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ABIGAIL OWEN

'A brilliant fantasy filled with adventure, twisted games,
and romance. This book is epic!' Alyssa Day



THE
THINGS GODS
BREAK

THE
THINGS GODS
BREAK

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The Stolen Throne

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The Blood King

The Warrior King

The Cursed King

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THE THINGS GODS BREAK

ABIGAIL OWEN

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*To the mean girls in high school who I let convince me to stop
writing for years because they told me I was weird for this passion...
welcome to Tartarus.*

*To the writers, the readers, the storytellers, the dreamers...
never, ever let someone else take away your passion.*

In *The Things Gods Break*, the Greek gods walk among us and the Titans are imprisoned below us—and they are all as unspeakably beautiful as they are deadly. As such, this story features elements that might not be suitable for all readers, including blood, gore, violence (human, god, and monster alike), perilous situations, heights, injury, vomiting, neglect, bullying, isolation, imprisonment, torture, death, grief, use of hallucinogens, graphic language, and sexual activity (including domination and choking). Readers who may be sensitive to these elements, please take note, and prepare to enter Tartarus...

**AUTHOR NOTE: A GLOSSARY OF THE GODS AND TITANS
AND THE (SOMETIMES TWISTED) ROLES THEY REPRESENT
IN THIS SERIES IS AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK.**

PREVIOUSLY IN THE CRUCIBLE

Who the hells could have guessed that, after competing in a series of twelve potentially deadly (and honestly pretty fucking twisted) Labors, I would *win* the Crucible Games. Me, a lowly office clerk for the Order of Thieves, cursed by Zeus to be unlovable. I won not only the throne of Olympus for Hades, but his heart. And along the way, I was made a goddess myself—Queen of the Underworld. That should have been the happily ever after to our story.

OVERWORLD

RIVER STYX

UNDERWORLD

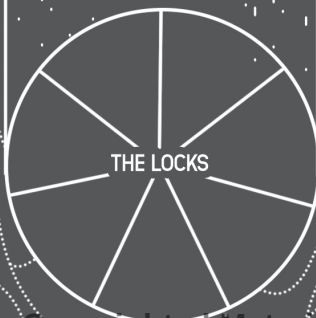


FOUR
PILLARS
OF THE
COSMOS

TARTARUS



ABYSS



THE LOCKS

ELYSIUM

FOUR
PILLARS
OF THE
COSMOS

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PART 1

WELCOME TO TARTARUS

"As far beneath the house of Hades as from earth the sky lies."

~*The Iliad*, Homer



WE'RE SO SCREWED

LYRA

Fuck the universe. I knew it hated me. I just didn't think it would be this *petty*.

Besides, becoming a goddess should've come with perks. Sparkly powers. A throne. Maybe a brief vacation somewhere that didn't drop me onto a stone bridge suspended over nothingness, with a yawning abyss on either side and a door looming in the distance like a punch line I've already heard.

Not that it matters what it looks like. I know where we are.

Tartarus.

Not because I recognize it, but because I was standing on the other side of the double doors of the massive gates to this place when one opened.

Worse? I dragged Boone in with me. One of my few friends—who already died once thanks to me and the Crucible Games. Sure, I won and pulled his soul into godhood, so yay, happy ending. That only lasted a few weeks.

Now he's here. Again. With me. In this hellhole.

I shoot him a quick side-eye, but he doesn't turn. Just grits his teeth and stares forward. Which is code for very worried and pretending not to be.

I take a breath. The air tastes like iron on my tongue. Or maybe that's dread. Because I don't have to ask who yanked us through the gates. I already know that, too.

Cronos.

King of the Titans.

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By all accounts, the mold all assholes have been made from ever since. After all, his son Zeus had to get it from somewhere. This guy swallowed all his children the day each was born to subvert a prophecy that he'd be overthrown by them one day. I mean, I've heard of crappy fathers. Mine wasn't exactly a poster boy for Dad of the Year. But Cronos was next level.

Is.

Not was.

Is. He's standing right in front of us. As tall and muscled as the hero of a novel, with hair as black as onyx only touched by silver at the temples, and a thick, dark beard that hides the cut of his jaw.

And gods, he looks like Hades. Not in the way parents sometimes do, but bone-deep, uncanny—like looking at an older, more brutal version. No wonder Hades always carried a shadow he couldn't name. This is where it came from.

But if the gods are beautiful, I'd say Titans are radiant. Like, it's actually hard to look directly at Cronos.

I'm not sure there's a word to describe how remarkably, overwhelmingly, hysterically bad staring at *this* Titan is. My heart is pounding so hard I can hear it in my ears, my rib cage expanding and shrinking visibly with every panting breath.

Keep calm, Lyra.

Something hits the gates at my back. "Lyra!" The shout is so faint, I can barely make it out.

I spin around and flatten my hands on the double doors carved in scrollwork that looks like thorny vines. Oh gods.

Hades.

My soul reaches for his through the barrier between us, but there's no way through.

No way to him.

No, no, no.

I swipe an impatient hand across the tear sliding down my cheek. I can't lose him. I *won't*. Not after we just found each other. I suffered in silence with Zeus' curse that no one would ever love me all my life, and still I survived the damned games the gods make us mortals play in their stead. I *earned* immortality and a life of happiness at Hades' side. He deserves happiness, too.

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This can't be happening.

Only I know, down to my marrow, that there's no possible way for even the mighty god of death to fix this. Yet I'm still silently screaming for him to get me out of here.

A sob breaks free as two thoughts strike in rapid succession. First... he'll blame himself for this. It's a truth as inescapable as Tartarus.

And second...I should have paid more attention to Rima's prophecy during the Crucible—a vision of Hades burning down the world. A future I honestly thought we'd stopped from happening. What else did Rima say?

The pounding gets more and more violent, until I feel the shake of it in the narrow bridge of solid rock beneath my feet. I think for a wildly hopeful minute that the gates might give way, and then...the pounding stops.

And so does my heart, leaving me hollow inside.

I try to feel Hades, feel a flash of emotion from him to tell me that he's still there, but the effect of him giving me his blood during the Crucible—allowing me to sense what he's feeling in any given moment, especially the strongest emotions—has already worn off almost completely. Nothing comes to me.

“Lyra!” Hades' voice is even quieter now, muffled, like he's farther away. What are the others with him doing? Dragging him back?

I curl my fingers into the metal door like I can dig myself out or keep him here. “Don't leave.”

But only silence answers.

I can no longer hear him. Putting my ear to the door, I close my eyes, listening for the smallest hint that he's still on the other side, that he hasn't left me.

“Hades.” His name is a whimper.

“He's still there,” Cronos says behind me. Or murmurs really.

Even that quiet, I tense. Hard.

The Titan *sounds* like Hades, like his firstborn son, although the deep tones are rougher, raspier, like he's been breathing in brimstone for too long.

“It's the wards that prevent us from communicating with the outside world,” Cronos informs us, still speaking softly. “You won't be able to hear him anymore.”

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I drag my forearm across my wet face, then turn to face the King of the Titans, meeting Boone's dark gaze on the way. The newly made god of thieves is ready to fight if we have to, jaw rigid, hands in fists at his sides. I give him the tiniest shake of my head. Fighting seems like a guaranteed path to sudden, instant, and even irreversible death. But that leaves one single thought circling my mind.

How do we get out?

The answer is simple. We can't.

This is godsdamned—literally—Tartarus. Maybe if I think it enough times, reality will sink in.

Not even the Titans have managed to get out in millennia, and I have no doubt they've tried. Pandora's Box was a gamble. A last resort. And it was supposed to let out only one person.

Persephone.

Speaking of... Where in the name of Olympus is the goddess of spring? She was supposed to be waiting on this side to escape, but Cronos is the only one with us.

What'd he do? Eat all the others like he did his children?

