

# Chapter I

## A Game of Balance

Hades manifested near the Coast of the Gods.

In the sunlight, the shoreline boasted turquoise water and pristine, white beaches, all set before the backdrop of cliffs, grottoes, and a monastery made of white and green marble that could be accessed after ascending three hundred steps. Mortals flocked here to swim, sail, and snorkel. It was an oasis, up until the sun made its fiery descent in the sky.

After twilight, evil moved in the darkened night, beneath a sky of stars and an ocean of moonlight. It came on ships and moved across New Greece, and Hades was here to neutralize it.

He turned, the gravel crunching beneath his feet, and walked in the direction of The Corinth Company, a fishery that took up an extensive amount of real estate on the coast. The plaster façade of the warehouse blended flawlessly with the ancient architecture adorning the shoreline, appearing worn, bleached, and charming. A simple, black lamp highlighted a sign bearing the company's name, written in a font that boasted prestige and power—admirable characteristics when they belonged to the best of society.

Dangerous when they belonged to the worst.

A mortal moved in the shadow. He had been there since Hades arrived and no doubt thought he was well hidden, which perhaps he was to other mortals, but Hades was a god and he owned the shadows.

As he passed, the man moved and Hades twisted, his hand biting down on the mortal's. A gun was clutched in his fingers. Hades looked at the weapon and then at the man, a wicked smile crossing his lips.

In the next second, sharp spires extended from the tips of Hades's fingers, sinking into the man's flesh. His weapon clattered to the ground and he dropped to his knees with a guttural cry.

"Please spare me, my lord," the man begged. "I did not know."

Hades always found the seconds before a mortal's death intriguing. Especially when he encountered one like this—one who had killed without thought and yet feared his own demise.

Hades tightened his hold, and as the man trembled, the god laughed.

“Your death is not imminent,” Hades said, and the mortal looked up. “But I will have words with your employer.”

“My employer?”

Hades almost groaned. So the mortal would play dumb.

“Sisyphus de Ephyra.”

“H-he’s not here.”

*Lie.*

The knowledge coated his tongue like ash, drying his throat.

Hades lifted the man by his arm, spikes still embedded in his skin, until their gazes were level. It was from this angle that Hades noticed a tattoo on the man’s wrist. It was a triangle, now spliced by the spears extending from his fingers.

“I do not need your aid to enter that warehouse,” Hades said. “What I need from you is an example.”

“A-An example?”

Hades decided to use actions to explain, carving two deep fissures in the man’s face. As blood coated his skin, neck, and clothes, the god dragged him to the entrance of the warehouse, kicked open the doors, and strolled inside.

What had looked like a building from the shore now appeared to be a wall, because instead of walking into an enclosed space, Hades found himself in a yard open to the inky sky above. The earth was bare, and there were large above-ground pools holding fish. The air smelled like ocean and rot and salt. Hades hated the stench.

Workers dressed in black jumpsuits turned to watch as the god pushed the bleeding mortal forward. The man floundered but caught himself before he hit the ground. Opposite Hades, another man approached, flanked by two large bodyguards. He was dressed in a white suit, and his fingers were fat and suffocated with gold rings. His hair was short and black, his beard manicured and threaded with silver.

“Sis, I-I-It wasn’t my fault,” the man said as he stumbled forward. “I—”

Sisyphus withdrew a gun and shot the man. He fell, hitting the ground with a loud thud. Hades looked at the still body and then at Sisyphus.

“He was not wrong,” Hades said.

“I did not kill him because he let you enter my property. I killed him because he has

disrespected a god.”

A display like that usually came from a loyal subject. Of those, Hades had few, and he knew Sisyphus was not one.

“Is this your version of a sacrifice?”

“Depends,” the man replied, cracking his neck and handing his gun to the bodyguard on the right. “Do you accept?”

“No.”

“Then it was business.”

Sisyphus straightened the lapels of his jacket and adjusted his cufflinks, and Hades noted the same triangle tattoo on his wrist.

“Shall we?” The mortal gestured for Hades to walk in front, toward an office on the opposite side of the yard. “Divine first.”

“I insist,” Hades declined.

Despite his power, he was never eager to have his back turned.

Sisyphus’s eyes narrowed slightly. The mortal probably saw Hades’s refusal to lead as a form of disrespect, mostly because it showed that Hades did not trust him. Ironic, considering Sisyphus had broken one of the most ancient rules of hospitality—the law of Xenia—by killing his competition after inviting them into his territory.

It was just one of Sisyphus’s transgressions Hades was here to address.

“Very well, my lord,” The mortal offered a cold smile before starting toward his office, the two bodyguards in tow. Their presence was amusing, as if the two mortal men could protect Sisyphus from him.

Hades found himself considering how he would take them out. He had a number of options—he could call forth the shadows and let them consume the two, or he could subdue them by himself. He supposed the only real consideration was whether he wanted blood on his suit.

The two bodyguards took their places on either side of the door as Sisyphus entered his office. Hades did not look at them as he passed.

Sisyphus’s office was small. His desk was solid wood, stained dark, and stacked with paperwork. An old-fashioned telephone sat to one side, and a crystal decanter and two glasses on the other. Behind him, a set of windows overlooked the yard, obstructed by blinds.

It was behind the desk where Sisyphus chose to stand, a strategic move, Hades imagined.

It put something physical between them. It was also probably where he kept a store of weapons. Not that they would do any good against him, but Hades had existed for centuries and knew desperate mortals would try anything.

“Bourbon?” Sisyphus asked as he uncorked the decanter.

“No.”

