

# IMMORTAL'S SPRING

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## CHAPTER ONE

“W<sup>H</sup>OA,” SOPHIE DARROW’S TWELVE-YEAR-OLD BROTHER, Liam, said as they entered the giant cave of glowing souls. “You weren’t making it up.”

“Nope. Can’t make something like this up.” Sophie led him off the raft, up the bank, and into the fields. She trembled, knowing she’d see their mom and dad soon, but at least she wasn’t crying. For now. She turned to the nearest group of souls and said in the Underworld’s tongue, “Can you please bring us Terry and Isabel Darrow, who arrived here last night? We’re their children, Sophie and Liam.” Her voice shook but didn’t break.

Liam turned an astounded look on her when she spoke that language. Except for the names, all its words would be unintelligible to him. But she’d serve him a pomegranate soon enough and he’d start remembering it.

Sophie’s best friend, Tabitha, stood beside them. The Darrow family’s one surviving dog, their boxer, Rosie, sat next to Liam. Their parents would probably bring the soul of Pumpkin too—their other dog, who had died in the fire along with them. Sophie’s heart almost beat out of her ribs. Too much emotion to contain. But she had to keep it together, for Liam’s sake if nothing else.

Poor Liam. Rough as Sophie’s night had been, his had been even worse in some ways. For the entire night he had

believed he would never see his parents again. Sophie hadn't been able to tell him otherwise, couldn't really explain about the Underworld until bringing him into the spirit realm this morning. Even in the ride across the planet, in Adrian's bus drawn by supersonic ghost horses, Liam didn't quite seem to believe Sophie and the rest when they assured him where they were going and who they'd see.

Sophie glanced over her shoulder. Adrian stood by the river with Niko, Freya, Zoe, and Adrian's dog, Kiri. They were talking to some souls; Sophie recognized Adrian's mum and Rhea among them.

Adrian glanced anxiously at Sophie. Sickness punched into her gut, and she looked away. The screaming, clawing, multi-layered guilt inside her, all tied up with the mere sight or thought of Adrian, wasn't something she could process at the moment. It would have to wait. Right now she needed to see her parents.

The souls had whispered the request outward. The crowd parted and two translucent figures walked toward them, a small ghost dog trotting at their heels.

Their mom and dad gazed serenely at Sophie and Liam as they approached.

"Sweeties, you're both here, thank goodness," Isabel said.

"I am so glad to see you two," Terry said.

At that, Liam fell to his knees, wracked with sobs, and buried his face in his hands.

"Mom, Dad." Sophie's voice still shook. "Forgive me, please. This is all because of me, because I got involved with—this." She flopped her hand miserably at the unearthly fields.

"There is nothing to forgive." Isabel used her most Mom-like voice, firm but loving.

"You and Adrian are good kids," Terry said. "We knew it before and we know it clearer than ever now."

"But—" Sophie began.

"If you need me to say it," her dad added, "then yes, we forgive you. Of course."

Sophie looked down at the grass in anguish. Naturally they forgave her. Souls were always forgiving. Sophie's conviction of her own guilt, however, remained as anchored as a mountain. Her gaze drifted to Pumpkin and Rosie, who were enjoying their strange reunion. Both dogs wagged their tails and poked their noses together, looking intrigued at how they couldn't smell or touch one another. She tried not to start crying; tried to think this was actually good: her parents had one dog on their side of the life-death boundary, and she and Liam had one on the other. All balanced. Sure. Perfectly fine.

"But what happened?" her mother asked. "We haven't been able to find out down here."

Last night. The whole story... "Well." Sophie swallowed.

Tabitha cleared her throat and stepped forward. "Hey, guys. Let's see if I can sum up."

Tab took over. She told them of the attack by the cult Thanatos, followed by the criminals' temporary kidnapping of Sophie and failed attempt to kill Adrian, and finally Niko and Zoe rescuing Sophie and Adrian, and Niko killing Betty Quentin, the cult's leader.

