

QUEEN
of
GODS

BOOKS BY KATHARINE & ELIZABETH CORR

The THRONE OF SWANS duology

A Throne of Swans

A Crown of Talons

The HOUSE OF SHADOWS duology

Daughter of Darkness

Queen of Gods

The WITCH'S KISS trilogy

QUEEN *of* GODS

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For our family



The Four Orders of Theodesmioi



Theodesmioi of the order of **ZEUS**
king of the gods, ruler of the heavens and the earth

Battle Wagers ~ fight with beyond-human powers of speed and endurance

Weather Workers ~ control the clouds and wind



Theodesmioi of the order of **POSEIDON**
god of the sea

Sea Singers ~ enhance the speed and strength of ships



Theodesmioi of the order of **HADES**
god of the underworld, ruler of the dead

Soul Severers ~ separate the soul from the body and send it on its journey



Theodesmioi of the order of **HEPHAESTUS**
smith-god and master of metals

Spell Casters ~ bind magic into metal

Note: Houses of the Orders of Zeus, Hades and Poseidon are found in most cities. There are only two houses of the Order of Hephaestus, in Mycenae and Thebes.





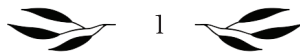
Prologue

Sing, Goddess, of rage . . .

That is the poet's request. Yet whose ire shall I make the subject of my song?

The wrath of Deina? Soul Severer, daughter of Hades, demi-god, thief. Tricked, as others have been, by Thanatos, god of death. The seeds he gave her, the seeds she ate that night in Thebes, allowed her to defeat the tyrant Orpheus and save her friends. They also bound her to the Underworld. Now, she makes her way through the darkness to Hades' realm, her heart silenced by the grip of eternity, forced to obey the summons of her divine parent, and fearing that she will never see the sun again.

Or the anger of Theron, true prince of Thebes? Another Soul Severer, and son of Orpheus, slaying his father would have left him lawful prey of the implacable Furies. Instead, he trapped his father's blood-soaked soul forever in the Threshold. He and Deina, Hades' daughter. Only as he lost her did she realise that he loved her. Now he lingers with his companions, hidden in the forest outside Thebes. Listen: he sings a threnody, a song of lamentation, as flames take the body of the betrayer, Chryse.





Within, Theron burns with frustration. He wishes to reclaim Deina from the Underworld, but he knows his duty. He must reveal the truth to the Theodesmioi, the god-marked servants of Zeus, Poseidon, Hades and Hephaestus – the truth of what awaits them after death. Not the joy of Elysium, but the eternal nightmare of becoming a blood hunter. Theron and his friends have evaded their pursuers thus far, and their sights are set on Iolkos, city of broad streets in the gulf of Pagasae – if they can survive long enough to get there.

Perhaps I shall sing the fury of Aristaeus. He is nursing his spite and his injuries in the sumptuous marble and gold surroundings of the Cadmea, the citadel of Thebes, the mighty city of which he now claims to be king. Alone in his chambers, Aristaeus plots his enemies' destruction, sending his spies to hunt them out.

Or shall I tell of the rage of my sisters, the Fates? For this is not how the story should have gone. That night in the Cadmea, Orpheus was to have destroyed his son or Theron was to have slain his father. Either way, Aster and Dendris were to have died. Deina, having watched her friends suffer, was to have been imprisoned in the Cadmea to serve Orpheus or Aristaeus for the rest of her days. This was what the Fates planned. This is what would have happened – if I hadn't stepped in so many years ago. If I hadn't ensured Deina caught the plague and brought her to the point of death. If I hadn't nudged Thanatos into sparing her life. If he hadn't seen the gold bloom around her iris. If he hadn't dared to hope. Shall I tell my sisters for how long their plans have been unravelling and reveal Thanatos's role? I think I should. Even now, the





cloud-capped halls of Olympus ring with the clamour of their protests. Once they know the full story, their resentment and bitterness will be beyond all measure.

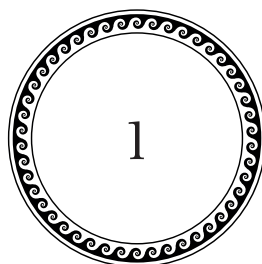
Yes, that shall be my song. I will even give the poet his opening line.