Cronos smiles at me. Sharks have more inviting smiles. Worse, he reminds me of Hades so much my heart keeps skipping beats, confused about what I should be feeling right now. Not attraction, of course, but certainly some sort of affection. Or maybe I'm slowly and quietly unraveling.

I let a single, sharp laugh escape. "Out of everyone you could've pulled through, you chose the two most useless to you. Nice work."

Or maybe I'm unraveling fast and loud.

Boone tenses ever so slightly. Then gives a short whistle, the kind thieves use to communicate.

A warning.

One I ignore. I learned early on in the Order of Thieves—where Boone and I both grew up—that the way to deal with bullies is never to back down, and, when challenged, double down.

Cronos checks carefully over his shoulder, presumably at the doorway behind him. Checking what, exactly? Is he waiting for backup?

I lean to look around him. There's no one else in here and no place for them to hide. The small doorway at the other end of the bridge leads off into a tunnel, maybe. Hard to tell in the light of the torches that burn

in sconces around the room.

“You need to be quiet,” Cronos whispers, still turned away. “Or you’ll wake them.”

Ominous and mysteriously vague. My two favorite things. “Wake who?”

“Shhhh.” Cronos goes very still, continuing to look down the tunnel across the way. “They always get worse when you arrive.”

What?

I exchange a glance with Boone. The Titan has been locked down here a very, very long time. Clearly, it’s had an effect. Something to look forward to if we can’t get out.

Cronos jerks around to face me, and I straighten as his eyes twinkle, his lips tilting in a growing grin.

Yeah, that’s not creepy as fuck. “What?” This time I ask the question aloud.

“You think you’re useless?” Cronos says in a tone like a kindly uncle, but it’s still a whisper. “Seems like *you’re* the one not thinking clearly.”

I glare. “I *think* you’re a total, raging—”

Boone shoves his elbow into my side in the universal signal to shut up before the Titan smites you, and I wince.

Cronos moves faster than anything I’ve ever seen, and that includes the gods and several monsters. In a blur of movement, he doesn’t come for me. Instead, he gets Boone by the throat and slams him into the gates. I yelp at the sound of Boone’s head striking hard metal.

Cronos drops Boone like a rag doll and not the six-foot-two grown man he is. Then the Titan turns back to me like nothing happened.

Horror building, I stare behind him at Boone’s limp body in a heap on the ground. His chest moves up and down. Thank the stars. One arm is bent under him at a bad angle, golden blood, the ichor of the gods we now are, trailing from a cut above his brow. I shudder. He looks so breakable like that, god or not. Like someone who never should’ve followed me through any door, let alone *this* one.

“Why did you do that?” I ask, fighting the urge to rush to Boone’s side. Something tells me I need to keep my eyes on the Titan if I hope to get us both out of here.

Which is when I remember my weapons. I reach up to grab the double axes strapped to my back. Only...they’re not there. I grab again, but I didn’t

miss. They're...gone. The straps still crisscross my chest, but the sheaths are empty.

When he sees what I'm doing, Cronos sighs. "The gates of Tartarus strip all who enter of their weapons, Lyra." He's still speaking barely audibly.

As I lower my hands limply to my sides, the last part of what he just said sinks in. I blink slowly at Cronos, a new band of fear ratcheting down on my lungs. "You know my name?"

He lifts his brows—can brows be disappointed? "Obviously."

Right. "Um...how?" I ask, a tad distracted, and who can blame me.

"We've met."

I rear back before I can bury the reaction.

Met the godfather of world-ending daddy issues? "Nope. Not even a little bit."

I should just stop talking to him altogether. I'm not going to get sensical answers—just cryptic declarations and Titan-size ego.

My mind scrambles for options to get Boone and me out of here. Escape routes. Diversions. Bribes the universe might actually take. I don't even know how we got here entirely. One second, we were standing on the threshold—and the next, we were in the lion's mouth.

How the hells am I supposed to carry Boone out of Tartarus if he doesn't wake up?

My mind finally relays the fact that I might not have my axes but I do have my tattoos. The animals Hades gifted me are buried in the skin of my arm, and surely no one can take those away. I go to wake them up, except Cronos is already there, moving too fast for even my goddess eyes to see. He scoops me up under the armpits, holding me with my feet dangling off the ground, his grip firm enough that I can't reach my arm to touch it and access my animals.

"Your tattoos are gone, too, along with your weapons."

"I don't believe you." I kick out at him, but he doesn't so much as budge at the impact.

"You are always so quick to fight," he murmurs softly. Like he's proud of me.

"You've only known me a few minutes," I say. "How would you know that?"

Maybe I can try to teleport. My skill in that area sucks—Hades has been trying to teach me—but I can't dangle here like a hooked fish, either.

I will Boone to wake up. To move while the Titan's back is turned.

"I know you well, Lyra Keres," Cronos says. Then grows scary serious in a way that makes me still. "You will be our savior."

My mind abandons teleporting. Just drops it.

Adrenaline floods so fast it feels like my skin's turning inside out.

Because I believe him. Gods, I do. He knows me. Really knows me. It's there in his eyes—too certain, too familiar. Like I already belong to some plan he made ages ago and forgot to mention until now.

"You're wrong about being useless," he says, still calm, still quiet. "You are very useful to me. And I will punish anyone who harms the one who will free me."

I shake my head, stomach lurching. He hurt Boone...because he *elbowed me*? Because he thinks I'm going to free a *Titan*? And not just any Titan. The absolute worst one?

A bell chooses that moment to chime. Clear. Cold. Final. Like it's counting down to something I won't survive.

Cronos doesn't let go. Just turns his piercing gaze toward the dark tunnel again.

"What is it?" I whisper.

The bell *keeps* chiming, and it sounds...off. Like it's supposed to be a happy sound, akin to toy shops at the holidays, but instead is in a minor key.

"Son of a bitch." With no warning, Cronos swings me around so abruptly that my feet fly out in an arc only to dangle over sheer nothing.

The abyss that edges both sides of Tartarus' walls—that pit full of monsters—looms below me like the open maw of a kraken.

Fear claws its way up the back of my throat, and I start thrashing for real.

"It might be safer down there anyway," Cronos says. "I hope you do not die this time."

Then he fucking lets go.



LIVING ON BORROWED TIME

LYRA

I scream.

Of course I scream.

It rips right out of my throat as I flail, my stomach bolting for the exit while I plummet into the chasm. Above me, I see Cronos leaning out over the edge of the bridge. That damned Titan is watching me drop the same way a cat might watch a bug flounder in a pool.

After another breath, his shrinking face disappears entirely, swallowed by an impenetrable darkness that consumes me. Which is about when I realize that I'm *still* falling and not hitting anything.

It's also when it strikes me that I'm a fucking goddess. Not all that great of one yet. But still...

Get your shit together, Lyra.

If Hades were here, he'd be watching with his arms crossed and that impatient look that furrows his brows when I'm not immediately grasping whatever he's trying to teach me. We haven't had long to practice, but I've already seen that look a lot. Goddess lessons have gone about the same way thief lessons used to go.

That all clicks in at the same time, and I cut my screams off sharply, leaving my throat feeling raw and only the sound of air rushing in my ears as I fall...and fall...and fall.

Rabbit-hole style.

Then, out of the oppressive darkness, I see...something.

I squeeze my eyes shut, then open them again, and it's there. Bigger.

Closer. Something moving with me? Or maybe to me?

I have only a second to take in what appears to be a crystalline crack that reminds me of a geode rock, but I'm not falling past it. It's floating *with* me.

"What the hells—"

The thing rushes me. Only instead of making impact or crushing me, it doesn't touch me—it's not solid. And it swallows me whole.

My question gets absorbed by a silence so oppressive, it's like sound no longer exists. Everything is tinted red as movement flashes all around me, like I'm running so fast that the world blurs.

Then the space around me changes abruptly, and rather than falling endlessly through a dark abyss, I'm standing on one of the delicately carved bridges in Hades' water garden in the Underworld. The transition is so jarring my head spins for a second, and I put a hand out on the trunk of a nearby tree until everything stops spinning and the world comes into sharp reality.

