaving chest while he was at it. “It doesn’t look it.”

The words looked physically painful to get out and I released a low chuckle. “You should be a poet, really. Your compliments are just immaculate.”

Dominic’s jaw ticked and I saw the restraint gathering in his whiskey brown eyes. “Would you rather me say that you look so good in that dress I want to pin you down and rip it off with my teeth?”

*Oh. Wow. Okay.*

I swallowed, and tried to press my thighs together as subtly as possible. It was all I could do to relieve the knot of pressure building low in my stomach. When he spoke in that low, low grumble of his, I lost control of my senses.

I tried to regain some of my footing. “It will have to wait till the sun sets.”

I snuck a glance over Dominic’s shoulder to the patio. It was the peak of summer, the sun setting far later in the night than normal. Even then, I had already missed the best part in my attempt to pry information out of Julian. Damn it.

“Right, the patio.”

It was my turn to snap my head towards Dominic. And his to drag a hand up my spine to the base of my neck. It took a Herculean effort to speak against the scalding pressure of his fingers on either side of my neck. “How did you know that?”

“Corrina told me,” He barely opened his mouth to speak, and the second the words caught out he clamped back down on his jaw.

“You are about to crack a tooth.”

Dominic blew air out through his nose in a sarcastic half-chuckle. “That would be preferable to this.”

Good god he was on one today. “What is up your ass?”

“Nothing.”

“Ha. Great, thanks for that.”

“I don’t owe you anything,” Dominic said, pulling me closer.

I followed. “Oh, trust me, I know.”

“Not when you are still keeping secrets.”

“I’m not keeping—you know what, I’m not getting in a fight with you in front of all these people.” I felt like a hamster stuck on a wheel that sent me constantly sprinting over Dominic’s hatred, stubbornness, and clear inability to have a cordial conversation over and over and over again.

“Sounds great, let’s leave then,” Dominic declared, taking my statement and running with it in the opposite direction I had meant it.

“Dominic, we are not leaving!” He turned me around despite my protests and planted both hands on my waist to push me towards the exit.

“Yes, we are,” Dominic grumbled over my shoulder as he plowed me forward. There was no fighting his brute strength with anything but cunning, quick planning. I’d get to that the second we didn’t have an audience.

Every eye in the room was pinned towards us as he walked us out of the ballroom—so much for subtlety.

I locked eyes with Corrina where she was standing in the corner with Julian, and mouthed “I’m sorry.” The smirk she gave me in response said that this little scene only looked like I was about to be promptly bent over a couch the second we got home. The rapid pace of my heart would seem to agree with her.

Dominic didn’t remove his hands from my waist until we stepped through a portal back into the sitting room of our

house. The second his grip loosened, I wiggled out of reach and spun towards him.

“You’re infuriating, you know that?” My voice came out in a frustrated yell. Dominic didn’t so much as flinch.

“Oh, I know,” Dominic said. “You’ve called me that before.”

“Still true,” I snapped, ignoring the little flutter at the thought he had been keeping track.

Dominic’s lip curled slightly. “I was done watching people ogle you like you were available.”

I huffed and my temper rose another ten degrees. *This. Man.* “They all know this is an arrangement.”

Dominic stepped close, leaning towards me. “And *arrangement* that doesn’t give them the right to practically palm your ass in front of me.”

His jealousy hit low in my stomach, working its way up my throat in an outburst. “For the love of Zeus, you are delusional!”

“And you are delusional if you think Julian wouldn’t fall to his knees if you asked him.”

Dominic was looking down his nose at me, nose flaring with the force of his rage. There was a thread of tension between us, pulling at my chest while I did everything to resist it. I felt myself losing, sliding further into his orbit.

I could feel hands crawling up the sides of my neck, phantom fingers that only made me wish to know what Dominic’s real ones felt like. I broke, staring down at my heeled feet, where they were pressed in between Dominic’s.

“Fuck me,” I said under my breath in frustration.

Dominic’s chuckle hit the top of my head, shaking my hair. “Gladly, just say the word.”

My stomach tightened. It was a throwaway retort, but I was over it. Dominic didn’t get to pull this after his little show. I

lifted my head slowly, confronting his darkened expression, mere inches away.

And then I went for it. “Bullshit.”

“What?” Dominic’s face lost all of its light as shock took over his features, all the gold streaks leaving his pupils to make way for a brown so dark it looked black.

My temper was too molten to be deterred. “I call bullshit.”

“Oh, really?” The words rolled off his tongue slowly, like he was giving me the space to interrupt and apologize.

I would do no such thing.

“Yes, because, you see, you say things like that and steal dances and flirt with me, but it’s all just to get under my skin isn’t it?” I was in his space now, crowding him like he always did to me. He didn’t get to make a scene in front of my friends and act like it was normal because I looked good and people noticed. “If I actually called you on it, you’d run away.”

“Are you saying you *want* me to call you on it?” He growled out. This conversation felt like the inner thoughts of the lion about the gazelle that dared to walk into his space. And that always ended with the lion’s teeth around the gazelle’s neck.

Except, I didn’t have the same self-preservation instincts as the gazelle.

“Nice deflection.”

Dominic scoffed. Clearly, no one called him on his shit. Just let him roam through the world flashing his sharp teeth and shaking out his overgrown mane.

Any attempt at a peaceful end to this night was thrown out the window. “You know, I think you’re scared.”

“I am not scared of you.” Dominic looked so offended, it sent my heart beating double time.

“Not of me directly. But of being attracted to me.”

Now, I was really sure he would never be able to chew solid food again. It would be impossible, with how hard he

was clenching his jaw, the joint bulging out of the side of his sculpted jaw and perfect beard so prominently it looked like someone shoved a stone in the corner of his mouth.

“See?” I said, dropping my gaze to his jaw. “It’s killing you to think of me that way.”

He stayed dead silent, doing nothing but ball his hands into fists.

I kept going.

“And you wouldn’t do anything that would be against your unbreakable little moral code now would you.” I jabbed my finger into his chest as I said it, and before I could get a second one in, Dominic snatched my wrist, wrapping his hand around it.

His skin was molten lava.

“I would choose your next words very, very carefully.” He was mad—furious—and I loved it.

“Why? Because you’ll do something bad?” I said, pouting my lips and drawing in my eyebrows. His attention snagged on my mouth. “I don’t think so.”

“You underestimate me.”

“Do I, now?”

“Yes.” The word was a lion’s growl. “Because I would do just about anything to wipe that smug grin off your face.”

“Then *do it*,” and when he didn’t move, I added, “Coward.”

Every tightly wound muscle in his body snapped. He pulled me forward against his chest, still holding onto my wrist with one hand. The other dove into my hair. Before I could pull away, Dominic slammed his mouth down on mine, taking my gasp as an opportunity to push his tongue past my lips. My momentary shock was quickly replaced by a blazing, burning, all-consuming fire as his mouth worked against mine.

I turned my still captive wrist towards his chest and pushed my other into his hair, yanking him closer. His tongue moved

against mine in long, deft strokes, each stroke shooting sensation into a different part of my body.

The kiss was stealing my breath, but I refused to pull away. Not when his hands were traveling around my waist to pull me closer to him, to feel everywhere his chest touched mine, to feel him hardening against my stomach.

He tasted like whiskey. I liked whiskey, but knowing he loved it made me want to kiss him harder, to replace the taste of it with my lip gloss and wine.

The way I gripped Dominic tightened him to me, pressing the heat of his body into mine. I moaned into his mouth, and if he wasn't unrestrained before, he was now. He shot his hands under my ass and hoisted me up to set me on the back of the couch. I trailed my now free hand down his chest to grab onto the waistband of his pants, pulling him flush against my core.

He groaned, breaking his mouth away to press hot, open-mouthed kisses to the tender spot in between my jaw and neck. My back arched into him and I must have whimpered out his name, because he mumbled "Yes, sweetheart?" against my neck in between kisses.

I wanted to say that I needed him, *now*. Right here, propped on a couch in an open living room. That I didn't care, not when his tongue was doing wicked, wicked things to the side of my neck. But that would expose how much he affected me.

His tongue licked across my skin and I had the overwhelming thought that I needed to feel his tongue in my mouth again. I pulled the back of his hair, beckoning him back to my lips.

I caught a glimpse of his eyes for a second before he crashed his mouth back down to mine, the unfiltered desire I saw there sending a shiver from the top of my head to my toes. If he moved one of the hands kneading my ass under my dress and between my legs, he would find me desperately ready for him. It would only take a few brushes of his fingers to send me over the edge.

I reached behind me and placed a hand over his to direct him where I needed him when he pulled away, breaking this kiss.

Air fell from my lips in a heaving breath. I was about to fall off the back of this couch, I was so dizzy from the kiss.

“You started this,” Dominic said, steadying me with two broad hands on my hips. His voice was gravelly and deep, I could feel it scraping against my skin. “Deal with the consequences.”

“And those would be?” My own voice was breathless and weak. There was no hiding how turned on I was.

Dominic’s eyes were half-lidded, but locked on mine. “You were all talk, weren’t you? It was you who couldn’t handle this.”

The slamming of a door behind Dominic sent us breaking apart, the lack of contact leaving me cold and wanting. Raiden rounded the corner into the sitting room, and I swore a knowing smile tugged at his mouth before he forced it back down.

“I step out for one, *one* second and come back to find you two gone,” Raiden accused.

“We were busy,” Dominic explained.

Great, now he definitely knew what we were doing.

“I can see that,” Raiden said, nodding to me. My hair was probably a tangled mess from Dominic’s hands. “Glad to see you are working through your differences.”

Dominic’s back tensed, remembering exactly what those differences were. I was not about to stand there and watch his face contort with regret. I had goaded him into it and then melted into a puddle under his touch.

“Oh, don’t worry, Raiden, those differences are still firmly intact.” I stepped around Dominic, tugging on my dress to re-center it and involuntarily cringed at the scrape against my burns. I’d forgotten they were there. Moments prior, all I could



feel was my nerve endings lighting on fire on my lips and in between my legs.

“Well, I’m beat,” I declared, looking at no one in particular. Certainly not Dominic. “See you two in the morning. Pancakes!”

Raiden looked like he wanted to say something, but wisely kept his mouth shut and let me leave. I made it to the staircase before I heard Dominic’s voice behind me.

“Rose, wait.”

I turned, and my stomach dropped when I saw the anguish on his face. Oh, he was beating himself up for his lack of restraint.

“See you in the morning, Dominic.”

I ran up the stairs, fleeing before he could say he regretted it or asked me to forget it. Because as much as I hated him, as much as he frustrated me, I knew in the back of my mind that he could repent for those sins. There was no undoing what I’d done, not yet anyway.

## Chapter 13

### **Dominic**

I changed my mind. Rose was dead.

No.

Not dead. And we had to stay married too.

But something. *Something* so that she would pay for the way she burrowed herself into my brain like a fucking beetle.

Rose. Rose. *Rose*.

Her name was on repeat in my head, branded there and forming a permanent scar. There would be no forgetting her, no dislodging her from my brain now.

She occupied more of my thoughts than I cared to admit before last night, weaseling her way into my home and my space and my every fucking thought.

But now that I knew what she tasted like, how she responded to my mouth on her neck and my hands in her hair, I was as good as dead. I wouldn't be satisfied with a quick release by my own hand in the shower, her face breaking through and pinning itself in my mind right as I finished.

No. Now, I needed to feel her for myself.

That wasn't going to happen, not when she cringed and fled before I could tell her I was nowhere near finished with her. Her head screwed back on when Raiden had interrupted. Not to mention the barely restrained regret that marred her beautiful face as she walked away from me.

My head wasn't fully cleared, even though it should have been. I didn't do this shit. Not with her.

She was the epitome of everything I hated, everything I didn't trust. The fact that she was wrapped up in a distractingly beautiful package was just a side effect.

I valued loyalty and trust above everything else. Those I kept around knew that. I'd been burned by disloyal people twice. Twice had I lost those important to me because someone decided that their life wasn't as valuable as power, as their own success.

And Rose was the perpetrator of one of those deaths. Whatever kindness she showed or other people backed was just a manipulation tactic. She was good at getting people to trust her, that was the point.

It should have hardened my resolve, but it only felt like it was cracking the glass, every touch or piece of information another splinter.

I needed to keep pushing, to see beyond that heart-breaking smile to the woman behind it. Then, I'd know how to get to her. Starting with pancakes.

My stomach grumbled at the thought. They'd be good, excellent. She was a brilliant cook, I'd give her that. I knew the invite extended to Raiden and I was a passing, ingenious offer, but I wanted breakfast, damnit.

I pulled a black hoodie over my head, leaving my flannel pants on, and followed the buttery scent hanging in the air outside my door. The closer I got to the kitchen, the easier I could hear the voices inside.

There were at least ten people there, if I guessed correctly. But my ears were specially attuned to one voice, melodic and honey-sweet, cutting through the others.

I heard that laugh of hers right before I stepped around the corner, and I had to take a deep breath to keep myself from getting hard.

*Fuck*, I was so screwed.

“Dominic, man, good for you to join us!”

“Good morning!”

“Hi, Dominic!”

“You look like hell.”

The greetings hit me from every direction as I stepped through the door, bombarding me before I could even match the sentence to its owner. There were eight people here, all sitting around the large oak table in the center of the room. Two spots were open at the head of the table and the seat next to it.

Great, now I was going to have to sit and smell the sweet oil Rose used on her hair and fight the urge to bury my nose in it.

Lukas sat at the opposite head, greeting me with a head nod and the sarcastic cheers of his coffee cup. That fucker definitely told me I looked like hell. Beside him sat Raiden and his husband Belen, their hands threaded together below the table.

Filling out that side of the table was a girl with a mess of curly black hair I didn't recognize and Corrina. The Greek goddess of love gave me a smirk that carried so much innuendo with it I almost laughed.

On the other side of the table sat Jason Dionysus, Sabina Minerva, and Sebastian Apollo. I nodded in greeting, trying to force the morning frown off my face. I actually liked them.

“Good morning,” Rose said from the stove, funneling all my attention towards her.

She stood in front of a large griddle that covered two of the burners and was flipping the fluffiest pancakes I'd ever seen with expert precision.

My mouth watered.

At the pancakes, not at the way Rose's pajama shorts exposed her long, tanned legs. She blushed as I approached, but didn't drop her eyes from my face.

I was going to sit down, but I needed coffee first. I walked by her, bending down to drop a “Morning” right by her ear, before I started at my coffee.

I could hear Rose's swallow and I fought a laugh. That was her tell. She may have fled, but she wasn't unaffected.

"Alright, I'm making these pancakes, but that's it. Put what you want on it," Rose said as she plated another pancake on top of an already perilously-large stack.

Everyone jumped out of their seats and rushed to the countertop. Jason literally elbowed Lukas to get ahead of him. There were bowls of fruit and nuts and containers of syrup and jam crowding the marble. It looked damn good.

Plates were loaded up in record time, and I watched as everyone sat and restrained themselves. Raiden slid a plate in front of Belen and Jason in front of the girl with curly hair across from him. She gave him a curt nod, but a small smile.

I'd have to ask Rose about that one. Like a reflex, my brain reminded me that it would have to be for revenge-sake.

I snapped out of it when Rose started removing her apron next to me. She reached for a plate and I snatched it out of her hand before she could do anything with it.

"Sit," I ordered. She looked at me like she didn't trust me to handle her food without poisoning it. Maybe she couldn't. Who knows.

She didn't fight me though, just walked over to her chair and plopped down. No one said anything, but Lukas looked at me like I was insane.

I was, that was crystal fucking clear. I knew Lukas well enough to read his expressions, but I couldn't decipher whether this one was directed at me or Rose.

Whatever, my coffee was ready and Rose's tea was boiling.

I threw mine in a cup, keeping it black, and added a splash of milk and a teaspoon of honey to Rose's. I dropped mine down and slid hers in front of her. She looked up at me with those pretty green eyes and gave me a half smile.

I'd figure out how to earn a full one soon enough.

I went and grabbed the pancakes and just guessed what Rose would want on hers. There was plenty of shit on the table

if she didn't like it. Based on the grand total of ten meals I'd had of hers—mostly through fucking leftovers—she didn't seem to have that big of a sweet tooth.

I dropped Rose's plate in front of her and then sank down in my seat, my stomach already yelling at me to get to it.

I picked up my fork and realized the table was dead silent.

"Go on," I said, the word coming out confused. No one moved. I looked over to Rose to find her staring at her plate with her hands folded in her lap.

She blinked at it once, twice, then brought her gaze up to me.

"What?" I asked. She looked like a deer on the wrong end of a gun.

She shook her head, releasing a strand of hair from behind her ear. I clenched my fist to keep my hand by my side. Whatever it was, she didn't say anything, and lifted her fork.

*Then* everybody moved. Right, this wasn't my house anymore. Rose cooks, Rose decides when we eat.

I silently tore into my food, waiting for the conversation to pick up so I could drink my coffee and stare at Rose in blissful silence.

"Rose, you miracle worker," Sabina said, leaning around Sebastian to squeeze Rose's arm.

"Really," Jason said, with a mouth full of food, "This is so good."

"Jason, really?" Corrina asked, waving a finger at his mouth and where a bit of pancake was about to fall out.

"Oh, I'm sorry, does this offend your delicate sensibilities?"

Corrina cocked an eyebrow at Jason. "No, my perfectly appropriate sensibilities are offended by your horrible table manners."

"Excuse me, Your Perfectness," Jason said, moving a hand across his broad chest to drop into a dramatic bow.

Sebastian groaned, dropping down an inch in his chair and throwing his head of shaggy black hair back. “Her perfect taste is the reason why my head is pounding with the force of a thousand suns.”

“She picks good alcohol, and you knew that,” Sabina countered, her sharp, knowing blue eyes looking at Sebastian’s dropped head. “It’s your fault you decided to steal a bottle of whiskey and drink the entire thing.”

Raiden jumped in, adding fuel to the fire. “Don’t forget the part where he was running around the ballroom barefoot and singing with the grace of a dying cat.”

“No!” Rose gasped, eyes sparkingly prettily.

“I think they call them sea shanties,” Lukas offered before shoving a piece of pancake dripping in chocolate into his mouth.

“Whatever it was,” Corrina said, “It was horrible.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be a good singer?” Sabina asked. “You know, as god of music and all.”

Sebastian groaned, pulling down the sleeve of his shirt at the wrist. “I am not responsible for anything I do while drunk.”

“Just be glad that it was a closed party. If one of your patrons saw you, they would abandon you,” Jason jumped in.

“And go to who? I’m all they got, baby.” When the Roman pantheon popped up over two thousand years ago, the seat for the god of music was missing, with no explanation. The Apollo house had assumed the mantle ever since. In the years after Adrian’s birth, that was the one godly line everyone could count on to transition smoothly.

“I’ll take them,” Lukas said, dropping his elbows to the table and earning a glare from Corrina. He peeled them off dramatically. “They’ll either want to drown themselves or dunk their heads in the water to muffle the sound of your shrieking.”

Rose took a sip of her tea, then, “I’d pay to see that.”

Sabina laughed, raising her eyebrows at Rose. “You’d have been there, if you weren’t preoccupied.”

I wished I had a picture of Rose’s blush. It was berry red and covered her cheeks and nose, deepening the green of her eyes. I cut in to save her, “My fault.”

“Clearly.” Lukas said, shooting me a glare. What the hell was that for?

“I wouldn’t have been able to get up and make your ass pancakes if I didn’t leave early,” Rose shot back, seamlessly relieving the tension.

Lukas nodded. “Fair point.”

“Dominic had the right idea, marrying you,” Sebastian said, shoveling another bite of food into his mouth. “I’d do it just to get food like this every day.”

Corrina looked at me with an unabashed jealousy. “She cooks for you?”

Not actually, but I wasn’t admitting that. “Yes.”

“What happened to your other cook?” Lukas said from across the table. “Mary, right?”

Rose choked on her tea. She brought her napkin up to her mouth then responded, “She wanted to work less hours, she’s trying to start a family, apparently.”

My fork clattered to my plate. Rose had just lied. She had Mary “redirected” because she wanted to cook for herself. The answer she gave the table made it seem like she had selflessly stepped in to give Mary more time with her family.

Every eye at the table shot to me, and I mumbled, “Seconds,” motioning to my thankfully clear plate before getting up. One of the cracks in the glass had just sealed back up. Rose was playing a part with these people, the kind, do-gooder to mask the killer underneath.

I’d just been momentarily distracted by her perfect lips and taunting eyes.

But that would change, starting now. It had to.



## Chapter 14

### Rose

Syrup, bananas, hazelnuts.

The trifecta, as Pine used to call it.

The key to a perfect pancake and the key to knocking me into a stunned stupor, apparently.

How Dominic knew that, I had no clue. That, the tea, and the kiss was enough to make my head explode. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd been served food outside of a restaurant. And that was a rarity anyway.

I felt a momentary surge of peace, that maybe we could get past this, and then the illusion shattered. Because, of course it did.

If I wasn't so tired from tossing and turning and trying to calm my feverish body down last night, maybe I would have remembered the excuse I'd given Dominic correctly. Maybe then he wouldn't have looked at me like he did after he heard I killed Pine.

The rest of breakfast floated by in a tense haze. Dominic's excuse that he wanted seconds convinced absolutely no one, and everyone could tell that the tension radiating off his shoulders was from something I'd said. Even then, I tried to participate as Jason and Sabina recapped the night and Sebastian made yet another joke about the Apollo House having a foot in both the Roman and Greek doors.

I fought an eye roll at that comment. He was sheltered from the chaos that had sprung up over the last thirty years. Sabina had lost her mother, and Corrina her older sister. Lukas had

lost his brother and father. Hopefully, I'd be able to give him his best friend back.

If I couldn't, I'd hunt Daphne down for him.

At least I could give them all this, a morning that was supposed to be filled with friends and stories of drunken escapades and good food. I held onto that hope for the rest of breakfast, even forcing a smile to my face to tell a story about how Lukas was responsible for my fear of the deep ocean.

I'd promised to go diving with him—and Daphne, but I left her name out—and in a little prank planned by his cousin, Lukas had snuck off, transformed into a sea dragon, and started chomping at me while he chased me through the water.

I thought I'd gotten Dominic to laugh, noticing his body started moving out of my peripheral vision, but he was only getting up to take his plate to the sink. He did all of the dishes, actually, saving me from the cleanup I normally did myself or delegated.

I wanted to talk to him, to try to explain what had happened, but when everyone took their chance to leave and hugged me goodbye, I turned around to find myself alone in the kitchen. Lovely.

The day was fucked regardless. The Council meeting was tomorrow, which was good, given today wasn't just a day for pancakes, but a day for repenting.

A day for the Fates.

I always gave myself the morning to enjoy before I found my way to them in the afternoon. Today was no different. I cleaned up the one pan Dominic didn't get to, and forced myself to go through the motions of getting ready.

My skin still felt raw, even though there was no physical trace of the burns remaining, and I was unsteady. I felt like I hadn't regained my footing since the second my ass had hit the back of that couch last night.

Today, I had a feeling it was going to be a doozy of a task, so I opted for loose black technical pants and a tight black tank top. I tied my hair up into a ponytail and faced myself in the

mirror. I looked tired and the sheen in my eyes looked more pronounced. Daphne used to always tell me that I'd suck at poker, you could see everything in my eyes.

Especially pain, but that was present more often than not.

I fixed up my makeup a bit, brushed through my ponytail, and did a quick check of my outfit. In the cut of the top and with my hair pulled back, you could see a few of my tattoos. I had one on the back of my neck and one on my right shoulder blade, both done by Lia Vulcan. She'd done all of my tattoos, actually. I hadn't seen her in a while, and I made a mental note to invite her out for drinks soon.

I knew she was friends with Dominic, maybe he'd make an appearance. If he ever decided to speak to me again, that is.

When I found the Fates, Lachesis was asleep in her chair and Atropos was deeply invested in spinning a new Fate line. Clotho was the one who met my eyes first.

"Hello, Clotho, how are you?" I greeted and was met with a sharp silence. I could hear water dripping down the stone walls and plopping onto the floor.

I looked her straight in her soulless eyes and asked, "Will you exchange my soul for my brothers?"

If she was capable of emotion, it was pity. "You know the answer to that."

"Indulge me," I said, lifting a shoulder.

"No."

Shocker. But that answer hadn't deterred me yet.

"Well, since I'm already down here, anything I can help with?"

"Yes," Clotho said quickly, they never were ones to turn down help. "There is a man in the Upperworld who keeps escaping our reach. He—"

"No." The world left my mouth before I could stop it.

Clotho balked at my boldness. No one interrupted the Fates and lived to tell the tale. "Would you like us to finish?"

“Are you asking me to bring him to you? So that you can finally cut his Thread?”

“Yes.”

I sucked in a sharp breath and silently prayed I was misunderstanding them. “Why would I do that?”

“We get what we want, this is just expediting the process. He will come to us eventually, we are just requesting you place him on that path sooner.”

I balled my fists and stared Clotho right in her withering, gray face. “You are asking me to kill him.”

Clotho shrugged, like this was the most natural conversation in the world. “Call it what you want. If you don’t, we will find someone or something who will.”

“My answer is no.” I wanted to force the word yes to my lips so badly. But I had sworn I wouldn’t kill again years ago, even if someone killed me for it. I would never harm another person in that way again. No matter how disconnected their life was to mine, no matter who told me they deserved it or if I agreed, no one else would die by my hand.

I held that promise so strongly I’d even say no to the Fates.

“You reject us?” Clotho asked, really hammering the nail in on my decision.

I blew out a breath, I could do this. “If you are asking me to kill him, then yes.”

“You have not denied us anything thus far.”

“Today is different, it seems.” This request was different. They’d never even asked me to harm another person before. The furthest they pushed it was making sure an already-dead soul didn’t escape. Even that grated against my nerves.

“Well, then you are dismissed.”

*Dismissed?* I’d never been dismissed by them, not even in the days I spent hours lingering in their quarters.

“Are you ordering me to leave?”

“You won’t fulfill our request, so yes, you may leave.” May meant must.

“Well, then.”

I left without another word, and immediately regretted it. I had made that promise to myself, but was it worth it if it meant I couldn’t bring Pine back.

That was more important, wasn’t it? I would suffer in the Fields of Punishment if I was lucky, Tartarus more likely. What was one more person gone because of me?

Except I couldn’t do it. I physically couldn’t do it. It would destroy the value system I’d built.

But, Pine. Pine could be back.

I kept at that loop of circular thinking for the entire walk home. Walking from the Fates lair was ill-advised. It was on the barest edge of the Underworld, and it would take me at least two hours to take the trip.

I did it anyway. But nothing worked. It was Pine then the nausea at the thought of killing then Pine again.

I pushed through my front door hours later, after almost being full-body tackled by Max. They hadn’t recognized me at first, my face downturned and my normally free-flowing hair tied back. They let me go with a promise to catch up over meetings the next day, and I agreed. Concern was etched into the soft lines of their face, empathy strong in their eyes, and I promised myself I would honor it later.

I made it up the stairs, practically running them. I needed to dive head first into a book and forget the world. I was on my way to do just that when I crashed into Dominic coming out of the library while I was headed in.

I did *not* need this right now. “Fucking hell, warn a girl would you?”

Dominic was still in that distracting black hoodie from earlier, with the sleeves rolled up to expose his forearms. They were corded with thick muscle and dusted with light brown

hair. He crossed his perfect hands over his chest and asked. “Running from something?”

I chuckled darkly. He didn’t even know how true that was. “What, like my past?”

“You said it, not me.” He thought he was hilarious, didn’t he?

“I’m leaving,” I said, turning around. I’d re-read a book from my personal collection.

Dominic’s voice stopped me in my tracks. “Why are you wearing that?”

“Wearing what?” I looked down at the simple outfit I had on.

Dominic nodded towards the pants, in particular, not without dropping his gaze to my breasts first. Fucking typical. “You look ready for a fight.”

“If you think this is appropriate clothing for a battle, I pity you.”

“I didn’t say battle, I said fight.”

“Semantics.”

“Ah, yes, semantics,” Dominic said, “Important to you, I presume, when you spin your pretty lies.”

I was a second away from stomping on his foot just to see him squirm. Instead, I backed up a step. “I’m not in the mood for this, Dominic.”

“*Why?*” The question was so layered I didn’t even know where to begin. It was a plea and a curse all in one.

“I don’t owe you anything,” I snapped, throwing his own words back at him.

Dominic stepped toward me, pressing me into the wall. “I beg to differ.”

I breathed in and was only assaulted by Dominic’s cologne. It did absolutely nothing to calm me down.

“Just leave me alone, will you?”

Dominic looked at me like there was no way that was happening. “You know, it is so interesting to see how you pull the mask down for other people.”

I tensed. “What do you mean?”

“Last night and this morning. Laughing and breaking bread like you care about those people.”

“I do care about those people,” I shot back, throwing air quotes to emphasize how stupid calling my friends ‘those people’ was. What the fuck?

“Then why lie to them? Or did you lie to me?” Dominic pressed, stepping into my space and sending an excited rush through me. I pressed it down. “Which one is it?”

And just because I was over this shit, my head pounding and my heart breaking, I told him the truth. “Both.”

“Like I said. Pretty. Lies.” He punctuated the words by dragging a finger over the perimeter of my face.

I pulled back, escaping the tingles the rough scrape of his finger beckoned on my face. “Then listen to me now, because I’m telling the truth. Stop. Bothering. Me.”

Dominic laughed, his eyes sparking with something close to excitement. “Never.”

I tried to move past him, but he lifted both hands to my upper arms and kept me trapped between him and the wall. I was going to knee him in the balls.

“I don’t think you fully understood that promise, Rose,” Dominic said, leaning close. Sick, twisted anticipation coursed through my chest. “I will never stop bothering you.”

“You’re nothing if not predictable,” I breathed, my eyes dropping to his mouth.

He noticed. Shit.

“Normally.” It was Dominic’s turn to look at my lips. And consequences and how much he twisted my stomach into a knot be damned. I wanted him to kiss me. He looked like he wanted to too.

And then he got an evil little glint in his deep brown eyes. Dominic pulled back and left me heaving, then strode down the hallway, tossing a “See you tomorrow, sweetheart” over his shoulder.

It took me a second, but then I realized he had just done the opposite of what I accused. That leaving, instead of kissing me, was going against the grain.

Being unpredictable.



## Chapter 15

### **Dominic**

Rose was cutting me up. Like the thorns of her namesake.

My chest and stomach felt tight and ready to snap and my hands literally ached with restraint. I knew, *knew* I shouldn't fucking go there.

And yet somehow, leaving her standing in that hallway, her lips glistening and pouting like they were begging for my mouth, felt like the most sacrilegious thing in the world.

My once comfortable bed felt itchy and hard under my back, like it was trying to force me out of it.

To slam through the doors separating our rooms—barely three inches of wood, far too easy to break through—and drag Rose out of her covers and under me.

After an eternity, sleep took over.

But I wasn't free of Rose even then.

Never would be.



*Council meetings were always tense. I tried to stay silent, to observe. That was what I was good at. Watching people, figuring out how they worked and what they cared about. It was the easiest way to get them on your side.*

*I needed that. It was still so unclear when the next generation would take over. I was shoved into leadership too soon and Adrian had taken over the throne earlier than most to gain traction with the older gods. It worked with a few, their natural instincts bowing to the more powerful god in their presence.*

*But some resisted, unhappy seeing the skies and half the Underworld ruled by gods thirty, forty, fifty years their junior. Especially when Lukas was taking on more and more responsibility by the day.*

*And Pine...well, no one knew when Pine would take over. His father still seemed quite happy in his seat of power. I wanted Pine in that seat. Jerome Hades was impossible to work with. He fought me every step of the way, voting opposite of me just because he could. Making comments about my youth and inexperience.*

*That was ironic when he just let his power rule for him, not even caring when something went wrong or having any respect for propriety. Even now, the meeting was about to start and he was nowhere to be found. A pattern for him. He would always roll in in the middle of Adrian's welcome without an apology.*

*Adrian shot me a look, with a nod towards the empty seat to my right at the far end of the table. He sat at the head of the other side. The Skies and Underworld juxtaposed.*

*I shook my head in disbelief, forever annoyed at the gall on that old man.*

*Tense murmurs stole my attention a second later. One of Lord Vulcan's guards was whispering in his ear, while Lady Ares was laughing under her breath at a letter that had just appeared in her hand.*

*Letters and guards started pouring in all at once. Even Adrian's advisor, Emre, came rushing to his side, pulling him into a private conversation. I turned in my chair, looking for Raiden, but he wasn't there.*

*And then it happened. Every single head at the table turned to me. There were so many emotions in the texture of those stares, but there was one feeling I saw more than the others.*

*It was fear, but in a particular form. The type of fear that came from hearing that something tragic had happened again. That a plague that had affected you for years had reared its ugly head.*

*The virus, that sickness was back.*

*Based on the shadows gathering in Adrian's eyes, it had come back with a force. I racked my brain for a member of my court who could have been killed in the power struggle that spawned from Adrian's birth. An old, minor god maybe.*

*Then the shadows of Adrian's fear broke. To show grief. Full body grief. The potency of it only had one explanation. A family member or a friend you valued just as much.*

*The glances at me, Adrian's reaction. The pieces slammed together right as the door to the Council room flew open.*

*Rose Hades stood in the doorway, hair flowing and green eyes blazing, looking like someone who just had the final part of her soul click into place. Like a goddess who just inherited the power to her realm.*

*"Why are you here, Rose?" Adrian asked, with the cadence of a rhetorical question. I hoped she didn't answer. I didn't want to hear it.*

*Rose moved her head slowly to look at him. Her body still. "Pine is dead."*

*Anger, grief, and vengeance split my chest open.*

*"And your father?" Adrian asked, his voice shaking with restrained power.*

*"Also dead," Rose said, her voice hollow. Empty. Emotionless.*

*Adrian's eyes narrowed, a storm clouds gathering as he curled his fist around a spark of light. I wished he'd let it fly right into Rose's chest.*

*"Huh," Lady Bacchus, the drunken, classless fool of wine that she was, said, breaking in at the most inappropriate time. "I didn't know you had it in you, Rose. Well, Lady Hades, now. Cheers."*

*She lifted a shriveled hand, clutched around a glass of wine like it was her life force—probably was—in the air towards Rose before tossing it back.*

*Rose blinked at her once. Then turned to Adrian, whose hands were letting off sizable sparks in her direction before*

*pulling reluctantly back into his fists. Then, slowly, so slowly, to me. To the open seat. Her seat next to me.*

*I knew what my face looked like. Could feel the same expression that had hardened my mouth and jaw while I extracted revenge from my uncle pulling at my skin.*

*Rose walked toward me, passing the row of gods seated on the right side of the table without a second glance. Just strode toward me, her eyes on my face the entire way over. I met her gaze, held it without backing down.*

*A distant, instinctual part of my brain registered that the power and age she'd gained since I'd last seen her looked good on her. Too good.*

*My rage kicked it out of focus a second later, my jaw clenching at the cold observation in Rose's eyes. When she was within a few feet of me, close enough to smell her perfume, she cocked her head and narrowed her eyes at me. Let those envy-colored eyes trail down to the wood splintering under my hands on my chair, to the shadows gathering around my feet.*

*Rose blinked again. Then her shoulders pinched and her mouth tilted up just an inch as she placed a hand on the back of the chair that was meant to be her brother's and said, "This seat isn't taken is it? I'd hate to have to remove someone from it."*

*"You know damn well that's not your fucking chair," I snapped, my anger straining my voice.*

*Rose raised one perfect eyebrow at me. "Really? Because I don't see anyone here who would take it."*

*I let out a low grumble and Rose let out a little laugh. Then, "Unless you're seeing something I'm not. If so, you're insane."*

*Insane. That was new. I'd remember that.*

*At my silence, Rose said, "Oh, good. Glad it's free, then."*

*And then the room went taut. Every god and goddess stared at her, realizing that the young, sweet Rose Hades had just*

*stolen the throne from her brother and father.*

*Realizing that it was now marriage or death—likely death, I had a few ideas forming—that would determine the future of the Underworld.*

## Chapter 16

### Rose

Dominic's smug fucking grin was the first thing I saw the next morning. I couldn't sleep knowing how few walls separated us, especially not when my head was still spinning from that near kiss and my heart felt heavy from me rejecting the Fates.

And today of all days—a fucking Council meeting—was only going to make it worse. It would be a reminder of why I started working for them in the first place.

Shaking off the thought, I finally opened my eyes to see Dominic sitting in a chair in front of my bed. Staring at me.

“Can I help you?” I asked, pushing my hair out of my face.

Dominic assessed me with warm brown eyes, dragging his hand through his light stubble. “We're going to be late.”

I snuck a look at the clock on my bedside table. *Eight in the morning*. I picked it up and threw it at him. It was a sloppy throw and he caught it with his left hand before it even got close to hitting him.

Dominic raised one thick eyebrow at my boldness. Whatever, it was too early.

“The Council meeting isn't until noon,” I argued. “Why on earth would you wake me up this early?”

Dominic sat forward, resting his bare, tattooed forearms on his knees, still holding my clock. “You were already awake.”

I sat up fully, letting the covers fall to my waist. My cotton tank was somewhat modest, and a lucky shade of black that would hide any definition of my breasts. Not that I had any

reaction that needed to be hidden from Dominic's assessing gaze.

"You don't know that," I said.

Dominic grin lifted up a bit higher. "Sure do. Your eyebrows pinched together a couple minutes before you opened your eyes. Awake."

"Exactly how long were you watching me for?" I wasn't sure what answer I preferred. Because the thought of him watching me that intently wasn't hitting acid in my stomach like I thought it would.

At my pause, Dominic continued, "Don't get flattered. I was making sure you weren't going to miss it."

I scoffed and threw back the covers. "When have I ever missed a Council meeting?"

"Fair point," Dominic said, right as I walked over to him. His eyes lingered on my bare legs for a second before he jumped up and strode toward my door. "Noon."

"See you there, sweetheart," I said to his back, then gave him a close lipped smile when he whipped around. If he could use the nickname, so could I.

Dominic's eyes went daring, and I almost took the bait. His self-restraint kicked in at the last second, though, and he left there standing in the middle of my room, thanking the Fates for the black fabric of my shirt.

†

I met Dominic downstairs at a quarter to twelve just to avoid any quips. He actually had a habit of rolling in at the last possible second, but apparently his punctuality only kicked in when it involved me.

No one was expected to show up in formal attire to Council meetings, so it mainly came down to personal style. I was in a comfortable dress, a staple in my closet. Dominic was in that same tight black long sleeve and pants that made his dark blonde hair and rich eyes stand out.

Let alone the peak of a tattoo on the underside of his collar. I'd seen the full tattoo, the few times I'd gotten a glimpse of him in an undershirt. It was a wide cypress tree over his left pectoral, with branches and leaves covering the entirety of his chest. And rather than feeling disgust, something goddamn normal in association with hate, all I wanted was to see more of it.

I shook off the image of Dominic and all the parts of his body I hadn't seen yet, instead focusing on the one in front of me.

"Funny seeing you down here, Dominic. I figured you'd be hiding in my closet and watching me change," I said as I descended the stairs into our entryway.

"If I wanted to see you naked, I have other ways of achieving that goal," Dominic said, letting his eyes dart over my face and body casually.

"That is assuming I'd let you, you narcissistic toad." Even though I had the sadistic urge to learn more about those methods.

Dominic chuckled darkly, then beckoned me closer to him with a flick of his hand. "You know, if you weren't so fucking annoying, I'd consider you witty."

I huffed a little before stepping closer, just barely catching Max's amused expression as they leaned against the door frame.

Guess Raiden didn't want another disappearing act like the beginning of the weekend.

"Like I care what you consider me," I retorted, weakly. I'd normally have something much sharper on the tip of my tongue, but the spice and wood floating off of Dominic was dumbing me down.

"Alright, you two," Max interrupted. "Out the door."

In seconds, we stepped through a portal into the entryway of the throne room. The halls looked the exact same, they hadn't changed for a millennium. But something about walking in with another person made it feel different.



The first time I walked in, I was alone, grieving, and numb. I wasn't even sure who I talked to or what I said. Just splotches of memory, marred by the visceral anger radiating from Adrian and Dominic. It was a spark of lightning from Adrian's fingers that almost snapped me out of it. In all the times I'd spied on my brother and his friends sparring, I'd never seen Adrian lose control, even when Dominic and Pine ganged up on him.

Only when he was restraining rage towards the goddess who killed one of his best friends did the iron fist he kept wrapped around his power loosen.

And Dominic, god Dominic looked so betrayed. It *was* the ultimate betrayal. It was years after he'd lost his parents, but I knew it must have felt like a few days.

Brightest, most painful of all, was the late Lady Bacchus saying *I didn't know you had it in you*. And the reactions that followed—a few impressed laughs and snickers, some shocked whispers.

But not a single, outward show of surprise. I barely knew any of them, but somehow they all just accepted the fact that I was a cold-blooded killer without a word from my mouth. That, combined with the two people who knew Pine the best, knew who our father was, blaming me was enough to pull out a snarky, cruel side of myself I didn't know existed before then.

I remembered the words and the looks every time I walked into this part of Adrian's home. Even as the younger gods took over, displacing their predecessors, I remembered it.