The mortal stared at Hades for a moment before pouring himself a glass. He took a sip and asked, “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Hades looked toward the door. From here, he could see the pools, and he nodded toward them now.

“I know you are hiding drugs in your pools,” Hades said. “I also know that you use this company as a front to move them across New Greece and that you kill anyone who gets in the way.”

Sisyphus stared at Hades for a moment, and then took a slow sip from his glass before asking, “Have you come to take my life?”

“No.”

It was not a lie. Hades did not reap souls—Thanatos did, but the God of the Underworld could see Sisyphus was due for a visit and soon. The vision had come, unbidden, like a memory from long ago. Sisyphus, dressed smartly, would collapse as he left a high-ending dining room.

He would never regain consciousness.

And before that happened, Hades would have balance.

“Then should I assume you want a cut?”

Hades tilted his head to the side. “Of sorts.”

Sisyphus chuckled. “Who would have thought, the God of the Dead came to bargain.”

Hades gritted his teeth. He did not like the implication of Sisyphus’s words, as if the mortal thought he had the upper hand.

“As penance for your crimes, you will donate half your income to the homeless. You are, after all, responsible for many of them.”

The drugs Sisyphus trafficked had destroyed lives, eating mortals up from the inside out with addiction and igniting violence in communities, and while he wasn’t the only one responsible, it was his ships that brought it into the mainland, his trucks that transported it across New Greece.

“Is penance not served in the afterlife?” Sisyphus asked.

“Consider it a favor. I am allowing you an early start.”

Sisyphus used his tongue to pick between his teeth, then he snickered quietly.

“You know they never describe you as a righteous god.”

“I am not righteous.”

“Forcing crooks like myself to donate to charities is righteous.”

“It is balance. A price you pay for the evil you spread.”

Hades did not believe in eradicating the world of evil, because he did not believe it was possible. What was evil to one was a fight for freedom to another—The Great War was an example. One side fought for their gods, their religion, the other fought for freedom from their perceived oppressor. The best he could do was offer a touch of redemption so that their sentence in the Underworld might eventually lead to Asphodel.

“But you are not the God of Balance. You are the God of the Dead.”

It would do no good to explain the workings of the Fates, the balance they strove to create in the world, and so he remained silent. Sisyphus pulled a metal case from the inside pocket of his jacket and withdrew a cigarette.

“I’ll tell you what.” He put the cigarette to his lips and lit it. The smell of nicotine filled the small shop—ashy, stale, and chemical. “I’ll donate one million, and I won’t violate the law of Xenia anymore.”

Hades paused a moment and used the silence to quell the rush of anger the mortal’s words ignited, his fingers curling into fists. Not so long ago, he would have let the fury overtake him, sending the mortal to Tartarus without a second thought. Instead, he let the darkness do the work for him. Outside Sisyphus’s office, Hades called to the shadows and they slithered across the exterior of the building, darkening the windows as they went.

Hades watched as Sisyphus turned, eyes following the shadows until they approached the two bodyguards at the front of the office. In the next second, they slipped into every orifice of their bodies and they collapsed, dead.

Sisyphus’s eyes returned to Hades’s and he grinned.

“On second thought, you have a deal, Lord Hades,” Sisyphus said. “Two hundred and fifty million it is.”

“Three,” Hades replied.

Defiance flashed in the mortal's eyes. "That is more than half my income."

"A punishment for wasting my time," Hades said. He started to turn and leave the office before pausing. He looked over his shoulder at the mortal. "And I would not worry about breaking the law of Xenia, mortal. You don't have much time left."

Sisyphus was silent after Hades's words. Ribbons of smoke danced from the cigarette poised between his fingers. After a moment, he put it out in his drink.

"Tell me something," he said. "Why do it? Bargain and balance? Have you hope for humanity?"

"Have you none?" Hades countered.

"I live among mortals, Lord Hades. Trust me, when given the choice to tip the scale one way or the other, they'll choose darkness. It's the fastest path with the quickest benefit."

"And the most to lose," Hades said. "Do not educate me on the nature of mortals, Sisyphus. I have judged your kind for a millennium."

Hades paused outside the door, looking down at the two men who lay at his feet. He did not revel in the idea of restoring them to life to spread violence and death themselves, but he knew the Fates would demand a sacrifice—a soul for a soul—and it was likely they would choose souls that were good and pure and innocent.

*Balance*, Hades thought, and he suddenly hated the word.

"Wake," he commanded.

And as they inhaled sharp breaths, Hades vanished.

## Chapter II

# A Game of Fate

Hades appeared in his office at Nevernight, one of his most popular New Athens clubs. It was close to eleven, and at midnight, he would wander through the upstairs lounge, choosing mortals who longed to bargain for their greatest desires and wishes—health, love, and riches. Those were just the things he could grant. It did not include requests like creating life, returning life, or bestowing beauty—desires he would not award.

“You’re late.”

Minthe’s voice was like a whip, shattering his thoughts. He had sensed her the moment he entered the room—all fire and ice—and preferred to ignore her when she was like this.

He focused on adjusting his tie and cufflinks, silently relieved that he had chosen to use shadow magic to take Sisyphus’s bodyguards down, so he did not have to hear the nymph demand answers. With his appearance restored, he turned to the flaming-haired nymph. Her lips, a shade darker than her hair, were twisted into a pout. She did not like being ignored.

“How can I be late, Minthe, when I abide by no one’s schedule but my own?”

Minthe had been his assistant since the beginning of time, and she went through phases where she would try to exercise rights over him—rights to his time, to his realm, and to his body. Her eagerness for control was not lost on him. He recognized the trait in her because he possessed it himself.

“Tardiness is not attractive, Hades, even from a god,” she snapped.