Home.

Sound returns in a flash, and I'm surrounded by the soothing gurgle of running water, the fragrant scents of jasmine and honeysuckle, the perfect cool air on my skin. I'm surrounded by the brilliant, glowing colors of Erebus, where Hades' castle-like home stands. It's in a cavern so massive, the ceiling looks like a star-studded night sky.

I'm *home*. My new home in the Underworld.

Or...maybe this is a glamour. What in the fields of Asphodel just happened?

"What in the name of Olympus are you doing down here?" A low, snarling voice sounds from behind me. "This is the worst possible timing."

An achingly, wonderfully familiar voice.

Heart thudding with euphoria, pretty sure I'm glowing, I whirl around.

"Hades," I whisper, then almost sob with the emotions bubbling up.

His entire body goes dead still as he stares at me, taking me in with a single sweep of his gaze. "What happened?"

Everything off about this moment gets buried by the crash of relief that slams through me. I'm across the space between us, my arms around his neck in a heartbeat.

"Thank the gods," I whisper and kiss him.

He jerks against me, going rigid in my arms as he draws his mouth away from mine. Only far enough to search my eyes. Confusion slices through my relief like one of my axes. Holding still as well, I stare back.

What I see in his eyes isn't relief. It's angry bewilderment.

But...as our breaths mingle, his hand draws up the small of my back, pressing me closer, and my confusion turns to a wanting so familiar, I smile.

Hades catches his breath, and then his mouth is on mine. Gods in the heavens, it feels like the first time we kissed. Only...more.

Commanding but still soft. Demanding but questing. Like he's claiming and savoring this as something he's thought about for a long time.

How long was I trapped in Tartarus, anyway?

As for me, I'm so happy that I got out of that pit of vipers and back to him that I'm kissing him like I thought I'd never see him again. Because part of me, a deep-down part I was trying not to listen to, was worrying that he knew. That he knew Tartarus was my fate, maybe even exchanged me for Persephone.

When we slow, we're both breathing hard, and he puts his forehead to mine, eyes closed, hands at my back still holding me pressed up against him.

"You've never kissed me before," he says.

It takes a second for the words to burrow past my bubble of relieved happiness. I've never...what? "What are you talking about?"

As if my question knocks him upside the head, Hades rears back, looking more shaken than my god of death ever allows himself to.

"Your hair is long. You're my future Lyra, aren't you?"

Confusion feels like I'm trying to swim through rapids, getting flipped around in the rush of water. Future? My hair? What is he talking about? I put a hand to my head, and sure enough, it's wound up in a low bun.

I have no idea what is going on or why my hair matters. "Hades?"

His brows draw together in an intimidating scowl. "Damn it, Lyra. You're in the middle of Poseidon's Labor right now. I shouldn't be leaving you to deal with that alone."

"What? I don't understand."

"You told me to—"

Without warning, that blood-colored crystal thing passes over my head in a blur, and after a soundless, red-tinted moment, Hades is gone. I can still feel him against me, the sensation slowly fading, but I can tell the instant it disappears again, because of the darkness and the swish of air as I fall.

Trapped in the darkness of the abyss once more and still plummeting.

I don't know if I should scream or something else. I flail, a sound bubbling out of my throat that I cut off just as abruptly.

Because screaming won't fix shit.

Think, Lyra. How do you get out of this?

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AT LEAST ACT LIKE A GODDESS

LYRA

Wrangling my crashing heart as best I can, I force myself to close my eyes—not that it makes a difference in the dark, but so far, it’s the only way I’ve managed to teleport the few times it’s worked.

The memory of Hades’ smooth voice rings in my head.

Focus.

Harder to do when a large part of me is bracing to splat when I hit bottom.

Draw on your power until you feel a tingling under your skin, like energy.

It takes longer this time, fear ripping the sensation away before I can get a good hold of it. My stomach is churning. But eventually, I feel it.

Then pull it inward until you feel pressure in your chest.

It never works that way for me.

The tingling gathers at the base of my spine, the same way pleasure does when Hades makes me...

Picture where you are going.

The memory of his voice in my head sounds more urgent now.

Because you’re still falling, Lyra. Focus.

But where do I try to go? If teleporting worked to get out of Tartarus, the Titans wouldn’t still be here. Instead, I picture Boone’s limp form heaped on the bridge in a tangle of limbs. I’ll try to get back to him and then get us both away from Cronos and whatever that bell meant.

Release the power.

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An act that tends to blip out on me. Like the electricity turns off right when I need it most.

I let the tingling burst through me, trying to hold the image of where Boone is in my head. The wind in my ears stops, and I jerk my eyes open, heart tripping because I think, for a second, that I managed to do it on the first try for once. Without the side effects.

Disappointment might as well be a slap in the face.

No bridge. No Boone. No Cronos.

But I'm also not falling anymore. I'm standing...

Wait. When did I land? How?

Actually, the more important question is, *where* did I land this time? I frown, spinning in a circle to take it in. A cramped room with rock walls that is aching, horribly familiar.

My room in the Order of Thieves' den in San Francisco.

It looks the same. My cheap metal desk is set up with my computer—only allowed for the clerks. My bed is a neatly made mattress tucked into a rounded recess carved out of the rock of our underground lair. Piles of loot from recent scores that I have to catalog are stacked as orderly as they can be. It even smells the same—cave, rock, and laundry detergent. I have a thing about mold, which can be an issue when living underground near the ocean. Keeping everything frequently washed is how I deal with it.

"What in the name of Tartarus?" I ask aloud, voice hushed. Is this even possible? Did I truly escape Tartarus? I'm still tingling like I haven't teleported yet, though.

I look down and stare at the jeans and my favorite long-sleeve shirt from my days in the den. Nothing special. Just gray, but soft, dry-fit material that was always comfortable. It's consistently cool underground, even in the summer. I wore this often. But I wasn't wearing it when I came into Tartarus.

Did I start over in my life, back at... Well, not the beginning, exactly. But out of that cursed place?

My shoulders slam back. Hades. *Does he know I'm in San Francisco?* I bolt for the door.

"You have entered the Lock of Hestia."

I screech to a stop and whirl into a defensive crouch at the sound of the voice behind me, only to jolt at the sight of a woman dressed in flowing traditional Grecian clothing. A golden laurel is woven into her crimson hair, which falls in waves down to her waist.

It can't be.

I stare at her hard as I come out of my crouch slowly. I've only ever seen carvings and paintings of this goddess, who is said to have died during the Anaxian Wars, when the gods and goddesses of the Greek pantheon knocked Zeus off his throne, then battled each other for the position. Scholars theorize that it was her death, not the destruction of Olympus, that finally ended the war.

"Hestia?" I ask, uncertain.

Goddess of home and hearth. Oldest child of Cronos and Rhea. What is she doing in my room?

Her smile is so full of natural warmth, I actually feel myself relaxing enough to smile back, a second sliver of hope wedging into my panic and fear, even if I'm still as confused as if I waded into the River of Oblivion. It's a good sign she's here, isn't it? It has to mean I made it out of Tartarus somehow. "Can you... Can you help me?"

"I am a reflection of the goddess who created this Lock," Hestia says.

Lock? She said that word already. Hestia's Lock. I frown, glancing around. How is *my* room a lock? "I don't understand."

Hestia flickers, like a signal got interrupted, and yet she still looks so... real. Would she feel solid if I touched her?

I don't try it.

She holds out her hands, indicating the room we're in. "Welcome to the Labyrinth."



HESTIA'S LOCK

LYRA

Shock hits, clean and sudden. I must have misheard the goddess. “Labyrinth?” I glance around but only see the walls of my familiar bedroom back in San Francisco. “We’re still in Tartarus?”

She enunciates each word as though speaking to a child. “The only way out of Tartarus is to open the Lock.”