It was only next to Dominic, who stole most of my focus, did the memory drift to the back of my mind.

Max ushered us through to the throne room, since updated into a large meeting table with grand, high-backed chairs from the original layout filled with oversized thrones.

The thrones were moved to a temple on the far end of Olympus, reserved only for the most sacred, important of

meetings. Or when it was necessary to remind humans of the power of the gods that kept their world alive.

It was far away from this hall, however. Olympus, Adrian's home as much as the gods, was a city in and of itself. Nestled in the Dolomites, it spanned an entire mountainside, serving as a grand display of the power of the skies.

Due to Adrian's parentage and his power, it was also accessible from its namesake and original mountain in Greece. It never concerned us, however, seeing as we just popped right into the foyer before the throne room.

Dominic and I took a step towards the large oak doors at the same time, before colliding. Max jumped around us to signal to Adrian's guards who we were and to gain access. While he did, Dominic placed a hand around my back and down to my hip, steadying me after our crash.

He leaned down to my ear, brushing my hair behind my back so that I would hear him clearly. "You go first."

I turned my head towards him, our faces inches apart. "Really? I thought you'd trip me just to get in the room before me."

Dominic gifted—burdened—me with his grin, his dimple appearing. "I considered it for a moment. But that's too small a punishment for what you deserve."

"And what would my *large* punishment be?" The second the question left my mouth I had the urge to suck back in the words. I tried to move away from him, but Dominic's hand tightened its hold on my hip, keeping me flush to him.

Dominic's breath caught and his eyes clouded as he looked at me. Shit. "I have something very large in mind."

I almost retorted that there was no way he was working with something large, but I shut it down. Because I knew that wasn't true. I could still feel the brand on my inner thigh from where he pressed his...sizeable length between my legs.

"Let's go," I said, my voice scraping out and placing my hand on his muscled forearm to wrench his hand off my hip.

Not that it gave me any relief, the feel of it burned like a brand.

“You first,” Dominic repeated, all but shoving me towards the opening door.

We walked in, Dominic too close to my back, to discover that we were, in fact, slightly late. Most everyone was already there. And they were all wearing mischievous smiles.

“Oh, shit,” Dominic cursed at my back, and I twisted my head to see what that was about. Meeting my eye, he nodded toward our end of the table.

I followed his stare and when I took in what sat there, my mouth opened in shock.

Lia Vulcan and Quinn Hephaestus yelled “Surprise!” from their spot behind our chair.

Well, bench now.

Those two little shits obviously had a field day designing that torture device. Lia moved her hand dramatically over the midnight black bench, complete with two peaked backs and embossed with gold detailing.

“Do you guys like?” she asked, clearly proud of herself.

“You want the first shot or can I take it?” Dominic whispered from behind me.

“All yours. Make it hurt,” I grumbled.

“What was that?” Quinn asked, ushering one of us to speak louder.

“You guys are all assholes,” Dominic said to the entire room, sending gods giggling like school children.

“Oh, come on, Dominic! It’s a wedding present,” Lia shot back, crossing her artfully tattooed arms over her chest.

“They like it,” Quinn assured, patting Lia on her shaved head. Lia yanked his shoulder length, black hair in response.

They weren’t siblings by blood, but they sure acted like it.

“Lia, Quinn, you both are so kind,” I cut in, walking over to them with Dominic hot on my heels. I shot him what I hoped was a murderous look, one that he matched with equal fervor. I was reminded that we were barely on speaking terms, still only interacting when we were forced.

Quinn looked positively gleeful. “See! I told you she’d forgive—”

“So kind to give me a reason to get you back,” I finished with an evil smile.

“Clever as ever, Rose,” Lia said, pulling me in for a quick hug. “All healed?”

I nodded, squeezing her arm in silent thanks for the latest tattoo she’d given me. Based on the scattered glimpses I’d gotten of Dominic’s, I assumed she’d done his as well.

I gave Quinn a quick hug as well, then walked over to the bench to the sound of a short greeting between Dominic and them.

I took in my new seat for a moment, giving Dominic just enough time to pull it out from the table. I took the cue to sit, and right as he pushed my side in, leaving his slightly ajar, he leaned down and said, “So you know Lia well?”

“That a problem?” I bit out.

“Maybe.” Dominic rounded the chair. “But now I know you have tattoos. I’ll enjoy finding them.”

“Like I’d let you,” I said. I really had to come up with better retorts.

Dominic sat, his massive form taking up way too much of the wooden space. I shifted, realizing in order to stay comfortable I had to choose between pressing our legs so tightly together I was practically sitting on his lap or letting the arm of the chair dig into my side.

“I meant when I burn every piece of clothing you own,” Dominic sneered. “But that’s good to know that’s where your mind went.”

“Asshole,” I grumbled, shifting against the wood piercing my side.

Dominic’s jaw ticked and he leaned closer to me, another threat clearly building. Before he could, two sharp claps echoed through the room, signaling Adrian’s arrival.

Everyone sat up a little straighter. Finally taking in the full scope of the room, I realized we were actually the last people there. Even though we were more present than Sebastian Apollo was, who had clearly dipped into a bit of Jason’s liquor stores before the meeting.

“Alright, everyone. Welcome,” Adrian said, striding into the room in a well pressed button down and slacks. He always looked perfectly put together. Rightfully so. A hair out of place and people attacked him like vultures.

“How’s everyone? Calm summer?” he asked, earning a smattering of positive responses trickling through the room. Summer was better, generally. Fewer illnesses, bright weather that improves mood, less reason for people to complain.

Fewer deaths, too. Summer was *supposed* to be a break from the madness. But the Fates had to just go and marry me off to Dominic. Now this summer was filled with his badgering and annoyingly sculptured face and his fucking *thigh* pressed against mine, hot and strong.

The hope in Adrian’s voice as he said the word *calm* sent a little flicker of guilt through my chest. Things didn’t *feel* fine. Tension was building around me and my past and my relationship with Dominic. But I hadn’t even told Dominic about the dress incident. Telling a room full of gods certainly wasn’t the time either.

While small talk filtered through the room, I barely understood a word exchanged. My leg started bouncing on reflex, brushing against Dominic’s in the process. That did nothing to calm my nerves, spun higher by the reminder of all that had transpired in this room and my husband’s proximity.

Right as I was about to still the movement, Dominic’s hand clamped down on it. His palm covered the top of my leg, with

his pinky reaching distractingly close to my inner thigh and his thumb on the outside edge.

“That’s bothersome,” Dominic said under his breath.

I pushed my leg up against his hand in retaliation, which just made him squeeze harder. Hard enough to send the nerve running from my leg and to my core taut.

I should have known my body would be confused by the proximity. Apparently a fevered kiss, that may or may not have been the hottest thing I’d ever experienced, and a near one in a hallway was enough to make me Dominic-stupid.

Not good.

“To get started,” Adrian began, forcing my attention (just barely) away from my leg and Dominic’s still hot hand. “There’s a few things I want to confirm. I need final checks on all harvest returns.”

Adrian nodded towards Lukas, Jason Dionysus, and Mia Ceres. Lukas would control any fish and seafood catches. Jason commanded wine and spirits, and Mia controlled all land harvests since their Bacchus and Demeter counterparts didn’t survive the merge.

One death and one choice.

“All good on my end,” Mia said, curling her hand around a mug. “Ferragosto is coming up, so I have a few days set aside for audiences with farmers and ranchers at the end of the month to address any problems.”

Adrian nodded. The break for farmers mid-August was always a closely held tradition. “Good. Are there—”

“No issues with the merge,” Mia interrupted, boldly. I even saw a few eyebrows raising. “As long as they can make a living, no one cares that it’s House Ceres keeping the soil healthy.”

Adrian regarded her for a moment, as if considering whether to call her on the interruption. Clearly deciding against it, he turned to Jason next. “Dionysus?”

Jason leaned on the table, folding his strong hands together. “Good numbers, so far. Puts us in a good position for the winter. We also haven’t depleted too much of what we prepared for the summer.”

“And Ferragosto?” Adrian asked.

“Prepped for,” Jason responded. The whole Mediterranean practically took the month of August off, which meant alcohol consumption went through the roof. “Shipping back up barrels and bottles to a few popular resorts, hotels, and bars in case. Have the Romulus family covered, too.”

“We’ll get back to them in a sec,” Adrian said, referencing Rome’s most powerful family. The *founding* family. “Lukas?”

“Huh?” Lukas said, snapping back into focus. Something—someone—was stealing his focus today.

“The harvest,” Adrian reminded, his tone balancing the line between a friendly scold and maintaining his position as king.

“We’re good.” The answer was short, but Lukas was an extremely capable leader. Adrian shot him—and Dominic—a look before moving on.

He looked over to the far end of the table, closer to where Dominic and I sat. For a second, I thought he was going to ask me something and I jerked slightly in my seat.

Earning me another tight squeeze on my thigh. I shifted as slowly as possible, as much as I could with a pounding heartbeat in my lower stomach.

“Lady Juno, you had something to share.”

Juno perked up, tucking a white blonde curl behind her ear. She was new to her seat of power, barely eighteen. Her mother, the late Lady Juno, had only passed a few months ago. “Yes, I’ll be presiding over the Romulus son’s wedding next week.”

“And Lord Hera?” Adrian prompted. Always one to make sure that both sides of the godly system were equally included. Even though the Romulus family was as Roman as they come, there were two gods of marriage to consider.

“I’ll be there,” Lord Hera confirmed. Adrian’s shoulders dropped an inch in relief. “Juno is officiating but we are both signing the marriage decree.”

Adrian’s eyebrows raised in what could only be doubt. The Romulus family had some choice words to say about his birth. The whole cohort of wealthy families on both sides of the Houses felt their resources entitled them to retaliate against the gods whenever they pissed them off. I was just glad all my sins were confined to the Underworld. Well, mostly. “And the family agreed?”

It was Dominic’s turn to readjust in his seat. I immediately despised it. I had half the mind to make a quip about him being restless, but his move slid his hand another inch up my leg. The static heat radiating from his hand to my center, barely a few inches and separated only by a scrap of lace and a thin cotton dress, sent the pulsing lower.

Unavoidably lower. The hand—yes, attached to Dominic, but I was ignoring that—was turning me on.

“Lorenzo was on board,” Hera confirmed, bringing up the patriarch of the Romulus family. The closest the humans got to a king. “Hasn’t put up a fight at all.”

Adrian laughed. “Glad to see he’s having a change of heart.”

I could barely hear him over the ringing in my ears.

“I think we are all well aware of the importance of keeping the peace,” Adrian continued, steeling his shoulders. “Power, the blood in our veins, is what keeps this world running. But money, which the Romulus family certainly has, is a more potent motivator. Money combined with opportunity, with reason to rebel, is the greatest threat to the gods. That is what we must avoid.”

It was a classic mind game in guilt, the feeling that someone was speaking directly at you when discussing a topic that applied to your fears. I knew that, but I couldn’t help the feeling that Adrian was addressing me.



I was the one with the poor reputation, the one who tainted Dominic's. Guilt clawed at my throat while desire battled it for my attention.

I could feel a bead of sweat building on my spine, just as Adrian waved a hand through the air. "But you all know that. We have had a number of peaceful, good years. The fact that Lady Juno and Lord Hera were included is a good sign."

"I'm just glad I'll be able to approve *this* marriage," Lady Juno said, not so subtly shooting Dominic and I a glance and channeling my focus.

Dominic's fingers dug into the flesh of my thigh, holding on like it was a life raft and Juno's passive aggressive tone was a tidal wave. I swallowed the lump in my throat.

"We would be happy to receive your blessing now. Same with you Hera," Dominic said smoothly. And that was something I envied about him. He offered no apologies for what was clearly a slight to Juno's honor. Instead, just redirecting her to the present.

How could I not envy it, when my whole life revolved around my past?

"Speaking of," Adrian cut in, "anything to add for the Underworld?"

I froze. I wasn't sure I was capable of words right now. "There's nothing to...everything is fine with um..."

For the love of Zeus, what was the name of our city. Our *only* city.

"Purgatory is fine," Dominic said, smirking like a victor in a duel. He dropped his eyes quickly, barely for a second, to his hand on my leg.

Oh, he had so many ideas running through that big head of his. And he deserved to suffer as much as I was. I crossed my legs, right over left, caging his hand between my thighs. His fingertips dug into my skin slightly in question.

I ignored it.

The position was radiating a level of heat I didn't even know was possible from his skin, but it also gave me the leverage to bring my heeled foot behind his calf. Slowly, torturously, I dragged my foot up the back of his leg, pulling his pants a little with it.

"Everything seems connected," Dominic said. Maybe I was crazy, but it sounded more drawn out than normal.

He deserved to slur his words in front of the whole Council. Threading my hand under his arm, I placed my hand on *his* thigh, stroking back and forth methodically.

I let myself imagine it was a different part of his anatomy. Only in hopes some weird marital bond would transfer the image to him. Up and down his muscled thigh, relishing in the strength and power under my palm.

I felt that muscle flex, tighten under my attention, and a surge of victory as sweet as honey burst through my chest.

"We should be fine for the"—I squeezed his upper thigh lightly—"clearances. In, um, June."

I felt myself smirk.

"It's July," Adrian corrected, raising an eyebrow at his friend, who was uncharacteristically fumbling over his words.

"Right," Dominic grumbled, as if that was all the response he could muster. It was hard to tell in black trousers, but the fabric of his pants looked slightly tented.

I let my hand linger as far up on his leg I could get without actually palming his cock, which pissed him off.

Or something.

Whatever the emotion, Dominic shoved his hand further up between the press of my thighs, mere centimeters from my underwear. He stopped short though, and I fought a treacherous groan.

I shouldn't want him to touch me like that, but here I was, about to beg for it. Made worse by the thought of him getting hard at the stroke of my hand.

We hated each other. We had *just* gotten in a fight about secrets I was keeping and I admitted to lying to him and our friends in a stupid, impulsive attempt at honesty.

“That all?” Adrian asked, snapping both Dominic and I back to focus, if his short grunt was to be believed.

Dominic nodded tightly and I made a weird sound in the back of my throat.

“Good. No more grand reveals out of you two for the next year,” Adrian joked and I let myself smile through the absolute havoc Dominic’s hand was wreaking on my body.

“You know a thing or two about grand reveals Rose,” Sebastian drawled, leaning so far back in his seat it was borderline disrespectful. “What I would have *paid* to have been here and seen the look on everyone’s faces. Tell me, did you really bring his head as a trophy?”

My whole body froze, time turning to syrup as I processed what, exactly Sebastian said. We were friends, not best, to be fair, but *friends*. It was a drunken joke in poor taste but it still lit a fire of agony through my chest.

Even Dominic’s thumb, which I just now registered was stroking small circles on my leg, stopped dead in its tracks.

“Sebastian!” Sabina Minerva scolded from the seat to his left, hitting him lightly upside the head.

“What?” Sebastian said, shooting her a confused look. “It’s just a question.”

“A dumb fucking question,” she snapped back.

The exchange gave me just enough time to unfreeze my brain. My body still wasn’t functional, not with rage and grief turning me cold and numb. The only heat was from a body that wasn’t my own, pressed between my legs.

It gave me time to go on the offense, to act like the comment didn’t affect me, to come up with a witty response. The same I always did with Dominic or Adrian or anyone else.

I acted like that girl who walked into a throne room and coldly told the room her brother and father had died, while

silently grieving.

I unclenched my jaw and said, “I left the head at home in my trophy case. It was too heavy to lug all the way here.”

My tone was dry, sarcastic. Enough so that it balanced the line of humor and self-deprecation. Like I’d been reminded with Corrina, most of the gods at the table didn’t know Pine. They chalked it up to business, the price of merging two godly systems. They were apathetic, which allowed them to chuckle lightly at the response, or judge Sebastian for bringing it up in the first place.

After that, I stayed silent for the rest of the meeting. I wasn’t even sure what was discussed. I didn’t think I felt the low rumbling of Dominic’s voice next to me, didn’t feel anything under where my hand was still gripping his leg.

In the span of two days, I’d been reminded twice of the path I walked. One where I lied to my friends or to my husband or both. Where the stories of how I’d delivered the news of my ascension were spun in more dramatic and grand ways. Where no one saw the numb pain that had taken over my body that day, but instead saw a cold, calculated girl.

I was forced out of my head when everyone started standing, signaling the end to the meeting. With scattered waves and promises for lunch or dinner or something I couldn’t remember soon, everyone started to filter out. At the end of the room, Dominic and I were among the last to leave. That, and the feeling of his hand sliding off my skin, were the only two things I registered fully.

By the time we made it out, everyone had jumped back to their homes, leaving Dominic, Max, and I alone.

In my haze, I didn’t even notice Dominic backing me into a column before my back hit the cold stone, shocking me enough to meet his eyes.

I had no idea what his expression meant, his pupils near black against the white of his eyes and the line between his brows a little deeper. I was too numb to care.

Dominic gripped my upper arms hard enough to draw attention. “Sebastian is a fool. Ignore him.”

My head cleared a little with the scoff that command deserved. “Easier said than done.”

The line deepened. Dominic looked at me, eyes bouncing all over my face like a slingshot. “Do you?”

“What?”

“Have a hard time ignoring them.”

I laughed bitterly, a retort breaking through the fog in my head, pushing it out of the way. “That answer is reserved for people I actually like.”

“So you do, then,” Dominic said. “Because if you didn’t, you’d just admit it.”

I blinked, forcefully shoving any remaining clouds from my mind. “I’d like to ignore you.”

“You couldn’t ignore me if you tried, sweetheart,” Dominic said, pushing me a little further into the column. How had we ended up like this again?

“That’s a bold claim coming from someone whose pants were a little too tight not ten minutes ago.”

Dominic laughed, low and rumbly. “You’re seeing things. But just for *trying* I’ll get you back for that.”

I squirmed under his hold, not liking how the attention grated against my skin and made my clothes feel uncomfortable.

“Can’t you just leave me alone like a normal husband?”

“Can’t do that, Rose,” Dominic said. “I have promises to keep.”

Yeah, like promising to never stop bothering me. Cute.

“Good luck with that,” I said, and then fled like a scared little bird. Because even though the reasons why I felt tense and a little sad weren’t precisely on top of mind after finding

myself between a stone column and Dominic's stone chest, I wanted out of that room.

Gathering a portal, I stepped through and went straight to the training room, refusing to give any weight to Dominic's laugh or Max's knowing gaze.

## Chapter 17

### Rose

Another two weeks passed, and I skirted around Dominic like avoidance was within my godly responsibilities. I couldn't fully escape his presence, not when we were forced to cross paths in the bathroom and over meals—I continued to cook for him and others, I wasn't that cruel—but for the most part, we kept necessary, wanted distance from each other.

If only it felt that way.

The tension was thick between us, not even a molten knife could cut through it. But neither of us made a move to reduce it, either through talking or anything else.

I dreamt of him three times, I couldn't even escape him then. Two of those times, I woke up sweaty and overheated. And I'd sneak glances at him over dinner or in the bathroom or in the hallway in between our offices, hoping the jolt that went through my body when we made eye contact went away.

It didn't.

It was a lonely stretch of time, if I was being honest with myself. Thea was away staying with Jason—they finally figured their shit out and were properly dating. Max and Marcus were busy trying to covertly address the dress issue and still fulfill their existing responsibilities. I just wanted it done, off my docket, then they would finally stop pestering me about someone breaking into my room.

It was one of Dominic's staff who disapproved of me, it had to be. Who else?

Yes, it was the most aggressive act anyone had ever committed. But my father's home was a graveyard, with only

people I trusted living in it. Having people I didn't know, who didn't know me, living under the same roof was probably just the catalyst to get bold.

I spent most of my days handling mind-numbing administrative tasks that came along with running a realm, and pouring over the details at least three times. I couldn't shake the feeling that something would go wrong with our power lines combining, the lack of issues doing nothing to quell my fears.

Normally, a time full of reading and solitude wouldn't bother me, but the feeling that I *had* to be alone because the alternative was to spar with Dominic and ignore the way he spun my stomach into knots was taking a toll.

I would try to find an excuse to leave the room when it was just the two of us, but on an afternoon in our bathroom, with a slight hair emergency, I didn't have a choice. I had been clipping and unclipping my hair all morning, forming a particularly nasty knot in the bottom of my hair and needed my hairbrush.

Who knew what Dominic was doing. Probably staring at himself in the mirror and repeating *I am better than everyone else* over and over in his head.

"Rose," Dominic said as I walked into the bathroom, making a show of raking his gaze down my body and the dress covering it.

"Dominic," I said in greeting, the words coming out clipped and short.

We stood, side by side, with my brush in hand and his hands working a balm over his freshly shaved jaw. At first glance, it might have looked like some type of marital peace, but one look at the bunched muscles in Dominic's back or my rigid movements and our awkwardness would be exposed.

I hated awkward silences, and was almost compelled to try and break it, even though I had absolutely nothing to say to him. The chance was stolen from me by the sound of a door—two, I realized—slamming open.



By the time Marcus appeared on my side and Raiden on Dominic's, I was pressed up against the glass door of the shower, knife in hand, with Dominic's body caging me in.

Protecting me.

"You two in there, *now!*" Marcus yelled, ushering us out of the bathroom and into Dominic's room so fast I almost tripped. Marcus had the type of confidence that was so integrated in his bones, his voice never wavered from a steady, even humorous, lit.

But he sounded nervous, unsure.

"What the hell is going on?" Dominic snapped the second Marcus slammed the closet door shut and placed a rope lock over the handle.

Raiden stood on guard at Dominic's door. "There's a breach."

Fear, quick and raging, stole my breath. Dominic's eyes flashed dangerously. "What?"

"Two guards on the lower wall were found knocked unconscious."

"Who?" The question was rough, urgent.

Raiden hesitated, inhaling deeply through his nose. "Ava and Lucan."

"Shit." Based on Dominic's reaction, I figured they were too good to be knocked out by just anyone.

Marcus piped up from behind me, voice still unsteady. "You two need to be barricaded in this room."

"Is that smart, putting us together?" Dominic asked before I could. If we both died...that wasn't a thought I wanted to entertain. The stakes were higher now. There was only one line sustaining the Underworld now, and if we both died without naming an heir, the very structure of the world would crumble.

Let alone the fact that someone broke in. And that it was probably my fault.

“It’s our best option,” Raiden explained. “We are short staffed and you both are very capable of defending yourselves.”

Dominic only latched onto one part of that explanation. “Where the fuck is everyone?”

“We are running on reduced staff,” Raiden repeated, his normally uncompromising shoulders hunched forward an inch.

Dominic breathed in and closed his eyes for a moment, chasing his fleeting composure. “You said that. Why?”

Raiden’s eyes landed on me for a fraction of a second. Unnoticeable to anyone who wasn’t looking for it. “There have been some hiring changes.”

“And no one thought to run that by me?” Dominic snapped.

Raiden’s shoulders straightened with steady authority. “They were low level, I had it handled.”

Dominic did not like that one bit. He didn’t move from where he stood in between me and the door, but his voice was so full of raw command, it was like he was across the room standing in Raiden’s face. “We are going to talk about this later.”

“Okay,” Raiden responded with a sharp dip of his chin.

I’d have to solve that before he got reamed for something that was not his fault.

“How long do we have to stay here?” I asked, already dreading the confinement.

“At least until the morning,” Marcus said. “We won’t come back until then.”

“*Fuck*” I cursed, my voice echoing deep and raspy. Dominic and I clearly had the same opinion on this little arrangement. Raiden was fighting a mischievous smirk, and I narrowed my eyes at him, hoping he caught the *Asshole* I was trying to communicate.

My skin felt itchy and hot with fear and dread of being stuck in this room without being able to help. The dam had

finally fissured and cracked, letting all the resentment and anger against me flood my home.

Threaten Dominic and I.

Maybe I should have listened to Max or Marcus or Thea when they begged me to retaliate against those who had quit or who spewed evil words at me.

Maybe it was the same person who'd poisoned my dress.

I shivered with the force of my fear, then shoved it down. I couldn't deal with this right now, not in front of Dominic.

I looked at Marcus, who shot me a look that towed the line between *I told you so* and *I have this handled* before walking over to Raiden. The locks they were putting on the doors could only be opened by them, but would still allow us to portal out if they didn't come back.

Which they would, Raiden promised, when he saw my mouth opening in protest. He also tacked on a serious warning to both of us—even though he spoke directly to me—about the stupidity of leaving the room before they addressed the situation.

I didn't argue, I did some stupid shit, but that was too far even for me.

They left with a nod to Dominic. I heard them secure the rope lock and their boots stomp away from the door, leaving me and Dominic locked together and alone.

“Well,” I said, throwing a rock through the glass wall of silence in the room. “I'm going to take a nap.”

I grabbed a blanket off the back of one of Dominic's chairs and moved towards the couch when he wrapped a hand around my arm. “What the fuck do you think you are doing?”

I looked up at him to find his eyes ablaze with wild anger.

“Um, napping?”

“You can sleep right now?” His jaw ticked and I had the sickening urge to press my hand to his skin to soothe the joint.

“It’s a breach,” I said, trying my mighty best to sound nonchalant. To hide the fear and the confession. “Some souls probably got overexcited.”

“And knocked two of my best guards unconscious?” Good question, one I was trying not to think too hard about.

I shrugged. With the wrong shoulder, I realized, when the movement caused Dominic’s hand to scrape against my skin. “Maybe they were drinking on the job.”

“How can you be so cavalier about this?” The question was deadly. Answered honestly, it would unravel everything I was trying too hard to hold together.

*Because I should have expected this. Because I spend most of my life in defensive mode. Because this is probably my fault.*

“Because it’s not that serious.”

Dominic scoffed, dramatically lifting his hand from my arm. His eyes were searching my face like it was a page in a book he was tearing through. “Do you have no care for your life?”

He had no idea how deep that question cut.

I flicked my hand and conjured a Shadowwalker to stand by the door. It was willowy, a little terrifying, and tall. Maybe a little more than normal. Pure death floating by the door and waiting for my silent command.

I looked at Dominic and shot him a look that said *are you happy?*

“If someone breaks down that door, you’ll see exactly how much I care about my life. Until then, I. Am. Napping.” I punctuated my last point by dropping onto his couch and throwing the blanket over me to fight the sudden chill in the room. The dress I was wearing was a thin cotton, held up by two straps and pulled together by a line of buttons down the front. Adorable, but nowhere near warm.

“I cannot believe you,” Dominic grumbled, turning his back to me.

“Speak louder if you want me to hear you,” I said from under the blanket.

He turned around, and if I thought I saw flames in his gaze before, it was a raging wildfire now. “I cannot believe you.”

“You know, you keep saying that.”

The fire was inches away from me now. “Well, it’s true.”

In a rare show of self-restraint, Dominic turned away from me again, and spent the next hour making as much noise as physically possible around his room. It was like he didn’t even want me to fall asleep.

Sharpening a sword—because he is the type of psychopath to keep the materials to do so in his bedroom—took him about ten minutes. He lit the fireplace, throwing wood around like it personally offended him. Then it sounded like he reorganized the tray of alcohol perched next to his stone fireplace. Next came the bookshelf, then some pacing, then back to the bookshelf, then some more pacing.

He stopped when he stood at the foot of the couch, wrapped a hand around both my ankles, and moved them out of the way so that he could sit down.

“Do you mind?” I asked putting my feet back up on the couch, this time with his thick thighs resting under my calves.

Dominic lifted a knee and kicked them off the couch again.

“I’m sorry, am I disturbing you?” he asked, glasses on and eyes focused on a book like he wasn’t disturbing my peace.

“Yes,” I said, placing my feet back and resting the urge to slam my heel into his crotch. I shimmied back under the blanket.

“Whatever. You’re the one with the stick up your ass.” My voice was muffled from the blanket and Dominic’s jaw did its ticking thing again.

“You were the one who put it there,” he responded coolly.

I lifted my chin out from under the blanket. I wanted my voice clear as I said, “You must really hate me.”

Dominic didn't look up from his book. "I do."

I knew that. Right. "For good reason."

"For good reason," he agreed, voice sounding hollow.

"Great." Glad we had that sorted.

†

We sat in silence as the sun fell the rest of the way to the horizon, the only movement from me, getting up to walk over to the window and watch the sunset. It was a fiery orange today, with streaks of brilliant pink weaving through it, before fading to a softer orange, like freshly bloomed tulips, as the sun finally dipped behind the bay outside Dominic's house. It left his bedroom in a soft, evening glow.

Our fighting would be a stark contrast to the candlelight. Burning rage against a mellow flame.

The only signal that our friends were alive on the other side of the door was a tray of food that passed through, relying on a show of power.

Dominic closed his book shut and walked over to the tray. He moved with the type of settled grace that only muscled strength could create. He walked over to the tray, bending into a crouch to pick it up, then brought it back to the table in front of the couch.

He lifted the metal covering, revealing what looked like a sandwich and some vegetables.

Interesting. But I stayed where I was by his balcony.

Dominic dug right in, devouring the sandwich like a crazed animal. He never ate the food I made him like this.

"Why aren't you eating?" He asked when he realized I hadn't moved.

"I'm not hungry." I was, but if his cook had made it, I didn't want to take my chances. I'd sit hungry.

"Liar," he said, twisting his mouth into a perfect smirk.

I narrowed my eyes on him. Either he'd picked up on the way I twisted my rings on my fingers when I was hungry or he was just being an ass. I'd bet on the latter.

I walked over to the couch and sat with my back to the arm and my legs towards him. "Mary looks like she can cook."

Dominic shook his head and said through a mouth full of food. "Mary wouldn't have made this."

I laughed, feeling the urge to free my hands in case he choked on that giant bite. "Oh, why?"

Dominic was looking at me weird, like I'd said or done something incredibly odd instead of asking a simple question. After a moment he said, "If there's a breach, everyone but the guards go on lock down. What you are looking at is a creation courtesy of Raiden."

"Oh. Okay," I said, and then reached for a sandwich.

"So *now* you're hungry," Dominic noted, his eyebrows raising.

"Yes."

He got an idea in that big head of his, I could see it in the way his eyes were bouncing in between me and the sandwich and he was forcibly pulling his mouth into a straight line.

I was getting ready to defend the action, but he just dug back into the sandwich and then started crunching on carrots.

Every snap made me want to flinch. It sounded like bones snapping. Too familiar for my comfort, but I shoved it down, along with the dry sandwich Raiden had thrown together.

†

It was close to midnight and Dominic was over half way done with a second book and had made unwavering progress on his plan to completely ignore my presence.

I wish I could do the same, when all I could do was sit there and try not to pay attention to the rise and fall of his muscled chest and his cologne climbing up my nose to burrow into my brain.

Like a little beetle. Or maybe one with wings. No, something smaller, like an ant.

I was losing my mind from boredom, clearly.

“What are you reading?” My voice broke through the silence.

Dominic didn’t so much as twitch. He didn’t look at me either. “A book.”

“I can see that,” I said, sitting up on the couch and pulling my knees to my chest. “What is the title of that book?”

“*Tempest Coming.*”

Okay, maybe he got a little bit of a break for ignoring me. That book was amazing.

“Hmm. It’s good. I liked the ending. Good plot twist, too.”

Dominic slammed the book shut so hard it could have transferred the ink onto a new page. He looked at me with his accusatory stare—the Dominic special it seemed. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“I was.” The words were meeker than I intended, breaking under Dominic’s annoyed scrutiny.

“Holy shit,” Dominic cursed under his breath.

“It is good though.”

“I know.”

Clearly making conversation with him was like pulling teeth. “I liked that author’s other book better.”

*Oh, so did he.* His eyes flashed and his head barely started moving in a nod before he clamped it down.

“Come on,” I said, lifting up to poke him in the arm. “If we are stuck in here, let me borrow one.”

Dominic’s eyes zeroed in on my finger. “Not a chance.”

I sighed and got up, stretching my arms over my head. Dominic made a pained sound. He really didn’t like me in his space. I rounded the couch and headed for his bookshelf. I’d



take one myself or I'd start doing destructive shit out of boredom.

"Don't fucking touch anything," Dominic warned as I got close.

"Calm down," I said, even though I fully intended to touch something. Many things. "Just trying to see if anything in here will give me a sneak peek into your personality. You know, the one I haven't seen."

Dominic was standing now. I had developed a keen ability to tell where he was in the room. "You've seen my personality."

"Nope," I shook my head then tilted it to read the spine of a series of books I didn't recognize. "Just glimpses, hidden behind a deep, deep hatred for me."

That point was met with silence. Confirming silence.

"I did see a little more than usual though, the night of Corrina's party."

Dominic made that pained sound again—it was a grunt mixed with a scoff. "Do not bring that night up."

"Why? Regret it?" I asked, still facing the bookshelf.

"No." That caught me off guard. And it sent an annoying little flutter through my belly.

"Hmm" was all I could manage in response. I moved toward the bookshelf again, and this time Dominic didn't so much as flinch. He couldn't have, when he was sitting with quivering intensity on the couch, his hands clenched into fists.

When my hand descended onto a book, his eyes narrowed, but he stayed silent and still. It wasn't until I made my way back to the couch, pulling my legs into my chest again, that Dominic tersely picked up his book and focused his attention to the pages.

His resignation could have been an olive branch, but I had the feeling he had let me take it just so he didn't have to put his hands on me again.

†

“Why are you so calm right now?” Dominic’s question came an hour later. Neither of us were making any move to go to sleep. That would involve discussion of a bed.

I forced myself to look at him sitting on the couch from where I sat in a high backed velvet chair. “Like I said, we can’t do anything until the morning.”

Dominic leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and folding his hands together. “You’re doing it again. Lying.”

I steeled my lips into a hard line. “No, I’m not.”

“That statement wasn’t a lie precisely, but you aren’t telling the full truth.”

Internally, I was gaping like a fish. Externally, I didn’t dare move a muscle.

“I’m getting good at reading you,” Dominic said and I felt it deep in my chest.

“Cute,” I said, jumping up to relieve the tension in my chest. I flipped him off and said, “Read this.”

Dominic chuckled, dropping his head. “That was low.”

“Yeah, well I’m not in the mood to deal with you.”

“You said that. Two weeks ago.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, and his eyes dropped to track the movement. Except now I wasn’t sure if he was just being observant or if he was looking at the way the motion lifted my breasts up. “Still not in the mood.”

It was Dominic’s turn to stand. And take a step towards me. “What happened that night?”

I knew the night in question, but was intent on acting like I didn’t. “I don’t—”

“Owe me an explanation, we’ve covered that,” he cut me off. He ran a hand through his hair, flexing his bicep as he squeezed the back of his neck.

“This is getting really fucking repetitive, Rose.” He was taking slow, measured steps towards me. I rounded the chair so that it stood between us, caging me in between it and the locked door to the bathroom.

I swallowed and Dominic’s eyes caught the motion. “Yeah, well this was your idea.”

“Doesn’t mean I liked it.” Another reminder this marriage was a sham.

“Will you ever leave me alone?”

“No.” He placed his hands on the back of the chair on either side of mine and a knee on the cushion, leaning towards me.

“Is that a threat?”

“I told you, it’s a promise.” He was looking at me like he couldn’t decide whether he wanted to kill me or fuck me. I knew which option I favored, and it was a knife to the back.

Our eyes locked, silently communicating what we both felt. What was on both of our minds locked in a room with so many surfaces at the ready.

Dominic let out a low growl at the blush I was sure was marring my cheekbones. I took a step back and he pushed off the chair, following me. “I will lock myself in your closet.”

Dominic moved to step towards me. “Don’t you dare.”

I walked back another step defensively, but kept my words offensive. “What are you gonna do, Dominic? Stop me? You’d have to put your hands on me to do that.”

Dominic looked at me skeptically, poking his tongue into his cheek. “I’m not the one who ran away. You did.”

Oh, fuck that. “Well, excuse me, if I didn’t think you’d want to touch me after Raiden brought up Pine.”

One more step, just a few until he had me pressed against the door. “You’re a little brat, aren’t you?”

I smiled, as cruel as I could manage. “So I’ve been told.”

“Whoever did is a dead man.” And then, “You’re relentless. Because even after the lies, after everything, you’ve still managed to weasel your way in here.” Dominic tapped his finger against his forehead. Once. Twice.

“Don’t sound so happy about it,” I snapped. He wasn’t the only one plagued with unwanted thoughts and dreams. Those *fucking* dreams.

“I’m not happy about it!” He yelled back. “It’s frustrating. Maddening. Irritating.”

I could feel the static from the door inches from my back. “I thought I told you I wasn’t impressed by a good vocabulary.”

“And I thought I told you that I’d figure out what did *impress* you.” We both knew that word was covering something deeper, stronger.

The static was everywhere now and Dominic was two strides away. I was losing a battle with nonchalance. “Any luck?”

“Yep,” he said, a stride away, now. “Turns out *I* do.”

I gasped, the truth of the statement aside. “You are so full of yourself.”

“But am I lying?”

I stayed silent, slamming my lips together. He knew the answer. We both knew.

“Am I lying?” The words were carefully enunciated, goading me.

“No,” I admitted, my voice barely above a whisper. “And I fucking hate you for it.”

Dominic’s eyes lit with victory. “Good.”

I had not two seconds to process the word before he backed me up into the bathroom door and kissed me with such unrestrained, burning desire I was sure the wood would catch on fire.

## Chapter 18

### Rose

No dream, not even the memory of the first time he kissed me, could have prepared me for this. Dominic had my face caged in between his hands, titling my chin up to press my lips further into his own.

I snaked my hands under his arms and over his shoulders to twist around his neck, pulling closer. It allowed him to push me harder into the door, lifting me up on my toes and pressing our bodies flush together.

He was solid, hard everywhere and it steadied me as his tongue stole my sanity and my balance. I had a desperate, pounding urge to move closer, as close as I could physically go, to touch every part of my body to his. He'd envelop me, his strong arms and legs wrapping around my own.

The thought sent a thrill through me, and I lifted a leg to twist around his hips, my heel digging into his ass. Dominic's groan matched my own as the movement pressed the seam of his pants right up against my core, sending a lightning bolt right up my center.

He pumped his hips up once, twice, pushing out waves of pleasure through me and ripping a moan from my throat. I was moving frantically now, dragging my hands down his neck and chest to catch the lapels of his jacket and push it off his toned shoulders.

The jacket dropped to the floor with a thud, exposing a thin black t-shirt that did nothing to hide the heat radiating off him. His skin was so hot it'd burn me, but I didn't care. I'd invite it if it meant he'd keep running his hands down my sides to settle on my lower back. He broke the kiss to drop his lips to

my throat, my head rolling to the side and giving him access to the spot where my shoulder connected to my neck. The second his mouth touched that sensitive spot, my hips bucked off the door to meet his hard length.

I needed him lower. I needed him everywhere.

“Dominic,” I begged, dragging up the hem of his t-shirt. I almost fainted when the back of my hand brushed the trail of hair dusting across his lower stomach. I wanted to see where that line ended, to catch a glimpse of the muscles I felt under my hands.

“Right here, Rose,” Dominic responded, the words scraping roughly against my collarbone. He paused for only a second, to lift a hand over to the back of his shirt and pull it over his head.

My mouth watered at what it exposed. His chest was a solid wall, covered with a light, groomed layer of hair and his stomach was stacked with muscles so defined they looked sharp. The trail of hair on his lower stomach dipped into his slacks. Slacks that hung low on his hips, revealing the band of his black boxers.

I dragged my gaze back up his chest to meet his eyes. I found his gaze triumphant. He knew I liked what I saw, and he'd never let me forget it.

“Good to know,” he said, confirming he knew exactly what was running through my head, before catching me with another blazing kiss. The feel of his bare chest under my hands was addicting, the feel of his hands on my bare thighs intoxicating.

Dominic slid his hand up the leg I had wrapped around his waist, squeezing my ass in his broad palm. I shivered, and a spike of heat went straight to my core.

I was throbbing, my body begging him to move closer, to feel just how much I wanted him. His hand moved up, brushing against the lace band of my panties, pushing another pained groan from his throat.

“No one is coming in to interrupt us,” Dominic said, punctuating his words with a slow, dirty drag of his tongue against my lips. “You are the only person who can stop this.”

An uninterrupted night with Dominic. I couldn't think of anything I wanted more in that moment. And I hated it.

“Don't,” I gasped, and Dominic immediately lightened his grip on my waist and ass.

*No.* The word was a guttural reaction to his absence.

I shook my head, brushing my lips softly against his. “Stop. I meant don't stop.”

Dominic pulled away just a fraction of an inch, his brown eyes on fire with desire. His lust felt good, made me feel beautiful and so, *so* turned on.

“*Good,*” Dominic claimed, dropping his forehead to mine for a second before tilting his chin down to kiss me again. His restraint was gone, his movements rough.

He dragged his hand from my ass up and over the crook of my thigh and hip. The thin lace of my panties gave way as he tucked his fingers under the band and slipped downwards.

The pad of his finger brushed over my clit and I bucked forward, pushing him down to my entrance to feel how ready I was for him.

Dominic dropped his head to my shoulder and shuddered. “You're soaked, sweetheart.”

I nodded my head, and I could feel him smiling against my skin. I was beyond words right now. Couldn't even address the old nickname, uttered with a renewed reverence that would change my reaction to the word forever. I could only let out a broken moan as he slowly worked two fingers inside of me, hooking one to hit a spot that made me throw my head back against the door.

