

CHAPTER I

A GAME OF RETRIBUTION

Hades manifested in the shadow of the grandstand of the Hellene Racetrack. Soon, the divinely bred steeds of the gods would compete in the first of three races, which would ultimately place the fastest competitor on a path to becoming one of Poseidon's prized hippocamps—the fishtail horses that pulled his ocean chariot. But it was not this so-called honor that drew Hades's presence or even the usual thrill he got from the promise of a risky bet. He had come to test the validity of a supposed oracle who went by the name Acacius.

He was familiar with the name and his businesses—a well-known relic dealer whose front was a mechanic shop. Hades and his team had kept an eye on his affairs for several months. They were familiar with his routine, instruction, and correspondences, which was why, when he began to offer mortals a look into the future, Hades became suspicious.

It was not just the future Acacius offered. He'd obtained a kind of omniscience that came only with divine blessing or the possession of relics, and since Hades knew it was not the former, it had to be the latter.

He had sent Ilias ahead to bet in his place, and now the satyr stood near the track, his disorderly hair slicked back and tied at the nape of his neck, making his horns look larger and more pronounced. Hades crossed the green, where twenty steeds would soon compete, toward him. At his approach, mortals gave him a wide berth. Despite their fear of his presence, they stared, curious too—more so now that he had openly shown affection to a person they believed to also be mortal.

Affection for Persephone, who was not mortal but insisted on acting as if she were, something that worried him far more than he was willing to admit.

He had few vices, among them racing, whiskey, and Persephone, his Goddess of Spring. Two of the three had never interfered with his routine, had never provided enough of an escape to be called a distraction.

But Persephone was more than that—she was an addiction. A craving he could not sate. Even now, he fought the visceral urge to return to her despite having spent most of the weekend with her, exploring her, buried inside her. She was why he was late. He had not wanted to leave

her side, in part because he worried over whether she would remain despite her promise that she would await his return to the Underworld.

A hot wave of frustration twisted through him at his doubt.

He had never doubted himself, but he doubted everything when it came to Persephone...even their fate.

“You’re late,” Ilias said, not looking at him but at the starting gate where the horses and their jockeys marched into place.

“And you’re a satyr,” Hades replied, following his gaze.

Ilias glanced at him, brow raised in question at the comment.

“I thought we were stating the obvious,” Hades said.

He did not like to be reminded of his mistakes, though those closest to him—in particular Hecate—reveled in reminding him that he was very much fallible.

Or, as she liked to say, an idiot.

“How are they looking?” Hades inquired, eyeing each powerful animal as they filed into their respective numbered stalls.

“I put money on Titan,” Ilias said. “Just as you advised.”

Hades nodded, his attention shifting to a large board where the odds glared back. Titan was favored for second place.

“I’m surprised you did not choose Kosmos,” Ilias said.

Hades heard what the satyr did not say—*If you wanted to win, why go with Titan?* He was familiar with Kosmos and his trainer. He knew that he was a favorite of Poseidon’s. Given that, it was likely no other horse in the running had a chance.

Then again, this was a race of divinity, and that meant anything was possible.

“The bet is a test,” Hades replied.

Ilias looked at Hades questioningly, but he offered no other explanation.

The horses and their riders were in place behind the gate, and the race would begin in minutes. There was a tightening in the bottom of his stomach, an anticipation for the race that was reflected in the enraptured and colorful crowd. Horse racing, like so many things in New Greece, wasn’t even about the race for most; it was about the fashion and status, and while the outfits were not as extreme as those at the Olympian Gala, the hats and headdresses were.

“Lord Hades.” A voice drew his attention, and he turned to find Kal Stavros standing a

few paces behind him. Kal was the CEO of Epik Communications, the media conglomerate. He owned television, radio, news outlets, even theme parks. Among them, *New Athens News*.

Hades hated the media for many reasons, but Kal Stavros ranked near the top, not only for how he encouraged the spread of misinformation but because he was a Magi, a mortal who practiced dark magic and already had two strikes against him for misuse.

A third and he would be banned, possibly punished.

Like many, the mortal kept his distance, though his pose was casual—his hands were stuffed into the pockets of his pressed navy slacks. His bright blue eyes seemed to glitter, and Hades knew it wasn't from admiration. When Kal looked at the God of the Dead, he saw power, potential.

Neither of which he possessed.

Kal took his hands out of his pockets to bow, and Hades glared—not only at Kal but those who stood near, warning off any approach they may have been considering after watching this exchange.

“A pleasure,” Kal said, grinning as he straightened.

“Kal,” Hades said. “To what do I owe the interruption?”

The words fell from his tongue, heavy with disgust. If the mortal caught on, he ignored it.

“Forgive me,” Kal said, though he did not sound all that sorry. “I would have approached you elsewhere, but I have been requesting a meeting for weeks and have heard nothing.”

Hades's irritation increased, a subtle heat that burned the back of his throat.

“Silence is usually taken to mean no, Kal,” he replied, focusing on the gate again. If it had been anyone else, they would have understood this to be a dismissal, but Kal had always made the mistake of flying too close to the sun, and it seemed that all but him understood the implications.

Kal continued, daring to step closer. Hades's spine went rigid, and he clenched his fist, noting Ilias's warning glance.

“I hoped to discuss a possible partnership,” the man said. “One of...mutual benefit.”

“The fact that you believe you could possibly benefit me, Kal, illustrates a significant amount of arrogance and ignorance.”

“Considering your recent experience with a certain journalist, I think not.”

There was a note of irritation in Kal's voice, but it was his words that drew Hades's

attention—and made that small scratch of irritation a full-on inferno.

“Careful with what you say, Kal,” Hades warned, uncertain of where this conversation was heading but disliking the possibility that Persephone’s name would soon pass this mortal’s lips.

Kal smirked, oblivious to the danger, or perhaps he wished to antagonize him, force him to act out in public merely for the benefit of his reporters.

“I could ensure your name never appears in the media again.”

Those words hit like hot oil, though Hades did not outwardly react. Despite the fact that he was not the least bit intrigued by Kal’s offer, he asked, “What exactly are you suggesting?”

“Your public relationship with one of my journalists—”

“She is not *your* journalist, Kal,” Hades snarled.

The mortal stared for a moment but continued. “Regardless, you allowed her to write about you, which will encourage others to do the same with an emphasis on your relationship. Is that what you want?”

