

Chapter I

The Narcissus

Persephone sat in the sunlight.

She'd chosen her usual spot at The Coffee House, an outdoor table in view of a crowded pedestrian street. The walkway was lined with shade trees and box gardens teeming with purple aster and pink and white sweet alyssum. A light breeze carried the scent of spring and the honeyed air was mild.

It was a perfect day, and though Persephone had come here to study, she was finding it hard to concentrate because her eyes were drawn to a bunch of narcissus flowers that sat in a slender vase on her table. The bouquet was sparse—only two or three slender stems—and their petals were crisp, brown, and curling like the fingers of a corpse.

The narcissus were the flower and symbol of Hades, the God of the Dead. They did not often decorate tables, but coffins. Their presence at The Coffee House probably meant that the owner was in mourning which was really the only time mortals worshipped the God of the Underworld.

Persephone always wondered how Hades felt about that, or if he cared. He was more than just the King of the Underworld, after all. Being the wealthiest of all the gods, he'd earned the title of Rich One, and had invested his money into some of the most popular clubs in New Greece—and these weren't just any clubs. These were elite gambling dens. It was said Hades liked a good bet, and rarely accepted a wager other than the human soul.

Persephone had heard a lot about the clubs from other people while at University, and her mother, who often expressed her dislike for Hades, had also spoken out against his businesses.

“He has taken on the role of puppet master,” Demeter had chided. *“Deciding fates as if he were one of the Moirai himself. He should be ashamed.”*

Persephone had never been to one of Hades's clubs, but she had to admit, she was curious—about the people who attended and the god who owned it. What possessed people to bargain their soul? Was it a desire for money or love or wealth?

And what did it say about Hades? That he had all the wealth in the world and only sought to add to his domain rather than help people?

But those were questions for another time.

Persephone had work to do.

She dropped her gaze from the narcissus and focused on her laptop. It was Thursday, and she had left school an hour ago. She'd ordered her usual vanilla latte and needed to finish her research paper so she could concentrate on her internship at *New Athens News*, the leading news source in New Athens. She started tomorrow, and if things went well, she'd have a job after she graduated in six months.

She was eager to prove herself.

Her internship was located on the sixtieth floor of the Acropolis, a landmark in New Athens as it was the tallest building in the city at one-hundred-and-one floors. One of the first things Persephone had done when she'd moved here was take an elevator to the top floor observatory where she could see the city in its entirety, and it had been everything she'd imagined—beautiful and vast and thrilling. Four years later, it was hard to believe she would be going there on an almost daily basis for work.

Persephone's phone buzzed on the table, drawing her attention. She found a message from her best friend, Lexa Sideris. Lexa was her first friend when she'd moved to New Athens. She'd turned around to face Persephone in class and asked her if she wanted to pair up for their lab. They'd been inseparable ever since. Persephone was drawn to Lexa's edginess—she had tattoos, hair as black as night, and a love of the Goddess of Witchcraft, Hecate.

Where are you?

Persephone responded, *The Coffee House*.

Why? We need to celebrate!

Persephone smiled. Ever since she'd told Lexa about landing her internship two weeks ago, she'd been hounding her to go out for drinks. Persephone had managed to postpone the outing, but she was quickly running out of excuses and Lexa knew it.

I am celebrating. Persephone texted. *With a vanilla latte*.

Not with coffee. Alcohol. Shots. You + Me. Tonight.

Before Persephone could respond, a waitress approached holding a tray and her steaming latte. Persephone came here often enough to know the girl was as new as the narcissus. Her hair was in two braids, and her eyes were dark and laced with heavy lashes.

The girl smiled and asked, "Vanilla latte?"

“Yes,” Persephone said.

The waitress set Persephone’s mug down and then tucked her tray under her arm.

“Need anything else?”

Persephone met the girl’s gaze. “Do you think Lord Hades has a sense of humor?”

It wasn’t a serious question—and Persephone thought it funnier than anything, but the girl’s eyes widened, and she responded, “I don’t know what you mean.”

The waitress was clearly uncomfortable, probably at hearing Hades’s name. Most tried to avoid saying it, or they called him *Aidoneus* to avoid drawing his attention, but Persephone wasn’t afraid. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that she was a goddess.

“I think he must have a sense of humor,” she explained. “The narcissus are a symbol of spring and rebirth,” her fingers hovered over the wilted petals. If anything, the flower should be her symbol. “Why else would he claim it as his?”

Persephone stared back at the girl, and her cheeks flushed. She stammered, “L-let me know if you need anything.”

She bowed her head and went back to work.

Persephone snapped a picture of her latte and sent it to Lexa before taking a sip.

She put her earbuds in and consulted her planner. Persephone liked organization, but more than that, she liked being busy. Her weeks were packed—school on Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday, and up to three hours each day at her internship. The more she did, the more excuses she had for not returning home to see her mother in Olympia.

Next week, she had a history test and a paper due for the same class. She wasn’t worried, though. History was one of her favorite subjects. They were discussing the Great Descent, the name given to the day the gods came to Earth, and the Great War, the terrible and bloody battles that followed.

It wasn’t long before Persephone became lost in her research and writing. She was reading a scholar who claimed Hades’s decision to resurrect Zeus and Athena’s heroes had been the deciding factor in the final battle, when well-manicured hands slammed Persephone’s laptop shut. She jumped and looked into a pair of striking blue eyes, set in an oval face framed with thick, black hair.

“Guess. What.”

Persephone took out her headphones. “Lexa, what are you doing here?”

“I was walking home from class and thought I’d stop by and tell you the good news!”

She bounced back and forth on the balls of her feet, her blue-black hair bobbing with her.

“What news?” Persephone asked.

“I got us into NeVERNIGHT!” Lexa could barely keep a handle on her voice, and at the mention of the famous club, several people turned to stare.

“Shh!” Persephone commanded. “Do you want to get us killed?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Lexa rolled her eyes, but she lowered her voice. NeVERNIGHT was impossible to get into. There was a three-month waiting list, and Persephone knew why.

NeVERNIGHT was owned by Hades.

Most businesses owned by the gods were insanely popular. Dionysus’s line of wines sold out in seconds and were rumored to contain ambrosia. It was also exceedingly common for mortals to find themselves in the Underworld after drinking too much of the nectar.

Aphrodite’s couture gowns were so coveted, a girl killed for one just a few months ago. There was a trial and everything.

NeVERNIGHT was no different.

“How did you manage to get on the list?” Persephone asked.

“A guy at my internship can’t make it. He’s been on the waiting list for two years. Can you believe how lucky? You. Me. NeVERNIGHT. Tonight!”

“I can’t go.”

Lexa’s shoulders fell. “Come on, Persephone. I got us into NeVERNIGHT! I don’t want to go alone.”

“Take Iris.”

“I want to take *you*. We’re supposed to be celebrating. Besides, this is part of your college experience!”

Persephone was pretty sure Demeter would disagree. She had promised her mother several things before coming to New Athens to attend university, among them that she would stay away from the gods.