The whimper I let out as he moved his thumb to work my clit was helpless. I was entirely at his mercy, could be in no other place as he moved his skilled fingers in just the right rhythm. Over and over and over again.

“If you keep making those noises, I’m going to get distracted,” Dominic said, right as I made another one of those breathless sounds. I couldn’t help it, not when my chest all the way down to where he was inside of me was stretching taut, lighting ablaze with pleasure.

I grabbed the back of his thick neck and gripped onto his hair, begging for purchase anywhere I could find it. I was so close to the edge my face felt hot. When he pressed down on my clit and dragged his hooked finger a little further forward, I detonated, my voice breaking on a groan as I came. I had to be breaking skin, I was digging my nails into his neck so hard, but I couldn’t find the mind to care.

Not when pleasure was radiating out from my body in tidal waves. My chest was heaving, trying to grab onto a spare breath.

“I...” I trailed off. Words could come later.

Dominic lifted his head from my neck and pulled his fingers out of me. He lifted them between us, and I braced myself against the door. If he was going to do what I thought he was, I was going to pass out.

Sure as the day was long, Dominic placed his fingers in his mouth and sucked, releasing a pleased grumble that poured more gasoline on my still fiery desire.

“Damnit, now you’ve made me an addict,” Dominic scolded, eyes glazed over with pleasure.

Despite the sharp bite to his words, the thought of his head between my legs sent another flush of heat to my core. And to my cheeks, for that matter. My face felt like it was on fire.

This was undiluted passion. I didn’t care if it was rooted in hate, it was still the most raw emotion that anyone had channeled at me in my entire life.

My hands were braced on his shoulders, and I dropped my gaze, clocking how his arousal pressed against his pants. Dropping my forehead to his chest, I dragged my hand down and palmed his erection, eliciting a groan from Dominic.

“Bed. Now,” he said, more of a rasp than intelligible words.



I nodded my head and Dominic hauled me up and carried me to the bed, pressing my back into his sinfully soft sheets.

Dominic paused at the edge of the bed and I lifted up on my elbows to watch as he kicked off his boots and slowly removed his pants, leaving him in just black boxers. He placed his large hands by my feet and crawled up on the bed, kneeling in between my legs and lifting them so that they rested on his hips. He sat back on his haunches and yanked me forward, dragging my dress up around my waist.

I reached towards the hem to rip it off me, but Dominic grabbed my wrists. “Not so fast. This dress has been torturing me all night. It’s my turn to make you hurt.”

I could do nothing but lay on my back and pant as he leaned forward and unbuttoned my dress meticulously, stopping only to swallow so hard it looked like it hurt when he caught a glimpse of the lacy black bra covering my chest.

“*Rose*,” he rasped with the same force as a curse to my name as his fingers grazed my belly button. His voice made my back arch off the mattress, praying for the relief of his hands.

“Hurry,” I cried. He was only at my lower stomach and the dress hit my knees.

“Patience.”

Dominic took his time with the rest, testing just how far that patience went, and by the time he was done I was a squirming mess beneath him. He peeled the dress off slowly, then lifted me up with a hand on the middle of my back to remove it completely.

Then, in a move so swift and skilled it pricked my skin with tiny dots of jealousy from the thought of how he learned that so well, Dominic snapped the clasp of my bra open and pulled it off my arms. The second he got a glimpse of my bare chest, he dove down, taking my nipple into his mouth and sucking hard.

“*Fuck*,” I cursed, my hands finding his hair.

I pulled at his shoulders, begging him for his mouth against mine. Dominic obliged with a contented moan, sliding his tongue against mine.

Patience might have been a virtue of his, but it was not one of mine. I shoved a hand in between us, diving into his boxers to grip his length in my hand. He was thick and long and gloriously hard. Dominic pumped into my hand twice before he reached down to rip off his boxers, taking my thong with him while he was at it.

We stared at each other, naked and breathless for a moment. That was all either of us could stand before we crashed back together and I threw my legs around his hips.

Dominic dragged his cock up my center, sliding easily through the slick arousal gathered there. He moved his mouth to my ear, and whispered, "Ready?"

I nodded and muttered out an affirmative curse, but he just dragged the tip of his cock over my entrance again.

"This isn't going to be slow and sweet, Rose," Dominic rasped against the shell of my ear and sending a lightning bolt down my spine. "That's not what we are. What we do."

Another torturous glide. I was hurting, so aroused it was painful.

"We fight like we hate each other, and we are going to fuck like it too."

If I had the mind to be embarrassed right now, I would have blushed to my hairline at the volume of the moan that statement ripped from my throat. I had certain tastes, but with him, it felt ten times as thrilling.

Dominic gripped my face in his hand and roughly pulled me to look him in the eye. I had to be staring at him in anticipation because he groaned and said, "Do *not* look at me like that excited you."

"It did," I said weakly, all my energy channeled into flexing my hips closer and closer to his length.

Dominic closed his eyes as if in pain. I certainly was. “Rose, I swear to...”

“Please,” I begged, pulling him closer with my hands on his back. “Like you hate me.”

He gave me one last moment of reprieve before lining up and slamming into me, all the way to the hilt.

I gasped so loud it was practically a scream and Dominic groaned from deep in his throat. He felt too good, stretching me just to the point of pleasure and pain. He didn’t move, not even as I moved my hips further towards him, silently begging him to do so.

“A second, Rose,” Dominic panted, pushing contented groans into my ear. So raspy it sent heat flooding my chest. “I need a second or this is going to be over far too quickly.”

“You promised me it would hurt,” I pleaded.

Dominic looked at me in disbelief, but it faded as he absorbed the challenge. He pulled out to the tip slowly, lighting me on fire with each small movement. Right as he was at the very end, with one small section keeping us joined, Dominic thrust back in so hard I saw stars.

He set a torturous pace, pushing into me with a frenzied desire that the burning in my chest matched in intensity.

“*Fuck*, you feel too good,” Dominic groaned against my ear, and I could barely hear him over the sound of my own moans.

“Was that a compliment?” I breathed, shocked I could form a coherent sentence

“No,” Dominic said, his lips moving down so he could lick up the side of my neck. “It’s fucking annoying.”

There was nothing to do but nod my head in agreement, there were no words for the hot pulses Dominic’s thrusts were sending through my body. I was a wildfire, the blaze building and taking out homes and trees the louder Dominic’s groans in my ear grew.

My hands were raking down his back, my long nails inflicting damage on his smooth skin, digging into the muscles underneath. Dominic snaked a hand under my hips and lifted with ridiculous ease, and on his next plunge into my body, I screamed.

The spot he hit was so right, so intense I blacked out for a second and then it was game over. He pounded into me through my orgasm, the pulsing in my body setting him on a faster pace. Dominic went over the edge seconds later, his head dropping to my shoulder and his teeth digging into my skin.

He caught himself on his arms before he could fall on top of me and I almost wished he had let himself, to give me his full weight.

Instead, he stayed hovered above me, both of us heaving in the aftermath of the apocalypse.

“This must be punishment,” Dominic breathed, stealing the thoughts from my mind. We couldn’t live like this, knowing this was how it was between us. Knowing that the people we’d done this with and actually *liked* didn’t compare in the slightest.

But if it was just this night, locked in and sheltered from my sins and the full force of his resentment, then I’d take it. Especially when the longer strands of his hair were falling into his face in a way that made my heart clench. He had no right to look that good. I reached up on instinct, moving a strand out of the way and dragging my nails through his hair.

I felt him harden inside me almost instantly, his stamina as strong as the power that flowed through his veins. I flexed my hips towards him and the movement shot a bolt of heat up my center.

Dominic must have felt it too, because he caught my lips in a blazing kiss and dragged me with him back into oblivion.

## Chapter 19

### **Dominic**

She had tattoos. Five of them.

I counted them all, traced them with my finger in the hours we spent in bed, locked in and safe from the reality of who we were.

They were all on her back, and if my eyes weren't glazed over from pleasure, I would have gotten a good view of them during our third round as I pounded into her from behind.

It was only now, as she laid on her stomach, head perched on her hands and turned towards me, that I could see them. The back of her neck, shoulder, spine, ribs, hip. They were placed so that no one would see them unless she wanted them too. I hadn't even seen them the night of Corrina's party, with her dress dipped low to expose her back.

No one at that party saw them, most probably didn't even know.

But I did. Now, I did. And if she wore that dress again, or any other one for that matter, I would know what was hidden behind her long silky hair or under fabric.

I'd known at least one existed since Lia slipped at the Council meeting, but seeing them was different. I knew what they looked like.

I knew.

It was triumph, the kind of victory that comes with taking that first real step towards your goal.

Know her, use that knowledge.

It was a simple set of goals, and I was now a thousand steps in.

My body was exhausted, sated beyond belief. My mind, however, was running at light speed. I was in it now. The fact that nothing, no one, had ever felt as good as Rose did, and the sinking feeling that wasn't going to change, was simply collateral.

“I still hate you, you ass,” Rose reminded me, her voice calm in a way I'd never heard it, as her eyes drifted closed and she fell asleep in my bed.

*Ass. First use: Summer Solstice party. Three years ago.*

“I hate you, too,” I agreed, drifting off with Rose's shampoo filling my nose and her body warming my side.

## Chapter 20

### Rose

The sound of banging and screaming woke me up from a dreamless, deep sleep. I was sore, but in the best way possible, and I stretched my hands above my head, pressing against the headboard before I registered just how urgent the banging was.

Dominic seemed to notice it at the same moment as a voice came through the door.

“Two seconds, or I’m breaking this thing down!” That yell definitely belonged to Marcus. And I was naked. We both were.

Dominic and I looked at each other, giving me just a moment to stare at his delicious bed head and sleepy brown eyes before shooting out of bed.

The room was a disaster. His clothes were everywhere, I had no idea where my dress was, and god knew where my underwear had disappeared to.

Dominic managed to throw on his boxers and chucked a shirt at me, hitting me square in the back of the head. I yanked it over, the hem falling indecently short. It was bigger than anything I owned, but I was still tall, and I was showing way too much leg.

I looked up to find Dominic staring at me with pure hatred in his eyes.

Or at least, I thought it was, but then I blinked and I realized the expression was the most raw, carnal look of desire I’d ever seen. It looked like he was being held back by invisible restraints, his body tilted towards mine, but something stopped him.

“That’s yours, now.” His voice, his *morning* voice, sent a shiver from my head down to my toes.

This was so beyond fucked. Now it was going to be harder to lie to him. Especially when I’d admit to just about anything when he had his hand wrapped lightly around my throat and had a hand between my legs.

I. Hated. Him. I reminded myself. There was absolutely no indication he felt guilty about the way he had treated me.

*Wasn’t it justified?* The thought crept into my brain, running across it like a scurrying bug. It was doubt, in its purest form, and I shoved it away as quickly as I could. Dominic didn’t fit in my life, end of.

My spiral was cut off by the sound of a door breaking off its hinges.

Marcus and Raiden came bursting in like they were expecting to find us tied up with knives pressed to our throats.

Instead, they found a rumpled bed, clothes all over the floor, and Dominic and I standing five feet apart, staring at each other, with nothing more than a pair of boxers and a shirt between us.

My face immediately flushed in embarrassment.

Raiden and Marcus stopped short, both standing equally tense as they realized what they just walked in on.

“Well,” Marcus said, always first to diffuse a situation, “Glad you two didn’t kill each other.”

*You’re killing me*, I’d cried last night, head thrown back against a pillow with Dominic’s face between my legs.

My face had to be the color of a pomegranate now.

Dominic stepped in front of me, even though Raiden had his eyes trained to the ceiling and eyebrows raised just as high, and Marcus was looking at Dominic instead of me.

“Both of you, *get out*. We will be downstairs in a minute.”

“A real minute, Dominic.” Raiden sounded like a cat had its claws embedded in his throat, he was so uncomfortable.



They left, wisely fleeing, with the locks in hand. My room was now open and welcoming, but I stayed where I was, scared to move a muscle.

“Get dressed.” Dominic’s voice was hard, unwavering.

“Okay.”

And that was it, it seemed. No discussion, no obvious regret, but also no appreciation, no *let’s do that again, how about now?*

I fled back into my room, slamming the door behind me harder than I’d intended. Every curse and self-inflicted insult in the book was rattling through my brain but there was one that rang louder than the others—stupid.

I was stupid for letting his magnetism get to me. But, damn, was it strong. Dominic had this way of pulling me in, every sense attuned to him. I’d never felt this kind of attraction to anyone. But it was just hatred, the passion of that emotion breaking through to drive me up a wall insane.

Faster than I had ever, I washed my face and threw on a dress, itching to get Dominic’s t-shirt off. I couldn’t think with his damned cologne crawling up my nose and stealing all rational thought.

I ran back through the bathroom before I could doubt the action, barreling into Dominic’s room to find him staring at the floor in front of his own front door.

He twisted to look at me, noticing my presence before I had a chance to speak. He looked tired, and it sent my chest tightening. I *was* tired, physically, but the bags under my eyes had softened. Dominic looked even more exhausted.

But he said nothing, just opened the door and motioned for me to exit in front of him. “After you.”

I walked over and brushed past him, his scent playing its age old tricks and making me delusional enough to imagine the sound of a deep inhale, a sniff even, out of Dominic. “Thank you.”

He trailed me all the way down to the kitchen, where I knew we'd find Raiden and Marcus waiting. I had half the mind to break the tension and ask how quickly it would take one of them—I had my money on Marcus—to make a quip about one of us needing caffeine after a rough night. Instead, I kept my mouth shut and reveled in the tension. It served as a much needed reminder of what we were to each other.

Married, but only in ceremony.

Even if we *had* consummated it. Three times. Four if you counted the way his fingers had—

And now I was thinking about Dominic and sex again. Not. Good.

No. No. No. The words were in time with my steps all the way to the kitchen.

Dominic reached around me to grab the door as we approached, guiding me in with the ghost of a hand over my lower back.

Either he was scared to touch me or was being painfully and unnaturally respectful.

When we stepped through the door, around ten minutes after Raiden's one minute warning, Raiden leveled us with a deadly serious look and ordered, "Sit."

I took the seat Dominic had pulled out for me and asked "What's going on?" while he walked over to the kitchen.

He didn't bother with fresh coffee this morning, just pulled out the cold leftovers stored in the fridge. I normally stayed away from coffee, my nerves already wired a bit too high for it, but I needed it this morning.

Not thirty seconds later and without an inkling of a word out of my mouth, a creamy iced coffee that smelled sweet like hazelnuts appeared in front of me, wrapped in Dominic's strong hand.

He dropped into the seat next to me and I turned to thank him, reaching toward him. Shaking out of my trance, I realized I was leaning in for a hug, and jerked my body back.

Even if the thought of him wrapping his strong arms around me, of snaking mine around his waist and pressing my forehead into the crook of his neck felt...necessary, it was wrong.

Wrong and dangerous.

Max caught the movement with their ever-perceptive gaze, but ascribed the wrong meaning to it.

“It will be okay. We have it under control.” Max’s voice was calming, *they* were calming. They had such a steady way about going through the world, identifying problems and solving them with a settled efficiency. It was something I admired, and something I needed to emulate.

Raiden took a deep breath, gathering visible strength before speaking. “So, five humans stormed the gates. Four were taken out by the Styx but the fifth made it.”

“Fuck,” Dominic cursed, his hand cracking the wood on the back of my chair.

Marcus jumped in next. “We caught him, but he isn’t talking.”

“Were they armed?” Dominic asked.

“Yes,” Marcus responded.

“Trained?”

“Probably.”

Dominic grunted a curse. “Do we know who they were?”

Raiden nodded slowly, twisting his watch around his wrist. Belen had gotten him that watch and he tended to touch it when he needed to ground himself. “His name is Vincent. Max got a pretty good shot to the face so he was mumbling but said something about his cousin.”

I furrowed my brows together. “Who is his cousin?”

“I don’t know, some kid,” Raiden said, lifting a shoulder. “Apparently tried to pull an Orpheus and didn’t succeed.”

“Shocker,” Marcus said through a chuckle.

I had no such predilection for humor. It was the kid, that young man's cousin, and *I* had been the one to prevent his escape. Which meant I was officially the one responsible for the injury to our guards and the stressful night that was visibly plaguing my friends.

I opened my mouth in shock, unsure what was even going to come out, but Marcus beat me to speak. "The only person to blame is the idiot who thought to try something no one has ever accomplished."

I dropped my head and shook it, my hair hiding my face. "Marcus..."

He cut me off, the confidence strong in his voice, offering the same advice he'd told me year after year. "Definition of insanity, Rose."

There was a splintered groan from behind me as Dominic gripped the back of my chair hard enough to warp the wood. He clearly didn't like to be left out of any conversation.

Marcus continued, speaking to the room this time. "The group had an accomplice. They had sage and gold in their pockets so they clearly knew what they were doing."

"We find him first." Dominic said, authority thick in his voice.

"That's the one piece of good news," Max responded. "We caught him waiting by the Athenian gates. On the Upperworld side, but we dragged him back down here."

I couldn't bring myself to look fully at Dominic, not when I was still convinced this was my fault. But I could see him nodding out of my peripheral vision. "So you have him?"

"In the dungeons," Raiden confirmed.

Dominic was halfway out of his chair with simmering rage. "Let's go then. I want answers from that motherfucker."

"That's the goal," Marcus said, stopping my rise from my chair to stand next to Dominic. "But there's something we need to discuss first."

“We’ve done enough talking,” Dominic snapped back, crossing his corded arms over his chest. I shoved down the little flicker that lit through my chest at seeing the material of his t-shirt stretch across his biceps. “I’m talking to him. *Now.*”

Raiden rose quickly, his strong brow darkening his already serious expression. “*You* are not talking to him.”

Dominic scoffed in his face.

Raiden turned his stare to me and said, “He’ll only talk to Rose.”

No. *No.* This was not happening.

Dread spread through my chest. There was only one person who would know to arm trespassers with herbs and money for the passage.

“It’s Odell,” Marcus said, confirming my fears.

I felt the blood drain out of my face. This would reveal too much, flay my sins out to Dominic and leave me exposed for him to feast like a vulture.

I tried to regain my composure, grappling for that armor of false confidence I wore when I was trying to hide tender spots.

“We...” I cleared my throat and started again. “We should go now, then.”

My limbs felt overly shaky, a sharp contrast to the sated, relaxed state they were in not twenty minutes ago. I got up quickly, almost tripping over my chair as I moved too quickly after Max and out the door.

If I took even a second too long to think about this, I’d back out or break down and curl into a ball.

As we walked, I could feel Dominic at my back. Some latent instinct made me think I should be scared. I was pretty sure he was still the predator and I was the prey.

The feeling of being watched, hunted by him was only more intense after last night. And as we descended into the tunnels below the house, the hallways transitioning from the rich brown scaffolding and intricate wallpaper to a cold stone,

Dominic stayed silent, but I wasn't given any solace from the awareness of his presence.

We were flanked by our guards and friends, Max leading with Marcus and Raiden standing on either side of us at the back. I knew I was physically safe, but I was starting to shake with fear.

Right as we reached the thick iron door to the dungeons, Dominic wrapped a hand around my upper arm, pulling me back into his chest.

The first jolt of contact sent a placating comfort spreading through me, but it was quickly replaced by a tense defensiveness when he bent his head to my ear and said, "Hold on."

Marcus and Raiden walked to the door, giving us a moment of privacy. I looked up to find Dominic's brown eyes penetrating, observant, as they took in my expression. His other hand drifted up to my back, and my shaking subsided some more.

"You're terrified," Dominic noted, sounding more like a curse than a statement.

"I'm fine," I tried to say, but my voice broke off at the end.

Dominic's jaw clicked. "You're not going in there. We'll make him talk."

I shook my head and dropped my gaze to my feet. "He won't."

"Tell me who he is." It was a hard command, accompanied by a squeeze of his hands on my arms.

I opened my mouth to tell him, but a tidal wave of fear was barreling towards me.

"Rose," Dominic said, almost imperceptibly softer. "Who is he?"

I breathed through my nose once, twice. "My father's old Head Guard."

"What does he want with you?" He asked carefully.

Too carefully.

My head snapped up. And then it made sense. I often forgot that there were rumors I'd killed my father too. The scandal was wrapped up with Pine. We were openly close, the picture of a loving brother and sister.

But my father fading into death not a week after Pine died was just too much of a happy coincidence to not be my fault too. So, *of course*, his former guard would want revenge. *Of course*, I should be scared of him.

I felt a punch to the gut, the force of this endless cycle of blame and guilt pulling my chest tight.

“Revenge would be appropriate, don't you think?” I snapped, markedly more tense than I'd been. The way Dominic's tongue licked over his teeth made it clear that he knew he struck a nerve.

I stepped out of his hold, turning towards the door.

“Open it.”

No one moved.

“Max, open the door.” I sounded bitter, but I was about to get beat down in front of my friends and my husband, so...

Max reluctantly reached for the door and shot me a look that was openly empathetic. They knew what was about to happen, and made it obvious they were saddened by it on my behalf. I appreciated it, but it was too telling. Dominic would

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“Rose.”

Catch on. He *did* catch on, based on the way he said my name.

I ignored it and took a step forward through the door after Raiden. Odell, my father's former guard and man with a capacity for evil that never failed to surprise me, was crunched in the corner. His weathered body was still bronze from exposure in the Grecian sun, but now looked overexposed and crackly rather than healthy.

His hair still carried a whisper of the dark brown it was when I was a child, but was now overtaken by a mousy, ashy rendition of what it once was.

Odell's head lifted at the arrival of bodies in the room, initially void of emotion at seeing Max again. But the second I stepped under the dingy light hanging from the ceiling, his mouth curled into the cruel smile of a hyena coming across an abandoned carcass.

“Hello, my dear.”



## Chapter 21

### Dominic

I had to stand and watch in abject horror as Rose shivered violently at Odell's voice and the endearment he slung her way. Some primal, insane part of my brain was still in control, and Rose's reaction to him, her obvious fear made my stomach clench in agony.

The wrong fucking reaction. This was somebody who clearly knew things about Rose, who had a vendetta that matched my own.

If this was her father's former guard, then I was sure he'd have a thing or two to say about the convenient timing of her father's death not a week after her brother's.

I should be waxing poetry about the opportunity to conspire with him, brimming with joy that I found someone who could aid me in my mission for revenge.

But no.

No, while my mind was screaming at me to view this as a win, my body was constricted with rage, building with every passing moment that I had to stand there and let this fucker terrify my wife.

"Odell," Rose said, clasping her delicate hands in front of her form. Her beautiful knuckles were turning white from strain.

"It's been too long, Rosemary." I changed my mind. *My dear* was preferable to hearing her name coming through his yellowing teeth.

I had to lean against the wall to try to recenter myself. It was a bloody battle between instinct and logic.

“What do you want?” Rose asked, all business. I realized she did that. Diverted to action plans when she was nervous or scared or backed into a corner.

*See, I’m still on track. Still learning her.*

Odell didn’t answer her, just continued with his ramblings in that grating voice of his. “I haven’t seen you since you were, what? Eighteen?”

Rose barely nodded, the motion looking painful. She’d get a kink in her neck if she tensed any tighter. Would need someone to massage it out.

Odell smiled cruelly again, regaining my attention. It was the same grin he greeted Rose with. “I didn’t think you could get more beautiful, but time has been kind to you.”

“Enough,” I snapped, shoving off the wall to stand behind Rose before I could stop myself. “Answer her question or you’ll lose your opportunity to speak to her.”

Odell assessed me with a cold gaze, one reminiscent of his time as a guard before returning his withered blue eyes to Rose. “You got yourself a guard dog, then?”

“I got myself a husband,” Rose returned with a lightning fast retort. “One who won’t hesitate to force you to speak.”

*Husband. New.*

Hopefully used often. Multiple times a day even.

Odell sat forward slightly, bringing his arms around his raised knees. “Ah yes, I have no doubt that he will. I saw what he did to his uncle. Seems his flavor of revenge is rather violent when it comes to slain loved ones.”

Oh, this was one slimy motherfucker. His thinly veiled comparison of Rose and my uncle was not lost on me. Nor was it lost on Rose, who was growing closer to fragile ceramic with every passing second.

“Answer my question and that *flavor* won’t be turned to you,” Rose said.

Odell wasn’t deterred. “An interesting choice. I must ask, was it a love match?”

One more shot at evading Rose and I was slamming his face into the floor.

“None of your fucking business,” I shot at him, a little too close to defensively.

“Ah,” Odell said, “Of course, an arrangement, then.”

“Answer. Her. Question.” I was already frustrated that he was evading Rose, but I didn’t need him poking holes in my paper thin argument for proposing this marriage. For all I knew, he had an in with the Fates and could bring this whole plan crashing down just by pulling up our Fate lines and showing them branching apart.

I really needed to pay them a visit. I hadn’t in years. Not when they let my uncle cut my parents’ threads that early in life.

“I’m here because your actual guard dogs caught me,” Odell explained, pointing fingers at Raiden, mainly, who just looked bored.

The low growl Rose released shocked me to my core. It was a genuine show of protectiveness for my friend. I would be stupid to believe her friendship with Raiden was anything but pure after that reaction.

Rose stepped forward. I stayed where I was. Following her like a lost puppy would only pull Odell’s stupid grin tighter. “So you admit to being near the gates, then?”

“Can’t deny it,” Odell said, noncommittal.

“*Why* were you near the gates?”

“Your little arrangement is nothing but a bandage.”

Rose stiffened.

Odell noticed. And chuckled. “Oh, my dear. Did you really think that marrying him would absolve you of your sins?”

“It wasn’t about *my* sins,” Rose said. I fought a cringe. This whole marriage started for precisely that reason. “Better to combine our houses than destroy another line. A powerful one at that.”

“Another whimsical choice made by the gods without any regard for their human patrons,” Odell responded lazily. Everyone was silent for a moment, waiting for him to continue.

He didn’t. And I already had enough of his bullshit.

I stepped toward the bars that separated his cell and dropped into a crouch. I fought a sick chuckle at the realization this man was much smaller up close. “You assisted a group of what—mercenaries? Rebels? To storm the gates, assault two of our guards, and try to break into our house. *Then*, you force my wife down here under the promise to speak. So, speak. In full, detailed sentences. Or I’ll remove your ability to do so.”

Odell swallowed and sat up a little straighter, the threat hitting true.

“The humans, myself included, are tired of being thrown around by the impulses of the gods. Funeral rites are the oldest, closest held traditions in this world. And you two threw that all off balance with a shotgun wedding that no one could plan for.”

“You know that’s bullshit, Odell,” Rose defended. I stood and backed toward the wall, letting her take the reins. “The funeral rites are the exact same regardless of which house you support.”

“And yet I’ll find myself praying to *Lady Pluto* when I pass into the Underworld.”

Rose crossed her arms and puffed air out through her nose. “That’s nothing but petty semantics. Would you rather the house disappear altogether?”

“No, I would have rather you killed *him*.” Odell lifted his hand and his chained wrist and pointed at me. I knew Rose’s father would have rather croaked than let us marry. He was the one who called off our childhood arrangement in the first place. Good thing his soul floated in a distant corner of the Underworld.

“And what purpose would that have served?” Rose questioned and even though I was at her back, I could picture her perfect eyebrow lifting in doubt.

“Not letting another Greek line die!” Odell spit out. “Having Jupiter reign is bad enough.”

*Fucker.*

Rose took another step closer to him and away from me. “Adrian has just as much Zeus in him as Jupiter.”

“And yet the Zeus name hasn’t been used for anything other than a curse in close to three decades.”

“Need I remind you that Poseidon still rules the seas?”

“Thank the Fates for that,” Odell said. “Having Hades rule would balance it out. Prevent the Roman scum from taking over.”

I’d have figured he was a loyalist to the Greek lines, but his disgust was more potent than I’d imagined.

“You’re delusional,” Rose said. I agreed.

Odell narrowed his eyes. “And you’ve gone soft.”

“Excuse me?” Rose asked just as my back shot off the wall. He didn’t get to sling insults at her from inside a cell. Rose flattened her hand out behind her back, silently asking me to not approach further.

I listened just to see what he would say for himself.

“You are supposed to be your father’s daughter. Strong. Willing to do what it takes to retain your power.”

Rose scoffed. “You say that like it’s an admirable trait.” “It *is*. Instead you throw it all away for a pretty face and a ring,” Odell mocked, his head tilting towards Rose’s left hand. Her bare left hand. “Or wait...just the pretty face it seems.”

I was planting my House ring on her finger the second we got out of here.

“I didn’t have much of a choice, Odell,” Rose said, and I couldn’t stop the guilt that formed at her defense of the lie I’d

spun.

“Tsk tsk, Rosemary.” I hated it when he said her name. “There’s always a choice. You’ve made it twice before, what’s another one?”

The only sound in the room was Rose’s shaky inhale.

Odell snorted and I clenched my fists. “See? Soft.”

“Be that as it may,” Rose said, sending a flash of anger through me that she just accepted that statement. She *was* soft, subdued, but strong. Not with the derogatory tone Odell used. “You’ve given us nothing to work with. We have a sole survivor of your pathetic little attempt at a heist and you are going to give us names, motives, accomplices, *everything*.”

“What are you going to give me in return?”

“The chance to see the sun again,” I spit.

Odell didn’t so much as spare me a glance. I looked to our guards, each of which seemed a hair’s breadth away from snapping. Max was quite rage, while Marcus and Raiden were squealing furnaces.

Odell kept his focus on Rose and said, “I’ve cultivated a bit of a reputation as the person to speak to regarding the Underworld.”

“What an entrepreneur,” Rose returned quickly. My lips turned up at the corners before I could help it, grinning like a proud fool. “Well, I had to make a living somehow after you exiled me, my dear.”

“Odell,” Rose warned.

Odell huffed as if to say *Fine*. “A group of young men recently lost a family member. Tragic story, really. He lost his fiancée in a car crash. Drunk driver. He was brave, that one. Tried to save her from Charon’s grasp. Poor boy didn’t make it and his family thought sending a group might be able to bring them both back.”

Rose’s back was tense, but her voice level. “How successful that was.”

“They put forth a valiant effort,” Odell said. “Tried to be smart about it.”

“And you helped them because?” Rose asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing personal, my dear,” Odell assured, like this was a simple favor instead of an act of treason. “They simply provided the right price.”

“Anyone else plan on trying to save them?” If this was going to snowball, we’d have to squash this before it escalated any further and put Rose in harm’s way again.

Odell shook his head. “I believe this attempt was the result of too much money and too much youthful courage. I imagine the family will mourn and move on.”

“If they are as wealthy as you say, this won’t go away quietly,” Rose said, voicing my own concern.

“Ah, yes. They may speak about it.”

That was frustratingly vague.

“And?” Rose prompted.

“It may inform what they already think.”

Another evasion. Rose took another step out of my reach, her frustration apparent in the way she moved. “That would be...”

“You are a ruthless killer encased in an angel’s body,” Odell responded, accompanied by a sweep of Rose’s form.

“Complimenting me won’t save you.”

Odell grinned. “Won’t it?”

“No.” The word was nothing more than a forced grunt. Odell was crossing a fucking line.

“Regardless,” Odell said carefully. “They may blame this on you.”

“Even though this was rooted in stupidity?” Rose asked. No person in their right mind would attempt to pull an Orpheus. Unless you were young and rich, it seemed.

“Even then.”

Rose scoffed and nodded her head sarcastically. “Great.”

It was just one word, but it carried a resigned tone to it that I didn't like.

Odell's brows pinched together in paper-thin sympathy. "I am simply trying to offer the truth, my dear."

"While you are feeling charitable, any information to share? You say this wasn't a conspiracy, but do those exist?" Rose was only a few steps away from the cell bars now, my hands itching to pull her away from Odell's slimy reach. The simple black dress she threw on this morning was turning gray under the harsh lighting. She still looked beautiful, even though I was regretting requesting she change out of my t-shirt.

"If there was," Odell said, pulling my focus back to him begrudgingly. "They would be smart not to involve me in their plans."

"Despite your reputation?"

"*Because* of my reputation. I am useful because of my ties to your family."

"You had ties to my father," Rose snapped, as if the clarification was of critical importance. Interesting. "If anything you should have a vendetta against me."

The whole room perked up. No one, not even Rose, spoke so openly about the rumors she'd killed her father too.

Odell looked like a hyena, smiling like that. "Was that an admission of guilt?"

Rose laughed tersely. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Odell nodded, a pleased smile, then voluntarily recentered the conversation. "Those young men gambled with my loyalty. It was just as likely that I turned around and told you their plans."

"And why didn't you?"

"They offered a higher price." Odell shrugged as he said it. His moral code was disgusting.



“What price would have purchased your loyalty?” The only thing keeping me from snapping into a rage was that Rose was asking every question I would. And Odell was cooperating. I tried not to think about how much this exposed how similarly Rose and I worked through problems.

Odell’s mouth twisted into a smile. One that sent goosebumps raising on the bit of exposed flesh I could see on Rose’s neck and back.

I fucking hated how much he scared her, but was proud of her for hiding it behind a sharp, but somewhat hostile wit. The defensive tactic seemed natural for her, which made me want to re-evaluate if the hostility she threw my way was rooted in the same thing.

“I had one in mind, but it seems Dominic has ensured that is off the table.” Odell looked to me, and I wanted to wipe that stupid fucking grin off his face.

Rose sighed, like she’d weathered that proposition before. “The answer has been and will always be no, Odell.”

“Shame.”

My eyes went white with fury. This creepy old fucker, the same age if not older than her father, had come onto her like this before. And he said he hadn’t seen her since she was eighteen.

“Is that all, Odell?” Rose asked, sounding beaten down and tired. That was the final straw where Odell was concerned. His days were now numbered. “You believe this to be an isolated incident and have no knowledge of a conspiracy against us?”

“The family came to me before the son pulled the Orpheus. I sent him some new herbs, a new method for sneaking in. You press them into your shoes, letting the Underworld suck the life out of them instead of you. Clearly it didn’t work. Although, just out of curiosity, did it happen to kill some of the remaining wildlife?”

My lip curled. The flowers, the ones Rose had found the day after our wedding.

Rose's shoulders visibly sagged, relieved. I had the strongest urge to lift more weight off them, to find out what burdened her and make it go away. "Sure did, Odell. Congratulations. Other than that and your outdated obsession with my last name, that's it?"

"A name is a powerful thing, my dear. The comfort of a unified, constant identity inspires fierce loyalty."

"I'll consider myself lucky then, that my patrons have always prayed to Lady Death," Rose retorted, bringing up the derogatory nickname people had come to call her over the years. One that used to fill me with satisfaction, even used myself, and now just felt grating.

Odell chuckled. "Right you are."

Rose nodded tightly and then turned to Raiden. "We're done here."

"Great, release these," Odell said, shaking his shackled wrists.

Rose was still facing Raiden, but said, "No."

"You promised freedom, Rose," Odell argued.

Rose kept her body facing towards the exit but turned her head to him. "I did and you'll get it. But first you will sit here, in this rotting, stone cage until you understand the grace I've extended and know that I've run out of it."

And with that threat, spewed in a voice I'd never heard her use, not even toward me, Rose fled the dungeons.

I looked to the three guards who all nodded in silent agreement that they would do their job and take care of Odell so I could follow my wife.

I widened my strides so that I was practically sprinting after her, and caught up to Rose just as the hallways turned back to the recognizable walls of our home.

I wrapped my hand around her shoulder, pressing down. "Rose."

Rose stopped but didn't turn to me. She wiggled her shoulder as if to shake me off. "Don't, Dominic."

I let her go but stepped further into her space, causing her to back toward the wall until I pressed her into it. I dragged a finger down the perimeter of her face. "And here I thought you found pleasure in my touch."

Rose's eyes lit with something light, teasing, bringing them up to the vibrant shade of green I'd come to associate solely with her. "You're a jester, now?"

*Jester. First use: Purgatory marketplace. One year ago.*

I let my mouth twist up into a grin that felt natural, now. "Always have been."

Rose narrowed her eyes and nodded her head, mocking me. "Just not around me."

I pressed her further into the wall, static radiating between us. "That's not the side of me you like, sweetheart."

"I don't like you, period."

"I'd beg to differ."

Rose puffed her chest out, but the move only sent her breasts pushing into my upper stomach. "Last night changed nothing."

"Oh, it did," I said, dropping my hand to the base of her neck. "Because now my hatred has a very effective, mutually beneficial outlet."

"Does it no—" I crashed my lips to hers, shutting off any retort from that smart mouth. It was better served opening for a long sweep of my tongue. I quickly won the battle, feeling her conscious acquiesce of control and slipping into submission.

My stomach clenched at what that revealed of her tastes. And how that aligned with mine.

We attacked each other in the darkened hallway, and I pushed her into a corner where the scaffolding was just wide enough that I could hike her up and rest her ass on it.

I pushed her skirt around her waist, my hands seeking the silky smooth texture of her thighs, while Rose battled the buttons of my slacks. When she finally wrenched them open and her hand dove beneath the waistband of my briefs, there was no more thinking. Just feeling as I ravished her in the shadows, mouth planted on the junction in between her neck and shoulders and Rose's nails raking against my scalp.

When we were finished, spent, I cleaned us up the best I could, but Rose still had to scurry off to the restrooms. I got twisted satisfaction from the thought of her walking any distance with the evidence of what we just did dripping down her thighs.

The thought almost had me following her down the hallway to pull her into another corner, but the remaining shadows I'd seen in her expression had me moving back towards the dungeons instead.

When I stepped into the space, the click of my boots jostled Odell from where he was napping against the stone wall.

"I answered all of Rose's questions," Odell said, defensiveness peeking out of his tone.

"You did," I agreed through gritted teeth. "But I have some of my own."

"Ah," Odell said, his smug face lighting with realization. It was the look of someone recognizing an ally hidden amongst your enemies. "Pine would have a lot to say about you marrying his sister. Especially for the reasons you did."

"The Fates commanded it." A lie, but I wasn't admitting the truth to him.

"And how are you faring, then?" Odell asked, leaning forward towards his propped up knees. "Having the girl who killed your best friend warm your bed?"

"Don't speak about her like that," I snapped. He wasn't getting anywhere near Rose if I had anything to say about it. "You're already on thin ice, you creepy fuck."

"Don't evade the question," Odell returned, coolly. "How are you faring?"

I tried to temper my anger. I came here for answers and snapping his neck wouldn't help me achieve that. "I'd be better if she didn't keep as many secrets from me as she does."

"Hm, that's a new one for her," Odell noted. "She was always a bright eyed child. Shared everything with her brother and mother."

Exactly how I'd remembered her. She was five years younger than Pine and I, but she'd always seemed very bubbly. Quiet, but joyful. I'd always assumed it was an act to cover a cunning interior. "When did that change?"

"Oh, I'm not sure," Odell said, "I would imagine after she killed Pine."

That statement had started to shift from a fact to a reminder. "And her father. Your best friend, it seems." Another reminder I needed.

"That has yet to be confirmed, despite my best efforts." Odell paused, considering, then continued. "I can't say she was entirely without reason for that one."

"Why is that?" Pine had never uttered a negative word about their father.

"His methods of training were quite intense. Effective, but intense. Fancied pitting Pine and Rose together. He knew whoever won was better suited to sit the throne."

My body was painfully still now. *Effective* and *intense* brought up pictures of torture rather than training. "Wouldn't it have been wiser to target me?"

"Oh, yes," Odell nodded, like this was something he was used to discussing. "This would be after one of them ended you. Jerome was simply trying to identify the stronger of the two."

"And you stood by and let him?" The insinuation that Pine was weak or let himself be killed grated on my nerves.

"He was the king. I was the guard." It was the explanation of someone who was used to strict rules of authority. A way of ruling neither Rose or I subscribed to.

“A guard with an interest in Rose as a wife,” I pointed out, barely keeping my rage concealed.

Odell just nodded. “And she went and dashed those hopes by exiling me.”

“She should have done a lot more than that,” I sneered and clicked open the lock to Odell’s cell. His form shrunk even more, all of his fake bravado out the door the second a threat posed real. I conjured two Shadowwalkers, manifesting in the form of a woman about a half a foot shorter than me with long, flowing hair, to stand guard by the door.

I chuckled as I took in his quivering form then reared my hand back and struck him across the face, spraying blood over the pale gray floor.

†

A day later, I sat in my office, toying with my mother’s ring. I’d wanted to give it to Rose yesterday, but my knuckles were still split from where they connected with Odell’s harsh cheekbones. It was only in the dark of the library, where I found her at midnight, and with the distraction of me bending her over a couch that I was confident she wouldn’t see the cuts.

But I’d stolen some ointment from Raiden’s desk and the skin would be back to normal by the evening.

Raiden burst through my door seconds later and I curled the ring into my hand. The movement caught his ever-perceptive gaze and he set his boxy jaw.

“Any idea why a nurse was sent to Odell’s cell yesterday?”

“No, how weird.”

Raiden snorted, unconvinced by the lie. Especially after clocking the state of my knuckles.

“You broke his nose and collarbone, Dominic.”

“He deserved it.” I clamped down on the ring in my hand a little tighter.

“Oh, he sure did,” Raiden said, running his hand over his freshly buzzed hair. “But I’m more concerned about your

reasoning for believing that.”

