

Spring 2022

Nectar of the Sleepless Dead

Grace Frances McNally
Bard College, gm6733@bard.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2022



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

McNally, Grace Frances, "Nectar of the Sleepless Dead" (2022). *Senior Projects Spring 2022*. 252.
https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2022/252

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects at Bard Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Projects Spring 2022 by an authorized administrator of Bard Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.

Nectar of the Sleepless Dead

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Grace McNally

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2022

*Mighty spirit, you have your home under
the earth, a grassy mead in Tartaros,
deep shadowed and sunless, Chthonian Zeus
holding a scepter, kindness in your heart.
Accept these holy offerings, Plouton,
you who hold fast the bars that bind the whole
earth, and give yearly fruit to mortal kind.*

*Come, Persephone, daughter of great Zeus,
blessed one, only begotten goddess.
Accept these gracious offerings to you.
Many-honored wife of Plouton, you give
life diligently, and control the gates
of Hades, beneath the depths of the Earth.*

- *The Orphic Hymns*, translated by Patrick Dunn

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I'd first like to thank the wonderful professors on my senior project review board:

To my advisor, Mary Caponegro, for encouraging me and my writing since my first Written Arts workshop, no matter how wild or impassioned. Thank you for being such a supportive mentor throughout this project and for your patience and guidance through its many hiccups and restarts.

To Cole Heinowitz, whose literature courses I will dearly miss. I have signed up for every one that I could fit in my schedule because I was so excited to be a part of the conversations that you foster again. Your courses "Monsters Я Us" and "The Gothic" were such a source of inspiration for this project.

To Wyatt Mason, who pushed me to develop my craft as a writer and was so understanding of my struggles, but up until this moment has only seen my literary criticism and has no idea what he has just signed up for. My apologies.

To the teachers before college who helped cultivate a love of learning in me: Ms. Buchholz, Mr. Hackbert, Mrs. Ghiraldini, Mr. Winkler, Mrs. LaTourette, Mr. Kelemen, Mrs. Haver-Castex: Thank you for letting me take refuge in your classrooms at lunch to giddily talk your ear off about my opinions on the characters in our latest assignment when I struggled to find friends who shared my passions.

To my father, who read *A Series of Unfortunate Events* and *His Dark Materials* with me throughout my childhood before bed, diligently edited my first serious attempt at a novel in 8th grade, and encouraged my love of stories.

To my coven: Zoe, AJ and Alyssa, for your constant flow of love, encouragement and laughter. Your support and sisterhood helped me get through the roughest parts of this year and I cannot thank you enough.

And to Hunter, who always picked up the phone throughout this project to listen to my excited ramblings about ideas for this novel, no matter the hour, and lent me so much inspiration whenever I got stuck. Talking through the world of this novel with you helped so much of it come to be.

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

CHAPTER ONE: Thesmophoria.....	1
CHAPTER TWO: Xenia.....	6
CHAPTER THREE: The Procession to the Delphinon.....	13
CHAPTER FOUR: Kourotrophos.....	19
CHAPTER FIVE: Symposion.....	25
CHAPTER SIX: Theogony.....	33
CHAPTER SEVEN: Prologos.....	47
CHAPTER EIGHT: Nostos.....	56
CHAPTER NINE: PHEME.....	75
CHAPTER TEN: Eleusinian Rites.....	85

....

CHAPTER ONE: THESMOPHORIA

Kore liked the fields at the cliffside best, not only because watching eyes were too far away to scrutinize the way she tilled the fields there, but because she could watch the spirit train sink into the dark beneath. The city pulled in its outer banks a mile away from the tracks on either side so not a fingertip or schoolhouse would fall too close. In all of their journeys tending to the farmland across the outskirts, Kore and her mother never ventured near that mile either, despite how much less unsettling the hills that carried the train would be with a couple fields of wheat or apple groves.

Kore had been six the first time she asked why.

“Do you see the smoke pouring out of that dreadful thing?” her mother had said, kneeling down to the little girl’s level and pointing to the great black chimney that perched atop the engine car. “That’s the miasma of the dead. It poisons any plant it touches and any living thing that breathes it in. Any fruit we grew there would blacken and rot, and anyone who walks too close finds themselves on that train and never comes back. You shouldn’t even look at it too long, you’ll fall ill if you lock eyes with one of the passengers.” She took her daughter’s frill-lined shoulders in her hands and stared stern and imploring into her eyes. “Promise me you’ll never go near that train, Kore, and don’t speak of it when we’re in the house.”

“Why?” Kore had asked. “Would it hear us from there?”

“The train smoke could follow your voice,” her mother answered. “The miasma could get caught inside.”

For years after, Kore would shield her eyes with her bonnet or a tiny hand when she saw the train pass by, stealing a peak between fingers for just a moment before hiding her eyes away.

But now that she was old enough to sew seeds and harvest fruit alone, Kore would sit, hypnotized by it as she paused her work. The whistle of the train, which she had been warned was ominous too, called after her like a wounded dog seeking rescue. She had been reminded long past knowing that this was a ploy to lead more souls in, but the sound stoked a curious pity in her all the same. It couldn't be that dangerous to listen to its cry from this safe distance; she had yet to fall ill from it. There was a beauty in its mournful sound, the lone hound who no one would look at as it made its diligent journey down week after week. Kore felt a kinship with it as she carried out her lonely and endless chores, and when she was certain she was alone, she would howl back in chorus with the sound, as if to tell the sad creature that it wasn't alone, that its ceaseless work did not go unacknowledged.

She would stay there, sitting still in the tall grass, eyes following the train until the last clouds of its smoke had disappeared into the valley below. With a heaving sigh, she'd rise to her feet, brushing off her skirts and hoisting her basket onto her hip before taking the long way home. The echo of the whistle's cry would soon be drowned out by the constant nagging chatter of the house, but it stayed with her as she walked alone, howling in agreement with her thoughts, turning the flowers that sprouted at her footsteps deep red like drops of wine. The flowers lost their tannin, the train lost its whistle, bit by bit as she neared the back gate to her mother's home, so by the time she'd made her way through the garden and into the house, the trail behind her was once more pink and innocent, and her eyes were again those of the cheerful, obedient girl who was most welcome in the house. The hound's mournful bride, with her haunted eyes and bloody footsteps was long hidden away.

But the older she grew, the more the howling rung in her ears, beckoning to her as she tended her mother's shop and sat wide awake in bedtime candlelight while the city danced outside her window. The calling didn't coax her toward the tracks, it never had, but it warned her that time was crawling forward as fast as the train while she stood terribly still. She was still very young, but all of that used in the little power that she had would be gone and she would be on that train. Unless she made something of herself, turned herself into a goddess worth worshiping, unless she had something to offer her people and make her worthy of offerings and prayers, she was as good as mortal. She would wither like unwatered fruit while her mother and friends stood ageless beside her. And soon enough, she would fall from her tree and would be carried away by that merciless train. The thought of it shook her from her dreams night after night and she would howl after the train again, this time begging for it not to come for her so fast, begging for it to give her more time, begging for it to give her more time.

She knew that her mother was just as afraid that the train would outrun her. Kore kept the thought to herself, thinking it did no good to dwell on aloud, but her mother saw it no use in brushing such crucial matters aside. Her mother was certain, or at least very determined, that Kore's gift was with the fields in the harvest as was hers; it was merely a matter of finding the task she was best at, of putting all of her heart and soul into it, which she reminded Kore of incessantly when she lost interest in her chores, or sewed the fields without enough passion.

"How do you expect any of this to grow when you put so little heart into it?" her mother would scold her, pushing her aside and checking each moment to make sure her daughter was watching as she lifted a finger with ease to cast the seeds in perfect lines across the field. "See?

Like that, straight and steady, each seed going into the burrows we laid instead of strewn about all willy nilly like food for crows.”

“Yes, Mama,” Kore would answer, as often as necessary.

“You should be grateful that you have me here to help you, that you have fields and fields to practice upon, my greenhouse and gardens to study in while you find your way. I had to find the magic of the earth all on my own, without my mother to guide me. I didn’t have time or chances to make a mess of things; all I knew was that my grandmother found her purpose in the Earth, that my mother had that stolen from her, and it was up to me to find it for myself and return it to our family so that it would feed and protect you and give you your purpose too. The Earth and its growth will keep you a goddess and keep you up here with me!”

Often during such a talk, as they were frequent enough for strange omens to be disregarded as daily happenings, the whistle of the train would interrupt them. Her mother would squint her eyes shut and cover her ears until the sound died away. Kore would close her eyes too, but only to better let the howling echo through her for a moment of reprieve.

She dared not ask her mother if she could grow no healthy plants but the flowers that sprung from her feet and tangled in her hair because her true power was waiting somewhere else. Such words would only end in tears that wouldn’t stop until she took her words back. But the call of the train barrelling down its tracks and down her spine told Kore that she was wasting time, that her power was somewhere else and she’d need to hurry if she wanted to ever track it down.

She soon realized that she would have to track that wolf when she was alone, when her mother was asleep or otherwise occupied with providing Olympia with its fruit and grain. There

was no way her mother would entertain any other paths in the hypothetical, but Kore hoped that if she found it and honed it on her own, if she brought it back fully formed to show her mother, that she would see her happy and worshiped and eternally young and would learn to accept her gift in time.

So in the dead of night, Demeter's daughter would wake and follow the wolf's beckoning call.

CHAPTER TWO: XENIA

A pleasant spring day was chilled at once to winter when Zeus, High King of Olympia, received the distressing news that an invitation he had personally sent had been accepted.

The king was seated at his favorite leather chair, overlooking his beloved city from the swath of windows that all but encompassed his sixth story office. His best oak pipe was resting comfortably between his lips, puffing curls of grey smoke that seemed to extend from his great silver beard, lifting it in merry tendrils into the air around him. Tomorrow's ball celebrated an occasion he awaited eagerly each year; the anniversary of the coup that restored his title and cemented his status as hero to the people. It was a night where his youthful glory felt all but his again. There would be new imports of bourbon, feasting, music, and most importantly, his wife would be too busy keeping the staff in perfect order to catch him ducking away with whichever serving girl looked the prettiest tonight. In these troubled times, where danger reared its pale and toothy head in the frames of those once trusted, celebrations such as this were crucial for boosting morale; his people were reminded that their leader had saved them from far darker times before and would again, and said leader could indulge in some much needed entertainment.

Zeus was dispelled from his smokey daydreams by a knocking on the door and the muffled voice of the secretary, Iris, who seemed to have something urgent to share. He called her in, remaining in his seat to take another languorous puff from his pipe. Iris fluttered in, wings scattering tiny rainbows of light across the room as she presented him with a freshly addressed but yellowing envelope.

“A letter, Your Majesty.” said Iris.

“From whom?”

“There’s no return address, I’m afraid,” she answered. “And I don’t recognize the seal. The wax seems to have remelted and hardened again during its journey, so it’s a little obscured.

Zeus reached into his pocket and handed her his letter opener, eyes still glazed, half focused on the window. “Be a dear and read it for me?”

The girl nodded and obliged. The letter she pulled out carried a strange smell like the dust of something long dead and buried. She coughed a little as she unfolded it, a peculiar powder, or perhaps a gathering of dust, falling out and onto the floor and her hands as she did. The letter was short, in an ink that at once seemed standard black and again a very deep red, in a controlled but elegant hand. She read:

*To their Royal Majesties the High King and Queen of Olympia,
It is with great pleasure that I accept your generous invitation to the Annual War Memorial Ball. I will remain in town on business for the duration of the week, perhaps longer. If Your Majesties wish to be informed of the current state of affairs, you may arrange to meet me at my city flat, and I would be happy to oblige.*

Cordially,

Hades, King of the Necropolis

Zeus choked on his smoke, dropping his pipe to clutch at his throat. The storm clouds that once danced with his beard darkened as they were cast outside to the sky above with a rumble of thunder, a flash of lightning through the coarse grey curls. Iris rushed to Zeus’ desk to retrieve his abandoned morning coffee to calm his throat. He nodded as he accepted it, throwing it back before whispering hoarsely.

“Read the name again.”

Iris sucked in a hesitant breath. “I beg your pardon, sir, but I’ve been told it’s bad luck to say his name, and I’ve already said it once...”

Zeus raised a finger to reprimand her, lightning poised to strike in the sky behind him, but he soon remembered the chill that went through his body when he uttered that name himself and changed his mind. “Very well,” he coughed, “Give it to me then.” He took the letter from her hands and scanned it over and over as if the letters would rearrange themselves into something less threatening with enough determination. After his fifth attempt, he admitted defeat.

“Fetch Hera,” he said after a long silence. “It doesn’t matter how urgent whatever preparation she’s tending to is, tell her I need her here *now*.”

“Right away, Your Majesty.”

“Actually, give her the letter first,” he said, handing it back to her. “I want her to get over the shock before she can talk to me about it.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Zeus let his face fall into his hands as the door swung shut. He should have known. That’s what Hera would be telling him in a matter of minutes, as soon as she got over the shock herself. He had sent the King of the Necropolis an invitation to every ball, every gala, every benefit and dinner he held. It was custom. Olympia owed its safety to him, for it was he who took all of their dead to be buried in his kingdom below lest they rise again from undetected infection. He had fought alongside Zeus in the very war they were now celebrating and had agreed to rule over the dark land below where Mad King Kronos and all those who took his twisted path to immortality were banished to. He made a sacrifice for Olympia that Zeus and his people all feared he would grow to resent, to lord over a kingdom where no new life would grow,

where the trains ran in but never out, his throne cursed to be solitary and barren, for what sane woman would dare agree to be his bride, to rule over such grim city and give it an heir, that is, if her husband could even beget one by her after so many years of breathing in the miasma of death. All he asked for was a flat in the central square, which he rarely used, and for an invitation to every event that the gods of Olympia hosted, which he never responded to nor attended.

Why had that changed? Part of Zeus felt like a fool for being so shocked. He wrote an invitation, or, more accurately, dictated one to Iris, to the King of the Necropolis for every occasion. He had all the right to be there; in fact it shouldn't have been a surprise if he showed up to one without an RSVP at all. It was in his character, after all; his social graces, on the few occasions that the King had arranged to meet with him, were strange to say the least.

What would his presence stir up at the ball? It was supposed to be a celebration of Olympia's safety, and while it was well known that he was a crucial factor in maintaining that safety, his presence was a harbinger of death. His knock at your door meant that someone in your house had been infected and would soon be taken out. The train to his kingdom was the last place you could say goodbye before the coffin of a loved one departed. His dark majesty lingering at his flat too long always coincides with a spike of maulings, and now he would be staying for a month and attending the most important event of the season. Did he anticipate an outbreak at the ball? Would the renewed faith that Zeus had wished to ring in at this anniversary of his victory be swallowed by a rash of maulings and fear? Why did that letter, so jarring in its existence, have to be so vague and concise?

“Zeus...”

The King of Olympia jumped in his seat before peering over the back of his chair to see his wife in the doorway, her face in the same state of disbelief as his. She stood in her usual light rain and majesty, an arc of peacock feathers extending from her back like a fan, but there was a touch of fear only her husband could detect in the way she held the blue silk of her dressing gown closed, something stiff and startled in the coolness of her face. He rose from his seat to meet her.

“Hera...”

She drew a hand through her dark curls and sighed “So he finally accepts.”

Zeus nodded.

“He could’ve at least had the courtesy to send this out a little sooner, the bastard.” They exchanged an uncomfortable laugh before she looked up at him, a hint of fear in her brown, cowlike eyes. “What do you think he wants?”

“I don’t know. What do we do?”

“We carry on as normal, I suppose,” she answered. “He didn’t make any requests or give any indication that it isn’t safe to hold a ball. We treat him like any other guest, do our best to keep things calm and maintain morale and normalcy, and when we can get him alone, we figure out what he wants. That’s all there is to it.”

“How are you so calm about this?”

“I simply don’t have time to panic,” she answered. “I also took some deep breaths before I came in, something that you, dearest, should try.”