Granted, she hadn’t kept many of her promises. She’d changed her major halfway through her first semester from botany to journalism. She would never forget her mother’s tight smile or the way she’d said, “*how nice*” between gritted teeth when she’d discovered the truth. Persephone had won the battle, but Demeter declared war. The day after, everywhere she went,

one of Demeter's nymphs went too.

Still, majoring in botany was not as important as staying away from the gods because the gods didn't know Persephone existed.

Well, they knew Demeter had a daughter, but she had never been introduced at court in Olympia. They definitely didn't know she was masquerading as a mortal. Persephone wasn't sure how the gods would react to discovering her, but she knew how the entire world would react, and it wouldn't be good. They would have a new god to learn and to scrutinize. She wouldn't be able to exist—she would lose the freedom she had just gained, and she wasn't interested in that.

Persephone didn't often agree with her mother, but even she knew it was best she led a normal, mortal life. She wasn't like other gods and goddesses.

"I really need to study and write a paper, Lexa. Plus, I start my internship tomorrow."

She was determined to make a good impression and showing up hungover or sleep-deprived on her first day wasn't the way to go about it.

"You've studied!"

Lexa gestured to her laptop and stack of notes on the table. But what Persephone had really been doing is studying a flower and thinking about the God of the Dead.

"And we both know you've already written that paper, you're just a perfectionist."

Persephone's cheeks flushed. So what if it was true? School was the first and only thing she was good at.

"Please, Persephone! We'll leave early so you can get some rest."

"What am I going to do at Nevernigh, Lex?"

"Dance! Drink! Kiss! Maybe gamble a little? I don't know, but isn't that the fun of it?"

Persephone blushed again and looked away. The narcissus seemed to glare back at her, reflecting all her failures. She had never kissed a boy. She had never been around men until she'd come to college, and even then she kept her distance, mostly out of fear her mother would materialize and smite them.

That was not an exaggeration. Demeter had always warned her against men.

"You are two things to gods," she'd told Persephone when she was very young. *"A power-play or a play-thing."*

"Surely you are wrong, Mother. Gods love. There are several who are married."

Demeter had laughed. “*Gods marry for power, my flower.*”

And, as Persephone had gotten older, she had come to realize that what her mother said was true. None of the gods who were married actually loved each other, and instead spent most of their time cheating and then seeking revenge for the betrayal.

That meant Persephone was going to die a virgin, because Demeter had also made it clear that mortals weren't an option, either.

“They...*age*,” she'd said in disgust.

Persephone had decided not to argue with her mother about how age didn't matter if it was true love, because she'd come to realize that her mother didn't believe in love.

Well, not romantic love at least.

“I...don't have anything to wear,” Persephone tried weakly.

“You can borrow anything from my closet. I'll even do your hair and makeup. Please, Persephone.”

She pursed her lips, considering.

She would have to sneak away from the nymphs her mother had planted at their apartment and strengthen her glamour, which would cause problems. Demeter would want to know why Persephone was suddenly in need of more magic. Then again, she could blame the extra coverage on her internship.

Without glamour, Persephone's anonymity would be ruined, as there was one obvious characteristic that identified all gods as Divine, and that was their horns. Persephone's were white and spiraled straight into the air like those of a greater kudu, and while her usual glamour had never failed around mortals, she wasn't so sure it worked for a god as powerful as Hades.

“I don't really want to meet Hades,” she said at last.

Those words tasted bitter on her tongue because they were really a lie. A truer statement would be she was curious about him and his world. She found it interesting that he was so elusive and the bets he made with mortals completely appalling. The God of the Dead represented everything she wasn't—something dark and tempting.

Tempting because he was a mystery and mysteries were adventures, and that's what Persephone really craved. Maybe it was the journalist in her, but she'd like to ask him some questions.

“Hades won't be there,” Lexa said. “Gods never run their own businesses!”

That was true, and probably truer of Hades. It was well-known that he preferred the dark gloom of the Underworld.

Lexa stared at Persephone for a long moment and then leaned across the table again.

“Is this about your mom?” She asked in a low voice.

Persephone stared at her friend for a moment, surprised. She didn’t talk about her mom. She figured the quieter she was about her, the fewer questions she’d have to answer, and the less lies she’d have to tell.

“How did you know?” It was the only thing Persephone could think to say.

Lexa shrugged. “Well, you never talk about her and she came by the apartment a couple weeks ago while you were in class.”

“What?” Persephone’s mouth dropped open. This was the first time she had heard of this visit. “What did she say? Why didn’t you tell me?”

Lexa put up her hands. “Okay, first, your mom is scary. I mean, she’s gorgeous just like you, but,” Lexa paused to shiver. “Cold. Second, she told me not to tell you.”

“And you listened to her?”

“Well, yeah. I sorta thought she would tell you. She said she hoped to surprise you, but since you weren’t home, she’d just call.”

Persephone rolled her eyes. Demeter had never called her. That was likely because she’d been there looking for something.

“Did she come into our apartment?”

“She asked to see your room.”

“Dammit.” Persephone was going to have to check the mirrors. It was possible her mother had left an enchantment so she could check up on the goddess.

“Anyway, I got the sense that she’s...over-protective.”

That was the understatement of the year. Demeter was over-protective to the point that Persephone had virtually no contact with the outside world for eighteen years of her life.

“Yeah, she’s a bitch.”

Lexa raised her brows, looking amused.

“Your words not mine.” She paused and then hedged. “Wanna talk about it?”

“No,” she said. Talking about it wouldn’t make Persephone feel any better—but a trip to Nevernight might. She smiled. “But I’ll go with you tonight.”

She'd probably regret the decision tomorrow, especially if her mom found out, but right now she was feeling rebellious, and what better way to rebel than going to the club of her mother's least favorite god?

"Really?" Lexa clapped her hands. "Oh, my gods, we'll have so much fun, Persephone!" Lexa jumped to her feet. "We have to start getting ready!"

"It's only three."

"Uh, yeah." Lexa pulled at her long, dark hair. "This hair is gross. Plus, it takes forever to style and now I have to do your hair and makeup, too. We need to start now!"

Persephone didn't make any move to leave.

"I'll catch up with you in a moment," she said. "Promise."

Lexa smiled. "Thank you, Persephone. This will be great. You'll see."

Lexa hugged her before practically dancing down the street.

Persephone smiled, watching Lexa go. At that moment, the waitress from earlier returned and reached to take Persephone's mug away. The goddess's hand shot out, holding the girl's wrist tight.

"If you report to my mother anything but what I tell you, I will kill you."

It was the same girl from earlier with her cute braids and dark eyes, but beneath the young college girl glamour, a nymph's features rang true—small nose, vibrant eyes and angled features. Persephone had noticed earlier when the girl had delivered her drink but hadn't felt the need to call her out. She was just doing what Demeter told her to do—spying. But after the conversation with Lexa, Persephone wasn't taking any chances.

The girl cleared her throat and didn't meet Persephone's gaze. "If your mother discovers I lied, she'll kill me."

"Who do you fear most?" Persephone had learned long ago that words were her most powerful weapon.

