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To all my author and book world besties...
You are my soulmates, my support system, my calm in the storm,
my "Is this normal?" checkpoints, my encouragement, my brainstorming partners,
my "What happens in Vegas," my rising tides, my geek out enablers, and my ride-or-dies.

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In *The Wrath Gods Reap*, the Greek gods walk among us, the Titans are imprisoned below us, and the souls of the dead are gathering at the gates of Erebos. As such, this story features elements that might not be suitable for all readers, including blood, gore, violence (human, god, and monster alike), death, grief, references to off-page sexual assault, common phobias (including bugs, snakes, and darkness), hospitalization, imprisonment, injury, burning, perilous situations, graphic language, and consensual sexual activity on the page. Readers who may be sensitive to these elements, please take note, and prepare to enter the Underworld…

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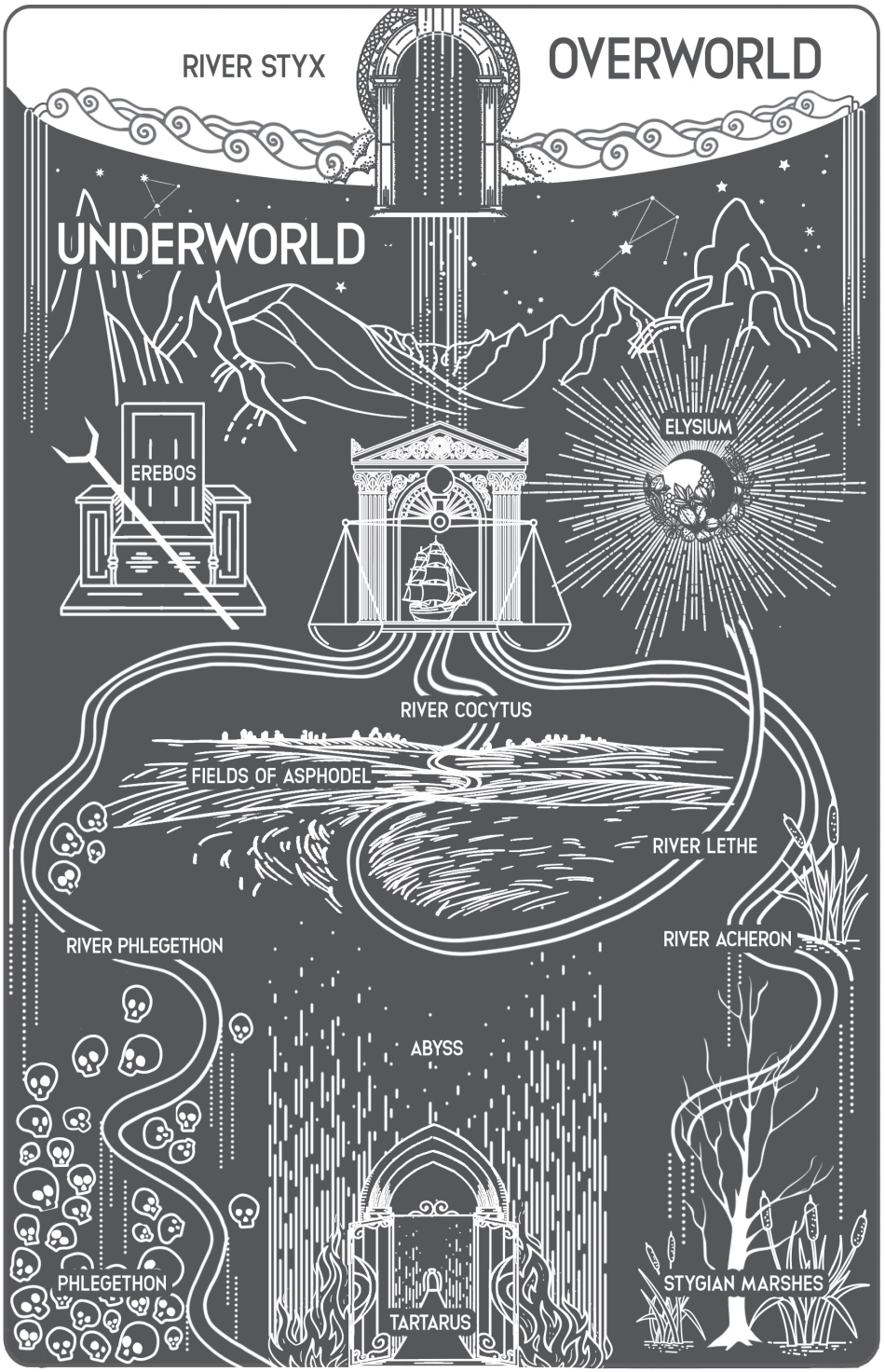
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PREVIOUSLY IN THE CRUCIBLE

None of this was on my bingo card. I won the Crucible and Hades' heart, taking me away from my life as a cursed-to-be-unlovable clerk for thieves, only to end up trapped in Tartarus. Except it turned out the Titans were trapped down there by a Deceiver who glamoured the entire world—including all the gods—to believe they were evil. Which they aren't. I managed to unlock Tartarus, but in the process, Hades' powers were stripped, and I had to reverse time to fix a huge mess. He's mortal now. The Titans are hiding in Tartarus, which we're pretending we escaped without them. As for me? I'm secretly the goddess of time and glamours, and openly the co-Queen of the Underworld alongside Persephone. We still don't know who glamoured the world, but we're damn sure going to hunt them down…and make them pay.

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PREFACE

Gone. It's all gone. The entire world, everything we can see, is burned to a crisp, leveled. And the oceans…the oceans are on *fire*.

We almost had it. The end of the Deceiver. The Titans released from Tartarus. And Hades… We were going to rule the Underworld together as King and Queen.

But it turns out the prophecy *was* inevitable. The proof is in front of me. A thousand thoughts bombard my mind. Question after question.

What if we'd discovered the Deceiver's identity sooner?

What if I hadn't used up all my power over time?

What if…

I look at Hades. He hasn't given up—I can see that in the hard set of his jaw. I adore him even more for that. I also know there's only one thing left to try. But I have to do it alone.

I dash an arm across my cheeks, which are soaked with tears. And then I summon the Helm of Darkness to me.

Hades goes still a beat before he jerks around, already reaching for me. "Lyra, don't go—"

But like everything else, I'm already gone.

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PART 1

THE PLAN

In the history of the world,
only the victor's version of the story is accepted as the truth.

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1

SCHEMING GODS

LYRA

Fuck death and all the gods and goddesses who rule over it.

Sure, technically I'm one of them now, as Queen of the Olympic Underworld, but those assholes *punished* Hades. They judged him and then stripped him of his powers and made him mortal. *They* are the reason we're having issues down here at all.