“How could you know that I haven’t?”

“Your hair is full of static. Here, let me help.” She walked over and began the familiar practice of smoothing down his hair, which had been made to stand every which way by errant little bolts of lightning.

“Thank you, my love.”

She gave him a small smile as she attempted to calm a sideways spray of his beard. “I suppose that’s one courteous thing about his sending this so late. If it were any earlier, I could make room in my schedule for an hour to lose my mind. I suppose a portion of the good night’s sleep I’d intended to gather tonight can be sacrificed for it.”

“Might I recommend that you refrain from mentioning how late the response is to His Majesty?” Zeus teased her, his amusement with her fretting over it the one point of ease from his tension. “I’m afraid it won’t go over well, dear.”

Hera narrowed her eyes.

Her husband scoffed. “What? I agree the fellow could use being knocked down a peg, I just think it would go over better if he had his own wife to do it, if anyone could be bribed into it.”

“I’m afraid it won’t go over well for you, dear, if you insist on trying my nerves at a moment like this,” said his wife. She began to make her way back towards the door. “I can’t fret about this any longer; I have to review the menu, sign for the flowers and make sure the way they’re arranging them isn’t completely absurd. We will move forward as if nothing is out of the ordinary, and we will tell *no one* that he is coming.” She stopped and stared back at her husband to ensure that her words stuck. “The last thing we need is for word of this to wind up in this week’s edition of the *Society Epics* and circulate a thousand rumors before he even arrives.”

“Oh certainly not.” Zeus agreed. “Artemis and her wild hunt will be in attendance, will they not? Should we inform them?”

“Yes. Your daughter was courteous enough to send her RSVP two weeks ago,” Hera answered. “We should have her and the hunt at the ready. I need to tend to the catering, but please send Iris to let them know they should come discreetly armed, but still dressed for a ball. We may need their protection, but the last thing we need is to rouse even more suspicion, Understood?”

CHAPTER THREE: THE PROCESSION TO THE DELPHINION

The full moon held court over the rows upon rows of street lights that stood at attention at her entrance. The skinny lamps fought for her notice amidst a twisting fortress of slate-grey factories, top-heavy boarding houses, deep-hued awnings and looming temples. While the street lamps were built to light the path of the stragglers navigating their way about the city in the dark, they did this job half-heartedly and could not be trusted to whisper warnings to those being followed or taking a wrong turn on the way home from a bacchanal. They were too enraptured with the beauty of the moon to give mere mortals much mind.

The lights happily passed off that responsibility to the phalanx of women in riding habits patrolling the streets. Though alert and at the ready in contrast to the dreamy eyed lamps, they followed their leader with the same reverence with which the lights beheld the moon. Artemis slunk silently forward, her hair adorned with the antlers of a young buck, a mechanical crossbow strapped across her broad shoulders.

Catching a sound that the others hadn't, she flicked her fingers to catch their attention before pulling herself up by the bars of a nearby window and silently scaling the wall of an apartment building to her left. The two women closest to her followed as the rest spread out across the alley, their once midnight blue riding habits shifting colors to blend in with the brick and stone of the buildings that they pressed their backs to as they walked.

"You're such a gentleman to offer," came the voice of a young woman from the alley. "But it's already so far past my curfew, and my mother will already be furious."

"You're already in trouble, make it worthwhile!" a man replied with a beer-stained chuckle. "Come upstairs. You can sneak home before sunrise."

“I really need to be home, I’m sorry.” Artemis peered down past the rooftop to see the young woman start for the mouth of the alley. The man grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed her against the wall. Artemis caught a flash of red reflected in the girl’s eyes as her body fell lank against the wall. She pulled a bow from her quiver.

“If you’re going to be a prude,” he said, his voice reverberating against the brick. “then I suppose I’ll have to kiss you goodnight out here.” He brushed a lock of hair away from the side of her neck. “What will your mother say when she sees your neck marked up like a whore?”

The man wheezed as an arrow tore through him, shattering him like a terracotta pot. The archer and her disciples leapt down from their perch on the rooftop to inspect their work. The two who had joined her on the rooftop, Loxo and Oupis, inspected the remains, while the leader of the herd on the ground, Hekaerge, gave her a proud slap on the back.

“Another success, ladies!” Artemis grinned with pride. “I say we return home to celebrate!” She nodded to the damsel. “And thank you again, Kore, our lovely bait!”

Kore brushed the dust of the unfortunate man off of her dress. “This whole thing would’ve been much easier if you’d let me take him down myself, you know.” she said. “I’m already armed.”

“Yes, and that blade is only to be used for emergencies,” said Artemis, plucking her arrow from the ground and polishing it on her skirt before returning it to its quiver. “You may only use it if we can’t get to you.”

“But why waste an arrow and risk it being seen if I could’ve just stabbed him?” Kore retorted.

“Oh yes, and you’d be so good at wielding that when he had you stunned.”

“I could’ve stopped that with my powers if you’d only let me! Being the bait is fun, and I’m grateful, but it gets old! I want to sink my teeth in too!”

“The rules are the rules,” Artemis reminded her, beckoning to the group that it was time to start walking. She strode to the front of the pack, her bitter apprentice trailing behind. “Only those who have sworn their oath to the hunt may draw blood in His Majesty’s name. But last time I checked, you’re still too scared to tell Mommy that you wander the streets at night with us and you still recoil when I remind you that the oath entails a vow of maidenhood.”

“I don’t *recoil*, it’s just... I don’t see how wanting to get married someday makes me unfit to be a huntress. I wouldn’t marry a man who’d forbid me from being a huntress-”

“But you’d marry a man.” Artemis turned to look at her head on, walking backwards. “We’re a maiden order, Kore. The maiden part is supposed to be freeing. If it feels like a sacrifice for you, then you might not belong here.”

“I know, and I respect your rules,” said Kore, anxious primroses spiraling about her fingers. “I just don’t know where else I should go. This is the most free I’ve ever felt, but I’m not getting the release I’m craving by just being the bait all the time and... it feels less like freedom when I remember that the privilege of getting that release means forfeiting any chance of falling in love.”

“I never said you couldn’t fall in love.” Artemis received a look of irritation from Kore and answered it with a hearty laugh. “I know, I know, you have an unfortunate affliction, we’ve all mourned such a loss and moved on, you want what you want.” She wrapped an arm around Kore’s shoulders, sympathetic but stern. “But if you’re going to get any of the things you want, you’re going to have to make a choice. You can carry on being your mother’s little lapdog, you

can join the hunt, or you can have a husband. Each of these is a separate path that cannot intersect with any of the others. You can only live a triple life following us and dancing with handsome strangers all night and following your mother's every order the next morning for so long. It's only a matter of time before the lies catch up to you or you collapse from exhaustion. You have to pick a path." She sighed and rubbed her shoulder fondly. "Speaking of which, unless you've suddenly decided to leave home for good and join our order, I suggest you go home now. You should have at least half a night's sleep in you before tomorrow comes with all of its chores."

"And tomorrow night's ball." Kore added with a smug little smile.

"You worry me, little flower." Artemis sighed. "Now off to bed with you. I'll stop by the ball before my patrol to see you tomorrow, that is you're not locked in your tower or collapsed from exhaustion. To bed!"

"Yes, mother." Kore stuck out her tongue before waving to the other huntresses and running off into the night.

Artemis watched her with her hawk's eyes until she was out of sight, shaking her head. "What are we going to do with her?" She turned to resume her journey home, but found her path blocked when a woman on gossamer wings landed before her, projecting rainbows of light across the cobblestone.

"Iris! What brings you to this side of town so late at night?" asked Artemis. "I hope my stepmother isn't making you take night shifts now."

"It wouldn't have had to be a nightshift if your ladyship and your esteemed attendants were not nocturnal," said Iris with a deceptively sweet smile as she lowered the hood on her

cloak. "I have an urgent message from your father and stepmother that could not be relayed on paper. I was told there could be no recorded evidence, this message must stop at your ears and yours alone."

The huntresses nodded in understanding and circled close around her. "We've just patrolled this area, no one is around who can hear." said Oupis. "Tell us."

"You are to attend the ball as planned. Do not dress for the hunt. Do not act as if you are on patrol. Carry on as if you are merely there to dance and celebrate, but do not drink, and bring whatever weapons you can conceal in a gown."

"So we're to patrol undercover." Artemis nodded. "Can you tell us why?"

"Their majesties do not wish to rouse unease or risk the circulation of gossip," said Iris. "But we were just informed that he who reigns below shall be in attendance, and we know not what he will bring with him." The huntresses gasped and murmured amongst themselves, some instinctively gripping the hilts of the knives at their belts. "You are to gather as much information as you can observe and report back to His Majesty at the end of the night. Do not breach hospitality, do not act unless it is absolutely necessary. If any of your order who will be in attendance tomorrow are not with you, you may inform them but only them. No one outside of your sacred order may know. I will see you there." In a flutter of wings and a spray of light, she was gone.

Artemis scanned the horizon for her apprentice, but her gaze came up empty. "Kronos in Tartarus, Kore's going to be at the ball! I have to warn her."

Hekaerge stopped her with a steady hand. "Remember our instructions, my lady. Kore isn't part of the order. She cannot know."

“You’re right, but what do we do?” asked Loxo, clinging tightly to her bow.

Artemis sucked in a sharp breath. “She’s a lantern for the moths of his kind. I’ll have to find her alone tomorrow and convince her not to go.”

“Good luck trying,” said Hekaerge, twisting a blonde curl around her finger. “She lives for these parties, and she’s too stubborn. Besides, she’d realize there was danger if we tried, and that would make her all the more intent on following us and trying to help.”

“We’ll protect her then,” said Oupis resolutely, the night wind tossing back her short black hair. “Just like we’ll be protecting the rest of the guests.”

Artemis had a feeling this was easier said than done, but she nodded and continued home.

CHAPTER FOUR: KOUROTROPHOS

When it became clear that she would never have permission to attend a ball as an eligible lady seeking propositions for courtship, Kore had to find another way to get there.

It certainly helped that her mother rose and slept with the sun, retiring shortly after dinner to be awake in time to attend to her farmlands and worshippers at dawn, but this couldn't always be relied upon. The evenings of important parties always seemed to be the times when her mother decided Kore hadn't been putting her full heart into her work or the losing quest of finding which part of plants and agriculture she was skilled with, because of course they had to share a domain, and pushed for an evening together in the greenhouse slaving over sprouts. So just in case, Kore would toss in seeds of fatigue, the suggestion of symptoms of an innocuous illness or her monthly blood, skirting the balance between often enough to be convincing and sparse enough to not be obvious, so she'd have a plausible reason to get out of any evening activities and retire early to her room to prepare.

She had long given up the wish she once held that her mother would escort her to the ball and join her in the festivities. She had learned from encounters at their temple and at the few events they did attend, that the light of her mother's torch would always be glaring upon her, straightening her posture, singeing the hand of any suitor who asked her to dance, nipping at her skirt and sleeves as she prepared for the ball, insisting that this dress was too provocative, this one too tight or too low at the chest, that one would attract a lecher, until Kore agreed to dress in something ten years out of fashion that disguised her figure into that of a young girl.

When her mother was appeased and walked into her room with her nightly tea, petals curled in with the setting sun, chores finished and inspected and retouched, Kore, who could

never attend a ball, would construct a woman who could. Not a lesser goddess seeking her domain within her mother's shadow, but a free nymph unbothered by a quest to find her talent. She'd never been told who her father was, so who was anyone to know that she wasn't a bastard daughter of Zeus whose mother had been blighted in Hera's wrath, free to roam the city and its festivities on her own.

She pulled a box from its hiding place under her bed and pulled out a dress befitting of her alter ego, one that Kore would never be allowed outside in. She unrolled the dress from its packaging and swooned at the sight of it. The fabric was red as garnet, shifting mauve in the sunlight, with jet lace filigrees framing its plunging collar. She pulled pigment from the flower she sprouted in her hand to carve out her cheekbones and darken her brows and lips.

She finished the last fastenings of the dress and turned to look at herself in the mirror. A gasp escaped her mouth. She was enchanted with herself. So many of the clothes her mother bought for her made her feel like a little girl or a school matron, but in this dress, she was finally a woman. The blood red fabric cupped her curves and flared out like rose petals at her bustle, turning her olive skin to gold beside it. She threaded a red ribbon through a protective amulet from Artemis and fastened it around her neck. She looked like a king's once favored concubine who'd soon be exiled for witchcraft. The thought made her grin.

Rumor traveled fast in Olympia, especially when the ball would be filled with aunts and other distant relations who would alert her mother immediately. But no one had recognized her thus far when she looked so unlike the prudish child tending to her mother's greenhouse. Only Artemis and her huntresses knew. And if anyone asked, the girl at the ball was not Kore, daughter of Demeter.

Her name was Persephone.

Sprouting vines to hold up her skirts for her as she made her escape, Persephone hoisted a leg out the window and descended spider-like down the trellis and through the rows of shrubs and flowering fruit trees that filled the garden, slipping through a gap in the arborvitaes that encircled the estate and down the alley. She was used to walking to the ball, it gave her time to release the day's tensions and make sure no anxiety of Kore's carried over, but an urgent note from Artemis had been slipped to her when she was at work that morning insisting on giving her a ride to the ball.

Sure enough, a carriage drawn by two grey stags waited at the mouth of the alley. A footman leapt smoothly from the front seat to open the door for her. Persephone nodded in thanks as he took her hand and pulled her inside.

Artemis gave her a smile and a nod as she came in, but there was something tense in her jaw, in the way she leaned back in the carriage seat, tapping her fingers on a violin case laid across her lap.

Persephone eyed her warily as she sat down, gathering a strange sense of foreboding as she looked over her friend's posture and dress. "Are you... armed?"

"Do you seriously think this is what a rifle is shaped like?" Artemis suppressed a chuckle. "It's Apollo's violin. The idiot's performing tonight and should've been warming up for the past hour, but he left it in my room when he came by for my opinion on which suit he should wear tonight. As if I don't have more important things to worry about."

“I wasn’t talking about the violin case,” said Persephone. “You’ve got something strapped to your leg, I can tell by the way you’re sitting. The handle of the knife in your boot isn’t exactly hiding either.”

Artemis shoved the dagger deeper in her boot as the carriage rumbled ahead. “I’m always armed.”

“Right.” Persephone said, not quite believing. “Are you on patrol tonight? It’s ok if you are. I was looking forward to spending some time with you tonight but I get it if—”

“I’m not on patrol, I just feel safer when I’m prepared!” Artemis said defensively. She turned to look out the window, scanning every figure they passed with a hunter’s eye, cursing Iris’ message in the back of her throat where the words were just barely hidden enough to go unheard. Why did she have to hide this from the girl who was always on alert for the smallest crumb of something wrong, especially when ‘I can’t tell you’ would be the most provocative phrase she could say.

Persephone found more than enough crumbs to be wary. “Prepared for what? Artemis, Is there something you’re not telling me? I wasn’t going to say anything because it was kind of you to offer me a ride, but you never do. Are you on watch for something?”

Artemis closed her eyes. “If there was something to tell you, I’d tell you, alright? Can you drop this?” Her tapping fingernails on the violin case became more incessant as she swallowed back the guilt of the lie. “I need to clear my head before being around so many people.”

“Fine.” Persephone huffed and cast her glare out the window.

Their silence still stewing, the carriage pulled up to the front of the estate. Persephone gave an imploring look to Artemis as she was helped out of the carriage. Artemis tried to be as discreet as possible with her glances over the crowd of arriving guests and her restlessly tapping feet.

“I’ll meet you on the dance floor, alright?” Artemis said, half wincing. “I really need to get this to Apollo.”

“Of course.”

Artemis started for threshold but stopped to look at Persephone. The amulet on her neck was reassuring, but it wasn’t enough to ease her nerves. It tested her enough to let Persephone work as unattended bait sometimes, but sending her into a viper’s den with no warning was too much. Sighing, she pulled the dagger from her boot and tucked it in the side of Persephone’s corset.