She tightened her hold on the girl's wrist before releasing her. The nymph cleaned up quickly and ran away. Persephone had to admit, she felt bad for the threat, but she hated being followed and she hated being watched. The nymphs were like Demeter's claws, and they were lodged in Persephone's skin.

Her eyes fell to the dying narcissus and she caressed the wilted petals with the tips of her fingers. At Demeter's touch, it would have swelled with life, but at her touch, it curled and

crumbled.

Persephone might be the Daughter of Demeter and the Goddess of Spring, but she couldn't grow a damn thing.

Chapter II

Nevernigh

Nevernigh was a slender obsidian pyramid with no windows, taller than the bright buildings around it, and from a distance, looked like a disruption in the fabric of the city. The tower could be seen from anywhere in New Athens. Demeter had said the only reason Hades built the tower so tall was to remind mortals of their finite lives.

Persephone was beginning to grow anxious the longer she stood in the shadow of Hades's club. Lexa had gone to talk to a couple of girls she recognized from school up the line, leaving her to hold their place alone. She was out of her element, surrounded by strangers, preparing to enter another god's territory, and wearing a revealing dress. She found herself folding and unfolding her arms, unable to decide if she wanted to hide the low cut of the outfit or embrace it. She'd borrowed the pink sparkly number from Lexa, who was far less shapely. Persephone's hair fell in loose curls around her face, and Lexa had applied minimal makeup to show off her natural beauty.

If her mother saw her now, she'd send her right back to the greenhouse, or as Persephone had come to refer to it, the glass prison.

That thought sent her stomach into a spiral. She looked around, wondering if Demeter's spies were about. Had her threat to the waitress at The Coffee House been enough to keep the girl silent about her plans with Lexa? Since she'd told her best friend she'd come tonight, her imagination had run wild with all the ways Demeter might punish her if she was caught. Despite her mother's nurturing ways, she was a vengeful punisher. In fact, Demeter had a whole plot in the greenhouse dedicated to punishment—every flower that grew there had been a nymph, a king, a creature that incurred her wrath.

It was that wrath that made Persephone paranoid and had her checking every mirror in her house when she'd returned to the apartment earlier.

"Oh, my gods!" Lexa was a vision in red, and eyes tracked her all the way back to Persephone's side. "Isn't it gorgeous?"

Persephone almost laughed. She wasn't as impressed with the grandeur of the gods; if they could flaunt their wealth, immortality and power, the least they could do was help humanity.

Instead, the gods spent their time pitting mortal against mortal, destroying and reforming the world for fun.

Persephone looked up at the tower again and frowned. “Black’s not really my color.”

“You’ll sing a different tune when you lay eyes on Hades,” Lexa said.

Persephone glared at her roommate. “You told me he wasn’t here!”

Lexa placed her hands on Persephone’s shoulders and looked her in the eyes.

“Persephone. Don’t get me wrong, you’re hot and all, but...what are the actual odds you’ll catch Hades’s attention? This place is packed.”

Lexa had a point—and yet, what if her glamour failed? Her horns would catch Hades’s attention. There was no way he’d pass up the chance to confront another god on his premises, especially one he’d never met.

Persephone’s stomach knotted, and she fidgeted with her hair and smoothed her dress. She wasn’t aware that Lexa was watching her until she said, “You know, you can just be honest and admit you’d like to meet him.”

Persephone’s laughter was shaky. “I don’t want to meet Hades.”

She wasn’t sure why it was so hard to say she was interested, but she couldn’t bring herself to admit that she might actually want to meet the god.

Lexa gave her a knowing look, but before her best friend could say anything, shouts came from the front of the line. Persephone peeked around to get a look at what was going on.

A man tried to take a swing at a large ogre guarding the entrance to the club—one of the notoriously ruthless and brutal creatures Hades employed to guard his fortress. Of course, it was a terrible idea; the ogre didn’t even blink as his hand closed down on the man’s wrist. Out of the shadows, two more ogres emerged, large and dressed in black.

“No! Wait! Please! I just want—I just need her back!” the man wailed as the creatures grabbed him and dragged him away.

It was a long while before Persephone could no longer hear his voice.

Beside her, Lexa sighed. “There’s always one.”

Persephone shot her an incredulous glance.

Lexa shrugged. “What? There’s always a story in the *Delphi Divine* about some mortal trying to break into the Underworld to rescue their loved ones.”

The *Delphi Divine* was Lexa’s favorite gossip magazine. There were few things that

rivalled her obsession with the gods—except maybe fashion.

“But that’s impossible,” Persephone argued.

Everyone knew Hades was notorious for enforcing the borders of his realm—no soul in and no soul out without his knowledge.

Persephone had a feeling it was the same for his club.

And that thought sent shivers down her spine.

“Doesn’t keep people from trying,” Lexa said.

When she and Lexa stepped into the ogre’s line of sight, Persephone felt exposed. One glance at the creature’s beady eyes, and she almost called it quits. Instead, she crossed her arms over her chest and tried to avoid looking at the monster’s misshapen face for too long. It was covered in boils and its underbite exposed razor-sharp teeth. Even though the creature couldn’t see through her glamour—her mother’s magic surpassed that of the ogres—she knew her mother had many spies across New Athens. She couldn’t be too careful.

Lexa gave her name, and the ogre paused as he spoke into a mic pinned to the lapel of his jacket. After a moment, he reached forward and pulled open the door to Nevernight.

Persephone was surprised to find that the small space they entered was dim and silent, and the two ogres from earlier had returned and now occupied the space.

The creatures raked their gazes over Lexa and Persephone and asked, “Purses?”

They opened their clutches so the two could check for prohibited materials, including phones and cameras. The one rule at Nevernight was that photos were forbidden. In fact, Hades had this rule for any event he attended.

“How would Hades even know if some curious mortal snapped a photo?” Persephone had asked Lexa earlier when she explained the rule.

“I have no idea how he knows,” Lexa admitted. *“I just know that he does, and the consequences aren’t worth it.”*

“What are the consequences?”

“A broken phone, blackballed from Nevernight, and a write up in a gossip magazine.”

Persephone cringed. Hades was serious, and she guessed that made sense; the god was notoriously private. He hadn’t even been linked to a lover. Persephone doubted Hades had taken a vow of chastity like Artemis and Athena, and yet he managed to stay out of the public eye.

She sort of admired that about him.

Once they were cleared, the ogres opened another set of doors. Lexa grabbed Persephone's hand and pulled her through. A blast of cool air hit her, carrying the scent of spirits, sweat, and something akin to bitter oranges.

Narcissus. Persephone recognized the scent.

The Goddess of Spring found herself on a balcony overlooking the floor of the club. There were people everywhere—crowded around tables playing cards and drinking at the bar shoulder to shoulder, their silhouettes ignited by a red backlight. Several plush booths were arranged in cozy settings and packed with people, but it was the center of the club that drew Persephone's attention. A sunken dance floor held bodies like water in a basin. People moved against each other in a mesmerizing rhythm under a stream of red light. Overhead, the ceiling was lined with crystal and wrought-iron chandeliers.