It wasn’t what he wanted at all, mostly because it placed Persephone in more danger.

“Your words ring eerily threatening, Kal,” Hades said.

“Not at all,” the man said. “I’m merely pointing out the consequences of your actions.”

Hades was not certain what the mortal meant by actions. Was it that he had let Persephone write the articles? Or was he referring to their public reunion outside the Coffee House, when she had run and jumped into his arms, both heedless to onlookers who had photographed and filmed the entire thing?

“I can help ensure your privacy.”

“For a price, you mean?”

“A small one,” Kal said. “Only a share in the ownership of Iniquity.”

Kal’s voice was drowned out by a loud bell, followed by the clang of the gates opening and the thundering of hooves as all twenty steeds sped down the track. The announcer’s voice rose over the roaring crowd, narrating with a lyrical inflection.

“Kosmos has an early lead as expected, then it’s Titan...”

He rattled off more names—Layland has the rail, Maximus on the outside. Throughout, Kosmos maintained the lead, with Titan only a length behind. The continued reporting from the announcer made Hades’s chest tighten and his teeth grind together, exacerbated by the crowd’s

cheering, but then there was a shift in the race. Titan seemed to gain a better foothold and practically sailed past Kosmos across the finish line.

The announcer's voice rose with excitement as he announced the winner.

"Titan, the dark horse and Divine superstar, wins the Hellene Cup! Kosmos is second!"

In a matter of minutes, the race was over, and Hades turned from the rail to make his escape when a hand landed on his arm.

"Our bargain, Hades," Kal said.

The god turned quickly, catching Kal's wrist within his grip and shoving him away.

"Fuck off, Kal."

He offered nothing else before he vanished.

Hades manifested at the Nevernight bar.

The club was pristine, the floor empty, though he knew his employees lurked, navigating within the shadows of the club to prepare for opening tonight—an event that never saw peace. Inevitably, someone always assumed their status would grant them access and, depending on their sense of entitlement, always led to a very public tantrum that Mekonnen—or in very serious cases, Ilias—would have to handle.

Mortals and immortals alike never ceased to illustrate the faults of humanity. There were moments when Hades wondered if he had done right to create such a paradise in the Underworld. Perhaps it was best when they feared the afterlife—feared him, even. Then people like Kal would never dare approach with such imperious requests.

Another wave of frustration ricocheted through him at the man's audacity.

Worse, Kal's offer brought up another concern—Persephone's safety. Hades had an unlimited number of enemies. He hated to regret anything about their reunion, but he should have been more careful. He could have draped them in glamour, teleported, anything to prevent the public from having access to their lives and leave her exposed.

But the damage had already been done, and the world was watching.

Was Persephone prepared? It was one thing to be favored, another to be the chosen lover of a god. She did not wish to be known for her divinity. Would she tire of being known as his lover?

He took a bottle of whiskey from the backlit wall and drank it straight. As he did, he

sensed he was not alone and turned to find Hera, Goddess of Marriage and his begrudging sister-in-law. She stood at the center of the floor, impeccably dressed in white, her face angled, proud.

Only slightly less severe than Demeter's, he thought.

"A little early for a drink," she said, her voice tinged with disgust, though he knew she had come to make requests. She never bothered to approach him otherwise.

"A little early for your judgment," Hades replied, returning his attention to the bottle, effectively dismissing Hera, who stood quiet for a moment before taking a breath and moving a step closer to the bar.

Hades braced himself for whatever came next.

He knew he would not like it.

"Before I begin, I hope my visit to you remains anonymous."

Hades raised a brow. "That depends on what you have come to say."

He took another drink, just to drive the point home.

Hera's features turned stony.

Hades did not dislike the goddess, but he also did not like her. For him, she was neutral territory. Her vengeful nature was often spurred by Zeus, his infidelity the crux of many of her outbursts. In most instances, Hades had a hard time blaming her for her outrage. After all, Zeus and Hera's marriage was built on deceit, but her cruelty was misplaced, always directed toward those who were often victims of Zeus themselves.

Hera lifted her chin, glaring.

"You are well aware of Zeus's exploits," she said. "The havoc he wreaks upon the human race."

She was not wrong, and though no god was particularly innocent, Zeus was probably the hardest on humanity.

"I'm well aware of yours as well," Hades replied.

Hera's mouth hardened and her voice shook as she spoke. "I have reason. You know I do."

"Call it what it is, Hera—revenge."

Her fist clenched at her side. "As if you haven't sought revenge."

"I was not passing judgment," he said and, after a moment, prompted, "Why have you come?"

She stared at him and Hades remembered that he did not like Hera's eyes. It was easy to forget as she was often with Zeus, and when he was by her side, she presented herself as being uninterested and almost aloof, but being the center of her attention meant feeling the stab of her gaze.

"I have come to obtain your allegiance," she said. "I wish to overthrow Zeus."

He was not so surprised by her statement. This was not the first time Hera had attempted to dethrone Zeus. In fact, she had tried it twice and had managed to enlist the help of other gods—Apollo, Poseidon, and even Athena, and of the three, only one had managed to escape Zeus's wrath once he was free.

"No."

His answer was automatic, but he did not have to think long about this decision. Hades disliked Zeus's tyranny just as much as the next god, but he knew Hera's intentions, and he'd rather his erratic brother have the throne than her.

"You would decline, knowing his crimes?"

"Hera—"

"Don't," she snapped, "defend him."

He had not intended to defend Zeus, but the reality was, Zeus was only king because they had drawn lots. He had no greater power than either Hades or Poseidon.

"You've tried this before and failed. What makes you think this time will be any different?" Hades asked because he was truly curious. Had Hera come into possession of some kind of weapon or alliance she believed would change the course of fate?

Instead of answering, she said, "So you are afraid."

Hades gritted his teeth. Zeus was the last person in the cosmos Hades feared. He was merely cautious. There was a difference.

"You want my help?" Hades asked. "Then answer the question."

A bitter smile spread across her face. "You seem to think you have a choice, and yet I hold your future in my hands."

Hades narrowed his eyes.

He did not need to ask what she meant. Hera also had the ability to bless and curse marriages. If she wanted to, she could ensure that he never married Persephone.

"Perhaps I will find reason to side with Demeter. I *am* the Goddess of Women, you

know.”

While many had known that Demeter had a daughter, she had kept her identity a secret, which meant that few gods knew of Persephone’s divinity. The most recent exception was Zeus—and by default, Hera—when Demeter had gone to him to demand the return of her daughter. Zeus, however, was not interested in opposing the Fates and had refused.