“Just in case you need this,” she said. “You won’t, you don’t need to worry, but in case.”

Persephone caught Artemis’ hand as she pulled away. “Artemis,” she said “If there’s something going on, it’s better for me to know. I can keep a secret.”

Artemis shook her head. “Look, I’ll talk to you after the ball if there’s anything to tell, alright?”

“But there *is*—”

“I’ll see you later!” And with that, she disappeared into the crowd, the tips of her antlers the only point of detection, moving further and further away.

Persephone sighed. There was so much her mind wanted to dwell on and attempt to unravel, and a good part of her that wanted to chase Artemis down and demand an answer. But

she would have to trust her friend and leave those worries for Kore to dwell on in the morning.

Persephone was here to dance and drink away the tensions of the week and to be seen in her ruby red dress. She took a deep breath, set on a wry smile and cast a spray of butterflies in her hair before ascending the staircase ahead of her.

CHAPTER FIVE: SYMPOSION

Hera perched at the threshold of the manor, the great teal sphinx whose riddle was her smile. All who approached her were let in of course; any who attempted to pass the front gate without an invitation would promptly find themselves transported elsewhere, though invitations were not needed for her to tell the difference. This may have been her husband's ball, but Hera, as always, was undoubtedly the host. Her personal cleaning staff had blasted their way through the ground floor of the estate that morning, sweeping away any evidence of her stepson's less than acceptable hobbies and hygiene. The menu, the decorations, the dress code... all enforced by Hera. And now she was the first face each guest would see on their way inside, and her well-trained smile letting each guest know whether they were in her good graces before they enjoyed her generosity. The question that now had her chewing the side of her mouth like a cow's final cud before slaughter, was how to receive a guest who she had invited but dreaded to see. One whose presence could easily stain the merriment she had so carefully sewn together for her guests no matter how hard she tried.

She wasn't supposed to be alone in this task, but as much as it set her teeth on edge that her husband was late, Hera was far from surprised. With every guest, she glanced back at the clock on the wall, the anxious tapping of her blue silk shoe creating tiny tremors in the floor that caused the guests to fumble with their drinks. A welcome distraction soon came to her in the shape of one of her sons, his regalia in desperate need of straightening up.

"Ares, my darling! So happy you made it!" came her peacock's crow "Come here, your jacket and your sash are all a mess! Let me fix them!" She pulled him close and whispered in his

ear as she smoothed out the tassels of his pauldrons. “Where is your father? He should have been here an hour ago.”

“Haven’t seen him,” Ares shook his head. “He’s not inside?”

“I’ve been at this door since 7:30 and in this house for far longer. If he’s here, I know. Shoulders back, I need to make sure your sash sits right. Did he say anything to you? Have you heard anything?”

“I don’t know anything about Father, but...” Ares obeyed, but cast eyes out to the front steps to see how much time he had to warn his mother of her next cause of distress. “I did see that Hermes has brought a guest with him...”

“Oh? Has your loyal flame Aphrodite caught fire to his house again?”

Any irritation or mocking retaliation Ares would normally have responded with was not to be found. “No flame of his,” he said in a low voice. “The last person I’d expect to see at one of these. You and father never mentioned that he was coming, just a tidbit of information that would’ve been helpful to share with your son and captain of the guard.”

Ares nudged her into silence and gestured towards the doorway. Hermes fluttered in, adjusting his jacket and chattering excitedly at the shadow shrouded figure that followed him. The figure blended into the night, seeming to pull the blackened skyline down to the earth to hide him, slowly revealing a well tailored, albeit out of fashion suit and a silver topped walking stick. The clues were already legible, but much of Hera’s life had depended upon finding definite evidence, so she squinted for the certainty that a face would provide her. The face had the audacity to be obscured by a tophat and a further gloom of dark hair, but then she was certain of the fact she had been denying. The question now was how to receive him.

Hermes mercifully delayed their greeting a moment longer by speeding ahead with a waving hand. He tipped his hat and smiled at his hostess. “Your Majesty!” he said with a deep bow. “Don’t you look exquisite in that gown! And Ares! Always a pleasure!”

“Hermes!” Hera said with a practiced smile, directing her bovine eyes solely on him without the slightest flitting to the figure behind him. “And don’t you look dashing! Ares, don’t you see how easy it is to look nice! If Hermes has time to get a nice suit ironed in between all the work he does, then you have very little excuses. You’re not exactly coming back from rallying the troops.” Ares started to grimace, but Hera carried on before he could protest. “You didn’t happen to see my husband on the way here, did... Ah ! He must have smelled the trouble he was about to be in! Zeus, darling, come greet our guests.”

Zeus strode quickly over, smoothing back his hair as he exchanged electric glances with Hera and Ares. A rumble of thunder echoed around him as he tucked all tension behind his smile, extending a hand to Hermes in one movement as he offered him a hearty welcome. “I see you’ve brought company, my boy,” The steel grey of his eyes demanding the blue of Hermes’ an urgent *Why?*

The spectre behind Hermes stepped forward, spindles of smoke reaching out with the hand he extended to greet Zeus, smiling with a face whose features had remained unchanged, carved in stone since their last meeting ages ago. “Hermes was kind enough to pull me away from business and escort me here.” His voice flickered. Zeus hesitated for a fraction of a second before giving the hand a firm, quick shake and placing a subtly protective hand on the shoulder of his wife. The visitor leaned forward to kiss the lapis ring on Hera’s hand. “You’ve raised a

perfect gentleman, unlike myself. I apologize for the rudeness of my late RSVP, I didn't anticipate being able to join you until very recently. I hope this hasn't created any problems."

"There's no need to apologize," insisted Hera. "You're always welcome." The last sentence felt wrong in her mouth, as if she were uttering a curse upon her own house, even though he was in fact welcome. "We're just pleased that you could finally attend! It's a pleasure to see you."

"What brings you here, Lord Hades?" asked Ares, who felt the fire of his mother's eyes on the back of his neck, scolding him for uttering such words.

Hades suppressed a laugh and gave a wry look to Hermes. "I made a little wager that must be seen through," he explained. "Besides, it's been too long, hasn't it?"

"Oh, certainly!" said Hera! "Please go inside and make yourselves at home! There's plenty to eat and drink, and Zeus and I would love to catch up with you after we've greeted the rest of our guests. And Hermes! Your father wanted to speak with you about something, didn't you, dear, so please come find us once you've had a drink!" She waited before Hermes and Hades made their way into the house before turning to her husband and son and all but shouting through gritted teeth. "What wager?"

"I don't remember a wager." said Zeus, hands up in protest. "If there was a wager, I would sure as Tartarus remember it! Maybe it's with Hermes?"

"Well we'd better find out what it is!" Hera replied.

"Have the huntresses arrived yet?" asked Zeus.

"The hunt is on guard?" Ares blinked. "Why didn't you tell me?"

“Well it’s not exactly good fortune to spread his name around, and if I’m being honest we were hoping that he wouldn’t show up,” sighed Hera, bracelets jingling with her frantic hands. “And yes, most of them have already arrived. Artemis just passed through. Zeus, find out as much as you can from Hermes. Ares and I will do our best to keep everyone in good spirits.”

“I haven’t been able to gather anything,” said Artemis, out of breath, “He disappears every time I think I’ve caught him in the crowd, Hermes carries on as if he’s any other party guest. My huntresses have scoped the estate and are fairly certain that they’ve come alone at least. There don’t seem to be any more of his kind here, but I can’t say that makes me feel any less uneasy-”

“He’s come for a bride,” said Zeus with solemn certainty.

Artemis caught the rest of her report in the back of her throat. “Are you sure, Father?”

He took a sip of bourbon, eagle eyes unmoving from the center of the dance floor.

“Frankly, I’m surprised it hasn’t happened sooner. Every king seeks a consort at some point in his reign, be it out of want or need; as much as I feel sorry for the girl, I feel the slightest tinge less uneasy around him knowing that he does have human urges.”

Artemis followed his stare to the dance floor, which buzzed about in uneasy merriment, couples waltzing around the edges of the room near the spectators so as not to touch the haze that clouded the center of the room. There spun the king of the dead himself, smiling darkly down at the woman in his arms, whose laughter rattled through Artemis’ ears. Tiny flowers dripped down her dress like blood onto the marble floor with each twirl of her red skirt, her eyes entranced by the spectre leading her. Artemis lunged forward but was stopped by Zeus.

“Stand back,” said her father. “We aren’t going to make a scene.”

“But Father, he’s hypnotized her!”

“I can see that,” Zeus closed his eyes. “But we should be grateful his target is so narrow. Better one nymph than all of the ballroom.”

Artemis stepped back with a scoff of betrayal. “But she’s-”

“Artemis, I’m serious,” said Kore with an obstinate pout. “You have to promise that you won’t tell anyone. No matter what happens, even if my life’s in danger, this can’t get back to my mother. No one who would tell her can know it’s me.”

“Alright, alright, I swear!” Artemis laughed, pinching the tip of Kore’s nose. “Gods, you need to see the look on your face! It’s too cute!”

“Artemis.” Kore’s tone slew her laughter in one strike. “This isn’t a joke.”

“I know, I know.”

“Then what do you swear on?”

She sighed and placed a hand over her heart. “I swear on my vow to the wild hunt, I will never tell a soul that you’re Persephone.”

Artemis clenched her fists. “She’s just a girl, barely older than Hebe. We can’t just let him put her in a trance and do his bidding with her!”

“You think it doesn’t hurt me to see it too?” said Zeus. “But you must understand, my Doe, when people put their faith in you as their leader, you learn to make sacrifices to protect them. I don’t want to know what may become of that girl if this is his intention, but I’d no sooner learn what would happen to this city if we refused him. If one nymph must be the sacrificial cow to appease the king of the dead, to make him return to his realm without trouble, then so be it.”

“Is there not anything we can do?” she snapped. “It’s against my oath to let one of his kind steal away a victim under my watch.”

“He won’t be taking her tonight,” said Zeus. “Of all the things that I could say about him, he lives by rules and etiquette and comports himself as a gentleman. If she holds his interest he’ll court her and ask her father’s permission for her hand before he whisks her away. If the girl’s a bastard, which the rumors seem to be, then he will come to me, and I will accept his offer if she is all that he demands.” He placed a hand on his daughter’s shoulder. “I will not restrain you from carrying out your oaths, Artemis. If I am correct and the girl is still among us after the ball tonight, you may do your best to break her out of her stupor so long as you don’t interfere with *him*. Do not offend him, do not question or threaten him, do not look his way. If you can’t bring the girl—”

“Her name is *Persephone*.” Artemis growled. “Use her name and think of her as someone’s sister and daughter if you’re so content to use her as your sacrifice.”

Zeus held the apology he could not utter in his eyes. “If you cannot bring Persephone to her senses, then you must let her go. That man is not like your other targets. He cannot simply be disposed of. He is the one barrier between Olympia and the unending hordes of the dead he governs. At the end of the day, he must get what he wants. Do you hear me, Doe?”

Artemis returned her glare to the dancers, finding herself more nauseated by every spin they took. Persephone’s joy, the freedom of her movements, the bells of her laughter, sights and sounds that once filled her with such happiness and relief to behold, felt so twisted under the puppet strings of the man of smoke and cremation ash. How dare he take advantage of her innocence, of the one space where she shed her hypervigilance and could exist as a free and

apprehensionless maiden? And how dare her father expect her to just stand by? But Artemis knew not to question his word, so shake Persephone— shake *Kore* from it she would. As soon as she was out of the arms of that fiend, her lungs free of his smoke, she would bring her to her senses and set her free before it was too late.

“Fine.” she said. “But I’ll leave you with one last question, Father, one I hope you remember if I fail and he comes knocking on your door to ask for her hand. Would you resign your own daughter to that fate?”

“Artemis—” Zeus called back after her, but his daughter was already retreating from whence she came.

“I’m getting a drink,” she said. “If we’re so set on standing by and being useless. Enjoy your party.”

CHAPTER SIX: THEOGONY

“Take a few drops of this under your tongue an hour before you reach the station and twice daily until you return,” Demeter instructed her, placing a small brown bottle in her hand. “But if the miasma is too thick, take a strong whiff of these herbs and it should alleviate the sickness for a while.”

Demeter’s sprawling greenhouse was a new addition to the city. Up until a few years prior, she and her daughter had run their business out of their modest cottage on the outskirts, traveling about to keep some semblance of agriculture as the city built itself up in their way. It had been hard to keep things alive in a city that insisted upon growing and growing, to appeal to a population so uninterested in preserving prairies and meadows and the gods who created them when they could bring their worship to those who could offer them textile mills and gleaming electric lights. Hard times had overtaken them and threatened to swallow them up like the dark valley swallowed the train to the Necropolis.

“Thank you, my lady,” the customer bowed her head. She accepted the bundle and vial and tucked them into her purse. “I can’t tell you how grateful I am that I can reach you in the city now. It was quite a trek to find you in the outskirts... a trek that I was happy to make, of course, but I’m so happy for you that you’ve found such success here.”

“Oh believe me, I am too,” said Demeter, coaxing an apple sapling taller with her finger as she spoke. “It was so difficult keeping everything running out there on my own, taking care of my Kore with less and less offerings and prayers. It was a dark and lonely world defending my daughter and my domain against the factories and townhouses.” She took the fingertip of a branch in her hand and slowly spread open her fingers as an apple grew and reddened between

them. “But I conquered that beast as I had to and know it serves us very well. I used to worry about keeping us fed, but now no one in this sprawling place will have to make do on empty bellies, as we did, for much longer.”

She had conquered the beast, and well. The machines that served her brothers and their children now plowed her fields, fertilized her plants, and brought more food than she and her daughter could ever carry on their own to markets, estates and mess halls across Olympia. Now she had the freedom to listen to the pleas of the farmers and gardeners from her new greenhouse as she experimented with new fertilizers and irrigation systems.

“I am so glad that the two of you can finally live as comfortably as you deserve.” The customer smiled, accepting the apple and turning it over in her hand. Its skin glistened with fresh dew, garnet red with flecks and swirls of tourmaline green. “It must be a relief knowing you can provide a dowry for sweet Kore, and I’m sure she’ll have her pick of suitors considering her mother’s fortune and success.” She chuckled, a bite of apple in her mouth. “Why, you must be beating the men off her with a stick!”

She coughed as the apple, first so sweet and crisp in her mouth, turned dusty and bitter on her tongue. Looking down at the fruit in her hand, she jumped and dropped it with a startled squeak. It was blackening and shriveling in on itself and crumbled like a chunk of coal in the grass.

“Oh, Kore isn’t seeking any suitors,” said Demeter coolly, brushing the remains of a second cremated apple off of her hands. “Smart young gentlemen know not to come looking for a bride around here, and the dim-witted ones will know soon enough. As soon as she’s found her

domain, she'll petition Zeus to have her sanctified as a maiden goddess." She pruned a wayward branch from the tree. "And there won't be any more nonsense after that."

"Oh, I see," nodded the customer. "Please accept my apology if I offended you, My Lady."

"It's alright," Demeter answered. "Humans like yourself don't have such a luxury, and neither did I. But now a goddess has the right to claim her independence if she is powerful enough on her own, and all men do is fool you into thinking they're special so they can steal your power and use you to fuel their machines in the background. I'm not risking losing Kore to that."

With the creak of a swinging door and the frantic patter of feet, in dashed Artemis. She stood straight at a soldier's attention with a neutral smile, but her shoulders subtly heaved below the eyes of a startled deer. "Good morning, Lady Demeter," she smiled. "Is Kore here?"

"She's at the back of the greenhouse trying to find out why the berries keep molding," Demeter answered, raising an eyebrow. "Is something the matter, dear?"

Artemis stifled a sigh of relief. "I just... figured she must've heard about what happened at the ball last night. Has she? I knew the news would make her anxious, but the wild hunt has the situation under control and I figured it would put her nerves at ease to hear from me that she's safe."