“Come on!” Lexa pulled Persephone down a set of stairs to the ground floor. She held on tight to Lexa's hand, afraid she would lose her as they wove through the crowd.

It took her a moment to figure out which direction her friend was going, but they soon reached the bar, squeezing into a space only big enough for one person.

“Two manhattans,” Lexa ordered. Just as she reached for her clutch, an arm snaked between them and threw down a few dollars.

A voice followed, “Drinks on me.”

Lexa and Persephone turned to find a man standing behind them. He had a jawline as sharp as a diamond and a head of thick, curly hair as dark as his eyes, and his skin a beautiful, burnished brown. He was one of the most handsome men Persephone had ever seen.

“Thanks,” Lexa breathed.

“No problem,” he said, flashing a set of pretty, white teeth—a welcome sight compared to the ogre's grisly fangs. “First time at Nevernight?”

Lexa answered quickly, “Yes. You?”

“Oh...I'm a regular here,” he said.

Persephone glanced at Lexa, who blurted exactly what Persephone was thinking. “How?”

The man offered a warm laugh. “Just lucky, I guess.” He extended his hand. “Adonis.”

He shook Lexa's hand and then Persephone's as they gave him their names. “Would you like to join my table?”

“Sure,” they said in unison, giggling.

With their drinks in hand, Persephone and Lexa followed Adonis to one of the booths they had seen from the balcony. Each area had two crescent-shaped, velvet couches with a table between them. There were already several people there—six guys and five girls—but they shifted so Lexa and Persephone could have a seat.

“All, this is Lexa and Persephone.” Adonis pointed to his group of friends, saying their names, but Persephone only caught those who were closest to her—Aro and Xerxes were twins, sporting the same ginger hair, spray of freckles, pretty blue eyes and willow-thin bodies. Sybil was blond and beautiful, her long legs peeking out beneath her simple white dress; she sat between the twins and leaned over Aro to speak to Persephone and Lexa.

“Where are you all from?” she asked.

“Ionia,” Lexa said.

“Olympia,” Persephone said.

The girl’s eyes widened. “You lived in Olympia? I bet it was beautiful!”

Persephone had lived far, far away from the city proper in her mother’s glass greenhouse and hadn’t seen much of Olympia. It was one of the most popular tourist destinations in New Greece, where the gods held Council and kept sprawling estates. When the Divine were away, many of the mansions and surrounding gardens were open to tour.

“It was beautiful,” Persephone agreed. “But New Athens is beautiful, too. I...didn’t really have much freedom in Olympia.”

Sybil offered a sympathetic smile. “Parents?”

Persephone nodded.

“We’re all from New Delphi, came here for college four years ago,” Aro said, gesturing to Sybil and his brother.

“We like the freedom here, too,” Xerxes joked.

“What are you studying?” Persephone asked.

“Architecture,” the boys said in unison. “College of Hestia.”

“I’m in the College of the Divine.” Sybil said.

“Sybil is an Oracle.” Aro pointed to her with his thumb.

The girl blushed and averted her eyes.

“That means you’ll serve a god!” Lexa’s jaw dropped.

Oracles were coveted positions among mortals, and to become one they had to be born

with certain prophetic gifts. Oracles acted as messengers for the gods. In ancient times, that meant serving in temples; now it meant serving as their press manager. Oracles gave statements and organized press circuits, especially when a god had something prophetic to communicate.

“Apollo’s already got his eye on her,” said Xerxes.

Sybil rolled her eyes. “It’s not as wonderful as it sounds. My family was not happy.”

Sybil didn’t need to say it for Persephone to understand. Her parents were what the Faithful and the god-fearing called Impious.

The Impious were a group of mortals who rejected the gods when they came to Earth. Having already felt abandoned by them, they were not eager to obey. There had been a revolt, and two sides were born. Even the gods who supported the Impious used mortals like puppets, dragging them across battlefields, and for a year, destruction, chaos, and fighting had reigned. After the battle ended, the gods had promised a new life, something better than Elysium (apparently, Hades didn’t like that too well), but the gods delivered—they threaded together continents and dubbed the landmass New Greece, splicing it into territories with great, gleaming cities.

“Well, my parents would have been ecstatic,” Lexa said.

Persephone met Sybil’s gaze. “I’m sorry they weren’t excited for you.”

She shrugged. “It’s better now that I’m here.”

Persephone got the feeling she and Sybil had a lot in common when it came to their parents.

Several shots later, the conversation lapsed into hilarious stories of the trio’s friendship, and Persephone became distracted by her surroundings. She noticed small details like strands of tiny lights overhead that looked like stars in the dark above, single-stemmed narcissuses on the tables at each booth, and the wrought-iron rails of the second story balcony where a lone figure loomed.

That’s where her gaze stayed, meeting a pair of shadowy eyes.

Had she thought earlier that Adonis was the most handsome man she’d ever seen?

She’d been wrong.

That man was now staring at her.

She couldn’t tell the color of his eyes, but they ignited a fire under her skin, and it was like he knew; his full lips curved into a harsh smile, drawing attention to his strong jaw covered

in dark stubble. He was big, well over six and a half feet tall, and dressed in darkness from his inky hair to his black suit.

Her throat went dry and she was suddenly uncomfortable. She fidgeted and crossed her legs, instantly regretting the move, because the man's gaze fell there and held for a moment before sliding back up her frame, snagging on her curves. The fire pooled low in her stomach, reminding her of how empty she felt, how desperately she needed to be filled up.

Who was this man, and how could she possibly feel this way about a stranger? She needed to break this connection that had created such a suffocating energy between them.

All it took was seeing a pair of delicate hands slip around the man's waist from behind. She didn't wait to see the woman's face; she turned toward Lexa and cleared her throat.

The group had moved on to talking about the Pentathlon—an annual athleticism competition with five different sporting events, including a long jump, javelin throw, discus throw, a wrestling match, and a series of short races. It was hugely popular in the highly competitive cities of New Greece, and while Persephone wasn't really a sports fan, she did love the spirit of the Pentathlon and enjoyed cheering for New Athens in the tournament. She tried to follow the conversation, but her body was charged, and her mind was on other things—like how it would feel to be taken by the man on the balcony. He could fill this emptiness, feed this fire, end her suffering.

Except that he was obviously taken—and if not taken, otherwise engaged with another woman.

She resisted looking over her shoulder to see if he remained on the balcony until her curiosity won out, but when she looked, the balcony was empty. She frowned, disappointed, and craned her neck, searching the crowd.

“Looking for Hades?” Adonis joked, and Persephone's gaze snapped to his.

“Oh, no—”

“I heard he was here tonight,” Lexa interrupted.

Adonis laughed. “Yeah, he's usually upstairs.”

“What's upstairs?” Persephone asked.

“A lounge. It's quieter. More intimate. I guess he prefers the peace when he's negotiating his terms.”

“Terms?” Persephone echoed.