A smile threatened his lips, but he remained composed. His amusement would only anger her further.

“While you were *dallying*,” Hades narrowed his eyes at the jab, “*I’ve* had to entertain your guests.”

Hades’s brows furrowed and dread crawled up the back of his throat. “Who is waiting for me?”

He knew by Minthe’s expression—the way her eyes narrowed, the slight curl of her mouth—that he would not like her answer.

“Lady Aphrodite.”

*“Fuck,”* Hades muttered.

Minthe did not even try to hide her amusement, her lips coiled into a full smirk.

“You might want to hurry,” she said. “When I insisted she wait for you here, she said there was plenty to entertain her downstairs.”

*Fantastic. The only thing to ever come out of Aphrodite entertaining herself was war.*

He sighed. “Thank you, Minthe.”

Clearly pleased by Hades’s expression of gratitude, Minthe uncrossed her arms, letting them fall at her sides.

“Shall I bring you a drink, my lord?”

“Yes. In fact, I am not to have an empty glass tonight.”

Hades vanished and appeared on the floor of his club, where he walked, silent and unseen. As always, it was packed with mortals and humanoids—nymphs, satyrs, chimeras, centaurs, ogres, and cyclopes. Some used glamour, others did not. Some merely wished to experience the thrill of attending the most notorious club in New Athens, others glanced longingly toward the upstairs lounge, hopeful one of Hades’s staff would offer the night’s password.

A password did not guarantee a game with the God of the Dead, it was just another step in the process. Once mortals passed through the doors of the lounge, fear settled in, and that fear either drew them away or made them desperate. It was the desperate Hades was most interested in—the ones who might change if offered the chance.

It was a delicate process and involved many players. Hades had lost his fair share of bargains, and he could feel those against his skin, a never-ending itch and reminder of failure, but if he could save one life on the path to destruction, he felt it was worth it.

Hades picked up the scent of Aphrodite’s magic—sea salt and roses—and found her sitting on the lap of an older, middle-aged man. He had dark, thinning hair. His forehead was greasy and his face chubby, melting into a sweaty neck, around which Aphrodite’s arms were laced, her breasts pressed against his chest. Hades noted a gold band on the man’s left ring finger. He did not have to look at the mortal’s soul to know he was a cheating bastard.

“Why don’t we go back to my place, baby?” the man asked as his hands explored Aphrodite’s body, moving across her ribs and over her thighs. Hades cringed as he observed the interaction.



“Oh, I really would like to stay just a little longer,” Aphrodite was saying. “Don’t you want to bargain with Hades?”

The man squeezed her, fingers digging into her bottom. “Not anymore. You’re everything I need.”

“Really?” Aphrodite said breathlessly, and leaned closer, her pink lips inches from his.

Hades had to admit, the Goddess of Love was a great actress. She hid her loathing for the man and distracted him with her hands as they drifted up his chest. Hades sensed her magic rising and knew she was compelling the man to tell her the truth as she asked her next question.

“What were you missing before?”

Hades knew the answer because he could see it. The mortal’s insecurities had grown claws as he had aged, and they twined with his narcissism and need to feel important. He held resentment like his child, close to his heart, and it had poisoned his blood, fueled his lies, and prompted his cheating spree. He had a little bit of humanity left in the guilt that sat upon his shoulders like a leering gargoyle. To numb the ache, he drank, but his tolerance for drinking had grown over the last few years, which meant he needed more to feel detached from what his life had become.

The man had a cracked soul, and Hades had a feeling Aphrodite was about to shatter it.

“I’m insecure. I need to know I am still wanted by other women.”

“And it isn’t enough to be wanted by your wife?” Aphrodite’s pretty lips twisted into a scowl. The man’s eyes went wide, his mind at odds with what was coming out of his mouth. Hades had seen it before when he had used the spell.

“I love my wife,” he said. “I’m just looking for sex.”

“Is that all?” She batted her lashes and then spoke in a voice veiled with darkness and strong with promise. “In that case, when you return to your wife this evening, she will no longer desire you. She will cringe at your touch and gag when your lips touch hers. She will refuse you, she will leave you, and you will never recover.”

The man’s eyes widened, and he was no longer holding Aphrodite, his hands peeled back from her skin as if she burned.

This was Aphrodite in her true form. The mortal world believed she was nothing more than a sexual being, that she sought entertainment and pleasure from gods and mortals alike, but the truth was she could be a vengeful god, especially toward those who betrayed love.

It was probably time for Hades to make an appearance.

“Aphrodite,” he greeted, dropping his glamour.

The goddess turned to meet his gaze and smiled.

“Hades,” she purred in a sensual voice, and even though she had just cursed the mortal she was still using as an armchair, his eyes clouded with desire at the sound.

“I think the mortal has had enough excitement for one night. Why don’t you let him slither off?”

Aphrodite’s face changed at the mention of the cheater, and she turned to glare at him before hopping off his lap. “Run along, snake.”

The mortal obeyed and wandered into the crowd, dazed.

“What?” Aphrodite snapped when she looked at Hades again.

His brows rose, surprised by her venom. “Nothing. Although you will hardly help the man’s ego by taking away the only love he has ever known.”

She dusted off her hands. “He betrayed love, so he will never have it again.”

“I don’t think your punishment is unfair,” Hades explained. “But it has the potential to create a monster.”

She smirked, her expression impish. “Then he’s all yours. Monsters are your territory, Hades.”

Minthe approached just then, balancing a tray of drinks. This was how the nymph spent most of her evenings at Nevernight—taking orders and delivering them, flirting with mortals and immortals alike, and gathering information from Hades’s more *elite clients*.