"Go right ahead," said Demeter. "I'd follow you to listen if I didn't have three more customers waiting outside, but please come and talk to me about it on the way out. I'd ask Kore to pass the information you give her along, but I'm sure there's details you know to spare her from." She smiled as she accepted a handful of coins and a bottle of mead from the customer

and sent a rustling through the vines along the ceiling to the door to summon the next one.

“Speaking of which, please be... *delicate* with how you explain this to my daughter, dear. She’s not worldlywise like you and your friends; I don’t want her having nightmares or getting tangled up with questions in conflicts she won’t understand.”

“Of course, My Lady.” Artemis nodded before dashing past Demeter’s workshop, down the rows and rows of perfectly manicured plants and toolsheds to the patch of berries where Kore knelt, yawning as she stretched her arms above her disheveled and blossoming nest of hair. Artemis all but slid across the cobblestones to the space before Kore and grabbed her by the shoulders.

“Woah, by the bloody titans,” Kore blinked in confusion. “Good Morning to you too.”

“Kore, are you alright? I didn’t see you after the ball, I was so worried.”

“I’m sorry, I figured I’d be walking home like I usually do,” Kore answered. “I saw Hekaerge when I was leaving and asked her to let you know. Did she not tell you?”

“She told me that you left in a carriage with two unmarried gods! Hermes and... who was it again, it’s slipping my mind, oh, *the king of the underground!*”

Kore clamped a hand over Artemis’ mouth. “Keep your bloody voice down!” she growled, her jaw clenched. The berry patch beside her, already pathetic in its molding misery, drooped and dropped a smattering of withered leaves at the sound of her voice. Kore groaned and began bitterly aerating the soil around them with her fingers. “In case you’ve forgotten, my mother is on the other side of the greenhouse.”

“And in case *you’ve* forgotten, you got into a carriage with the ruler of the very monsters we hunt, and danced with him all night! I don’t even want to know how much miasma you

breathed in. That could kill you, you know that?” She took Kore’s face in her hand. She was talking like her normal self, at least, and her eyes didn’t have the glassiness of a girl entranced, but her face was strangely cool to the touch, and a telltale shadow hollowed the sockets of her eyes and her usually soft cheeks. “I think he’s gotten you ill! Have you seen yourself?”

Kore squinted at her with exasperation. “Or, to present an alternate theory, that could be because I got maybe three hours of sleep last night and five the night before! I breathed in just as much ‘miasma’ as you and the rest of the ball. I’m fine.”

“That’s debatable, but more importantly, you got into a carriage with him! Have you forgotten everything I’ve taught you? He could have entranced you and done Fates know what!”

“I only accepted a ride from him because Hermes was there too,” said Kore. “I’m not an idiot. But, what proof do we have that Hades is one of them just because he rules them? What need would he have to buy immortality like that? He has a domain and a job that gives him ample worship. Why would someone choose that if they were so secure in their godhood already?”

Artemis stared out through the greenhouse windows at the sky as grey as her eyes, absentmindedly spinning her dagger in one hand in a rhythm to chase away the storm. “It’s not that simple,” she said. “Do I need to remind you how he came to rule over the sleepless dead in the first place? How they came to be?”

“I know that story well, Artemis.” Kore rubbed her tired eye.

“Not well enough,” she answered

“Long ago, before Princess Hebe gifted us with the ambrosia that keeps us young, lived a king consumed by the fear of the end. The end of his rule, the end of his life, the end of a time in history when he would be more than just a name on paper, a face that people only knew from portraits that failed to capture his likeness. He had achieved godhood, but was only worshiped for his position as king and worried that if one of his sons overtook him, he would be worshiped no longer. The same end had come to his own father, who had grown tyrannical in his madness and that the king himself had overthrown. He felt righteous in his actions then, but now he understood his father’s fear. He was no longer the handsome, fearsome warrior he’d been when he usurped the throne. His muscle had begun to atrophy, his skin to crease and wan, his sway over women and his subjects to wane, and in the stead of his once heroic image in the eyes of his people, rumors began to steep. His mind was beginning to teeter and rust, and froze every time that he caught it, desperately trying to discern whether it was paranoia or if disease and age were truly eating away at his mind and body. He couldn’t distinguish the difference.

His people were catching on to how desperately he clung to his throne, the coldness with which he treated his wife and his children, surely because he knew one of them would overtake him. They were right. He swore he could feel his sons sizing him up as if they stood in an arena with every new sign of age he displayed, waiting for just the right moment to strike him down. There was talk in the kingdom about how his eldest had a diplomatic genius that he himself had never possessed, how his youngest had gained the charm he could no longer master. He could feel himself rotting from the inside out, and it was torture. He wasn’t ready to let go, certainly not like this, not yet....

So he reached out to the darkness, offered it everything he had to freeze himself in time, for a way to reabsorb his youth and power and become the most formidable thing in his kingdom once more. He begged for a way for his life and his rule to be eternal.

And it was so.

He didn't return to his bed that night, and when his queen found him late the next day, wandering the halls of the castle, he was a different creature entirely from the husband she knew. He did not move like a man of his age, nor like a man at all, for that matter. There was something subtly animal in his gait, in his hunching posture and the contortions of his movements. It had been years since he had looked upon her with love, but she'd grown accustomed to his anxious weariness, even his anger. But the way he looked at her now filled her with an uneasiness that his scorn had never created in her. His stare said that she was something less than human to him, and that he was something greater. She learned to avoid him in her own home, ducking down the nearest hallway whenever she heard his approach and taking on the diplomatic missions abroad that the king could no longer bother himself to attend. Her only solace came from the fact that he had no desire to take meals with her anymore, nor did he join her in bed. She had once felt envy towards his mistresses, but now was grateful that only they seemed to have the misfortune of sharing a bed with him. Let them have him; He was cold to the touch and reeked of death.

And then, her eldest son took ill. His symptoms dumbfounded every doctor she brought in, each of whom tried every cure they could think of, but to no avail. He wilted like a sun-scorched flower in drought, feverish and muttering delusions of a dark figure looming over his bed at night. The queen, in her dark hour, tried desperately to find solace in her husband once more, but he was strangely indifferent to the matter, brushing it off as if being told that the boy had come

down with a cough. His spirits were strangely high, and as the child took a turn for the worse, the queen realized that her husband's health was taking a turn for the better. A glow returned to his skin that had departed for good a decade before. Strength was returning to his limbs, and she wondered if her eyes were tricking her, for she was certain that instead of continuing to go grey as he slowly had been for the last twenty years, the once grey hairs departed to make way for more color. One by one, each of her children fell ill, all but her youngest son. She plotted to send to the countryside with his nurse, far away from his father's grasp. She dared not tell the king, who, even in his newfound power, raved and muttered that his sons were looking at him like a foe to be overthrown. Her precious boy would not be safe that way. So she tended to his bedside for many nights as if he too had taken ill, and on the morning after his departure, ran to the king, tear stricken to tell him that his youngest had passed. He placed a cold hand on her shoulder in reassurance and made funeral arrangements, but she caught a flicker of relief in his eyes, the look of a general who had taken out one more legion of enemy troops.

The queen scolded herself at first for even having a passing thought of it, but as her children grew sicker, and members of the castle guard were found dead at their posts, appearing to be mauled by some wild animal, the terror that her husband might be the cause of all this seized her. When her eldest son awoke from a nightmare with a dreadful wound on his neck, the queen had not a doubt in her mind. Her nights were now dedicated to searching for where the king disappeared to, for any clue of what he had become, and she soon received confirmation from the king's concubines and her own eyes that he did not spend his nights with them either. The concubines confessed to the queen that they too were unnerved by the king's sudden change,

that there was something strange and violent in his temperament, and that one of their ranks had gone missing two days before after spending the night with him.

That night, she returned to her bedchamber with the conviction to catch her husband in the act. She armed herself with her father's dagger and waited in the shadows of the room where her children slept, waiting to see what her king was doing to them.

Word of the queen's murder rung through the kingdom like a warning bell. Rumors had already stirred since the princes and princesses took ill and disappeared from public view, wives' tales had speculated on the cause of the king's sudden return to youth... But the queen's death was sudden, and the king's proclamation that he would track down her killer rang hollow when he looked more alive than he had in decades. But there was nothing to be done. Who would dare challenge him when it was certain they'd return like the queen, her guards, the king's concubines; all whose coffins no one dared present open?

So years passed, frigid as eyes cast down and away from the castle so attention wouldn't be attracted, so stares would go unnoticed. When the king announced that his sickly eldest son had gone missing and sent a search party on a fruitless mission to find him, it was taken as unspoken truth that he was hiding the poor boy's murder. The kingdom seemed resigned to wait until the king himself succumbed to the illness he spread if not his age, unsure of what to tell themselves when for fifteen years more, he stayed viciously young and savagely strong, the sentinels who guarded his palace, those who didn't turn up dead, became madly grinning, hulking shadows in his image. What was there to be done, who had they left to turn to for help?

Who was left to rescue them from the mad king when he had ensured there was no heir left to succeed him?

But his heirs all lived, wasting away in his dungeon, and the youngest, safe in the coastal palace of his aunt, had finally come of age. His eldest brother had in fact escaped, and barely alive, managed to find the boy, tell him the truth about their father and beg him for help. The youngest prince rode in like lighting with legions of men behind him, freed his ailing siblings from their prison and laid siege on his father's palace. A savior had risen for them from the dead, and this miracle inspired the people to join the revolt, ready to sacrifice it all now that there was a fighting chance.

After a long battle, mad King Kronos was defeated by Zeus, his youngest son. Unable to kill him, Zeus imprisoned him deep in Tartarus, far below and away from Olympia, and declared that he would defend his people from those wretched creatures like his father. Chosen as the next king due to his heroics, Zeus swore there was no longer anything to fear, but continued to rule the kingdom with an iron grip, for he soon learned that many of his father's victims, like Kronos himself, had learned a tricky habit of evading death, and the agony of such a condition, so far from being human, would make a monster and a traitor out of even those who shared his blood.

Zeus' brothers and sisters soon recovered from their illness... or so they claimed, for there is a story that no one speaks of. Hades, the eldest son, is said to remain afflicted by his father's illness, and that was why he was chosen to rule the Necropolis, ensuring that the dead and those who shared his disease did not escape."

“I’m not questioning your maturity or your intelligence, Kore,” Artemis concluded.

“There’s simply a lot of this world that’s been kept from you, but it’s important for you to know before you decide what direction you’re going in.”

“With all due respect, I’m aware.” said Kore, spinning a freshly plucked weed in her fingertips. “I don’t have a domain like you, I understand the desperation and its risks. That’s why I’m trying three paths at once, I don’t want to wind up like them if one falls through.”

“The question is if you’ve weighed the risks of your paths, though.” said Artemis. “If you enter a courtship or any less respectable entanglement with *him*, you are dancing with the sleepless dead whether he is one of them or not. Even if he bought his immortality the proper way, the people he’s supposed to be ruling over are ravaging our city in larger and larger numbers, meaning he’s either encouraging them to do so or can’t keep control of his prisoners and wouldn’t be able to protect you from them.”

“I can protect myself,” grimaced Kore, sprouting thorns.

Artemis gripped her friend’s shoulder with a protective hand. “Tradition isn’t the only reason we’ve only let you be bait on the streets with the hunt not far behind. Once you begin to hunt them, that becomes your neverending purpose. It’s safer than marrying one of them in my opinion, but you will still be dancing with them until we’re rid of them for good, or until they make you one of theirs.” Her hand was pulled to the cord around her neck, hung with beads and arrowheads. “We’ve lost our share of girls to them. At the very least, you should understand why I’m hesitant to let you join our number.”

“What other option do I have, Artemis?” Kore snapped. “Stay here?” Her hand rushed to her throat as if she could stop her voice from carrying across the greenhouse. Her eyes darkened as she lowered it to a pained whisper. “Why would you ask that of me?”

“I’m just asking you to really think, Kore.” Artemis rose to her feet. “I have business I need to attend to, and I’d like to give you some time to consider things. I know that you planned to join us tomorrow night, but I’m asking you to stay home this week.”

“What?”

“I talked it over with the hunt, and we think it’s best that you stay back until our visitor returns to the Necropolis.” She studied her friend’s desperate gaze and met it with a piercing one. “Don’t try to sway me, you’re not going to change my mind.”

“Are you serious?” Kore’s fists hit the earth, reinvigorating it with a snarl of weeds to replace those she had pulled. “Do you not trust me?”

“I do, but you need time to clear your head of his miasma, and we just want to be careful. He shouldn’t be in town too long, but it will give you enough time to think things over before you join us again.” Sensing protest coming from Kore, Artemis brushed the dirt off of her skirt and turned to leave. “I have to go, I’ll be late for my meeting with father.”

“Artemis, wait!” Kore rose to her knees and reached out a hand in protest. “You can’t keep me away! Aside from the parties, joining your hunts in the little way I can is what keeps me going! I don’t have any other release or control or fun in my life without that!”

“I know, and I’m sorry.” Artemis sighed in sympathy. “But like you told me, you’re clearly exhausted from living a double life. You’re not getting any sleep, and I worry that it’s clouding your judgement. If I don’t run into you beforehand, I’ll see you at my brother’s ball,

alright?” As she made her way out to the sound of Kore’s irritated grumbling, she called back. “If you want to join us again soon, then I advise you to stop giving *him* any reason to stay.”

Kore fell back on her heels, her heavy head in her hands. She hears the train’s howling whine plead at her ears, luring her out with its sweet smoke. Her body did beg for rest, every part of her hanging too loose for its ligaments, but she was too stubborn to succumb to exhaustion. A good night of sleep lost its comfort when she knew it was a punishment.

She had been slumped there in a fog outside of time, unsure if it had been minutes or moments since Artemis had left when her mother called:

“Kore! Are you done yet? I need your help.”

She exhaled in sympathy with her withering leaves. Of course, when it was chores and standing as a smiling shopfront doll that competed with her sleep instead of running with the hunt, she no longer felt so resentful of her bead. Her limbs cried that they were too heavy to be lifted, but as her mother called again:

“Kore? Did you hear me? Come here, now!”

She realized the gap would need to be filled. It would mean undoing her morning’s ceaseless work, but she could blame that on her talent not coming through or a disease in the soil; looking lazy and disinterested, not running up smiling when called, those were far worse offenses.

“Just a moment, Mama!”

Planting her hands in the berry patch, she closed her eyes to scry for their tiny veins pulsing deep in the dirt. She coaxed those veins to feed her, and felt the berry bushes shrink in on

themselves and lose color as their fresh blood brought life to her sleepless eyes. She kissed a withered leaf in thanks before dashing through the greenhouse to her mother's call.

CHAPTER SEVEN: PROLOGOS

A black hound of three heads perched silent at the hilltop overlooking the castle they called home. They had raced up the hill ahead of their master despite his protests when their well-bread ears caught the sound of a visitor approaching, charging forward at a speed he had no chance of keeping up with. They had reached the ideal spot without capture and were now sniffing professorially at the fog with long pointed noses. Catching a marked scent, the middle one began to whine excitedly, but his two brothers growled until he held his tongue. The scent of the capital en mass always preceded that of the individual, and they were not being good sons if they alerted their master before they could tell him if friend or foe was coming to visit. Their mission in life was to be very good sons and earn fond scratchings from their master behind their ears and be treated to a dinner of veal.

A man in a top hat came into view, a fan of blue and yellow feathers on either side of his crown like wings. He strolled towards them in an easy, floating gait, moving deceptively fast through the grass for how little of an exertion this seemed to be on him. He whistled a merry tune that pricked the ears of the three hounds, and they deduced that the voice and soft blonde curls were very familiar. They craned their necks forward, snuffling for his scent, but just as they discovered it, one of a friend that their master would be eager to see, the man locked eyes with them and pulled a paper bag from his pocket. He opened it up and shook it tauntingly at them, revealing a fact far more important than whether or not this man was a threat to their master.

TREATS!