The reason *I* am having issues.

The dead need to be processed. Missing a king is one thing, but we have *no* god of the dead. Just me and Persephone—co-queens whose natural powers cover spring, glamours, and time. Though my power over time is glitching at the moment. Regardless, none of those gifts have anything to do with death or the dead.

And it's showing.

I can only hide some of it. But the lines of souls backed up and waiting for me to get to them is a big godsdamned clue.

Of course, there's a way for Hades to get his powers back. It won't even take three guesses to figure out how it's done: trials. The answer is a series of trials.

More damned trials. The cosmic joke of my life.

So yeah…fuck them.

I cast my gaze over the view from the terrace of our home in Erebos, in the Underworld I now rule. Water gardens sprawl below, and mountains rise all around us, eventually blending into the cavern ceiling so high up, it looks like a night sky, dotted by points of light that glow bright blue. Our

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version of stars. The colors here are deeper, brighter, and more brilliant than in the Overworld or even Olympus. Every phosphorescent leaf and flower and blade of grass blends into the tapestry of natural wonder.

But I'm not going to find answers down here.

That's what worries me most. No answers. And we've been looking.

I don't realize I'm fidgeting until Hades steps in close from behind, easing a hand around my waist to pull me against him, pressing a kiss to the nape of my neck.

"Play nice when Anubis gets here," Hades whispers in my ear. His voice is a slow, delicious slide against my senses, but the words are an order.

I twitch against him but don't break his hold. "I don't like involving him."

"So you've said." Seduction takes on an edge. "Several times."

"Yeah…well…" I mutter.

Hades chuckles. Mostly because I couldn't come up with anything better.

At least Hades told me his plan this time. Correction: *plans*. There's always more than one with Hades. That's progress from all the secrets we've both been forced to keep from each other in the past. We still have secrets.

But now…they're *ours*. It's us against the entire immortal world.

No big deal.

Still holding me against him, Hades trails the fingers of his other hand down my bare arm. "I could distract you until our guest arrives, if you like."

Cerberus, our three-headed hellhound standing guard, tilts all three of his heads. *"Actually,"* Cer, the serious head in charge, drawls. He only speaks telepathically to the people he wants to hear him. *"We'd rather you didn't."*

"Definitely not," Ber grumbles.

Rus' tongue lolls out of his mouth. *"Yeah. Gross."*

Persephone doesn't say anything. Delicately feminine with long, midnight black waves of hair that fade into a rich burgundy rose and then pale pink at the tips, she's wearing a flowing pink dress in a modern cut that still manages to reflect ancient fashion. The color is striking against her deep-brown skin.

For all her effortless beauty, she's practically vibrating with tension. She's not exactly sitting—she's teetering. Right on the edge of her seat.

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Back straight as an arrow, hands folded in her lap, trying to appear serene but failing by a long shot.

Her darting glances toward the stairs are a dead giveaway of what… or more particularly who…she's looking for.

"Boone's not coming." I try to say it gently.

Now the god of thieves, Boone was with me growing up in the San Francisco den of thieves, with me again in the Crucible, where he almost died, and then again in Tartarus. He and Persephone have their own history that I'm trying not to get in the middle of, though curiosity rides me hard.

She straightens, cheeks taking on a rosy glow. "Who says I was looking?"

None of us says a thing, and she glances from face to face before she wrinkles her nose. "Was it that obvious?"

"Only because we know you." Rus nudges her shoulder with his nose.

Persephone sighs. "He's avoiding me. Again."

"We can't meet *all* together, or it would be suspicious," Hades reminds her. Charon's not here, either. The other player in our merry band of Team Underworld. The ferryman of the dead, who brings the souls across the River Styx, is on duty there now.

"That's Boone's excuse *this time*," Persephone mutters. "How am I supposed to fix things if he won't talk to me?"

Out of nowhere, a scream pierces my mind—something that happens a lot since I've taken my place as one of two Queens of the Underworld—and I don't quite contain my flinch.

"The souls?" Hades asks softly.

I fix my face into a less pained expression, but nod. Then catch Hades' glance in Persephone's direction. *She's* not struggling. We can both hear them, and she doesn't seem fazed.

Then again, Persephone doesn't handle the souls who earned punishment. She can't. The darkness in them, the lies they spew until commanded to confess the truth, the evil that often pours out when they do—the goddess of spring wasn't made for that kind of darkness.

So I deal with them.

She gets the easy ones.

"Are you okay?" Hades lowers his voice, the question just between us.

Okay is a relative term.

"I'm—" I stop myself.

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Exhausted and struggling.

Not sure I can do this.

This felt so much easier when you were king.

Those are all the things I want to say. But not yet.

I'll tell him when it gets worse. *If* it gets worse. We have enough to deal with—a favor to beg from Anubis, trials to start, a Deceiver to hunt down, the Titans' names to clear, Hades' immortality to regain. Not to mention my power over time is glitching. We have so many issues to choose from. What we don't need is more.

But death stops for no one. Not even its queen.

So I'll deal with this as long as I have to. As long as I can, at least. "I'm fine."

His arms tighten around me. "Don't do that."

"No, really," I insist. Then I deliberately redirect with a grumbled, "How are you being so offhand about Anubis?"

There's a long silence, and I keep my eyes trained on the beauty of Erebos. It doesn't help quell my nerves.

"If I've learned anything…" Hades finally says. "It's that nothing lasts forever."

He doesn't miss the way I stiffen. "Wrong choice of words when you're mortal and about to compete in trials against…wait for it…gods." *Some even still think you're prophesied to destroy the world, and they might want to do something about it*. I keep that unhelpful reminder to myself.

"I promise it's going to be okay." Hades tucks my long hair behind my ear. "*Trust* me."

I turn in his arms with a scowl. Blue eyes. That's what I stare into. Not silver. Mortal eyes. What if I lose him again? "That's not something you can promise—"

"I do not appreciate being summoned, Hades." Anubis suddenly appears before us. No warning. Just there. "You know this well."

"Damn his timing," Hades mutters as we both turn to face the jackal-headed Egyptian god.

Power rolls off Anubis the same way waves roll onto the shore. Inevitable and constant. And intimidating. He's dressed in a simple linen, kilt-like schenti, his bare, onyx-skinned chest ridged with muscles. Inky black fur covers his head.

Despite his irritation at being summoned, Anubis' posture is more

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curious than angry. His tall, pointed ears face forward, and his brown-and-gold eyes aren't narrowed. He's still unsettlingly direct. But not angry.

His sweeping glance takes in Persephone and Cerberus.

"I apologize, old friend," Hades says. But the ease in his voice is canceled out by the way his grip on my hip bites into my flesh.