“Lady Aphrodite,” Minthe said as she passed the goddess a glass of rosé. “Lord Hades.”

She handed off a glass of whiskey, and as she wandered away, he turned to Aphrodite, who raised a pale brow at him.

“Yes?” he inquired at her questioning stare.

“That nymph wants to fuck you,” she said.

*A mistake I will never make again*, he thought.

Hades did not acknowledge her comment and instead said, “You do not often grace my halls with your presence, Aphrodite. What can I do for you?”

She took a sip of wine, her sea-foam eyes locked with his. “I had hoped you’d be interested in a bargain of our own.”

“I do not play gods.”

“Just one game, Hades,” she said innocently, and then goaded, “Are you afraid?”

“A game played under this roof is never *just* a game.” *Not even for me*, he thought. There was always the possibility of losing, and he tended to lose just as much as the mortals who bargained with him, but their requests he could grant. He did not trust what Aphrodite would ask for. “Why request a game? What is it you want, goddess?”

“Why must I want something?” she asked. “Perhaps I am just bored and in need of entertainment.”

“There is nothing more dangerous than a bored Aphrodite,” Hades mused.

She pouted. “Please, Hades?”

He met her gaze and sipped from his glass before answering.

“No, Aphrodite.”

She was after more than entertainment. He could see it in the way she carried herself, rigid and tense. Something had brought her here, and if he had to guess, it had to do with her husband.

“Fine.” She lifted her chin in defiance. “You forced my hand.”

He glared at her, knowing what she was going to say next.

“I have an unclaimed favor from you, Hades. I wish to use it.”

A favor owed between gods was like a blood pact. Once invoked, it could not be taken back.

“You would waste a favor on a game of cards?” he asked. He knew the answer—whatever had brought Aphrodite here, it was worth spending.

Her eyes flashed. “*It is not a waste.*”

He took a drink of his whiskey. It kept him from saying anything he might regret before he gritted out, “One game, Aphrodite, no more.”

She brightened like he had given her the stars in the sky. “Thank you, Hades.”

Hades snapped his fingers, and the two teleported to the Ruby Suite upstairs. It was one of several rooms Hades used when bargaining with mortals. They were all named after precious stones. He chose this one intentionally, as a bit of a jab at Aphrodite. Ruby was passion—something she lacked these days. The walls were red, and black fabric was draped from floor to ceiling, framing sensual monochrome photos. A pack of unopened cards sat at the center of a

table, which was positioned under a pool of muted light.

As Hades took his seat, he offered them to Aphrodite. “Would you like to deal?”

“No.” A smile curled her lips. “I’ll let you retain some power, Aidoneus.”

He glared at her. He did not like that nickname. Mortals used it out of fear. She used it now to taunt him.

“Blackjack, then.”

“Five hands,” Aphrodite said. “Whoever wins the most, sets stakes.”

Hades agreed, dealt the first hand, and lost. His fingers curled into a fist on his thigh.

“What do you see when you look at my soul, Hades?” Aphrodite asked offhand, pursing her lips as he dispensed the cards again.

The question was not all that surprising. It was one he received often, but never from Aphrodite.

“Why do you ask?”

When she met his gaze, he saw she was serious and that she also feared the truth. It was present in her eyes, a shadow that flickered across her expression. She did not look at him long before focusing on her cards.

“Hit me,” she said, and Hades gave her another card before revealing their hands—Hades had two aces and a twelve of diamonds, Aphrodite, a bust. She frowned at her loss but continued to speak as Hades dealt a third hand.

“I just wonder if I’m as horrible as Hephaestus seems to think.”

Aphrodite was not horrible, but her union with Hephaestus had hardened her heart and broken her spirit. What was left was a spiteful and cynical shell.

Hades had been bitter once, too, but unlike Aphrodite, who dealt with her anger and loneliness by entertaining herself with mortals and gods, he had isolated himself further and further, until the only thing people could do was make up stories and tales about the elusive God of the Underworld.

“Hephaestus does not think you are horrible, Aphrodite. He’s just afraid to love you.” She offered a mocking laugh, so Hades challenged, “Have you ever told him you love him?”

“What relevance does that have to my question?”

*Everything*, Hades wanted to say.

“You were a gift to Hephaestus at a time when you flaunted your lovers. From his

perspective, you were a reluctant bride.”

It did not matter that Hades knew the truth. Aphrodite had always been enchanted by the God of Fire. In ancient times, on the rare occasions Hades had gone to Mount Olympus, he had caught her watching Hephaestus, mostly frowning because he did not give her the time of day.

But Hades knew Hephaestus well, too. The god was of a different sort. He was not eager to be under the spotlight, less eager to speak. He took pleasure in solitude and innovation, and in his heart, he felt...unworthy, mostly due to his treatment in antiquity. As a god with only one leg, he was often—and wrongly—mocked. Over time, Hephaestus adapted, fashioning prosthetics, and now sported one made of gold.

“I’m not surprised Hephaestus is not interested in forcing you into monogamy.”

Aphrodite was silent for a moment, focusing on their game, and as they turned their cards, Hades bit down on his tongue—a bust. He had dealt himself one too many cards.

Aphrodite was in the lead.

Finally, she admitted, “I asked Zeus for a divorce. He will not grant it.”

Hades’s brows rose. “Does Hephaestus know?”

“I imagine he does now.”

“You want Hephaestus’s love, why ask for a divorce?”

“I will not pine after him.”

“You are sending mixed messages, Aphrodite. You want Hephaestus’s love, but you ask for a divorce. Have you even tried talking to him?”

“Have you?” she snapped, glaring at Hades. “He might as well be mute!”

