



UNDERWORLD'S DAUGHTER

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CHAPTER ONE

HADES LAY NAKED UPON HIS BLANKETS. WITH HIS ARMS FOLDED behind his head, he gazed up at the bed's canopy. Joy coursed through his veins.

Persephone emerged from the passageway, returning from her bath in one of the river's small underground tributaries. She wore only his damp cloak wrapped around her. "Brrr!" She hopped onto the bed and wriggled up close to him.

He drew up one of the goatskin blankets over both of them and hugged her. Her shivers ceased, and she sighed and rested her fragrant head against his shoulder. Nearly all the flowers had fallen out of her hair by now. Some still lay crushed on the pillow, tickling his ear. He had discarded his own crown and its flowers onto the floor the moment he and Persephone had arrived in the bedchamber, just before tumbling with her onto the bed.

Firelight gleamed from an oil lamp on a ledge in the wall, and two leashed spirit dogs glowed in the corner. Here and there on the surrounding cave walls, gems sparkled in the flickering light.

Hades slid his hand up beneath the mass of Persephone's hair and rested his palm upon her warm back. "A freezing cold underground river. A dark cave lit by ghosts. A man too stupid to realize you loved him. This is what you want?"

"All of it. Especially the very stupid man."

He sat up and drew her onto his lap. "Listen. Before you regain your mind from this madness, will you consent to be my wife?"

She threw her arms around his neck. "Of course, yes! Didn't you know I'd said yes?"

They toppled back onto the mattress, wrapped around each other, Hades breathing the scent of her damp skin. After a long moment lying in the embrace, he rose on his knees and helped her up in front of him. He bent and kissed her breast, over her heart. "I marry you," he said.

When he lifted his face, she leaned down and kissed his chest. "I marry you."

They broke into smiles and fell onto the bed again in each other's arms.

In most of Greece at the time, those gestures and words were all it took for two adults to count themselves officially married. They would want to carve their names somewhere together, and hold a feast so their friends and relatives could recognize and celebrate their union. But as far as Persephone and Hades were concerned, their marriage pact was now sealed.

"Barely lunchtime, and you're already married." He latched her thigh over his. "Busy day."

"Very. Speaking of lunch, I'm hungry. What food do you have down here?"

"Not much. Some nuts. A few fruits in the orchard that won't do strange things to us. We could go up and catch fish at the beach."

"Let's." She kissed him on the lips. "Then we'll come back here for a good long time."

As they dressed, a sound of clacking toenails and panting approached from the tunnel. Kerberos trotted in, tail wagging, and leaped onto the bed next to Persephone, who sat tying a rope around her tunic as a belt.

She laughed and held out her hand, which Kerberos licked. "Where did you come from?"

"Oh yes, I have a dog now." Hades pulled a dry, folded cloak from a wooden box and shook it open. "This is Kerberos."

"Kerberos? Indeed. Fearsome, I can tell." The dog flopped over

on the bed and turned his belly upward in submission. Persephone scratched his ribs until his hind leg kicked.

Hades snorted. "He worships you already. Come on, boy. Get up. Fish?"

At the word "fish," Kerberos leaped to his feet and answered with a bark.

Persephone borrowed a pair of Hades' sandals and wrapped them down to her size with a few rags. It worked well enough that she could walk out of the tunnel with Hades and Kerberos, though she had to shuffle a bit.

"I meant to tell you about him." Hades waved toward Kerberos. "He was wounded from some bite and it got infected, but one of your new fruits seemed to put him right. He's been a barrel of energy ever since."

"New fruits? Exciting. I'll have to try them."

But today the excitement of being newlyweds eclipsed the appeal of all the Underworld plants. They prepared and ate their lunch with barely any notice of the food. Shaded by a boulder on the beach, they embraced on a blanket, their attention fastened to one another's words, eyes, lips, and bodies. Kerberos, after wolfing down the fire-roasted fish Hades gave him, flung himself in and out of the waves, snapped at driftwood, and chewed up sticks.

After the sun set, Hades and Persephone moved to the warm rocks above the cave's entrance and rested there. The souls poured in. Breaths of chilled subterranean air wafted up from the Underworld.

"Wouldn't you like to go tell your mother where you are?" Hades said.

Persephone shook her head and kept watching the waterfall of souls. "Let her figure it out."