“If you wish to embody that role, then you’d do well to listen to Persephone herself and not her conniving mother. Do not fuck with me, Hera. It will not end well.”

She offered a bark of laughter, her chin dipping so that she glared back at him. “Is that your answer?”

“I will not help you overthrow Zeus,” Hades repeated.

He would not do anything on anyone else’s terms. Overthrowing Zeus was far more complicated than gaining alliances. The God of Thunder was always looking for hints of rebellion, consulting prophecies and moving pieces to prevent the conception of someone far more powerful than himself. It was perhaps the plight of being a conqueror—a fear of the cycle repeating as it had with the Titans and the Primordials. Zeus feared ending up like their father, Cronos, and their grandfather, Uranus.

Hades had no doubt that eventually, the tides would turn, and the Fates would weave new rulers—a fact that would make the Olympians a target. He’d already suspected Theseus, his demigod nephew, of making such plans, though he did not know the extent. Theseus led Triad, an organization that rejected the influence and interference of the gods. Ironic, considering Hades was certain Theseus hoped to obtain full divinity, or at least equivalent power.

“Then this will not end well for either of us,” Hera replied.

They stared at each other, a quiet tension building.

“If you will not help me overthrow Zeus, then you shall have to earn your right to marry Persephone.”

Hades’s fingers curled into his palms.

“This is not about Persephone,” he said, the words slipping between his teeth.

“This is the game, Hades, and all gods play it. I asked for your aid and you declined, so I shall seek retribution all the same.”

She spoke as if this were mere business, but Hades knew Hera and her threats were not idle. The goddess would do just about anything to ensure she got her way, which meant she was

not above hurting Persephone.

“If you touch her—”

“I will not approach her if you do as I say,” she said and then tapped her chin, eyeing Hades from head to toe. “Now, how best to earn the right to marry your beloved Persephone.”

Her musing made Hades cringe. Clearly her intention was to wound. She knew Hades wished to marry Persephone just as much as she knew he felt unworthy of such a gift. This was as much a punishment as it was entertainment for the goddess.

“Ah! I have it,” she said at last. “I shall assign you to twelve labors. Your...completion of each one will show me just how devoted you are to Persephone.”

“Pity Zeus never had to do this for you,” Hades replied tightly.

It was the wrong thing to say—and hateful, he had to admit. Hades despised how Hera had come to be wed to his brother. It had been through deception and shame, and Hades’s words had only brought those memories to the surface, causing Hera to go pale with rage.

“Kill Briareus,” she sneered, “That is your first task.”

Hades could barely breathe hearing her words.

Briareus was one of three Hecatoncheires, unique in his appearance, as he had one hundred arms and fifty heads. The last time Hera had tried to overthrow Zeus, it was Briareus who freed him, earning Hera’s wrath, so while it was no surprise that she would seek her revenge, to execute him through Hades’s hands was another thing entirely.

Hades liked Briareus and his brothers. They had been allies during the Titanomachy and ultimately were the reason the Olympian gods had been able to overthrow the Titans. They deserved the gods’ reverence, not their blades.

“I cannot take a life the Fates have not cut,” Hades countered.

“Then bargain,” she replied, as if it were that simple.

“You do not know what you ask,” Hades said.

A soul for a soul was the exchange the Fates would make—a give or take, depending on the havoc they wished to create.

The Fates did not like the gods meddling in their threads. This would have dire consequences. Hades could feel it moving beneath his skin as the phantom threads of the lives he’d bargained away tightened.

“You have one week,” Hera replied, heedless of his words.

Hades shook his head, and while he knew she did not care, he said it anyway. “You will come to regret this.”

“If I do, then you will too.”

He had no doubt.

When she vanished, Hades stood in the quiet of Nevernight, recalling their exchange. The Goddess of Marriage had been right. This was a game that all gods played, but she’d used the wrong pawns.

Hades would get his way eventually, and the goddess would come to rue the day she decided to test him.

He took another swig of whiskey before hurling the bottle across the room, where it shattered in an explosion of glass.

“Fucking fates.”

CHAPTER II

AN ELEMENT OF DREAD

Kill Briareus.

The two words felt thick and heavy in his chest, a binding that made it hard to breathe or think as he made his way to the Underworld.

He had imagined his return very differently. He had intended to occupy himself with erotic thoughts of how he would conclude his weekend with Persephone and see them through to the early morning when they would both face the harsh reality of their choice to go public with their relationship, a decision Hades was not certain either of them were prepared for. Given Kal's earlier attempt at some kind of blackmail, the sharks were already circling.

Now he was distracted by Hera's singular order and devising plans to avoid her labors. Hera was not the only god with the power to bless marriages, though her power to curse marriages was far more dreaded. Ultimately, though, the decision was up to Zeus, and Hades did not think his brother would be so approving if Hades was responsible for Briareus's death.

Gods, he hated his family.

Hades appeared in his office, intending to go in search of Persephone, but found he was not alone. Thanatos was already waiting. The God of Death often kept Hades informed on the daily activities of the souls—especially when things went awry, and it was that thought that gave Hades pause.

"Is something wrong, Thanatos?" Hades asked as the god swept into a deep bow, his long white hair veiling his face.

"No, my lord," Thanatos replied as he straightened, his feathered wings rustling. He looked like a slender shadow, his head crowned with a pair of black gayal horns. "I merely wished to make you aware of an...occurrence."

"An...occurrence?"

"At the Styx," he said. "Lady Persephone greeted the souls."

There was nothing inherently wrong with Persephone greeting the souls, though the way Thanatos was presenting the information made Hades's heart race.

"Get to the point, Thanatos," Hades snapped. "Is she okay?"

The God of Death blinked.

“Why yes, of course,” he said quickly. “I did not mean to imply otherwise. I thought you would want to know and perhaps...caution her. You know new souls can be very unpredictable.”

Hades’s relief was instantaneous, though his irritation with Thanatos spiked.

“Are you...*tattling*, Thanatos?” he asked, raising a brow.

The god’s eyes widened. “I—no, that was not my intention. I only thought you should know...”

The corner of Hades’s mouth lifted. “I will speak with Persephone,” he said. “Though the next time you intend to inform me of her exploits, I suggest you begin with how it ended.”

Thanatos’s pale face turned red. “Yes, my lord.”