“Yeah, you know, for his contracts. Mortals come here to play him for things—money or love or whatever. The fucked-up part is, if the mortal loses, he gets to pick the stakes. And he’ll usually ask them to do something impossible.”

“What do you mean?”

“Apparently he can see vices or whatever. So he’ll ask the alcoholic to remain sober and the sex addict to be chaste. If they meet the terms, they get to live. If they fail, he gets their soul. It’s like he wants them to lose.”

Persephone felt a little sick. She hadn’t known the extent of Hades’s gambling; the most she’d heard was that he asked for the mortal’s soul, but this sounded much, much worse. It was...manipulation.

How did Hades know these mortals’ weaknesses? Did he consult the Fates or possess this power himself?

“Is anyone allowed up there?” Persephone asked.

“If you’re given the password,” Adonis said.

“How do you get the password?” Lexa asked.

Adonis shrugged. “Hell if I know. I don’t come here to bargain with the God of the Dead.”

Though she had no desire to enter into a bargain with Hades, Persephone did wonder how people came by the password. How did Hades accept a wager? Did mortals offer their case to the god who then deemed it worthy?

Lexa stood, grabbing Persephone’s free hand. “Persephone, bathroom.”

She dragged her across the crowded floor to the restroom. While they waited at the end of the long line, Lexa leaned toward Persephone, a huge smile plastered on her face.

“Have you seen a more attractive male?” she gushed.

Persephone’s brows lowered. “Adonis?”

“Of course, Adonis! Who else?”

Persephone would have liked to inform Lexa that while she was ogling Adonis, she’d missed the man who truly deserved the term. Instead, she said, “You’re smitten.”

“I’m in love.”

Persephone rolled her eyes. “You can’t be in love, you just met him!”

“Okay, maybe not love. But if he asked me to carry his babies, I’d agree.”

“You are ridiculous.”

“Just honest,” she grinned. Then she looked at Persephone seriously and said, “It’s okay to be vulnerable, you know?”

“What do you mean?” Persephone’s question was snappier than she intended.

Lexa shrugged. “Never mind.”

Persephone wanted to ask her to elaborate, but before she could, a stall opened, and Lexa took it. Persephone waited, sorting through her thoughts, trying to figure out what Lexa might have been talking about, when another one opened.

After Persephone emerged from the restroom, she looked for Lexa, expecting her to be waiting, but didn’t see her among the crowd. She looked toward the balcony where Hades supposedly made his deals; had her friend wandered up?

Then her gaze met a pair of sea-green eyes; a woman was leaning against the column at the end of the stairs. Persephone thought she looked familiar but couldn’t place her. Her hair was like gold silk and as radiant as Helios’s sun, her skin the color of cream, and she wore a modern version of a peplos that matched her eyes.

“Looking for someone?” she asked.

“My friend,” Persephone said. “She was wearing red.”

“She went up.” The woman tilted her chin toward the steps, and Persephone followed her gaze. “Have you been there?”

“Oh, no, I haven’t,” Persephone said.

“I can give you the password.”

“How did you get the password?”

The woman shrugged. “Here and there,” she paused. “So?”

Persephone couldn’t deny she was curious. This was the thrill she’d been seeking—the adventure she craved. “Tell me.”

The woman chuckled, her eyes glittering in a way that made Persephone wary. “Pathos.” *Tragedy*. Persephone found that horribly ominous.

“Th-thanks,” she said, and headed up the spiral steps to the second floor. As she topped the stairs, she found nothing but a set of dark doors embellished with gold and a gorgon standing guard.

The creature’s face was badly scarred—evident even with the white blindfold covering

her eyes. Like others of her kind, she once had snakes in place of hair. Now, a white hooded cloak covered her head and hid her body.

As Persephone approached, she noticed the walls were reflective, and she caught herself in the surface, observing the blush of her cheeks and the brightness of her eyes. Her glamour had weakened since she'd been here. She hoped if anyone noticed, she could blame it on the excitement and alcohol. Persephone wasn't sure why she felt so nervous; maybe it was because she didn't know what to expect beyond those doors.

The gorgon lifted her head, but did not speak. For a moment, there was silence, and then the creature inhaled, and she froze.

"Divine," the gorgon purred.

"Excuse me?" Persephone asked.

"Goddess."

"You are mistaken."

The gorgon laughed. "I may have no eyes, but I know a god when I smell one. What hope have you of entering?"

"You are bold for a creature who knows they speak with a goddess," Persephone said.

The gorgon smiled. "Only a goddess when it serves you?"

"Pathos!" Persephone snapped.

The gorgon's smile remained, but she opened the door and asked no more questions. "Enjoy, my lady."

Persephone glared at the monster as she entered a smaller, smoky room. Unlike the main floor of the club, this space was intimate and quiet. Overhead, there was a single, large chandelier that provided enough light to ignite tables and faces, but not much else. There were several clusters of people gathered, playing cards, and none of them seemed to notice her.

When the door clicked shut behind her, she started to explore, looking for Lexa, but found herself distracted by the people and the games. She watched as graceful hands dispensed cards and listened as players at the tables bantered back and forth. Then she came to an oval table where the occupants were leaving. She wasn't sure what drew her to it, but she decided to sit.

The dealer nodded. "Madam."

"Do you play?" A voice asked from behind her. It was a deep rumble she felt in her chest.

She turned and met a pair of endless eyes. The man from the balcony stood in her shadow. Her blood heated to an unbearable level, making her flush. She squeezed her crossed legs together and clenched her hands into fists to keep from fidgeting under his gaze.

Up close she was able to fill in a few gaps in her assessment of his appearance. He was beautiful in a dark way—in a way that promised heartbreak. His eyes were the color of obsidian and framed by thick lashes, his hair pulled into a bun at the back of his head. She had been right that he was tall; she had to tip her head back just to meet his gaze.

When Persephone's chest started to ache, she realized she had been holding her breath since the man approached. Slowly, she drew in air and with it, the smell of him—smoke and spice and winter air. It filled every empty place inside her.

As she stared, he took a sip from his glass, licking his lips clean. He was sin incarnate. She could feel it in the way her body responded to his—and she didn't want him to know. So she smiled and said, "I'm willing to play if you're willing to teach."

His lips quirked, and he raised a dark brow. He took another drink, then approached the table, taking a seat beside her. "It's brave to sit down at a table without knowing the game."

She met the man's gaze. "How else would I learn?"

"Hmm." He considered, and Persephone decided she loved his voice. "Clever."

The man stared like he was trying to place her, and she shivered.

"I have never seen you before."

"Well, I've never been here before," she said and paused. "You must come here often."

His lips quirked. "I do."

"Why?" she asked. Persephone was surprised she said that aloud—and so was the man. His brows rose. She tried to recover. "I mean—you don't have to answer that."

"I will answer it. If you will answer a question for me."

She stared at him for a moment, then nodded. "Fine."

"I come because it is...*fun*," he said, but it didn't sound like he knew what that was.

"Now you—why are you here tonight?"

"My friend Lexa was on the list," she said.

"No. That is the answer to a different question. Why are you here tonight?"