Throwing back their heads in a gleeful howl, the three bounded down the hill, yapping and drooling and prancing like a circus horse. The man threw his arms in the air in greeting and

let the hound topple him over, licking his face and clambering for the bag of raw sausages that he held just out of reach.

“Now, now, don’t you remember? You say hello to your uncle before you get your present!” Chuckled the man. “Don’t tell me that you only love me when I bring you treats! I should hope not! Off of me, brigands! Stand at attention!”

The hounds remembered their routine, unhanding their visitor and sitting obediently at his feet with eager grins and lolling tongues. The man rose to his feet. “Thank you gentlemen. Now if you shake my hand, I might be persuaded to give you your gifts. Now shake!” The three headed hound held out a jittering paw which the man shook thrice with the same level of pomp he’d use to greet men of great importance before reaching into the bag and tossing them each a sausage. The hound leapt to catch them, gobbling them down and yelping greedily for seconds, which were dutifully provided before a low voice spooked man and dog from their greetings.

“Spoiling my boys again, Hermes?” said the voice, bemused “I hope you’re not trying to steal them away from me, they’re starting to love you more than me!”

As if to reassure their master of their loyalty, the hound rushed him in greeting, leaping in mad attempts to lick his chin and yammering to announce the visitor that he already saw before him. They each received a well earned scratching on the head in thanks for their service.

“Lord Hades, your grace!” exclaimed the visitor, lifting his fallen top hat from the ground to tip it at him and place it back on his head. “It’s so good to see you! You know, I wouldn’t have to lure these dashing boys away if the four of you would accept the countless invitations to dinner that I have sent you.”

“Need I remind you how close to the capitol you live?” Hades answered, clapping a hand to his back in greeting “As much as I enjoy your company, I can’t say it’s worth putting my life at risk. Besides, business has kept me busy.”

“You offend me, my Lord!” said Hermes with a grinning scowl. “I come all this way, and with information you requested of me no less, only to learn that I would not be worth the same journey to you!”

Hades rolled his eyes in fondness. “Come inside,” he said, turning back from whence he came and gesturing for Hermes to follow. “I’ll make it up to you over tea.”

“They’ll be meeting in the town hall on Thursday night,” said Hermes, leaning out of his armchair to hand Hades a bound leather file. “Everything else you need is here.”

Hades nodded in thanks as he accepted it, tucking it aside before attending once more to the dog’s whining, which resumed the moment his hand was not scratching at least one set of ears. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Hermes sipped his tea “You’d be much less woefully dependent upon me if you came into the capital and mingled a bit yourself.” He received no more than a shake of the head in response, but bolted forward in his seat as a new idea took him “That’s it! You should come to the ball with me on Friday!”

“Oh, most certainly.” Hades muttered into his glass in a wry voice. “I’ll ready the horses at once.”

“No, I’m serious! Zeus and Hera are throwing a ball at their estate, and I know for a fact that they sends you an invitation every time they host one, and you’ve been very rude to ignore

them so many times, and not very smart either; if you were as wise as you make yourself up to be, you'd accept every third invitation to shake off any suspicion."

"Yes, and I'd turn around and raise that suspicion back up when Lady Artemis and her guard dogs got a whiff of me." The hound cocked one head at him in offense, but was quickly reassured with firm pat. "Not you, boys, please accept my apologies for comparing them to the likes of you. That was deeply insulting."

"His majesty's hunters rarely show up to these sort of things, they're much too occupied as you well know. But even still, need I remind you that this ball is being catered by Dionysus? The few hunters who are there will be on the opposite of high alert, his lordship practically demands that all of his guests drink to the point of madness."

"Ah yes. My favorite kind of party."

"Oh would you stop being such a prude, Hades?" came a shrill triad of women's voices, accompanied by a single set of stomping feet. The woman, whose face flickered between that of a snickering sister, a scolding mother, and a bemused old wise woman, walked purposefully into the study with an accusatory finger pointed at Hades, mahogany hair flying like smoke behind her. "Hermes, I'm begging you, get that man out of this house and into Dionysus' clutches tonight whatever it takes! I need a break from his constant stench of ennui."

Hades turned his head in an owl-like motion to the source of the sound "Hecate, what are you doing here?"

Hecate patted his shoulder before claiming hold over an empty loveseat. "Lovely to see you too, Your Grace, but you're changing the subject. If you're so afraid of arousing suspicion in the capital, you'd cast some off by finding yourself a wife!"

“That wasn’t an answer to my question-” Hades grumbled into his teacup. “All you’ve told me is that you’ve been listening in on our conversation since Hermes got here, as I should have suspected.”

Hecate tsked. “My Lord, with as little respect as I am permitted to give you without losing my head, I am tired of being the governess to your melancholy, A little drinking to the point of madness would do you some good!”

“Thank you, Lady Hecate!” Hermes said with exultant hands “Finally some reason in this house! Please inform this gentleman of how desperately he needs to find a wife-”

“Says another bachelor,” Hades interjected coolly.

Hermes huffed, his winged boots lifting him off the floor in his frustration. “I am a man about town, thank you very much! I have friends outside of work, and I have lovers and bastards to show for it who I spend quality time with! You, on the other hand, seem content to rot alone with eons as if attending to people’s funeral rites and sending unspeakables to their doom counts as social interaction!”

“They keep me very busy,” was Hades’ response. “Besides, I have you two and Charon, I have my dog, and a lifestyle that I wouldn’t dare inflict upon whatever unfortunate woman approaches me at a ball and mistakes me for a worthy suitor.”

“But what if there’s a woman who wants this kind of life?” asked Hecate, earnest, scrying and bemused. “You know that Hermes and I wouldn’t bother you about it so much if you were happy. You don’t want us to worry about you, you think your work is too important to be troubled by it, but I know that you’re lonely.” One face eyed him with sweetness while another one teased, but at the center, her eyes were white and flickering, reading something far away. The

two men ceased their bickering and watched her intently, waiting to hear what she had grasped. “You think it would be cruel to drag someone down here with you because you had no choice in it yourself, but what if you met someone who wanted to be here with you, knowing and even eagerly awaiting all that it entailed?”

Hades rose from his seat with a rush of smoke, all of him a flickering of moth wings at her words. “Wait... Is there such a woman? Do you see something?”

Hecate hummed as she gazed deeper, nodding along with a smile before blinking out of her stupor to greet Hades with a wicked grin. “Why would I tell you when you can go to the ball and look for yourself?”

“Are you seriously...” Hades tried to hide the hope she’d relit within him under his frustration, but he hadn’t the patience for it. It would be at the cost of never hearing the end of it, but that was a problem of lesser importance. “Hecate, if this is no more than a ploy to get me to the ball, I need you to be truly honest with me. I can’t handle—”

“I know, I know when it’s best to leave your poor nerves alone, don’t worry.” She placed a hand on his shoulder and smiled, no more mockery, “Let Hermes take you to the ball. In fact, pack to stay at your flat upstairs for a little while. I can’t make any promises, but I’m asking you to trust me.”

Hades was ready to protest again, but some cord inside of him pulled taught, refusing to let him say no. He told himself this feeling was just the certainty that it would take a lot more than he had the energy for to convince Hermes and Hecate to drop this, but admitting that he felt the ringing of fate deep within him would’ve been far harder to admit.

“Well...” he said. “I wouldn’t be able to bring Cerberus, but I don’t like leaving him alone for that long.”

Hecate threw her head back and groaned.

Hermes shook his head excitedly “No no! This is an improvement! I haven’t ever gotten him far enough to consider what to do with the dog! This is good!”

Hades smirked. “You do know that I’m right here?”

Hermes narrowed his eyes. “I’m only saying this because you’re right here. You need to hear yourself.”

“I’LL WATCH THE DOG!” Hecate snapped, voice ringing. “Go! Just go! I will take care of the dog.”

“Don’t you want to go to the ball?” asked Hades.

Hecate shook her head. “*I* actually go to parties fairly often, I can spare one. It’s you we’re worrying about today!” She lifted Cerberus’ heads in her hands and lured them towards her “Come here, babies! Aunt Hecate will take very good care of you! Don’t you think it’s a good idea for Papa to go out? Aren’t you getting tired of his moping around? Tell him how badly you want him to bring you back a mother! Tell him!”

Cerberus whined in a chord to match Hecates’, their mischievous red eyes and three goofy, lolling smiles on Hades.

“On second thought, maybe I shouldn’t leave him with you,” said Hades, scratching his goatee “He’s already enough of a menace without your influence.”

Hermes pulled out his pocket watch with a grin. “Well, would you look at the time! The two of us had better be off! We can’t have you showing up late for your public debut! If we miss

this afternoon's train, there's no chance we'll make it in time!!" He took his reluctant friend by the wrist and made a fluttering b-line for the door.

"Now?" Hades blinked in confusion. "But we were just... Will you at least let me make myself look presentable first? I have no idea what state my hair is in and I really should put on some cologne--"

"You're already overdressed for the occasion as usual, you'll be fine," insisted Hermes, dragging him out of the parlor and down the stairs to the entryway. "I'm not giving you a chance to polish yourself up even more. I may be trying to find you a bride, but I'll be damned if you show me up in front of my dearest Duchess Aphrodite."

"That shouldn't be a worry, Hermes," said Hecate, racing down the stairs ahead of them with the three hounds scrambling behind her to select a hat and a cloak from the coat closet. "His Grace is too much of a prude to excite the Duchess' sensibilities. Don't worry, Lord Hades, if you decide to stay, as I suspect you will, I'll have a trunk sent to your flat in town. I'll even pack it myself."

Hades sighed in exasperation as he found himself at the bottom of the stairs as Hermes and Hecate tested a number of hats and coats against his suit as if he were their porcelain doll. "Why do the two of you insist on insulting me to my face? If you'd let me get ready on my own upstairs, you could stay down here and gossip about me to pass the time."

"And give you a chance to change your mind? Most certainly not!"

"Oh and one last thing!" Hecate sifted through the many pockets that decorated her skirts and waistcoat before triumphantly pulling out an amulet of twisted iron and fastening it to the center of Hades' cravat. "And to think you were about to go out there without protection and get

yourself killed! I hope you find someone to help me look after you, but I'll forgive you for coming back empty handed if you at least blight someone's bloodline and wake up in someone else's bed." She threw open the door and smiled. "Ah, and there's Charon with the carriage, just on time!"

Hades stared dumbstruck at the scene before him. "When did you tell Charon to ready the carriage?" he asked. He watched Hermes exchange a handful of coins with the chauffeur, who gave him a crooked grin and a tip of his hat. "Was this a setup? You planned this and bet on me no less? From Hermes I should have known better, but Hecate? I thought you were being genuine with me!"

"Oh that was all genuine," Said Hecate with a wink, "But we all know and love you and thus genuinely knew that it would take some advanced planning to get you to this ball tonight."

Hades shook his head in resignation. He wasn't ready to give Hermes and Hecate the sweet victory of agreeing eagerly to follow, but he found a quiet amusement in their games and privately hoped that they would prove him wrong. He looked back at his castle, so quiet and cold despite being a place of safety. He had long since given up hope that he could share this place with anyone else, but some thread inside him pulled him forward, promising a chance. It wasn't as if he'd disproved the impossible before.

CHAPTER EIGHT: NOSTOS

As the carriage turned onto the street of Zeus and Hera's estate, the two gods were bathed in a sea of light and laughter which rolled down the tiered floors of the manor down the garden hill, waves stirring the sea. The tuning chords of a distant orchestra and the woodwind chatter of arriving guests in jewel-toned suits and bustled gowns, feathered hats and bouffants floating as birds above them. Hades pulled off his hat in wonder, blinking as eyes adjusted to the sudden rush of color. He thanked the darkness of the night sky for making the transition easier. He glanced over to Hermes, who was giving him his signature knowing grin.

"What?"

Hermes nudged him in the shoulder. "You're going to thank me for this later, I know it. I'm tempted to make a bet."

Hades shook his head "You should know by now not to gamble against me, Hermes."

Hermes scrunched his nose in defiance "That should prove to you how certain I am."

"Alright then," Hades nodded "What's your wager?"

"See, I can like the way you think sometimes!" Hermes cupped his chin in thought "Hmm... I wager... that if you enjoy yourself, you'll come with me to another two of these before the year is out, but if you regret coming out with me tonight, I'll give you my winged shoes."

Hades raised his brow. "You're that serious?" He set a stern hand on Hermes' shoulder "Are you plotting something?"

"I'm not plotting anything," insisted Hermes.

"Is *someone else* plotting something?"

“If I was, hypothetically, willing to share other’s secrets so easily, would you really trust me to keep yours?”

Hades grumbled through clenched teeth “Fair, but I’d lose my trust in you just as easily if you led me into a situation knowing I’ll be made a fool of.”

Hermes exaggerated a gasp. “Is your trust in me so tenuous?” he sighed and put his hands up in protest “I promise you that if any meddling has been done, it isn’t for your harm, but maybe your benefit.”

Hades was still unsure “Can I trust the person who so kindly bestows this ‘benefit’?”

“If there is such a person, I swear on my life that you can.”

“Well, Hermes,” sighed Hades, taking a long, beleaguered sip from his flask. “I hope you enjoy your last night of dancing with those winged shoes. I have no doubt they’ll be mine in the morning.”

“Oh no, don’t think you can call in on your winnings just yet,” Hermes shook his head, leaning back against the wall with one foot. “We’ve been here for an hour, which, as I understand you might not be aware, is not enough time to judge a party.”

“Oh yes, and I suppose in another half hour, everyone in this ballroom will get tired of staying no less than ten feet away from me at all times and looking at me like I carried off the corpse of their beloved mother.”

“Well to their credit, you probably have.”

Hades squinted at him indignantly. “Did I do something to offend you and Hecate? Because it’s my job to decide how people suffer, and I make a point of making it evident what

crimes one has committed before I leave them to that fate, so I'd hope you'd do me the same justice."

Hermes opened his mouth to make another wisecrack, closing it promptly as he reexamined Hades' face and realized his humor would not be well received. This was not going as planned. He knew fully well the fear Olympia had about the Necropolis and its residents, but considering that he was always a happily expected guest despite business carrying him so frequently below, he figured that at the very least, they would treat Hades cordially out of fear. But a little slip like that wasn't about to make him give up. He was determined in his purpose, and the prospect of pulling a few puppet strings to win his wager and bring some much needed light to his friend and the Necropolis could make the endeavor all the more entertaining.

"You know, I'm going to grab myself a bite to eat." he said, pushing himself from his perch on the wall and fluttering off into the fray. "Do you see that lovely platter of cheese and grapes that Dionysus brought in? I'm getting myself a plate. Can I bring you back some, My Lord?"

"Hermes, you know I can't eat—"

Paying him no mind, Hermes zoomed through the crowd and to the banquet table, stopping right in the path of his newest target.

"Eros, old pal! How are you? My, that's a lovely waistcoat, the color really compliments your eyes! Where can I get myself one of those?"

Eros nodded at him stiffly before returning his focus to his plate. "My, that's a lovely guest you brought with you," he muttered, "Really compliments your duplicitousness."

“Oh how I’ve missed your charming words.” Hermes mused. “Speaking of which, I have a favor to ask you.”

Eros’ white wings folded sternly behind his back. He popped a grape into his mouth and chewed it slowly before he replied. “Hermes, you know I normally would accept without question, but I’m a bit distracted seeing as the guest you brought with you has single-handedly corrupted what was supposed to be a celebration of prosperity and peace for everyone here. I’ve spent the whole night consoling my mother and trying to keep calm myself. I am not in the mood for favors, and the sort of antics you and I get up to are not the type that will soothe anxious hearts.”

“Oh, but they are!” Hermes stopped him. “No one is at ease because no one knows what King Hades wants, but I know. And it’s something you can help me with.”

“No, no, no, I seriously doubt that playing a prank on him will get me anywhere but his bad side...”