Sing, Goddess, of the impotent fury of the Fates.

For I am Tyche, goddess of fortune.

And fate means nothing if you have luck on your side.





The darkness was suffocating, and Deina felt the weight of it. Like a too tight second skin it squeezed her body, stealing speech as well as sight.

Thanatos's fingers still gripped her left wrist. With every step, he took her further from her friends, further from the future she'd dared to dream of, and nearer to the perpetual imprisonment that awaited her. His touch was so cold it felt like fire. Yet she'd stopped pulling against his grasp. She was terrified that if he let go, she'd wander here forever.

On and on they walked. Until the darkness was displaced by a flaring brilliance that made Deina throw up her right arm to shield her eyes. That too faded, into the ordinary glow of oil lamps.

If you could call anything about Hades' court ordinary.

Deina blinked, looking around as her vision adjusted. Thanatos was next to her, his face impassive; he'd released his grip on her arm. They were back in Hades' throne room. There was the huge obsidian looking glass on the wall, the





sweep of its polished black disc offering Deina a shadowy reflection of herself and her surroundings. There were the two empty thrones, lofty on their dais. There, the lapis lazuli snakes that had attacked her and Theron and the others, ossified and confined to alcoves once more. So much the same – but Deina herself was different. To her dismay, her Severer’s robes had gone. Instead, she was wearing the clothes that Hades had conjured her into – briefly – the last time they’d met. A full-length, one-shouldered gown of diaphanous garnet-red silk, secured by a gold belt and a single gold shoulder brooch set with rubies. There were more rubies scattered across the hem. She was shod with delicate sandals made from a fine gold mesh, and – Deina lifted one hand to her head – the dark waves of her hair were confined by what felt like more of the same material.

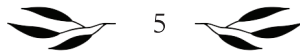
She turned on Thanatos.

‘Is this your doing?’

‘No.’ Hades’ voice echoed through the immense room. ‘It’s mine.’

Deina spun to see one of the empty thrones now occupied. The god of the Underworld – the god who claimed to be Deina’s mother – was wearing the same rich blue gown as at their last encounter. She crossed her legs and grinned. ‘Don’t you like your new clothes, Deina? I think the colour suits you. And Thanatos approves. Don’t you, Thanatos?’

Thanatos blinked at Deina as though just becoming aware of her presence. His eyes widened as he took in her appearance, and a faint flush warmed his pale cheeks. Hades laughed. The sound was chilling.





Deina wrapped her arms tightly around herself. ‘Why are you doing this?’ she demanded.

The god tilted her head.

‘Because I can.’ Some invisible force seized Deina’s limbs and forced her onto her knees. ‘And because you have displeased me,’ Hades continued. ‘Either Orpheus or Theron was fated to die. One of them should have been down here by now, pursuing the desolate paths of the Underworld towards the place of judgement.’ Her voice began to vibrate with anger. ‘Instead, what do I find? Theron still alive, free, and Orpheus neither dead nor alive, but trapped in the Threshold – in a place of your making.’ She flung out her arm, pointing at Deina accusingly.

Deina couldn’t get up; her body was no longer under her control. But she could still speak.

‘And I would do it all again.’

‘Deina –’ Thanatos murmured from behind her – ‘you mustn’t.’

Deina paid no attention – she would not, could not, conceal her loathing of the being lounging on the throne. If she tried to swallow her hate, it would choke her. ‘I’d do all of it, and more. I do not fear the wrath of the gods. And I do not fear you.’

For a moment Hades stared at her. The god’s violet eyes glittered dangerously.

‘You should be afraid.’ She gestured in Deina’s direction: one languid flick of her long, beringed fingers. Deina found she could no longer move mouth, tongue or throat. ‘You should be absolutely terrified. You are bound to this realm and to me, now, daughter. And I can make you do anything. Even tear out your own hair, should it amuse me.’



Deina's fingers immediately wound themselves in her hair and began tugging against her scalp. The pain brought tears into her eyes. She would have cried out if she hadn't been silenced.