I shoot him a questioning glance. Where is this tension coming from?

"*Are* we still friends?" Anubis asks, flicking a pointed look in my direction.

"Lyra knows that you were only doing your job when you judged me," Hades assures him.

"Does she?" Ber mutters.

Do I? I crank my head to give Hades my own pointed look. How can he say that? Maybe because Anubis was his mentor and, for a long time, one of the few beings who would go anywhere near him. He feels like he owes this god.

I, on the other hand, don't owe Anubis shit.

A burn of anger creeps up my throat, trying to drag words out of my mouth along with it. It takes a hell of a lot of effort to swallow them down.

Doing his fucking job? After I had already showed Anubis and all the gods of death the truth about the Titans, he still punished Hades for merely trying to protect me until I could escape Tartarus. Those gods of death were the catalysts, the instigators, not Hades. They tried to kill me, rather than risk me letting the Titans out.

The Titans who are innocent, who aren't the evil the world has been deceived into believing they are.

Hades takes my hand in his as we both face the Egyptian god. "Anubis," he says. "We need you to run the trials and be the ultimate judge to select a new god of the dead for our pantheon."

The screams that hit my mind this time steal my vision and hearing. The gut-punch impact knocks the breath out of my lungs.

"Lyra? Lyra?"

Sensation comes back slowly, and I find myself crouched down, hands over my ears as Hades' face swims into view. Behind him, Persephone isn't crouched or freaking out. Why doesn't this affect her the way it does me?

"What happened?" His mouth forms the words, but they're muffled, like he's talking to me through a thick pane of glass.

My own voice echoes inside my head when I speak, bouncing off the

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screams. "Souls. Too many—"

I drop my head, unable to hold it up under the onslaught, when a familiar pair of work boots shows up in my periphery.

Charon.

I'd recognize those boots and his wide-legged stance—a habit from sailing his pirate ship full of dead souls—anywhere.

"We're overrun down there." I vaguely hear him over the screaming in my head.

"No shit," Hades snaps. "We're coming now."

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2

MAYBE THE STARS GOT IT ALL WRONG

LYRA

Is this what being a rat trapped in a maze with only poison at the end feels like? I *just* came from there. I whittled down those waiting for punishment. I don't want to go back. Not yet.

Anubis' voice snaps over my head. "Explain."

My fault. I'm not going fast enough, and the dead are stacking up. That's what's happening.

"Not now," Hades says as, with his hands on my shoulders, he helps me upright. "Lyra—"

"I know." I snap my fingers to change our clothes into something more formal, for appearances.

Hades is in a dark suit that shows off the lean strength of his body, which incidentally also highlights the way he prowls when he moves. While I love him in jeans and tees, honestly, this look is drool-worthy. Meanwhile, I'm trussed up in a diaphanous, one-shouldered, ancient-Greek-inspired gown, also in slinky black. And, of course, we wear our matching dark crowns made of black gold, obsidian chips, and smoke. That was my touch. These outfits are basically the same, if a little darker, as those we wore the night Hades was crowned King of the Gods.

Now the gods have no king. The throne is empty.

That's a problem for Olympus. We have bigger issues down here in the Underworld.

Even the dead talk. To keep the gossip in check, we need a little PR razzle-dazzle—hence the intimidating clothes. Helps keep the souls in line

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while we figure things out.

Or it *was* helping.

I guess I need to get them back under control. Now.

"Ready?" he asks.

Not even a little bit. "Do you still have the ring?"

The Ring of Gyges—it can render the wearer invisible. I had Boone pilfer it from the archives, where it was returned after the Crucible Games. A protection for Hades while he's mortal.

He pulls it out of his pocket to show me, then slips it back before he looks over my head at Anubis. "Please stay. We won't be long."

Don't be so sure about that. I don't bother to say it, instead teleporting us down to where Charon's ships drop off the new arrivals.

When we rematerialize, we're standing at the top of the dais in the throne room of the smaller "processing palace"—there's no other way to describe it—that sits just inside the gates to the Underworld.

The cacophony of screams and cries hits me first. Like a physical blow.

"The queen." The whispers start from the souls closest to the bottom of the three flights of stairs that lead up to the dais where we stand. "The queen is here."

More whispers chase their way toward the front of the room. Then the yells of the dead, already ringing loud, start to turn on us. *At* us.

"Hades," someone yells. "Isn't he mortal now? Why bother to come?"

Resentment quickly follows.

"About time."

"We've been waiting so long."

"You'd think they'd be able to keep their hands off each other long enough for her to do her job."

Cerberus chooses that moment to appear beside us.

The hellhound stands fifteen feet tall at the middle head, his smooth, shiny coat showing off his every muscle. If that isn't intimidating enough, the black, spiked armor around the dog's necks and shoulders, strapped under his chest and across the snout and crown of each head, should be.

All three heads give a single, sharp bark.

The grumbles of the dead cut off abruptly, leaving the massive, multi-storied, columned rotunda almost echoey with quiet.

I should have been the one to silence them.

This space is also about perception. Intimidation. All of it is cut out of

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a pale-blue marble shot through with gold. It is crowned by an impressive beveled-glass ceiling showing the Underworld's "starry sky" of glowing blue constellations overhead. Hanging from the center, directly over the thrones, is a golden chandelier designed to look like falling stars, casting an eerie, ethereal glow over the room.

Persephone appears a moment later, taking her seat.

Her throne is awash in flowers that fill the room with a heavenly, delicate scent that has no business perfuming a place like this. The sharp smell of sulfur coming from Cerberus is a better fit. Not that I'd ask Seph to get rid of the blooms. The rainbow array of blossoms flows over the comfy mauve-cushioned, high-backed chair and down the floor, almost to where her line starts.

She shoots me a sunny smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes as Hades settles me into my own throne. It's your basic blue-velvet-cushioned, gold-scrolled monstrosity of magnificence. Uncomfortable as sand up my crack.

I perch on the end, stiff-backed, and give Cerberus a pat as he lies down beside me like a sphynx.

Hades is supposed to go to his place in the shadows, but he doesn't. Instead he bends over, hands on the arms of my throne so we're eye to eye as he cages me in. "If anyone thinks we're slacking off because I can't keep my hands off of you, my star…" His gaze drops to my lips. "Then they'd be dead right."

Despite putting on this show for the horde of souls, he allows me to see the very real need in his eyes. The heat. The tension of it swirls and eddies through the room. I feel it lick at me, surround me, even when he's not touching me.

Even in the middle of this mess.

And the tension coiled tight in my belly…eases.

Hades cocks his head, and I know with that tiny move what he's daring me to do. A power play.