Hades grimaced. He had a feeling Hephaestus kept quiet because her temper was a short fuse.

“You haven’t answered my question, Hades.”

The god watched her for a moment. He did not particularly like answering questions about the soul. Often, god and mortal alike were not ready to hear what he had to say. Aphrodite was no different. Parts of her soul were a garden, full of roses and lilies and sunshine, dreamy and quiet. Others were a storm, raging over a churning sea—furious and devastating. She was broken, split in two like a cracked mirror, straddling a line. One day, she would choose a side.

“You have a beautiful soul, Aphrodite. Passionate. Determined. Romantic. But you are desperate to be loved and believe yourself unlovable.”

He spoke as they played their last hand, and when Aphrodite flipped her cards, a wide smile broke out across her face. Whatever she felt about Hades's comments was lost in her excitement.

"It's time for terms, Hades."

He scowled and sat back in his chair, glaring. Aphrodite threw her head back in laughter.

"Someone does not like to lose."

Her words were like a poker in his side. Hades did not actually mind losing. He lost all the time when he bargained with mortals, but he had not wanted to lose to Aphrodite.

The goddess pressed a finger to her chin and offered a soft hum, as if she did not know what to ask of him. She was wasting his time. She knew what she wanted, but just as he was about to bark at her, she spoke.

"Fall in love, Hades. Better yet, find a girl who will fall in love with you." Then Aphrodite clapped and exclaimed, "That's it! Make someone fall in love with you!"

Hades's jaw tightened, and Aphrodite stared back as if she wished to see to his soul in turn. Her terms were insulting. If it were that easy to fall in love, he would not be alone now.

"Is this your idea of a joke?" he asked, his voice quiet and calm, despite the anger twisting his insides. He was going to have to torture someone just to release the tension in his body.

"Not a joke," she said, raising a thin blonde brow. "You've offered love advice. Follow it."

Not a joke then, but retribution. She was frustrated with him for offering his opinion on her marriage.

"And if I can't meet those terms?"

Her smile cut across her face wickedly.

"Then you will release Basil from the Underworld."

"Your lover?" Hades could not keep the disgust from his voice. They'd just spent the last few minutes discussing her love for Hephaestus, and here she was asking for a man—her hero, to be exact. Basil had fought and died for her in The Great War. "Why? Don't you want Hephaestus to admit that he loves you?"

She glared at him. "Hephaestus is a lost cause."

"You haven't even tried!"

“*Basil*, Hades. *He* is who I want.”

“Because you imagine yourself in love with him?”

“What do you know of love? You’ve never loved in your lifetime.”

Those words did not hurt, so much as embarrass him. He leaned toward the goddess.

“Basil loves you, that is true, but if you don’t love him in return, it is meaningless.”

“Better to be loved than not at all,” she countered.

*You are a fool*, Hades wanted to say. Instead, he asked, “Are you sure this is what you want? You have already petitioned Zeus for a divorce, now you have asked me to resurrect your lover in the event I cannot meet the terms of your contract. Hephaestus will know.”

Aphrodite was quiet, and he recognized her uncertainty in the way she toyed with her lip.

Finally, she answered.

“Yes. It is what I want.” She took a deep breath then and managed a smile. “Six months, Hades. That should be enough time. Thank you for the entertainment. It was...*invigorating*.”

With that, the Goddess of Love vanished.

## Chapter III

# A Game of Restraint

*Make someone fall in love with you.*

The words were a cruel taunt that echoed in Hades's mind as he prowled the darkness of his club to clear his head.

Perhaps he had gone too far in criticizing Aphrodite's choice to ask Zeus for a divorce, but Hades knew the goddess loved Hephaestus, and rather than admit it, she thought to force the God of Fire into expressing his feelings by goading him. What Aphrodite failed to understand was that not everyone worked like she did, least of all Hephaestus. If she won his love, it would be through patience, kindness, and attention.

It would mean she would have to be vulnerable, something Aphrodite, goddess and warrior, despised.

And if he understood anything, it was that. Aphrodite's challenge forced him to acknowledge his own vulnerabilities, his *weaknesses*. He frowned at the notion of finding someone who wanted to carry his shame, his sins, his malice, but if he failed, the Fates would get involved, and he knew what they would require if he returned Basil to the land of the living.

*A soul for a soul.*

Someone would have to die, and he would not have a say in the Fates' victim.

The thought made his body tighten, another thread added to the others marring his skin. He hated it, but it was the price of maintaining balance in the world.

A smell brought him out of his thoughts and gave him pause. It was familiar—wildflowers, both bitter and sweet.

*Demeter*, he thought.

The Goddess of Harvest's name was sour on his tongue. Demeter had few passions in life, but one of them was her hatred for the God of the Dead.

He inhaled again, taking the scent deeper. Something about it was off. Mingled with the familiar aroma was the sweetness of vanilla and a mild, herbal note of lavender. A mortal, perhaps? Someone with the goddess's favor?

The scent drew him out of the darkness in which he had lingered to the edge of the



balcony, where he scanned the crowd and found her immediately.

The woman who smelled like vanilla, lavender, and his enemy sat poised on the edge of one of his sofas in a pink dress that left little to the imagination. He liked the way her hair curled, falling in luminous waves down her back. His fingers itched to touch it, to pull it until her head tipped back and she looked him in the eyes.

*Look at me*, he commanded, desperate to see her face.

She seemed to look everywhere before her gaze halted on him. His hand tightened around his glass, the other gripped the balcony rail.

She was beautiful—lush lips, high cheekbones, and eyes as green as new spring. Her expression was startled at first, eyes widening slightly, transforming into something fierce and passionate as her gaze swept his face and form.