As Tab spoke, and Liam sobbed at Sophie's feet, Sophie's gaze rose to her parents. She would never feel those arms around her again. She would never again rest her cheek on the rough flannel shirts her dad favored. She would never smell her mother's lavender perfume as her mom engulfed her in a welcome-home hug. There was no home to return to.

Sophie's throat closed against speech and her eyes filled with tears.

When she couldn't answer the next question turned her way, silence fell. Then her mother said, "You kids should rest. You need it. We'll be here, don't worry."

"We won't be going anywhere," her dad assured. "Not for years and years. You rest, kiddos."

Sophie nodded and helped Liam up, and they stumbled off to the main bedchamber.

Zoe was there, spreading fresh sheets over a camping mattress against the main bedchamber's wall. "This one's for you, Liam," she said. "Adrian says you can have the bed, Soph. He'll...sleep elsewhere."

Liam conked out, exhausted. Sophie got into bed and drifted in and out of an uneasy doze most of the night—or rather, day. They were nine time zones off from their usual, in Greece now instead of the Pacific Northwest. Sometimes she let her eyes slip open, and gazed at the battery-powered blue nightlight glittering against the gems in the cave walls.

She wasn't sure which "elsewhere" Adrian was sleeping in. Another part of the cave, probably. He'd barely spoken to her or anyone else throughout the journey, and hadn't touched her after her request that he stop doing so, back in Washington.

She did want to rest. She couldn't handle anything—funerals, relationships, revenge, family, friends, acceptance, moving on—until this horror had abated, and she had spent a long while recuperating. But how long would that be, before she could handle life again?

*Years and years*, her father's voice echoed in her head. *Years and years*.

AFTER TABITHA ESCORTED AWAY THE TEARFUL SOPHIE AND Liam, Adrian Watts approached the souls of Isabel and Terry Darrow. He felt sick with misery.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "More sorry than I'll ever be able to say. If I were you two, I would hate me right now."

But even Terry, who had excelled at glaring at Adrian while he was alive, wore a sympathetic expression.

"We don't hate you," Terry said. "I know this outcome was

the last thing you wanted, and you were doing your damndest to prevent it. We just didn't get out of there fast enough."

"You know how it works down here," Isabel said. "We all become a lot better at understanding. Just, please, help our kids through this. I already know you're going to."

To that, Adrian could only nod and shuffle away.

The fields would do for a bed tonight. He curled up on his side under the drooping branches of a willow, nothing beneath him but the pale grass. Kiri lay beside him, chin on her forepaws. The cave air was cool and dank, but at least the little white flowers sprouting near his face smelled sweet. It wasn't as cold as the nights he'd spent camping on Mary's Peak in September, when he'd been circling Sophie like a shark. Before going in for the kill. Which was essentially what he'd done to her life.

He slumped into a weary sleep. His mind shut off the past-life memories and tormented him instead with a dream in which he begged Sophie to forgive him, and she snarled insults at him and stalked away.

When he awoke with a shudder, he found Nikolaos near him, sitting against the tree.

"At least we can trace them now," Niko remarked, as if they had been in the middle of a conversation.

Adrian creaked himself up to a sitting position. "Uh. Thanatos? Well. One of them."

"Two." Niko gazed at a willow switch he held, dragging it against his opposite palm.

"Two? I could only sense the woman. The one who was Ares."

"I can sense the boy, too."

Adrian blinked in confusion. "You didn't tell me."

Niko shrugged. "I only realized last night when I saw him in person."

"Who was he?" Adrian asked.



"Just one of the many people I connected with in the old days."

Only immortals could track someone with their special sense, and they could only do so if a bodily-fluid connection was made while the sensing party was immortal. Sex was the most common way such links were created, but a small exchange of blood did the trick too, as did having someone be your biological child. So this young man was probably someone Niko had been with in his days as Hermes, long ago, or one of Hermes' children, of whom there might have been more than Adrian knew about.