She considered his question, then said, "It seemed rebellious at the time."

"And now you aren't so sure?"

“Oh, I am sure it’s rebellious.” Persephone dragged her finger along the surface of the table. “I’m just not sure how I’ll feel about it tomorrow.”

“Who are you rebelling against?”

She looked at him and smiled. “You said one question.”

His smile matched hers and it made her heart beat harder in her chest. “So I did.”

Staring back at those endless eyes, she felt he could see her—not the glamour or even her skin and bones, but the core of her, and it made her shiver.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

“What?”

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

She felt her face redden. “Who was that woman with you earlier?”

Confusion clouded his face and then cleared. “Oh, Minthe. She’s always putting her hands where they don’t belong.”

Persephone paled—she sounded like a mistress, and if that was the case, she wasn’t interested. “I…think I should go.”

He stopped her with a hand on hers. His touch was electric and warmed her from the inside out. She pulled away quickly.

“No,” he said, almost commanding, and Persephone glared at him.

“Excuse me?”

“What I mean to say is, I haven’t taught you how to play yet.” His voice lowered to a mesmerizing rumble. “Allow me.”

It was a mistake to hold his gaze, because it was impossible to say no when she did. She swallowed and managed to relax. “Then teach me.”

His eyes burned into her before falling to the cards. He shuffled them, explaining, “This is poker.”

She noted that he had graceful hands and long fingers. Did he play piano?

“We will play five-card draw and we’ll start with a bet.”

Persephone looked down at herself—she hadn’t brought her clutch, but the man was quick to say, “A question answered, then. If I win, you will answer any question I pose, and if you win, I will answer yours.”

Persephone grimaced. She knew what he was going to ask, but answering questions was

far better than losing all her money and her soul, so she said, “Deal.”

Those sensual lips curled into a smile, which deepened lines on his face that only made him look more attractive. Who was this man? She guessed she could ask his name, but she wasn’t interested in making friends at Nevernight.

While dealing each of them five cards, the man explained that, in poker, there were ten different rankings, the lowest being the high card and the highest being the royal flush. The goal was to draw a higher rank than the other player. He explained other things, like checking, folding, and bluffing.

“Bluffing?” Persephone echoed.

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

Persephone looked at her hand and tried to remember what he’d said about the different ranks. She laid her cards down, face up, and the man did the same.

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

“So...you win,” she said.

“Yes,” he replied, and claimed his prize immediately. “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 dealt another and won again. This time, he didn’t ask the question, just looked at her expectantly.

She sighed. “Because...she made me mad.”

He stared at her, waiting, and she smiled. “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.”

Butterflies erupted in her stomach. She should tell him this was the first and final time she would come to Nevernight.

Except she couldn’t make herself say the words.

He dealt again and won. Persephone was getting tired of losing and answering this man’s questions. Why was he so interested in her, anyway? Where was that woman he’d been with earlier?

“Why are you angry with your mother?”

She considered this question for a moment. “She wants me to be something I can’t.”
Persephone dropped her gaze 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?”

“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?” The question was meant to remain a thought in her head, and yet the words slipped out between her lips.

He smirked, and she could feel it deep in her gut. “Darling, I win either way.”

Her eyes went wide, and her heart stuttered. She stood quickly, and his name fell from her mouth like a curse.

“Hades.”

His name on her tongue seemed to have an effect on him, but she couldn’t tell if it was good or bad—his eyes darkened, and his smile lines melted into a hard, unreadable mask.

“I have to go.”

She spun and left the small room.

This time, she didn’t let him stop her; she hurried down the winding steps and plunged into the mass of bodies on the main floor. All the while, she was highly aware of the spot on her wrist where Hades’s fingers had touched her skin. Was it an exaggeration to say it burned?

It took her a while to find the exit, and when she did, she pushed through the doors. Outside, she took a few deep breaths before hailing a taxi. Climbing inside, she sent a quick text to Lexa, letting her know she was leaving, and while she felt bad, it didn’t seem fair to make Lexa leave early just because she couldn’t stay in that tower another minute.

The force of what she’d done hit her.

She’d allowed Hades, the God of the Underworld, to instruct her, to touch her, to play her, and question her.

And he had won.

But that wasn't the worst part.

No, the worst part was that there was a side of her—a side she'd never known existed until tonight—that wanted to run back inside, find him, and demand a lesson in the anatomy of his body.

Chapter III

New Athens News

Morning came fast.

Persephone checked the mirror to ensure her glamour was in place. It was weak magic because it was borrowed, but it was enough to hide her horns and turn her bottle-green eyes mossy.

She reached up to apply a touch more glamour to her eyes. They were the hardest to get right, and it took the most magic to dull their bright, abnormal light. As she did, she halted, noticing something on her wrist.

Something dark.

She took a closer look. A series of black dots marked her skin, some smaller, others larger. It looked like a simple, elegant tattoo had been inked on her arm.

And it was wrong.

Persephone turned the faucet on and scrubbed her skin until it was red and raw, but the ink didn't move or smear. In fact, it seemed to darken.

Then she remembered yesterday at Nevernight when Hades's hand had covered hers to keep her from leaving. The warmth of his skin transferred to hers, but when she fled the club later, that warmth turned to a burn, which only intensified when she went to bed last night.

She'd turned on the light several times to inspect her wrist but found nothing.

Until this morning.

Persephone lifted her gaze to the mirror and her glamour rippled from her anger. Why had she obeyed his request to stay? Why had she been blind to the fact that she had invited the God of the Dead to teach her cards?

She knew why. She'd been distracted by his beauty. Why hadn't anyone warned her that Hades was a charming bastard? That his smile stole breath and his gaze stopped hearts?

What was this thing on her wrist and what did it mean?

She knew one thing for certain: Hades was going to tell her.

Today.

Before she could return to the obsidian tower, however, she had to go to her internship.

Her eyes fell to a pretty embellished box her mother had given her. It sat on the corner of her vanity and held jewelry, but at twelve, it had contained five gold seeds. Demeter had crafted them from her magic and said they would bloom into roses the color of liquid gold for her, the Goddess of Spring.

Persephone planted them and did her best to nurture the flowers, but instead of growing into the blossoms she expected, they grew withered and black.

She would never forget the look on her mother's face when she found her staring at the wilted roses—shocked, disappointed, and in disbelief that her daughter's flowers grew from the ground like something straight out of the Underworld.

Demeter had reached forward, touched the flowers, and they flared with life.

Persephone never went near them again, and avoided that part of the greenhouse.

Looking at the box, the mark on her skin burned as hot as her shame. She couldn't let her mother find out.

She searched through the box until she found a bracelet wide enough to cover the mark. It would have to do until Hades removed it.

Persephone returned to her room, but didn't make it far when her mother materialized in front of her. Persephone jumped, and her heart felt like it wanted to jump out of her chest.