Hermes leaned into his ear. “He’s here to find a bride,” he smiled. “And if you do your magic and help him fall in love, he won’t cause much trouble and will be back in the Necropolis forever before you know it.” He could feel the first start of flame in Eros’ eyes and blew in to stoke it. “I’m sure I could give the task to your mother instead, but I thought I’d offer you the opportunity first. Getting rid of such a threat in such a heartfelt way would surely send you a new crop of worshippers as well as the favor of their majesties.”

Eros flashed a strained smile and placed a shaky hand on Hades' shoulder. "Good to see you, eh... big guy. Been a while, hasn't it? Can I... can I get you some ambrosia?"

The touch of Eros' palm on his shoulder shook Hades into focus, and across the sea of wreaths and dancers, he saw her. Her hair, a brambles bush of curls and waves, at once auburn and gold and burgundy in the shifting light, vines of jasmine and morning glory twisted amongst the waves and growing from her scalp alongside her hair. It rolled and climbed down her sun-kissed shoulders, down her back and breast, warm light against the deep red of her dress. Her head was thrown back in laughter, a hearty, witch's cackle, a big laugh for such a small woman that seemed to rise from the bellows of the earth mother Gaia's heart. The corner of Hades' lip twitched upward at the sound. Even so out of his element, he was unable not to smile at the joy radiating from this strange little woman. Her eyes caught his mid laugh, irises shifting all the colors of the garden around them.

She smiled, just as anxious as any other guest at the ball, yet giving Hades the warmest welcome he'd known in a long while. Realizing that any attempt at a smile would look foolish on his face, he gave her a nod and hid his face in an attempted drink from his empty flask.

"Oh, something better than ambrosia then," said the cunning Eros, feeling less intimidated by an unwelcome guest once under his spell.

"Who is she?" Hades asked.

Eros cocked his head innocently to the side. "Persephone? She's just a nymph, one of Dionysus' maenads, you know the type, only around at parties, probably sleeps during the day, a bit like your lot." He winced as Hermes stamped his foot at the remark. "No one seems to know her parentage, but her powers are fairly strong for a nymph, so we assume she's a bastard of

Zeus', but I mean no insult! She's become quite a fixture on the ball and tavern circuit, quite a lively little thing and a most excellent dancer. It almost doesn't feel like a party without her nowadays."

Persephone watched the ballroom through the foyer, peering suspiciously over her glass. She wouldn't be sacrificing another night of sleep and lying to her mother for this if she knew that this party would be so eerily dismal. There was dancing and music as promised, but Apollo and his band played with little of their usual liveliness, holding their instruments with such hesitation that it seemed they were standing by for the go ahead to pack up and flee. The couples on the dance floor waltzed in stiff lines, rarely switching partners if at all. No one new had entered the dance floor since Persephone had entered, and no one dancing had left for a break or refreshments, and this didn't appear to be out of a surge of monogamous devotion either. Even the most miserable of couples dared not leave each other's embrace, as if one of them may be trapped in the arms of a much crueler beast if they let go. Those not dancing clung to the edges of the room, whispering amongst each other between nervous nibblings of refreshments. So many party dresses and freshly pressed suits wasted away, their owners sharing an unspoken understanding that it wasn't worth it to enter a dance floor that they'd dare not leave once they entered.

This hadn't been the case half an hour ago. The musicians had been lively and eager to please, servants whirling by with trays of shimmering glasses of ambrosia, the dancers hungrily grasping for new partners and weaving their footsteps in braided paths across the floor. Persephone was about to accept a handsome satyr's offer for a dance when she heard her

mother's voice at threshold, apologizing to Hera for a late delivery of flowers and offering to help set them up.

Persephone politely excused herself before ducking through the crowd and clamoring down the hall, testing each doorknob until one granted her entry, and shut herself away in the library, latching the door shut behind her. There she paced and sifted through the books until she could trust that her mother had gone, hoping that she hadn't left a telltale trail of blossoms on the ground behind her in her haste. She kept an eye on the window looking down the hill and into the street, and when she saw her mother being helped into a carriage, she adjusted her hair, returned her book to its place on the shelf, and returned to the ball, the life of which appeared to have left with her mother. But there was no way she could have been the cause of this.

Persephone remembered Artemis' strange behavior in the carriage, in fact she saw it mimicked by many of the party guests, but as if certain that she would be questioned, Artemis was nowhere to be found. Persephone caught Loxo by the cheese tray, attempting to console a scowling, frantically chattering Aphrodite, and decided that if Artemis knew something, her trusted confidante must know it too, and made her way over to the two women.

"Loxo! Lady Aphrodite! So nice to see you!" she exclaimed, waving her hand before lowering her voice as she closed in on them. "What in Tartarus happened to this party?"

Loxo clenched her jaw into a tense smile and clasped her hands together. "Well, I know it's a bit unnerving, but everything is under control, there's truly no reason to be alarmed-"

"Have you gone mad?" Aphrodite snapped. "Persephone, sweetling, have you not seen him? Did you just get here?"

“I... realized I put my skirt on backwards and had to go to the washroom to fix it,” Persephone fumbled. “I had to relace my corset and everything, so it took me a while. I really hope no one noticed it when I came in, it was quite embarrassing.”

“Well, if anyone did, it’s the last thing on their mind now,” Aphrodite droned into her glass. “A backwards skirt will most certainly be forgotten in tomorrow’s gossip, I assure you.”

“Persephone,” winced Loxo, “I’m here on duty and I assume that Lady Aphrodite’s station obligates her to stay, but you should take advantage of your position and leave.”

“What? I’m not leaving!”

Loxo folded her hands like a diplomat losing a treaty. “I promise I’ll explain it to you tomorrow if it isn’t in the papers before I see you.”

“The papers?” Persephone scoffed. “You truly think that will persuade me—”

“Just trust me!”

“Oh, accept defeat, Loxo, you’re not convincing her,” said Aphrodite. “Besides, the streets might be more dangerous than this ballroom. The most powerful gods in the city are here to protect her, but we don’t know if *his* lovely citizens are waiting in the streets outside for frightened young ladies trying to run back home. We’re putting her in more danger by not telling her.”

“Oh?” Persephone crossed her arms over her chest. “Well if that’s the case, put me out of danger and tell me what’s going on.”

Aphrodite sighed and leaned forward, perfectly manicured hand cupping her mouth to whisper: “The king of the dead is here.”

Persephone froze in place for a moment before bubbling over in a fit of laughter.

“Shhh! Don’t call attention to yourself!” panicked Loxo. “He might hear you!”

“That can’t be true!” crowed Persephone, doubled over in hysterics. “He wouldn’t! That’s honestly what all of this is about? The jailer of the sleepless dead has come to visit the king he signed a treaty with, however shall we manage? You know he keeps us protected from them, no one knows for sure if he’s one of them.”

“And no one knows for sure that he isn’t.” Aphrodite ushered over a jittering maenad barely holding her tray of drinks afloat and took one from her to replace the one on the floor, knowing she’d more than need it.

“Which is why no one wants to risk it!” Loxo grabbed Persephone by the shoulders. “These are serious matters, Persephone! All you’re giving me is more evidence that you can’t handle this and you should go!”

Persephone rolled her eyes. “I know who he is, Loxo. But what do you think he’s going to do, unleash his horde on the ballroom? King Zeus and Queen Hera’s ballroom? It would be a declaration of war in a room where he’s vastly outnumbered!”

“You don’t know his power, kid.”

“I may not,” admitted Persephone. “But I’m aware of the power of societal convention, something I’ve heard that he heeds even more strongly than most of Olympia does.”

“And who told you that?”

“Hermes,” Persephone gestured towards him. “He’s the only person here who actually visits the underworld, you realize, and no one acts like they’re choking on the miasma of the dead when he comes to a party.”

“Diplomats are crucial when dealing with a despot...” grimaced Aphrodite.

Loxo nodded insistently. “And Lord Hermes, unlike *someone* I know, has the knowledge and power to defend himself if something goes awry!”

“Which isn’t to say that I forgive him for escorting the man here,” scoffed Aphrodite. “Nor Eros for bringing him drinks! I can’t believe that one of my dearest lovers *and* my son are over there consorting with him as if—” Aphrodite shivered. “Fuck.”

“What is it?”

“Do not, do you hear me, *do not* turn around, but he’s looking at you, Persephone.”

Persephone turned to look over her shoulder, snickering. “Ohhh how dreadful!”

“I said don’t look!” Aphrodite reached out to stop her with her hand, realizing in dread what she had done as her hand touched the bare flesh of Persephone’s shoulder as the girl locked eyes with the Lord of the Dead.

Persephone studied the stranger. He was one of the tallest men she’d ever seen, with skin like stone and a cascade of smooth, raven hair that floated like smoke around his shoulders. In a sea of jewel toned ball gowns, crystal chalices and the electric light of rows and rows of chandeliers, he existed in greyscale, with only the gold of his eyes glowing against his black hair, black suit, and sun-shielded skin. She could see just by looking at him that his power and strength were formidable, the broad shoulders and muscle of one who had stood against the might of Titans in that war so long ago... but she got a sense by the way he stood, by his wrathless eyes, so strange a sight to see even among the kindest of gods, that he was very gentle. She could’ve sworn she felt the pinprick of an arrowhead at her back, but she brushed it aside.

“That’s a tall chalice of ambrosia if I’ve ever seen one.” she smirked.

Loxo gasped in horror. “That had better be a joke, but even if it is, it is not funny!”

“I’m sorry!” Persephone laughed, throwing her hands up in surrender as her butterflies flittered giddily at her ears. “Don’t worry, I know why the city lives in fear of him, my mother drilled it into me more than anyone else’s mother does, I’m not an idiot. I am just stating the fact that he looks very nice in that suit, and that while he is scary looking, he’s scary in an attractive way.”

Loxo turned to Aphrodite, seething. “What did you do to her?”

“I didn’t mean to! I was trying to turn her away, but as soon as I touched her, she locked eyes with him!” Spat Aphrodite, who had dropped her glass and was now pulling her hair into different textures and colors. “Why would I do this on purpose? Look me in the eyes and tell me that you truly believe I would do this to her on purpose!”

“I’m sorry, My Lady,” said the exasperated Loxo. “Wait, he locked eyes with her? Why would he be looking at her?”

“Eros was talking to him, I saw him point to her,” Aphrodite realized aloud. “Oh, Kronos in Tartarus, did you see Eros touch him? I swear, if my own son—”

“You know,” said Persephone wryly, watching Hades converse with Hermes and Eros, “He’s being perfectly friendly with those two. Maybe, and this is only a theory so please listen to me Loxo, maybe we’re making the problem worse by avoiding him like the spirit train. Isn’t that just going to make him angry? It would make me angry.”

“Persephone—” Loxo pleaded.

“In fact,” Persephone fluffed up her hair and straightened out the front of her skirt. “I think the air in this ballroom would be so much lighter if someone asked the poor bachelor to just one dance.”

“Don’t you dare!” Aphrodite warned her through gritted teeth.

“Persephone, I said this isn’t funny!”

“Hold my mead for me, will you, Loxo?” Persephone smiled archly, handing her goblet to the dumbfounded huntress. “You’re welcome to come to my rescue if it looks like he’s about to drain the life out of me, but just watch. I’m going to bring this ball back to life with just one dance.”

“You are such a bloody fool! You know, this kind of behavior is why Artemis doesn’t let you hunt!” Loxo shouted after her.

“Correction: I haven’t sworn myself to the hunt so I can indulge in this kind of behavior.” Persephone said with a salute.

“Well, I haven’t seen you here before.”

Hades jumped, nearly dropping his chalice at the low, honey sweet voice that greeted him. He scolded himself. She must have caught him staring. But he had to keep his eyes down, or he’d be caught taking in her radiance all the more now that she was close enough to touch.

He lowered his head further “I’m terribly sorry if I bothered you by staring, that was very rude of me, I just don’t get out much... Not that that’s an excuse! It isn’t—”

“It’s alright,” she protested warmly. “You weren’t being rude! I’ve gotten my share of stares before, and I assure you, yours was the most respectful stare I’ve gotten.”

“You are... too kind.”

“I’d hold off on calling me that until you get to know me,” she smiled. “For now, you can call me Persephone.”

“A pleasure to finally make your acquaintance,” he said, bowing his head. “I’ve heard wonderful things about you.”

“King Hades, isn’t it?” she smiled. “I haven’t seen you at one of these dances before, my lord.”

“I assure you, there’s truly no need for you to use a title with me, Lady Persephone.”

“Well then,” Persephone crossed her arms and feigned a scowl. “I’ve heard plenty of nasty things about you, but never that you were a hypocrite.”

“A... a hypocrite? I’m sorry if I offended you, but I don’t think I said—”

“You, a king, forbid me from using your proper title and call me Lady in the same breath when I hardly qualify as one? That isn’t fair, is it?” She tipped her chalice of mead to her lips with a glimmer in her eyes. “If I didn’t hold you in such high regard, I would think that you were mocking me.”

The corner of Hades’ mouth curled up as a well-guarded chuckle tried to escape him. “Forgive me, Lady Persephone,” he smiled, bowing his head again. “It’s just that we’re in your domain, not mine. You have more power here than I do, I only wanted to show my respect.”

She raised her head in pride “Well, I’m glad someone finally recognizes me as the queen of the dance hall,” She set down her glass and held out her hand to him, vines of tiny flowers twisting towards him from her wrist. “But how can you be sure until you’ve danced with me yourself?”

His bone white cheeks flushed petal pink, but he retained his composure. “How can you hold me in high regard when you’ve heard plenty of nasty things about me?”

“You give a home to everyone when their lives come to an end,” she said. “I’ve always thought the Lord of the Dead must have a kind heart to be so just and welcoming. Besides, Hermes holds you in high regard, and I trust his word more than most,” the purple petals, now at her fingertips, kissed his hand in reverence. “But my opinion might change if you deny me a dance.”

Hades took her hand in his and pressed in gently to his lips. “It would be an honor.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

“Do you know how to dance, Your Majesty?” Persephone said ruefully, leading Hades to the line of dancers who quickly spun away from them like a school of startled fish.

Hades was flummoxed by this question “Do I... do you not think I...” he cleared his throat with a bit of a laugh “And what gave you the impression that I wouldn’t know, Lady Persephone?”

“I didn’t mean to insult you!” She put up her hands in protest, a bit of apprehension slipping its way through her facade. “It’s just that I’ve never seen you at one of these before, and this is your first dance of the evening, is it not?”

“I’m... a busy man...” he said stiffly.

“Of course.”

“So I don’t usually make time for these things, but...” He took in the way the candle light glittered on the bronze of her skin, the summer storms shifting under her thick eyelashes, the kiss of the tiny petals reaching to him from her wrists. “I’m terribly sorry I haven’t,” he coughed and looked away. “And I owe a great debt to Hermes for convincing me to come.”

“I hope he didn’t rope you into one of his famous bets.”

“I’m sad to say he did,” he smiled. “He’s wagering I enjoy myself at this party.”

“How cruel of him.” She feigned a pout.

“Yes, how very cruel, so I’d appreciate it if you hurried up and made me miserable. If it’s unbearable for me to come back, he’s promised me his flying shoes.”

Smoke and daffodils, ashes and butterflies danced around their feet with each step, kissing their ankles and singeing the trim of her dress as he dipped her, as her laughter rung like birdsong into the curve of his neck. His face, so unaccustomed to smiling, so long shielded from the sun, glowed in her light.

Hades’ laughter, so unpracticed, rolled out from him like incense smoke, and Hermes blinked in surprise as he and Persephone danced past him, trying to remember the last time he’d heard that sound. Persephone could tell, somewhere deep within herself that this was a man who rarely had occasion to smile, that his laughter was a rare gift, and she felt so honored to be the cause of it.

Apollo lifted his bow from his violin with a flourish and bowed to a cheering crowd, giving them his eager thanks to indicate that there would be no more music for the night and that hospitality would only be extended for so much longer.

The last note rung through Persephone as if Apollo’s bow had crossed her throat. Guests were meandering out in clusters and pairs, and the waitstaff crept out to the corners of the tables so they could begin cleaning the moment the last guest was gone in hopes of finishing up and

going to sleep as soon as possible. Persephone found herself unable to let go of the reassuring cold of Hades' suede-gloved hands, hoping to no avail for just one more song. But she knew that the dream was over; it was time to run back home and clean up the mess she made.