My first illogical thought is, *Thank the gods. There is a way out of Tartarus.* Immediately followed by thought number two...

“What do you mean by lock?” That word feels eerily synonymous with *captive*, and my stomach pitches. “What is a lock? How do I open it?” I shoot the questions at her like Artemis’ arrows. “Is it part of a maze?” The Labyrinth is a maze, isn’t it?

Hestia’s ghost, or projection, or whatever she is, flickers again. “The Lock tests your innocence. I wish you luck in this. My Lock will test the power of your deepest unfulfilled desire.”

My head is reeling. “What the hells does an unfulfilled desire have to do with innocence?”

The goddess blinks at me, and then the first smile she offered pins to her features again. This time, it’s not giving me any warm fuzzies. “You have entered the Lock of Hestia.”

I frown. “You already said that.”

Another blink. Another flicker.

“Welcome to the La—”

“You said that, too.”

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Flick. Blink. Flicker.

If I wasn't so damned confused, I'd say it's been a while since anyone talked to Hestia's...recording?

"Welcome to the Labyrinth," she finally starts again.

"*Eirene help me*," I pray to the goddess of peace, since technically there is no one to pray to for patience.

With a sigh, I cross my arms and wait to see if, without me interrupting her, Hestia might provide more information. Sure enough, after yet another smiling beat, she says, "This Lock can only be opened by one willing to give up what they want most."

Damn. This sounds *exactly* like the godsdamned Labors the gods and goddesses created for the Crucible. But this isn't so bad, I try to console myself. One simple test. I made it past *nine* Labors in the Crucible. Surely, I can open one measly lock and meander through a labyrinth.

I nod and open my eyes again, ignoring the racing of my pulse. I offer Hestia my own sinister smile. *Bring it.* "Let's do this."

But she's not done. "In the Lock, you will be tested without your powers."

Fuck *me*. Then the rest of what she said hits me... "No!"

I shoot out a hand like I can stop her. She is *not* taking the powers that Hades *sacrificed* to give me, that saved my life. I have a bad feeling that I'm really going to need them down here.

She snaps her fingers.

The lingering sensation of tingling from my teleporting attempt gets... stronger. And stronger. And stronger. Not pleasure now, but pain. Until it feels as though I've stuck my finger in a light socket.

I fight it. Or I try to. Fist clenched, I hold on to the sensation at the core of me that I think of as a piece of Hades—warmth, light, brightness in the dark—I try to hold on to it with everything I am.

A jolt ricochets through me.

Electric.

Then another, so violent that I pitch forward on a gasp. My grip on my power slips as, with my hands on my knees, my vision closes in on itself, the edges turning black until all I can see is a pinpoint of...light.

I *know* this light.

I am awash in it, everything around me radiant. It is everywhere, within me and without. My power. Hades' power. Only, unlike when Hades

made me a goddess, this time it lifts away from me, as if I'm watching a train going farther away down a tunnel. As it gets smaller and smaller, all warmth disappears, leaving me chilled to the bone.

My vision clears and I come back to myself with a blink and a shudder, lungs heaving with effort and sweat trickling down my temples, only to find that I haven't left my room and creepy AI Hestia is still standing there with that inane smile on her face. Wrapping my arms around myself, I try to control my breathing.

I'm already sure of what just happened, but I test it anyway. The only thing I've mastered in the little time I've had to learn is turning lights on and off. I focus on my sad, wonky desk lamp and swish my finger like a wizard's wand.

Nothing. Not a flicker of the lightbulb. Not even a poltergeist.

I'm human. A frail mortal without a weapon. Worse, she stole the only part of Hades I had left with me down here. Son of a bitch.

"Now for your test—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." I throw up a hand. "Cronos threw me down a hole, and I ended up here. I do not want to go through any Lock or take a test."

She flickers and blinks, clearly not computing.

Useless.

"Just send me back the way I came," I beg. "I don't want to do this."

Another episode of flickering and blinking, and then she settles again. "The only way out is forward."

Godsdamned gods with their "only way out" and "you have no choice but to compete" bullshit. I *earned* the right to never play a game or be tested again. This can't be happening.

"Your sacrifice is to be granted your deepest unfulfilled desire," Hestia says.

I glance around. Did I hear that right?

"Err... You mean you take it away, right?"

Glitch. Flicker. Blink. Glitch.

I don't know why I keep bothering with questions.

"When you cross the threshold of this room, all that is will no longer be, and everything you want, you will have in its place."

"Uh-huh," I mutter under my breath as I start to search the room for anything I can use to fight my way out. A grappling hook, maybe? Can I

climb out of here? “Riddle me something else, Batman.”

Like she finally decides to answer one of my questions, she rephrases it. “Everything that currently is will be stripped from your memory, replaced with a new history and what you’ve always wanted most.”

I straighten to stare at her. Anger twists like writhing snakes in my belly at being put in this position again, then goes limp under another onslaught of panic. It keeps coming in horrifying waves. She’s going to take away everything. Including...Hades?

Oh gods.

Oh hells.

Olympus be damned.

I scrape my brain for a thousand different answers. A way out of this. A way back up to the bridge. Cronos probably already left, assuming I’m dead.

But I’m also asking myself...

What have I always wanted most? That’s easy. My heart is screaming Hades. *Hades* is what I want most—to get back to him and the life we were trying to start together. That has to be it, right? I’d gladly give up being a goddess if it returns me to him.

“You have a choice,” Hestia says now.

“Finally.” I fling my hands up on a wave of sharp relief.

“You can accept the life you’ve always dreamed of inside my Lock. Or you can unseal this Lock and return to your real life.”

The relief abandons me so fast my shoulders slump. That’s not the choice I was hoping for. “How do I open the Lock?”

“You must willingly choose to walk away from the alternate life your hopes and dreams create, even if it breaks your heart and your mind.” She shoots me one more fake, glassy-eyed doll’s smile. “You may start...now.”

Hestia’s AI ghost disappears without a sound or trace. I narrow my eyes, frowning as I stare at the lamp on my desk. Why does the light look... fuzzy, hazy? I rub at my eyes, but it doesn’t help. The entire room has this romantic softness to it. A knock sounds at my door, unexpected, and I jump.

Then pause.

Do I open it?

“Lyra?” That’s Felix.

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How does my boss in the Order even know I'm in here? Then my brain kicks in. This is part of the Lock. This is an illusion. The instant that thought occurs, a sharp pain pierces through my head, right behind my eyes. I wince.

Another knock. "Lyra? Good news." I try to focus on the words and how wrong they are. I don't think Felix has ever used that term in his entire life. The basic concept of "good" is lost on that man.

I point at the door, calling out to the invisible goddess. "This simulation got that part wrong."

Another stab of pain is the only answer I get. I understand her reply all the same. Holding on to reality, to the truth...hurts in here.

Another knock.

I still hesitate. Hestia said that one bit about crossing the threshold of this room. So I probably shouldn't do that. Right?

Except the only way forward is through. She said that, too.

A choice that is not really a choice. I have to go through this. The thing is, if Hades is on the other side of that door, even if it's an illusion, what if I can't make myself walk away from him to get back to the dumpster fire that is my reality?

Mental note for when I escape this place—lodge a complaint with the gods about their cruelty and shitty instructions in all things locks, labors, and games.

"Lyra?" another voice calls out.

I gasp so hard I splutter.

Was that...?

I'm only vaguely aware that the pain disappears thanks to a flutter of nerves taking off in my stomach. My feet carry me to the door, and I jerk it open to find Felix standing there with a grin as cutting as the rest of him. Behind him, haloed in pink glowing light that almost makes them appear angelic, are two people I used to dream and pray about every night from the age of three, when they handed me over to the Order of Thieves so I could work off "our" family debt.

But the reality is, thanks to the curse Zeus gave me as a baby—to be unlovable—they were using the debt as an excuse to abandon me. Or so I've always thought.