The stars emerged. Though still aroused enough to be caressing Hades idly beneath his tunic, Persephone was growing sleepy, her head heavy against his shoulder. He carried her back to the chariot, called the salt-encrusted Kerberos in as well, and made the descent into the cave. Guided by the light of one of the leashed spirit dogs, Hades and Persephone walked with happy exhaus-

tion down the tunnel to the bedchamber, disrobed, and fell asleep. Kerberos snoozed near the door, next to his ghost-dog friends.

They awoke some time later when he scrambled upright and barked. From the tunnel bloomed a glow of torchlight. A female voice shouted, "Persephone!"

Demeter burst in with the torch. Kerberos barked once more, then sat back beside the bed with a grumble and watched her distrustfully. She paid him no heed. She glared at Persephone and Hades.

They sat up. Persephone blinked against the bright torch and held the blankets around her naked body. Mother and daughter gazed at one another, Demeter's fury against Persephone's coldness.

Hades reached for his cloak and wrapped it around his waist before stepping out of bed. "Demeter, I should officially inform you—"

"She knows we're married," Persephone cut in. She kept her eyes upon Demeter. "And there's nothing she can do about it."

Demeter's chest heaved in a breath. Long blades of grass had tangled around her sandals, and bits of leaf were stuck to her cloak, suggesting she'd been tearing through meadows and forests in search of her daughter. "This is how you tell me? Not a word of warning, you just disappear? Do you realize how worried I've been, how—"

"You brought this on yourself. You meddled." Sitting tall in the bed, flower petals clinging to her ruffled hair, Persephone already had the bearing of a goddess.

"No one's seen you since morning!" Demeter said. "You left to gather flowers and simply vanished. I found your cloak and basket and sandals, all scattered across the ground—what was I to think? Girls have been raped and killed at these festivals. Finally I found Adonis and Aphrodite, and they told me *not to worry*." She said the words through clenched teeth. "They said someone had seen you in the forest with a black-haired man in a cloak. An immortal, who took you away into the spirit realm." She slid

a contemptuous glance toward Hades, then returned her gaze to Persephone. "I should have guessed from the start."

"Yes, you should have. Now you know I'm married and safe. You may go."

"Safe? With him?"

"I won't get pregnant," said Persephone, at the same moment that Hades said, "I will never hurt her."

Demeter finally rounded on him. "To you I say only this. If you do hurt her in any way, or you leave her or betray her when she ages and you don't, I will have the rest of eternity to hate you and punish you for it."

Defenses rose to his mouth, but he held them in check. His gaze moved to the torch, which she must have brought with her from above. "You've never come down to the Underworld before," he said gently. "Certainly not by yourself, at night, and without knowing your way in the tunnels. That would take a lot of courage for anyone. I know what Persephone means to you, that you'd brave this place to find her."

"I still loathe it. Seeing it firsthand hasn't changed my mind."

"But she's queen here now," Hades said. "Does that change your mind?"

Demeter shuddered and turned back to Persephone. "This doesn't have to be your future. You can still leave him, find a normal life. There are men who'd have you."

"This is the only man and the only life I want. If you can't accept it, you know the way out."

Demeter lowered the torch and turned, but stopped at the doorway. "I'm sorry I lied to you. Both of you." Her voice was strained. "Persephone, I'm sure you realize I only did so to keep you safe. To keep you with me."

"You'd prefer I never grew up? Some of us don't have that luxury."

Demeter bowed her head, and departed into the tunnel.

Hades sent a concerned glance at Persephone. Her brows were lowered, her eyes troubled and stormy. She gathered dried petals off the blanket and crushed them in her fist.

Kerberos rested his chin on the bed and gazed at her.

"Don't you want to go after her?" Hades asked.

"No. This is what she deserves, tampering with our lives."

He sat beside her, and she leaned against his chest. "Look," he tried. "Long ago, when Demeter found out she was going to have you, I told her I'd always be her friend, and the friend of her child. Now I'm...well, she must think I've utterly stolen and violated her child. Not to mention her trust."

"You haven't. This is her wrongdoing, not yours." She looked up at him. "I promise you, this is where I want to be. And she must live with it. Let's go back to sleep."

"If you wish."