“Why?” The reasons were obvious and simple to me.

Raiden pushed on. “I figured you’d view him as an ally.”

I clenched my jaw. We’d never spoken about this so plainly. Not when he could run back to Rose with the information. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Raiden.”

“I’m not stupid, Dominic,” Raiden said in a voice that sounded like he was working at the end of his rope of patience. “I know that this was convenient for you. You don’t piss off the Fates and get her in a position where you could enact revenge.”

I stayed silent, letting the absence of sound confirm what he’d said.

“I’m in no position to override your authority, Dominic,” Raiden continued, and I had to restrain myself from pushing back. I didn’t assert my power like that. “But she is my goddess and my friend. Be careful how you choose to hurt her.”

And he turned and walked back through my office door. Another person I’d thought would agree with this vendetta, but scolded me for the mere threat of harming a hair on Rose’s head.

## Chapter 22

### Rose

It looked like a bookshelf threw up all over the floor. I'd pulled out at least fifty books trying to confirm a theory. Odell had been so angry that the Hades house had combined with Pluto and it reminded me of the fervor of religious zealots.

Those who were so wrapped up in their own belief it colored everything that happened to them. Surely there had been an organized group in our history. My father focused our education on physical defense, the majority of our history taught by our mother. I didn't remember her saying there was anything Hades-specific, but I wanted to double check.

Odell had been released a day ago, with Raiden walking him all the way to his doorstep after Dominic had gone down to place a banning mark on his ankle. One step back into the Underworld before he died and he'd burst into flames. I kind of hoped he'd try to test it out.

I'd offered to walk Odell out, but Dominic shut the idea down faster than I could blink.

Not that I minded.

Odell reminded me of my father and of my own mistakes. I was shaken up, but somehow less so than I would have been a year ago.

I'd been thinking about my father a lot lately. I normally avoided any reminder of him like it was a plague. Hell, I'd tossed away my family's home and last name for *Dominic* of all people. But this threat, still hanging over our heads, made me think of my father.



No one liked him. He was all the worst things of the Underworld. I felt like my role as goddess tasked me with making sure souls transitioned smoothly into death, making sure they were at peace after a tiring, hard life. Or, yes, even letting my life source sustain the Field of Punishment and Tartarus, making sure that those who had spent their time in the Upperworld harming others paid for their sins.

My father viewed his role more like an accountant, sitting on the gold and treasures that souls brought with them to pay their passage or gaining a sick satisfaction from torture. Most of all, he loved that he was a god, period.

He loved the power, the fame, the status. So much so that the thought of losing it to Dominic terrified him enough to shove Pine and I into training to make sure we were strong. I resented it so much, the pressure he put on us.

The pressure that I broke under.

My father loved his power more than us, that was clear. Even the Thanatos Society, the ages old cult dedicated to the Underworld got more positive attention out of him than he ever gave to us.

While the Thanatos Society loved death on an obsessive level, it was always neutral. Death in general, not Hades or Pluto specifically.

Maybe they could help then, in making sure that merging our houses was going over well with the humans. Adrian's words from the Council meeting were still haunting me. Even though there was a clear, seemingly contained explanation for the breach and Odell's involvement, there was still so much unclear.

There was still the dress incident. In the wake of the breach, I'd finally caved and gave Max and Marcus permission to start snooping around the other guards and staff's things, trying to find evidence. They hadn't found anything on the cameras in the hallways, meaning it had been somewhere inside the staff wing, which was a blind spot.

And tomorrow Max was going to the marketplace to look through the receipts from every store that sold herbs, pastes, dyes, anything that could have made the dress burn me like that.

Max was far more diplomatic than Marcus, who would likely tear through the shop without any regard for polite, political maneuvering. As if summoned by my thoughts, Marcus appeared in the doorway a second later, taking in the disaster on the floor.

“Oh, good, you’ve officially lost it,” he drawled. I commanded a Shadowwalker to reach an arm out of the fold of darkness by the door and smack him in the back of the head.

“Why even have us if you can make shadows do your dirty work?” Marcus asked, coming fully into the room.

“Because they can’t talk back,” I said, not looking up from the large, leather book in my lap. “And when you aren’t calling me crazy, I actually enjoy speaking to you.”

“Fair,” Marcus said, and then, “Why does it look like you knocked over a bookshelf?”

“Thanatos Society,” I said, looking up at Marcus. “What do you know about them?”

Marcus snorted. “Bunch of crazy fucks that’s what.”

“Eloquent,” I said, his brazen assessment funny, but unfortunately unhelpful.

“Fanatics,” Marcus corrected dramatically. “Obsessed with death. And you and Dominic for that matter. I heard they threw a party so that they could move your portraits to hang on the same wall.”

I laughed softly at the image, not entirely unappealing.

“Why?” Marcus asked at my silence, arms crossing. “Concerned?”

“Odell,” I said by way of explanation. “I was worried about zealots. If he was that angry, I was wondering who else would be mad. I know they don’t have a history of picking one side, but they were the first people I thought of.”

“Makes sense,” Marcus said, casually lifting a shoulder, even though the topic of conversation was anything but. His confidence often verged on cockiness and this was one of those times. “I know Raiden has a guy but I’ll talk to the Head Priest at the Temple in Athens. He’d know if anyone weird came through.”

“Thank you,” I breathed, relief clear. “It’s the end of the month so...”

“Administrative nightmare,” Marcus finished. I fought a groan at the thought. Taxes, registrations, hospital clearances, they made the end of the month draining. Especially the latter.

It never got easier, seeing Charon’s boat almost tipping over from the amount of souls coming through the gates when the hospitals removed those who had died over the months.

I shivered a little at the thought, a distant wish for strong arms to hold onto passing through the back of my mind.

“I’ll look into it,” Marcus promised. “I hate to be the one to remind you, but today is Saturday.”

I knew that. Jason and Thea had been over for breakfast that morning. The four of us sat on the deck until Jason had to go back for a meeting and I ran up to the library to start researching.

But it was Marcus’s reminder, laced with a reluctant color that he always had when we broached the subjects of the Fates that had me steeling my spine.

“I know,” I began slowly, nervous to even articulate what I was contemplating. “I don’t think I’m going to go today.”

Marcus looked at me for a half second longer than normal, taking it in. Then, “Okay. I’ll keep you updated on Max’s findings tomorrow.”

And just like that, he let it go. He sounded a little relieved, but like he was masking it under nonchalance. It was that willingness to let me do what I needed that comforted me, ever thankful for his friendship.

“Okay,” I said softly. Marcus left after a quick exchange, leaving me to my research. It was easy to ignore what that decision was doing to my chest while translating Ancient Greek in my head.

After a little longer chasing dead ends, I decided to let Marcus and Raiden contact their people at the Thanatos Society and my temple. Asking for help was new, but I was trying it on.

I stood, almost tipping over from standing on numb legs and took in the mess I made. To speed up the process, I conjured two Shadowwalkers. Their impossibly black forms moved with vacant silence to the books and began placing them back in their home.

I bent, grabbing two books I knew lived right next to each other.

I had taken the entire row out of the histories from the years the Roman houses first appeared, curious if any formal rebellions sprung up. The disputes between our patrons at the time seemed to pull their focus, in addition to being the reason the Roman houses manifested in the first place.

I reshelved them, then went to turn to grab the third, but it appeared in front of my face.

“Here,” Dominic’s voice rumbled, right over my skin. In my focused state, I hadn’t even felt him come in.

As he moved the book towards me, his eyes traveled over my skin, my clothes. I shivered slightly at the perusal, fighting the temptation to flee and hide from the urgency building in my chest. It’s not like we hadn’t seen each other over the past few days or that he hadn’t sought me out, he just didn’t verbalize it.

We weren’t talking about it. The sex. It was happening all the time, everywhere. Couch, desk, wall, chair, but never a bed. It had been only five days of it and yet I felt the permanent mark of Dominic’s hands on my body.

Dominic had changed into a black long sleeve since this morning—I was pretty sure the navy shirt he’d started the day

with had a rip in the neckline now, torn by my hands perched on the dining room table—and had pushed the sleeves up to his elbows.

I almost groaned in annoyance. He looked perfect.

His mouth pulled into an amused grin, close to a full smile, at the state of disarray. “What happened here?”

I gestured towards the remaining books, spreading my hands out. “I had an idea.”

Dominic looked down at the books then to my Shadowwalkers emerging from one of the hidden rows. He smirked at something in their tall, strong builds, but kept quiet.

“About?” he asked, both our hands still on the book. The closest we’d ever get to holding hands.

“I was looking at zealots and religious groups to...” I trailed off, searching for the right words.

“Looking for someone who would retaliate at the loss of an identity,” Dominic finished.

“Yes, like Odell said.”

“Hmm,” Dominic hummed. “Look into the Thanatos Society yet?”

“Just did,” I breathed, unsure what to do with a conversation where we agreed. “Marcus is going to talk with Raiden.”

“Good idea,” Dominic said, then pulled the book from my hand. “You have a lot of those, hidden behind those pretty eyes.”

“Don’t sound so shocked,” I bit back, reaching for the book again. Dominic shook his head but leaned towards me, crowing me against the bookshelf. He leaned over me, bringing his face down right over mine, static sparking the tip of my nose.

My eyes zeroed in on his lips, waiting for the moment he touched them to mine in a savage hold. Just a little closer.

Right as I was moving my hands up to pull him towards me, I heard the powdery slip of a book being reshelfed next to my ear. Dominic pulled back, smirk on his lips instead of my own.

I kept the *Asshole* restrained, just so he didn't know he'd taken something I wanted.

Dominic went back to shelving like the tension in the room didn't kick up a notch. If this was how it was always going to be around him from now on, I'd never know a moment's peace.

But somehow I couldn't find the words to complain.

The books were all back to their resting spots and the floor looked normal again within a few minutes. I sent the Shadowwalkers back to their shaded origins and turned to Dominic, who was leaning on the bookshelves, arms crossed.

I swallowed, and immediately tried to distract from Dominic's knowing stare at the motion. "Why did you come in here?"

"I'm going to Purgatory to grab the taxes deposit," Dominic explained. "Figured you might want to come with."

I did, actually. Surprisingly. Whatever. "And willingly spend time with you?"

"Oh, we spend plenty of time together," Dominic said, drawing out the last word. I forced my lips into a frown that I was pretty sure looked more like a pout than anything. Dominic was the only person I knew who could actually frown. And look good doing it.

I plowed right through that reminder. "Fine. Let's go."

Dominic didn't move from the bookshelf. "Try again. With a little more feeling this time."

I breathed out, huffing. "Dominic, can we please go to Purgatory?"

"Well, when you beg like that, I guess we should," Dominic said, finally pushing off the bookshelf. I tried to

scowl at his back as he walked toward the door, leaving me behind.

I walked after him and right through a portal to the gates of Purgatory. He stopped abruptly, sending me crashing into his hard back. My hands were squished between us low on his spine and I used them to push off.

As I took a step back, Dominic turned quickly, snatching up my left hand and sliding something onto my fourth finger.

“That felt like an attempt to break my finger. Try hard—” I broke off when I looked down at my hand, all words lost.

It was a ring. A beautiful, stunning, blinding ring that had no place on my hand.

But it was so, so pretty.

There was a large diamond in the center, a perfect stone the shape of an elongated circle. On either side stood three stones, shaped like an oval that ended in a point. They were set so that two touched the center stone and one connected to the band, creating the illusion of a flower. The stones were set in a yellow gold that brightened the entire ring into something that sent my heart clenching.

“Don’t swoon, Rose,” Dominic drawled, humor thick in his tone. “Just don’t need a repeat of last time.”

I curled my hand in protectively, then looked at him. When we made eye contact, his jaw ticked, moving just slightly to the side before resetting, the joint tensing.

“I don’t see how a ring would prevent someone shoulder checking me.”

Dominic’s nostrils flared a little. “They’d know someone exists who would punch them in the face for that.”

“I think you standing behind me like a shadow does that job well enough.”

“Call it reinforcements, then,” Dominic said, grabbing my shoulders and pushing me lightly toward the gates. “Jupiter knows I need them, dealing with you.”

“Baby, Jupiter won’t protect you,” I said, before taking off towards the entrance. It was a short walk, but if we stopped every two seconds to bicker it would take an hour.

Realizing I didn’t have my shadow, I looked back at Dominic. He was standing in the same spot I left him, staring at me.

Something in that statement, the docile tone, the endearment, *something* had him sucking in air through his nose, then breathing out slowly. Like he was trying to remove the breath carefully from his body.

“What? Let’s go,” I said, lifting my eyebrows at him.

Dominic snapped out of it, then met me in two long strides. When we made it through the gates with polite nods at the guards, he bent down and spoke low by my ear. “You know, I much prefer *baby* to all the other names you call me.”

A small laugh buzzed in the back of my throat. “I bet you keep track of them. Write them down in a diary to pour over at night.”

“Sweetheart, you have no idea,” Dominic said, placing a hand on my neck to direct me around the corner. The casual affection might have seemed like a step in the right direction, but it didn’t feel like it, now that I knew what his hands could do.

All those weeks ago, back in Purgatory, when he’d placed his hand in the same spot, I thought I knew desire, knew torture. But this was worse.

And Dominic just looked completely unruffled. Because of course he did. If he kept looking so fucking unaffected around me, I was not liable for what I did to make him snap.

Dominic squeezed the back of my neck lightly when we got to the treasury. It was a small building, with limestone walls and a tiled, copper colored roof. Behind a strong wooden door, stood our treasurer, Plutus.

Not to be confused with our House, Plutus was another immortal being. He came to the underworld with my ancestor,



Persephone, and took on the role of warding over any money that came into the Underworld.

Originally, his duties were confined to counting the passage paid to Charon, but now expanded, to his eternal glee, to regulating taxes for Purgatory.

Dominic opened the door for me, and I stepped through to find Plutus already waiting in the front room, clutching an envelope in his hands.

“I triple checked everything as you requested, Lord Pluto. No problems here. Or with me. I’m just so happy for you two,” Plutus rushed out, his stout form practically bouncing with glee.

“I’m glad you agree,” Dominic said, reaching over my shoulder to grab the envelope, surely filled with a note for the taxes, from him.

“Everyone does,” Plutus said. I almost laughed. I could name one person, a middle-aged shop owner in particular, who would not agree with that statement.

And there was the guilt and the fear creeping into my stomach. I pinched my shoulder blades together, standing up a little straighter.

“How do you know?” Dominic asked, voicing my own concerns.

Plutus looked at me as he responded, “Purgatory has been shared for years. And in your tenure, Lady Pluto, nothing has gone wrong. Trade is stable, souls find easy passage, Tartarus is well-guarded. There is no room for complaint without coming across ungrateful.”

“And what about my tenure, Plutus?” Dominic asked sarcastically. I barely heard him, though. I was too busy fighting tears at the relief flooding my chest. Maybe, maybe Purgatory was fine. That was a win.

I had only ever cared about keeping the realm healthy, anyway. Keeping it healthy for Pine and for my people. I was protective over it, cradling it in my hands. Even the thought of

handing it over to Pine one day filled me with dread rather than hope, like it once did.

I was a little uncomfortable with that realization, but I had fixed a lot. There was a lot to be proud of, especially given how—

“Since you both have been in power, we are free of the problems we once faced,” Plutus said, stealing my thoughts. For one, my father used to charge obscene taxes, far more than we needed. The first thing I’d done was drop them to a reasonable level.

“Speaking of, how have taxes been collected?” I asked Plutus. “With different rates.”

“Oh, not an issue at all,” Plutus said, waving a hand. “Your rates have always been the same.”

Dominic’s head turned toward me at the same time I looked at him. Agreements between us felt like tapping out in a fight. Dominic nodded at me, poking his tongue into his cheek, while I just scrunched my nose up at him.

He’d be pulling that little detail out later, I knew he would.

“Well, this has been easy,” Dominic said, looking right at me as he shoved the envelope into his back pocket.

“You are asking to get that stolen,” I said, nodding to the white I could see over his hip bone.

“And if I gave it to you,” Dominic said, dragging his eyes down my body slowly, lewdly. Down the tight, pocketless sundress that covered it. “Where would you put it?”

I moved closer, reaching around him so I could grab the envelope. When it was in hand, I folded it lengthwise and tucked it between my breasts, safely under the wire of my bra. With a little adjustment of the neckline of my dress, the envelope was hidden.

Dominic’s eyes were zeroed in on my chest, his eyes darkening with every second he burned through the layers to look at my breasts. He knew what they looked like, and yet there was shock in the line between his brows.

I turned my head to Plutus, who was watching the whole interaction rather intently. “Thank you, Plutus. Your help is always appreciated.”

“It’s an honor, Lady Pluto,” Plutus responded. “I hope to see you next month.”

I smiled and nodded at Plutus, before looking at Dominic, who had snapped out of whatever trance he was in.

“Let’s go,” he practically growled, ushering me out the door. I laughed, full and rich, at his demeanor.

I turned to him, a quip like *poor Dominic, did you get distracted* brewing, only to be cut off by his viciously murderous stare.

“What?” I asked.

“That’s all it takes to make you laugh?” Dominic asked, his tone deep, threatening. Completely contradictory to his words. “Me staring at your tits and shoving you out the door?”

Another laugh, this time a smaller chuckle. Dominic’s eyes went a shade deadlier. “Yes.”

“Well, shit, if I knew it was that, I would have done it a long time ago,” Dominic said, before taking off down the street. In the opposite direction of our house.

I ran after him. Had to to keep up with his insane strides. “Is making me laugh something you want to do?”

Dominic grumbled. “More like want to know *how* to do.”

I nodded. “And that just makes perfect sense.”

“Does to me,” Dominic said, stopping in the middle of the street, right in between a small cafe and store. “That way I can make sure you never laugh again unless—”

Another laugh was already building in my throat as the sound of a door chime muffled whatever Dominic was going to say. I looked over his shoulder to see the cafe door opening to see Laurel, of all people, leaving with a bag of coffee beans in hand.

“Oh,” she said, when she saw us. “How good to see you both.”

Dominic looked at her, and said, “You too, Laurel,” his voice rumbling out of his throat.

“Hi, Laurel,” I said, forcing a kind smile to my lips. Nice, despite how poor our last interaction went.

Laurel looked at me, eyes bouncing to Dominic, then back. With what seemed like a deep breath, she said, “Good to see you, Rose. What brings you both here today?”

I sputtered a little at the genuine kindness in her tone. “Um, seeing Plutus.”

Laurel smiled. *Smiled*. “He’s so kind. Well, if you aren’t too busy, feel free to stop by the shop in the next few days. I’ve been working on a new recipe I’d love for you to try.”

“That, um,” I reset myself, “That sounds great, Laurel. Thank you.”

Laurel nodded at both of us, then trickled off down the street. I stared at the spot she’d been for a little, shocked. Maybe Plutus was right, maybe people were actually okay with this. Maybe their opinion towards me was starting to improve.

I thought of Laurel’s shop, of the bread and spices and jam there. “Damn it.”

“What?” Dominic asked, crowding me a little.

I threw a hand out in the direction Laurel had walked off. “Now I have to go back to her store.”

Dominic looked at me like I might be a tad crazy. “Why?”

“She had this amazing fig jam last time we were there,” I explained. “I told myself I wouldn’t buy it if she was rude, but now I have to.”

Dominic’s lips turned up at the corners. “You *have* to?”

“Yes.”

“That makes...sense,” Dominic said, slowly.

“Don’t try to understand my feelings towards that jam,” I said. “I would have risked her wrath for it.”

“And what would you give me?” Dominic asked, leaning towards me, eclipsing the sun peaking over the buildings. “If I faced her wrath for you?”

“The day you do anything *for* me, Dominic,” I said, reaching up to pat his chest. “Is the day our lovely realm freezes over.”

“No need to remind me, Rose,” he said, wrapping his hand over my wrist, pulling me off balance and closer to him. “Now,” Dominic continued, moving the hand around my wrist to fold my palm in his, “We’re getting ingredients for dinner. You owe me.”

“I don’t owe you shit,” I said, even as I followed him. I got the ingredients for a recipe I had in mind because *I* wanted to. Not because I gave a damn what Dominic thought. I told him so, surrounded by wheels of cheese. To which Dominic chastised me for exposing our bickering to the entire Underworld. Which made me throw a small block of gouda at his head.

The shopkeeper looked at us with wide eyes, but I just had the urge to tell him that this was nothing, that this was covering the depth of our resentment and serving as repentance for what I’d taken from Dominic.

Something I was now doubting I’d be able to give him back.

## Chapter 23

### Rose

A jar of fig jam had to be the most innocuous item in the world. There was nothing inherently wrong with it, nothing to set me off.

And yet looking at it sitting in my cabinet, exactly the way I remembered seeing it in Laurel's shop made me angrier than I'd been in a while.

Somehow in the past day since going to Purgatory and without me noticing him leave, not that I kept track that often I just...

Without noticing him leave, Dominic managed to sneak away to Laurel's store and buy the jam for me. Then place it in the cabinet without fanfare.

And I. Was. Pissed.

Because if he'd purchased it, then strolled into the house waving it in front of my face and making a ridiculous comment about how I was going to pay him back for his kindness, I wouldn't have batted an eye.

But buying it like this was fucking *normal* for us, like he did this every day was so off-putting and world-ending I had only one reaction. Anger.

Dominic didn't just get to decide to start being nice to me, not after everything. He'd spent years reminding me of what I'd done to him at every turn, constantly keeping me on edge and in waiting for the day he decided to pop out of the shadows and put a knife to my throat.

Without so much as an admission of forgiveness or change of heart, he just starts doing shit like that for me? The way he

made my tea for me every morning and the afternoons where I needed it was one thing. Not a pattern. No, no that wasn't who we were to each other.

Because if we did, I would have to take the lock off my own instincts, desires. The soft touches and time spent in silence and wanting to ask him if he wanted to eat dinner with me alone.

No, the lock stayed in place. Especially when I was dealing with the status of my plan to bring Pine back.

I hadn't gone to the Fates since the last time. The decision haunted me like a shadow. I'd forget about it until I stood at the right angle in the sunlight and caught the reminder of my sins stretched out on the floor.

But like a shadow, it was just...there.

I was teetering on this decision, between being settled in this new feeling and dealing with the guilt of abandoning a plan five years in the making.

If Pine had an inkling of what I was planning, and he surely did, he was probably stalking me to make sure I didn't do anything stupid. He'd kill me before the Fates could if he knew. He'd want me to be happy.

And I was. It didn't feel like a lie to say that.

At that very moment, I would say I was happy if it wasn't for that jar of fig jam sitting in the kitchen. Haunting me.

Dominic had no right to do that. I was craving a fight it seemed, because the second I saw it, I ran up to his door without hesitation to disturb his peace.

I knew he probably wanted to be alone. Dominic seemed to enjoy solitude, in the way that it freed him from expectations and authority and responsibility. I understood that—it was the same reason I enjoyed it, even though I might have added *free from judgment* to the end of the list.

I knew he probably wanted to be alone, but I didn't care. Not right now. I curled my hand in a fist and lifted it to the door, about to—

The door swung open purposefully, pulled by a hand that was skillful and strong. Dominic stood in the door frame, looking down at me through his glasses and tightening my chest in a quick little pinch. I was expecting it to be him, I don't know why I was acting shocked to see him standing there. But that shock was enough to kill the wind fueling my anger sails, now leaving me standing there, heaving, without a reason to show for it.

Dominic stared at me for a second, intense as always but with a touch of something close to resignation in his whiskey brown eyes. Wordlessly, Dominic stepped aside and gave me access to his office. I walked through, welcoming the afternoon sun that flooded through his floor to ceiling windows. The exact mirror to my own office.

I got burgeoning, buttery morning light, while he got fading, fiery afternoon sun.

Dominic closed the door behind me, caging us in. I stood still for a second, waiting to see what he would do. Instead of going around his desk like I thought he would, he dropped into the long sofa tucked in the corner of his office and picked up a book.

He continued looking at me, though, now waiting to see what *I* would do. I had a choice then, to ruin the peaceful afternoon he'd made or to join him.

The anger was simmering to a low burn, the same that was always there around him. Scratching the center of my chest.

So I made a decision. Walking over to him, allowing instincts to trample reason, I sat down in the open space in between the arm he rested on the back of the couch and his midsection. Dominic's hand immediately moved to my shoulder, confirming that this was alright. That we could touch softly, instead of frenzied grasps in the dark.

That permission had me tucking into his side—guided by his hand as much as my own movement—and positioning my legs to rest over his thighs.



The only sound in the room was the soft crackle of a book spine opening, the whispery rustle of pages turning as Dominic and I read a book. Together.

He was in the middle of a chapter, but flipped back a few pages to the beginning to help me catch up. It was a classic novel, one I'd read before, but I needed a bit of context on where in the story he was. I tried to focus on the pages, but the words started swimming together. Within minutes, I was asleep.

†

## **Dominic**

Rose was sleeping on my chest in broad daylight. Taking a *nap* on me.

And it pissed me off.

Not the fact she was doing it, I wouldn't dare move a muscle to disturb her. Not when her eyebrows finally looked relaxed and I didn't have to see the glimmer of pain in her eyes.

I was pissed because this *thing*, some mellow feeling low in my chest, not too dissimilar from the setting sun's light outside my window, was building with alarming speed.

The urge to protect her, the fear at the thought of her getting hurt. Her calling me baby in public like that didn't make me want to throw her to the ground in front of everyone. The fucking jar of fig jam that had all but burned a hole in my desk drawer since I'd shoved it away all those weeks ago.

Her smile—bright, unguarded—and that *laugh*—husky, rich—that made me want to kill anyone who took those away from her. When I was planning on doing the same thing at one point.

So different now.

I'd asked Raiden about our limited staff and he said we were hiring more, just an inconveniently timed slew of job turnovers and I'd felt a sharp sting of panic about leaving Rose vulnerable.

But protectiveness had been building with Rose for a while.

This comfortability, this settled feeling in her presence, far more candle than bonfire, was dangerous. Comfortability meant trust, it meant forgiveness, it meant companionship.

Not a single one of those words should be associated with Rose.

They shouldn't. But shouldn't wasn't real while she was napping on me. Or while I was falling asleep alongside her.

## Chapter 24

### Rose

“You two need to get out of the house,” Raiden said, waking me from the nap I was apparently taking. *On* Dominic, it seemed.

Raiden was looking down at the scene of the two of us, my weight pushing Dominic into the crease of his couch, his arm slung around my shoulders and pulling my body into his. The afternoon sun had descended into a pleasant gray dusk, small streaks of purple and indigo still dancing across the sky. I mustn't have slept long, but I felt surprisingly well-rested.

Dominic rustled awake then, his muscles bunching slightly. He was always in survival mode, as if he was expecting to roll off the bed right into a fight.

The fact that I *knew* that was disturbing in its own right. We had only slept in the same bed once, but it wasn't just after sleep. Every time he seemed relaxed and then someone would come barging in, he'd revert to some battle-ready version of himself, shoulders taut and jaw hard.

“I just left the house yesterday,” I told Raiden, pushing up into a better sitting position. I went to lunch with Corrina which included some Ares-level interrogation on the state of Dominic and I's relationship.

Apparently Corrina, Sabina, Jason, and the rest of the Council were of the same opinion—that Dominic looked at me like Jason looked at a new batch of wine from his best grapes.

“So did I,” Dominic added, the sleep slowly fading out of his voice. He told me he was at Adrian's house (come to think of it, maybe that was when he got the jam) but I didn't have

the chance to ask any more questions before he pulled me over him on the couch, mumbling something about *ten hours*.

“If you both weren’t napping,” Raiden said the word with mild disgust, as if he didn’t know the meaning of the word. Probably didn’t, he was too well-dressed to risk creasing from a nap, “You’d have heard me say that you need to leave the house for a specific reason.”

“That would be?” Dominic asked, dropping his elbows to his knees.

“My contact at the Thanatos society is historically Greek. Doesn’t care too much anymore, but I guess his mom owns a restaurant in Athens.”

“Was his name Andrew?” I asked, sitting up a little straighter.

Raiden looked at me like I was whittling down his patience every second. “Yes.”

“Ah, yes, I know his mother. She’s a doll.” Maria was the closest thing to a grandmother I had in my life.

“Well, she’s a doll who is the matriarch of one of the oldest families in Greece and has been complaining to her son that hasn’t seen you in a year. And quite recently, added that she lost you to the Romans.”

I gasped, offended. “I would never abandon Maria like that.”

“Not even for me?” Dominic asked, mocking my reaction.

“Not even for you, baby,” I said, trailing a finger down his jaw, relishing in the feel of his stubble.

He didn’t squirm like I wanted him to, just threw his hand across his chest, grabbing his heart. “It’s like you’re trying to hurt me.”

“You try her baklava and then come back.”

“That’s exactly what you both will be doing,” Raiden said.

My eyes lit up. “You have some?”

“No, calm down, for the love of Jupiter,” Raiden said, judging my excited response with his even mannered stare. I could imagine him shooting Belen this look every day. “You should go to her restaurant. Include the whole thing about not abandoning her for Dominic’s pretty face.”

Dominic leaned in close to whisper in my ear, his nose brushing against my hair. “Did you hear that? He thinks I’m pretty.”

I laughed as quietly as I could, but to no avail. Raiden looked like he’d just lost his appetite for the evening. “Stop giggling like school children and get dressed.”

“This is good. Everything seems to be going over well down here.” Much to my shock and honestly, eternal relief. “But we haven’t been seen together in the Upperworld. It would be a good test.”

“Exactly,” Raiden said. “I want you guys to go and act natural. Keep an eye out for anything tense, any looks, anything.”

“And if something happens?” Dominic asked.

“You both can protect yourself just fine.” Raiden eye’s hit me once, for barely half a second. As if checking if revealing that about me was okay. Few actually knew how Pine died. For all they knew I couldn’t hold a sword and had poisoned him.

“I’m bringing a knife.” Dominic’s hand curled in, scraping the couch right next to my ear. Then he was up off the couch, pulling me behind him without another word.

Raiden walked out with us and squeezed my arm as Dominic and I split off to our rooms. Empathy like that would serve him well if he ever took power.

Dominic and I suffered through the awkward back and forth that always arose when I branched off to my own room. We were both obviously avoiding the subject.

It seemed like an important line not to cross.

I changed quickly, throwing on a white summer dress and tying a scarf through my hair. I walked into the hallway at the same time as Dominic, who was looking sickeningly handsome in a simple, clean white shirt.

“She might try to steal you from me,” I said, staring at the juncture of his elbow where his pushed up sleeves ended.

Dominic laughed low, then walked over. “I’ll stay strong, I promise.”

Dominic grabbed my hand and pulled me through a portal right into a familiar alley right near Maria’s restaurant. The Upperworld was busy today. It always was, in comparison to the Underworld. But the distinct sound of people dining and cars and scooters zipping was louder.

We walked down a short cobblestone street, lined on either side with white buildings with gorgeous purple flowers climbing up the sides. A short walk, complete with a few stares but no outright glares or threats thrown my way (thank the Fates) and we found Maria’s street.

The wooden sign of Maria’s restaurant appeared a moment later, and before we even got to the door, she was rushing out to greet me. She probably spied us through the window.

“Rosemary! You are not to leave me that long again!” she scolded, waving a cloth towel at me.

I smiled, then hugged her tightly. “It’s only been a few months, Maria.”

“A few months too long.” If I showed up every day that wouldn’t be enough for her. “You didn’t miss my food?”

“Of course I did! There are few better joys in life than being served good food.” I meant it. I loved to cook but *having* to got tiring.

“Good.” Maria turned to Dominic, giving him an appreciative once over. “Now, who is this?” She obviously knew who he was. And who he was to me. Even without knowing from the news, Dominic standing with the right side of his body pressed into the center of my back was a dead giveaway.

I smiled at her, then turned to Dominic, “This is my husband, Dominic.”

“Nice to meet you, Maria,” he said, his formal tone sliding over my skin and making me feel warm. Just as quickly, that warmth spiked with a bit of jealousy. He knew how to turn on the charm when he wanted to.

Maria eyed him boldly, leaving us standing in silence for a stretch of time. She turned back towards me, “Husband, huh? Keep an eye on him. Someone might try to nab him.”

I chuckled, well aware of what Dominic’s imposing presence and devilish smirk did to people. “I’m on high alert.”

Maria pointed us to a table outside, as close to the water as we could get. Pressed up against dark, powerful rocks, we’d barely be saved from the spray of the ocean as it crashed against the shoreline.

It was beautiful.

As we walked, silence fell upon the entire restaurant, watching as two gods strolled to a table like it was an everyday occurrence.

“Don’t just stand there and stare. Eat,” Maria hissed through her teeth behind us and a smirk touched my lips. *That* was why this restaurant was one of the best for gods. Maria didn’t care who you were, so long as you were kind and complimentary. She also hated any distraction from her food.

When we reached the table, Dominic pulled out my chair for me wordlessly, tucking me safely into the table. As he walked around to his side, I couldn’t help but gawk at him.

He was this *presence* pulling all the candlelight around us into his space. He smirked at what he saw in my expression and I could see the restraint to tease me in the clench of his jaw.

I looked around to the people I could see behind him and off to the left. A few people were looking blatantly, the way you do when you see someone famous walking by. But not with the visceral hate that would imply that they were bitter about losing their identity, to use Odell’s words.

Dominic was doing the same, looking somewhere right over my left shoulder. A waiter who was shaking so hard it looked like he had a permanent chill walked up a moment later, showing us a bottle of wine that Maria had picked out for us.

After Dominic looked at the label, the waiter awkwardly shoved the bottle toward me. It was a recent bottle from a Bacchus vineyard and a tart, dry white wine. I smiled, half at the wine and half at the idea that Jason would chastise me for preferring his Roman counterpart's grapes.

At my nod, the waiter reached into his apron for a bottle opener. The second his hand slipped trying to cut off the top of the wax, Dominic grumbled, "I can do that."

"No, I couldn't let you," the waiter said, terrified.

Dominic took the bottle out of his hand anyway. "Not a fan of other people serving my wife."

The possessiveness sent my heart beating double time and the waiter running off. The second he was out of ear shot, I let out the giggle I'd been holding in.

Dominic's eyes lit up, but kept his focus on the bottle. He peeled off the wax, uncorked the bottle, and poured me a taste with such skill and grace it was borderline erotic.

I barely tasted the wine he poured under the close scrutiny of Dominic's eyes. The way he watched my neck as I swallowed.

My cheeks burned. He noticed. And fucking smirked.

"Asshole," I grumbled at him, right as the poor waiter returned with a basket of bread and a plate of a creamy white spread.

Oh, Maria was a gem. It was one of my favorite dishes of hers—made of fish roe, onion, lemon, garlic, and olive oil.

I dug in a piece and moaned helplessly at the taste. Dominic raised an eyebrow and I narrowed my eyes, daring him to tell me that sounded familiar. He—very wisely—just grabbed a piece of bread and tried some himself.



He let out a groan in the back of his throat that clearly took him by surprise. Dominic's eyes shot up to arrest mine and I let myself match the smirk he gave me.

The air around us grew tense, the soft candlelight adding to whatever electricity was cracking in the space between us. But we were in public, it was no time for tearing off his clothes.

To break it, I went back to looking around me as subtly as I could. That was something productive I could do, instead of figuring out how to talk to Dominic without it turning into a fight, lighthearted or otherwise, for the whole restaurant to see.

"There's someone staring at you," Dominic seethed, his hand curling on the table.

"Where?" I asked, cringing slightly at the panic in my voice.

Dominic looked at me under pinched brows, then jerked his chin over to the space behind my left shoulder. Under the guise of looking at the flowers and vines climbing up the side of the restaurant, I turned over my shoulder.

I knew who it was immediately. It was a man, about in his fifties, with a protruding belly and a graying beard, staring directly at me.

His eyes were narrowed, lips pulled into something of a sneer. But then when he locked me in a second of eye contact, he winked, the sneer transforming into a grin.

So an advance, then.

I turned back to Dominic who was a little paler throughout the middle of his face. "Can I use the knife, now? I'll be subtle, I promise."

I laughed softly. "No, I think that would defeat the purpose of coming here and keeping the peace."

"Still want to," Dominic grumbled, before tossing back his glass of wine.

"Why? Jealous?" I meant it as a joke, but the second the question left my lips, Dominic's eyes went black.

“Yes.”

“I don’t know if you’re allowed to be.” There were no feelings between us. Unless that’s what you wanted to call the urge to scrunch my nose in vexation around him.

Every time we were together—well, apart from when we were *together*—I constantly felt like I was frustrated. Like I was trying to remember a word that was on the tip of my tongue or couldn’t find a book I could have *sworn* I’d seen the day before.

“*Allowed?*” Dominic sounded offended. “You’re my wife. An old pig winks at you in front of me and I have every right to carve the word *no* into his forehead.”

My mouth fell open an inch. “That is a...colorful image.”

“He does it again and it will be reality.”

“I’m sure you’d get away with it,” I muttered under my breath. Because if *I’d* done it, I’d incite a mob in the middle of the restaurant.

“What was that?” Dominic asked, giving me his ear.

I took a sip of wine instead of answering.

Silence, heavy and thick, fell over the table. There were questions, casual conversations I could start, but I honestly didn’t know if that was okay.

“We can’t sit in silence the whole dinner,” Dominic said, leaning back in his chair, looking at me like I’d been presented to him.

“What do you want to do, talk like normal people?”

“We’re gods, not normal people.” Dominic stared at me. Through me. Then spoke pointedly. “Tell me something no one else knows.”

My lips cracked into a helpless smile, drawing Dominic’s attention. “You and my secrets.”

“Come on,” he goaded, eyes still on my mouth. “Tell me.”

I paused. The trust, the willingness to answer him honestly took me off guard. But it didn't *feel* wrong.

"I'll make you tell me," Dominic said at my silence, the threat throaty and dark.

"And there's the threat." We couldn't go a full conversation without one.

"Glad you see it like that." Dominic leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table. "I know how to torture the information out of you now. Actually, don't answer. I want a reason to do it."

Oh. I swallowed on reflex, my throat feeling dry. I reached for my wine, taking a long enough pull to drain half my glass. As I set it back down on the table, Dominic chuckled. I really needed to stop giving him information about myself if he was only going to use it against me.

But now I was considering giving him another piece.

I twisted his ring around a few times, then, "I like the beach."

Dominic frowned. "Sweetheart, I knew that. Try again."

I laughed, earning a prideful jolt in Dominic's expression.

The look in his eyes unlocked my filter because I said, "I'm mad at Daphne," before I could stop the words.

Dominic sat up straighter at the vulnerability of my answer. "Because she left Lukas?"

I shook my head. "Because she didn't tell me. She was—is—my best friend. I wouldn't have told him where she went. Even if he tried to force it out of me. She *knew* that and still... she just left."

Dominic nodded with understanding. My stomach pinched with the realization that he'd actually listened to me. Such a basic requirement of a conversation and yet when he did it, it felt honoring. "She didn't trust you."

"Mhm," I hummed in agreement. I dropped my gaze to the napkin crossed over my lap. I adjusted it. "I'd trusted her with

so much and the thought that she didn't feel like she could trust me back..."

"Hurt," Dominic supplied.

"Like a bitch," I said, lips turning into a pitying smile.

"You know," Dominic said. Carefully, like he was testing out responding genuinely instead of with a sarcastic quip. "People do stupid shit when they are scared. React the wrong way out of fear."

"You think she was scared?" I knew she had reasons to be. A tall, heavily muscled, sea-controlling reason to be. But I wanted to hear what Dominic thought.

"She was staring down a wedding and the responsibility of half a realm. Makes sense."

"Seventeen years is a long engagement," I joked. Daphne learned of her betrothal when she was six. "Enough to plot an escape plan."

Dominic poked his tongue into his cheek. A habit that looked a little too good on him. "Good thing I gave you less than a day then."

I barely even noticed the dolma dropping down in the space between us.

"And a small wedding. The affair Daphne's mother was planning would have given me a panic attack. So many ruffles." I shivered at the thought. The dress I was supposed to wear made me look like a cupcake.

"I do not look forward to seeing that," Dominic said, sharing my disgust.

"That is if she comes back at all." The thought terrified me. But what did I know anymore?

Dominic's hand grabbed mine on top of the table, pressing into my skin and soothing the ache in my heart. "She'll be back. Fear only lasts so long."

When would my fear of the truth fall away? It was already draining, like small drips out of a leaky faucet. A rather large

one broke through right then, sitting in the candlelight and sound of crashing waves.

A question built on my tongue, a damning one that would crack open a piece of me I'd kept buried. At least to Dominic.

Dominic's foot brushed against my ankle and the motion forcefully pulled the question out. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Yes." Zero hesitation. Just warm, dark brown eyes holding mine the same way his hand was.

I breathed through slightly pursed lips and then went for it. "Did you ever try to get them back?"

Dominic's face pinched together in a mix of panic and shock. It lasted less than a second, but I caught it. He took a long sip of his wine, and I gave him the space to collect himself. I needed to hear this, no matter how painful.

"No." The word was nothing more than a low groan. "I know it sounds like I should have."

I shook my head, motioning—begging—for him to continue. "It's fucked up. Being the god of the dead and not having the power of resurrection."

I let out a bitter laugh in agreement.