Without another word, Hades left his office to find Persephone.

It was not difficult to locate her. He could sense her within his realm, her presence a steady pulse that beat in tandem with his heart. He followed it, drawn to it, and found her in the library, coiled upon one of the overstuffed chairs near the fireplace. Even if he had not been able to sense her, he would have guessed she took solace here. His library was one of her favorite places in the palace, and he found it comforting that even after their time apart—though he hated to be reminded—she found it so easy to return to her previous routine.

From his place at the door, he could see the very top of her golden head, and as he approached, he found her reading. A chaotic mix of emotions erupted inside—a warm relief and a cold dread.

She was here now.

She was present now.

But the last month had taught him that it could end in an instant, and Hera’s labors did not ease his turmoil, though he managed to suppress the feelings as he entered the library.

“I thought I would find you here,” he said and reached for her, seeking her mouth. He curled his fingers beneath her chin, tilted her head, and pressed his lips to hers. She arched to reach him, her hand clamping behind his neck as they fused together.

Hades liked this. It grounded him, reminded him that she was real—that they were real.

He pulled away and brushed her jaw with this thumb, studying her face, lingering longest on her lips, which he wanted to taste once more. Her eyes were brighter today—like the vibrant green of her meadow—and he liked to think it had something to do with him.

“How was your day, darling?” he murmured.

“Good,” she answered, and her breathlessness made him smile.

“I hope I’m not disturbing you. You appear quite entranced by your book.”

He glanced at it before straightening.

“N-no. I mean...it’s just something Hecate assigned.”

“May I?” he asked. She handed it over and he noted the title, *Witchcraft and Mayhem*. He refrained from rolling his eyes at Hecate’s choice of assigned reading. Though it was no surprise the Goddess of Magic would choose to teach his lover the art of chaos. It was a type of magic that could be both harmless and destructive, and Hades had no doubt that Hecate had intended to teach Persephone the whole spectrum.

He would have to speak with her later.

“When do you begin training with Hecate?” he asked.

“This week,” she said. “She gave me homework.”

“Hmm,” he acknowledged and leafed through a few more pages before closing the book.

“I heard you greeted new souls today.”

He spoke casually, and yet as he lifted his gaze to meet hers, she had straightened, ready to defend her choice.

“I was walking with Yuri when I saw them waiting on the bank of the Styx.”

“You took a soul outside Asphodel?” That was far more concerning to him than the fact that she had greeted souls.

“It’s Yuri, Hades. Besides, I do not know why you keep them isolated.”

“So they do not cause trouble.”

He admired Persephone for her trust, and of all the souls, Yuri was probably the least likely to break protocol, but offering them free rein of the Underworld would only prove difficult. Even Persephone could not manage to stay out of trouble. The last time she had wandered into the wild of his realm, she’d found herself face-to-face with Tantalus.

She must have forgotten that encounter because she laughed, her eyes bright with amusement—an amusement that died with his stare. His eyes fell to her lips, which were now parted as she studied him, and his thoughts took a drastic turn.

He drew in a breath and tried to swallow, but his throat was dry. Suddenly, all he wanted to do was close the distance between them. Perhaps he could still have the evening he’d

imagined with Persephone before Hera had ruined it all, but then Persephone dropped her gaze.

“The souls in Asphodel never cause trouble,” she said.

“You think I am wrong.”

He wasn’t at all surprised.

“I think you do not give yourself enough credit for having changed and therefore do not give the souls enough credit for recognizing it.”

Her words surprised him and stirred something warm within him.

“Why did you greet the souls?” he asked, curious about what had motivated her to approach.

“Because they were afraid, and I didn’t like it.”

He wanted to laugh, but he managed to suppress it. “Some of them should be afraid, Persephone.”

“Those who should will be, no matter the greeting they have from me. The Underworld is beautiful, and you care about your peoples’ existence, Hades. Why should the good fear such a place? Why should they fear you?”

Once more, he would have laughed at her assessment if she weren’t so serious. If anyone had been listening, they would never suspect she was talking about him, the God of the Underworld, and though there was perhaps a grain of truth to what she said, it was only that, and he feared the day she discovered otherwise.

“As it were, they still fear me. *You* were the one who greeted them.”

“You could greet them with me.”

She spoke as if she feared he might reject her suggestion as quickly as she had made it.

“As much as you find disfavor with the title of queen, you are quick to act as one,” he observed.

The smile her words initially brought to his face vanished as he noted how she hesitated, asking, “Does...that displease you?”

“Why would it displease me?”

“Because I am not queen.”

Hades did not like those words. It was as if she were distancing herself from the idea, and as she stood and took the book from his hands, he spoke. “You will be my queen. The Fates have declared it.”

He noted how she straightened, her chin jutting in defiance. She had not liked what he said, and instead of confronting him, she turned and headed into the stacks, book in hand.

Hades followed, appearing before her as she made her way down one of the aisles.

“Does that displease you?” he asked.

“No,” she said, brushing past him, and while he followed, she continued to speak.

“Although, I would rather you want me as queen because you love me, not because the Fates have decreed it,” she said as she returned the book to its place.

He waited until she faced him to speak, frowning. “You doubt my love?”

Her eyes widened, and her lips parted. “No! But...I suppose we cannot avoid what others may perceive about our relationship.”

Hades raised a brow and drew a step closer.

“And what will others say, exactly?”

Again, she averted her eyes and shrugged as she answered, “That we are only together because of the Fates. That you have only chosen me because I am a goddess.”

Now his brows slammed down over his eyes. Those sounded oddly like things her mother would say.

“Have I given you reason to think such things?”

He hadn't.

He already knew the answer.

“Who has given you doubts?”

“I have only just started to consider—”

“My motives?”

“No—”

He narrowed his eyes. “It seems that way.”

She took a step away, though she had little room to put distance between them as her back hit the bookcase, which did nothing to dispel the tension between them.

“I am sorry I said anything,” she snapped, her arms crossing over her chest, as if to put a barrier between them.

“It is too late for that.”

“Will you punish me for speaking my mind?” Her eyes flashed, full of defiance, but those words interested him.

“Punish?” he asked, closing the space between them. He guided her hands away from her chest, his cock growing thick and heavy as he rested against her hips. “I am interested to hear how you think I might punish you.”

She inhaled, her chest rising, and Hades could see the want in her eyes, yet she fought it, unwilling to give in to temptation.