Act like the Queen of the Underworld that I am, even if I don't feel it yet.

What if it doesn't work? What if Cerberus' bark proves more powerful than my own demands? What if—

Good grief, Lyra Keres, I snap at myself. *When did you start giving in to fear?*

I raise my voice without taking my gaze from Hades. "Any souls who

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expressed displeasure—or even *thought* it—may go to the back of the line." With a bored wave of my hand and a whisper of my will, all those souls disappear to the back of the line, and an uneasy murmuring rises through the ranks.

"Nicely done," Hades mouths for me alone.

I'm just trying not to show my relief that it worked.

As he goes to straighten, I wrap a hand around his neck and bring his mouth to mine. The kiss is for show, but *every* kiss with him is real, true. I'm breathing hard by the time I let him go.

Hades' smile is pure, sparking devilry. Only *I* can see the pride.

He draws a line down one of his arms and awakens the tattoos I gave back to him—added protection while he's mortal. A blue owl, a green panther, a purple fox, a red tarantula, and a tiny silver butterfly that never left Hades to begin with.

Even through the sleeve of his fancy coat, they come to glittering life.

"Keep them in line," he orders.

All five animals leap from his arm into the air, becoming real and larger than their Overworld counterparts. The butterfly hovers between us, but the other four prowl down the stairs to herd the dead, pushing the crowds into some semblance of order.

Only then does Hades take his place in the shadows just behind my throne, leaving me free to look over the line of souls in front of me. I seriously wish this place didn't have so many windows—big ones—revealing exactly how many sentences I have to get through. My line winds out of the throne room, out of the castle, past the gates, and down to the River Styx.

This is what I blame the gods of death for. This is *their* fault. The dead are waiting for their punishments, and I can't keep up. That's where the fear is coming from. Not from the numbers or the chance of humiliating myself—both of which are high. It's more insidious than that.

It's doubt.

Because I'm not sure that Hades' power was ever supposed to be mine.

Charon suddenly appears at the bottom of the stairs, facing us.

The ferryman of the dead is total Jack Sparrow pirate material. It's not just the tousled sandy-brown hair and the blue-green eyes that look like the ocean after a storm—it's also the cleft in his chin and the devil-may-care grin. It could also be the swashbuckler way he usually stands, his feet

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planted wide and arms crossed.

Right now, though, he stands formally at attention. Charon bows. "My queens, I present to you souls already evaluated by the three Infernal Judges, ready for your reward or punishment, as you see fit."

Then, with a click of his heels, he disappears. I see him reappear on the docks down the mountain a second later.

I glance toward Persephone, seated to my left. A line with seven souls. Only seven. Smiling. The souls stacked in front of me don't smile. They glare. They groan. They mutter. They can go jump in a lake of fire—

No. I close my eyes and inhale. *That's not how a queen thinks.* Emotions don't lead to fair punishments.

Facing forward, I try not to count the people in line. I tweak the skirt of my gown. The train flows down the stairs like Persephone's flowers.

An outfit meant for a dark queen.

Or a fraud.

It's all about perception.

I can do this, damn it. I won't let him down.

"Come," I command.

My mistake is immediately obvious when, with a cry, all the souls surge forward, some even daring to climb the stairs. I grab my half of Hades' bident that Anubis copy/pasted—one for me and one for Persephone—and bang it on the ground. The souls stop immediately.

But it takes Hades stepping forward, out of the shadows, before they back down.

Tartarus be damned, that could've been bad. The control we hold in here is as fine as silk thread, and just as easy to snap.

Taking a deep breath, I let it out like a disappointed sigh. Then I sit forward, pinning them all with a look I learned from Hades—a cat suddenly more interested in the mouse than it was a second ago. "Do you have somewhere you want to go in a hurry?"

After all, these are all the souls bound for the worst punishments.

It goes dead quiet once more.

Good.

I point a finger at a single soul. "You first."

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3

JUDGMENT DAY

LYRA

Hours.

We've been here for hours. I stopped counting how many, since the line feels like it's just as long as it was when I sat down. Soul after ghastly soul has come forward to receive punishment, while the mob presses forward in an endless wave.

I've seen Anubis show up at the back of the hall at least twice, checking on my progress. Meanwhile, Hades hasn't so much as twitched, letting me handle this job my way.

When I was time traveling in Tartarus, I once saw exactly what happens if we get truly overrun down here. Souls sent to the wrong destination, escaping to hide from us, even attacking the gods in this place. Individuals have little power, but a mob can be a terror. Dangerous. It happened before, during the Anaxian Wars. It's why Hades went to the extreme of leveling Olympus to stop those wars and the numbers of dead coming to his domain.

So I push through. A little longer. A few more. Just enough that we're not standing with our toes sticking out over the edge of chaos.

"You," I order.

A ghostly being in the shape and shadow of the man he was when he was mortal climbs the stairs to stand before me. I've stopped paying attention to the details of their faces.

"Confess!" My voice, when I say the word, is not a roar, but a song. A host of angelic choirs in music so beautiful, even the soul's incorporeal

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eyes well with tears.

It's a magical command only the rulers of the Underworld can use. One that will drag the truth from anyone. Even Hades. I used it on him once, a long time ago.

The soul's gaze goes glassy, and his translucent features move, forming words with lips that no longer exist as he tells me of his life. Only Persephone and I can hear him, and as he talks, out of the corner of my eye, I catch how she creeps her hands up to cover her ears.

I don't get to do that.

I have to listen to every horrific, bone-chilling detail as the faces of his victims flash through my mind with graphic, gut-wrenching clarity.

The shaking starts about five sentences in.

Shit. I really should have stopped with the one before him. I already pushed myself too far. To hide my hands from view, I slip them into the folds of my skirt and clench. This isn't the first time this has happened.

Stop talking, dude, I want to tell him. I've got the gist. But I'm here to listen to his full confession. It just keeps getting worse.

He got more adept with practice, apparently.

By the time he's done, I'm so jittery I'm surprised my teeth aren't chattering, and there's a strange new heat coursing through my veins. Not the good kind. I can feel it with every pulse of my heartbeat. Hells, I'm surprised there's not a glow like lava underneath my skin.

I stare at the soul, and he stares at me.

Remorseless.

Hades says I'm supposed to be able to feel it—the soul's true emotions—but I can't. I think maybe only the true god of the dead can. But I can see it in his eyes. He feels not a drop of regret for his actions. He destroyed lives like they didn't matter.

"Lyra?" Hades prompts softly.

How long have I been sitting here? I straighten slowly, bringing my hands back to the throne's armrests. The soul's gaze flicks to them, and I realize I'm clenching them into fists. So hard my nails might be drawing blood.

"Lyra?" Hades again.