"Anyone I knew?" Adrian asked.

"I doubt it."

"An immortal?"

"No."

"Well. All right. Two we can grab and hold hostage. Or simply kill." Adrian clenched his hands in the grass. "I'm leaning toward 'simply kill'."

"Not yet." Niko brushed the willow switch around his knee.


"Then at least we learn their names and report their whereabouts to the police. Identify them as the ones who blew up Sophie's house."

"When Quentin was locked up, Thanatos just got her out again. They'd likely do the same for those two."

"But we can track those two. We can get them caught over and over, as many times as it takes."

"Yes, we could, but *think*, Adrian. They're our windows onto the cult. We should look in upon them a while, figure out what Thanatos is going to do, how they work. That way, we can stop them, perhaps for good. Let's watch and learn."

## CHAPTER TWO

 LONDON OSBORNE DUMPED HIS BAG ON THE MOTEL BED, HIS limbs shaking. He made sure the door's deadbolt was locked and its security chain fastened. As if that would help. He turned on the lamp at the bedside table, for it was the middle of the night and the room would be pitch black without it. But he wondered, with the same sickening dread that had chased him all day and night, whether he should turn it off and hide in darkness.

Would that keep the immortals from finding him? Would anything? The immortal man—the one who had almost certainly killed Landon's grandmother last night—had said he would find them. But he could have been bluffing, only trying to scare them. Maybe.

He slumped to his knees on the carpet beside the bed, resting his dizzy head on the bedspread. It smelled of stale cigarettes, like the rest of the room. When you checked in under a false name, paying with whatever cash you had, you couldn't choose the finest accommodations.

He did need to rest. As the leader of Thanatos now, he had a difficult road ahead, perhaps one every bit as deadly as his grandmother's had been. And though he longed to slide under the bedspread and sleep—even with the likely nightmares—he had a task to accomplish first.

He raised his head. Tension throbbed from the base of his

skull to the bridge of his nose. He opened his laptop computer, and while it booted up he dug out the notebook his grandmother had given him. It was small, with worn gray cloth binding. Her precise, antiquated handwriting filled half the pages, in ballpoint ink of blue and black. The sight sent a pang into his heart. He longed, for about the hundredth time, to race back to the site of the cabin and look for her, because what if she was still alive and needed help?

But chances were a hundred to one the man had killed her. And since he'd probably done so in their other realm, Landon would never find her. He pulled off his glasses and pressed finger and thumb to his aching, closed eyelids. Then he opened his eyes, slipped his glasses back on, and logged in to the email account written in the notebook.

He addressed the email to the ten recipients she had written down, all supposedly safe accounts for such a message. Still, he was careful not to include specifics of location, and began with the established SOS phrase she had taught him. It meant "horror and fear" in ancient Greek, which fit his current mindset all too well.

*Daimos kai Phobos. My name is Landon Osborne. Betty Quentin has mentioned me to you. She was my grandmother. I say "was" because last night during our attempted job, the opposing faction captured her. I am almost certain they've taken her to their other home and that we'll never see her again.*

*This places me, by her wishes, as the new head of operations. But I will need as much help as you all can give me.*

*My coworker Krystal was injured last night and is being cared for by one of our team. We will need your guidance in sheltering us and discussing our next steps. Our job failed to achieve its target, or at least I don't know yet if it succeeded. But I do know col-*

*lateral damage was sustained in the family of the central young woman being recruited by the others. The opposing faction will definitely wish to retaliate, and Krystal and I need your protection urgently.*

*Anyone who can help, please respond.*

He sent off the message, changed his sweat-soaked shirt, and flopped onto the bed. While his mind whirled in a cyclone of fear, he prayed for safety, for just enough strength to face the next day. And the next. And the next.