“By the gods, Mother! Can you at least use the door like a normal parent? And *knock?*”

On a normal day, she wouldn't have snapped, but she was feeling on edge. Demeter couldn't find out about Nevernight.. She did a quick inventory of everything she'd worn last night—the dress was in Lexa's room, the shoes in her closet, and she'd shoved the jewelry in her purse which hung on her doorknob.

The Goddess of Harvest was beautiful and didn't bother to glamour up to hide her elegant, seven-point antlers. Her hair was blond like Persephone's, but straight and long. She had glowing skin and her high cheekbones were naturally rosy like her lips. Demeter lifted her pointed chin, assessing Persephone with critical eyes—eyes that changed from brown to green to gold.

“Nonsense,” she said, taking Persephone's chin between her thumb and forefinger, applying more magic. Persephone knew what she was doing without looking in the mirror—covering her freckles, brightening the color in her cheeks, and straightening her wavy hair. Demeter liked when Persephone resembled her, and Persephone preferred to look as little like

her mother as possible. “You might be playing mortal, but you can still look Divine.”.

Persephone rolled her eyes. Her appearance was just another way she disappointed her mother.

“There!” Demeter finally exclaimed, releasing her chin. “Beautiful.”

Persephone looked in the mirror. She had been right—Demeter had covered up everything Persephone liked about herself. Still, she managed a forced, “Thank you, Mother.”

“It was nothing, my flower.” Demeter patted her cheek. “So, tell me about this...*job*.”

The word sounded like a curse coming from Demeter’s lips. Persephone ground her teeth together. She was surprised by how fast and furious the anger tore through her. “It’s an internship, Mother. If I do well, I might have a job when I graduate.”

Demeter frowned. “Dear, you know you do not have to work.”

“So you say,” she muttered under her breath.

“What was that?”

Persephone turned to her mother and said louder, “I want to do this. I’m good at it.”

“You are good at so many things, Kore.”

“Don’t call me that!” Persephone snapped, and her mother’s eyes flashed. She’d seen that look right before Demeter thrashed one of her nymphs for letting her wander out of sight.

Persephone shouldn’t have gotten angry, but she couldn’t help it. She hated that name. It was her childhood nickname, and it meant exactly that—*maiden*. The word was like a prison, but worse than that, it reminded her that if she stepped too far out of line, the bars of her prison would solidify. She was the magic-less daughter of an Olympian. Not only that, she borrowed her mother’s magic, and that tether made obeying her even more important. Without Demeter’s glamour, Persephone couldn’t live in the mortal world anonymously.

“Sorry, Mother,” she managed, but she didn’t look at the goddess when she spoke. Not because she was embarrassed, but because she really didn’t mean the apology.

“Oh, my flower. I don’t blame you.” Demeter placed her hands on her daughter’s shoulders. “It’s this mortal world. It’s creating a divide between us.”

“Mother, you’re being ridiculous,” Persephone sighed, placing her hands on either side of Demeter’s face, and when she spoke again, she meant every word. “You are all I have.”

Demeter smiled, holding her daughter’s wrists. Hades’s mark burned. She leaned in a little, as if to kiss Persephone’s cheek. Instead, she said, “Remember that.”

Then she was gone.

Persephone released her breath and her body withered. Even when she had nothing to hide, dealing with her mother was exhausting. She was constantly on edge, preparing for what she would find unacceptable next. Over time, Persephone thought she had hardened herself against her mother's unwanted words, but sometimes they pierced her.

She distracted herself by focusing on choosing her outfit for the day, a pretty, light pink dress with ruffled sleeves, a pair of white wedge shoes, and a white handbag. On the way out, she stopped to check her reflection in the mirror, pulling glamour from her hair and face, returning her curls and freckles. She smiled, recognizing herself once again.

She left the apartment, feeling happier as she stepped into the morning sun. Persephone didn't have a car and she didn't have the ability to teleport like other gods, so she either walked or took the bus when she needed to get around New Athens. Today, since it was warm, she decided to walk.

Persephone loved the city because it was so unlike what she'd grown up with. Here, there were mirrored skyscrapers that sparkled under Helios's warm rays. There were museums filled with histories Persephone had only learned when she moved here, buildings that looked like art, and sculptures and fountains on almost every block. Even with all the stone and glass and metal, there were acres of parks with lush gardens and trees where Persephone had spent many evenings walking. The fresh air reminded her she was free.

She inhaled now, trying to ease her anxiety. Instead, it traveled to her stomach where it knotted, made worse by the inked bracelet around her wrist. She had to get rid of it before Demeter saw it and her few years of freedom turned into a lifetime in a glass box.

It was usually that fear that kept Persephone cautious.

Except for last night—last night, she'd felt rebellious, and despite this strange mark on her skin she'd found Nevernight and its king to be everything she had ever desired.

She wished that weren't so—she wished she'd found Hades repulsive. She wished she hadn't spent last night recalling how his dark eyes had trailed her body, how she'd had to tip her head back just to meet his gaze, how his graceful hands had shuffled the cards.

How would those long fingers feel against her skin? How would it feel to be swept into his strong arms and carried away?

After last night, she wanted things she had never wanted before. Soon, her anxiety was

replaced with a fire so unfamiliar and intense, she thought she might turn to ash.

Gods. Why was she thinking like this?

It was one thing to find the God of the Dead attractive, and another thing to...*desire* him. There was absolutely no way anything could happen between them. Her mother hated Hades, and she knew without asking that a relationship between them was forbidden. She also knew that she needed her mother's magic more than she needed to quench this fire roaring inside her.

She neared the Acropolis, its dazzling, mirror surface almost blinding her, and made her way up the short flight of steps to the gold and glass doors. The lower level of the floor had a row of turnstiles and security guards—necessary for the businesses located in the high rise, with Zeus's advertising company, Oak & Eagle Creative, among them. Zeus's admirers were known to wait in crowds outside the Acropolis just for a glimpse of the God of Thunder. Once, a mob had tried to storm the building to reach him, which was sort of ironic considering Zeus was rarely at the Acropolis and spent most of his time in Olympia.

Zeus's business wasn't the only one in need of security, though. *New Athens News* broke some difficult stories—stories that infuriated gods and mortals alike. Persephone wasn't aware of any retaliation, but as she moved through security, she knew these mortal guards wouldn't be able to stop an angry god from storming the sixtieth floor for revenge.

After security, she found a bank of elevators that took her up to her floor. The doors opened into a large reception area with the words *New Athens News* overhead. A curved glass desk sat beneath it, and a beautiful woman with long dark curls greeted her with a smile. Her name was Valerie; Persephone remembered her from her interview.

"Persephone," she said, coming around the desk. "It's good to see you again. Let me take you back. Demetri is expecting you."

Valerie directed Persephone to the newsroom beyond the glass partition. There, several metal and glass desks were arranged in perfect lines across the floor. There was a flurry of activity—phones ringing, paper shuffling, keys tapping as writers and editors pounded out their next article. The smell of coffee was strong, like the whole place ran on caffeine and ink.

Persephone's heart thudded in her chest with the thrill of it all.

"I saw you were from New Athens University," Valerie said. "When do you graduate?"

"In six months."