*She is yours*, a voice echoed in his head, and something inside him snapped. *Claim her*.

The command was feral. He had to grind his teeth to keep from obeying, and he thought he might shatter the glass in his hand from clutching it too tight. The impulse to whisk her away to the Underworld was strong, like a spell. He had never thought himself so weak, but his restraint was a thin, frayed thread.

How could he want this woman so badly? What was this unnatural pull? He stared at her harder, searching for a reason, and became aware that he was not the only one feeling the effects of their connection. She fidgeted beneath his gaze, her chest rising and falling as her breath hitched, her skin turning a pretty pink, and he had the thought that he would like to follow that flush with his lips.

He would give anything to know what she was thinking.

He was so preoccupied by his own salacious thoughts, he had not felt anyone approach until arms snaked around his waist. He reacted quickly, latching onto the hands that held him and twisted to face Minthe.

“Distracted, my lord?” she purred, amused.

“Minthe,” he snapped, releasing her arms. “Can I help you?”

He was frustrated by the interruption, but also grateful. If he stared at the woman any longer, he might have left his position on the balcony and gone to her.

“Already zeroing in on your prey?” she asked.

For a moment, Hades did not understand her comment, and then he made the connection.

Minthe assumed he was searching for a potential love interest, someone who could help him fulfill Aphrodite's bargain.

"Listening in the shadows again, Minthe?"

The nymph shrugged a shoulder. "It is what I do."

"You gather information *for* me," he said. "Not *on* me."

"How else am I supposed to keep you out of trouble?"

He snorted. "I'm millions of years old. I can take care of myself."

"Is that how you ended up in a bargain with Aphrodite?"

He narrowed his gaze, then lifted his glass. "Did I not tell you I am not to have an empty glass tonight?"

She gave her best *fuck you* smile and bowed. "Right away, my lord."

He made sure Minthe was no longer within sight before returning his gaze to the floor. The woman had turned back to her friends.

Hades studied them in an attempt to discern the kind of company she kept, when he noticed someone he was not particularly fond of—a man named Adonis. He was one of Aphrodite's favored mortals. Why, he had no idea. The mortal was a liar and had a heart as dark as the Styx, but he supposed the Goddess of Love had a hard time looking past his pretty face.

He hoped the woman did not share that quality. He frowned, wondering if she would leave the club with him tonight, and then scolded himself for having these thoughts. His concern should go as far as fearing for her well-being for the mere fact that Aphrodite was fond of punishing anyone who gave her lovers too much attention.

"Your drink, my lord," Ilias said.

Hades glanced at the satyr, relieved that he had sensed his approach.

Ilias could be best described as another assistant. He had worked for Hades almost as long as Minthe, filling roles wherever Hades needed: bartending at Nevernight, managing his restaurants, and enforcing Hades's rule in the Upperworld. He was best at the latter. With an unassuming, pleasant appearance, Hades's enemies were often surprised by his ruthlessness.

Hades did not often employ satyrs. They were wild, prone to drunkenness and seduction, but Ilias was different and not by choice. He had severed ties with his tribe after they betrayed him, raping a woman he loved. She had killed herself and Ilias had killed them.

Hades took the glass, and before he thought too long on the subject, said, "I have a job

for you.”

“Yes, my lord?”

Hades nodded to the woman who had triggered him with her golden hair and green eyes.

“That woman, I want to know if she leaves with anyone.”

Silence followed Hades’s order, and when the god looked at Ilias, he was staring back, brow raised. “Is she in danger, my lord?”

*Yes*, he thought, she was in danger of never leaving this place. Something inside him wanted to disregard every civility and *possess* her. Something about her called to him—a thread that pulled at his heart.

He froze as those words surfaced in his mind, eyes narrowing, and thought, *it cannot be*.

Hades peeled back layer after layer of glamour that kept his vision shielded from the ethereal Threads of Fate. They were like shimmering spiderwebs connecting people and things—some were wisps, others were solid, their strength waxed and waned throughout life. The whole floor was like a net, but Hades was only focused on one, fragile cord that ran from his chest to the woman in shimmering pink.

*Fucking Fates.*

“My lord?” Ilias asked, sensing the sudden change in him.

*This cannot be*, he thought. The thread and its placement near his heart had significance in a way he was not quite able to wrap his mind around—the Fates had woven this woman into his life.

*She was meant to be his lover.*

“Lord Hades?”

“Yes,” the god finally answered, looking at Ilias as he turned from the floor. “Yes, she is in danger.”

He left in a daze, pausing in the shadow to collect his thoughts. His chest felt tight, the thread pulled taut, and he had the thought that if he continued his retreat, it might snap.

*This is some sort of game.*

It would not be the first time the Fates had dangled a wish in front of him, only to take it away. That was probably their greatest skill—extracting his deepest desires, then weaving them into his life, only to unravel them when they wished.

It was torture.

When he was younger, it had been more fun for the Fates because his reactions were vicious, his retribution violent, but the angrier he became, the more the Fates took. It was like the sisters wanted to see him tear the world to shreds.

For a while, he had obsessed over it, attempting to bargain for love. When that did not work, he decided to defy the Fates. He would find love; he would force it. The results had been a one-night stand with Minthe and a tumultuous relationship with another nymph named Leuce, who had betrayed him.

His wrath had been swift, and his desire to fight Fate on the subject, quashed. He resigned himself to a lonely existence, building walls around his heart and soul. He existed without expectation of happiness or love, and focused instead on bargaining and balance.

Until now.