They lay back and he cradled her in his arms until she breathed deeply and peacefully. But he stayed awake a long while, disquieted by the echo of Demeter's words: *I will have the rest of eternity to hate you and punish you for it.*

CHAPTER TWO

IT'S GONE." ADRIAN'S VOICE SOUNDED PUZZLED, ALMOST FLAT.

Sophie stared at the little tree. A few days ago she had touched the one remaining orange on it, which she had come here today to eat. But...

"It's gone," she echoed.

"Why is it gone?" Adrian said. "It shouldn't be gone."

"Did an animal eat it, you think? A bat, a...I don't know, are there raccoons down here?" She would not panic. They'd figure this out. She'd still become immortal.

"Animals have never done that before. And no, then it'd be all ripped apart on the ground." He circled the tree and shone his LED flashlight around it. "It's just gone. Like someone took it."

"But who would take it? Who *could*?"

He lifted his face toward the cave's entrance. His features hardened in anger. "Who indeed." Adrian seized her hand and pulled her through the tangled orchard, back toward the fields.

"Where are we going?"

"Niko!" he roared as they broke free of the trees. He dragged her along.

They were nearly running, and Sophie did her best to keep up and not stumble on the bumpy fields. "You think Niko knows?"

"Who else? Niko!"

They crested a hill, and found Nikolaos climbing it on the other side to meet them. "Yes, what are you shouting about?"

Behind him at a distance stood Freya, with a middle-aged

Indian woman whom Sophie assumed was the wife of Sanjay—the reincarnation of Apollo, lately murdered by members of the Thanatos cult. The woman was talking to the souls of Sanjay and Rhea, and she looked sorrowful. Niko and Freya must have just returned from India, fetching her here to visit, as they'd promised Sanjay.

But Sophie only had a moment to consider all of that, for in the next second Adrian seized Niko by the front of his black denim jacket and slammed him against a tree trunk.

"What did you do with the orange?" Adrian said.

"What orange?" Niko said.

Adrian jerked him forward and slammed him back again, making him grunt. "You *know* what orange."

"Don't hurt him," Sophie said.

Adrian glared at Niko. "It won't hurt him."

Suddenly Adrian flew backward and sprawled upon the grass. Niko had shoved him with both feet in a nimble kick. Niko straightened his jacket and smirked. "Quite right. Won't hurt me. Now would you care to discuss this like a grown-up?"

Adrian growled and leaped up. He lunged at Niko and crashed down atop him on a rock outcrop, one hand around Niko's throat.

Sophie cringed at the thud Niko's skull made against the rock. "Adrian—"

"What did you do with it?"

"What on Earth?" Freya shouted. She ran to them.

"Stop choking me," Niko rasped out. His face was turning purple.

Sophie hauled on Adrian's arms, but might as well have tried to move a boulder. Freya dived between the two men and shoved them apart. While she held Adrian back, Niko scrambled to his feet.

"Are you going to admit it?" Adrian yelled, from the restraints of Sophie and Freya's hold. "Or do I ask the souls? They'll tell me who's been down here recently, visiting the little orange tree. They never lie."

Niko lifted his chin, unabashed. "It was going to be a nice surprise for you. For heaven's sake."

"Sophie was going to eat it. Today." Adrian's voice shook with fury.

"Well, I didn't know that. I texted you to ask, a few days ago, and you said she wanted to think about it a while."

"I didn't say, 'Go ahead and feed it to someone else.' I'd never say that. You knew we were saving it for her."

"It wasn't a written contract," Niko said. "And it isn't her last chance. It's still blooming. More fruit's going to grow."

"Who did you give it to?"

"Look, we need more immortals on our side, as soon as possible. It was clear even before what happened to Rhea. So I considered all the—"

Adrian tried to lunge at him again, but the women held him back. "*Who did you give it to?*"

Freya sent Nikolaos an entreating look. Niko's gaze moved to Sophie, and his face changed into what might have been subtle apology. For a moment both dreadful and thrilling, she wondered if he had made her father—Demeter's old soul—immortal.

But finally he answered, "Dionysos."

Adrian stopped struggling. His mouth twisted in disgust. "You didn't."

"Have you met her? She's awesome."

Sophie stared at the white grass. Her mind traveled back. She knew the name Dionysos—god of wine, among other things, according to her mythology book from childhood. But she remembered him from the Persephone lifetime too. He had joined the immortals later. No, he had been someone she'd known. Hadn't he? And he was definitely a "he," so why had Niko said "she"?