“I am interested in having my questions answered.”

He’d forgotten everything that had come before her suggestion of punishment.

“Remind me again of your question.”

She looked at him shyly and took a moment to speak. All the while, he grew harder, still pressed between her thighs.

“If there were no Fates, would you still want me?”

An unsettling shock rippled through him as he considered her words.

If there were no Fates, would you still want me? He took a moment to comprehend them, to let them cycle through his mind, but there was a part of him that could not quite grasp why she felt inclined to ask such a question. In the end, did it matter?

The Fates were.

And so they were.

That was all.

Those were not the words she wanted to hear, though, and in truth, they were not enough, because Hades knew that what was between them had gone beyond Fate.

And even if their future were to unravel, he would fight for it.

Desperately.

She began to lower her eyes and shift from between him and the shelf, seeking an exit, but he clasped her jaw, forcing her to look at him once more. When he had captured her attention, his fingers brushed along her cheek as he spoke, low and rough.

“Do you know how I knew the Fates made you for me?”

She shook her head, and he leaned in, allowing his parted mouth to touch her skin.

“I could taste it on your skin,” he said, and his lips followed the trail of his fingers—along her jaw, over her cheek. “And the only thing I regret is that I have lived so long without you.”

His teeth grazed along the shell of her ear and down her neck, a light caress that had her

breath seizing. Then he pulled away. She wavered a moment, and a look of confusion crossed her face before her brows slammed down over her eyes.

“What was that?” she demanded.

He smirked, chuckling at her anger, and answered, “Foreplay.”

And then he swept her over his shoulder and left the library.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, her hands pressed into his back as she tried to hold herself up.

“Proving that I want you,” he said.

Since his obviously erect cock wasn’t enough.

“Put me down, Hades!”

He grinned at her breathlessness, and his hand slipped up the back of her thigh and into her heated flesh. Her moan ignited him, and he suddenly did not care to find a private place for what he intended to do to her. He shifted, bracing her against the wall just as her hands tangled into his hair and their mouths collided. He clasped her jaw, plying her mouth with his tongue while his other hand gripped her ass, grinding his hard and throbbing length into the soft cradle of her hips.

This was a need, he thought. A tonic that cured his frenzied mind.

“I will punish you until you scream,” he promised, feeling the truth of the words swell within his chest. “Until you come so hard around my cock, you are left in no doubt of my affection.”

He didn’t think it was possible to grow any harder, but then her magic surfaced, smelling warm and sweet. He could feel it on the tips of her fingers like lightning, calling to his—to the shadows and threads that moved beneath his skin—and it only added to his excitement, to the heady anticipation of feeling her around him, hot and pulsing and coming.

He drew back to meet her gaze, to gauge her readiness, and then she spoke. “Make good on your promises, Lord Hades.”

His lower stomach tightened, the head of his cock throbbed, and he was suddenly so fucking desperate for her flesh, he could wait no longer. He worked his hand between them, intent on freeing himself and taking her against the wall—until it collapsed, and he stumbled forward with Persephone in his arms, catching himself before they tumbled to the floor.

As he straightened, he lowered her to the ground but kept her pressed to him because they

had an audience—a large one, in fact, made up of mostly his palace staff, in addition to Thanatos, Hecate, and Charon.

Thanatos looked in their direction and away, a slight tint to his pale cheeks. Charon's dark eyes widened before he too averted his gaze, breaking into a wide smile. Hecate was the only one who stared openly, a brow raised, a tilt to her lips.

There was a part of him that acknowledged he should have been more mindful of where he chose to take Persephone, and yet at the end of the day, the palace was his in its entirety.

He could fuck where he wanted.

Hades cleared his throat, and Persephone cast a glance behind her before pressing her forehead into his chest, and for a moment, he imagined he could feel the heat of her embarrassment through his shirt.

“Good evening,” he said. “The Lady Persephone and I are famished, and we wish to be alone.”

Her hands rested on his sides beneath his jacket until he spoke and she jabbed him in the ribs. He grunted, tightening his hold as his staff scrambled to clean up. They filed out of the hall, carrying platters of food, addressing them as they went, and with each, “Good evening, my lord, my lady,” Persephone burrowed farther into his chest.

Hecate was the last to leave, and as she passed, she popped a grape into her mouth before closing the door behind her.

“Now,” he said, guiding her back until she came into contact with the table. “Where were we?”

“You cannot be serious.”

“As the dead,” he answered.

“The...dining room?”

He did not understand her hesitancy now, not when they had done this before, but perhaps she had envisioned something far different when he had promised punishment.

“I'm quite hungry, aren't you?”

He lifted her onto the table and took her mouth, tongue sliding out to caress her lips and then dipping to collide with her own. His hands slipped up her waist to her breasts. He wanted to touch her smooth skin but settled for teasing her nipples before taking each into his mouth through her dress. Her legs tightened around him, heels digging into his ass, urging his hips

forward. He indulged for a moment, surging forward to kiss her as he guided her to her back. Once she was settled, he straightened and took her in—a literal goddess, a queen in her own right, spread before him, golden hair spilling off the edges of the table. Her chest rose and fell, her eyes gleaming with a hunger he could feel in the pit of his stomach.

She was a dream—one he never wished to wake from.

He drew each of her legs up, so her heels rested on the table, and kissed the inside of each of her knees. The skirt of her dress was pooled at her hips, and he pressed her legs apart, exposing her hot flesh as his mouth closed over her clit.

She arched, her legs coming up to cradle his body, and while he liked the feel of her thighs against his face, the position did little for her pleasure and his access, so he pushed them down once more and continued to caress her with his tongue. She tasted warm and wet, and he was consumed by her as she writhed and moaned and whispered encouragement.

Then she stretched her leg, her foot rubbing his engorged flesh, and as much as he would have liked to free his sex and slide inside her, what he wanted most was to make her come.

And she was close.

Her body was a bowstring pulled taut, and Hades was desperate to feast, but his chase was hindered by a knock at the door.

Persephone tensed and a wave of frustration roared through him.

“Ignore it,” he snapped, glancing up at her from where he still knelt, unceasing as he continued his work. His face grew hot, ears ringing as he pushed Persephone toward the edge, preparing to wring every bit of pleasure from her body, and in the aftermath, he would pour his own into her.

It was just as much a cycle of life and death—a give and take—one he would never bargain away.

The knocking sounded again.

“Lord Hades?”