I was wrong. I can't do this.

Sucking in a sharp breath through my nose, I'm up and out of my throne before I even think to move. No plan. Just…panic.

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"No!" the soul snaps. "You have to finish it." Then, with his mouth open like a predator trying to eat his prey, he rushes me and the throne.

Hades moves faster than he should be able to, given his mortality. One second, he's standing behind me, and the next, he's between me and the soul with *my* bident in his hand.

The tip of the blade is at the soul's throat, and what was a blur of a ghostly attack stops cold.

"I don't think so," Hades says almost casually. Like he really doesn't give a shit.

I would love to not give a shit, but right now I can't stop shaking.

"I will give you a choice you don't deserve," Hades says. "Back off and wait for your punishment, or I cut you with this bident. I promise whatever she does to you won't be worse than the eternity of pain you'll suffer if I so much as scratch you with this blade. Decide. Now."

The soul, no doubt aware of the rumors about the bident, doesn't allow himself to so much as swallow. "I will wait."

Hades doesn't move.

Not even when the soul carefully backs up, then walks back down the stairs to stand at the front of the line. Only when he's back in his place does Hades flip the weapon so that the two-pronged end is upright. Then he looks at me. "My star?"

I glance at his forehead, at the glittering evidence of the mark of protection Persephone gifted him, allowing his mortal soul not to be trapped down here. I couldn't figure out how to do it myself. Another failure.

"You," I rasp out, not taking my eyes off Hades. Drawing my strength from him.

The entire chamber, every soul within it, goes silent and still. The kind of stillness I once thought only Hades could command.

And boy does it feel…good.

"I—" The soul hems and haws. "I can wait, my queen—"

"No." I finally look at the pathetic creature so rotten I can smell it from here, despite Persephone's flowers and Cerberus' smoke. "I know what I want to do with you now."

Fear.

The emotion flashes over his features.

Finally. Any emotion at all. It may not be remorse, but I'll take fear

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instead.

I hold out a hand and will him to me. Faster than he moved before, his translucent form is dragged across the room like I tied a rope around him and yanked. His neck slots nicely into my curved palm, and I squeeze. I imagine the fear on the face of every woman he took from the Overworld before her fate line was meant to be cut.

"Lyra?"

I ignore Hades and instead bring my lips to the dead man's ear and whisper my punishment.

The soul's mouth opens on another silent scream. One no one hears, because he's gone to his place in the Underworld. To his punishment.

The furies will have fun toying with him for eternity.

"Lyra?"

I crank my gaze around to Hades, who is watching me with an inscrutable expression. Which means he doesn't want the souls to see his reaction, or maybe he doesn't want *me* to see. Because of what I just did.

What I just did…

Oh gods, I punished that soul in wrath, not justice. Even if he got what he deserved.

At the back, I catch sight of Anubis watching. The shaking hits me again, even harder, the strange heat flaring hotter. I can't lock it down. It won't stop. *What did I do?*

I offer Hades a calm smile I am far from feeling. "I'm fine."

Hades is around the throne and cupping my face with his hands. Then his mouth is on mine, and the shaking eases. Just a little. I whimper, trying so hard to forget everything but his touch.

He drags his lips from mine, then abruptly holds out his arm. "Return," he orders.

The tattoo animals leap back onto his skin, under his sleeve, the glitter of their bodies fading from sight.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Screw the lines," he says. "We'll throw them all into Phlegethon if they can't wait patiently. Take us to where I'm thinking right now."

Because I'm the only one of the two of us who can teleport while he's mortal.

From somewhere down deep I didn't know I had in reserve, I find the strength to close my eyes and teleport us away.

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4

THE CALM IN THE STORM

HADES

The voices of multitudes go silent the second we rematerialize, replaced by a breeze that whispers through fields of tall grass and the gentle lapping of water against a worn wooden hull. Lyra brought us exactly where I was picturing: a boat lined in furs with a lantern overhead that casts a golden glow around us.

"Where are we?" Lyra asks in a voice that quivers. "I thought you were taking us to Anubis. He's been waiting."

"He can keep waiting," I murmur against her lips.

This is more important. *Lyra* is more important.

I've waited thousands of years for her, to be with her. To make a life together. No one and nothing—not time, not the Deceiver, not even fucking death—is going to get in the way of that. Not when she's in my grasp.

The only question I'm asking myself right now is whether I stop and tell her the one thing I've been holding back. It might help her, but then again, it might not. I don't know for sure it's going to work.

Besides, that bombshell might set her off worse.

No.

First, I get her through this. Then, maybe, the truth. If she can handle it.

So I keep kissing her, and she doesn't stop me again. Not everything in the processing palace was for show. She needs this. Distraction. The chance to replace something horrible with something beautiful. *Me.*

Every possessive, hungry kiss is for her. To bring her back to me from

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the darkness she was succumbing to.

"I…" A whimper somewhere between desire and fear stutters Lyra's words. "I need…"

"I know, my star. I know." The power she struggles with is the same I had to master once as well. But I had no one to help. If she would just turn to me…

"How bad is it?" I ask between kisses.

The way she moves against me, I can tell she's practically crawling out of her skin with it.

"Bad." Her breathing hitches in her throat. "Don't stop."

I take that as a command, claiming her lips fast and hard, driven by the way her eyes haze over, by the sounds she makes, by the way she clings to me.

I smooth one hand down her side, tracing the flares and dips of her body, down to her thigh, where I inch up her silky skirt with excruciating, teasing slowness. Fuck, I want to move faster, but this is for her.

And Lyra is still struggling.

So I force myself to torment her with slow caresses, to consume her thoughts, to make her do the chasing. With questing fingers I tease at the edge of her panties, barely brushing over the spot that makes her press into me, reach for more. Beg.

Not enough.

She cants her hips, seeking more of my touch. *That's it, my star, focus on me.* I want her to be addicted to this feeling that is about connection, about the good in life, to let it push the fear and failure aside, replacing those dangerous emotions with a delicious, different kind of tension.

And a new kind of frustration.

"More," she pleads. "Hades."

By the stars, I could listen to her say my name for eternity and always feel this rush. This possessive, hungry need to make her happy.

Even while I ache so hard it hurts.

"Not yet." I sound as frustrated as Lyra.

She surges up and bites my lip.

All it does is make me growl…and back off.

"Play nice, Lyra."

"You first." She trails her hand down my arm to my wrist and tries to show me what she needs.

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Dragging my lips from hers, I snatch her wrist and pull her arm up over her head, pinning it against the soft furs. I stare into hazy, lust-filled eyes.

What if I lose her?

I've spent so much of my life losing her, waiting for her, having her taken from me, that it's hard to believe now that this will last.