"What were you thinking?" Adrian said. "Without even consulting us? Did you talk to anyone about it?"

"Well. Not beforehand."

Adrian snarled, broke free of the women's hold, and threw himself at Niko again.

But Niko met him halfway, anger finally surfacing on his

face, and caught Adrian's arms. While Adrian fought him, Niko slammed his knee up into Adrian's stomach, then shoved him to the ground. Sophie cringed and covered her mouth, though she knew Adrian couldn't be injured for long by a move like that.

Niko planted his foot on Adrian's side. "Stop it, Ade. It's done. What is this temper tantrum going to accomplish?"

"Thrashing you would feel really good right now." Adrian seized Niko's leg and pushed him, but evidently not hard. Niko kept his balance and merely hopped away a few steps, allowing Adrian to roll onto his side and get up.

"It's done," Niko repeated. "We have new strength on our side. Let's be happy, eh?"

"Who is Dionysos now?" Sophie directed the question at Adrian.

Wiping dirt and grass off his shirt, he sent her a long, stormy look. "Tabitha," he said.

Her mouth fell open. Jubilant delight fought with intense jealousy. Then a sense of betrayal stabbed at her as well. Adrian knew Tabitha had been a god, and he'd never told Sophie?

"She's awesome," Niko said again. "You have wonderful taste in friends, Sophia." He glanced at Adrian. "Not so much perhaps in boyfriends."

"Out," Adrian said. "Get out."

Tabitha. Tabitha was immortal, and used to be a god, like Sophie. Why hadn't Tab called her? Did Tab know about Sophie?

Sophie whipped out her phone and tapped Tab's speed-dial number. But nothing happened. Of course; they were underground, in a cave. No cell reception. She lowered the phone and looked again at Niko and Adrian.

"Fine, I'll give you some space." Niko sauntered toward the river. "Happy to."

"No, I mean you get out of here and you do not come back, and you stay away from me, and the Underworld, and Sophie, until I decide I want to lay eyes on you again."

Niko swung around. Derisive amusement twinkled in his eyes.

“Oh, you’re banishing me from the Underworld? You have such powers, do you?”

“You have the rest of the world. That should be enough.”

“You’ve said it yourself, Ade: you don’t own this place. No one does.”

“Well, I was here first.” Adrian said it with deliberate clarity.

Niko snorted, but turned and strode toward the river. He paused once to call back, “You know, it wasn’t even the only lovely surprise I had for you. But never mind. I suppose the rest will have to wait. Goodbye.” He walked off.

The souls of Rhea and Sanjay, along with Sanjay’s living widow, watched him go. They looked conflicted, but no one spoke to stop him.

“Adrian,” Freya said. “He wouldn’t have done it if he thought Sophie would eat the orange so soon. He acted rashly, yes, but—”

Adrian folded his arms. “I don’t want to hear a defense.”

“But I think you’ll find,” she said, “that he acted out of love, not malice. And it’s going to be a good thing on the whole.”

“Did he tell you?” Adrian asked her. “Did you know?”

She hesitated, and cupped one hand in the other. “Not until after he’d done it.”

“At which point you still didn’t tell me.” Adrian swung away and walked toward Sophie. “Maybe you ought to go too.” He tossed the words to Freya with cruel casualness over his shoulder.

Freya’s sad gaze met Sophie’s. Sophie only looked blankly at her, then stared at the pale ground. Rhea was dead, the orange was gone, Niko and Freya were not the great allies they had appeared to be, Tabitha was immortal, Adrian hadn’t told her about Tab’s past lives, Sophie had to find a new place to live, and she did not get to become immortal today. Nor tomorrow, nor for a couple of months, or however long it took for the fruit to grow. And who knew what Thanatos would try in the meantime?

All she wanted to do was sink to her knees and cry, or scream in frustration. But she felt the quiet, reverent gaze of the souls all around her, and even now, in her pathetic mortal state, she considered herself their honored representative—in some sense even

their queen. A queen didn't behave like a whiny kid. She blinked as she stared downward, willing the tears not to rise.

"All right," Freya said. "We'll talk later." When Sophie finally glanced up, Freya had walked away. Her blonde head made a bright spot in the gloomy fields as she retreated toward the river.