"But they have each other," he said, nodding his head as if he was reassuring himself. "I've seen them a few times, when their souls gather enough strength to manifest, and they seem content. Peaceful."

I was hit with a flash of jealousy so severe I felt my stomach turning sour. I wished I could see Pine. But it was a rare extension of grace in the Underworld that you couldn't see those who had ended your life.

Dominic's eyes narrowed observing my reaction too closely. I schooled my features to avoid the scrutiny. "I thought about it. At the beginning. But, I've come to terms with it. My uncle paid for it."

*Like I would.* Or should.

"You won't."

My head snapped up. I hadn't even realized I'd dropped eye contact.

Dominic was looking at me with such intensity I shifted in my seat. I didn't know how to deal with it.

"You won't," he repeated.

Another droplet fell. I was out of control, not able to get a grasp on the things I was willing to tell him. Secrets I'd sworn would never find the light of day in his presence were finding the sun.

I opened my mouth, my jaw shaking slightly with the gravity of what I was about to tell him, what I was about to reveal. My courage was hanging on by a thread and the arrival of Maria cut it, letting it crash and shatter on the floor.

"Something wrong with my food?" she snapped playfully, motioning to the untouched dolma and the barely touched spread.

"Of course not, Maria," Dominic said, his casual charm smoothing her features. "We got carried away talking."

"Enough talking, more eating. Talk later," Maria chastised, then shoved the dolma out of the way to make room for a large plate of well-seasoned meat and vegetables.

When she left, I watched her full form move between tables and slap her young grandson upside the head. I turned back, expecting intensity, but Dominic was looking at me with lit eyes, the lighter brown peeking out from his normally black brown eyes.

He took a bite of lamb, swallowed, then said, "My turn."

I smiled, feeling something close to gratitude. He didn't press me, just moved on. "Least favorite god."

I laughed, careful not to choke on my food. "You're trouble."

"And you like it," Dominic shot back. "Come on, answer."

"I am not the biggest fan of Morpheus." Another one of the gods who'd simply never started a line. The same immortal

entity that has been haunting dreams since his inception.

Dominic gifted me a deep laugh. “Of course you would pick the one god no one likes.”

“Look me in the eye and tell me he doesn’t creep you out.”

Dominic looked at his plate then stabbed a piece of zucchini with his fork. I laughed as he chewed it roughly.

“My turn,” I said, sounding horribly giddy. I didn’t sound happy around Dominic. I sounded pissed, annoyed, frustrated. “Tell me your favorite meal.”

“Really?” Dominic looked skeptical.

“Yes,” I defended. “It says a lot about a person.”

“Risotto,” he replied on instinct. “My mom used to make it with mushrooms and scallops.”

My heart clenched at the mention of his late mother. God, he was so young when they died.

“I have a good recipe for that,” I said carefully. “But I’d love to try your mom’s if you have it.”

He shook his head, then reset the hair that shook out of place with a swipe of his hand. “It’s lost. It was never written down.”

“Oh,” I said softly, unsure what to say. There was that odd moment of trust, but I still felt like the comparison to his uncle applied.

“Would you make your recipe for me?” Dominic asked, pulling my misery out of my chest with a resounding pop.

“Yes! Of course, yes,” I rushed out, my eagerness pouring over the table.

“Thank you,” Dominic said. And then smiled. Smiled and punched me in the heart.

Maria caught my eye across the restaurant and I kicked Dominic under the table. He dug right into his food, clearing the portions he’d put on his plate then reached for more.

I did the same, lest I suffer Maria’s wrath.

When enough food was consumed to safely avoid a lashing, Dominic took his turn. “Ever been in love?”

I stared at him, stunned. I’d never heard the word love from his mouth. Not when it was the opposite of everything we were to each other. But I answered anyway, drawn into honesty by the wine. “No. I haven’t really been with anyone actually.”

My gaze was on my plate as I said it and when I looked up, I saw Dominic looking like a dog who’d just found his favorite bone.

“Not like that,” I said, my voice thick with amusement at his assumption. “Even though I’m sure you’d take immense pride if it was true.”

That would just be perfect really. Letting him—a man I hated and who hated me—where no one had been before.

“I would,” he said, fatally serious. Some thought passed through his head and then he shuddered violently, jerking forward. He spit out his next words like he could throw them away. “Never tell me who they are.”

I knew it shouldn’t elicit a positive reaction from me, but my face felt warm and my heart kicked up a speed. Maybe it was his face, handsome and haunting. The steel in his expression highlighted his sharp jaw and strong nose. “Jealousy looks good on you.”

Dominic grumbled. “Take your turn before I start breaking shit.”

“What about you?” I asked, suddenly needing that information more than anything else in the world.

“No.” It was one word, final. Clearing his past of everything but me. Relief poured over me in a wave so powerful I sunk down a little further in my chair.

“Good.” My voice clinked over the glasses, harsh and deadly.

Dominic barked a laugh. “Jealous?”



“More than I thought,” I said, then looked at my food. It didn’t look like the delicious ministrations of Maria’s kitchen anymore. Now, it just looked like nondescript faces of Dominic’s former lovers. I pushed the plate away from me. “I’m finished with this.”

Dominic laughed loud enough to turn the head of the person behind him, then settled with a pride so bright it colored my nose pink.

We talked through the rest of dinner, but I couldn’t for the life of me remember what either of us said. The warmth elicited by his possessiveness spread through my neck, chest, and lower, taking rational thought with it. Maybe we were playing the part of a married couple to mask our observations of the crowd around us, or maybe the mission just gave us a reason to act differently around each other. Whatever it was, I wasn’t sure I wanted it to end.

Dominic started shifting in his chair and after a stare down that lasted a second too long and conjured too many memories of his hands on my body, he flagged the waiter to clear the dishes.

After a short argument about skipping dessert—during which Dominic said that he had no plans to skip dessert, he would just be eating it later—and Maria screaming at me like a banshee when I tried to leave money at the table, she shooed us out of there.

Apparently we were distracting her staff.

Dominic walked us out of the restaurant, his hand resting low enough on my back that his intentions were crystal clear. If they weren’t already. He pushed me out of the restaurant and then to the right, instead of left towards the alley we arrived in. Settling me in the space between his body and the buildings, away from the bustling street, he grabbed my hand and started down the street.

“Where are we going?” I asked, picking up my pace to keep next to him.

He looked at me, fire in his eyes. “The beach.”

## Chapter 25

### Rose

The water was stunning tonight.

Lapping against the shore in onyx swells, reflecting the silver of the moonlight with the brilliance of a diamond. The moon was a half crescent, not at all special to someone who lived in the Upperworld and could feel the cold light on their face every night.

But for two people who were used to a dimmed down, dying version of the night's sun, it was almost blinding.

I thought the Underworld was beautiful—the feeling a combination of nostalgia for the place I was raised, protectiveness for the realm that was fueled by the power in my blood, and genuine awe at the way flowers had managed to find a way to live when they were surrounded by so much death.

But the Upperworld carried a more striking, forceful beauty. One that stole your attention, made me feel less important, like I could escape my reputation for a moment.

Be anyone.

Enjoy the simple pleasure of silence and a man as they walked together toward the ocean. So I didn't ruin it, just let my hand settle into Dominic's palm a little deeper.

Dominic led me to the beach, holding my hand all the way from Maria's restaurant, down the worn staircase, and onto the rough sand. It was only then, that we stood here, watching the waves hit the shoreline, that he let go.

I had to physically restrain myself from protesting. I wasn't done with this illusion yet. There were questions I wanted to

ask—did we come down here because it required us to walk along the main street, scanning for glaring humans or outright aggression, or did he just want to? I needed to know what the hell went on in his head.

Dominic bent down, slipping off his shoes and rolling his slacks up, cuffing them high enough that the water wouldn't damage his pants.

The move was clean, sterile even, and yet somehow the glimpse it gave me of his ankle bone felt lewd. I reached down to take off my own sandals, resting a hand casually on Dominic's shoulder to steady myself, but his hand wrapped around my ankle before I could do it myself.

Purposefully, Dominic unzipped the high back of my ropey sandals, then lifted my right foot to peel off the shoe. The feel of the leather dragging against my skin along with the scrape of his calloused hands sent heat pooling in my core.

Dominic repeated the move with my left foot, sending a twin flash of heat down. When he was done, gathering both my shoes in one hand, he looked up at me under his thick, light brown lashes.

He looked good on his knees, and I told him so. The towering, imposing Dominic, finally submissive. Although somehow, he made it look like a choice. That he was on his knees, but only because it was the position necessary to dominate me completely.

“You'd like that wouldn't you?” Dominic responded, his tone eliciting a very clear picture in my head of his tongue at my core.

“Guilty,” I breathed. I'd be an idiot not to salivate at that image. And salivating I was, my mouth watering at the sight of his broad shoulders from above.

Dominic chuckled and I could feel the scrape of his hot breath through the thin fabric of my dress. He stood, shamelessly pressing a kiss to my stomach and dragging the hand still wrapped around my left ankle all the way up my body, bypassing my core by an inch.

His hand resettled in mine, and he passed me my shoes so he could pick up his own.

“Do you know this beach?” Dominic asked as he pulled me along, positioning me so that I was closest to the water.

“Yes,” I responded. “It’s a favorite of mine, actually. I love how high the cliffs go. How you can see the grass and greenery on top.”

The cliffs on this beach were abnormally high, jutting up seemingly out of nowhere next to the flatter expanse that Maria’s restaurant and the town sat on.

“It’s private,” Dominic noted, correctly landing on the reason I liked it so much.

“Feels like our own little world.” My voice sounded weirder—lighter—than normal.

“Do people come down here often?” Dominic asked, keeping his gaze forward. I looked up at him, his side profile defined by the moonlight. The little valley between his high cheekbones and strong jaw, the golden stubble covering it. His nose—straight, but on the larger side.

The hate in my chest flickered, spreading an ache over my shoulders and down my back.

“Sometimes,” I said. “People climb the cliff, I’ve heard.”

“You’ve heard or you know?” Dominic asked, cutting my attempt at humility in half.

“I *know*, jackass.” I jumped in front of him and pulled him toward the little cave I knew was tucked in between two enormous rises of rock. You wouldn’t see it unless you were walking right along the cliff wall, but it was there to the trained eye.

I was one of the trained.

We walked into the crack in the rocks, the sand peppering with grass as we moved further from the shoreline. But not far enough to lose the comforting crashing sound of the water.

I let go of Dominic's hand and moved toward the wall of rock, momentarily distracted by the low hum, a growl even, that Dominic released.

My hand reached out, touched one of the metal hooks drilled into the rock.

"See?" I asked, turning over my shoulder to Dominic, looking all too demon-like with the moon backlighting his body.

"Grappling hooks," Dominic said, taking a step toward me.

I spun as he approached, allowing him to press my back into the rock, to the right of the metal. Looking at him made me nervous, a silly flicker of fear shooting down my body. But it was a smarter move than giving him my back. That wasn't what any person did when they were being hunted.

And I was pretty sure I still was.

Dominic stepped closer, aligning his legs, hips, stomach, chest against every matching part of my body, just several inches higher. I let my head fall back against the rock softly, feeling my neck relax. As if this was how my head was supposed to be positioned. Looking into the deep brown eyes of someone half a foot taller than me.

Those very eyes traced over the lines of my face, deepening the burn of the moon on my skin. I felt like there was a spotlight on me, forcing each one of my features into a harsher, more revealing light.

Dominic looked like he was relishing in that, drinking in my exposed features like they could tell him everything about me.

"What are you doing?" I asked, trying not to squirm under his assessment.

"Looking at you."

"Why?"

"Because I like to look at beautiful things," Dominic said plainly. "Now shut up and let me."

I acquiesced, only because the silence added to the anticipation growing in my chest. It was fizzing, the bubbles pulling tight then breaking with a satisfying pop.

Dominic pressed into me a little tighter, trapping me against the rough rock, the edges digging into my bare back. The thin straps of my dress were doing nothing to protect me from the onslaught of feeling on both sides of my body.

Dominic lifted a hand, brushing the tips of four fingers over the perimeter of my face and swiping his thumb over the tip of my nose. I squirmed helplessly under his attention, allowing a low sound escape from the back of my throat.

Dominic grinned and I shoved my mouth into the best frown I could. It felt like letting him win to give him an insight into how much he affected me.

I wanted him to suffer as much as I did.

“This is nice,” Dominic said, moving his hand around my head to where the scarf was knotted at the base of my neck. His finger slipped into the knot, loosening, then fully untying it.

“You like it?” I asked as he pulled it from my hair, the cold silk caressing my neck and collarbone. I spoke barely above a whisper. Any louder and the quiver in my voice would give away how turned on I was.

“Hmm.” The sound dripped down my skin like water droplets. “Did you wear it because it was pretty or because you wanted me to use it?”

“I...” I began, then had to cut myself off. My stomach and chest were tight with something close to hope and I knew my throat would constrict too, forcing my words tense.

Dominic took my gaping as an excuse to speak again. “Because I think you wanted me to use it. Bringing me here, to an alcove that conveniently has grappling hooks nailed to the rocks. Wearing a piece of fabric in your hair that would make it all too easy to tie your wrists together.”

My heart—and my stomach—clenched painfully. Based on Dominic’s smile, my arousal was all over my face, obvious to

him.

And when Dominic dragged the scarf through his fingers, curling them in the same way he did when they were inside of me, I decided at that moment I didn't just want him to suffer, I needed him to.

"I think I'm gonna go for a swim," I said, wiggling out from where Dominic had me pressed into the wall.

"Oh, really?" His chuckle said *bullshit*.

"Yes, really." And then I reached behind my back to pull open the strings of my dress. Dominic's eyes narrowed on my chest, looking at the way the fabric loosened as I worked the strings open.

"Rose." It sounded like a warning.

"What, Dominic?" I pulled the dress over my shoulders and let it fall down around my waist, exposing me to Dominic's black stare.

I was greeted with a growl and the sight of his hands curling into fists at his side. Good, I was getting to him. I tackled the zipper next and when that was open, I let the dress fall into my hand, pulling it off my feet one at a time.

Dominic's jaw got that familiar little stone in the corner which meant he was biting down. *Hard*.

But he didn't move. Just stared at me like he was trying to commit the sight to memory. Or to see if I would launch myself at him.

"Not going to join me?" Silence. Dead silence. "Okay, then."

He stood still, so I shrugged and gathered my dress up in a ball.

"Rose," Dominic grumbled, muffled by the sound of my dress hitting him in the face. It dropped into his waiting hands, then he said, "Don't taunt me. It won't do you any good."

"I fail to see the threat there." And then I was off, walking quickly over the short expanse of beach and into the warm

water. With a final look over my shoulder at Dominic, who, quite frankly, looked fucking terrifying standing in the shadowed alcove like he was waiting to take your soul, I dove under the waves.

The salty water felt amazing against my overheated skin, slipping over my limbs. I broke the surface on a heavy exhale, pushing my wet hair back.

I spun around at the sound of heavy footfalls on the sand. Dominic was marching down the beach, gloriously free of clothing and deliciously ruffled.

He snapped, *finally*. And I felt victorious.

I stood up as he approached, the water hitting only to the cinch of my waist. Dominic's eyes glowed black and the vein that ran over his bicep popped out.

“Under the fucking water, Rose. Before someone sees you.”

I cocked an eyebrow. He was standing on the beach stark naked. “Get in the water before someone sees *you*.”

The rough texture of my voice seemed to break whatever sanity Dominic had left and he charged toward me like a man possessed. The splash of his thighs moving through the water pelted me, giving me a glimpse of the force about to crash into me.

The second I was within arm's reach, his hand shot out and clasped around my neck, pulling me towards him, reminiscent of the times he'd done the same in bed.

“Do you enjoy being a little brat?” Dominic asked, lightly squeezing his fingers into the side of my neck but leaving my windpipe free.

“I do when it finally gets you to show a little emotion,” I taunted. “You're so stoic. For all I know, I don't affect you in the slightest.”

“You think you don't affect me?” Dominic asked, offense splashed across his features and earning me another squeeze.



His head dropped to my ear, his nose running over the upper arch. “You want me to tell you how much you *affect* me, Rose?”

I nodded as much as I could around the cage of his hand.

“I can’t go five minutes without thinking about what it feels like to be inside you. To feel you squeezing me in a tight little fist over and over again as I make you come.”

I let out a whimper before I could help it. I might have pushed him a bit too far. But I couldn’t find the mind to feel guilty about it.

“I feel like a man insane,” Dominic continued, the low growl of his voice drilling into my ear and straight down my center. “One wink. A fucking wine bottle. That’s all it takes for you to affect me.”

A small yank at my throat and I was plastered to him, his hard length trapped between us.

“I can’t even let a waiter do his job and serve you wine because the thought of something he gave you touching those lips makes me crazy. I want to go back and track down everyone we just saw who looked at you walking around in that skimpy little dress with a bare pussy and erase their memories.”

Dominic pulled away from my ear, taking my stare in a grip as unforgiving as the one around my throat. “You are my wife. Those lips are *mine*.”

His free hand reached up to cup me between the legs. “*This* is mine.” His middle finger broke free and shoved inside me, ripping a moan from my lips.

“And all you do by taunting me, Rose, is make me a little more insane. You whittle down my sanity to the point where all I can think about is shoving in between your legs and burying my cock so far inside you you’d feel me for weeks.”

“Dominic,” I breathed, begged.

“Is that what you wanted, Rose?” Dominic touched our foreheads together. “To drive me insane?”

That was exactly what I'd wanted. "Yes."

"Well, mission fucking accomplished, sweetheart." And then Dominic kissed me, not even bothering with an attempt at a sweet beginning, just diving his tongue straight into my mouth.

I arched against him on instinct, desperation clawing at my veins and pleading with me to move as close as I could. I'd bury myself into his skin if he'd let me. Dominic's finger pumped in once, then out so that he could add a second finger as he dived back in.

In his madness, he'd walked me back into the water so that it was now at our chests, giving me the buoyancy to jump up and wrap my legs around his waist easily.

I could feel my hips moving on their own accord, driving down into his fingers and to where his thumb was pressed perfectly against the apex of my thighs.

My hands grappled with his shoulder and around his neck, the tension in my body pulling painfully tight from the pressure of his fingers into the side of my neck to where his other hand was doing sinful things to my body.

"Rose," Dominic growled when I started moving quicker, obviously chasing release. "Not fucking yet. Not until you feel my pain."

"I already do," I begged, grinding down again.

"I fucking doubt that," Dominic said, his voice a rough scrape. Like the rocks on the cliff.

Dominic released my neck and my core at the same time, making me whimper in protest. Until he reached around my thighs and started dragging me closer to the shore. When most of his chest was exposed, he hauled me over his shoulder, his arm clamping over my exposed backside to secure me.

"I thought you didn't want anyone to see me," I said against his lower back.

"They can see you now, when it's crystal clear who you belong to." And then we were gone, stepping into dead space

and out in the alcove where we'd ditched our clothing.

Dominic knelt with me still on his shoulder, using his free hand to spread out my dress and his shirt to create a makeshift blanket on the sand. He dropped me onto it and straddled my hips with his knees before I could even attempt to get away.

Not that I wanted to.

He grabbed both my wrists in one hand and yanked them above my head. I could feel the cool kiss of metal of the lowest grappling hook and my stomach bottomed out when I realized what he was about to do.

"Dominic," I gasped.

"I'll repeat," he said, looking down his strong nose at me. "Did you wear it because it was pretty or because you wanted me to use it?"

"Use it." I sounded like I was begging. Maybe I was.

"Good girl." My legs twisted, slick from the praise and anticipation. Dominic slid the cool scarf around my wrists and through the hook, tying me tightly together. Restraining me against soft silk while I was burning up inside.

I looked down Dominic's muscled chest to where his arousal was resting on my stomach and I flexed my hips toward it on instinct. Fuck, he was big. It shouldn't shock me, I was used to him. But it still did, every time.

He didn't even need to try that hard and I would feel him the next day. I felt him always.

Dominic dragged a hand down my chest, stopping to squeeze my breast, and then down to grab his length off my stomach. He pumped himself slowly, while his eyes looked at me laid out and tied up for his taking.

"You like this," he said, almost in wonder.

"Yes." I strained towards him, as much as I could while restrained.

"Good. Because I love it," he said. My mind tried to latch on to that word, the first time he'd ever said it in relation to

me, but I was distracted by the sight of the tip of his cock glistening.

“Dominic, stop playing with me,” I said, sounding so desperate it was almost embarrassing.

“Never,” he promised. He gripped himself at the base and stepped his knees in between my legs, pushing them wide with his free hand.

Leaning over me, he brought a hand right next to my head. “My turn to drive you insane.”

“Please.” And then again, softer, like a whisper, “Please.”

“Good girl, begging for my cock,” Dominic praised, notching himself at my entrance and pushing in slowly, lighting my nerves on fire.

When he was seated to the hilt, he let out a satisfied groan that matched my own and brought his other hand up to the top of my shoulder.

He looked over my arms extended over my head, my wet hair splayed out over my dress, and down my naked body before saying, “God, you look so pretty tied up for me.”

“Then show me what that does to you,” I moaned.

And show, he did. Dominic’s face dropped into concentration as he began moving, rocking his hips into me slowly. His pace increased almost immediately, driven faster and faster by the pleased moans falling from my lips.

Right when he could feel me close to the edge of release, Dominic pulled himself from my body and sat back on his haunches. He dragged a hand through his shaggy hair, breathing in deeply.

“I hate you,” I groaned, pulling against the binds on my wrist.

“I need a second, but you don’t deserve any breaks after that little stunt,” Dominic said, an evil glint in his eyes.

In a flash, he had my legs thrown over his shoulders, his hands gripping my ass as he licked clean up my center.

I released a broken, far too loud moan, at the feel of his tongue on me. Not unfamiliar, but shocking all the same. He was so, so good at this.

He teased me for a second, lapping up my arousal, before moving up towards my clit, circling it with his tongue.

“Fuck,” I cursed, throwing my head back and arching against my restraints.

Dominic chuckled knowingly against my core, the vibration kicking me higher towards my release. He wrapped his lips around me and sucked hard, and the onslaught of pleasure that had been building on his hand in the water came barreling through, compounding into what I could already tell would be a soul-stealing orgasm.

Dominic didn't give me a single second of reprieve, alternating between long pulls of his mouth and circles of his tongue, all while teasing me with two fingers inside.

My chest stretched tighter and tighter, until I could see nothing but black behind my eyes and hear nothing but the sound of my hoarse voice begging him not to stop.

With a forceful, long suck, I detonated, pulsing through my entire body and letting out a scream that bounced over the rocks and echoed into the night.

Dominic was up and shoving himself back between my legs in a second, my core still pulsing around him from my release.

“No breaks,” he reminded, pounding into me with gloriously rough strokes until I was hurtling toward release again, wrapping my hands around the metal for stability.

It was a hopeless grasp for sanity when Dominic was lighting me on fire with his hips and his thick cock and the praise he was whispering in my ear.

The hatred and pain and guilt was twisting, shooting into every crevice of my body and digging in, reminding me that I would never, never be rid of him. Not when my body was impossibly warm, overheated with him inside and out.

Dominic's voice dropped from words to growls and groans poured into my ear, and that was all I needed to hear. The sound of how much I affected him drove me over the edge again, falling back with the feel of Dominic's lips connecting with my neck as he finished. The feel of him spilling inside me filled my chest with a glow of pride.

"See what you do to me?" Dominic breathed against my neck.

I nodded then yanked at my wrists. Dominic untied me quickly and the second my hands were free, I dropped them to his back to pull him down over me. He stayed inside me, but gave me his full weight, bringing his head up to drop lazy kisses all over my face and neck.

We stayed wrapped in each other, my hands stroking his back and his tongue stroking my own, until the moon hit directly overhead.

Only then did we gather our sandy clothing and retreat back to his bedroom. I didn't even try to leave for my own after he dragged me under the sheets again, falling spent and sated against his pillows as he pulled me against his chest and fell asleep.

## Chapter 26

### Rose

Based on the murderous look in Dominic's eyes, this would be the last time our morning was interrupted by desperate knocking.

We woke up barely touching, a tense inch of space separating our bodies. Dominic was on his back, his arm slung across the top of my pillow. I was on my side, my pinky finger so close to the side of his chest I could feel the phantom brush of his skin.

But not touching. Even if we'd fallen asleep pressed together, it was if our sleeping forms knew that there was still so much untouched, so much animosity between us.

I'd rolled out of bed first, making quick use of the restroom and brushing my hair in an attempt to look put together. I thought about going back to my room, but I opened Dominic's door to find him waiting on the other side.

Straightening the workout clothes I'd thrown on, I inched past Dominic and back into his room, absolutely refusing to look at the grin surely plastered on his face.

I sat on his couch, picking up the book I'd stolen That Night and was flipping through it when he joined me, pulling my legs over his thighs. He was clad in nothing but low slung, black flannel pants and I was trying not to jump him when a clipped knock hit his door.

"Stay here," Dominic ordered. But when had I ever listened to that command?

I scurried to the wall next to his door, on the side it opened so I would be hidden to whoever was behind it.

Dominic opened it, then moved his hand up to rest on the door. From my hiding spot, I could only see a sliver of light from the hallway and Dominic's tattooed arm.

"Woah, you good, man?" Dominic asked the knocker.

*Lukas.*

"Just peachy this morning, Dom," Lukas said, his voice carrying his typical forced sarcasm. He always tried to push humor when he was in a bad mood. "Where's your wife?"

I could see Dominic's hand grip the door tighter. "Why do you want to know?"

"I'm in the mood to get sweaty. And she really puts me to work, I'll say that."

I silently cursed Lukas and the entire Poseidon line. He'd just burst my happy little bubble.

"You want to *get sweaty* with my wife?" Oh, Dominic sounded so pissed. And the wood was groaning from how hard his fingertips were digging into the door. Now that he'd admitted to jealousy, the signs were crystal clear.

"Yes, Dominic," Lukas snapped.

Dominic jerked back, giving me just a small view of his neck and the rear side of his head. "What is wrong with you this morning? Didn't get your beauty sleep?"

"Slept like shit but somehow, I still look fantastic," Lukas returned dryly.

"Still didn't answer my question."

"In a bad fucking mood, if you must know. So, again, where's your wife?"

"And why should I answer that?"

Lukas laughed. His diabolical one. Oh, no. "Because you owe me. Especially after you scarred poor Loretta."

I didn't have to see Dominic to know his eyebrows shot to his hairline. "And who the fuck is Loretta?"



“One of my generals. She went to investigate a disturbance on the western shoreline of the Aegean. Big surge from two very powerful beings.”

Oh. No.

“And wanna know what she saw?”

“No,” Dominic grumbled.

Lukas answered anyway. “She saw the gods of the Underworld getting busy in the water. Fled like she was getting chased by a pod of sharks right back to Lounion to tell me what she saw.”

The mention of Lukas’s underwater palace hitched my nerves up a level. The fact that he was still there at the height of summer was a problem.

“Well, tell Loretta to mind her fucking business,” Dominic responded.

“You can issue an apology yourself. She likes tuna.”

Dominic snorted. “Your general likes tuna?”

“Well, she’s a dolphin,” Lukas said. “So, yes.”

“I’m not apologizing to a dolphin, Lukas.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you, Dominic. She’ll bite your ass off next time you want to go skinny dipping with Rose.”

I could see Dominic’s head shaking with a silent, but tense laugh.

“Rose,” Lukas prompted, causing Dominic’s head to snap back up.

“One second,” Dominic said, then slammed the door in his face, muffling Lukas’s laugh. I didn’t hear anything in the hallway, so I assumed he was still standing there. Waiting.

“I should probably go,” I said, but before I could move toward the door, Dominic crowded me against the wall.

“Why?” It almost wasn’t a word, the question was spoken so low.

I clamped my lips down to fight a smile. Since our morning bubble was already fucked, I decided to tease Dominic a little bit. See that vein that loved to pop out of his neck when I irritated him.

“Lukas needs me,” I explained.

Dominic’s eyes narrowed, and he brought his hand to my chin to force me to look him in the eye. “Say that again.”

“I should go,” I evaded.

Dominic let loose a growl and I broke, my lips pulling into a grin and a chuckle building in my throat.

“Something funny?” Dominic asked, deadly serious.

“Yes, actually.”

“Care to explain?”

“I just think it’s hilarious that you think Lukas and I are sleeping together.”

Dominic’s shoulders dropped an inch in relief. Good. “So you admit that you aren’t?”

“No, Dominic,” I said, then brought my hand up to brush a loose strand of hair out of his face. “You are the only person who’s been inside of me this year.”

Dominic hummed in satisfaction, but Lukas’s “Ew, for the love of Zeus” through the door distracted both of us.

“I’m just going to spar with him,” I said, my voice dropping to a whisper. Then I mouthed, “Daphne.”

Dominic’s eyes widened in understanding and then nodded to himself.

“Go,” he whispered back, his genuine tone assuaging the little flicker of guilt in my chest. “Take care of him.”

Dominic placed me in front of him then opened the door. Lukas had retreated a little down the hallway, clearly to avoid any more overheard declarations about Dominic and I’s sex life, but when he saw me, he walked back over to us.

“Are you also going to refuse to apologize to Loretta?” The question pulled my focus from the darkened, haunted blue of his eyes.

“I’ll send her a gift basket of tuna. I’ll throw in some sardines too,” I said, feeling Dominic chuckle at my back.

“Good,” Lukas said. “Ready?”

I nodded and Dominic said, “Return her in one piece. Please.”

Lukas dropped his gaze to me for half a second. A very loaded, knowing half a second that meant I had some explaining to do. “Did he just say please?”

“I think he did,” I answered through a smile.

“I mean it,” Dominic said. “One piece.”

“Be careful, Dominic,” Lukas chastised. “You’re sounding quite possessive.”

“I damn well should,” Dominic shot back. “Allude to fucking my wife again and I’ll break your nose.”

“But I like my nose,” Lukas pouted.

I laughed then turned to Dominic. I swiped a hand over his chest and down to squeeze his hand once.

The action seemed to settle him a bit and he looked at me, amused but still a little traumatized. I tilted my chin up slightly in invitation, and Dominic took it. He gripped my head in both hands and planted a deep kiss on my lips.

“Find me later,” he said, after releasing me.

“I will,” I promised and then I turned to walk down the hallway to the gym with Lukas.

Right as we were about to turn and leave the sight of our—Dominic’s—door, Lukas called over his shoulder, “Bye Dom! Thanks for letting me borrow your wife without breaking my nose!”

Dominic flipped him off, but laughed, full and throaty.

Lukas and I walked down to the gym, chatting about mutual friends, specifically about the end of summer party Sebastian was planning. Sebastian hadn't apologized for his comment at the Council meeting, but I chose to ignore it since he had obviously been drunk.

For now.

Lukas made me promise to stay long enough to see Sebastian sing again and I told him I'd make sure Dominic didn't pull anything this time.

The poison Lukas picked today was hand to hand combat. Lukas and I spared for over an hour, my body growing more flushed with every swing and blocked punch. I tapped out the third time I pulled a punch and Lukas used it to his advantage to grab my elbow and flip me onto the ground.

That was always my weakness. Pulling back at the last second for fear of hurting someone.

But when had breaking that pattern ever done me good?

We switched to knife throwing after that, which allowed for easier conversation. It also meant Lukas could pepper me with questions about the shift in Dominic and I's dynamic.

I assumed he knew we were sleeping together, but a late night rendezvous in the Aegean was too romantic to write off.

"Any plans on telling him?" Lukas asked, right as the point of his knife embedded itself in the shoulder of the target carved into the wall.

"I don't know," I replied honestly. "I know I should, but he's already chipped away at so much already."

"It might help," Lukas said.

"Help what?"

"The unrequited love you're feeling."

My knife flew into the lower leg off the target. I was aiming for the head. "Love? Lukas, darling, that's a stretch."

The heady feeling of hate was still sitting pretty in my chest. It just looked a little different. Was warping.

Lukas looked at me skeptical, the words *beach* and *threatening my nose* clear in his expression. “You sure about that?”

I nodded and channeled my energy into nailing the target right in the chest. I was always good at knife throwing.

“Does it hurt?” Lukas asked.

“What?”

“Does looking at him hurt?”

I stared at him stupidly for a second, taking in his words. I thought about how it felt. The thing in my chest with his name on it. “Yeah. It um...it aches. Like I overworked a muscle.”

Lukas raised an eyebrow like that was exactly what he meant. *Shit.*

“You said unrequited,” I noted. “That means it’s one-sided.”

Lukas threw a knife then looked back at me, crossing his large arms over his chest. “It’s not.”

My knife clattered to the ground.

“Did he say something?” I dared to ask. Even though I was still uncomfortable, itchy at the thought of anything existing between us that belonged in the positive emotion category.

“No,” Lukas said, shaking his head. I ignored the pit that sprung up in my stomach. “Even if he did, I wouldn’t tell you.”

“C’mon, Lukas. I thought we were friends.”

“But he’s my best,” Lukas returned. “Besides, I wouldn’t ask you to do the same with Daphne. For all I know you are keeping her secrets.”

He got me there. I’d help her hide a body if she asked. But for some reason, I felt the need to defend the situation. Especially when I’d seen him wither since she left. “I told you everything I know. I want to find her just as much as you do.”

Lukas laughed bitterly. Almost like it was a competition that I'd certainly lose. "He hasn't said anything directly, but he was about to take my head off at the mere thought of us hooking up."

We both shuddered at the thought. Lukas was like a brother. Let alone Daphne was—he was Daphne's fiancé.

"He's like that with everyone," I defended weakly.

Lukas raised his eyebrow like that exactly proved my point. "You trust him?"

"Yeah." I did. I was a little annoyed that I did.

"Tell him," Lukas said, then breathed in like I was about to be in for a friendly lashing. "You are the one keeping a secret. Why would he reveal anything if you are still hiding this from him?"

I grimaced. "Tough, but fair."

"I'm just fantastic at giving advice," Lukas said. "Spouses are hard."

"You'd know, wouldn't you?" I shot back and thankfully, he took the tease in stride.

Lukas just raised his eyebrows and said, "Shut it and throw, loser."

"You're a child." But I did throw. Two knives this time, hitting the head and chest of my target back to back.

When we were done, Lukas's eyes thankfully lightening a shade, Max walked through the already open door and said, "We gotta talk, Rose."

Lukas shooed me out, saying he'd go find Dominic for me, and let me follow Max.

"Dress Bandit is almost a closed case," they said, assigning the name their twin forced upon the incident.

"Tell me everything," I said through a laugh, walking down a hallway that smelled like Dominic's cologne as we talked.

## Chapter 27

### **Dominic**

Today was a shit day. It always was, but this was especially horrible.

Eleven years without my parents and it still felt like it was days ago. The memories of walking into their room, of slipping in my mother's blood, haunted me every day. But today, today they were all I could see when I closed my eyes.

My uncle was a blind idiot, consumed entirely by his need for power and paying no mind to simple fucking logic. He'd assumed that because the humans seemed to place weight on the age of eighteen, deeming that to be the culmination of adulthood, the same rules applied to the gods.

He thought that if he killed my parents before I turned eighteen the power would transfer to him. He was dead wrong. The second his knife had pierced my father's heart, I'd been pulled out of my slumber to the power of the entire Underworld coursing through my veins.

That was the worst of it, waking up with the horrible premonition that my parents were dead. Waking up to power that should have been granted freely, knowing what I'd find when I left my room.

My mother had loved her brother, treated him with respect and kindness, and he'd used that to catch her with her guard down and end her life.

He'd paid with his life and his limbs and his sanity. I didn't regret it, not for a second.

He deserved it.

If not for the years he stole from my parents and from me, but for the hell he put me through every year on the day they died.

But this, this year was worse. I normally forced Lukas or Adrian to get blasted drunk with me, trying and failing to cover the pain of seeing my parents' graves that morning.

Three years I'd been lucky, able to see their souls and talk to them. It never the same though, not as comforting as my mother's smile or my father's squeeze on the shoulder when they were alive.

I hadn't seen them this morning, but I paid my respects as I always did.

That wasn't why today especially sucked. Today sucked because I had the nagging, sickening, horrible feeling that I knew how to lessen the pain. And that feeling came with the image of long, dark brown hair and striking green eyes.

How had I gotten here?

To a place where I relied on Rose fucking Hades. Well, Pluto now, because I was the idiot who married her. She was supposed to be the equivalent of my uncle. Worthy of the same revenge because she had killed my best friend in the same way he'd killed my parents.

But no, I hadn't even formulated a plan for revenge and spent most of my time with her in my grasp or in my space. And I hadn't complained once. I'd even gone so far as to tell her that I didn't compare her to my uncle.

She was driving me insane. Every little look on her face had me wanting more, wanting to dive into her mind and figure her out. Every brush of her skin made me a hair's breadth away from snapping.

I was fucking exhausted, trying to justify the way she acted towards me, towards everyone around her, with the person who killed Pine and kept it a secret for a week.

There were two answers. One, she was the best liar and manipulator I'd ever met. Two, there was more to the story.



She was still keeping secrets, but then again had I really been pressing for answers?

Even that morning after we first slept together, I'd gone back to get answers out of Odell and had beaten the shit out of him instead. After I'd fucked her against the wall like an animal.

And now, now there was too much evidence to support the second option—that there was more to the story. That I'd been wrong about her.

Seeing her fight Lukas drove the nail in the coffin.

I'd gone down to the training room to tell her that I was going to meet Adrian. I got to the door at the same moment that Lukas stumbled slightly over his steps and dropped his hands, leaving Rose a wide open opportunity to clock him in the face.

Instead of hitting him and relishing in the victory like I would have, she pulled back at the last second, giving Lukas the chance to grab her elbow and land her flat on her back.

And then I had to watch him hurt her again. The next time, Lukas put too much weight in his left leg, leaving him vulnerable and in less than a second, Rose softened a kick.

I knew she was well trained, but being able to recognize the opening, pull back, and make it look like a natural mistake was an entirely different level. The whole time they were sparring, she absolutely refused to hurt Lukas and was able to make it look like he was just on his game.

And then the *knives*. On the fifth throw that Rose landed in the dead center of the target's chest, I left. I couldn't stand to watch anything else that gave color to Odell's statement about her father's training.

I walked down that hallway hearing nothing but the beat of my heart as it slammed against my chest and spurned guilt in its wake.

And in the past day, it hadn't disappeared. I'd avoided her the rest of the night.

I needed to avoid her today too, because even though I knew the relief I felt when she sat on the couch in my office and read or did work or just existed in my space, I didn't want to have to explain what today was.

I would just lock myself in my office and hope no one came to bother me or that she didn't come looking for me.

It was a pipe dream, I got at least five knocks a day, and with my luck there would be one now.

But instead of a knock, there was Rose's voice, muffled behind the wood.

"Don't go in there," she said to whoever was on the other side of the door. It sounded like she was whisper-yelling across the hallway.

"What?" Raiden responded, his voice clearer.

There were footsteps across the hall. Rose's footsteps. "Today is the fifteenth."

I dropped my head onto my folded hands. *Holy Shit.*

Raiden must have given her a confused look because she continued, "August 15th. Ring a bell?"

"Shit," Raiden cursed.

"Just...give him the day. I'll take whatever that is."

My heart lurched into my throat. I was a fucking coward, because I was not moving from this chair. If I got into Rose's space right now, I'd do something horrendous like tell her I loved her.

Most people just kind of dealt with me on the days where the grief got bad. Rose was giving me the space I needed. She was considerate and caring and *nice*. She was making sure I was given space on the worst day of my year.

She was someone who remembered the fucking date.

And I was the asshole who shoved what was a probably an isolated mistake down her throat every second I got.

Or maybe I was just looking for reasons to forgive her.

I fell back in my chair and stared at the ceiling and took the rest of the day to drown in my grief and my guilt. Missing my parents and beating myself up for lying to Rose and trapping her in marriage.

The Fates would come for me, for stealing her.

But she didn't seem unhappy. I didn't think I *made* her unhappy. And I sure as shit wasn't going to start now. The rest of my life would be dedicated to repenting.

I barely noticed the sun setting, lost in thought. It was only when my stomach started punching against my abs in a call for hunger that I rose from my chair and went down to the kitchen.

I knew she was in there the second I stepped into the hallway, her sweet vanilla rose perfume giving her away. Not that she could hide from me.

I walked in, expecting to see her at the stove, with that little red apron she always wore, bathed in light. Maybe even a glass of wine next to her.

Instead, I found her standing in the near dark, lazily stirring something in a large pot with a book in her other hand.

My presence registered soon after I walked through the door.

Rose's back straightened and her eyes shot to the intruder, then softened into a glowing green when she realized it was me.

She looked relieved to see me. *Relieved*. Not locking up in fear, but a deep breath out in my presence. I wasn't sure I deserved the weight of her relief. It sat in my hands, destroying my world and building it back up in her image.

"Oh, hi!" she said, immediately marking and setting aside her book.

"Why are you in the dark?" I asked, taking a step closer to her after flipping on a soft lamp.

Rose tucked her hair behind her ear, twisted my ring around

her finger. “You stir this thing a ton and I got caught up and didn’t realize the sun set. I was just about to turn on the light.”