I'll fucking make it last.

I smile, letting her see my determination, and watch the way her gaze slips to my lips, the way her body relaxes, settles against me. Total trust.

Not just the pleasure. Me.

I will always be her center, as long as I draw breath.

As if she can't help it, Lyra smiles back. I've seen fewer and fewer of her smiles since she got out of Tartarus.

"There's my Lyra," I murmur.

I change my grip, releasing her pinned wrists to twine our fingers together. But it's not until I feel a slide of movement against my arm that I realize our linked hands are the ones that bear the bond that only Lyra can see.

With a gasp, she looks up at the same time as I do, and her eyes fill with adoring fascination. They glitter with unshed tears. What does she see?

"Do you see it?" she whispers.

"No." I wish to all the hells that I did.

Even when I was a god, I couldn't see bonds. But Lyra is the goddess of glamours, so she can. At least, that's what I try to tell myself.

More sensation slides along my skin, bringing with it a pounding heat that demands release. I groan and bury my face in the crook of her neck. "But I can feel it."

After that, our coming together happens in a rush. A rush of mouths and touches, a rush of possession, a rush of knowing that no matter what we face right now, our bond is unbreakable. An oath. A promise. One that I put all the power I possessed into, to make it strong.

Through it all, we never once separate our hands.

As our bodies come together, reaching for that incandescent release, I stare into Lyra's eyes. And we both smile.

Only this time, in the slowing, in the beauty of after, she doesn't float back down to reality quite the same way as she has before.

There's still a tension to her…an anger.

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I try my hardest not to stiffen. Not to feed her anxiety, which I know from experience will only make the anger and fear worse.

I press a soft kiss to her shoulder.

Fuck. I won't tell her my last secret. Not just yet. Not until I know for sure it worked.

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5

WHY WE SCHEME

LYRA

The burn of anger isn't gone. Forgotten for a moment in Hades' arms, but not gone. It's just pushed deeper. Fed by fear. It lingers, like a dead rat in the walls. Underneath the sweetness, something sour is growing.

I squeeze my eyes tighter, trying to hold on to what we just shared and how he makes it better for me. But the peace of a moment ago is slipping out of my grasp.

This is getting worse.

My control is fracturing more every day, not building with practice. And my power over time isn't getting better. It's not *gone*, exactly. I can feel it there, like a pilot light, barely flickering. I just…can't access it. We all agreed I used everything I had to reverse time right after we escaped Tartarus. But I'd thought I'd regain some of it by now.

Hades says I just need to give it time—not ironic at all. That it's like a well gone dry and I need to wait for it to refill. I haven't pointed out to him that if my power over time was going to return in full force, future me would have already come back in time to reveal the answers to all our problems.

My well is Mojave Desert dry, and I'm pretty sure it's just being filled with fear and fury instead of power.

"Hades…"

I feel him lift his head, hear the smile in his voice. "What, my star?" Then…worried. "Lyra?"

That terrible heat from before blazes under my skin hard and fast, and

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I shove both palms against Hades' chest, pushing him away in a frantic heave.

At the very last second, I tug back on my goddess strength, which could do catastrophic damage to his mortal body. Thank the stars all I do is send him tumbling to the far end of the boat.

Hades is on his feet in a heartbeat, the boat rocking with the motion. And my arrogant, always-has-the-answers King of the Underworld *pales*. "Lyra, your eyes—"

I don't have to ask. I can feel it. "Hellfire?"

He nods, just once, his mouth a grim slash.

Breathing deeply doesn't help. "I probably shouldn't touch you."

Hellfire—the hottest of fires only rulers of Underworld can summon, which Hades almost used to burn down Olympus and Tartarus trying to protect me—is deadly to mortals. Not so great for gods, either, apparently.

"Not while it's still burning," Hades agrees, staying where he is.

I spot the way he glances at the furs, probably to check if they're catching fire. They aren't. For now. And for some odd reason, that helps me feel less out of control, the blaze in my veins easing. "Did you also struggle to control the hellfire?" I ask.

"What do you think I was meant to burn down the world with?" His tone is so dry that, despite the heat still flaring in my veins, I chuckle.

And the haze of purple tinting the world disappears.

Hades tilts his head, gaze pinned to mine. Then his shoulders ease slightly. "I much prefer your eyes green, my star."

I guess being in his arms isn't the only thing that calms me down. It's just the quickest way to bring me back from the edge. Really, all I need is Hades.

Making me laugh, making me irritated, driving me wild.

Just Hades—who he is at his core.

He prowls across our boat, the water of the river sloshing gently with the rocking.

But I hold up my hand. "Wait. What if it's too dangerous?"

"A single touch won't kill me. You'd have to burn me more deliberately than that. Or I would've been dead the second you ignited just now, even though you kept it inside."

I didn't keep anything anywhere. The hellfire decided not to erupt. That's hardly me having control.

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Still, I relax, letting him come the rest of the way to me. Hades positions us so he's seated with his back against the curved hull of the boat, and I'm nestled between his legs with my back to his chest. Surrounded by him like this, I finally feel myself relax the rest of the way.

He presses a kiss to my temple. "*Talk* to me, Lyra."

It's time. I don't want it to be. I want to figure this out on my own. Do better. But…

"It's getting worse," I whisper.

I feel him nod. "I've been waiting for you to bring it up."

"I didn't want to add to your worries. I thought time and practice and regaining my strength would…*fix* me." I shake my head. "But it's not."

"It hasn't been long enough," Hades murmurs, rubbing his chin against my hair. The rasp of his stubble is oddly soothing. Such a normal, mortal sound.

"But you said I just needed time to recover, to learn—"

"My fault."

I turn to stare at him, wide-eyed. Gods, his own blue eyes are striking, but I miss the silver—the swirl of his emotions, the visible proof that I won't lose him. "Care to repeat that?"

He flicks the tip of my nose. "I sometimes forget you were born mortal. Gods think of time as something much larger than hours and days and even years."

I wrinkle my nose. "No matter how you gods see it, we"—I wave a hand between us—"don't have time to fuck around."

"I know." He sighs. "That's why I brought you here."

Here? I frown. I finally take a closer look at exactly where we are.

The Fields of Asphodel.

Mortals are led to believe this part of the Underworld is a gloomy expanse where souls wander without purpose. A flavorless, sunless realm dominated by vast oceans of ghostly asphodel flowers.

That's not what it is at all.

Lush green fields stretch as far as even my goddess eyes can see. Copses of trees dot the landscape here and there, including weeping willows along the banks of the river. And flowers. Everything here blooms, but the colors are deeper, brighter, and more brilliant than in the Overworld or even Olympus. Including the asphodel flowers that pop brilliant white everywhere.