"Mom?" I croak around a throat that is threatening to clog up with tears. "Dad?"

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NEVER DREAM

LYRA

Brad and Jessica Keres. They're here. They came for me finally.
Not Hades but my parents.

Another stabbing sensation rips through my head, and my heart might as well tear in two. Until I met Hades, I only ever wanted three things—to lose my curse, my freedom from the Order, and a real family. Is the wish Hestia is granting me the one I've ached for the longest?

"You've grown up so much," Mom whispers.

The haze in this illusion makes it hard to collect details, like walking through a dream, but I still greedily absorb everything I can about both my parents. My mom is petite, her brown hair graying at the roots, but she does have green eyes like mine with gold at the center. My dad is tall with a belly that reminds me of Santa Claus. I get the raven-black shade of my hair from him. Brown eyes, though. I didn't seem to inherit any of his other features.

I used to put myself to sleep imagining this exact moment. When they came back for me.

My father holds a trembling hand out to me. "We've come to take you home, baby."

His eyes brim with hope, but worry lines bracket them, etched deep as if carved there by time. Is this an act? Or did they miss me every single night the way I missed them? Did they wonder what I was doing? Picture me thieving? Pray for my safety?

It's all a lie, I try to tell myself, and I flinch with the pain. Don't believe it.

But it feels so...much better...to believe this. It doesn't hurt. It feels... warm and more real by the second, and convincing my mind that it's fake is getting harder.

The only way they'd be here in the den is if they came here to pay off our family debts and take me home... Maybe I was wrong. Maybe they do care.

"You're really here?" I ask.

Is that my voice?

I sound...off. Like an automaton reciting scripted lines.

Besides, that's not what I should have asked. I want to ask how in the name of Hades they could have left me here so long. I want to demand why they thought a three-year-old should be paying off debt of any kind. I want to ask why they blamed *me* for Zeus' curse in the first place. My mother is the one whose water broke in his temple, pissing him off. It's her damned fault.

So many other questions.

My mother nods, dropping her hand from her mouth to smile at me through the mist of tears. "Yes, baby," she says. "We're really here."

She steps closer, opening her arms, beckoning me.

Something pinches in my head, like the start of a headache. Pain means something, doesn't it? But the reason why is slippery. Didn't Hestia say something about a threshold? Maybe I'm remembering that wrong.

Swallowing hard, I manage to keep my feet where they are, but I still reach out and grasp her hand. Then close my eyes as even that small touch sends happiness through me on a surge of pure warmth.

All the pieces of my heart that chipped off—year after year, each time they didn't come—rush back in and snap together. Whole again. Like nothing was ever missing.

A tear squeezes out to run down my cheek. Grief doesn't always come from losing someone—it also comes from realizing they were never really yours to begin with.

I was *so* angry with them, but now all I want is for this to be true. I can have both, can't I? Them and Hades? Another pinch of pain—duller, though—and in the back of my head, a small voice, barely audible, whispers that something is wrong. That this isn't right. Isn't real. I have new dreams and a new family.

But it's such a little voice. Distant and far from me and growing softer

and hazier by the second.

My mother squeezes my hand. “Let’s go home, Lyrá.”

A small part of me is still fighting this...compulsion...but only a small part, and I step through the doorway and into my parents’ arms, and what was left of that little doubting, warning voice flies away.

Everything that’s happened recently—the Crucible, Hades, Tartarus—suddenly, it becomes so obvious that all of that was just a dream. A nightmare, most of it. I’m still in the Order, still cursed, still paying off our debt...and yet my parents have come to free me and take me home.

“Come on, sweetheart,” my dad says in a voice wobbly with tears. He clears his throat.

Before they can lead me away, Felix gives me a big hug. It’s a little uncomfortable, since Felix is not and has never been a hugger. But I find myself hugging him back.

“My little master thief,” he says in my ear.

Master thief? I try to pull away, the ache behind my eyes growing again. Because that sounds wrong. I’m not a master thief. I’m a...

His face blurs a little more, turns rosier, and the warmth takes away the headache.

And I suddenly remember things are different. Or...not suddenly. More like the knowledge just...is. I *belonged* here.

Felix looks over my shoulder at my parents. “You should be proud. She’s one of our best. Second only to Boone.”

I...am?

Pride swells in my chest as memories of my scores flash through my mind. I *am*. I’m one of the best master thieves they’ve ever seen.

I pull back and grin at Felix. “You only want me to come fix your spreadsheets.”

Spreadsheets? I don’t do spreadsheets. That’s the clerks’ job. Why did I say that?

A sharper shot of pain stabs behind my eyes, and for a flash, the space it takes for a hummingbird’s wing to flutter once, I think Felix’s face morphs into something...not human. Are there...teeth? Did I see jagged teeth?

But even faster, he’s back to smiling. No pain, either. Must’ve been a trick of the pretty lighting.

He shakes his head with a click of his tongue. “You will be a sore loss to the den.”

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Which makes me tear up. So many years in one place will do that.

As I step away from him, my mother takes my hand and my father wraps an arm around my shoulders. Together, they lead me away down the long natural stone hallway, navigating the various twists and turns of the den secretly buried underneath the city of San Francisco.

We get to the area where the newest pledges are required to stock rubber boots and flashlights for the thieves coming and going from our underground tunnels. I help my parents find pairs that fit them before I grab one of the lights. Which is when the slap of running feet has me glancing back.

Then straightening.

Boone.

“Lyra,” he calls.

The second he says my name, the edges of my vision feather and fuzz and another wave of memories comes at me. Boone and I...

We’re partners.

Best friends, but more than that, when Boone and I work together, we’re unstoppable.



MY HEART'S FAR, FAR AWAY

LYRA

The details about Boone are crisper in the rosy light than everything else. He's dressed in dark jeans and a hoodie, like he's been out casing a score. When he gets to me, Boone glances over my head at my parents, dark-eyed gaze sharp on them. He knows how long I've been waiting.

Boone has never waited for his parents.

The way he talks about them, on the rare occasions he has, I'm pretty sure he thinks of them as evil incarnate. The look on his face tells me he's worried my parents are the same. I hear my father clear his throat, shift on his feet.

My father is not a small man. I seem to remember he was a mechanic, and those years have left him in good shape other than the belly. I don't blame him for being nervous. When he wants to be, Boone is intimidating as hell. His size, the muscles, the recently shaved scruffy beard a shade darker than his brown hair. Add that to his usual get up of biker clothes—leather and jeans—combined with a palpable vibe of fuck around and find out, and most people avoid him on the street.

Which is hilarious, because really, he's a big squish. A squish who can handle himself and is the best master thief the Order has seen in several centuries, but still...

As if dismissing my parents as insignificant, Boone focuses on me. "You were going to leave without saying goodbye, Lyra?" he asks quietly.

With my free hand, I tug on his jacket so he'll lean down.

"I figured you'd come find me," I whisper.

Official partnerships within the Order are strictly forbidden. Dating, too, not that Boone and I have ever entertained that. They don't want their pledges distracted by personal bonds, and they want to use all the combinations of their resources that they can. So Boone and I manipulate things behind the scenes to suit ourselves. The truth is, he's taking a risk, meeting me like this.

Although neither Boone nor I have ever been too worried about breaking rules.

He looks over my head again. "Excuse us for a second."

Boone pulls me away, backtracking to a turn in the corridor. Then he swallows. This close, I see his throat move with it, the details clear. "They came for you?" he asks.

"Just now."

Boone tugs on my long hair, which just for a second makes me frown. Wasn't it just up in a bun? Or...didn't I cut it? It shouldn't be long.

The flash of pain disappears quickly when Boone distracts me. "And me?" he asks.

Which gives me a different pause, my hair forgotten. I study my friend's face. He is *never* vulnerable. Part of that is training as a thief all his life, and part of that is how Boone is. I can see a hint of worry in his eyes all the same. Because he *lets* me see it.