He would forever remember the vicious reaction his body had when he laid eyes on the woman in pink. His insides still shook. How could the Fates offer him a taste of what it might feel like to have a soulmate, only to take her away?

*As easily as I can condemn a soul to Tartarus*, he answered, gritting his teeth.

He was still frustrated as he made his way to the lounge. As he approached, Euryale, the gorgon who stood guard at the entrance, nodded at him despite his invisibility.

“My lord,” she said.

The god smirked, dropping his glamour.

The gorgon was blind. Centuries ago, her eyes had been gouged out of her face and the venomous snakes that had once graced her head had been chopped to pieces—a punishment for her beauty. Hades had found her in the forest. She lay where she had been attacked, curled into the fetal position, sobbing and shaking. He had gathered her up and brought her to the Underworld, allowing her to heal before employing her.

Despite the horror she had experienced, and her attackers’ attempts to take away her power, they had not succeeded, for beneath that blindfold, Euryale’s gaze was still potent. After she healed, Hades released her upon her attackers, and the gorgon had turned them all to stone.

“Your sense of smell amazes me, Euryale.”

“You make it too easy,” the gorgon replied. “Lay off the cologne.”

Hades chuckled, pressed a hand to the gorgon’s shoulder, and entered the lounge.

The environment here was far more subdued, a mix of mortals and ancient creatures

chatting and drinking and playing. Some were relaxed, others on edge, fidgeting as they waited to be summoned to one of the suites in the shadows, ready to bargain for their deepest desires no matter the consequences. Hades wandered among them, assessing and searching, attempting to choose his first contract of the night, when he rounded one of the gaming tables and halted, glimpsing a familiar pink dress and silken hair.

She was a siren, luring him with her scent, her beauty, her very presence.

He should turn around, meld with the darkness, and pretend he never laid eyes upon her, but watching her profile made his chest ache, and there was a part of him that resented the feeling. He had never wanted the Fates to have control over his love life, and yet, it was inevitable.

*I could have control*, he told himself. *Use this to my advantage to fulfill my bargain with Aphrodite.*

Hades did not often feel guilty, but that thought made his chest sick and heavy.

*Make someone fall in love with you.*

The bargain was callous and unfair, but Hades wanted to win.

*Fucking Fates.*

Shoving aside his tumultuous thoughts, he approached her.

“Do you play?” he asked.

She turned to him, and his breath caught in his throat as he was again, stuck by her beauty. Her eyes were wide and fringed with dark lashes. A dust of freckles kissed the tip of her nose and the apples of her cheeks, fading beneath a flush that colored her creamy skin.

Hades took a sip from his glass to wet his throat, but the movement drew her attention to his mouth, and he repressed a groan as he wondered if she tasted like she smelled—sweet, honeyed, forbidden.

After a moment, she smiled, a playful glint in her gaze. “I’m willing to play if you’re willing to teach.”

*You wouldn’t say that if you knew who I was*, he thought, taking another drink.

Anyone who entered into a game with him was bound to the rules of Nevernight—a loss meant a contract.

*You are a bastard*, he told himself as he approached the table and sat beside her. The movement stirred the air, and her scent continued to invade his mind. There was something else

in the atmosphere—an electricity that made his heart race and the hair on his arms and neck stand on end.

“It’s brave to sit down at a table without knowing the game,” he said.

He thought that she might have sensed the warning in his tone, because she arched a brow at him and asked, “How else would I learn?”

“Hmm.”

She was right, though Hades would not advise running before learning to walk, especially when it came to bargains with him. Still, her response illustrated her cunning and willingness to try new things, and he found that insanely attractive.

“Clever.”

Now that he was close to her, he could not stop staring. He wanted to know why she smelled like wildflowers. What was her connection to Demeter? It felt intrusive and wrong to strip away the barriers that barred her soul from his eyes, but he would be lying if he said he did not want to know who she was beneath that perfect exterior.

She quivered, her lithe shoulders shaking. Was she cold or uncomfortable?

“I have never seen you before,” he finally said, hoping that explained his stare.

“Well, I have never been here before,” she replied, and then narrowed her eyes. “You must come here often.”

He smirked at the tone of her voice, tinged with suspicion.

“I do.”

“Why?” She sounded curious rather than disgusted, then blushed and tried to recover by adding, “I mean—you don’t have to answer that.”

“I will answer it.” He met her gaze, challenging. “If you will answer a question for me.”

*Say yes*, he silently begged, though he would never compel her. *Say yes so I can learn all of you.*

A small furrow appeared between her brows as she considered his proposal. *An answer to a question is a small price to pay if she lost*, Hades wanted to say. *Others put their soul on the line.* But he remained quiet.

“Fine,” she conceded.

It was a challenge not to smile.

He answered her earlier question, “I come because it is...fun.”

It was not a complete lie, and it sounded like something a mortal would say, and for this moment in time, that is what he intended to be—fragile and human.

“Now you—why are you here tonight?”

“My friend Lexa was on the list,” she explained, looking at her hands as she twined her fingers together in her lap.

“No,” he said. “That is the answer to a different question. Why are *you* here tonight?”

She met his gaze, a mischievous glint in her eyes, and he found himself desperate to chase it—that flicker of defiance, that hint of passion.

“It seemed rebellious at the time,” she answered finally.

“And now you aren’t so sure?”

“Oh, I am sure it is rebellious,” she said as her fingers trailed the felt table. Hades’s gaze followed them and he thought he would have liked for those fingers to explore his skin. After a moment, he lifted his gaze to hers.

“I’m just not sure how I’ll feel about it tomorrow.”

Now he was curious. “Who are you rebelling against?”

Her smile was like an arrow to his chest—devastating, secretive, enticing. “You said one question.”