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This place is not a vague nothing, and it's definitely not a punishment.

"Why Asphodel?" I ask. "Why not Elysium?"

Where it's even more extraordinary.

"I wanted you to see where most souls go," he says.

I frown. "Why?"

"A reminder. You're doling out punishments to a painful few who, for whatever reasons—nature or nurture—have become corrupted in an extreme way. But that's not most of humanity, my star. Most…" He wraps his arms around me tighter. "The majority of mortals come to this place, where ordinary souls who lived neither exceptionally pure nor deeply wicked lives can simply rest in peace and harmony."

Most souls.

I look out over the fields. It *is* peaceful here.

"I used to come here when I would start to forget that. When the bitterness and anger and disgust would creep in. I'd come here to find peace again. To forget the worst and focus on the most."

To forget. "If that doesn't sound like heaven, I don't know what does," I murmur.

He kisses my temple. "Come here, too, when you need to."

"I will." I take a deep breath, letting the tranquility of Asphodel wash over me. "Thank you for this."

"I will always take care of you, Lyra." He puts his cheek to mine. "No matter what."

I know that. It's part of what keeps me going. "Me too," I whisper.

Then, something at the back of my mind tickles, and I frown slowly.

Forget.

My gaze moves to the water. Hades' only way out if the hellfire slips beyond my control.

My heart stops for a beat. "We're on the River Lethe."

"I know you're directionally challenged, my star. But even you should know what river—"

"No." I bat at his arm. And then teleport us with a single thought back to our home in Erebos. *"Lethe."*

He raises his eyebrows. "What about it?"

I breathe out the frustration rebuilding in my chest only seconds after leaving Asphodel. "The river that causes oblivion for *mortals*."

His prowling toward me earlier takes on an entirely new context. What

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if he'd fallen in? Worse, if I had set that entire boat on fire—the kind that would kill his mortal soul—Hades would have had to dive into the river.

The waters would have made him forget. Everything.

"Ah." He doesn't even have the decency to look properly chastised.

I glare at him. "*Ah?* That's it? You just risked yourself—"

"It was fine."

I roll my eyes. "Now you sound like a teenager who doesn't realize that just because something foolish didn't kill them the first time, it won't the next time."

Heat flares all over again. Only seconds after leaving that peaceful place.

Hades' smirk disappears, and he takes a step back. Then blows out a long breath. "I'm sorry, Lyra."

The heat eases. "Don't do it again. I can't… I can't lose you."

"You won't. And I won't. This… It'll be over soon."

Because of the trials? The plan is for him to win, of course, and gain back both his immortality and his power as god of the dead. Previous work experience should give him a significant advantage. Maybe we'll get lucky and all the other contenders will forfeit.

I drop my gaze to my feet, fighting a dread that sits hard and low in my belly. Asphodel's peace can only help me so much. I think those trials are dangerous as hell for Hades and a distraction from our biggest problem—the Deceiver. But this? My losing control could be just as dangerous.

"I think you're right." I look up. "About the trials. And even…Anubis."

Hades' eyebrows shoot up, then lower to a frown. Probably because I've been so anti-Anubis. "It's *that* bad?"

"Let's just say I'm starting to consider dunking myself in the River Lethe." Maybe forgetting will help me stop feeling *everything*.

This time, it's me who can't miss the way Hades stiffens.

"In that case…" Hades says slowly, probably because he knows how much I hate this idea. "Let's not make him wait any longer."

Right. I grab him by the sleeve, careful not to touch skin. Just in case.

"Lyra…" I'm only vaguely aware of him saying. "There's something I should tell you—"

But I've already teleported us away.

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6

DEATH HAS MANY NAMES

LYRA

"Damn," Hades murmurs the second we arrive on the terrace.

The others are all there—Persephone, Charon, Anubis. Persephone surges to her feet at the sight of us.

I'm too focused on what I have to do next, though, and walk straight to the Egyptian god, hands on my hips, considering him. Am I really going to trust this asshole? "We need you to run and judge the trials," I say.

He glances over my head toward Hades, like he's the one in charge.

I hate that shit. "You saw?" I ask, pulling his focus back to me.

"Saw what?" Charon asks.

Cerberus gets to his feet, like he can stand guard over my feelings. Beside him, Persephone winces.

"I'm having trouble with the Underworld powers," I say without looking away from Anubis.

Humiliation at my weakness, at my failure, is like being trapped in a whirlpool while everyone watches from the sidelines. Like every eye in the Underworld is on me, judging me, finding me wanting. I could close my eyes and let it suck me down. But if I learned anything as a cursed office clerk in the den of thieves, it's how to swim against the current. "And…" I tack on. "The hellfire."

They might as well know the worst of it.

No one says anything, though Charon rocks back on his heels like my words physically pushed him.

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After a pause where I might see a flicker of respect in his eyes, Anubis nods. "I saw."

"Naming a new god of the dead just became mission critical," I say. "We can't find the Deceiver if we're falling apart down here."

If I'm falling apart.

"But you still don't trust me," Anubis points out.

Is he really going to rub my nose in it?

The glamour is still over his face—the one I removed once but was returned when I reversed time to save the world. Anubis will still remember, though. It glitters red, like a bullfighter's cape tempting me to charge. Hades and I decided I shouldn't start removing glamours yet. Not until we've narrowed our list of suspects.

This god still remembers, though. I couldn't erase that. He knows the truth of the Deceiver. He *knows*. And he punished Hades anyway. "You put us in this position. I'm trusting your sense of…honor…to get us out of it."

He looks over my head at Hades again, something passing between the two of them that I don't quite catch.

Especially when Persephone makes a distressed little noise. "I can take on more. Help you with your line—"

"No," I say at the same time as Hades.

I leave Anubis to take Seph by the hands. "If I get out of control, you're the only one right now who can do anything about it. We can't have both of us glitching."

Color flares in her cheeks. "You're not the one glitching. I am. Those violent souls… I can't face them."

Neither can I.

And a tiny little voice inside me wonders if she truly can't face them, or if maybe she's setting me up.

Deceiver.

The word whispers through my mind. Not for the first time. But I don't want to believe it, so I shove it back down deep where it belongs. "One of us has to stay strong. You're my emergency backup."

"You haven't told her, then." Anubis sounds…less calm than a second ago.

We all look at the jackal, who now stands with his arms crossed, glaring at Hades.

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Told me what?

"Told her what?" Charon's easier posture has disappeared.

"You haven't told *any* of them?" Anubis now sounds like he's taking a child to task.

Hades pauses long enough that I take a nervous step toward him, then another, until I'm standing directly in front of him. "Hades? What is he talking about?"