Persephone dreamed of the moment she'd walk across that grand stage to receive her

degree. It would be the pinnacle of her time among mortals.

“You must be so excited.”

“I am.” Persephone glanced at Valerie. “What about you? When do you graduate?”

“In a couple years,” Valerie said.

“And how long have you been here?”

“About a year,” she said with a smile.

“Do you plan to stay when you graduate?”

“In the building, yes, just a few floors up at Oak & Eagle Creative,” she grinned.

Ah, Zeus’s marketing company had sourced her.

Valerie knocked on the open door of an office at the very back of the room. “Demetri, Persephone’s here.”

“Thanks, Valerie,” Demetri said.

The girl turned to Persephone, smiled, and left, allowing room for her to enter the office and catch her first glimpse of her new boss, Demetri Aetos. He was older, but it was clear he had been a heartbreaker in his prime. His hair was short on the sides, longer on top, and flecked with grey. He wore black-framed glasses, which gave him a scholarly air. He had what Persephone would consider delicate features—thin lips and a smaller nose. He was tall, but thin beneath his blue button-up, khaki slacks, and polka dot bowtie.

“Persephone,” he said, coming around his desk and stretching out his hand. “It’s good to see you again. We are happy to have you.”

“I’m happy to be here, Mr. Aetos,” she took his hand.

“Call me Demetri.”

“Okay...Demetri.” She couldn’t help smiling.

“Please, sit!” He indicated to a chair, and she took a seat. Demetri leaned against his desk, hands in his pockets. “Tell me about yourself.”

When Persephone had first moved to New Athens, she hated this question, because there was a point when all she could talk about was her fears—closed spaces, feeling trapped, escalators. Over time, though, she’d had enough experiences, and it had become easier to define herself by what she liked. “Well, I’m a student at New Athens University. I’m majoring in journalism and I’ll graduate in May...” she started, and Demetri waved his hand.

“Not what’s on your resume.”

He met her gaze, and she noticed that he had blue eyes.

He smiled. “What about you—your hobbies, interests...?”

“Oh.” She blushed and thought for a moment. “I like baking. It helps me relax.”

“Oh? Tell me more. What do you like to bake?”

“Anything, really. I’ve been challenging myself at sugar cookie art.”

His brows rose and his smile stayed. “Sugar cookie art, huh? That’s a thing?”

“Yes, I’ll show you.”

She pulled out her phone and found a few photos. Of course, she had only taken pictures of her best cookies.

Demetri took the phone and swiped through the photos. “Oh, nice. These are great, Persephone.”

He met her gaze as he returned her phone.

“Thank you.” Persephone hated the cheesy smile those words brought to her face, but no one but Lexa had ever told her that.

“So, you like to bake. What else?”

“I like to write,” she said. “Stories.”

“Stories? Like fiction?”

“Yes.”

“Romance?” he guessed.

It was what most people assumed, and the blush on Persephone’s cheeks wasn’t helping her case. “No, actually. I like mysteries.”

Demetri’s brows rose again, almost meeting his hairline. “Unexpected,” he said. “I like it. What do you hope to gain from this internship?”

“Adventure.” She couldn’t help it. The word slipped out, but Demetri seemed pleased.

“Adventure.” He pushed away from his desk. “If adventure is what you desire, *New Athens News* can give it to you, Persephone. This position can look like anything you wish—it’s yours to craft and manage. If you want to report, you can report. If you want to edit, you can edit. If you want to get coffee, you get coffee.”

Persephone only had an interest in getting coffee for herself, but she didn’t bother telling them that. She didn’t think she could be any more excited, but as Demetri spoke, she had the overwhelming feeling that this internship would change her life.

“I’m sure you know that we find ourselves in the media a lot,” he smiled wryly. “Ironic, considering we are a news source.”

New Athens News was well-known for the number of lawsuits filed against them. There were always complaints of defamation, slander, and invasion of privacy. Believe it or not, those weren’t the worst accusations leveled against the company.

“I couldn’t believe when Apollo accused you of being members of Triad,” Persephone said.

Triad was a group of Impious mortals who actively organized against the gods, supporting fairness, freewill, and freedom. Zeus had declared them as terrorist organization and threatened death to any caught with their propaganda.

“Oh yeah,” Demetri raised his brows and rubbing the back of his neck. “Completely ludicrous, of course, but that didn’t keep people from believing it.”

Probably the worst thing to come from it was that, as a result of Zeus’s condemnation, the Faithful organized into cults and started a manhunt of their own, killing several who were openly Impious, uncaring if they were associated with Triad or not. It was a horrific time, and it had taken Zeus longer than necessary to come out against the cults. *New Athens News* said so themselves.

“We seek truth, Persephone,” Demetri said. “There’s power in truth. Do you want power?”

He didn’t even know what he was asking.

“Yes,” she said. “I want power.”

This time when Demetri smiled, he showed his teeth. “Then you will do well here.”

Demetri showed Persephone to her desk, which sat just outside his office. She settled in, checking drawers, noting what supplies she would need to ask for or buy, and stored her purse. A new laptop sat on top of the glass desk. It was cool to the touch, and when she opened it, the dark screen reflected the face of a man behind her. She turned in her chair and met a set of wide, surprised eyes.

“Adonis,” she said.

“Persephone.” He looked just as handsome as he had last night, only more professional with his lavender button-up and coffee cup clutched in one hand. “I had no idea you were our new intern.”

“I had no idea you worked here,” she said.

“I’m a senior reporter, mostly focused on entertainment,” he said, rather smugly. “We missed you when you left last night.”

“Oh, yes, sorry. I wanted to prepare for my first day.”

“Not going to fault you for that. Well, welcome.”

“Adonis,” Demetri called as he stepped back into the doorframe of his office. “Mind giving Persephone here a tour of our floor?”

“Not at all.” He smiled at her. “Ready?”

Persephone followed Adonis, eager to witness the fast-paced environment of her new office. She was happy to see a familiar face, even if she had just met him last night. It made her feel more comfortable here.

“We call this the workroom. It’s where everyone follows leads and investigates,” he said.

People looked up from their desks and waved or smiled at her as they passed. Adonis indicated a wall of glassed-in rooms.

“Interview and conference rooms. Break room. Lounge.” He pointed to a huge room with various casual sitting areas and warm, low light. It was cozy, and there were already several people nesting. “You’ll probably prefer to write in here when you get the chance.”

Adonis showed her to the supplies closet, and she raided it for pens, sticky notes, and notebooks. While he helped her carry her supplies back to her desk he asked, “So, what kind of journalism are you interested in?”

“I’m leaning toward investigative reporting,” she said.

“Oh, a detective, huh?”

“I like research.”

“Any subject in particular?” he asked.

Hades.

The god’s name popped into her head without warning, and she knew it was because of the mark on her wrist. She was anxious to get to Nevernight and figure out what it was.

“No, I just...like to solve mysteries,” she answered.

“Well then, maybe you can help us figure out who’s been stealing lunches from the fridge in the break room.”

Persephone laughed.

She got the feeling she was going to like it here.