ADRIAN SCRUTINIZED THE SOUL OF BETTY QUENTIN IN HER solitary cell of rock deep under the Earth. Her pale eyes stared at the blue-edged flame burning in the floor of her cell. The Underworld had woven an especially thick willow-and-ivy vine to confine her, wrapped at least three times around her middle. That told him the Fates intended to keep her a long time, and that she'd had a hand in killing and harming even more people than he already knew about. He'd interrogate her about those later, when he could bear to take it in. For now Adrian kept his arms folded, gripping his elbows to keep himself from lashing out and tearing down the rocks around her, burying her soul under a heap of suffocating stone. Little good that would do.

"What will Thanatos do next?" he asked her.

"Landon and Krystal will gather the troops, tell them what happened. Form a plan." Her voice had the same clarity as in life, but now with hollowness behind it. She lifted her gaze to his. Sadness accentuated the age lines around her eyes. "They won't give up. I fear it'll be fatal for him."

"Yes, I suspect it will. We may not find every last one of them, but we'll find him. Easily." Adrian had never before been in the habit of threatening old women with the murder of their grandsons, but he possessed little mercy after what

Thanatos had done to Sophie's family — and to himself, Rhea, Sanjay, and others.

Quentin lowered her face. The firelit stone walls shone through her translucent body, only the vine rope solid and opaque. "Poor boy. I shouldn't have brought him into it."

"My father. Will the group go after him?" She would have to tell the truth, at least. Souls always did.

"We've considered it. But you seemed not to care about each other anymore, so we chose someone you did care about."

Sophie. And Goddess everlasting, hadn't she and her loved ones paid the price. He shut his eyes a moment, then opened them. "Who are the likeliest next victims? Who will your people go after?"

"I expect they'll try again with Tabitha Lofgren. And they'll probably try to find out who the man was who killed me. He must have been one of you." She glanced at him, faint curiosity rising in her face for a moment.

He said nothing. Even though she couldn't communicate with her Thanatos associates anymore, he felt a profound disinclination to tell her any truths about his friends and family. "What about my father?" he asked again.

"They'll keep investigating him. It's likely they'll try something if they can't find a better hostage."

He exhaled and glanced away, tightening his grip on his elbows. "He's innocent. So were Sophie's parents. You can see now, can't you, how evil you all are?"

"The group perceives you as a dangerous threat. Even now I'm not sure they're wrong."

Adrian jerked his gaze back to her. "But you must see it now. Don't you regret it?" Quivering in rage, he took a step closer. "I want to hear you say you regret it."

"Regret isn't a strong enough word for what I feel down here. Were you ever one of these souls?"

"Not down here. Not this bad."

“Yet surely you feel regret too, now.”

Though she spoke with the bland depression of every other soul in Tartaros, rather than with the malice she had shown in life, the words penetrated with a sting. “At least I’m alive,” he said, and turned and left.

## CHAPTER THREE

**D**IONYSOS AND HERMES BOTH SLEPT IN THE UNDERWORLD near Hekate, or sat awake outside her room, for the first several nights after her parents and grandmother were killed.

Dionysos had lost his parents too, a few years ago during the plague. “Your trauma’s so much worse than mine,” he told her that first night. “But I do know your grief, and will do anything I can to help you through it, and to make things right.”

Then as she was walking dispiritedly toward her bed, Hermes stepped in front of her and held her shoulders. “They are not gone,” he said. “No one is ever gone. You’re blessed, because you know this better than most. I loved them too, and you know I grieve.” Indeed, his green eyes shimmered as tears filled them, and at his touch she sensed the heartache emanating from him. “But we will not despair. Agreed?”

She smiled despite the lump in her throat, and nodded.

But now, three nights later, she had lost another cornerstone of her life. Her magic was gone. She had brought it on herself, and didn’t even have the strength to tell her friends yet.