“Go. Away.”

Another word from the other side of the door, and he would send whoever it was to Tartarus.

“It’s important, Hades.”

Fuck. He recognized the voice now—Ilias.

He straightened completely and Persephone followed.

“A moment, my darling.”

He tried to keep his frustration at bay, but it was difficult given the nature of this interruption, made worse by Persephone’s roving eyes, which lifted from his hard cock to meet his gaze.

“You won’t hurt him, will you?” Her voice was low and silky, urging him to return.

“Not too terribly,” he said, though he was already weighing options.

He stepped away, gaze lingering on her flushed skin, the evidence of how hard he’d chased her orgasm, and slipped outside to find Ilias waiting.

“This,” Hades hissed, “better be important, or I will send you to Tartarus—a year for every word you speak. Choose carefully.”

Ilias did not seem fazed by Hades’s threat as he replied, “It’s urgent.”

Hades stared at the satyr for a moment, recognizing that he never summoned Hades unless absolutely necessary, which meant whatever had occurred was not good. He wondered if it had anything to do with Kal or Hera, and he stiffened at the thought.

“I will be along soon,” he said.

Ilias nodded. “I’ll be in security.”

That made Hades curious and slightly concerned, but he pushed those thoughts to the back of his mind as he returned to the dining room before he could watch the satyr leave. Persephone had moved from her perch on the dining table and now stood, staring up at the ceiling. Hades wondered what she found so appealing, but he did not ask, remaining silent as she turned to face him.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, keeping her arms crossed tight over her breasts, as if she wished to put up some kind of wall between them. A wall he refused to allow, so he drew closer, and her hands went to his waist.

“Yes,” he said. “And no. Ilias has made me aware of a problem better dealt with sooner than later.”

“When will you be back?”

“An hour. Maybe two,” he guessed, depending on what Ilias wanted, but he did not wish to worry Persephone.

Disappointment darkened her eyes, and he placed a finger beneath her chin to hold her

gaze.

“Trust, my darling, leaving you is the hardest decision I make each day.”

“Then don’t,” she said, and her arms wound around his waist, sealing their bodies together. “I’ll go with you.”

Her suggestion made him stiffen. Though he did not know what Ilias had to show him, he could not imagine anything good coming from Persephone’s presence in his work, at least aboveground.

“That is not wise.”

“Why not?”

“Persephone—”

“It’s a simple question.”

“It isn’t,” he snapped and regretted the loss of his temper as her eyes widened and her mouth hardened. He sighed. All he wanted to do was get this over with so he could return to her. Could she not see that?

“Fine,” she said and took a step away. Her distance felt like more than the loss of physical touch. “I’ll be here when you return.”

Was she only saying that to appease him?

“I will make it up to you,” he promised.

She arched a brow and, like a queen, commanded, “Swear it.”

He offered the slightest smile, his still-heavy cock spurring his mischief. “Oh, darling. You don’t need to extract an oath. Nothing will keep me from fucking you.”

Though it felt like sacrilege to leave her without having made her come.

CHAPTER III

RETURN OF THE NYMPH

Hades met Ilias on the top floor of Nevernight, which was dedicated to security. It was a large room, but the walls and ceiling sloped inward to a shadowed point just like the exterior of the building. The room was awash in the pallid light of computer screens, illuminating the stern faces of Hades's security team, though this was only a fraction. The others roamed the floors below and the dark alleys of the exterior, eyes peeled for anything untoward.

Ilias was positioned before a set of screens on the far wall, one for every holding room. Of the six, four were occupied. They were reserved for anyone who broke Nevernight rules, which occurred nightly and ranged from taking photos to card counting and, on rare occasions, spying.

It was the latter Hades expected to hear about from Ilias, considering his most recent visitors, but as he scanned the screens above the satyr's head, he caught sight of a familiar face, one that shocked his system.

"Is that Leuce?"

Though he asked the question, he knew the answer. There was no denying the ocean nymph's white hair and pale skin. It had been a long time since he had loved her, since she had betrayed him, since he had turned her into a poplar tree and forgotten her.

And yet here she was, returned from her prison.

How?

He certainly had not freed her.

"It is," Ilias said. "She made a scene when she arrived."

Hades wondered how many people glimpsed her outburst before it was contained. As if Ilias knew what he was thinking, he added, "We have begun damage control."

"Has she been questioned at all?"

Ilias shook his head. "I figured you would want the opportunity."

He would, though she had already had plenty of time to herself. Time to think up lies and believe them enough to avoid detection. It was a tactic she knew well and would not have forgotten, given she had spent her years as a tree unconscious. She would have woken up today

believing he had only just confronted her about her infidelity—what a shock to learn that over two millennia had passed. He wondered now if he had done her a cruelty or a kindness.

He watched her on the screen once more. She had pushed her chair against the wall, away from the table. Her knees were drawn to her chest and her thin arms were wrapped around them. She looked small, innocent, though that was not how Hades remembered her.

“What will you do with her?” Ilias asked. Hades knew the satyr wasn’t asking out of concern; he was asking because he wanted to know what he would be tasked with next, which was likely handling the nymph.

Hades looked at Ilias. He had not thought beyond this moment, save that he did not see any reason for Persephone to ever find out about Leuce. He could just imagine how she might react to not only discovering that his lover from the ancient world had returned but how he had handled her treachery—and it wasn’t good.

Leuce was a complication.

“I do not know,” Hades said. “Just...be on standby.”

Ilias nodded and Hades left.

He could teleport into the room, and he often did when he confronted those who had committed wrongs against him, but he wanted time to think, to prepare to face the lover he had forgotten, so he moved from floor to floor, invisible to the crowd, growing more and more frustrated.

Of course Leuce would return only a day after he had managed to reunite with Persephone, he thought bitterly and then halted. That thought gave him pause. Perhaps it wasn’t just a coincidence. Perhaps it had been more purposeful.

Perhaps it had been Demeter.

Suddenly, he was more than eager to confront her, and he did not hesitate. A cloud of thick, heated air hit him as he opened the door. Leuce pinned him with a chill gaze, her blue eyes narrowed in contempt.

“You.”

It was all she said, but she spoke with venom in her voice and then launched herself at him.

She was lithe and willowy, and she moved as if she had wings, cresting the table between them like it wasn’t there at all. While her anger was justified, he was not interested in allowing

her near, so he flung out his hand, and his magic became shadows that restrained her midair.