"I was just about to," Hades insists to Anubis, never once taking his gaze from my face. "But Lyra jumped in with you before I had a chance."

Dread piles rocks into my stomach, followed by a torch of heat in my blood. "Told us what?"

Hades takes me by the shoulders, brushing his thumb over my arm. A tiny, soothing gesture, and a caution.

But I shake him off. "Told me *what*, Hades?"

He pulls a face. "I didn't want to worry you or to get your hopes up—"

Here comes the fire. I know Hades sees it in my eyes, because he takes a jerking step back. Cerberus is suddenly between us, not growling, just a barrier. A container.

I spear a look between Hades and the Egyptian god. "One of you needs to make it clear, real fast."

Anubis holds out a hand, and a familiar set of golden scales materializes in his palm. The scales he used to judge Hades and strip him of his power—and our eternity together.

Charon's between me and the Egyptian god now, an arm out to hold me back as I ask, "Is that a fucking threat?"

Forget holding the fire inside.

Like I'm not even in my body, but watching from somewhere outside myself, I lift my hand, manifesting purple hellfire in my palm to throw at the jackal god. "Get out of my way, Charon."

Hades tries to move around Cerberus. "Lyra, don't—"

A feather appears on one side of the scales, so slight that they don't even move. But in the other tray appears…an orb of black light. It looks exactly like what Hades' power turned into that day he was stripped.

"Oh my stars," Persephone says on a gasp.

"It disappeared," I whisper. "It was destroyed."

"Was it?" Anubis might smile. I don't know.

Charon's hands drop slowly to his sides. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

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The fire in me dies like someone doused me in a tidal wave, and I look past Cerberus to Hades, whose focus remains intently on me, regret etched across his features.

We weren't supposed to have any more secrets.

What's happening right now? I want to ask. But I can't seem to make my mouth work.

"What did you do?" Charon demands.

"It's easier to show you first," Anubis says.

Then he scoops the black glowing orb into his free hand. As soon as it leaves the scales, it swirls, almost like the Egyptian god is sucking the darkness out of it. Once it is clear blue again, Anubis teleports around Cerberus. The hellhound's snarl cuts off in his throat as Anubis slams the glowing ball into Hades' chest until his palm flattens against his shirt.

"What are you doing?" I lurch forward to…I don't know…stop him. But Charon grabs my wrist, pulling me up short.

"Wait," he says, holding out a hand to Persephone at the same time. She stops mid-run.

Hades' body rises into the air, blue light coming from…everywhere. He rotates slowly, arms held out from his body, head dropping back like he's looking to the heavens.

Then that light bursts, exploding straight up out of his body in a rush that doesn't stop until it hits the ceiling. The starburst travels in a wave, down across the cavern ceiling, over the mountains, which shake and shift as light crawls across them. Trees and plants bend with the force before the starburst coalesces in a spot directly in the water gardens I can see from this terrace. The light turns white-hot as it grows smaller and smaller… then disappears.

"Now what could that have been?" Anubis murmurs from behind me.

"You don't fucking know?" Charon demands.

I barely hear him as I whip around to Hades as his hovering body lowers slowly to the ground. When his feet touch, he stays upright, eyes still closed.

I'm across to him in a moment, taking his face in my hands. "Hades?"

His eyelids flicker like he's having trouble opening them.

"Hades. Come back to me."

Another flicker, and then his eyes crack the tiniest bit.

And I see…silver.

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The gasp that rips through me is so violent, it hurts my throat. “Are you…”

He opens his eyes all the way, the silver swirling with all the layers of gray I’ve been missing, and he smiles, dimples in full view. “All better, my star.”

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7

NOT EVERYTHING

LYRA

A hysterical little laugh bursts from me, and Hades jerks me into his arms. I feel the way he lets out a breath that might be relief.

I, however, must be saving my relief for later. Right now, I'm just… pissed.

"Did he just say *all better*?" Charon sounds about as angry as I am.

"I told you to trust me," Hades murmurs into my hair.

He doesn't see the shove coming. Unlike in the boat in Asphodel, this time my goddess strength barely moves him.

"Trust you?" I snarl the words. "*All better?* Are you fucking kidding me?"

Hades' self-satisfied smile falters. Pinning me with an intent gaze, he reaches for my hands, but I step out of reach. "Lyra, you can stop worrying. I'm not mortal anymore. I can help you with—"

"You *lied* to me." I back up, not letting him anywhere close.

"To all of us." Persephone's soft voice is all things hurt.

He's lucky I'm not burning the place down right now. We both are.

An emotion ripples over his features that might be regret—I thought I saw regret earlier—but it could also be irritation.

"We said no more secrets," I point out.

"*You* didn't tell me you were struggling with the Underworld powers I gifted you until *today*," Hades points out right back.

"Wow," I hear Charon mutter. "Wrong way to go, Phi."

"You don't get to be the self-righteous one right now," I snap. "Why?

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Why did you keep this from me?"

Hades glances at Anubis, but the Egyptian god shrugs like *you dug your own grave*.

"We came up with this plan while you were reversing time," Hades admits slowly. "We had…seconds."

Charon turns and walks to the decorative wall, then back to us, hands on his hips as his spine remains stiff.

"You've had much longer than that to *tell* us." Persephone points out what we're all thinking as she sinks back down to the couch.

Hades doesn't take his gaze off me for a second. "The Deceiver is more likely to come for me if they think I'm vulnerable."

"Great." The sarcasm that is my defense mechanism is in full force. "Love it. Totally agree. But you didn't answer my question."

Anubis clears his throat. "The immortal world had to see him punished, or there would have been war. It was the only way forward."

"You think that actually stopped a war?" I scoff.

"I'll start a war right now," Ber snarls, and judging from the way Anubis flicks him a glance, the hellhound allowed him to hear that thought.

Then the Egyptian god shifts his unnerving golden gaze to me and draws his lips back in what I think is a smile. "You are right to fight for Hades." He moves that gaze to Cerberus, then Persephone, and lastly to Charon, who doesn't turn to face us. "All of you."

Ber snorts, but Cer cocks his head, assessing.

"War may be inevitable," Anubis allows. "But we at least bought you time to start it on your terms and in your favor…or stop it altogether if you manage to unmask this Deceiver."

I cross my arms. "You could've bought even more time if *he*"—I hook a thumb at Hades—"had told any of us about this particular plan."

The jackal god barks a high-pitched vocalization that I think might actually be a laugh. "I like you, young goddess."

I move my disbelieving gaze to Hades, who is still watching me not with the cold mask of indifference he uses when he's hiding things, but with a wary sort of concern.

"What?" I ask.

His shoulders rise and fall. "I didn't tell you because we weren't sure it would work. Anubis has taken powers only twice before and didn't hold

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