"I couldn't exactly ask Felix where you were." Not without making things harder on Boone, who has to stay here. "I planned to catch you on your way topside to scope your next score tomorrow night. The diamond place, right?"

His broad shoulders ease slightly. "You knew about that?" We don't talk jobs we don't partner on.

"What do you think?" I raise a single eyebrow in challenge.

He offers a narrow-eyed half smile. "But I haven't even reported that one yet."

I shrug. "I'm damn good at what I do."

Boone breaks into a wide grin, eyes gleaming at me over his crooked nose—broken before I met him, when he was still part of the Dallas den. But then he slowly sobers. "So this is goodbye?"

We've never talked about what would happen when one of us left. But he's talked about going legit when he gets out, putting his skills to use and opening a private security business.

“I was thinking...you might need a hand with that new business of yours.”

Boone backs up, searching my face like he thinks I’m joking. “Are you being serious?”

Does he hate the idea? I shrug. “I mean, I know a thing or two. And I’m better at office work than you.”

Office work. The hazy light wavers behind him and around him on another flicker of pain behind my eyes. Why would I know anything about office work? The dens have clerks for that.

But then Boone grins again, and this one doesn’t fade away. “I’m in, partner,” he says.

I laugh because that’s what I said to him the first time he offered to team up on a score.

He’s nodding to himself, and I can see he’s already plotting out how this will work. “The gods must have plans for us, Lyra.”

Gods...

The gods have plans...

Another flicker in the haze, and a twist of pain hits as those words rattle around in my head. An image of mercurial silver eyes in an unsmiling face flashes through my mind.

Hades.

But as quickly as it appears, the image is gone, along with the sharp ache it brought, returning me to that odd, fuzzy feeling. Almost...feverish.

“So...” I rub my hands together.

We’re doing this. I have plans for my future. A fear I’ve been stuffing down deep my entire life—what I would do when I finished with the Order of Thieves—is no longer a fear. “Tomorrow night, after you scope your next job, we can talk. Figure out what I can be doing while we wait for you to pay off your debt.”

“You won’t have to wait long,” Boone says.

His track record as a thief is unrivaled, so I’m not surprised. I let out a silent breath of relief. “When?”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I rock back on my heels, not sure what he means. “To talk through plans?”

He shakes his head. “I paid my debt off two years ago.”

“Two...” Holy shit. How did I not know that? I mean, I should have assumed, given how good he is, but I’m just as good.

"I have a stash saved away where no one knows. Enough for us to get a solid start." His lips tip. "More than a start."

So do I, for that matter. I frown over that. "Why didn't you leave?"

"I didn't have anywhere else to go." He shrugs.

Gods, the things the world does to us sometimes. The Order hasn't been awful, but it hasn't exactly been all candy, Christmas, and pats on the head, either. And he didn't have anywhere else to go.

At least I have my parents.

"I'm sorry," I say softly.

But he shakes his head. "Don't be. Hermes gives his thieves what they need. So I figure he brought us together for this. I couldn't make my business idea work all on my own anyway."

He needed me. That's what he's saying. That I'm needed.

My heart feels like one of those symbols on computers showing the battery level. It was close to full, thanks to my parents, but now I'm practically glowing I'm so charged up.

"So..." My whisper is embarrassingly choked. "Tomorrow?"

He sticks his hand out for a shake. "Tomorrow, partner. I'll come to your parents' home, and we can talk. Figure out how to start a business. Okay?"

A new life...

Family. Freedom. The future.

It's like all the holidays landed on my birthday and I'm getting everything I ever wanted.

The headache that keeps threatening pushes outward with pressure and a new shooting ache.

Not everything. A tiny voice tries to wave a red flag. And I shake my head like I'm attempting to rattle something loose that I can't quite remember. There's something else I want more. Isn't there? Something right out of reach in my mind. Something to do with Hades...

But Boone grabs my hand to shake it, and the feeling goes away as I laugh and squeeze back, even while the pain behind my eyes remains. I ignore it.

No way am I not soaking up every single second of this.

Maybe I have a migraine coming on? I've never had one, but I hear they can make you light sensitive.

I'm probably only thinking of the god Hades because he's associated

with omens of endings. After all, it's hard to believe this won't all be taken away from me. I should be ecstatically happy, so why do I feel like something is off? Maybe everything that's happening is so good, so perfect, that I can't quite believe it. That has to be it. Right?

Boone grins one last time, then gives me a small push toward where my parents are waiting to take me home, probably wondering what happened to us. "I'll see you tomorrow."

As I turn the corner, I see my parents down the hall. They're standing in shadows, the rosy light not quite reaching them, so it has to be my mind playing tricks again.

Because, for a heartbeat, I swear I see a blank space where their eyes should be.



HOME'S A LIE

LYRA

My father steps out of the shadows, nearing one of the sconces that light the halls. Blue flame—a gift from Hermes of undying flames to light all his thieves' homes. It casts more of that pink haze over his features.

I was definitely seeing things, because Dad's eyes aren't blank sockets. They're normal. He's even grinning, making them crinkle at the corners, which makes my own eyes ache.

"You ready to go home?" he asks.

Home.

The *finally* of this moment settles into my heart, into my soul, wrapping around me like the softest, warmest blanket. I take a deep breath. "I am."

I grab one of the flashlights and lead my parents through several more twists and turns in the dark until we get to a solid-looking cement wall.

"Did you ever meet Hermes in person?" my mother asks curiously as we pass through the hidden door into the human tunnels where his image is painted.

"No—"

A sharp sting of pain in my skull comes just before a vague image, one that feels like a memory but couldn't possibly be. Because in it, I'm standing on some kind of platform surrounded by mountains and white temples. Lots of them.

And standing in front of me isn't Hermes but Hades, wearing jeans, a blue button-down shirt rolled up at the sleeves, and work boots.

Hades.

This feels like a memory, but I'm certain I've never met the god.

I close my eyes, applying pressure to my temples as I try to force other images into some kind of order. Try to force them past the growing ache. There's a vague feeling that the place I was standing in was Olympus. Which doesn't make a lick of sense. Humans don't go to Olympus.

The harder I try to remember it, the worse the pain gets, building and building and making my stomach roll, and so do the images until I'm left feeling like I'm drifting in a sea of confusion.

"We've kept your bedroom exactly the way it was when you left us," Dad interrupts my thoughts to tell me.

I drop my hands, letting the images go, and immediately the pain fades. It's probably better that I stop trying to force memories that aren't there. I'm sure it was just a dream anyway.

I swing the flashlight my dad's way.

Only to pause.

Teeth.

I saw jagged, inhuman teeth in the dark a flash before the full beam of light hit his face. What is happening? Trying not to be obvious, I peer closer. But the details of his face stay the same, if slightly fuzzy around the edges in the darkness.

"We hoped you would come home sooner," he continues. "But since we weren't able to get enough money until now, we thought it might be nice if you chose all new things." I blink at the lopsided, slightly sheepish smile he gives me. No jagged teeth.

Terrific. Now I'm seeing things.

It has to be the shock of all this happening so quickly. I'll settle in soon enough. In the meantime, I won't say anything to my parents. They'd only worry.

Dad takes me by the hand and tugs me along. "I'm pretty sure you're not going to fit in the bed we had for you when you were three."

I chuckle. "Probably not."

Then we're standing in a hallway in a home. My previous home. For a disorienting second, it feels as though I closed my eyes and when I opened them, we'd moved, but the longer I think about it, the more I remember walking out of the tunnels, then hailing a cab home, the drive, all of it.

Gods. I guess excitement is making me lose it a bit.

I follow my parents down the length of the narrow space but pause to stare at the pictures on the wall. I don't remember what used to be here, but now there is image after framed image of...me. All from far away, all different ages.

Me growing up.

I reach out to run my finger over the smooth glass, biting down hard on my lip. They've always been watching?