“You have every right to be angry,” he said. “But if you have come here to ask for my aid, as I suspect you have, then you will do well to keep your hands to yourself.”

She spit in his face, and he released her quickly. She collapsed to the ground, a pile of bony, white limbs. She glared up at him.

“Haven’t you hurt me enough?”

He hadn’t heard her voice in so long, he had forgotten the sound. Despite her anger, she spoke softly, and yet each word was deliberate, another stone stacked, a greater guilt to bear. He wanted to flinch at her words but kept his cold composure. He did not want Leuce to think she was welcome to return to his side. In fact, he’d prefer she kept her distance.

Then he noticed the tears.

“What is this place?” she whispered, once again resuming the position she had taken in the chair and drawing her knees to her chest. Hades was confused and taken aback, both by her tears and her question, but he recognized suddenly that he had given no consideration to how much of a shock all this had been. He had merely assumed ill intent, and he still did, but that did not take away the trauma of returning to a world that looked nothing like the one you remembered.

He crouched low before her.

“What do you wish to know?” he asked.

She froze a little, probably caught off guard by the change in his demeanor. After a moment, she spoke. “How long has it been?”

Dread crept up the back of his throat. He did not want to answer. Somehow, he felt that if he said it aloud, it would make him crueler.

“Over two thousand years.”

She blinked, and for a moment, there was nothing behind her eyes.

“Two thousand,” she repeated, as if saying it would help her comprehend just how much might have changed over all those years. Then her eyes focused on him, and he thought that she was recalling what he had looked like the moment he had turned her into a tree.

Perhaps he’d been wrong to think he could question her. She was clearly in shock.

“Why?”

Hades was not prepared for the way her voice broke. Guilt twisted his stomach, and

because he had no explanation, he remained quiet.

“Why?” she said again, more demanding.

He gritted his teeth. Her watery eyes, rimmed with red, made her anger all the more apparent.

“At first, because of your infidelity.”

She shook her head a little, as if she didn’t understand. “It took you two thousand years to get over my treachery?”

Hades’s jaw tightened. He wanted to deny her statement, did not want her to think he had pined after her all these years, but he also did not want to admit the truth—he had forgotten.

“And Apollo? What was his punishment?”

Once again, Hades did not reply because the truth was shameful. He had not punished Apollo as he had Leuce. Indeed, he had done nothing to the God of Music, and at the time, that had seemed more than fitting, given that Apollo had seduced Leuce in retaliation for Hades’s refusal to allow him to reunite with his lover Hyacinth. So he’d left the god alone with his misery.

She scoffed and looked away, more tears sliding down her cheeks. “You’re all the same,” she whispered.

Hades frowned, brows knitting together. He wanted to say something about how he had changed like the new world she found herself in, but what good did that serve? She was a victim of his wrath, and no matter how he had moved forward, nothing changed that.

He rose to his feet. He had been wrong to think he could question her now, but that only meant he would have to keep a close eye on her longer.

“You have much to learn if you are going to return to this world,” Hades said.

“That’s all you have to say?”

He stared back at her, uncertain of what she wanted from him and feeling like there really were no words great enough for this moment.

When he said nothing more, she spoke, her words bitter. “I see you haven’t changed.”

“If that were true, I’d have told you I owe you nothing beyond the life I have granted you and turned you away.” He recognized the irony of his words. As much as he had granted her life, he’d also taken the majority of it away.

“I don’t need your charity.”

“Don’t you?” he asked. “Or is the one who returned you to your physical form offering a hand?”

Her brow creased at his comment. “Was it not you?”

He was concerned by the genuine confusion in her expression and asked, “Exactly how did you come to be here tonight?”

“I woke up,” she said. “I screamed your name until someone brought me here.”

He stared at her for a long moment. He did not sense a lie, and though she may have omitted parts of the truth, he supposed it wasn’t impossible that she had not seen the person who had restored her to her natural form.

Still, Hades did not trust her. Ilias would have to keep an eye on her activity once she was settled.

He turned to the door.

“I will have my people help you make the transition into this world,” he said. “But beyond that, never contact me again.”

With that, he left.

Someone was fucking with him, and he did not like it.

First Kal, then Hera, now Leuce.

He had wanted his confrontation with her to be short, concise, and final, but he knew he’d have to talk to her again. He needed more information on her sudden transformation. He had a hard time believing she didn’t know who was responsible, and her connection to him was too great for someone not to use it against him.

Hades instructed Ilias to find Leuce a place to stay and assign surveillance before returning to the Underworld, and while he’d have liked to return to Persephone, he had one other unpleasant task ahead—visiting the Fates.

Dread pooled low in his stomach, a weight as heavy as the guilt he carried for Leuce. Hades never enjoyed visiting the Fates, but he liked it less when it was personal. They were deities who understood their power and used it to mock, tease, tantalize, and provoke, and he knew that he would not escape their ridicule tonight, which would make the horror of his labor worse.

He manifested outside the Fates’ mirrored palace, the size of which was impossible to

detect given that the structure was almost consumed by evergreens and ivy. When Hades had created their isolated realm, the sisters had insisted on many things. Among them, the palace was to be made of mirror and glass.

“To reflect the truth,” Clotho had said.

“To show what is,” Lachesis explained.

“To illustrate reality,” Atropos added.

Hades had no doubt the Fates used the mirrors for more than just truth. They represented possibility, and while possibility could be grand, it could also be devastating. The Fates were supposed to be neutral deities, but truthfully, they had a tendency to favor tragedy.

“The King of the Underworld is troubled,” Lachesis’s voice was the first to reach him, and yet the Fate had not yet materialized.

“The Rich One is in despair,” Atropos said.

“The Receiver of Many is bothered.” Clotho materialized as she spoke.

All the Fates looked the same, even in age, though Clotho was the youngest. They had long, dark hair and wore white. They did not have horns but wore crowns that resembled a nest of gold twigs.

“What is it, King?” Atropos inquired, appearing next.

“Tell us why you have come, Your Majesty,” said Lachesis, incarnating last. They stood in an arc before Hades, and he gritted his teeth. They knew why he had come. He needed to know if they had woven Briareus’s fate and if he could fight it.

“I need the thread of Briareus,” Hades said.

“Demanding, aren’t we?” Atropos said.

“Gruff,” Clotho replied.

“Brutish,” Lachesis agreed.

“Ask nicely,” they said in unison.