"I... I should be going," she said, the carnelian confidence leaving her voice as her vines retreated from his arms back into hers. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Lord Hades. I'll see you again, I hope?"

Hades, just as disoriented by the return to earth as she was, blinked as her words became clear to him too slowly before nodding. "It has been an honor." He let go of one hand but kept the other. "Allow me to escort you to your carriage."

"That's unnecessary, but thank you."

"It is more than necessary!" he insisted. "I couldn't allow myself to send a young lady out in the dark into a sea of Olympia's finest drunken lechers unaccompanied. It's no trouble."

Persephone tucked a laugh into her palm. "You won't be very happy to hear that it's unnecessary. I plan to walk home." Her laughter gained strength at the expression of mystified defeat that Hades responded with. "Oh spare your worries, My Lord, I know these streets and their beasts all too well. I'll be alright."

Regaining his composure, he shook his head firmly. "With all due respect, Lady Persephone, I won't allow it. I could not forgive myself if something happened to you. Please allow me to give you a ride home. If you are worried about us being alone, I assure you that Hermes is sharing our carriage."

"And I assure *you* that if I had any quarrel with being alone with you, I wouldn't have danced with you for the entire evening," she smiled earnestly. "It's only that... I'm more afraid

of my mother's reaction to me returning in a carriage with two men than I am of whatever drunk nobleman may have the bad sense to try to corner me on the street."

"She doesn't know that you're here?"

"Oh she does, but she's not very happy about it, and it will be much worse if she's given any reason to believe that I've found myself a suitor, regardless of whether he's the type of man to escort me home or not. I already have more than enough amends to make with her as it is, it's a lot less trouble this way, trust me."

"Allow me to drop you off two blocks away from your mother's house, then," he said.

"That way she won't see me and I can sleep tonight knowing that you made it home."

"What a shrewd businessman you are!" she smiled. "I suppose I'll have to accept your offer."

Hermes was already inside the carriage when they stepped in, grinning like a lemur and tapping his feet. He tipped his hat with an impish grin. "Persephone! A pleasure as always! I had meant to dance with you, but it appears that *someone* was determined to keep your dance card entirely to himself!" He turned to Hades. "Are you bringing her home with us, you cad?"

Persephone giggled. "The cad tried his best to convince me to join you, but unfortunately, I'm already long past my curfew and in dreadful trouble."

Hades sighed through a clenched jaw. "There is no debauchery here, we are simply giving Lady Persephone a ride back to her mother's house. You won't be spreading any gossip about this, we've clearly caused enough distress here. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

The ride passed mostly in silence, all words exchanged hidden in furtive glances from under the brims of Hades and Hermes' tophats and over Persephone's fan. The carriage halted at the mouth of an alley, out of view of the immaculate hedges that stood watch over Demeter's greenhouse. Hermes blinked as he recognized the building and looked at the girl in sudden understanding but kept his mouth shut. Persephone gave him a nod of gratitude before Hades led her by the hand out of the carriage.

"Are you certain you don't want an escort to the door?" Hades asked, unable to let go of her fingertips just yet. "I have a knack for blending into my surroundings."

"I appreciate it, but I'll be entering through a second floor window, not the door," Persephone answered. "And it will be enough of a challenge getting myself up there unnoticed without company."

Hades pulled a cloak from the seat behind him and offered it to her. "Take this then. I wear it when I need to pass by undetected. It can't do a thing to muffle the sound, I'm afraid, but it will render you invisible to your mother until you take it off."

The blossoms in Persephone's hair blushed pink as she looked up at him with wide eyes. "I can't take this from you, it sounds like something you'd need for work."

"I can go a few nights without it," he assured her. "Pass it off to Hermes the next time he visits your mother's shop, he'll bring it back to me." He wrapped it around her shoulders.

"Besides, you didn't bring a coat, and I don't want you to catch a chill on your thrilling adventure back inside."

Persephone giggled into her hand. "Thank you." she said, holding the cloak close around her. "For everything."

“Thank you for the pleasure of your company. Goodnight, Lady Persephone.”

“Goodnight.” She stepped out onto the cobblestones and took a few steps forward before stopping in her tracks and turning back to ask. “Lord Hades?”

“Yes?”

“Will you be receiving a pair of winged shoes tonight?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

“Did you win the wager or did Hermes?”

Incense smoke spiraled dizzily around him as a moth-like breath fluttered at the back of his throat. He shook his head and gave her a quiet smile. “I’m afraid I lost.”

Persephone grinned, a flurry of tiny butterflies. “So I’ll be seeing you at the next party, then? Artemis and Apollo’s birthday?”

“I suppose you will. Save a dance for me?”

She hid her beaming face in his cloak. “I’ll consider it.”

CHAPTER NINE: PHEME

The citizens of Olympia managed the next two social events of the season with as much courage and grace as they could find it in their hearts to muster. The gods of great importance and anxious young people with only so much time left before expiring on the marriage market came to the dreadful conclusion that they had no choice but to continue attending events as if all was well; Everyone else was left with a more complicated decision.

The natural choice was to wait at home until the Lord of the Necropolis had returned home and all risk of his appearance at a ball, concert or gala was absolved, but was this truly as smart of a solution as it seemed? Lesser gods, wives and businessmen started to speculate if they would be doing an insult to His Lordship by avoiding his eyes on the street when he passed and events where he would be in attendance; what if he took this as an insult and they woke up to find their once healthy elderly parents to be dead or their daughters and scullery maids seduced into the army of sleepless dead, who were rumored to being spotted in greater numbers? It was still unwise to stand near him, converse if unnecessary, or gods forbid invite him over for tea, but perhaps they would be putting themselves in more danger by treating such a formidable visitor with such an obvious lack of hospitality.

Secondly, and more pressingly than anyone was willing to admit, Olympia realized that it was very difficult to collect clear gossip on a man whose name no one dared to utter. Even Lady Calliope of the Sisterhood of Muses, who's *Society Epics* could always be relied upon to relay an event's happenings and gossip, was exercising more than a degree of caution, finding herself questioning whether writing the name of the Lord of the Necropolis was just as much of a source of bad luck as uttering it. Regardless, speaking of him at all was sure to be dangerous, but

ignoring the greatest scandal in the city meant the certain loss of business and worshippers, so Lady Calliope decided in defeat that she must discuss the matter in increasingly elaborate metaphors. This left Olympia frustrated with their own intrigue, their urge for self preservation waning in their need to answer the muse's riddles. The unfortunate conclusion became clear: if they wanted to know how he behaved at these events and what trouble his presence stirred, they would have to observe for themselves.

And thirdly, as Zeus had reassured his daughter Artemis, and soon his wife and a few concerned business partners, many realized with relief that a sacrificial virgin had been placed at his altar, and as he spent more and more of the festivities distracted by her, he posed less of a threat. Many mourned for the poor girl. What could have possibly driven her to put herself at such risk? Hypnotism? Money? Complete and hopeless naivete? No one knew of her parentage, but what parent, guardian, governess or schoolteacher would let a girl grow to maturity with no awareness of the dangers of this man and his miasma? Was she mad?

They pondered this mystery in whispers and the anxious snacking of carnival patrons as they watched Persephone spin with gleeful laughter across the floor, returning again and again to the arms of her ominous suitor, her red gown a sickening warning of what was certain to become of her. Were they complicit in some crime to not pull her aside, shake the hypnosis from her eyes, offer to help her with whatever debt she doubtless owed to him? Gala after ball after concert, they concluded no. Sacrifices for gods were commonplace, and if this was what kept him appeased and away from their daughters, then the maiden must burn.

And burn she did, a heat so unknown to the coldness of his stone, warm with exhilaration from another quadrille on the deserted dancefloor, she and her flurry of butterflies laughed at him

and said “Really, a fourth dance with me tonight, My Lord? If you don’t attempt to cloak your intentions just a bit by asking another young lady to dance every couple of songs, people will start to talk!”

“Are they not talking yet, Lady Persephone?” He raised a brow. “I can all but feel their whispers scuttling under my skin.”

“Whispers about us?” She crowed, pleased with herself. “What a vain assumption, My Lord! All this clamor couldn’t possibly be about us when there are much greater scandals in this room.”

“Vain?” He asked. “My words were misleading. I did not claim that *I* was the source of all those whispers. The vast majority are certainly attributed to you.”

“They often are,” she said with a pout as he twirled her. “I would hate to embroil such a beloved and well respected gentleman in my kind of trouble. I give you full permission to abandon me on the floor right now and find a mundane, agreeable partner who will attract minimal whispers. Go! Run along now before it’s too late!”

Hades feigned a dramatic scowl. “You wound me, Lady Persephone! Have I not shown myself to be worthy of a lady who attracts whispers? You would so willingly pass me off?” He sniffled as if desperately holding back tears, drawing another cackle from Persephone. “Is there anything I can do to prove my valor, or is it too late?”

Persephone pressed a hand to his chest, producing a crackle of embers and smoke. “Maybe you should show all those whisper-deflecting ladies that I am the only one you have eyes for.”

“Have I not? You were only just teasing me for being too forward with my intentions, I’ll have you remember.”

“If those are in fact your intentions, My Lord, and you can handle the whispers,” she smiled, leaning forward to expose her long, sun-kissed neck. “Then perhaps you should make your intentions clear in a manner that will make them shout.”

“I warn you not to tempt me.”

“Oh? And what horror will meet me if I do?”

The smoke rising from him thickened, its haze of funerary incense clouding the space between them, coating Persephone’s throat so that her breath struggled to escape. She looked up at him to see the red of her dress reflected in his eyes and veins that surrounded them, swallowing out all but a glimmer of the kindness she’d always seen there. The coolness of his hands, once refreshing to her skin after the exhilaration of dancing, turned the mist of sweat on her shoulders to ice.

“I will warn you again so that you may listen,” his voice echoed. “Do not tempt me.”

The song came to an end, and they stood in frigid silence for a moment until it was broken by the sound of a man clearing his throat behind them.

“Hades, old friend, do forgive me for interrupting,” said Zeus, a rumble of thunder in his beard. “Would you mind following me to the library to discuss some business over some bourbon?”

Hades’ fog dissipated, the strange new features retreated as if never there. He cleared his throat and nodded politely. “I won’t let you waste your nice bourbon on me,” he answered. “But yes, there are some matters I’d like to discuss as well. If you’ll excuse me, Lady Persephone.”

Persephone remained frozen as she watched the two men make their way out of the ballroom, the crowd parting and bowing their heads before them in a blend of respect and unease wearing its clothing. She rubbed her fingers together, inspecting the ash as she meditated on the strangeness that had overtaken him.

As if there were no other option, she followed them at a distance, tracing the path she had taken a few parties ago to the library. Her first steps felt suspended in quicksand, and she struggled to shake herself out of the incense fog and resume her normal walking speed. When she finally reached the library door, it was long since shut. How long had she been standing on the dancefloor after they'd left? She tiptoed over and leaned her ear to the crevice between the door and its frame. The voices inside were too low, too muffled by the thick oak to make out so much as a word, but she soon recognized the voices of Artemis and Oupis inside.

"Am I to be kept out of everything?" she grumbled to herself, half laughing as she slid down the door and sat down before it.

"Kept out of everything..." another woman's voice repeated meekly.

Persephone turned to see a willowy girl in a yellow gown, hunched over anxiously at the far end of the hall. A glimmering green hummingbird buzzed at her ear as if it were whispering to her.

"Miss Echo, is that you?" Persephone asked, cocking her head to the side as she approached her.

"...is that you?" Echo started to scramble backward, but the hummingbird leaned in close to her ear again, and she stood still. "...don't move."

No one else is here. Persephone glanced around. *And Echo can only parrot. Is the bird talking to her?* “There’s no need to run!” she reassured her. “I think you’re here for the same reason I am. I’ll hold my tongue if you hold yours. Are you listening in on the meeting too?”

Echo glanced around anxiously, saw the bird bob up and down before raising a cautious finger to Persephone. “I’ll hold my tongue if you hold yours?” she clarified. Persephone nodded, crossing a finger over her heart. Echo relaxed her shoulders and nodded. “... listening in on the meeting, too.”

“Are you able to hear through the walls?”

Echo tiptoed over to the door next to Persephone and leaned her door to the crack. She waved her hand back and forth to indicate that the sound quality was so-so.

“Did you happen to see who went in there before King Zeus and Lord Hades?”

Persephone asked. “Or hear anything they said as they were walking in?”

Echo opened her mouth to speak, but the hummingbird chattered angrily, flapping its wings until the girl nodded and said. “... can’t tell her anything.” She repeated.

Persephone squinted in recognition. “That’s not... Lady Calliope’s bird, is it?”

Echo pressed a hand over Persephone’s mouth and rushed her away from the door. “Not Lady Calliope’s bird!” She insisted. “Not Calliope’s!”

Persephone gasped, her butterflies a flurry of quiet laughter. “You’re gathering gossip for her, aren’t you?”

Echo clenched her jaw. “Aren’t!”

“You know,” mused Persephone, pacing idly around her. “I happen to be the center of a lot of rumors circulating about town lately. I’m sure that Her Ladyship would be eager to have a morsel or two of my side of the story.”

Echo leaned in close to the hummingbird for a moment before squinting at Persephone with a cautious nod. “...eager.”

“Would she be willing to trade? I’ll only share if you make it worth my while, you tell me what you heard them say going in and who they’re talking to, I can let you know whether I’m being coerced or acting freely?”

Echo waited for the bird’s response before nodding, repeating it’s twittering of responses. “Queen Hera... huntresses... Lord Hermes... King Zeus and... His Lordship whispering... getting increasing incidents under control... something about *his* interest in a young nymph... you, perhaps?”

“I’d assume so,” said Persephone. “Incidents of what?”

Echo shrugged. Calliope’s bird buzzed impatiently and she translated: “Your turn.”

“I haven’t been bribed or hypnotized,” said Persephone. “And I’m frankly insulted by all of the insinuations that I’m too naive to know—” Both girls jumped as the door behind them flew open.

“Artemis, where are you going?”

Artemis stormed out of the door, turning to shout behind her. “I’ll be back when you all get your sense together and stop discussing this like it’s some business meeting! And you!” she turned to point her finger at Persephone and Echo. “I thought I heard two little spying mice

outside the door. Echo, if any word of this leaves this hall or winds up in the *Epics* I'll be at your door and you won't be happy to see me."

Persephone lightly shoved her shoulder. "You knew Echo was Calliope's informant and you didn't tell me?"

"It was a hunch," said Artemis. "She's been in the corner of my eye whispering to that bird all week. You, little flower, are coming with me. I'm leaving and I'm giving you a ride home."

"You really don't have to give me a ride, I was planning to stay—"

"I don't know if I trust anyone here to escort you anymore, and you're certainly not walking or losing yourself on the dancefloor any longer under my watch." Artemis felt a coldness behind her and caught a dark figure stepping out from the library behind her. She realized that there would be no more time for nonsense and prayed that Persephone hadn't noticed him yet. "My carriage will be outside in a moment, wait there for me."

"You don't trust anyone here to..." Persephone's vines snared, incensed. "Did this meeting have something to do with me? If you were discussing my future and my endeavors, then I should be a part of it!" She noticed that Hades had emerged from the library, rising from behind Artemis like a shadow. "If you won't tell me, perhaps he will! Lord Hades, was this meeting about me?"

"The matters we discussed are confidential." Hades answered. "But I understand your suspicion after how I acted on the dance floor earlier and I wanted to apologize—"

Back shot up arrow straight, Artemis moved to grip the hilt of the dagger in her belt. “And how exactly did you act on the dance floor, *My Lord?*” She spat the title as if it turned to acid on her tongue.