I took another step closer and got a whiff of what she was making. It smelled buttery and salty and incredibly familiar. It smelled an awful lot like mushroom risotto.

“Rose, what did you make?” I asked, my voice scrapping out, sounding hollow and harsh to match how quickly my stomach had dropped.

Rose blushed to her hairline, the color of her cheeks darkening even in the dim light. “I didn’t know if this was too much or completely weird, but I just figured it would be nice. I don’t know, I always make soup on the day my mom died and it helps a little and I just thought that it might help you.”

I stared at her like the lovestruck fool I was.

“I’m sorry. I know it’s not her recipe, but this is still good.”

I stayed silent. Had to.

Rose continued. “Fuck, I’m sorry, this is totally out of line. Please, ignore me.”

My chest was caving in, hollowing out.

Rose looked at me, searching my face for any sign of life, but I was too far gone. Breaking my stare, she muttered, “*Fucking fig jam*,” under her breath before standing up straighter and starting again. “Seriously, you don’t have to—”

I shut her up with my lips, kissing her so hard we would both bruise. It was all I could do to fight the tightness in my throat. Rose was stiff at first, her rambling winding her up, but she eventually relaxed and twisted her hand in my t-shirt, melting into me.

It was a short kiss, shorter than I preferred with her, but I didn’t want the risotto to get cold. I kept my forehead pressed against hers and said, “Thank you.”

“It’s okay?” she asked, eyes shining.

“Yes, sweetheart, it’s perfect.” I swiped a thumb across her cheek and dropped a peck on her mouth before releasing her.

“Oh. Okay, good,” Rose nodded to herself. “Sit, please.”

I didn't listen to her. I planted my hands on her hips and turned her back toward the stove, but kept my chest pressed to her shoulders as she plated the risotto. Topped it with parmesan and a green herb.

I reached around her to pick up the plates when she was done, then let her lead me toward our dining room table. She picked two chairs that were next to each other with a view of the bay outside.

I dropped the plates and pulled out her chair. She sat and looked up at me expectantly. And I almost caved right then and there, but I resisted the urge to drop to my knees and beg for forgiveness. For now.

I made quick work of pouring us both a glass of wine and lighting a few candles before I sat down next to Rose with spoons in hand. Her body was turned toward me. It always was, I realized. Except when we were sitting like this, she normally had her legs draped over my thighs.

Needing the contact, especially today, I tucked my arm under her knees and lifted her legs. Rose moved easily, settling herself over me.

I brushed a hand down the side of Rose's face, relishing in the feeling of her pressing her cheek into my palm.

Then I dug in. Not the first meal she had made specifically for me (a much needed energy boost at two in the morning had that honor) but the only one that put a lump in my throat. I grabbed and bite and ate it, catching Rose watching every move with her hands folded in her lap.

It was perfect. A little creamier than my mom's but a taste of home regardless.

“Are you okay?” Rose asked after I let out a satisfied groan.

I shook my head tersely. “No.”

Rose nodded and didn't push it, just looked at me with genuine care in her eyes for another second and then started

eating.

“Thank you,” I said again. “For taking whatever Raiden gave you.”

Rose looked down at her lap and I brushed her hair back off her shoulder. “You heard that, huh?”

“Sure did.” I squeezed her shoulder lightly. “Why?”

Rose gave me a soft, beautiful smile. “It seemed like work would be a reminder of your authority. And how you got it.”

She articulated something I never could. And the guilt flared a little. Along with something deeper, stronger. Something that made me drop another kiss down on her mouth in silent gratitude.

“You said you make soup on the day your mother died,” I dared to ask when we were almost finished eating. “What about your father?”

Rose flinched. A restrained one that she caught at the last second. But I felt it on her shoulder.

She breathed in, dragging a long inhale through her nose. “Nothing.”

The word was harsh and final and made me think back to Odell’s description of her father’s *particular* training methods. A punch of anger hit me in the stomach on instinct.

It was a raw sort of honesty, to voluntarily open the door to her father. I didn’t press but I asked. “And your brother?”

Maybe not saying his name would make it easier, not as terrifying. She’d almost told me at dinner earlier in the week. I could see it in her eyes, in the way she steadied herself with deep breaths. But pushing her wouldn’t help.

Rose’s eyebrows scrunched up in the center, her eyes softening under her lashes as she considered my question.

Pain. She looked in pain. The anger flashed again, so I smoothed a hand down her back.

“Tell me.” A hoarse whisper. “Even if it’s awful. Tell me.”

Rose breathed in, her cheeks painting a pretty pink. My own breath stilled, my hand curling over her ribs possessively, tucking her into the safety of this conversation.

She opened her mouth to speak, closed it, then started again. Looking directly into my eyes, she said, “I make his favorite sandwich and go down to the Lethe. There’s a large cypress tree there.”

I knew the one. Pine always used to say that was his favorite place in the Underworld. Rose loved her brother, that much was clear. And now dread filled my chest at what the real explanation was.

But Rose seemed like she wanted to talk about it, so I moved forward, treading as carefully as I could. “Pine loved that tree.”

“So much,” she said through a laugh. “Whenever I couldn’t find him at the house I knew he was there.”

I stayed silent for a moment, then she spoke again. “He’s um...I buried him there.”

My chest constricted with grief. “That’s where he should rest.”

Rose nodded, like she needed to hear that. Needed to hear that she did something right and that sent a knife straight into my heart. The pain in her eyes twisted it in even more.

“You buried him?” I asked.

The pain shining in her eyes as she said, “No one else would,” made me want to burn the world down.

“But you did,” I said, brushing my knuckles over her cheek. “You made sure he was at peace.”

Rose shrugged, one of her perfect shoulders lifting up. She even doubted that. She considered me for a moment and I almost broke under the trust in her gaze. “You have had a rough day. You should go to sleep.”

She was right. Somehow, I *knew* that she would tell me what happened if I asked. That was enough for today. I was

drained, exhausted. And today had done nothing but solidify that all I needed was her.

“I should or we should?” I asked and Rose gifted me with a smile. One of the real ones that sent a flash of pride through my chest when I did something to earn one.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Rose asked carefully.

I nodded, restraining what would have likely been a desperate plea to get her into my bed.

And starting tonight I was turning it into *our* bed. No more of this sleeping in separate rooms bullshit. I rinsed the dishes quickly and led Rose upstairs by the hand.

She disappeared to the bathroom to wash her face, but came back to our room to strip off her dress and throw on one of my t-shirts. I had the same reaction I did the morning after the lockdown. Pure and utter satisfaction.

Rose looked fucking hot in my shirt.

At the glint in my eyes, Rose walked over and pressed a soft kiss to my lips, then wrapped herself around me and didn't let go until we fell asleep.



## Chapter 28

### Rose

I woke up in Dominic's bed. Again.

The night after the beach felt like a result of exhaustion, the night of the anniversary of his parents passing felt like a desperate grab for comfort.

But there was no good explanation for the other nights I'd spent here. No reason other than the warmth of his bed and his body that kept me turning back towards his room every night.

Every time I walked back through the door, I could have sworn Dominic sagged a little with relief. But that could also be my traitorous brain trying to justify the flips my stomach did when I saw him lying shirtless amongst disheveled sheets.

So, this was my routine now, waking up with Dominic curled along my back, a strong arm banded around my waist.

After a rather extended wake up that ended with him leading me downstairs to the kitchen with flushed cheeks, we went about our routine.

Dominic and I now had a *routine*. One we did together.

I cooked. Dominic made his coffee and my tea. We sat at the kitchen table and had a conversation that contained a maximum of two minutes of bickering on a good day, eight most. Only about ten or so epithets thrown around.

It was weird.

But I'd come to crave the twisted feeling in my chest when I saw him, the instinct to trust him even though my brain hadn't quite caught up yet. Shit, I'd basically told him the entire Pine story on the day of *his* parent's death.

Dominic hadn't changed the way he treated me though. Just took in the information and proceeded as normal and it was everything I could have asked for.

I knew there were so many conversations we had to have. But for now, I was living in sweet blissful ignorance and enjoying my tea with Dominic's warm hand on my thigh. Because that was what people who hated each other did.

Right as we were talking about updating the gates on the Upperworld side to Purgatory, Marcus entered the kitchen, drawing our attention to his hulking form.

"Morning," he greeted, somewhat terse. Bubble: burst.

"Good morning, Marcus," I said. Dominic just grumbled. I laughed softly, then added, "That was his way of saying good morning too."

Marcus crossed his arms over his chest but grinned. "Figured as much." He paused, breathing in. "Look, can I steal you for a second?"

My back straightened involuntarily. "What for?"

"We need to talk about..." Marcus trailed off, but his hand moved over his shirt slightly, signaling that this was about the dress.

Guess they found who it was. My stomach sank slightly at the thought. I hated having to retaliate, but this was pretty bad.

I must have physically reacted in some way, because Dominic squeezed my leg softly. And then I made a decision. "You can tell me now. Dominic can hear."

I could hear the shocked snap of air Dominic sucked through his nostrils.

"Are you sure?" Marcus asked carefully. This was a massive change from my previous decision to actively lie to Dominic about the more torrid consequences of my reputation.

"Yes," I said, barrelling forward before I could chicken out. I turned to Dominic and looked into his dark eyes. "I'm sorry that I kept this from you."

Dominic just grunted, which was his way of saying to move forward but that he already wasn't happy. I'd admitted to at least one of the secrets he kept claiming I was hiding from him, so I gave it a pass. For now.

I looked back at Marcus who stepped toward us and leaned on the kitchen island.

"The herbs were sold to Lucan." One of the guards who had been knocked out. "And before you ask, he was actually knocked out. He had nothing to do with Odell."

I let out a bitter laugh then said, "Well, at least there's that." Even though I didn't believe it for a second. I'd be following up on that one.

Marcus seemed inclined to agree. He asked, "So what do you want to do with him?" The tone of his voice made it clear that he already had something in mind.

"Erase his memories?" I suggested. The less abrasive path to the involuntary, indefinite confinement Marcus definitely pictured. He nodded as if it pained him. He always did have a stubborn streak.

"Hold on," Dominic cut in, his voice low and scraping roughly against my skin. I'd never heard him sound so dangerous. "This is one of my guards. I need to know what happened."

I breathed in, then turned to look at him. I placed a hand on his knee reflexively. He moved under the contact, but I couldn't tell if he stiffened or softened. "Someone put poisoned herbs in one of my dresses. It...burned me."

"The night of Corinna's party?" Dominic asked, drawing every letter out of the words.

I could do nothing but nod and watch Dominic justify what he remembered from that with what he was learning now. It was like watching dominos fall in someone's head. I could also see it, his eyes darkening into a deeper shade of brown, turning nearly black, with each tile that fell.

Dominic breathed in sharply then pressed his finger to the space in between his eyebrows.

“And Mary?”

Marcus let out a laugh of disbelief. I was tempted to match it. He made that jump with almost no information. I had half the mind to wonder what else he had pieced together if I wasn't staring at him dumbfounded. I picked my jaw up off the floor and said, “She tried to quit. I offered to cook for myself and she agreed to stay.”

The chair to Dominic's left snapped in half and I flinched. The wood clattered to the ground, ruined. Dominic looked at me and took in my horrified expression. “Be glad it's the chair and not Lucan's neck.”

“Dominic!” I said, shocked at his brutality. I knew he took revenge seriously. But on my behalf? I didn't deserve it.

“What, Rose?” Dominic snapped back. “You expect me to be *calm* when you kept this from me for weeks? Lied to my face about that dress when I knew something was wrong. And again about Mary.”

“I had a good reason to!” I argued, the defensive fire I used to feel around him reigniting in my chest. I lied, sure, but why did he think I would have told him shit before now? “You probably would have fired them and then I would have been blamed for them losing their jobs. That would only make it worse!”

Dominic laughed. He clearly thought that was a ridiculous excuse. “You are their *god*. You make sure they have a place to go when they die. You can't let them treat you like that.”

I jerked back slightly at the anger in his voice. And then I fought back. That's how it always was between us. “I'm not going to retaliate and reinforce what they think of me! They already hate me and I wasn't going to compromise your reputation too.”

“Why? Figured you'd like that,” Dominic shot back sarcastically.

I pushed my chair back, cutting off any contact between our bodies. “I don't find joy in hurting people.”

Dominic pulled my chair back to him with his foot. “Only letting yourself get hurt.”

“I can take care of myself,” I argued, crossing my arms across my chest. As if that would do anything to protect me.

“You don’t have to!” Dominic yelled, then quieted. “Not anymore.”

“Okay.” My voice was a little weak, a little shaky from the shock. My throat felt tight. The fighting wasn’t anything out of the ordinary for us, so why was it now making me feel like I wanted to cry?

“Now,” Dominic said, turning back to Marcus who was watching us scream at each other with the same investment that he would in a soccer match. “Where is Lucan?”

I tensed again at the obvious threat in his tone. “Dominic, we will just erase his memories.”

Dominic did not like that option. Not one bit. His eyes went a little crazed as he said, “Like hell we will! You had burns on your skin. He’ll answer for that.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“How often does this happen?” Dominic asked. Daring me to tell him it had happened more than once.

“This is the first time it’s ever escalated.”

Dominic looked at me like his patience was about to break in half. “Now is not the time to be vague, Rose. Details.”

I ran my tongue over my teeth to calm my anger, then, “This is the first time it’s ever come to physical harm. But basically my entire staff quit when I first took the throne. I haven’t been able to hire that many people since. A good chunk of your staff quit after we got married. And yes, I get a *murderer* or *bitch* on a couple street corners.”

Dominic dipped his chin down once, as if that was all the movement his body would allow if he didn’t want to snap. “Are. You. *Kidding*. Me.”

“No, I don’t think jokes are appropriate right now.” Oh, yep, sarcasm was not wise. Dominic was mentally wringing my neck.

“This is too fucking far. Lucan—and Mary—need to know you are off fucking limits.”

My skin started to tingle. I couldn’t let him do that. “They will just use that to hate me even more.”

“You need to get over your fear of pissing anyone off,” Dominic said in response. It was half true. I did fear pissing people off. But the missing word was *more*. Pissing people off *more*.

“Are you kidding?” I threw his words back at him, instead of copping to the real answer.

The real answer was too revealing.

Because sometimes, admitting that you want something and having it be so far out of your reach is embarrassing. The humiliation, the shame of other people knowing you want something and have them watch as it escapes you.

I wanted love. Friendly love I had. But I wanted the love of an acquaintance. Someone who meets you and is willing to learn you because they’ve heard nothing but good things.

I wanted romantic love too, but that wish was even more terrifying to acknowledge. The consequences more damning.

“It’s true, Rose,” Dominic said, doubling down. It’s not like he spared an insult before anyway. “Who cares if someone is reminded that they can’t fuck with a god.”

“Are you saying I caused this?” I asked, my own voice turning tight at my disbelief.

“No!” Dominic said quickly, reaching for me. I moved away at the last second and his defeated hand fell onto his knee. “I’m saying that people have gotten really fucking mad since Adrian was born and I’m fucking terrified they are going to turn on you. In a way you won’t come back from.”

Oh.

I knew what I hoped that meant. But he could just as well mean the health of our realm. So I moved forward. “Well violence isn’t the answer. You can’t—”

“If you are going to say *fight fire with fire* I’m going to throttle you,” Dominic said, cutting me off. “You’ve been dousing the situation with little useless water droplets. I’m just suggesting we get a fucking bucket this time.”

“I don’t think I can get behind this,” I said honestly. Erasing memories just made it so much cleaner. The threat of violence made me uncomfortable.

“That’s something for you to work through,” Dominic returned. “But I won’t stand by and let you risk your own safety because of a reputation.”

“Stop treating it like it’s something trivial!” I snapped. It wasn’t, not when it was still affecting me. “The *reputation* was clearly bad enough for people to try to hurt me!”

“I know this isn’t fucking trivial!” Dominic yelled, his eyes dark with a crazed sort of fury. “You are not fucking trivial. You are not replaceable.”

*You are not replaceable.*

The words rang through my head and my chest. An evil little seed of doubt tried to attribute that to me needing to be physically alive to support the Underworld. But the way Dominic was gripping my leg like it was the only thing attaching him to this plane of existence made me think otherwise.

“Now please tell me this is everything,” Dominic begged, speaking into the space somewhere between Marcus and I, completely unfocused other than the tight grip on my thigh.

“Um, Odell has been badgering Raiden for an audience with Rose,” Marcus said. I knew he was trying to be helpful but it did not work.

Dominic was up and out of his chair so fast, it almost fell over. He steadied before the legs could kick up in my direction.

“For fuck’s sake!” he cursed. Then he dropped his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. He turned his head to look at me, then shook it. “I need a second.”

“Dominic,” I said, reaching for him. This didn’t feel okay. We didn’t feel okay. We’d had fights more explosive than this, deadlier, but never one that threw me off kilter like this.

“I need a second, Rose,” Dominic repeated, backing away from me. I wondered if he felt this punch in the gut when I’d done it to him. “I’m fucking pissed and this conversation isn’t helping.”

I couldn’t argue with that. At least not right now. “We are not done talking about this.”

“Oh, trust me,” Dominic said through a bitter, disbelieving laugh. “I know I can’t escape you.”

I watched him walk out the door, his heavy steps echoing through the hallway and up the stairs, leaving Marcus and I sitting in tense silence.

“He’s gonna go after Lucan, isn’t he?” I asked Marcus.

“I suspect so,” Marcus said. He looked at me, taking in my hunched posture and worried eyes.

Marcus scrunched his nose a little and I knew he was about to say something uncharacteristically emotional. He always did that when he had to stick his nose into other people’s personal lives.

“You know,” he began slowly. “Raiden once told me that Dominic only ever gets truly angry over one thing: when the people he loves get hurt.”

I smiled sadly at Marcus to thank him for saying it. Even though I wasn’t sure it was true. Was terrified of letting myself hope that it could be.

“I don’t believe Lucan and Odell are totally separate,” I said, changing the subject.

“Not for a second,” Marcus agreed.



I grumbled, knowing what I had to do next. The family of the Orpheus kid might not be behind us yet. “I’m gonna have to look into that family, aren’t I?”

“Grandfather is a priest at your Temple in Corinth,” Marcus said.

“How convenient for me,” I said, rising from my chair. “I’ll pay him a visit. But first, I need to piss some people off.”

With that sorted, maybe, maybe I would finally feel like things were improving. Be able to write off the market and dress as isolated incidents. Quell my fear of something organized.

†

“Long time no see,” Clotho said from her floating throne when I walked through the flimsy little gate at the entrance of their lair.

“Apologies, Clotho,” I said, mentally steeling my nerves. “You know how much I love our visits.”

Lachesis’s withered voice piped up next. “Does that mean we are to see you regularly again?”

“No,” I said, then took a deep breath. It was time. This had gone on for too long. “You’re never going to say yes, are you?”

“No,” Atropos said, not even needing to clarify what I was asking. Reincarnation was not the type of evil they messed with, even if it meant returning a good, kind, amazing soul to the world of the living.

Pine should have been the first one they’d consider, so much more worthy of the throne than I was. But I was finally starting to realize that this had been a patchwork attempt at dealing with my grief and my guilt.

“Then I’m done,” I said, nodding my head to reassure myself. “This whole thing has only hurt me. I used to tell myself that Pine would see how hard I was working for him, but now I just think I’ve been making him angry all these years.”

My words pinged against the stone walls of the dome, rattling through my bones and deep into my gut. Forcing me to listen to what I was saying and believe it.

“And someone recently informed me that I need to get over my fear of pissing people off. So, I don’t care how mad you are to lose me. I’m done.”

There. There it was. Done.

I felt lighter but guilt clawed at the perimeter of my mind, begging me to let it in and convince myself that this was selfish and wrong.

I slammed the door shut on it.

“We are in no position to argue,” Clotho said without an ounce of anger. Even though they were losing their best minion. Maybe they had something they were lording over Dominic and could convince *him* to do their dirty work. They seemed to like him well enough to give him the heads up on our Fating. I wanted to ask, but that was his story to tell.

“We owe you a great debt,” Clotho finished.

I grinned. “Glad you think so.” That would certainly come in handy later. I wasn’t wasting that for a second.

“Would you like to call it in now?” Atropos asked, leaning her lithe, young body forward in her chair.

I raised an eyebrow. “Should I?”

“*Should* implies an obligation,” Clotho evaded. “You are free to do as you choose. We do not control minds.”

“You sure about that?” The Fates had ways of controlling *when* and *where* you died. I had a hard time believing they didn’t extend it farther.

“Are you attempting to argue, Rosemary?” Lachesis asked with the closest thing to humor she could manage in her voice.

“Never, Lachesis.” I gave them a little salute just because I could. Because I was feeling freer despite having to go to Corinth and maybe see if Dominic wasn’t fuming. “See you whenever I have something to ask of *you*.”

“I do not look forward to that day,” Clotho said darkly, her tone following me all the way back to our house like an ominous warning.

## Chapter 29

### Rose

Dominic was nowhere to be found the rest of the day. I managed to track down Raiden, who'd given a dismissive response that he was busy but that he was sure he'd be around later.

But he wasn't at dinner. Wasn't *around* afterwards.

And my traitorous heart missed him. It ached in the absence of him, ached with the knowledge that our last conversation had ended on a bad note.

I wasn't going to roll over and just agree I should have told him—there wasn't an ounce of trust between us until recently. But I could understand where he was coming from.

He was more brutal than I was, more inclined to treat revenge like a transaction. You hurt me, I hurt you.

I was still half convinced that Dominic thought I owed him a debt in that regard. But he'd made no moves to make it seem that way, even going so far as to say that I was different in his eyes.

I had an overwhelming urge to make sure that everything between us was okay. If it ever was.

I sulked around like a fool after dinner with Max, Marcus, and Raiden, then headed back to our room.

It wasn't until I hit Dominic's door that I realized that I had started to view it as *our* room. The house seemed to agree, as Dominic's closet had grown by a few inches, a new shelf or inch of hanging space appearing every day to make room for the clothes I kept leaving in the room.

My own room was shrinking in response, the bookshelves expanding and another chair that matched the one I already

had springing up. Converting itself into a personal library or sitting room.

My bed was still in there, even though it looked a little more crowded than normal. I walked through our shared bathroom to my room and just stood in the center for a moment.

Internally debating whether I should sleep here tonight. It still felt like there had to be a perfect storm for Dominic and I to share a bed, to show casual affection.

I couldn't stand the embarrassment of going to Dominic's—or ours or who the fuck knew whose it was—bed and him walking in and looking at me like I was out of place. So I got ready for bed as normal and pulled back my cold sheets, already stiff with lack of use.

I was tired and drained and a little sad if I was being honest. I drifted off into an exhausted sleep with Dominic on my mind. Seconds or minutes or hours later, he appeared at the foot of my bed like I had conjured him with my thoughts.

Half asleep and dazed, I wasn't even sure he was real. But he felt very real as he walked to the side of the bed and ripped back the sheets. "Absolutely not."

"What?" I asked, my voice thick with sleep.

"We sleep together," Dominic said, then shoved his hands under my back and knees and lifted me from the bed.

I turned my face into his chest and chuckled lazily. "That's not in contention."

"Smart ass," Dominic grumbled as he carried me through the bathroom. "I've gotten used to you in my bed. Don't take that away from me."

I nodded, only because Dream Dominic sounded like he was pleading. He set me down gently on my side of the bed then pulled the covers over me. He turned my clock, the one he'd once taken from my room after I threw it at him, making sure the light wasn't shining on my face. A second later he was under the sheets with me, tucking me against his side and wrapping both arms around me.

“I’m sorry,” he said, pressing his lips to the top of my head.

“Me too,” I said against his neck, then drifted back to sleep. Restful this time.

†

My temple in Corinth was a monstrosity.

The Nekromanteion.

The name fit, given the dark gray stone looked like rotting flesh in some places. It was a towering dedication to the strength of my House. A reminder that death would come for everyone. That there was no escaping the reach of Dominic and I’s power.

The structure of the temple was standard: tall columns topped with intricate details of flowers and a long rectangular base that came together in a pointed roof. The facade on the front was of the Asphodel fields, barely there carvings of human figures—meant to represent souls—amongst stringy grass. Long banners dropped down in the between the columns, a rich black with gold string weaved through. Five of them, still spelling Hades in Ancient Greek letters.

I instantly wondered if that was a choice or a detail that hadn’t yet been updated. It wasn’t like our marriage wasn’t highly publicized. It only just stopped gracing the news.

I appeared right behind one of the columns, lest I scare off half the city. Only Max came with me, much to both Raiden and Marcus’s chagrin.

To which I responded that this was me talking to a priest who lived to serve me and if that wasn’t a relatively safe situation for me to be in, I didn’t know what was.

Max and I walked through the giant oak doors and into the main temple space. There was a statue of the first namesake, a tall, lean man with long hair and a full beard, holding a staff taller than he was in his right hand and his three-headed dog sitting on his left.

A priest donning rich black robes almost fell over when she saw me. “Lady Hades!”

I almost corrected her. Like a reflex.

“Hello,” I greeted, fighting a smirk. Speaking to humans often made them think you were there to claim their soul. In a twisted way it was hilarious, watching their faces drain of color and expressions turn grim. “I’m here to see Io.”

She nodded quickly and ushered me to the perimeter of the room, behind even more columns, and walked me back to the Io’s office. People stared as I walked, their scrutiny somewhere between fear, awe, and dread. I knew it was likely positive but the attention still made my skin itch.

When we got to the office, Io answered the door as if he was expecting us. Io nodded at the priest, who got the hell out of dodge as quickly as she could, leaving the three of us alone. Max shut the door behind us and went to stand guard by it, their legs widening to a strong stance.

“It’s a pleasure, Lady Pluto,” Io said, gesturing for me to take the chair on the other side of his desk.

“Pleasure’s mine, Io.” I sat, crossing my legs and settling my hands in my lap. “How has summer been for you?”

“Calm, mostly.” Io’s aged voice pinged off the wood and the walls sharply.

I smiled softly. In an attempt to be lighthearted, I said, “I hope that *mostly* has little to do with my marriage.”

Io crossed his hands over his stomach and the white robes covering it. “It caused quite a ruckus around here.”

“Nothing too chaotic, I imagine,” and then because his tone was inching too close to combative, I added, “Much less chaotic than the Hades line ending all together.”

Io’s mouth tightened, the corner of his lip twitching up. Contempt or a twitch, but too close to call. “We had full faith in your ability to protect this line.”

Oh, Io. It was the same old bullshit with all these loyalists. “It is a well-known fact that Dominic and I are equally matched in power. He’s older, too. The odds between us were equal. We chose the best path for both our Houses.”

And because the Fates said so, but I didn't add that on.

"You make a strong point, Lady Pluto," Io conceded, his shoulders dropping an inch.

I grinned, pleased Io knew his place. "Well, now that that is settled, I am here for a different reason."

Io's face went tight, fear taking over his features. "I had nothing to do with that nonsense with my grandson."

I let a full smile show now, maybe it was a little cruel around the edges. "I'm glad to hear that, Io. If you know that, then you'll also know that we released your other grandson and his conspirator with nothing but a predetermination."

When they died, they were going straight to the Fields of Punishment for five years, then released to the Meadows. It was fair. Too fair.

"But it has come to our attention that breach might not be an isolated incident," I continued. "One of our guards was knocked out the day of the breach and was later found to have put poisoned herbs in one of my dresses."

"That's awful," Io rushed out, panic slowly creeping into his sunken eyes. "I'm sure that my family had nothing to do with it."

"That's what I'm hoping to settle," I said, then looked back at Max, who pulled an envelope out of their jacket. "I need you to take a look at this photo and tell me if you recognize this man."

Io nodded quickly, then snatched the photograph the second I placed it on the desk. After a quick perusal, he said, "I have no idea who that is."

"Good," I said, switching the cross of my legs. Getting ready to take on the next topic. "I will need you to make sure none of the younger, more courageous family members know him either. He's Roman, but we both know that is no bar to cooperation."

Io's eyes pinched together at my double meaning. "I'll take it to my family tomorrow, Lady Hades. I won't have another



stain on my family's name.”

“I feel for your grandson and his love, Io. Death is sometimes hardest on those we leave behind. But the rules of this world cannot be bent, not even for someone who lost their partner too soon.”

Io nodded again, some of the color returning to his face. It was like he thought I was there to kill him, seeking retribution for a far more serious crime.

“Well, I'm glad that's settled. It has been—” I was cut off by the sound of a brutal crash outside his door. Max turned around and placed an ear to the wood in a heartbeat, trying to figure out what was on the other side of the door.

See, this was why I needed guards. I could fight, but I would have opened that door without thinking. Max pulled back, but didn't move to open the door.

I stood, opening my mouth to ask them what they heard when a blast shattered the door into a thousand splintered pieces, the force of it throwing Max to the ground and me into the back wall.

Pain radiated down my shoulders and back and I landed too hard on my wrist, agony shooting up my left arm.

Max seemed okay and jumped up like they were barely affected, but that was the least of our worries. A mob of people so large I couldn't see where they ended started shoving through the door.

It was a crowd of all genders, but they had one thing in common—the absolute rage and disgust in their faces. They were shouting, epithets and curses to my name and the gods in general breaking through the noise.

One thing was crystal clear: this was an organized group of people who really fucking hated the divine.

Max started going after them one at a time, taking them out with swift efficiency. But when one person dropped, another stepped over them and pushed into Io's office. The second I saw the metal flash of a knife, my stomach plummeted to the floor.

There wasn't time for figuring out what this was. I tampered my shock and sprang into action. I conjured six Shadowwalkers from the floor, their towering bodies stepping into the room from the darkened corners. I commanded them to start grabbing bodies, pulling them away from where they were closing in on Max.

The color drained from the skin of each person that the Shadowwalkers restrained. Shadowwalkers were the purest creations from the Underworld, and when death touched life, well, it drained it.

But without it, we would be unmatched for too long. And I refused to expose Max to harm.

Just then, bodies started dropping from behind the mob. I caught a flash of blonde and black hair moving through the crowd. Marcus and Raiden.

Fear ebbed slightly. My Shadowwalkers kept me protected, blocking and restraining anyone who made it past Max and leaving a pile of graying bodies at their feet.

Marcus and Raiden were moving closer, subduing the crowd. I kept getting flashes of a dark circle, a tattoo on exposed forearms. Someone else was in Thanatos society robes. I registered the image in the back of my mind with bitter amusement.

Weren't they supposed to be the ones who loved me the most? I couldn't entertain that now though, not when my instincts kept me focused on controlling my Shadowwalkers and making sure Max and Raiden and Marcus were okay.

Raiden broke through the crowd a second later, stepping over unconscious bodies. There was blood, which sent my heart racing faster.

But not his. Not his.

As he approached, leaving Max and Marcus to subdue the remaining people, I breathed in, my chest expanding and my throat bobbing outwards to meet a cold bite of metal.

I froze.

The color drained from Raiden's face and Max whipped around, their expression dire.

I could feel Io at my back, his bony hand creeping over my shoulder to press into my chest while his other hand held a knife, curved and shaped like a scythe, to my throat.

Old *asshole*.

"And here I thought you lived to serve me, Io," I said, speaking softly so that the knife wouldn't cut into my skin any more than it already was. I couldn't feel any blood yet, but any harder and it would start streaming down my neck.

"You would be wrong," Io snapped into my ear. "We are not sheep, who follow along mindlessly with whatever you gods decide to do. You're out of touch."

"So, I'm supposed to listen to you? A group clearly in touch with reason, who storms my temple and presses knives to my throat?" Whoever that *group* was needed to be dealt with, now. Spinning out of control wasn't an option.

"You gods have no consequences for your actions," Io sneered. I caught Max's eye and silently pleaded for them to keep their expression scared. Not to drop their fear. I did the same with Raiden.

I laughed bitterly. "And is this my consequence? You know what will happen if you kill me." Dominic and I hadn't picked an heir, and that required both of our assent.

"The Underworld will crumble, or so you say. How do we know you aren't lying?"

"Why don't you find out?" I asked, goading Io's anger. His chest heaved and he pulled back on the pressure at my throat slightly, but I needed a little more room. "Kill me and enjoy your soul floating into a black abyss of nothing when you die."

Io breathed in, rage and irritation pressing his stomach into my back and pushing his hand a little farther from my throat.

I moved before I could weigh the odds, twisting out of his grip. Io recovered quickly, I'd give him that.

He swiped the knife down. I barely felt the hot lance down my forearm as the blade cut my skin, not when I conjured another Shadowwalker right behind him and commanded it to reach into Io's chest and crush his heart.

Io dropped to the floor in a heap, his death immediate. It was mercy compared to what was in store for him otherwise.

A splash of my blood hit the floor a second after Io's body did, sending a sick plop echoing through the deathly silent temple.

I turned my arm inward, pressing it against my dress to stop the flow of blood. It would heal in a moment anyway. Sparing Io one more glance, I spun to face Raiden, Max, and Marcus who all looked like that were waiting for permission to approach me.

I looked past them, to the trail of unconscious and dead bodies they left behind. I hoped the ones my Shadowwalkers turned down had enough life force to keep them on the side of the living. I took a numb step forward, then looked at one of the Shadows floating in the corner.

I stared at it, the figure familiar. It was half a foot taller than me, broad, with strong arms and steady legs. The nose was defined, straight on the bridge but a little on the larger side. I could almost picture the mouth built for smirking and the deep brown eyes, so able to switch between hard black and softer brown.

It was Dominic, I realized with a numb chuckle. Somewhere along the line, my Shadowwalkers had changed shape.

It was that realization that broke the shocked wall that had been caging in my emotions and my fear from the attack. I heaved in a breath, my chest and throat growing tight, my vision going blurry.

"Please," I rasped out, to no one in particular.

"Please, what, Rose?" someone asked. Someone else, or maybe the same person, touched a comforting hand to my

shoulder. Another hand gently peeled my arm away from my bloody dress, checking the wound.

“Dominic,” I scraped out, then broke down with sobs. My knees gave out and I dropped to the floor, someone catching me as I went down while two others ran out the door.

## Chapter 30

### Dominic

My anger still wasn't under control. It was prowling under my skin about to break through the surface of the water and take out everything in its path.

The only coherent thought I'd been able to put together yesterday morning in the kitchen was: someone hurt my wife.

I didn't want to leave Rose after fighting with her. What was once something that lit my blood on fire now sent it running cold.

I took myself out of that situation because if I had to listen to Rose putting Lucan's life before her own one more time I was going to lose it. Didn't she understand that *she* was the one who was irreplaceable? Essential to my life and everyone else's?

The cherry on top of that shit fucking day was finding her in her bed instead of *ours* like she thought us getting in a singular argument meant I was done with her. I would never be done with her. Carrying her back to our room and seeing her in our bed almost, *almost*, was enough to quell my anger and my fear.

But I woke up this morning pissed again. Because I dreamt—for the first time in fucking years—that it wasn't just poisoned herbs, it was a knife to the throat and I had to find Rose covered in blood and dead in our bed.

Rose was going to talk to a priest in Corinth, so I took the opportunity to do something with the rage in my chest.

I had Raiden bring Mary and Lucan to my office. They both walked in white-faced and shaking. So they knew exactly

what they did, they just thought they could get away with it.

“Sit,” I ordered. Their asses dropped into the chairs opposite from me so fast it created a small wind.

Mary opened her mouth and I held up a hand to cut her off. I was speaking first. “Just so we’re clear, I wanted you both locked in a dungeon for the rest of your miserable lives. But Rose convinced me that I should be merciful.”

Lucan paled another shade closer to death (a good look on him) and Mary let out a little squawk.

“Now you, Mary,” I continued, my voice low and calm. Deadly calm. “A refusal to cook for my wife, your goddess in case you forgot, is a relatively minor sin. You have two weeks to find another job and then I never want to see you under my roof again.”

I’d never had a problem with Mary until now. She got off easy.

“Thank you, Lord Pluto,” Mary rushed out, shaking her head of blonde hair eagerly. I jutted my chin at the door and she ran out, tracked by Raiden’s amused stare.

“But you, Lucan,” I said, turning towards where he sat looking like he was about to hurl. “You marred my wife’s skin. Burned her.”

“I’m sorry, but—”

“Oh no, no excuses out of you,” I cut off. “I don’t give a shit what your motivations were or if you thought you were doing something noble or were just being a fucking idiot. You. Hurt. My. Wife.”

Lucan nodded slowly.

“You have two options. This,” I said, setting a small jar down on the desk in front of him, “is full of the same herbs you used in Lady Pluto’s dress. You either give yourself the same treatment you gave her or your ass is sitting in a dungeon until you learn the consequences of your actions.”

“I thought you’d be happy,” Lucan said quickly, the words all stringing together. The air in the room went stagnant, cold.

*“Excuse me?”*

Lucan, to his credit, didn't start crying at the scrape of my tone. “You always hated her.”

It was my own face that paled. “Do you think I *wanted* you to hurt her?”

Lucan nodded tightly. “Yes.”

“Any harsh words I may have directed at Rose over the years are my problem.” A problem I would be spending the rest of my life making up for. “You do not get to take that into your own hands and hurt her.”

“I—”

“Choose.”

Lucan swallowed, twisted his hands together, then said, “Um, the herbs.”

Fuck. I wanted him to pick the dungeons. I jerked my chin towards the silver jar on the desk, “Go on then.”

I watched in barely restrained satisfaction as Lucan spread the herbs over his exposed arms and rubbed in, wincing and whimpering like a wounded animal at the pain. When I was satisfied with the flush of his skin, I said, “Now get the fuck out.”

“Make sure the next time he's in the Underworld, it's his soul I see,” I added to Raiden as he walked him out.

Raiden nodded and closed the door behind them. Leaving me to sit in agonizing guilt that people might have been horrible to Rose because of me. She didn't admit to it, but I was sure the incident at the market with Laurel and the spider was a cause of that too.

I had so much to fucking apologize for. Yes, I hadn't even made an inch of progress on my stupid fucking revenge plan, but I'd forced her into a marriage and treated her so openly like shit that people thought it was okay to do the same.

I needed to repent, drop to my knees and beg. I'd do so, when she got home from the temple, when she came back to



me.

I could only hope she'd forgive me.

†

“Oi, look alive!” The shout was the only warning I got before a muffin nailed me in the face.

The pastry fell into my lap, leaving crumbs in my stubble and on my freshly pressed shirt. I'd just returned to my office after running down to the training room to try to work out my guilt and anger by imagining my own face on the punching bag.

“Asshole,” I grumbled, wrapping my hand around the muffin to throw it back at Adrian, hopefully nailing him in the head.

I chucked it, but it was stopped by a floating ball of water seconds before it collided with Adrian's smug face.

Lukas stepped around the corner, his hand barely contorted as he moved the sphere, muffin and all, over to the open window behind my desk and flung it outside.

“And what if I wanted to eat that?” I asked, pinning him with a stare.

“Figured you would,” Adrian said, revealing a container behind his back. “Persy made them.”

“Oh shit,” I said, jumping out of my seat to grab them from his hands. His younger sister was an amazing baker and if I wasn't careful I'd eat the entire sheet of whatever she made.

I walked over to Adrian, eyes pinned on the muffin, and barely caught Lukas snaking behind me to drop dramatically into the sofa I'd been sitting on, stretching his body out. I was taller than him, but he was bulkier, and dwarfed the leather beneath him into something that looked fit for a child.

I almost bit out a curse, but held back. He'd been through some shit this year, and before, I didn't understand why he seemed so torn up about it. But then Rose happened.

The second the muffin was in my hand, Adrian darted around me too and dropped in the chair closest to the fireplace, leaving the lumpy one for me.

I scowled at both of them. “This is my house, you know?”

“Yes,” Adrian said, shoving a muffin in his mouth. “Wrr gweshts.”

I had no fucking clue what that meant.

“He said, ‘we’re guests,’” Lukas said, looking mildly disgusted from where he was lounging, hands folded and resting behind his head. “Adrian, pick up that crumb, you heathen.”

Adrian dramatically plucked up the crumb and popped it in his mouth.

I grabbed three tumblers off the cart by the fireplace, filling them with whiskey and bringing them over before I dropped into the remaining chair. I shifted around until the lump was no longer digging into my ass. Still fucking uncomfortable, though.

I shifted forwards, resting my forearms on my knees. “To what do I owe the honor of your company? Or was it just to bring me Persy’s muffins?”

“That would be occasion enough,” Adrian answered. “But, we gotta talk about what’s going on, man.”

I tensed. Shit. “Who told you?”

I whipped my head toward Lukas in accusation after I said it. He was chummy with Rose, maybe she said something.

Lukas held up his hands. “Don’t look at me.”

“Raider told Emre,” Adrian explained, bringing up his own head guard. “Not much, just that there was a breach and an ‘incident’ with Rose and that he should be on alert.”

I fought the urge to grind my molars together. Raider was right to say something, but I had hoped to resolve it before it made it to the rest of the gods.

“I didn’t realize this was some big secret,” Lukas said, picking up on the way I had tensed.

I blew out a breath. “It’s not. But it’s complicated.”

“Explain,” Adrian said, an ounce of command slipping into his voice.

“The breach was organized. A kid tried to pull an Orpheus and his family freaked out and tried to come get him together. Rose’s father’s old guard helped them. But there’s...”

“There’s what?” Adrian’s stress was clear in his question.