Mom rubs my back, and I have to keep myself from flinching away, not used to touch. "We knew we weren't supposed to, but..."

I swallow hard and nod.

Then I let them lead me to the room at the end of the hall and pause in the doorway.

"There's enough room for a king-size bed in here," Dad says, looking over my shoulder from where he's standing behind me.

Mom slips her hand into mine and gives it a squeeze. "I only caught a glimpse of your room in the...errr...den, but it looked like a smaller bed. Maybe you'd like a little extra space to start with."

With another zap of a headache, a crystal-clear image flashes through my mind. This one of a king-size bed in a masculine room, floor-to-ceiling windows with a view of San Francisco, gray silk sheets. Did I do a job in some rich asshole's penthouse? I don't remember it.

"Lyra?" Mom asks.

Her voice clears away the pain like it never happened, and I shoot her a smile. "A king seems awfully large for one person. Maybe a queen would be better."

Queen.

That word means something else to me, doesn't it? Something new?

As Mom exchanges a glance with Dad, her shoulders drop slightly, like my answer was...a relief.

The size of my bed is a relief?

Maybe they can't afford a king and are just trying to make up for all the years we've lost.

"Now that I think about it, a double would be better," I say. "After so many years in a small bed, I think I'd feel lost in a bigger one."

The lines around her eyes ease. "Anything you want, honey." Mom inhales and lets it go. "Is spaghetti still your favorite?"

Anything that doesn't taste like sawdust is my favorite. The Order is cheap

when it comes to feeding their pledges. I don't tell her that. "Absolutely."

Her eyes light up. "I'll go get that started." And she hurries down the hall.

Dad watches her go with a smile tinted with sadness.

"What's my real name?" I ask. The question comes so out of nowhere, even I tense a little.

Dad frowns. "You don't remember?"

I shake my head slowly. "I was too young, and I've been Lyra ever since."

"Right. Of course," he mumbles to himself, casting his gaze around in darting little moves.

Does he not remember? How could that be—

"Alani."

I straighten. "Alani?" I try out the sound of it, strange in my mouth, but sweet, like a song.

He nods, watching me closely. "Your mother's idea."

"I like it."

That earns me a new grin. Did my parents always smile this much?

They just got you home. Of course they are extra smiley.

What is wrong with me? I've been in the Order too long, had things like faith and trust trained out of me. That's what it is. I'm the problem here.

"Do you want us to call you that?" The hopeful note in his voice is unmistakable, but...

"I don't think so," I say slowly. "I'm used to Lyra now."

"Of course." He holds his hands up. "Anything you want."

"Brad?" my mom calls from the kitchen.

"Coming," he calls back. Then Dad gives me an awkward little wave and leaves me there.

I turn around and wander my room. They really did leave it the same. The small twin bed that is more toddler size than a full twin. I squat down, picking up a dark-haired doll that I remember. Three-year-old me always thought she was so beautiful, with curling locks and big brown eyes and grown-up clothes. Current me sees the tatters. She was second- or third-hand. I still don't care. She was my favorite.

"Nice to see you again," I whisper, then smooth her hair and set her back down beside her faded plastic house.

Getting up, I turn around in a slow circle, hands on my hips. What changes do I want to make?

Nothing too expensive, but maybe paint the walls a simple white. Blue has always been my favorite color, so a bed with blue sheets and maybe a white or darker blue bedspread would be nice. Or maybe...gray silk.

Another lightning strike of pain zings my brain, and I can picture that bed again, even more clearly now. Visceral details come with the image. The silky feel of them against my skin, the smell of lying in them—fresh linen, chocolate, and...smoke? Like a campfire. Why smoke?

More details come at me fast, so real that I start breathing harder—a strong arm stealing around my middle, pulling me back against a solid chest. The low rumble of a voice in my ear that makes me both shiver and sigh at the same time.

But I can't make out what he says.

Just that I...am happy.

Who? There is no one. I've never had anything like that with anyone. Ever.

I press my palms into my throbbing temples and squeeze my eyes shut.

"You couldn't even wait until morning?" I murmur in the memory and can hear the smile in my own sleepy voice.

Then I roll over and freeze.



BEFORE MY TIME

LYRA

A lock of raven-black hair falls into silvery eyes that stare at me with sleepy adoration.

Hades.

My heart stutters, then jagged pain bursts through my head like fire burning away the underbrush and clearing the haze with the truth as the veil of the illusion rips from my mind.

Hades.

My home is with *Hades*. My life is with the god of death, the King of the Underworld. No...not king anymore.

I am queen.

I spin around my little-girl room and see incandescent shimmers of glammers and enchantments everywhere now. This version of me, of my life... It isn't real. Exactly like she said she would, Hestia made me believe that none of that happened. She showed me a different future. Yes...one where I got everything my younger self dreamed of for so very, very long. One where I could even have been happy.

But it's *not* my future.

Not the one I choose for myself. Not the one I desperately need to get back to on the other side of those damned gates.

Not anymore, and it never will be.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to wrestle with the abrupt disillusionment. The ache in my head turns into throbbing, like reality is still battling to keep the false narrative out. Because I did want this once—the love of my

parents. The bigger shock, reverberating through me like an earthquake shaking the very foundations of San Francisco, is that what I will regret giving up most is...

"Lyra?" Boone's voice sounds from behind me.

I whirl around to find him in my doorway, my parents' worried faces tucked in behind him on either side.

My hand creeps up to my throat like I'm trying to contain my own sorrow as my throat closes up at the sight of his face.

This alternate life blends with what really happened, and I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Boone is only my friend from my life before—we were never partners, never best friends. Those were things I wanted. Desperately, at the time.

But that's not what I want now. I walked away from those dreams with ease the second I gave my heart to Hades.

This Boone must see something of the truth in my face because he reaches out almost reflexively. "We're supposed to start a business together—"

I shake my head. "It's not real. None of it was."

"Please," he chokes out. "You're the only true friend I have. I can't do this alone."

"I'm sorry." I twist my lips around the words and the threatening burn of tears.

I'm sorry because now that I can see the glamour of Hestia's test, I know the future she showed me would never have happened. My parents were *never* coming back for me. Even if I'd paid off the debt, I don't think they would have taken me in. I'm not sure they ever loved me, or missed me, or thought of me once they shucked me off to the Order, able to go on with their lives debt free and no longer burdened with a cursed child.

But Boone...

That future with him *was*...possible. My skills as an office clerk would have made me ideally suited to help him start a business. Was that what he'd wanted? His dream?

He closes his eyes, because he knows I won't change my mind.

I take a step back, lifting my gaze to the ceiling, looking anywhere but at him. "Okay, Hestia!" I call out. "I've made my choice. Let me out."

A hissing sound comes from the direction of the doorway. Behind

Boone, my parents' faces...melt. Like candle wax. The colors of their skin and hair and eyes drip away with it. My throat was already raw and tight with emotion, but now it closes even more with gut-churning horror, making it hard to breathe as I see what lies beneath.

Because my parents aren't an illusion...they are Nightmares.

Oh. My. Gods.

I'm not safe in my dreams here. I was being hunted.

I thought the creatures of antiquity were eradicated from the world around the same time the Titans were locked up in Tartarus. I guess they've been stuck down here, too, waiting for more victims.

And Cronos fed me to them like chum in the water.

The illusion melted away, they stand behind Boone in their true form. Sickly pale, grayish-white skin stretches over an anthropoid shape—lanky and long-torsoed with humanish heads, they stand on two overlong legs and with two arms that nearly scrape the ground. That's where the resemblance to humans ends.

Their sinewy chest muscles blend into something that looks like tree roots under their skin, growing around their collarbones and leading up their necks to their faces, which have wrinkles where a nose should be, smooth sockets for eyes, and high foreheads that mold into what looks like a ridge at the back of their heads. Their mouths are human-looking but filled with jagged teeth.

I wasn't seeing things before.

Trust your damned instincts, Lyra.