“So I did.”

*Well played, darling*, he thought with a smile.

She shivered again.

“Are you cold?”

“What?” She seemed surprised by his question.

“You’ve been shivering since you sat down.”

She flushed, fidgeted under his gaze again, and then blurted, “Who was that woman with you earlier?”

He frowned but then remembered. “Oh, Minthe. She’s always putting her hands where they don’t belong.”

She paled, and he realized he had said something wrong.

“I...think I should go.”

*No.*

They had not spoken long enough. He did not know her name, and he wanted to teach

her—he wanted to teach her so many things. Before he knew what he was doing, his hand was on hers and something volatile sparked between them, eliciting a gasp from her perfect lips. She pulled away quickly.

“No,” he said, but it came out as a command, and she glared at him.

“Excuse me?”

“What I mean to say is, I haven’t taught you how to play yet.” He lowered his voice, forcing away the hysteria that had caused him to reach for her. “Allow me.”

*Please.*

She glanced away from him, and he thought she might bolt. *Trust me*, he wanted to beg, though he knew that was a ridiculous thing to ask. He was the last person she should trust.

Finally, she seemed resolved and relaxed, lowered her lashes as she spoke in the most erotic voice he had ever heard, “Then teach me.”

*I will. Everything*, he thought.

He shuffled the cards and explained the game. “This is poker. We will play five-card draw, and we’ll start with a bet.”

“But I don’t have anything to bet with,” she said, glancing down at herself.

*I would happily take the dress.*

“A question answered, then. If I win, you will answer any question I pose, and if you win, I will answer yours.”

She grimaced, but her expression seemed in conflict with her body, because as she spoke, she leaned toward him. The air between them thickened, and Hades found it hard to breathe.

“Deal.”

Thrilled, Hades continued to explain the game.

“There are ten rankings in poker. The lowest is the high card and the highest is the royal flush. The goal is to draw a higher rank than the other player…” he expounded. “If you are dealt a bad hand, fold. It is better than the alternative. Checking and calling would apply if we were playing for coin, but since our currency is answers, the point is moot. Perhaps the most important skill in poker is your ability to bluff.”

“Bluff?” That seemed to pique her interest.

“Sometimes, poker is just a game of deception…especially when you’re losing.”

Hades dealt each of them five cards, and they took their time eyeing their hands and then



each other. Finally, the goddess laid her cards down, face up, and Hades did the same.

“You have a pair of queens,” he said. “And I have a full house.”

“So...you win.” She didn’t seem upset so much as contemplative, still trying to remember the rules and understand the game. Hades, on the other hand, was impatient, and he jumped at the chance to ask his question.

“Who are you rebelling against?”

She smiled wryly. “My mother.”

He raised a brow. “Why?”

“You’ll have to win another hand if I’m going to answer.”

He was all too eager. When he won a second time, he did not ask the question, just looked at her expectantly.

“Because...” She paused, and her eyes moved away from his, focusing on the table in front of them, brows furrowing. She was searching for an answer. *For a way to avoid telling the truth*, Hades realized. She smiled ruefully as she said, “She made me mad.”

There was a hint of darkness to her words, and he wanted to chase that moment. It was the first time he sensed she was holding back. He waited for more of an explanation, but she just smirked.

“You never said the answer had to be detailed.”

His grin matched hers. “Noted for the future, I assure you.”

“The future?”

“Well, I hope this isn’t the last time we’ll play poker.”

Especially now. She was teaching him how she thought and worked, and he would be more than prepared for their next game. She would not be able to cut corners so easily. The terms would be detailed, the stakes higher.

Her expression turned wary, and he got the sense that she had not planned on seeing him again after tonight.

Something jolted through him—an emotion akin to fear.

*I have to see her again. I will go mad.*

He pushed those thoughts away. *Finish the game*, he told himself, and dealt another hand and won.

“Why are you angry with your mother?” he asked.

She looked thoughtful for a moment, and then said, “Because...she wants me to be something I can’t.”

*Was that what I sensed beneath the surface? Her true nature, desperate to be free?*

Her gaze dropped to the cards. “I don’t understand why people do this.”

He tilted his head. “You are not enjoying our game?”

“I am. But...I don’t understand why people play Hades. Why do they want to sell their soul to him?”

*Haven’t you ever been desperate for something?* he wanted to ask, but he knew the answer. He could feel it burning between them.

“They don’t agree to a game because they want to sell their soul,” he said. “They do it because they think they can win.”

“Do they? Win?”

“Sometimes.”

“Does that anger him, you think?”

She had pursed her lips at the question, and dread tightened his chest. This woman had connections to Demeter, which meant she had heard the worst things about him. If he had any hope of deconstructing the myth that had been erected around him, he was going to have to spend time with her, and that meant she needed to know who he was, so he answered her question truthfully.

“Darling, I win either way.”

Her eyes went wide, and she stood quickly, almost knocking her chair over. He had never seen anyone so eager to leave his company. His name slipped out of her mouth like a curse.

*“Hades.”*

He shuddered. *Say it again*, he wanted to command, but he kept his mouth shut. His eyes darkened, and he pressed his lips together. The look on her face would haunt him for an eternity. She was shocked, frightened, embarrassed.

*She made a mistake.* He read it on her face.

“I have to go.”

She spun, fleeing from him like he was death himself come to steal her soul.

He thought about chasing after her but knew it did not matter whether or not he followed. She would be back. She had lost to him, and he had marked her.

He swallowed the rest of his whiskey and smiled.

Perhaps Aphrodite's bargain would not be so impossible after all.

"Fastest path, quickest benefit," he muttered.