I shook my head and took a deep breath. This was a shit show. “There’s other stuff. Isolated. Someone put some poisoned herbs in one of Rose’s dresses.

My blood heated at the reminder

“Is she okay?” Adrian asked, concern slipping between his eyebrows

“Now.” There was no scarring that I could see. Thank the Fates. “It was the night of Corrina’s party. Before the Council meeting.”

Adrian nodded, processing. “And nothing since?” I shook my head tightly. “Good. Let’s hope it stays that way. We don’t need anything other than isolated.”

“Rose is checking right now to make sure it is.”

Adrian nodded again, breathing out a resigned breath that carried the weight of his birthright. “Shit like that kid is bound to happen. There is always someone pissed at the gods. But the second it becomes organized, turns against all of us, that’s where I get worried.”

“Is there anything to worry about right now?” Lukas asked, propping himself up a little higher.

“I don’t know,” Adrian replied honestly. “It’s hard to tell who just hates me or if the entire godly system is threatened. I’ll say this, we can’t afford any more disruption.”

Lukas paled a little. It was hard to tell, given he didn’t have his normal color, but it was there. I waited for him to say

something, but he stayed quiet. Whatever caused that was between him and Adrian.

“I’m sorry for anything that Rose and I caused,” I said. One apology at a time.

“No, you helped,” Adrian said, letting out a tired laugh. “I can’t imagine the shit storm that would have hit if one of you died.”

“That’s not happening any time soon,” I said, my voice snapping. Lukas raised an eyebrow at me but stayed silent.

Adrian sighed and dropped his head. He carried too much blame on his shoulders. “Anything, and I do mean anything, that seems organized, you tell me.”

“I will, brother,” I assured him. He dealt with enough just because of his name, who his parents were, let alone a full blown coup, Fates forbid.

“Who put the herbs in Rose’s dress?” Lukas asked.

I shuddered before I could stop it. I should have known that the pained look she gave me while we were dancing at Corrina’s party was genuine pain instead of her excuse of an uncomfortable dress. I’d had my hands on that dress, and the material was soft and delicate. “One of my *former* staff.”

“Fuck,” Lukas muttered.

“You knew?” I snapped. He knew what I was talking about. The quitting, the refusal to work for her. All shit she didn’t deserve.

“Woah, man,” Lukas said, lifting his hands in surrender. “Daphne told me.”

I raised an eyebrow. From what Rose told me about Daphne, it didn’t seem like her to run back to her fiancé with all of her best friend’s secrets.

“Don’t tell Rose that,” Lukas warned. “Daphne only said something because she thought I could help. She was worried about her. Or whatever.”

I shoved aside the million questions I had about that explanation. How could he help? Why had he said Daphne's name twice in the span of thirty seconds, when he'd refused to even acknowledge she existed for an entire year? Why did his *or whatever* come out in the most brutal, clipped tone I'd ever heard him use?

"It's dealt with," I said, heaving in a breath. This topic stressed me the fuck out. "Won't happen again."

"Someone care to explain why we are all suddenly harboring concern for Rose?"

I whipped my head towards Adrian so fast it formed a knot. "Excuse me?"

Adrian didn't back down at the threat in my voice, his authority unwavering. "She killed Pine. We remember that, right?"

I growled and Lukas laughed. Asshole. "There's more to the story."

"Oh, yeah?" Adrian asked.

"Well, she hasn't told me everything," I clarified. "But there is."

Adrian let out a bitter laugh. "Wow, she must be a firecracker in—"

"Don't finish that fucking sentence."

Adrian laughed again, but this time a genuine chuckle. "That was a test, and you failed. You're fucked, man."

He was right about that one. It was borderline comical how gone I was for her. The hate had twisted, changed into something else just as strong. There was a name for it, for the jolt I got every time I saw her, the punch to the gut every time she smiled at me. I just hadn't admitted to it yet.

"If she didn't kill him," Adrian continued, "Or there's more to the story like you said, I'd like to apologize."

"Let's hold on for a second," Lukas said, moving into a sitting position and pinning me with a stare. "What did she tell

you?”

“She doesn’t talk about Pine like she killed him in cold blood,” I said through clenched teeth.

“So you *think* there’s more to the story?” Lukas looked entirely unconvinced.

“Isn’t there? You’re clearly over it.”

“How do you know that?” Lukas shot back. “I only became friends with her because of Daphne. And clearly I’m a shit judge of character in that regard. What I know now was purely coincidence, and happened far later.”

I wasn’t touching that landmine in the slightest. Lukas would tell Adrian or I when he was ready. “She just...I don’t know, Lukas. I think her father had something to do with it. Forced her to kill him or tricked her or something. Her father’s guard went on and on about his *training methods* and Rose is clearly still working through it.”

“How. Do. You. Know. That?” Lukas repeated, punctuating every word.

“I—”

“Let me ask you something. Because I think you have this image in your head that she is entirely innocent here. Maybe that’s true.”

My jaw clenched so hard that I could hear Rose’s voice in my head warning me I was about to crack a tooth.

“But, maybe it’s not.” Lukas continued. “Say she did it on purpose. Say she killed him in cold blood, planned his murder for weeks and did it without hesitation? What then? Would you forgive her?”

I breathed in, searching for the conviction and rage that had me storming into her room not three months ago ready to kill her in revenge. That had me slapping a ring on her finger. But it was nowhere to be found.

“Already done,” I said, the words exposing everything Lukas, or Adrian, needed to know about how I felt about her.

“Well, shit,” Adrian said, laughing. “Dom is in love.”

I grumbled instead of throwing something at him. Lukas laughed too, the little shit.

“May your Rose never lose her thorns,” Adrian toasted dramatically, lifting his tumbler before tossing it back. He was one cheeky fucker. Even if he was right. Rose’s sarcasm and quips were one of the reasons I loved her.

Lukas seems settled by my explanation and relaxed back into conversation. I steered the topic to Adrian’s romantic escapades in an attempt to pull any information about Daphne from Lukas, but he casually evaded it and kept the conversation focused away from him.

We talked for another hour or so, but I couldn’t quite tell how much time passed, because the longer we sat there the more restless I got. Restless wasn’t a word I’d ever use to describe my state, but something tight was building in my stomach.

I tried to shove it away, attributing it to residual panic from yesterday and the lack of Rose in my day. That excuse worked until I heard footsteps slamming against the floor in the hallway.

Raiden burst through the door seconds later, his normally calm demeanor disheveled and my mind immediately went to Rose.

My stomach dropped out in terror, the worst already running through my mind.

“Where is she?” I ground out, already out of my chair and stalking toward him. Or the door. Or whatever path got me closer to Rose.

“The Temple in Corinth,” Raiden said, breath heaving like he ran here. “There was an attack and she got—”

I disappeared. I didn’t need to hear anymore. All that mattered was doing something with the hopeless feeling building in my chest, the all-consuming need to find her. The nausea curdling in my stomach at the state I’d find her in.

I popped into being right inside the temple, finding Max standing there, looking haunted.

*No.*

No. Losing her wasn't an option. Not before I could apologize for being a royal ass, beg her on my knees to forgive me.

To plead for the chance to show her that she should love me like I—

Like I loved her.

There was no doubt about that now. No mistaking the sheer panic I felt at the risk of losing her. The burgeoning rage towards whoever hurt her, the absolute need to be the person who comforted her.

Just needing to see her smile at me and know I caused it. The easy conversation and how many laughs she was able to pull from my throat. Seeing her in my bed and in my office and at our kitchen table. The sound of her teasing chuckle. The growing list in my head of all her nicknames for me.

But I'd get none of that if she was...

My chest went tight immediately. My throat felt like someone was choking the life out of it. I dared to ask Max, "Is she..."

"In the back," they said, then hung their head, like looking at me hurt.

I took off running, needing to see Rose in whatever form she was in. Praying not a hair on her perfect head was touched. Knowing deep in my soul that prayer wouldn't be granted.



# Chapter 31

## Rose

I had just managed to stop crying. Barely.

My whole body hurt and I felt raw and exposed. Flayed out. I could feel the bruises forming on my back and shoulders from the force of the initial blast.

The ugly cut down my arm had already stopped bleeding, the wound more superficial, the only other evidence being the blood that marred my dress.

I rubbed it absently with my free hand, trying to distract from the tightness in my chest, so forceful it threatened to constrict my entire body.

I killed. In self-defense. And my brain felt split, comparing it to Pine, getting mad at myself all over again and knowing that I would be lying here dead if I didn't defend myself. It was necessary.

Tears threatened again at the fact that it *was* necessary in the first place. The anger in the faces of my attackers as they channeled all the feelings about their lost identity into harming me.

I just...hated that we were here.

What was left of the door to Io's office slammed open a second later, revealing Dominic standing there like the harbinger of death, sucking all the light out of the room and into his presence. At the sight of his strong form, his face drained of color and muscles tight, I broke, burying my face in my hands and letting the sobs wrack my body.

"*Sweetheart,*" Dominic gritted out, voice breaking on the last syllable. He was in front of me so fast I could feel a breeze

in his wake.

His hands weren't touching me, but they were traveling over my body an inch above, scanning me for injuries, lingering on the bloodied fabric. At every place my skin was flushed, his hands paused for a second, the static heat of his skin burning. My heart felt scorched, ruined to a charred mess.

His skin touched mine for the first time slowly, pulling my hands away from my face. Dominic's eyes looked frantic, his jaw clenched, but his movements were soft, easy.

That sent another burst of tears streaming down my face. I was hysterical, and Dominic's tenderness wasn't helping.

This was such a fucking mess. Right as I was finally reworking my grief and trying to find a way to move forward, I was knocked off kilter again. Brutally and in the form of a mob of people in a place dedicated to me.

"Rose, sweetheart," Dominic said, placing his strong hands on my shoulders. "What happened?"

I couldn't speak through the tears and the explanation came out in hiccupped words. "Mob... Attack... Fine."

"You are not fine," Dominic said and it sounded like a curse. He turned to Max, who I just now realized was standing there, with Raiden and Marcus too, and ordered, "Handle this, *now*. I want everyone still alive thrown in the dungeons. Take the bodies too to be searched. Pick up anything that was left behind. *Anything*."

He pulled me close, gingerly, and spoke into my ear. "I'm taking you home, now, sweetheart."

"Okay." God, I sounded so weak.

I barely registered the rush of wind as we moved through the portal. We just popped right into the foyer of our house. I immediately registered two more bodies in the room. I lifted my head slightly, out of the shadow of Dominic's chest, to see Lukas and Adrian standing there, looking deeply concerned.

I couldn't handle their pity.

"Rose, I'm so sorry," Lukas said. "You don't..."

I shook my head furiously, cutting him off. He was going to say *deserve this*. That I didn't deserve this. My disagreement was on the tip of my tongue, but for some reason, it felt wrong.

"I don't deserve this," I whispered, barely uttering the words.

"Of course not. No, no, you don't," Dominic rushed out, pressing his hand into the back of my neck.

"I don't deserve this," I repeated, my teeth chattering and my limbs and muscles shook in shock. It was an admission, a promise to myself, that I never thought I'd make.

I had been torturing myself, inflicting punishment because of the idea that I *did* deserve it. That what I'd done was unforgivable.

But, maybe, maybe I felt like I was forgiven. And the only person who had to apologize was me. To myself, for placing blame that belonged on my father's shoulders onto mine. For letting my grief and regret and anger spin it into something that was entirely my fault, something that deserved endless punishment.

To apologize for not standing up for myself, instead just molding into a shape that fit the accusations and rumors.

"Rose, you don't deserve this," Dominic said, his voice a whisper that wrapped my skin in a soft embrace.

I was shaken but I relished in his touch. He was the only thing that could make me feel better right now. Because right now, I needed to feel safe. I needed to feel protected. I needed to feel cared for.

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and buried my head in his neck, breathing in the scent of his cedar and cypress soap, and I felt my nerves dissipate with each breath in.

I was in love with him.

My breath hitched at the thought. The realization had dawned on me so fast, my knees would have buckled if I

wasn't still kneeling on the floor. It was followed by the kind of peace that could only come from finally admitting to something you'd known for a long time. I had. For a while.

I'd just masked it with a claim to hate. Not hard to do, although now the weight in my heart felt powerful enough to destroy a realm.

I'd deal with the fallout later. For now, I just needed him.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked.

I shook my head, scraping my forehead against his warm neck. "Later."

"Are you okay? Physically, at least?" Dominic asked, softly. Like he was scared of the answer.

"Yes," I said against his throat, right on the strong, corded muscle.

"Let's clean you up then." And that was that. Whatever I needed, whatever I asked for, he would give me.

Dominic silently said goodbye to Lukas and Adrian and hitched me up into his arms before I could protest. Not that I would have, when it was so easy to keep holding onto him and let him sweep me away.

On solid, quick legs, Dominic carried me up three flights of stairs and into our bathroom, not setting me down until both doors were closed and we were closed off from the outside world.

I kept my eyes closed as he turned on the shower and stripped off my bloodied clothes. His own went next and then he guided me slowly under the warm spray.

It was even the perfect temperature, not hot enough to shock me but warm enough to calm my shaky limbs. I whispered a thank you, keeping my words short. Too much talking and I was at risk of blurting *I love you*.

Not good, not when I wasn't sure how he felt.

But it didn't feel like he hated me as Dominic tilted my head back, slowly running his hands through my hair. I hadn't

realized there was blood in it, not until I got a glimpse of pink stained water on the white tile.

His hands worked shampoo through my scalp next, and as the suds washed out, my fear and shakiness went with it. Well, most of it.

When Dominic realized I could stand on my two feet, he twisted us so that he could stand under the spray. I kept my hands on his chest, even as he turned away from me to face the wall.

He stood there, letting the water hit the back of his head and neck, with his hands pressed to the far wall. He was so stiff. My eyes were zeroed in on the space in between his shoulder blades when I saw his muscles bunch.

He had dropped his head and his shoulders were jutting forward every few seconds as a silent sob wracked his body.

“Dominic,” I beckoned, pulling on his arm so that he’d face me.

He shook his head.

“Dominic, baby, look at me.”

He listened, slowly revealing his face. He looked so distraught, his eyebrows pulled tight and his eyes glassy.

“Dominic, I’m okay,” I said softly, begging him to believe it.

“No.” God, he sounded so pained. “This is my fault.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s not.”

“Yes,” he said, refusing to meet my eyes. “I was such a dick to you. I made it okay for everyone to treat you the same.”

“You didn’t make them do anything.”

Regret was visible on his entire body, from the way his eyebrows pinched together to the way he was gripping my elbows in a silent plea to blame him. “Didn’t I?”

“No. However we acted towards each other in the past is in. The. Past.” Because I hadn’t spared an insult or quip in front of anyone. Didn’t plan to in the future, either.

Anyone who had hurt me did so on their own volition.

“I’m sorry,” Dominic shook his head, flicking water in my face. I smiled and his breath hitched. “I don’t know how to fix this.”

“You don’t need to fix anything. Everyone is either dead or in the dungeons, ready for us to get to the bottom of it. We can trust our friends to handle it. Right now, I just need you.”

The word *need* caught his attention. “You need me?”

“I do,” I said, in lieu of a different response, the one I was hiding away for now.

Dominic breathed out and closed his eyes for a second, and then faster than I could blink, slammed his mouth down on mine. The kiss started slow and wet, his tongue dragging over my bottom lip and against my own tongue in a long stroke.

The second my nails dug into his back, Dominic backed us against the heated tile wall and hiked me up so that my legs could wrap around his waist.

“Wait,” he said, pulling back and leaving me heaving and trying to catch my breath. “I need you to know that you don’t need my forgiveness, but you have it.”

I started crying, slow hot streams down my face. Overwhelmed by the force of what existed between us. Dominic looked like he just found me folded on the floor again.

“*Please*, Rose,” Dominic begged. “Please don’t cry. I’m barely hanging on by a thread right now and your tears will take whatever is left of my sanity.”

“I’ve had a rough day,” I said, my voice watery.

“Tell me how to make it better.” His wet hair was falling into his face, a darker brown than normal. “I’ll do anything.”

I pulled on the back of his neck, threading my fingers through the strands there. “Kiss me, please. I need you.”

He listened, bringing his lips back to mine. The desperation was thick between us, heightening every touch, making me focus on every place his hands dug into my skin.

I could feel him hard and ready against my thigh, but he kept his hands pressed against my ass, kneading it in slow strokes as I attacked his mouth. I was burning, aching, and needed him in between my legs, not imprinting his fingers into my skin.

I whimpered, pulling on his wrists. Dominic broke the kiss to drop his mouth to my ear. “You need me, huh?”

I nodded furiously, grappling with his forearms, begging him to move.

“Where do you *need* me, sweetheart?” Dominic growled in my ear. “You can’t just grind all over me and expect me to know what you want. Use your words.”

I moaned so loud the sound overpowered the sharp slap of water on the floor. I reached down in between us to wrap my hand around his length, relishing the way he jerked forward as my skin connected with his. “I want you.”

“Be more specific,” Dominic instructed and I slapped my hands on his shoulders, trying to get him to move. “Do you want me on my knees or do you want me buried deep inside you?”

“Inside,” I breathed, arching towards him.

I could feel Dominic’s smile against the shell of my ear. “Whatever you want, wife.”

He slid home, fast and all the way to the hilt, ripping a groan from my throat.

“You feel so good. So. Good.” Dominic punctuated the words with snaps of his hips, keeping me pinned against the wall at an angle that set my chest on fire with pleasure.

“Every time,” I agreed, the words coming out on a breathy moan.

Dominic kept a punishing pace, pressing me further into the wall so that he could move a hand in between my legs. My own hands were in his hair, pulling at the wet strands, begging for any type of purchase as my release crashed over me in waves, guided by the sweet praise Dominic whispered in my ear.

When he finished, my name on his tongue, we were breathing heavy, the steam thick around our spent bodies. Dominic cleaned us both, dragging a loofa over my skin in such soft strokes by the time he was done, I was throbbing all over again.

We didn't even bother with towels, I just dragged him straight to our bed, pulling us between the sheets and losing myself in him, drowning out the feeling of blood on my skin and the fear that the other shoe was about to drop.



## Chapter 32

### Rose

I was tired and bruised and just didn't want to deal with anything. Not when I could ignore any problems from the cocoon of my comforter and Dominic's body.

But that wasn't a choice a god or the protector of a realm could make.

I got up and got ready, Dominic close behind as if he was convinced some other injury would pop up if he let me out of his sight.

My physical form was fine. Any bruises had faded and the cut on my arm hadn't reopened. As gods, we healed faster than normal, unless you severely injured yourself.

I'd had cuts on my knuckles that hadn't healed for any entire day after my father forced Pine and I to wail on a punching bag until blood coated the surface.

Mentally, I was feeling okay too. I was tired, that wasn't in debate. Yesterday was just a lot. It was a long time coming, but finally believing that I didn't deserve any of this, that maybe I'd let it go on too long and shouldered misplaced blame, rocked me.

If it wasn't for the support I knew I had from my friends and Dominic, it might have sent me spiraling. But I felt like they had believed it before me, and that was comfort enough.

A small ping hit my chest at the thought that my best friend wasn't there to share it with me. But I also believed what Dominic said—that it would be okay, and Daphne would come back when she was ready. And I'd be here to hear what happened and talk her through it.

Max had sent breakfast up to our room that morning, along with a note that requested we meet in my office instead of the kitchen. This wasn't a breakfast table discussion in the slightest.

Dominic and I walked down to my office together, his hand never leaving the back of my neck. He was silent today. Not that he wasn't all grumbly and quiet normally, but this seemed more tense than his comfortable silence.

I looked up at him with curious eyes, letting him know I noticed.

He just shook his head silently and kept walking toward the office wing.

When we got there, Max and Marcus were already sitting on my couch and Raiden was in a chair next to the coffee table. It left the two chairs in front of my desk free, which Dominic pulled out and around to face them. We talked like everything was normal for a little, exchanging morning pleasantries until Max breathed in and crossed their hands together over their legs, a subtle reminder we had business to attend to.

Silence fell around the group and Max nodded at Marcus, who sat up a little straighter and began.

†

## **Dominic**

“First things first, this was organized,” Marcus said, and my hands immediately curled into fists.

Of course, it was fucking organized. There was no other explanation for an angry mob of people attacking Rose at the exact moment she was locked away with a priest.

Who was also in on it.

In the early hours of the night, Rose told me she had been the one to kill him, one of her Shadowwalkers crushing his heart. That was more merciful of a death than I would have

preferred for him, but I got at least some satisfaction from the fact that he was ended by a version of me.

I had noticed it first that day in the library, but thought I was hallucinating it. There was no way that when Rose still despised me, the embodiment of her own power would manifest in my form.

Even though my own had been a tall, lean woman for years. Before we were married.

I'd noticed the likeness before but had written it off as the fact that I associated her with death, and the Shadows were an extension of it. Now, I just thought my power knew I was going to fall in love with her before I did.

Rose's unmarred hand in my own was the only, *only*, thing keeping me together. I would be in full blown attack mode if it wasn't for her, going through the cells in the dungeon one by one until someone spilled. Instead of letting our friends do their job.

"Go through everything you know," I told Marcus.

"Max went back to the Temple last night," Marcus said, gesturing at his sibling. Max took over from there, "Io had a button under his desk. Triggered a silent signal out to someone on the outside who gathered the mob."

"I was only in there for ten minutes. How did they get that many people together?" Rose asked. It was killing me to see fear in her eyes.

"Final count was twenty," Raiden said, crossing his ankle over his knee. "The temple is in the middle of the Corinth town square. Enough time for that many people to gather."

"That means they were able to gather twenty people on a whim in a relatively small city. Who hated me," Rose said.

"We don't know if it's you," Raiden pointed out.

"Io said that people weren't going to follow along with what the gods wanted to do. Not just you," Max reminded, to which Rose flinched. I tightened my grip on her hand.

“You might just be a catalyst,” Raiden continued. “There has been unrest for a while.”

“For the love of Jupiter, Adrian wouldn’t have been born if this wasn’t Fated,” I snapped.

“You’re telling that to the wrong crowd,” Raiden said, tone even and steady. “We all know that. Most of your people know that. But that was still an upheaval of a system that has been in place for over two thousand years.”

“People didn’t have this much of a problem when an entire new Pantheon popped up,” I argued. The first Pluto lived close to a century without an attack on his life. And in a post-war world.

“They did,” Rose said, running her thumb over the top of my hand. “But they were dealing with the aftermath of a war and were just crushed under a god’s boot if they said something. We aren’t like that anymore.”

“It might be necessary to remind them,” I said, even though the thought of a full-blown crack down made my nostrils flare.

“Okay, so it may or may not be because of me,” Rose said, recentering the conversation. “What else?”

“About half of them had a tattoo of a circle on their forearm,” Marcus said.

Rose breathed out heavily. “I saw that.”

“Any idea what they mean?” I asked. I didn’t recognize it and I knew just about every icon, logo, and symbol of Upperworld organizations. It was necessary to understand how humans worked and interacted before they passed over into our realm.

“It’s not on record anywhere,” Raiden said tightly. Not knowing things pissed him off more than just about anyone else.

Rose looked at me and raised an eyebrow. I gave her a quick shake of my head. We both knew who to go to if we needed knowledge no one else had access to, but that was a last resort considering where she stood with Lukas.

Especially not when her counterpart might know.

“Please don’t tell me that means it’s a dead end,” Rose pleaded lightly.

“It’s not,” Marcus said, a grin entirely inappropriate for the subject matter appearing on his face. “Anyone who was touched by a Shadowwalker...died.” He said it carefully, cautious of Rose’s reaction to the news. More evidence that she didn’t have a murderous bone in her entire body. She breathed in deeply, squeezed my hand, but otherwise looked okay. “Everyone we knocked out hasn’t woken up yet.”

“Why?” I asked, wishing they would. Then I could have a go at them.

Raiden shivered a little. Oh shit, that meant it was gross. “Their tattoos are festering. Like it’s infecting them. There’s a solid chance they don’t wake up at all.”

“So, the tattoos come from a power source. What a relief,” I said. This was just great. If another god was involved or the group had access to power-filled objects, this was an entirely different discussion.

Max nodded tightly, their blue eyes cold with worry. “Not a dead end, though.”

“Who’s talking?” I asked, leaning forward in my chair.

“You’re not going to like it,” Raiden said, rising to the door to go retrieve whoever it was.

“If it’s Odell I’m breaking his nose again,” I said to no one in particular.

“You broke his nose?” Rose said, looking at me under pinched brows.

I just shrugged and to my surprise, she laughed and held onto my hand a little tighter.

“Don’t be weird,” Raiden said from right outside the door, before ushering in a woman who looked like she was about to shit rainbows through the door.

She was dressed in a black and red Thanatos society t-shirt, a rare look given they normally wore ghoulish robes, and was bouncing up and down so excitedly her light red hair was shaking all around her. “Oh, wow. It’s really you guys. I love you both so much. Well, maybe I love Rose a little more, but Dominic you’re great, too. Wow, this is just such an honor. Everyone back at the society is going to be so jealous.”

Rose and I both blinked at her dumbly. The Thanatos society were over-excited fans the majority of the time, and now this girl was getting a glimpse of our palace and a free trip to the Underworld. It was probably the best day of her fucking life.

Rose smiled brightly at her, and I forced myself to give her a crooked half smile. The girl’s mouth dropped open.

“What’s your name?” Rose asked, far too sweet.

“Alyssa!” she practically screamed.

“Well, Alyssa, welcome to the Underworld,” Rose said, rising to shake her hand. I reluctantly did the same. After we both took our seats again, Raiden pushed her into the free chair around the coffee table as if that would do anything to subdue her fidgeting. When she couldn’t bounce with her whole body, she did with just her legs.

“Alyssa here has some information that you might find very helpful,” Raiden said, looking sideways at her. I had to restrain a grin. Raiden didn’t fidget because it was apparently a waste of energy.

“First off, I’m so sorry for what happened, that’s horrible!” Alyssa exclaimed, her eyes welling up with tears as she looked at Rose.

“I’m alright, but I appreciate your concern,” Rose returned sweetly. How had anyone ever doubted she was anything but kind?

“If I had known it was a real thing, I would have said something sooner,” Alyssa continued.

“What does that mean?” I asked as nicely as I could manage.

“There was this guy in the Thanatos Society—I hope he’s dead now, by the way—who would always go on and on about how much the gods suck and are out of touch.”

I couldn’t help the snort I let out.

Alyssa paled. “I didn’t mean—”

I waved a hand to cut her off. “We might be, given we don’t actually interact with the living that often, but the other gods are much better with people.”

Rose chuckled lightly under her breath. Alyssa regained some color then said, “I know that! I just saw Lady Aphrodite and Lord Apollo on the news at some charity gala at a museum. Not sure which one though, could have been Corinth or Naples for all I know.”

That checked out for them. Where beauty went, they followed. Or the other way around, really.

“Alyssa,” Rose said kindly, keeping her on track.

“Right! His name was Johnathan, and he was honestly the worst, but he would talk about how there were these people who thought the gods needed to change. It picked up after you guys got married and he kept saying that you guys needed to pay.”

I hoped he was dead in the dungeons.

“I didn’t think anything of it because he was literally the only person I’d ever heard talk about it. I mean not just in the Thanatos Society. Everyone loves the gods. If it was some weird, organized thing, I can’t imagine it’s that large.”

They were certainly large enough.

“Did you ever see a tattoo on his arm?” Rose asked.

“No,” Alyssa said, shaking her head. Okay, so it was fairly recent. “But whenever he was being weird on the phone, he would end the call by saying maiden or something like that. He was always whispering like a creep.”

That was such an innocuous word but could mean so much. A connection to Hera or Juno maybe. Or a statement of purity.

“And he was the only one you knew to be involved with this?” Raiden asked.

Alyssa nodded. “The only person. But then I heard about the attack, and he wasn’t at our meeting last night and thought he might have been involved somehow.”

I was sure it was already all over the news. Fucking great. Adrian would be two seconds away from an aneurysm by now.

“Thank you, Alyssa,” Rose said, smiling genuinely. “Anything else?”

Her eyes went sad. “That’s all I know, I’m sorry.”

“Oh, no, you’ve been beyond helpful,” Rose said. “Dominic and I will be sure to stop by soon to thank you for your help.”

“That would be awesome!” Alyssa exclaimed. Now I was really sure this was the best day of her life.

After a quick goodbye and a few tears from Alyssa, Raiden ushered her out, passing her off to someone to take her home.

The entire room heaved a sigh.

Rose turned to me, and I leaned in, letting her speak just between us. “We need to tell Adrian.”

“Shit, we need to tell the whole Council at this point,” I said. No good would come from keeping it a secret. “But I think we should keep it between Lukas, Adrian, and us until we know more.”

Rose nodded in agreement. “If we go to them right now, it will just freak everyone out.”

“Daphne too,” I added, and Rose’s eyebrows perked up.

“Really?”

“Adrian told me the other day that we can’t afford any more disruptions. That was before the attack. I imagine he’ll tell Lukas to hunt Daphne down sooner rather than later.”

Rose shivered at the thought, then turned back to the group. “I don’t think I like how little we know.”



I grunted in agreement. We knew shockingly little and that was not how I functioned.

“Maybe we should do some more in the Upperworld,” Rose suggested, looking to our guards for confirmation.

“Over my dead fucking body,” I grumbled.

Rose shot me an incredulous look, but I didn’t back down. My stomach felt tight at the memory of her bloodied, bruised, and crumpled on the floor. “I’m never finding you like that again.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“If we do anything, we are doing it together,” I said, pulling her hand to my mouth and placing a kiss on her open palm. “I can’t lose you. I refuse.”

Rose’s eyebrows lifted in the center and her eyes shone with repressed tears. “I can’t either,” she said softly, pressing her fingertips into the back of my hand.

“No one is going anywhere,” Raiden cut in. “There are multiple ways to get information. There are people who know way more than they are letting on. Especially once you involve Lukas and Adrian. And Fates know Daphne probably has information.”

Of course, he heard. Raiden had hearing like a fucking bat. I turned to Rose to see her reaction to the comment about Daphne but found her looking at her lap with the wheels in her head turning at a lightning-fast pace.

Rose lifted her head slightly and looked over at Marcus under her brows. It took him a second, but Marcus seemed to clue in on whatever idea had just popped into her head.

“Not a bad idea,” he said.

“Fuck it,” Rose said, shooting out of her chair. “They owe me.”

“Who owes you?” I asked, rising to meet her.

“The Fates. They owe me.”

And with those five words, my body rocked with a fear worse than finding Rose bloodied and bruised on the floor.

It was the fear that *I* would be the one to hurt her so thoroughly that I would lose her forever.

## Chapter 33

### Rose

“The Fates. They owe me.”

“Why?” Raiden asked at the same time Dominic said, “Rose.”

I answered Raiden first, even though Dominic was looking at me like I might break. “Why do they owe me or why am I going to them?”

“Why do they owe you?”

Dominic was hovering near me as if this answer was of the utmost importance. Maybe it was. It revealed the most about what happened with Pine.

“I started working for them after Pine died. Hoping they’d...” I glanced at Dominic, who looked nauseous, the color draining from his face. He knew where this was going. “Hoping they’d bring him back. Even if it meant exchanging his soul for mine.”

“Before anyone freaks out,” Marcus said, staring pointedly at Dominic, “She stopped working for them.”

“All of three days ago,” I said. “But, Marcus is right. I realized what a hopeless mission that was. I need to accept that my father would have found a way regardless.”

“Rose,” Dominic said again, his voice desperate.

“I’ll explain later,” I told him, smoothing a hand down his arm. I hadn’t meant to tell Raiden too, but it just slipped out. Trust was a weird thing in that regard. Once you did trust someone, the pieces of your life floated to the surface easier.

Dominic didn't say anything, just swallowed whatever stone was lodged in his throat.

Well, alright. It was time to see the Fates then. Knowing Dominic would follow, I turned quickly and stepped through a portal right into the Fates lair. Dominic came barreling through after me, like he had reached for me right as I stepped out of the way.

I was somewhat giddy with the chance to call in a favor, finally making the Fates help *me*. Clotho met my eye immediately, and I smiled at her. Then she looked behind me to Dominic. This would be interesting, I'd been meaning to ask what debt they'd incurred with him.

"Dominic. Last I saw you, you were closer to a boy than a man."

It took a second. A second for those words to register. For my smile to drop as I processed what, exactly, Clotho had just said.

Drawing on a healthy dose of naive hope, I tried to find another meaning for it. Maybe a youthful disposition or his age was young compared to theirs or—

No. No, they just hadn't seen Dominic for years. And I was a fool.

"What?" I asked hoarsely.

Clotho looked at me with unabashed pity, the emotion swimming in her hollow gray eyes. It was so potent, so overpowering I wanted to scream. She felt so bad for me. And it was because she knew how deep I would feel the betrayal.

Her expression only stole my attention for a moment before I turned to the man who I couldn't seem to take my eyes off for more than a few seconds, even now.

Dominic looked sorry, I'd give him that. His brows were creased together, and my thumb twitched with the urge to smooth down the line. I would have, maybe an hour ago, before I knew. But now, I kept my hands at my sides, tucking my fingers into a fist to fight the urge to reach for him.

Clotho's voice cracked somewhere to my right, gearing up to answer my question.

"No," I cut her off before she could. Then said to Dominic, "I want to hear it from you."

Dominic wisely listened, clenching his fists once before his voice scraped out of his throat. "I lied. We aren't Fated."

My life shattered to pieces before my eyes.

*The only way to escape our control is to know your Fate.*

How had I been so stupid? So blind? Fuck, Dominic didn't even know how much they'd controlled him. He would have the urge to get close to me, to spend time with me. They wouldn't *let* him kill me. He wouldn't even know that someone else was manipulating his life, taking the power completely out of his hands.

I could forgive him for the lie.

Lying to force our marriage was one thing. It made sense for the realm and to keep the peace and to prevent another death as a consequence of the godly lines merging.

But this...this was torture.

Dominic didn't know that he wasn't in control of himself. This entire time I had thought that we were acting despite being Fated, but not *because* of it. I took a step back, away from Dominic and the sheer anguish in his deep brown eyes. His hand reached out on a reflex, and I stepped back again. If he got his hands on me I wouldn't be able to focus, to ignore the part of me that felt so deeply for him I could cry.

"Sweetheart, please," he ground out, taking a stride that was double the length of mine towards me. Suddenly he was inches away, the smell of his cologne threatening to steal my sanity. When his hand reached up to softly brush mine where it was crossed over my chest, my breath seized in my throat.

He had me cornered, surrounding me with his energy, his power, just him. He followed me as I slowly backed into the wall and when I hit the cold stone of the dome, Dominic gingerly lifted his hands to my face.

One brushed under my jaw before circling around to cup the back of my head. The other gripped my chin softly, pushing up as he said, "Let me explain. I'm sorry I lied, more than you know. But this changes nothing between us. We don't need to be Fated."

That last statement is what did it. What had me pushing off the wall of the Fate's lair and past him before he could blink, escaping his grasp. Dominic jumped after me, a growl escaping his throat as I kept moving towards the gate.

"Don't you dare walk away from me, Rose." His voice was desperate, pleading.

It didn't stop me though, the pressure building in my chest and the tingles attacking my throat were overpowering my need to stay and hear him out. I ran out of there into the hallway, one hand bracing the wall.

"Rose."

Okay, so Dominic followed me. The ghost of his hand near my shoulder had me moving down the hallway again, running...left. Apparently.

I didn't know where I was going, I just knew that I had to get out of there. I couldn't sit and listen to him tell me that he didn't need a bond to care for me. He didn't even know how blind he was.

He didn't care, not really. He was just clouded by whatever magic the Fates could spin around our thoughts. The idea that the past months had just been forced sent my stomach turning sour, nausea propelling me faster down the hallway.

"Rose."

My name. Again. Spoken with a raw sort of desperation I didn't think I had ever heard from him.

He was really committed to following me, it seemed. I had fled so quickly and without reason, I didn't even know where I was trying to go.

Another left down a black-walled hallway, and I started to run even faster as I heard the stomp of Dominic's boots against

the tile floor getting louder.

I was back to the impasse between the gardens, to fresh air and a sky I could unleash a scream into, and the Fates' chambers when Dominic called my name again.

"Rose," he pleaded, and if I had half a mind right now I might have thought it sounded like he was getting choked up.

"Let me explain," he begged, again. "I lo—"

"*No.*"

I ripped the words out of his mouth as fast as I could. He didn't *love* me. He just didn't know it yet.

It was his near declaration that had me turning back towards the chambers instead of for the fresh air. If he was so out of his mind from the Fates' control that he was claiming he loved me, then he needed to be knocked back into reality. Fast.

Especially before he tried to say those three words again, and I wouldn't be quick enough to stop him. If I had to hear those words from his lips, knowing that they were based on a lie, I would crumble. It would be worse than the torment that was already wracking my soul.

I turned left, back towards the stony, damp home of the Fates.

Dominic jumped after me, our steps echoing louder as the material covering the hall turned from glittering black tile to a soulless gray stone. "I'm going to keep following you, you know."

"That's kind of the point!" I yelled, looking over my shoulder at him. He looked crazed with desperation.

*What did the Fates do to him?* I'd hardly ever seen him so disheveled. Only when he found me in the Temple.

I forced my head back around my shoulder and away from his penetrating gaze. We reached the knee-height gate moments later, and I pushed through it without warning, jolting Lachesis from a nap in her chair. The old crone fell asleep in minutes.

They might be mad, but who gave a fuck.

“Rose, what are you doing?” Dominic said again, the gravel in his voice teetering dangerously close to the tone he used when he had his lips pressed against my ear.

“Shut up,” I snapped back, before turning to face the Fates where they now sat at attention in their hovering chairs. The dome that housed them was large, and currently without light. In moments it would light up with the evidence that would drive the knife embedded in my chest an inch deeper.

“Clotho, be a dear and pull up our Fate lines, please.”

I didn't recognize my own voice, hoarse and barely above a whisper. But in the hollowed dome where you could hear the droplets of water crashing to the floor, it came out loud and scraping.

Clotho had dropped the pity and now just looked sad. I didn't even know she could. And Atropos wasn't making eye contact with me.

Even they knew how fucked up this was.

Dominic was close to me now. I refused to look at him, training my eyes on the dome and waiting for my heart to shatter, but I could feel him close. Within a few inches.

I was always so aware of his presence. That was something I would miss, how the knowledge of his proximity to me in the room had turned comforting. Now it was doomed to be tense.

“Clotho,” I said, when she stalled.

She released a breath and twitched a gray hand, sending two bright gold strands shooting across the dome. They stood on their own for a second, before pulling together and twisting around one another like a full-body hug.

Two different strands, but part of the same rope.

Fated.

I let myself admire the beauty of it for a moment. It was the second and last time I would ever look at them.



I imagined a world where I was studying them with Dominic, reminiscing over how our relationship started, but proud of how we'd changed. But, no, in reality I was pulling the cloth back from his eyes, opening them to the fact that he didn't actually love me.

I was snapped out of the moment, however, by Dominic's voice.

"Fuck."

The only thing I could do was release a laugh in disbelief. That word was confirmation that he was stuck with me and he hated it. There was no way I could look at him now, so I kept my stare trained to the floor.

His rejection hurt more than I thought it would. Who was I kidding, though. I was bleeding out, dying, at the sound of his voice.

Nothing had ever hurt like this, and I needed to get out of that room. I allowed myself one more look at our Fate lines, at the end where the bit of his that was longer than mine curled down, as if it couldn't stand to have even one inch not touching mine.

My eyes dropped to the floor again and I turned, in the direction away from Dominic, to head towards the exit. An exit he let me walk straight of as he stared at the lines with a stricken expression planted on his beautiful face, oblivious to my heart breaking.

## Chapter 34

### **Dominic**

I was such a fucking idiot.

I knew the signs, should have put them together. Rose still grieving her brother. Asking me if I'd ever tried to bring my parents back. Sneaking off in tactical gear and lying about where she was.

I had practically begged her to test me that first night, dared her to go to the Fates and call me on my bullshit, convinced they wouldn't tell her a thing.

How wrong I was.

It explained why I was never quite able to shake the feeling that she hadn't put up that much of a fight. Sure, she fought me every step of the way after we got married, but she walked into that temple suspiciously well-mannered. For her, anyway, she still called me at least three names during the course of our wedding.

I was sick to my stomach, at how blind I'd been, but more so at the heartbroken expression I'd seen on Rose's face.

She was so convinced I'd been forced into this that she wouldn't let me tell her I loved her. Well, that was bullshit. I didn't need to know that we'd been Fated to realize that killing her would have been a mistake. I had been distracted by my own grief and desire to get revenge that I hadn't been able to see her until she was forced in front of me.

If the Fates had a hand in our marriage then I'd drop to my knees and thank them.

Atropos's spry voice forced my attention up to their floating thrones. "We don't manipulate. We may push

physically. End a life or start another. We inspire, but we are not in the business of altering minds.”

I nodded in agreement. I knew that. The only person responsible for how wrapped around Rose’s finger I was was Rose herself.

“Make sure she knows that,” Clotho said. “The sentence she has imposed on herself is much too harsh.”

“Will do, Clotho.”