In sync, they both open their mouths wide, and it only gets worse—those jagged teeth protrude on what, to me, looks like a beak. Pink and raw, their beaks are lined with those teeth along the entire length, snapping at me.

On sheer instinct, I reach behind me to grab the axes strapped to my back only to get handfuls of empty air. Which is when I remember that the Gate of Tartarus stripped me of my weapons and Hestia stripped me down to mortality.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Keeping my gaze glued to the snapping creatures, I try to think.

Is there anything in here that can help me?

Unless you count the doll—I mean, those plastic pointed toes could be used to stab—there's nothing I can use to fight the Nightmares. Shit.

Maybe I can run past them if they come in the room. Except Boone is blocking the doorway.

I pull my thinking up sharply.

Boone, who isn't covered in a film of glamour, who has been crystal clear the entire time I've been down here. I squint at him. Why hasn't he melted into a monster yet? Is he an NPC in this illusion? He's holding still with his eyes closed.

One of the Nightmares lifts a long limb, and the hand at the end changes shape into something akin to a sword. Holy hells. The bastards are shape-shifters? It's not entirely about glamouring?

I take up a fighting stance—feet wide, hands up, ready for it to come at me—but the thing that was my mother moments ago steps back and aligns the point of the sword with Boone's spine. Then, even without eyes, I know it looks directly at me.

A threat.

Boone is *real*.

Did Cronos throw him down here with me, too?

What an asshole.

Holding up both hands, I don't move. "Boone," I whisper.

His eyes open slowly, and he stares at me, kind of hazy and confused. Oh my gods. It's *really* him. Boone is here with me. Since when? The entire time?

Focus on the important stuff.

I think Boone is still caught in the fantasy, his eyes glassy and unfocused and slightly accusing. I do the only thing I can think of...

I whistle.

It's one of the signals all pledges know—the warning to drop.

At the same time, I whirl and grab the doll, chucking it at the sword-armed Nightmare, but I miss and hit Boone right between the eyes.

Because he didn't fucking drop.

His head snaps back. Before he can straighten, I tackle him, trying to take out his legs so he'll fall forward instead of back. Which works great, except he lands on me with an *oomph*, though I'm not sure if it comes from him or me, because all the wind gets knocked right out of me.

"What the hells, Lyra," he groans. "You don't have to tackle me to—"

A flash of a weird, gray-fleshed sword comes from overhead, and, despite still struggling for air, I manage to roll me and Boone together,

slamming my back into the doorjamb, but at least the Nightmare misses us. Its sword arm slams into...

Rock.

Not carpeted flooring.

The glamour of the bedroom and the house and the entire world of San Francisco melts away like an oil painting melting in a fire, and instead we're lying on the ground in a huge space that reminds me of a pie wedge—wide at one end, which boasts a curved wall, and narrowing to a point at the other. There is no ceiling, or maybe I can't see it, since the top is so high up. Smooth stone walls climb into the darkness of the abyss. The space is lit only by a glowing orb that floats in the center close to the ground.

And scattered around the floor are bones. Bleached white like they've been in the sun.

Or picked so clean there's nothing left.

Fuck.

"Move!" Boone, sounding more himself, wraps around me and rolls us both over and over and over as more than one sword arm flashes by, thudding against the ground with sickly noises as they miss each time. Using a flipping technique, Boone has us on our feet, with him bodily between me and the two Nightmares, his arms stuck out to keep me from coming around him.

I lean over, getting a better look at their entire bodies. The rootlike growths around their shoulders and necks also extend down their legs. I shudder. Those things were my parents only a few moments ago.

With an otherworldly screech of sound that reminds me of nails being dragged down giant chalkboards, the two creatures charge. Boone drops a shoulder and barrels into one of them, backing it up even as it pummels at him with its sword arms—but the swords are too long and it's only hitting him with the fleshy part.

And the second Nightmare is coming straight for me.

My early years of training as a thief, including self-defense, kick in hard, and I manage to deflect its stabbing motion, grabbing it by the forearm and turning to bring its elbow down across my shoulder. The arm bends the wrong way with a satisfying crunch, and the Nightmare screams. The sound seems to trigger its friend into a rage.

Across the room, the other Nightmare lifts Boone up, holding him lengthwise overhead like it's lifting a barbell, not letting go no matter how

much he thrashes. The thing has to be eight feet tall at least, and its arms are even longer.

Another screech—this one different, almost shocked—sounds from the Nightmare at my side.

At first, I think it's because of me, but then I realize that it's looking behind me with those eyeless sockets. Then it drops to its belly on the ground, trying to scoot away, like it's hiding.

I jerk around to see what it's hiding from. Another one of those red crystal things is coming at me fast. I get a better look at it this time—glittering in a deep red sheen of jagged minerals, like a bloody gash ripping through reality. Bypassing the Nightmare, it swallows me whole.

In the next instant, after a new round of silence and blurring red, I'm standing in Hades' office in our penthouse.

The shock is followed by a rush of relief that is like diving into the bracing cold of the Pacific Ocean. My hands fly up over my mouth as I stare around me at the familiar space.

Wait. Is this real? Or another Nightmare illusion? Is Hestia trying again? She got my deepest desire wrong and is trying to fool me again.

But this isn't hazy like before. No rose-colored sheen to it. No pain in my head when I think of him or anything that was real. Which means *this* is real. I'm actually *here* in the penthouse. Just like I was in the water garden with Hades.

No fucking clue how. Or maybe all of this is a glamour. One giant hallucination.

Only...I can *smell* the bitter chocolate of him. Faint but here. My body lights up at the familiar scent.

This is real.

It feels like yesterday when I woke in his bed, the scent of him all over my body. Or like he'll show up any second, stealing his arms around me from behind, feathering his lips over the curve of my neck. Coaxing. Teasing. Calling me his star. Making me burn.

I run toward the door.

"Hades!" I call out. "Hades—" I stop mid-step and stare at something that is...definitely wrong.

A chill slithers through me, stealing all the warmth of his scent from the room.

I'm facing his trophy wall. That's what I call it. It's a wall of glass

shelves, brightly lit to show off the antiquities he's collected through the years. Including...

"That's not possible." The words scratch in my throat.

Because a matched set of weapons is displayed inside—two axes with golden handles, the bottom halves of which are wrapped in turquoise leather. The blades are silver with golden markings. A circle with a symbol of Odin's head divides the larger axe blade from a smaller one on the backside that's shaped more like a tip of a spear. There are other symbols. Norse.

A gift from Odin to Cronos' eldest child.

Our axes. Mine now.

Stripped from me when I entered Tartarus.

My hands start to shake. Did Hades put them here after I disappeared? I haven't been gone *that* long. Have I? He wouldn't give up on me so fast. He couldn't.

Forcing my trembling fingers to work, I open the case but only have time to lift one of the axes before a shimmer of glittering red light catches my eye and the crystalline form passes over me again. After another freaky soundless second, I find myself back in the rock pit with the Nightmares. It's like I didn't leave at all. One is still cowering on the ground, and the other is holding Boone in the air.

The one closest to me springs to its feet and reaches for me.

I don't hesitate, slamming the handle end of the axe into the side of its face. The creature crumples to the ground in a heap of long limbs. Not dead, though. I don't think. They're stuck down here just like me. I won't kill them unless I have no choice.

Across the room, the Nightmare holding Boone aloft screams so horrifically I want to put my hands over my ears, but I can't. It goes to break Boone over its knee, and, in that split second, I hurl my axe at it. I swear I hear the *whomp, whomp, whomp* as it turns end over end in the air before striking the Nightmare in the shoulder, lodging deep with a sickening crunch and suck of bone and blood and flesh that I can hear from across the chamber. Throwing axes is the only thing I got any good at as a thief, so I hit exactly where I aimed. Not a kill shot.

The Nightmare stands there, still holding Boone in the air and staring at me with its creepy-as-sin blanks for eyes for a long second before it collapses.