All of them were silent and shaken upon returning from the massacre, where they had released wild spirit-world carnivores upon a band of Thanatos members. They’d left only

carnage behind, and the message inked in blood upon a few tree trunks nearby: *These were murderers. The Goddess has taken her justice.*

The message might scare some of the mortal world into behaving. Then again, it might also incite hatred and spur a new rush of membership into Thanatos. Was there anything the immortals could do to prevent that, though? They had tried the diplomatic route. They had healed people, defended coastlines against invaders, thrown festivals full of ribaldry and enlightenment. The killer cult had attacked Hekate and her friends anyway, and murdered Persephone, Hades, and Demeter, along with several others.

So the immortals had retaliated, and now the specter of murder shadowed them all. Hekate saw it in the avoidant faces of those who stayed in the Underworld with her that night: Hermes, Dionysos, Aphrodite, and Rhea. And she felt it in the blankness that met her fingers and mind when she reached out to the world, the rocks and water and trees that used to sparkle and sing with magic for her.

She plodded to her bed in the small cavern just off her parents' larger chamber. Their possessions still sat about where Persephone and Hades had left them. Hekate didn't allow anyone to move them. In the previous three days, she had entered the chamber and touched things—her mother's faded red robe lined with rabbit fur, her father's green rope belt, the wool blankets of their bed, their combs and the leather strings they used to tie back their hair. The residual energy of their living selves had shone forth as she rested her fingertips on each item, so strong and real it made tears stream down her cheeks, but comforted her heart as well.

Now that comfort would be gone. Their possessions would seem to her the sad, empty relics they seemed to everyone else.

Aphrodite and Rhea had made up beds on the floor in a different room of the cave, and had stayed for the past few



nights. They had run errands or provided help as Hekate needed. But tonight they retreated in silence, surely disturbed by the bloody revenge.

Though Dionysos had been sleeping on the floor of Hekate's room on previous nights, she now stretched her hand in silent invitation to him. His gray eyes solemn, he followed her to her bed, and they curled up together. They hadn't touched intimately since the one encounter at the deadly Dionysia those few nights ago, and wouldn't tonight either. But human warmth was one of the few consolations left to her, so she took it. With her back curved against his chest, and his arm latched over her, she tried to relax enough to sleep. Hermes took up the spot on the floor he had occupied the past few nights, and pulled a blanket over himself.

Dionysos eventually fell asleep, his breathing steady. Hekate still couldn't. She opened her eyes. Beside Kerberos lay a leashed ghost dog, whom she had brought in so his glow could serve as a flameless light during the night. The faint green shimmer illuminated Hermes' profile as he lay on his back, arms folded behind his head, gazing at the stalactites on the ceiling.

Hekate shifted, pushing down a fold of her blanket. Hermes' gaze moved to her, dark and complicit, bereft of the merriment that usually cavorted there. Her desolation became unbearable. She slipped away from Dionysos and dropped her bare feet to the cold stone. Hermes scooted over to make room for her on his mattress of folded wool. She sat on its edge and drew her legs up beneath her long tunic. Hermes' body warmed the small of her back.

"Show me something," he whispered. "I need some happy magic tonight, love."

She lowered her forehead to her knees. "I can't. It's gone."

"What do you mean, gone?"

"The magic left me," she whispered into the cloth that covered her legs. "It's my punishment."

He drew in a breath. His hand slid onto her back, smoothing the tangles of her long hair. "You should have let us go there tonight without you."

"How would you have? My magic called the beasts to us. Then it left me after I used it for murder."

"It will come back. I'm sure it will. No one's ever punished forever, not even in Tartaros."

"It might come back someday." She kept her head upon her knees. "And someday my parents will be reborn, and someday we might make them immortal again. Someday life will be happy once more. It's a long way ahead, though. How do I get through all those years until 'someday'?"

Hermes pulled her hand away from its clutch across her shins, and kissed it. "With us. We'll all get through together, love."

She sniffled, and lifted her face. "Am I still your 'love' when I can't do my tricks anymore?"

"Always."