And then I was out of there, stepping right back into our bedroom in search of Rose. I needed to grab her and tell her how in love with her I was, how we were inevitable, how I didn’t care if the Fates caused this, that I was just thankful they had chosen me for her.

I tore through our bedroom and the bathroom, then busted through the door to her old bedroom, the one that had been half-converted into a second library and came up empty.

*Damnit, where was she?*

If she ran, took a page out of her best friend’s book and fled, there would be no corner of the earth she could hide from me. Not even the darkest corners of Tartarus could conceal her.

My blood spiked a degree hotter in urgency. With every passing minute I knew Rose was delving further and further into insanity, doubting every kind action, every time I did something to take care of her, the fervor with which I loved her.

Every day.

She could be at Lukas’s palace, maybe off with Thea at Jason’s home. But first, I would try her favorite spots in the house.

“*Little flight risk,*” I mumbled under my breath as I started my search.

The library was empty.

The kitchen void of her rich vanilla rose perfume, floating off her skin and begging me to bury my nose in her neck.

The back deck free of her shining hair, perfect to run my fingers through.

The hallway outside of the training room, however, was full of her presence. I would sense her anywhere, my body perfectly in tune with hers.

I all but sprinted down the hallway, barreling through the dark, oak double doors.

When I did, I came face to face with Rose, sitting in candlelight, sharpening a knife.

## Chapter 35

### Rose

“Are you here to kill me?” Dominic asked, that stupid grin plastered on his face.

“Yes.” The word would have been barely audible if the room wasn’t deadly quiet. I scrambled to my feet and raised the knife slightly, dropping the sharpening block to the floor.

Dominic raised his eyebrows and shoved his hands into his pockets, making no indication he understood how serious I was. “Are you now?”

“Yes,” I repeated. I tensed my muscles, the same way I did when my father’s training had first started and I was terrified of what he was going to throw at me.

“Hmm,” Dominic said, nodding his head and sending his hair shaking a little from its hold. I’d wanted to smooth it back for him. But I was no longer allowed to. “I don’t think so.”

I scoffed, and said “You’re wrong.” Trying to convince myself as much as him.

“No. I’m not.” Dominic took a step toward me and I threw the knife, watching as it whistled an inch away from his head and embedded itself into the far wall.

“I’ve seen you throw knives, Rose,” Dominic said, after not even flinching an inch. “You don’t miss. If you wanted to hit me you would have.”

I wordlessly shook my head, then pulled another knife out of the sheath at my thigh. Dominic needed to be knocked back into sense. To remember what he wanted for me before the Fates got involved.

“The closer you get, the easier it will be for me to stab you,” I warned as he took another step toward me. I almost, almost took one back, but stood my ground.

“Okay.” He took two steps forward. I stayed still. The sound of his boots hitting the ground were echoing off the walls and my hollow, drained heart.

“Dominic,” I said. It almost sounded like a plea.

“Rose,” he returned, now three strides away from me.

“I’m going to stab you.”

Dominic stopped, then casually crossed his arms over his chest. “No, you aren’t.”

I shook my head again. “You don’t know me.”

Dominic laughed, full and rich and familiar. “Oh, yes I do, sweetheart. Now, I’m not moving toward you another inch. If you really want to kill me, you’ll come to me.”

“I’m better than you at hand to hand combat,” I said. But I didn’t move.

“That’s true. So come over here and show me. Kill me,” Dominic said, his voice steady. “And don’t think I missed that deflection.”

I tightened my grip on the knife. I could do this. Just a couple well placed jabs to get him riled up and then I’d conveniently forget to block and he’d get what he wanted.

“Come on, sweetheart,” Dominic goaded. “Kill me.”

I growled and tensed my entire body for a step forward. I still didn’t move.

“I’m giving you one more second to come at me, or I’m knocking that knife out of your hand.”

I raised the knife toward him, the only movement my body would allow. I could keep it steady, all he had to do was walk into it.

My throat went dry. Just an abdominal flesh wound, but the thought of Dominic bleeding made my knees weak.

Dominic and I stared at each other in the dark room. I still didn't move.

"Second over," Dominic said, then came toward me. When he was within arm's reach, he knocked the knife out of my hand and I just watched as it clattered to the floor next to my feet.

But then Dominic grabbed my face and I panicked at the familiar comfort of his touch. On instinct, I wrapped my foot around his leg, digging into the back of his knee to set him off balance and twisting so that he went to the ground with me on top of him.

Dominic grunted as his back hit the ground and the air was pushed from his lungs. The second I realized what I did, I pulled back, my hands lifting off his chest. Dominic looked shocked for a moment, then registered something in the way I released him.

Quicker than I could blink, he had me on my back, his legs encasing mine. If I couldn't deal with his hands on my face, how the fuck was I supposed to deal with this?

I scrambled out from under him, grabbing the knife and backing up a few strides. Dominic looked pissed now. Good, he'd end it soon.

"If another *relieved* thought about me killing you runs through your perfect head, you're not going to like what happens," Dominic cursed out.

I gaped like a fish.

"What, Rose? I told you I know you better than anyone else."

"You want revenge," I said softly.

Dominic was in front of me in one long step, wrapping his hand around my wrist. The same wrist that was connected to the hand holding the knife. He lifted it, so that the blade was pressed flat to his chest. "Revenge is nothing compared to you. Nothing makes this"—he tapped the knife over his heart—"beat except for you. And I can't let you die because you'll be taking us both down. Live with me, Rose."

I closed my eyes to try to fight the tears building. I wanted to believe him so bad. To live with him.

Dominic stroked his free hand down my face then under my chin, forcing my head up to him. When I didn't open my eyes, he continued, "I might have told myself at the beginning I was marrying you for revenge. But I never got past asking other people about you. All I wanted was to know pieces of you. You pulled me into your orbit, Rose. Don't knock me out of it."

"Dominic," I pleaded. My chest was cracking in half. I couldn't hear him tell me this if there was a chance it was all forced.

"Look at me."

My eyes fluttered slightly, but I forced them to stay closed. A tear dropped out and down my cheek, catching on Dominic's thumb.

"Rose, look at me." That did it. The sheer, desperate command in his voice stole any ounce of resistance I had. I opened my eyes to find him staring at me under pinched brows. Staring so intently I could see the love there.

My breath hitched.

"I'm not fighting you," Dominic said. "And you're not going to fight me either."

"You don't know that," I whispered.

"Oh, I do. You can't hurt me anymore than I can hurt you."

He paused. Then, "Any more than I already have."

Dominic moved his hand up to mine, his strong palm covering my own and effortlessly grabbing the knife from it. Without one single ounce of protest from me, he flung it across the room. I heard the dull snap of it sheathing into the wall.

"I know that you love me and are terrified that the Fates had something to do with this. That I don't feel anything real. I know you think I was forced into this."



“Dominic,” I said, my brows pinching together in pain and prayer. This was too much.

“I love you on my own.”

“What?” I jerked away, but he steadied me with a hand around the back of my neck.

“I fell in love with you on my own.” Dominic said it so matter-of-factly. Like this wasn’t insane.

I could do nothing but stare at him in silence and hope that he’d keep speaking. His voice was easing the pain in my chest and he was gripping my face like it was a life raft and he was in the middle of a hurricane.

“I’m sorry I lied, and I’m sorry I didn’t know about this. But I can’t say I’m sorry it happened. Because this means not even the Fates can take you away from me.”

I opened my mouth as another tear fell from my eye.

Dominic swiped it away with his thumb. “Let me finish, sweetheart.”

I nodded furiously and allowed my lips to break into a smile and hope to enter my eyes.

“There it is,” Dominic said quietly, eyes on my lips, before continuing louder. “I love you. I am in love with you. If I could stop the sun from burning your skin or the ground from scraping your feet, I would. I would take all your pain if I could, if it meant you would see you how I see you.”

“How?” Emotion pulled my voice taught.

“You’re perfect. Good. Deserving of nothing less than the entire world laid at your feet.”

“They could be controlling you,” I dared to argue. Despite his words and his touch and how much I could *feel* his love, I was still terrified.

“After you ran away from me,” Dominic said, tossing the words out like they offended him. It was clear I’d never be doing *that* again unless it was a game. He continued, “Clotho made sure I knew that the only thing they forced was our

marriage. Everything after that was entirely up to us. The only person who made me love you is *you*, Rose.”

Now I was full-blown crying, the tears falling down my cheeks in a steady stream.

“Can I speak now?” I choked out.

Dominic nodded, his face lit up by a brilliant smile. I ran my hand across his jaw and his stubble.

“I love you too, Dominic,” I said and his eyes darkened to those black pools with pure satisfaction. “So much that sometimes it feels like I can’t breathe. We wasted so much time...”

I had to shake my head to fight the tears building again.

“Hey, no.” Dominic smoothed his hands down the side of my face. “Everything that happened in the past got us here. I love you now. That’s all that matters.”

I nodded, relishing in the scrape of his hand against my cheeks. “It’s going to take me a second to calm down. I feel like my chest is cracking in half.”

Dominic reached down to grab the hand that was now curled over my chest, trying to soothe the ache. “Sweetheart, that’s everyday with you. But it’s a good crack. Big enough for you to weasel your way in there.”

I smiled, pressing myself closer. “You’re a lot bigger than me. I don’t know how you’re gonna fit.”

“I have time to try,” Dominic said, after a loaded pause that had another response lifting one of his brows. Just the knowledge of it, ringing through my head in the exact voice and tone he would have used, warmed my body.

Fuck, I loved him. I opened my mouth to tell him again, tell him why. But Dominic spoke before I could start again. “As much as I want to hear how much you love me, I’d rather kiss you.”

I laughed, giddy at the thought. “Okay.”

“Good,” Dominic chuckled, “Now come here.”

He used the hand on the back of my neck to crush my lips to his, the kiss channeling every ounce of relief and terror and love we felt. I wiggled my other hand out from between us and threw both hands around his neck, pressing up on my toes to kiss him harder.

Dominic held me with so much care and love, it was the final stitch I needed to sew up my heart and hand it back to him, trusting that it wouldn't break again.

I giggled against his mouth, earning a nip on my lower lip, and then went back to trying to climb him like a tree, raking my hands over his shoulders and corded neck.

Without warning, Dominic broke the kiss and squatted down grabbing one of my arms and pressing his shoulder into my waist. He hauled me up over his shoulder for the second time, my ass in the air and my face parallel with his lower back and sauntered out of the room with a clear destination in mind.

"Where are we going?" I asked his lower back. If this was going to be a pattern I would have to start naming it.

"To bed," Dominic said, swatting me lightly on the ass. "Because the next time I say I love you, it's going to be while I'm inside you."

My face flushed and my stomach went molten at just those words. I could feel the rumble of Dominic's laugh through his back at my silence and what it gave away. Within seconds, I was hitting the bed as Dominic practically threw me across our room.

I bounced twice, and a bright smile split my lips. Dominic jumped on top of me, pinning me to the bed with his hands on either side of my shoulders.

"This for me?" Dominic asked, shifting his weight into one hand so that he could run a finger over my lip.

I nodded and smiled brighter. "Always."

Our clothes disappeared in record time, fabric ripping in our frenzy to get each other undressed. Dominic almost didn't keep his promise, murmuring a broken *love you* against my

core as he drove me crazy with his tongue, my back arching while release burst through my chest. Moments after, Dominic rose and notched himself at my entrance, pushing in in one stroke.

The second he was fully seated inside me, he bent down, placing his lips against the shell of my ear. "I love you."

"I love you," I said in a half gasp as he drove in again. And those seemed to be the only words, other than each other's names, we could form for the rest of the day. The only thing *to* say when Dominic brought me over the edge again and went with me.

When we laid together, lazily running our hands over each other.

When we fell asleep tangled together.

When we woke up still touching.

When I lifted my head off Dominic's chest to find him already looking at me. Like he loved me.

And I believed him.

## Chapter 36

### **Dominic**

Rose was smiling at me.

Even in this shitstorm, with so much unresolved and so much on the line, she was smiling. At me.

I was still in somewhat of a state of disbelief. Yes, she'd smiled at me before. I'd *made* her smile before. But it had been so few hours since everything came out.

So little time before we had to go back to reality. I would have preferred to keep Rose locked away for a week, then spend another week walking around every public place I could find, Rose by my side, grasping onto my upper arm. Puffing my chest out like a beast of the plains.

I wasn't entirely adverse to the idea, but Rose would give me shit for it. Even though I was pretty sure she secretly liked it.

She would try to hide the same smile she was giving me now, her cheeks flooded with a blush. All I'd done was add, "oh, by the way, I love you," to the end of my sentence, and her lips broke into such a devastating smile I almost said it again.

I shifted a little in my seat, both at what that blush and smile did to me and because I was imagining Pine beating the shit out of me for sleeping with his sister.

I tucked the memory of Pine away for later. That was for another time, when we weren't expecting Adrian and Lukas and the whole calvary in our formal dining room any minute now.

Belen, our new chef, had put together a spread of fruit and a million pastries that honestly looked the same to me, but I wasn't about to tell him that. Raiden's husband wanted to scale back the amount of time he spent at the restaurant he worked at in the Upperworld now that he and Raiden were seriously talking about starting a family.

It was somewhat ironic, that the same excuse Rose had given to justify Mary leaving was what brought Belen into our home. But it gave Rose a break when she didn't want to cook or didn't have time and it gave us another friend under our roof.

I grinned slightly at Raiden huddled with Belen in the corner, his right hand moving passionately as he talked.

"When do you think Adrian will be here?" Rose asked, just as I wrapped my foot around the leg of her chair and pulled her a little closer.

"Not a minute past eleven," I said. Adrian was one punctual motherfucker. Always keeping appearances. "Lukas on the other hand will probably show up thirty minutes late."

"That drives Daphne crazy," Rose said, not even recognizing that she'd used present tense. I didn't point it out, because it would pull a sad wave into Rose's eyes that I was not about to witness.

It was only ten, but we were down here because Rose didn't want to tell the story anywhere in the house she liked. The formal dining room was fine, she'd said, because we never spent any time there.

And that her father had loved their dining room.

I already had plans to find his soul and drag it to Tartarus, if it wasn't already there, but I had a feeling those plans would be expedited by the end of the conversation.

I jerked my chin up once Raiden caught my eye, gesturing for him to give us a second. When we were alone, Rose looked like she wanted to fold in on herself. I placed a hand on her shoulder, then smoothed it down her back.

She looked up at me with those sad eyes, the ones I absolutely hated to see, and began.

“Odell was underplaying it. My father’s training methods weren’t just effective, they were brutal. I think after my mom died he lost any shred of soul he had and became obsessed with his power. And which one of us would follow him.”

I had to fight like hell not to break Rose’s stare. “He broke our arrangement soon after that. And then he made us train. I don’t remember much else from those years. I was eight when my mom died and the next ten years were just...a blur. It got really bad once you took over. He’d scream and scream at Pine that he was a fool for staying friends with you.”

Rose dropped her gaze to her lap and I looked away. I had to. I propped my elbow up on the table and pressed my forefinger under my nose and my thumb under my chin.

“When I turned 18, my father decided it was time for one of us to succeed him. He went to us both individually to try to bait us into killing the other, but we just went right to each other instead. So he...”

Rose blinked back tears and I plotted murder.

“He had been forcing us—me, specifically—to fight prisoners for a while. I resisted at first but he would just threaten Pine. He was still stronger than us at that point. One day he’d asked me to meet him in the dining room for breakfast. I went because I had no choice but to say yes. He must have slipped something in my tea because the next thing I knew, I was in the training room, and this prisoner was coming at me with a knife. I tried to knock him out but he just kept coming and coming at me and my father was screaming at me that I was weak and a disappointment.”

I grabbed Rose’s hand and squeezed.

“I just...snapped. I grabbed the knife and twisted it on him and plunged it into his heart. I turned towards my father and said something like *are you happy now?* And that’s when I heard it. Heard my brother say my name from next to me. I turned and the knife was still there and he was choking on his

own blood. He was...he was gone by the time I dropped to my knees to catch him.”

Tears were threatening my own eyes now.

“I brought him to the Fates, trying to get them to bring him back. They said no, of course. But that’s when the favors started. The one thing they did do was cut my father’s thread. One day he seemed fine and the next he was a sickly gray version of himself that didn’t live to see another sunrise. I went back to the Fates every day for a week until I realized that it had *been* a week.”

The Council meeting.

“I was going to tell Adrian at the meeting. But then I walked in and everyone was looking at me like I killed him in cold blood.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “We should have known better. All we heard was that Pine and your father were dead. Everyone was saying you killed them.”

“I did.”

“No, you didn’t,” I said, pulling Rose’s hands together and placing a kiss on her knuckles. “Your father did. If the Fates blamed you, they would have cut your thread instead of his. And how the rest of us reacted had *nothing* to do with you. I should have asked questions, should have given you the benefit of the doubt.”

Rose sniffled and my heart cracked. “I thought I’d done something to make you think that.”

“No, *no*,” I said. “You did nothing wrong. You were just young.”

At the time, Adrian and I were the youngest gods. No one else our age had ascended yet.

“No one knew you,” I continued. “Or your heart. But that is no excuse. I’ll spend the rest of my life making it up to you.”

Rose shifted closer to me. “There’s no use in trying to rewrite the past. We are here, now. Together. That is all that matters.”



I let out a sarcastic laugh. “And so far your life with me has been an assassination attempt and a potential conspiracy against the gods.”

Rose’s eyebrows lifted in the center. “My life with you has been you comforting me after said assassination attempt and us dealing with any conspiracy together.”

Her way of spinning things in a positive light was one of the many things I loved about her. Maybe the thing I respected the most. I could only hope it rubbed off on me.

“I’m still sorry,” I said, dropping a kiss to her lips.

“I forgave you ages ago,” Rose said through a smile. “And the same goes for you.”

“I did, you know.”

“I know,” Rose said.

I pulled her to me, needing the contact to fight the remaining fury and guilt in my chest. Her father was a dead man two times over. And I had some planning to do for an apology.

†

Adrian arrived a minute before eleven and Lukas ten minutes after the hour. While we were waiting for Lukas, Adrian had apologized to Rose, who brushed it off like it was nothing and pulled him into a hug. Adrian sat down with us, and when Rose went up to grab some more fruit, Adrian took the opportunity to raise an overly curious eyebrow at me.

“I presume there is a lot to catch me up on,” Adrian said.

“Oh, yes,” I said. A lot had changed in such a short time. Too much turmoil for my blood.

“She’s looking at you like she wants to eat you,” Adrian said, referencing the multiple times Rose looked up at me with suggestive eyes when my hand moved a little too high on her leg.

“The sentiment is shared,” I said and Adrian gagged.

I flipped him off and right as Lukas walked in the room, shaking off a loose water droplet.

“What a great start to the meeting,” he said with a grin, but it was entirely unconvincing. Every one of us saw the bags under his eyes. I hoped that Rose didn’t notice, but he also was growing a little too big for his shirt, the sleeves digging into his biceps.

That meant he was slinging heavy shit around to work through whatever demons were in his head. He damn near snapped my neck in half when I tried to press the subject, but I wouldn’t be letting this one go. He clearly had shit he needed to talk about.

“Grab some food, Lukas,” Rose said, “Then sit.”

When we were all settled, I let Rose take the lead and tell the story about the attack and the symbols we’d found tattooed on the bodies. Io’s statements too. And the Fates. Rose had gone back early this morning to ask if they knew anything and they said no. As much power as they had over individual lives, they knew little about the inner workings of man.

Adrian was slipping slowly into battle-ready mode, I could see it in the tightening of his shoulders. When Rose was done explaining, Adrian said, “This is what I was worried about. Something organized.”

“What do you want us to do?” I asked.

“Cut off any reason someone would hate either of you.” Adrian twisted one of his silver cufflinks around. “We need to be able to differentiate individual discretions from this.”

“I don’t know if that’s going to be easy for me,” Rose said softly.

“We can tell them,” I said.

“If we do, they’ll just spin that against me too,” Rose responded.

I shook my head. “The details of how can stay private. But your father killed your brother. He instigated it, drugged you both. We release a statement saying he killed Pine and you

never said anything in an attempt to preserve his legacy. But that your people needed to know the truth. Especially after the attack.”

Rose took in the idea and I could see her working through it.

“I’m in support,” Adrian said. Obviously he would be. Whatever kept the peace.

Rose blinked slowly then nodded to herself. “Alright. We move forward. And if this helps preserve the future, I’m on board.”

“I agree we need to keep this between us right now,” Adrian said. “Issues are blown up with the three of our Houses. Something smaller—do *not* tell a single god I said that by the way—is a secondary issue.”

I chuckled, imagining heads exploding at the illusion we were more important. Can’t fight facts though.

I looked to Lukas, who was being eerily quiet, and caught his mouth opening slightly. He slammed it shut a second later, but that was definitely an almost admission of something.

“We have the press statement and sympathy for the attack to help weed people out,” I said. “Lukas, anything to add?”

Lukas lifted his head from the croissant he was staring at like it could tell him the secrets of the deep ocean. “No.”

His tone left no room for disagreement. Whatever that was about was between him and Adrian. He’d tell me when he was ready.

Adrian could handle the power issues. I was going to make him tell me about Daphne. It was eating him alive to keep it all locked up.

“Lukas, I want you to run some checks,” Adrian said. “End of summer catches are the biggest of the year and economic issues make people way more mad than a god killing a family member. Sorry, Rose.”

Rose lifted her hands in surrender. “No offense taken. You’re right. Money is everything.”

“Will do, Adrian,” Lukas said gruffly. Then, “I’ll go do that now.” And then he was up and out the door before anyone could protest.

“We need to figure out what’s wrong with him,” Adrian said, looking towards me with a weighted stare.

“You know what’s wrong with him,” I shot back. Nothing stole sleep quite like not knowing where your fiancée was.

Adrian scoffed, resetting his jaw. “This is good. Will keep him busy and his mind off her.”

Somehow, I knew that wasn’t true.

“You guys know what you have to do,” Adrian said, standing and buttoning his navy suit. “It’s on Lukas now.”

Adrian left Rose and I alone, returning to Olympus. To start obsessively preparing for war, I imagined. Begrudgingly, I had to leave Rose, but not without an extended goodbye and a promise to see her later.

And I would. If I could prove a theory.

## Chapter 37

### **Dominic**

I found Rose on the back deck. Her favorite place in our house, it seemed. She was on a lounge chair, tea in hand, when I approached.

Her eyes brightened when she saw me and a knife twisted in my chest. I'd never get used to that expression. Looking relieved to see me.

"You disappeared," Rose said, her lips curving into a small pout. "Into the wind. You were a Dominic-shaped flower."

*Dominic-shaped flower. New.*

I laughed smoothly.

"Come on," I said, reaching a hand toward her. Trying to steel my expression.

"Why?" Rose asked, but was already grabbing my hand.

"I have something to show you."

I folded her palm in mine and stepped through a portal to the far side of the Meadows. To the bank of the Lethe.

Rose noticed it immediately. "What are we doing here?"

"I found the tree," I said. I knew exactly where it was, but was feigning ignorance for now. "I wanted to see it together."

Rose looked skeptical, fearful, for a moment, then started pulling *me* along. I smiled and widened my strides to meet up with her. I prayed to every ancestor we both had that this would work.

The tree sprung out of the landscape a moment later. It was large, with roots jutting out of the ground and a large, curved

trunk. Dark gray green leaves shaded the area, including a patch of grass that looked a little different from the others.

Grief hit me. But not as strong as it had when I'd been here earlier. Rose walked up to the tree, running her hand over the bark. I could hear her sniffing, trying to bite back tears.

That's when I saw it. The flicker on the other side of the trunk. A figure—a soul—manifesting. And then Pine's tall, thin form solidified. The hair that matched Rose, but their father's dark blue eyes.

I prayed again. For Rose to be able to use her connection to me to see him.

And then she froze.

†

## **Rose**

The tree was beautiful. You didn't need shade in the Underworld, the dim sun couldn't burn you, but Pine would always say he loved to hide from the sun.

I was grateful Dominic brought me here with him. He anchored me, gave me the strength to come here sometime other than the day Pine died. The day my father killed him.

It wasn't the full truth. And I would regret ever killing in the first place and grieve as I had before. But it helped me clarify the experience.

Maybe I would come here more often. Bring Dominic with me. We'd joke about Pine and mourn him together. Pray he looked on. I could picture him now, his soul hiding behind the tree, watching us.

I blinked, expecting the vision to go away. But it didn't. Pine, looking exactly as I remembered, was still standing behind the tree. Looking at me.

I froze, far too hopeful for my own good.

"Rose," my brother said.

I dropped to my knees.

“Pine,” I said through burgeoning tears.

“It’s good to see you, sister,” he said. He walked over and crouched in front of me. I could feel the cold touch of his willowy hands on my own. “You look older.”

“I’m the same age as you now,” I said through a watery laugh. He was twenty three when he died. So young.

“You’re as beautiful as ever,” he said, smiling brightly at me. Tears slipped out of the corners of my eyes.

“That compliment doesn’t count when I look like you.”

I wished I could hug him. As if he could hear my thoughts, Pine wrapped his arms around me and pulled me to his chest. I couldn’t press hard, I would fall right through him, but I could feel a little resistance.

“I missed you, too,” Pine said, stroking a hand down my hair.

“How?” I croaked. This didn’t feel real, it was the subject of some of my most closely held dreams.

Pine grinned, and nostalgia punched me in the gut. “Your dear husband had a theory that you might be able to see me now that you’re married to him.”

“I was right,” Dominic said from behind me. Tears fell as the full weight of the gesture barreled into me.

“Don’t think you’re off the hook, man,” Pine said, then covered my ears with his hands. I could still hear perfectly fine. “I’m still pissed. You slept with my sister.”

“Pine!” I gasped, then my face went beet red.

“The branch to the face wasn’t enough?” Dominic asked. I’d noticed a new scratch on his forehead but didn’t want to press it in case it had something to do with what he wanted to show me.

Guess it did.

“Not nearly enough,” Pine said, then shivered.

“Please don’t think too hard about it,” I begged.

“I try not to,” Pine said. “But when you two go after it like rabbits, it interrupts me trying to check on my sister.”

He checked on me? Yep, the well of tears was building again.

“I married her, at least,” Dominic defended.

“At least?” I shot back, looking over my shoulder at him.

“I love you, too. But that should have been implied.”

“Jackass,” I muttered under my breath and Dominic’s cheek twitched. I turned to find Pine smiling, like that exchange soothed him.

“I’ve only just decided not to kill you,” Pine said to Dominic. “It pains me to admit it, but I see how you are good for each other.”

“Damn right,” Dominic said. I could have sworn he puffed his chest out a little.

I didn’t know how much time we had and so I just leaned into Pine as hard as I could.

Pine moved me softly so that I could look at him, his airy limbs brushing my skin. “Dominic is right, Rose. Father did this. To both of us.”

I could only nod and take in the words. “I miss you,” I said. Barely believing this was real.

“We can see each other now,” Pine said. Not every day, not even often. But the chance was there. I relished the time we had together, asking Pine about how he’d found peace, him alternating between questions and minor threats for all the stupid shit I’d done in my grief.

When his body started to fade and flicker, Pine hugged me as tight as his soul could manage, then nodded to Dominic.

“Take care of each other,” he said, before fading away.

Dominic was behind me a second later, wrapping his strong arms around me and resting his chin on the top of my head. I reached up and grabbed both his biceps.



“Thank you,” I said, squeezing his arms lightly.

“Sorry I couldn’t tell you,” he said. “I wasn’t sure it’d work.”

“I’d have called you crazy.”

“Well, maybe I should have told you then. I don’t think you’ve called me that yet.”

I laughed and said, “I’ll add it to the list.”

“Wait, you’ve called me insane. That’s close enough.”

“You are insane, you know.”

“Insanely in love with you.”

I turned around in his arms and groaned. “That was cheesy.”

Dominic smiled and I matched it. “It’s true.”

“I know,” I said, truly believing him. “I love you.”

“I know,” he said, then kissed me.

He kissed me under the setting Underworld sun, holding me to him like he was scared I’d leave. I pressed closer, as if to tell him with my touch that I’d never. Because not even the Fates could separate us now.

# Epilogue

## Rose

Saturdays were my favorite day of the week.

Now.

A morning full of good food and friends, maybe even a little foggy with a hangover.

My afternoons were spent how I wanted. And today, all I wanted was to sit on the back deck with Dominic.

So I was.

My legs were slung over his thighs, my chest turned towards him, while he told me a story about Raiden's bachelor party. I had been at Belen's and thought it was a mess, but apparently Raiden had thrown up everything in his stomach after eating breakfast too hungover.

Dominic was getting animated as the story went on, gesturing with his left hand, his wedding ring glinting in the sun as he showed the splash zone of Raiden's digestive woes. He talked with his hands when he got carried away. It was fucking adorable.

I stared at him, still in somewhat of a state of disbelief. But any doubts I had could be swept away with the tiniest swipe of his thumb against my skin. He knew me. Could tell when I would get wrapped up in everything and—

“Sweetheart.”

Dominic had noticed me drifting. “I'm sorry. Please continue. I would love to hear more about Raiden spilling his guts everywhere.”

Dominic shook his head, leaning a little closer. “Not until you come back to me.”

I placed my hand on his cheek, the stubble tickling my palm. “I never left.”

“Good.” He kissed me, and if I hadn’t already refocused myself, that would have done it. There was no room for thoughts when his tongue swept into my mouth in a move that was so slow it was obscene.

My hand was around his neck, gripping hard, within seconds. Dominic pulled me almost entirely into his lap. The pressure didn’t cease though, just kept pushing like I wasn’t close enough.

“For the love of Zeus.”

Dominic tensed, pulling away from me quickly, then relaxed when he recognized the voice. We turned to see Lukas standing on our deck, wiping a stray water droplet off his shirt.

Lukas wasn’t wet, not really. It was a constraint of his power, that he could only jump between points in water, but it never affected him unless he let it. He probably crawled out of our bay if he made it to the deck without us noticing. Or rather while we were distracted.

“You two are ridiculous,” Lukas chastised, looking down at our tangled bodies.

“Can we *help* you?” Dominic asked. His irritation was shared. But he was the one trying to conceal a hard on under my thigh.

Lukas turned his seafoam eyes towards me, a monsoon of emotion raging in them. “Any plans to use the rest of those favors?”

“Not at the moment, no.” I wanted to keep them in case people thought about getting testy again.

“Got a few to share?” Lukas asked.

“Why?” Dominic asked with the care used when handling a wild animal.

Lukas jaw hardened, his lips pulling tight. “Daphne.”

Oh.

“I’ll gladly share some of the wealth, especially if it’s for Daphne, but why now?” I asked.

Lukas breathed in then ran his tongue over his teeth. Stalling. Then, he said, “Fish stocks just came in yesterday. Reduced by 30%.”

“Shit.” Dominic and I said at the same time. I had to restrain a grin at the appearance of that habit. It was a highly inappropriate time for smiling.

“The betrothal agreement bonded her to me in some way,” Lukas explained, running a hand through his recently-cut short hair. “Her being away for so long is starting to take a toll.”

“And..?” Dominic prompted.

“And she either holds up her end of the bargain or I find someone to take her place.” Lukas shrugged, like he wasn’t suggesting that he dissolve their engagement. Even if I wasn’t sure that was possible, it was still an insane claim.

“I don’t think she would back out, Lukas,” I said. Daphne knew the consequences. “There’s too much at stake.”

Lukas scoffed, crossing his thick arms over his chest. “Yeah, well, I didn’t think she’d run off without warning, but here we are.”

I ignored the tone. For now. “So you need the Fates to find her.”

“You and I both know she’s too smart to leave a trail if she doesn’t want to be found.”

“That is true,” I said, somewhat reluctantly.

“So? Yes or no?” Lukas snapped.

Dominic must have shot him a look because he added, “Obviously, I’m very appreciative.”

“Yes, I will help you find her,” I said, then added, “But I want to be clear that I’m doing this because none of us can

afford anymore unrest. Daphne is still my best friend.”

“Clearly, if you’re willing to defend her after this shit.”

Dominic’s voice rumbled in his throat, but I placed a hand on his leg. My raised eyebrow would do enough to tell Lukas to back the fuck off the tone. “Fine. Answer one question then. Is there anything going on between you two?”

Lukas looked stricken for a moment, his teal eyes flashing, then shook his head. “Not anymore.”

Dominic tensed under me. He always did when someone lied in his presence.

“Lukas...”

“Don’t,” he cut me off. “Just ask the Fates. Please.”

“I will,” I said, then spared a glance at Dominic, reminding me what had changed and where my priorities were now. Healing. Loving. “Tomorrow.”

“And keep it quiet, will you?” Lukas asked. “For all I know, she has a spy in your midst, just so she can say she knows everything.”

There was a touch of familiarity in that statement. A little window into how well Lukas knew Daphne. “That sounds like Daph.”

Lukas ran right through that statement. “Find her.”

“Okay.” I wanted her back to. Fates knew I had a lot to fill her in on.

“I hope she enjoyed her little vacation,” Lukas said through a bitter laugh. “Tell her that when you see her.”

I balked. “You want me to play messenger between you and Daphne?”

“No.” Lukas scarped a hand over his jaw. “I want you to play messenger between Lord Poseidon and Lady Athena.”

Using honorifics was a paper thin attempt to reduce the relationship between them.

“I won’t tell her anything other than when to meet you,” I said, to which Lukas nodded in agreement.

And with that, Lukas turned and jogged back down to the bay, diving under and disappearing, leaving nothing but ripples behind. Dominic settled me with a swipe on the arm and I tried to relax.

Until tomorrow, when Daphne Athena would leave the shade of an olive tree for the blistering sun of the sea.

Again.

Curious what happened between Lukas and Daphne? Keep reading for a sneak peak of For the Gods' Sake.

≈

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## For the Gods' Sake - Chapter 1

### Daphne

There is an art to hiding your divinity.

I'd learned that over the years. I'd figured out how to lessen the shock that rang through a human's body when they were confronted with the power of a god.

To let it gradually hit them instead. Or not at all.

It's what I'd done the last year, simply removing the realization that I was a god from the minds of those I came across. Took work, but it was necessary.

But even without that, there were ways you could alter it, make it a little less imposing. More stealthy.

Rose thought she was being stealthy, she really did. But while she was making an effort to sneak up on me, carefully placing her steps so that I wouldn't hear the click of her heels against the marble floor, I noticed her the second she walked in the building.

Rose didn't know that you had to consciously hide your power. Set aside the way we were raised, all grace and power and perfection, and embrace humanity. It was in your steps, your tone, the way you looked at people. The little tendrils of black smoke that chased her around, like dogs of smoke finding their home in her as Death.

That change—and, okay, the fact that I was simply preventing anyone from realizing who I was—was how I was standing here, staring at one of the most beautiful sculptures I'd ever seen, waiting for Rose to appear to my...left, if the distinct smell of narcissus flowers collecting there was to be believed.

Rose's graceful form stepped up to my left a moment later, her long limbs and flowing hair visible from the corner of my eye. I kept my gaze trained on the sculpture in front of me, telling myself the smooth curves of the snakes' bodies weaving through the man's arms were just simply too captivating. It was easier to stomach than the alternative.



She took a second, too. I could sense her eyes flitting over the marble, taking in the incredible definition in the muscles, the painstakingly immaculate details in the hair. Rose gave me a grand total of thirty seconds of blissful peace, pretending to be too entranced by the sculpture before she broke the silence with one word, “Daphne.”

“Rose,” I greeted, finally turning to look at her. The familiarity in her form struck some closed off part of my heart for a moment, almost strong enough to crash through the wall I’d built around my guilt and shame. Her hair was the same shade of rich, dark brown, styled in the same long waves, and she was donned in the same clothes I had seen her in countless times before. Simple black dress, gold jewelry, perfect makeup.

It was her, and yet it wasn’t. Because the Rose I knew always had the faintest glimmer of pain behind her green eyes, and she never wore more than three rings on her hands. But now, there was something akin to peace floating in her gaze, and she had an egregiously large ring on her left hand.

I expected the ring, I’d seen the press release about her marriage. And the one about the attack on her.

Which made me feel a little sick if I thought about it too long.

But the ring was expected. Not the change in her expression. *That* was concerning. But I didn’t want, or really even have the right, to ask.

“You missed a lot.” Rose’s claim hit low in my chest. Of course she had noticed me looking. I’d been away from her trained eyes for too long it seemed, too used to being able to hide my own watchful gaze.

“I know,” I responded, turning back towards the sculpture. “Why are you here?”

Rose laughed with what sounded like disbelief. “Right to the point, then.”

“Please.” My voice sounded hollow in my own ears. I was speaking to her like a stranger, not my best friend.

“You need to come home.”

I knew it was coming, and yet the words hit me so strongly I took a step backwards. “And where would that be?”

“Daph,” Rose warned in a tone I had never heard used towards me. It was her goddess voice. And it pissed me off.

The skies, seas, and the dead always acted like they were more important. And the dead, with Rose at the helm, were sheltered. She made it above ground at times, that was for sure, but it was different than dealing with humans every day. Dealing with their ego and their money and their grudges.

I wasn't sure whether I still belonged in a category with those three Houses. Maybe her using that tone with me made it clear that I wasn't.

“Give it up, Rose,” I snapped, turning back towards her for this argument. “Just tell me what you want.”

“Lukas wants you home,” she said, her eyes looking for a moment like they used to.

The mention of his name made my temper skyrocket. “Oh, so you're running errands for Lukas now? Guess a lot *has* changed.”

“No, I'm making sure the world doesn't fall apart.”

I didn't even try to fight my scoff. “Don't be dramatic. I can promise you I'm not missed in that palace.”

“You are.” *Lie*. “But that isn't the point. You are engaged, in case you forgot.”

“I have been for seventeen years. If I was going to forget, I would have by now, don't you think?” I quipped, sending another flash of hurt to Rose's eyes. But the hole I was digging for myself just looked all too comfortable to stop.

“So you know, then, that the reason why there has been two storms in the past month and the catches have been reduced by over *thirty percent* is your doing?”

And there was the Rose I was friends with, the one who didn't take shit from anyone, least of all me. She had pulled

the one card I couldn't argue with. Logic.

I knew this day would come eventually, where my lack of presence in Lukas's realm caused problems. I had just been blissfully ignoring that inevitability.

My fiancé's power was now tied to my own, and as much as I didn't want to step foot back in that water-logged palace ever again, I couldn't watch our people suffer.

"How long?" I asked, letting the concession in my tone peak through.

"Two days. I'm meant to hand deliver you." We both released a laugh at that image. "But I think we both know that won't happen. So, we've settled on a dinner."

I'm positive my expression showcased how excited I was for that little adventure.

"Dominic and I will be there," Rose continued, mentioning her husband for the first time. I knew their marriage was likely a hostile battle ground. It was obviously forced, but for what reason I didn't know. Yet.

"Ah, yes, Dominic. Has he tried to kill you yet?"

"Only once."

My burgeoning response skidded to a halt in my throat. Somehow, with those two words, I knew that Rose fancied herself in love, knew why her eyes no longer looked as sad.

My head snapped up

"You've got to be kidding me, Rose. He thinks you killed his best friend in cold blood. Killed your own *brother*." The words were sharp, but my disbelief was stronger than my concern for tone.

"Not anymore," Rose said, her tone softening even though mine had hardened. She sounded peaceful, and that was dangerous. Dominic had spent the better part of his life hating her, that wasn't going to change in less than a year.

"And that solved everything then?"

“Pretty much.” Rose smiled softly. “That, and releasing a fair bit of sexual tension.”

I knew Rose was trying to make a joke to ease the hostility between us. I, however, was already picturing the day Dominic decided he still blamed her for the loss of his friend.

“Well, when the hate sex gets old and he leaves you, you can have the extra room in my wing.”

That was irrevocably the wrong thing to say to her. Something close to panic flashed across Rose’s expression before she cleared it with a deep breath. I took a similarly heavy inhale, but to try to release the guilt pooling in my chest.

Rose fell silent for a moment, her piercing green eyes flickering over my face before forcing a tight smile and saying, “I will see you in two days, Daphne.”

It was final, because we both knew I couldn’t say no. I nodded in response, not sure how to navigate the emotions swimming through my head. How I hurt Rose, seeing Lukas, it was all too much.

When Rose decided I was not going to offer verbal confirmation, she tilted her head down once and turned to leave. I watched her movements, turning with her, and my breath caught in my throat. I had felt Rose’s power the second she walked in the room, but I hadn’t noticed Dominic’s.

But there he was, leaning against the far wall with his hands tucked into the pockets of his black pants. He didn’t even bother to look my way, he was too busy tracking Rose’s steps as she walked up to him. When Rose was about three feet away from him, Dominic lifted off the wall as if he was pulled by a magnet and tucked her into his arms.

It was then, as he pressed a kiss to the side of Rose’s head, that he let his eyes drift up and connect with mine. The pure, murderous intent glinting there meant he heard every word exchanged between Rose and I. Someone different might have been convinced that anger—combined with the way his hand was trailing down Rose’s arm in a loving caress—proved that

they had worked through their problems and were now properly in love.

I, however, knew gods like him.

And in two days, I would be reminded of just how those people could be when curiosity is satisfied and grudges build and the world goes to shit.

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xx,

Rory

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**For the Love of the Gods**

Tempt the Gods #1