“He didn’t act any less proper than I.” Persephone asserted. “I wasn’t comporting myself in a very ladylike manner, and I believe I stepped too far with my flirtation. I accept your apology, My Lord, and I hope you will accept mine as well. What I would like an explanation for, however—”

“Flirtation is more than a step too far and you know that!” Artemis interrupted her. “This is a private matter not to be discussed in public. Unless His Lordship defiled your honor on the dance floor and I need to defend your honor in a duel, then we will talk about this later and you go outside and meet me in the carriage. Understood?”

Persephone inhaled a snarling breath before turning on her heels and storming back into the ballroom towards the door, snapdragons gnashing their petaled mouths in her hair. Hades reached out a black gloved hand in protest, but was stopped by Artemis.

“I refuse to cower before you like every other fool in this palace,” she grimaced, antlers glinting like glass in the light of chandeliers. “You have the sense not to harm a daughter of Zeus and throw yourself into a war, and I have the sense to put an end to you if I must, and if you bring any harm to Persephone, I will. But let’s not create any more messes than we’re already lost in.”

“I assure you that my intentions with Lady Persephone are pure,” Hades answered, eyes candle wicks in smoke. “I would sooner die than bring any harm to her.”

“And what a claim that is.” The huntress scoffed. “It was bold of me to think that I was capable of wrestling the truth out of you when all before me have failed, so I will leave you with this. If you value the immortality that you paid such a cost for, then you had better break whatever spell you’ve cast on my friend.”

“I have done no such thing.”

Artemis walked away, dagger pressed to her back in warning. “I hope for your sake that that you’re not lying.”

CHAPTER TEN: ELEUSINIAN RITES

Hades, King of the Necropolis and Lord of the sleepless dead, was a master of looking perfectly stoic and dignified while he was a moment's lapse away from tearing the nearest person open and drowning himself in the spurt of their veins.

He had little choice but to stand coolly on this precipice every time he returned to Olympia on business. If he was well fed enough for his insides to be as quiet as his stone mouth, he would revert to a youthful enough countenance to arouse suspicion; The murmur that followed him, something that could generally be dismissed as old wives' tales, would develop traction. If he kept himself on the brink of starvation, however, there would remain the start of silver hair at his temples and the permanent crease at the center of his brow that people had started to recognize. There wasn't a specific age he needed to feign, per se; the frozen clock of godhood wasn't terribly specific and he hadn't exactly accrued enough friends in town for anyone to ask to celebrate his birthday, but somewhere between an insomniac thirty-five and a well aged bourbon of a forty-eight was ideal. That same touch of sleepless grey made the city wonder why he had yet to take a wife despite shielding its daughters from him when he came to supervise the collection of their dead. Hades respected that choice. He averted his eyes for their comfort, he stayed away.

This wasn't usually a problem. But he usually planned his trips for a precise number of days that he refused to stay past. With the exception of the direst of emergencies that no one else could take care of, no meeting, no event, no invitation, kind or urgent, could sway him. But Hermes had caught him in a trap. He promised to attend two more balls if he wasn't completely miserable at the first, and much to his chagrin, he had enjoyed himself very much. An impishly

beautiful goddess had asked him to dance and convinced the part of him that was once a mortal man that he must do everything in his power to dance with her again.

And most unfortunately, his immortal half was obscenely, ravenously hungry.

If worse came to worse, he could walk out to the woods and find a less satisfying but passable meal, but judging by the frequency of outbreaks that he had come to town to monitor, finding his preferred fare on the street should have been a feasible task.

If he hadn't already committed a map of their hives to memory, he could find them by smell from the third floor of his city flat. He couldn't say which led him there now; he hoped it was memory, because that would mean he was not as far gone as he feared. The nearest hive was opposite from him across the bordello district, a test of endurance in itself with its ceaseless reek of bodies and their warmth. It pounded through him, threatening to turn his vision white as he avoided the stares of the harlots peering at him through their windows and shook his head in respectful refusal of those dull or desperate enough to proposition him.

"You look like you could use some respite from your day," crowed a nymph draped in red silk as he passed. "Would you fancy my assistance, Sir?"

Hades shook his head and walked on, tightening his grip on the head of his cane in an effort to slow the shaking of his hands. Even pausing to politely refuse her would be too much. He hated to be rude, but it would be ruder yet to risk harming her. He was almost there, he could hear the raucous laughter of those deemed permissible as the lights and colors of the alleyway blurred together like water in paint, just a few moments and he should be himself again at least through the next ball, there would be no risk of losing composure the next time he saw her, he

would be perfectly sated, perfectly godlike and gentlemanly and reserved enough to ask her to waltz at Duke Apollo's gala, in no way overwhelmed or overcome by the smell and feeling of—

“Is that you, Lord Hades?”

Oh. Oh no.

He knew from the sound of her voice, from the sudden realization that it was not memory that assaulted him with the smell of her, from the fact that this was the worst possible moment to run into her that the voice belonged to Persephone. It would be best to ignore her, continue walking, hope he'd give her reason to believe she had mistaken his likeness in the dark and insist it must've been someone else if she asked him about it at the gala.

“My, Lord Hades, you had me convinced you were a gentleman. Are you really going to ignore me so blatantly on the street after escorting me home in your carriage earlier this week?”

“Lady Persephone!” he said with a stiff laugh, avoiding her eyes. “My apologies, I heard your voice but I assumed it was just my imagination, seeing as this isn't an area where I'd expect to find a young lady unaccompanied at this time of night!”

“Nor where I'd expect to find a respected gentleman.” Persephone said archly. “With your title, I'd expect you'd be able to call a courtesan to your room or bring your favorite from home to town with you. I didn't imagine you'd have to go out and find one for yourself.”

“Oh, I'm not looking for a... I don't hire courtesans—”

“It's not a shame nor my business if you do, My Lord—”

His drunken brain, now clawing at its prison for a taste of her, struggled to discern an excuse more palatable to her ears than seeking a courtesan, as his current quest was certainly worse. “I'm merely going for a walk,”

“In the bordello district?”

“I don’t know how I wound up here, if I’m being perfectly honest,” he said with an unsalted laugh. “Everything runs nocturnally down in the Necropolis, and I haven’t been able to get much sleep since arriving here as I’ve had business matters during the day. I was taking a walk in an attempt to rest my mind and lure it into sleep, but I’m afraid I’m so delirious from a lack of sleep that I’ve gotten lost.”

“Oh, that’s dreadful! I can see why you so rarely come up here!” she gasped. “I understand how difficult it is to try to work on so little sleep. If you’re lost, would you like me to escort you home? I’ve committed the map of this city to memory, I can find your way home if you give me an address.”

No. He stumbled back to get further the gap, losing his footing and hitting the back of his head against a lamppost. Persephone sighed in sympathy and rushed to his side.

“By the Styx, My Lord, you really aren’t well! Where are you staying? Let me take you there.” She leaned down and extended her hand, fronds and petals reaching towards him as they had on the dance floor.

“Thank you, Lady Persephone, but I assure you, there is no need,” he insisted, avoiding her eyes as he struggled to return to his feet. It was impossible not to breathe her in, to see the movement of blood in the veins of that arm that so naively reached out to him. All of his strength had been directed to holding himself back, leaving very little left for standing. “Besides, who would I be to bring a young lady to my door, especially at this hour, and leave her with no escort home?”

She reached around his shoulder and pulled him to his feet. “Consider it repayment for escorting me home the other night,” she said. “Besides, your rules of chivalry, though very kind, do not count towards me at this hour. From dusk to dawn, I serve Lady Artemis’ hunt, so it is my duty to protect this city and its visitors such as yourself. Your address, My Lord?”

“Number 4 Poplar Avenue,” he said, her previous words taking longer than usual to make sense in his mind in his current state. “You say that you serve—” His throat tightened. Such a revelation was enough to distract, if just a moment, from his hunger. Somehow, there was something worse than not being able to taste her. “You have sworn yourself to the Wild Hunt?” he said. “My apologies, I would not have made such flirtatious advances toward you the other evening had I known—”

“Oh, there’s no need to apologize, My Lord,” she said, beginning to walk. “I haven’t sworn an oath, I’m more of an unofficial apprentice.”

“Apprentice? I didn’t think they took those on.”

She sighed. “Can I trust you to keep a secret?”

He nodded.

“My mother is a beloved goddess, but I have yet to find my domain, and I’m frightened. Mama’s convinced that I share her talent and that I’ll develop enough skill and a following with it, and my hand with her talent is alright, but it doesn’t call to me, and I’ve always wanted more than a life of existing as her shadow.”

“What is that talent?” he asked, focusing hard on every word she spoke to fill his head with something other than the gnawing and frothing at the back of the mouth.

She scrunched her nose. “That’s not the secret I’m sharing with you.” she said.

“So you’re seeking other domains, then?”

“Without her knowing, yes. The Duchess Artemis is an old friend of mine, and I pestered her for months to let me help her with her hunts, to see if it was for me before I considered swearing an oath. I was fascinated by the exhilaration and blood of it all, for the prospect of fighting to defend this city after being told for so long that I was at its mercy. She allowed me to join them as bait for the sleepless dead but forbid me to raise a weapon myself unless I was caught alone without The Hunt to defend me. It’s become what I live for, but the release I crave isn’t there because unless I commit my life to them, the most I can do is be the coquette or injured little bird luring the targets in.”

“If it’s what you live for,” he asked hoarsely, “Why not join them?”

She twirled a vine in the fingertips of her free hand. “Strange as it may sound, they’re both too similar to my mother and something she wouldn’t approve of. Admitting to her that I’m not following the path she has planned for me... the prospect of that is so terrifying that I’ll only feel willing to go through with it when I’ve found something that feels right. And the hunt is wonderful, it makes me feel alive, I’d be living and working alongside some of my dearest friends... but I would become one of a herd. I want to make a name for myself and earn my immortality from something that is purely mine. I couldn’t stand to live very long dressed in uniform, I feel that I do that enough already, I want *greatness*.”

“Is that what this path shares with your mother’s domain?” he asked. “That it isn’t yours?”

“In part,” she said. “The other half is that they both require a vow of maidenhood. And the one thing I want almost as much as my own domain is to fall in love and to marry.” She gave

him a catlike smile. “So you need not apologize for making advances upon a supposed sworn virgin.”

“What mother in this city doesn’t want her daughter to marry?” He said. “From what I’ve read in the *Epics*—”

Persephone snorted. “*You* indulge in the *Epics*? I thought you a gentleman with little time on your hands! Are you less refined than you let on?”

He gave a pained laugh in response. “I have very few friends in this city, Lady Persephone, I need to find out how what rumors are circulating about us somehow. Especially after *two little spies* were found eavesdropping outside of my meeting with the King and Queen.”

“What about Hermes?”

Hades rolled his eyes. “The bastard delivers it to my door himself and reads it to me while I’m trying to go over my ledgers. But you’ve diverted the conversation—”

“Oh, my sincerest apologies,” she laughed.

“The *Epics* gave me the impression that every mother in this city was clawing for suitors for their daughters with such desperation that they are willing to risk their lives by sending them to ballrooms where me and my miasma of the dead are present. In fact, I’ve heard there’s been a decline in mothers petitioning for their daughters to be declared maiden goddesses, the last I heard of was—”

He paused, tightening his jaw to force himself to focus as he looked her over again, the brambles and flowers and vines interwoven with her hair and flowed down her arms, reacting and changing with her emotions just as clearly as her voice and face; her tanned and freckled skin; the shape of her features, so starkly molded after a woman he’d known long ago.

Persephone watched his wheels turn and nodded to tell him he was right. “Can I trust you not to tell?”

“You can,” he promised. *At this point it's inevitable that you'll have a secret of mine in return.* They walked in silence for a few moments before he asked “You’re not acting as bait for the wild hunt now, are you?”

“I’m not supposed to be here,” she assured him. “Artemis forbade me from joining them until you leave town. She isn’t exactly pleased with your advances.”

Hades laughed. “Oh, she’s made her displeasure quite clear.”

A thorny vine spun down Persephone’s shoulder, pricking his in warning. “She may not know that I’m here, but I know where she is, and I know just how to summon her if you show any sign of giving me trouble.”

“So you’re not spying on behalf of Lady Artemis,” he said, “But rather you’re acting as bait for your own reasons.”

She smiled. “And what do you mean by that, my lord?”

He pressed a cold hand to hers. “You think you know something about me, and you’re trying so very hard to bait me into exposing it myself.” He narrowed his eyes. “Did it cross your mind that you could try simply asking me before trying to draw it out of me with such theatrics?”

“If you’re certain that I know,” she said, eyes glinting, “then why don’t you show me?”

“Don’t tempt—”

“I know what happens when I abstain from tempting you,” she said, taking him by the shoulders and turning him to face her. “Show me what happens when I don’t.”

In his tenuous state, Hades had paid no attention to where they were headed, focusing only on keeping rhythm with Persephone's footsteps. He found that they were at the mouth of an alley. He slowly recognized from the distinctively dark brick peeking out from a curtain of ivy that they were behind a building a block away from his flat. She held his coat of invisibility in her hand, watched her drape it so it covered one shoulder of his and one of hers. His vision of their surroundings came in pockets of focus, most of it blurry and bright, spiraling around the figure of Persephone, whose racing blood was as present to him as the garlands of flowers intermingled with her hair, the shifting colors of her eyes. He could smell it as if that blood were the pollen in every blossom that adorned her. Her wry words of permission, the way she leaned into his chest and exposed her neck to him as she'd done on the dance floor was enough for him to break. He sunk his teeth into her neck and let the blood flood his mouth.

When Hades regained consciousness, he was on his knees on the pavement that lined the alley, Persephone laying cold and fragile in his arms. His heart, now uncannily warm and alive, crawled into his throat at the sight of her.

He had gone too far.

Her tendrils of blossoms hung limp and withered, her flurry of butterflies weakly hanging in the air around her. Her skin, always bronze and bright, was horribly sallow, her collarbone and cheeks too sunken in to look like they belonged to her buxom form.

And then there was the blood.

Darkness clawed at him, tearing him apart as he had done her, filling his head with ceaseless screaming as he struggled to understand what he had done. The fog, the blurring of the

world around him dwarfing that which had consumed him just minutes before. Had it been minutes? How long ago had he been completely lost to the monster that lurked in his blood, the sneering, evil gift from his father that couldn't be discarded.

Of every god or nymph he'd met, she had been the most alive, her voice and witch's laughter so booming in volume, her movements so free... the only daughter of Demeter, her very hair alive with vegetation and frantic butterflies.

Agony coursing through him like a train, Hades howled like the injured dog that carried his people below the earth, desperate for something, even if it the very sound that would alert the city to his crime, to fill the emptiness in the place he had torn her from.

"Quiet," came a weak voice, laughing. "I thought you knew me better."

Hades gasped a puff of smoke, staring down in disbelief at the husk of a woman in his arms. "Lady Persephone! You're alive! I'm so sorry—"

"I will admit I underestimated you," she winced, hands stumbling as she struggled to prop herself up. He rushed to support her. "I didn't think you'd kill me!"

"It isn't too late," he panicked. "Let me take you to the house of a god who can give you some ambrosia—"

She pressed a bone of a finger to his lips. "There is no need," she smiled. "You may be far more formidable than I thought, but I still have my secret to share with you."

"Lady Persephone, we're running out of time! I need to find—"

"You don't need to find anything. Just bring me closer to the wall."

"I'm bringing you to Hermes—"

"Bring me closer to the wall."

He obeyed, and Persephone reached a shaking hand to the ivy that cloaked the brick. The leaves closest to her hand blackened as if by fire, and the blight traveled up the vines, all moisture, all life draining from them until they were mere cords of ash.

And the hand, withered and gloved in lace, gorged upon that life until its flesh was supple and bright again, at which point it flowed down her arm, down to the gaping, horrid wound at her neck, which began to draw itself closed with crawling moss. The color and fullness returned to her face, and she smiled at him with lips red as pomegranate as she whispered.

“I think that if anyone can help me find my path,” she said, “It is you. Because we are of the same kind.”

END OF BOOK ONE