His jaw hurt as he glared back at the three so hard, his eyes burned.

“Please,” he gritted out.

The three broke into wicked smiles.

“Well, since you asked so politely,” Lachesis sniffed.

“Pleasantly,” Clotho added.

“Kindly,” Atropos said. “What do you wish to know?”

“I must know Briareus’s fate,” Hades said, hating the way the Fates’ eyes gleamed.

“Briareus, you say,” said Lachesis.

“One of the Hecatoncheires,” observed Clotho.

“The storm giants,” Atropos affirmed.

“Why?” they asked in unison.

“As if you do not already know,” he gritted out.

They were all quiet, and Hades recognized his own behavior in them. They would not continue until he gave them the answer they wanted.

“What will it cost me when I kill Briareus?”

He hated asking the question before he’d even tried seeking a loophole, but he knew how this worked. He had seen the cycle repeat over centuries. There would likely be no other way to appease Hera, and the one thing he was not willing to sacrifice was Persephone and their future together.

“You wish to end a life I have spun?” Clotho said.

“A life I have measured?” Lachesis continued.

“A life I haven’t cut?” Atropos asked, affronted.

As they spoke, a gold thread shimmered in the dark, twisting and looping around each of the Fates. He watched it, a thin line of energy that made up the fabric of the world.

“I do not wish to,” Hades said, but the alternative was a price he would not pay, so he had to know this one. “As you are aware, this is Hera’s vendetta.”

“And you she has chosen for the deed,” said Clotho.

The thread morphed into a silhouette of Hera, Persephone, and himself. The Goddess of Marriage stood between them and used her spear to sever the thread that connected them. That was not the end of Hera’s rage, however. The threads continued to depict her pursuit of Persephone until she descended into madness.

Hades closed his eyes at the scene, and when he focused on the Fates again, the threads were gone.

Atropos spoke. “And the consequences of refusing her are so great, you are willing to face our wrath.”

It was not a question, and Hades did not speak.

“A life like Briareus will cost you dearly, King,” said Lachesis.

“The consequences are the same—a soul for a soul,” said Clotho.

He did not bother asking which soul would replace the one he was about to take, though he knew a life like Briareus would come at a great cost. He was an immortal being, a monster, and whatever took his place would have to be powerful.

“Where does this path leave Persephone?” Hades asked, focusing on what was important. If one path led toward madness, he did not trust that the other would not lead to hardship.

“Oh, dear king,” said Clotho.

“There is no path,” said Atropos.

“That will leave her unbroken,” said Lachesis.

There is no path that will leave her unbroken.

Those words crowded his thoughts, pressing hard against his skull as he watched Persephone sleep from his position near the fireplace. She lay on her side, draped in black silk. Her hands were curled under her head, her breathing even and undisturbed.

She was safe.

If he were true to his nature, he would never let her leave his realm. It was the life above that would damage her...or would it be him?

He frowned at the thought and then downed what remained of the whiskey in his glass before shedding his clothes and climbing into bed. He hovered at the end and pulled the sheets from her body. As the silk slid over her skin, exposing her nakedness, she opened her eyes and turned her sleepy gaze to him.

“You’re back,” she said groggily.

She rested on her elbows, and her breasts filled his vision. They swelled as she breathed, her nipples peaked and rosy, contrasting beautifully with her creamy skin. Hades leaned forward and took each into his hand, lavishing her with kisses. As his tongue teased, she let out a moan, fingers tangling into his hair and tightening as she pulled, urging his lips to hers, and he obliged, crashing down on her mouth. He let his body mold to hers for only a moment before his knee parted her thighs to tease her, feeling the wetness of her arousal. Another wave of sheer pleasure rocketed through him, straight to his already-hard cock, and as much as he wanted to be inside her, he wanted to prolong this more.

He left her lips, trailing kisses down her body until he reached the apex of her thighs, and

as he went down on her, he held her gaze. She had returned to her original position, leaning back on her elbows, watching with lust-clouded eyes. She inhaled deep and Hades focused on the sound of her quickening breaths as he continued. He loved the taste of her, the feel of her heated flesh against his tongue. All the while, his cock throbbed and the anticipation of plunging into her warmth made his balls tight.

“Fuck,” Persephone breathed, and Hades glanced up to see her head had fallen back, her fingers crushing the sheet beneath her. Then she began to move against his mouth, chasing the friction that would make her come. That was when Hades pulled back. Persephone watched him, and then her eyes fell to his length, heavy with arousal.

“Let me pleasure you,” she said.

He did not argue as she moved to her knees before him and took him into her mouth.

He intended to release his breath in a slow stream, but it came out as a gruff exhale. In their time together, she had gained a rhythm, and she used it now—her hand cupping his balls, her mouth working the crown of his cock.

“Yes,” he hissed as her mouth moved down his shaft while she continued to stroke him. The pressure made his ears ring, and all he could focus on was her touch, her smell, her presence. She filled all his senses, and as her mouth popped off his cock, he guided her onto her back. Her legs fell open, and he jerked her close, stroking himself before guiding his cock to her entrance. She slid on with a practiced ease and they moved together. Hades kept himself upright, one hand on Persephone’s shoulder, as they slammed together. Her breaths turned to cries as he moved, alternating between long, slow strokes and rapid thrusts. He wanted to kiss her, but he also wanted to watch her expression continue to morph as he fucked her into oblivion.

“It feels so good,” she whispered, her head hung back, her throat exposed. Hades bent and kissed her there.

“I thought about this all day,” he said. “How I would make you come.”

At his words, she met his gaze and he pulled back, bringing Persephone with him, lifting her into his lap. Her legs framed his body, giving her the leverage she needed to move with him. He liked this position—he could feel her breasts and her swollen clit rubbing against him, and when she grew too tired to move, he rolled with her, moving to their sides. He pulled her thigh up and behind his knee, continuing to thrust. The pressure at the base of his cock was building, moving upward, and he wanted to go faster but also make all this last forever.

Persephone's cries became keen, and he could feel her muscles contract around him.

"Fuck," she breathed, her hand sliding down her stomach to her clit, rubbing vigorously.

"Come," he commanded, and as her orgasm tore through her, he followed, body stiffening as his release spilled inside her. Hades drew his arm around Persephone's waist and pulled her close, their breathing evening as their bodies relaxed.

"Was everything okay?" Persephone asked, her voice heavy with sleep.

"Fine," he replied, even though it was a lie.