Adrian stood before Sophie, head bowed. He looked up at her, and their gazes held a moment. Most of his anger seemed to have dissipated; he looked sad and preoccupied.

"Well," she said. "I guess I should go too."

His brows lowered. "Why? Aren't you staying the weekend?"

"I have a lot to do. Find a place to live. Talk to my best friend about how she's immortal, see how that's going. You know. Stuff." She knew she sounded cold. Too bad. She couldn't manage any kinder mood right now.

His shoulders drooped lower. "You were right. Is that what you want me to say?"

She stared at him in incomprehension.

"You said we shouldn't trust Niko," he added. "Just the other night. Well, you were right. What can I do now?"

"Like I said, take me home. I have things to do."

He shoved his hand through his hair, and paced a few steps away and back again. "A minute ago you were ready to spend eternity with me. Now you hate me. Why? Was I too rough with Niko? I'm sorry for that, but—"

"It's not that. I didn't like it, no, but I know he deserved it."

"Then what?"

"It would've been nice of you to tell me my best friend was Dionysos. What else haven't you mentioned?"

He drew in his breath, as if controlling another outburst. "That information— who everyone was, who they are now— it's dangerous. Surely you see exactly how dangerous it is, after everything Thanatos has tried to do to you."

"Yes! They're trying to beat me up anyway, even though I *don't* know everything. So why not go ahead and tell me? What difference will it make?"

"You'll remember it anyway. Quite soon. It would've been a—a lovely surprise when you realized—"

"A lovely surprise," she repeated. "Just like Niko was planning."

His eyes darkened. "Don't compare me to him."

Sophie looked away and stared without focus at an ash tree with violet-white leaves. She didn't apologize, and neither did he.

He sighed. "Look. It's been a rough week. Wouldn't you rather relax here a day or two, then go back?"

She calculated time zones. If they left now, it'd be the middle of the night by the time they arrived in Oregon. She'd have to sneak into the room where her treacherous roommate Melissa slept, and stay there. No, unbearable. Sleeping next to Adrian would be a challenge, but it was better than sharing a room with the girl who'd reported to the cult members of Thanatos about her.

"I'll stay here tonight," she said. "But I need to get back to the living world tomorrow, first thing."

He said nothing, and Sophie returned her gaze to his. He closed his eyes and lowered his face. "Fine. Whenever you're ready."

HE DIDN'T TRY to touch her when they climbed into bed. Sophie kept her back to him, beneath the black canopy in the chamber.

"Look, I'll answer whatever you want," he whispered. "Just don't shut me out this way."

She had plenty of snippy answers prepared, mostly regarding his not telling her important things like Tabitha being a god's soul. But those responses crumbled away when she reached for them, showing themselves the pointless, flimsy things they were. He was right. Telling her earlier wouldn't have helped much. It might only have caused her further confusion, in a time when her mind was already undergoing enough chaos. And she still would have learned about Tabitha eventually.

What made her withdraw into herself was a more basic and pathetic matter. She spoke the truth, in all its self-pity.

"It's not that I'm shutting you out," she whispered without

turning. "It's that I don't belong here. I'm mortal. I didn't want to be, but I am, so I still belong to the living world. I have to sort out my life there." The ache in her chest swelled until tears stung her eyelids. "I need a backup plan, because apparently I can't just join you here like I hoped."

Adrian latched his arm around her. His face pressed warm against the back of her neck. "You can, you always can. Please do."

"And do *what*? Drop out of college? Tell my parents I'm studying abroad at some place I can't give them an address for? Stare at the orange tree and wait for it to grow faster? And even when another orange does grow, *then* do I drop out and leave the real world? I don't know! I didn't think ahead far enough."

He sighed. For a minute or more he said nothing, only held her. She found his fingers at the center of her chest and laced hers into them.

"You're right," he said. "We're supposed to help the living world. That's been the point all along. And you do need backup, people there to support you and give you a normal life in case anything ever happens to me. Which Thanatos is doing their best to ensure it will."

She squeezed his hand. "Don't say that. We can't live in fear of them. That's...letting them win."

"Yes. Which is why you should ignore them as much as possible, and tend to your regular life. And be fantastic at it."

But he sounded so somber that she couldn't answer with any words of comfort or agreement. She said nothing, merely held his hand, and didn't sleep for a long while.