'Or . . . ' Hades mulled, as Deina's hands went slack. 'Or I could give you a pin and command you to blind yourself.' A long brooch pin appeared in Deina's left palm. Unbidden – unable to resist, despite the terror turning her stomach – she lifted the pin so that the point hovered just in front of her eyeball. Tightened her grip on the sliver of sharp metal as the muscles in her arm tensed, ready to plunge it into her eye.

'Hades, you have to stop this!' Thanatos demanded.

Hades' head snapped round to stare at the god of death as Deina's arm dropped to her side; she felt faint with relief. The pin rolled away across the marble tiles.

'Have to?' The god raised an eyebrow. 'You dare issue orders to me?'

Whatever spell was restraining Deina's body vanished; if she hadn't put out her hands to brace herself, she would have pitched headfirst onto the stone floor. Quickly, she forced herself to scramble upright; whatever Hades was planning next, better to meet it on her feet. The god's attention switched back to her.

'Tell me,' Hades questioned, 'how do you feel about Thanatos right now?'

Deina gritted her teeth. 'I despise him. He gave me the seeds to eat. He told me they'd make me strong enough to defeat Orpheus, made me think that they'd at least kill me too. But instead, they bound me to the Underworld, and to you.' She turned and glared at Thanatos. 'He claimed to be





my friend. He said he wanted to help me, but all the time he was working for you.’ Her voice sank to almost a whisper. ‘He betrayed me.’

Thanatos shook his head, the word *no* forming silently on his lips.

A long-bladed knife appeared in Deina’s hand.

‘Well, then.’ Hades smiled. ‘Here is a chance to take your revenge. Thanatos may have carried out my orders on this occasion, but I grow tired of his insolence and mischief-making. So do my siblings on Olympus. He interferes and constantly oversteps his authority. If you want to hurt him, I won’t stop you.’

The knife was heavy in Deina’s palm. Part of her – a large part – wanted to make Nat suffer. She’d thrown a knife at him once before, and he’d just plucked the spinning blade straight out of the air; what if, this time, Hades prevented him from defending himself? The idea of Thanatos writhing in pain at her feet was attractive. Yet Hades *wanted* her to attack the god of death. That alone seemed like a good enough reason not to. Instead, Deina lifted the knife and threw herself at Hades, allowing her rage to drive her forward, bringing up her arm to strike –

The blade slashed through nothing more than air. At the last moment, moving too quickly for her to see, Hades had stepped out of the way and was standing, instead, beside her.

‘Don’t test me, daughter,’ the god warned.

Deina ignored her. Pivoting, she plunged the dagger towards Hades’ chest. Again the god moved. Deina snarled. ‘Fight me, damn you!’ She lunged, slashing the knife through already empty space. ‘You – you coward!’





Hades raised her hand and dealt Deina a stinging backhanded blow, splitting Deina's cheek open with one of her rings and knocking her to the floor. Blood dripped from Deina's face. With a scream of rage, Deina drove the knife against the green marble, cracking the tile in two and shattering the blade.

Hades was watching her coldly.

'The seeds have made you strong, daughter. But you can still suffer. You can still die. And you can still be forced into obedience.'

Deina felt Hades seize control of her body again. She got up and began to walk towards Thanatos, coming to a halt no more than a hair's breadth away from him. Even while her mind yelled at her to stop, her arms reached up to embrace his neck. She felt herself rising onto tiptoe. Felt her lips curving into a seductive smile – despite the ripple of pain from the wound on her cheek – as her mouth lifted to his and she pressed herself against his muscled torso.

Perhaps Thanatos could see in Deina's eyes the emotions that she couldn't express any other way: horror, despair, fury. Gripping her wrists, he forced her away from him, holding her at arm's length.

'Please, Hades,' he said. 'You've proved your point.'

'Which is?'

Thanatos gazed at Deina sadly. 'That she is not a god.'

'Precisely.' Before Hades even finished speaking the word, Deina was freed again. Thanatos released her and backed away. 'But,' the god continued, 'she could be.'

The statement hung in the air like warm breath on a winter's day.





‘Well?’ Hades prompted. ‘No clever come back, Deina? No questions?’

‘Only one.’ Deina turned to face her tormentor. ‘You care nothing for my feelings; that much is clear. You’ve taken my dreams from me. You’ve separated me from those I love.’ An image of Theron reaching out for her, staring in horror as she was dragged into the Underworld, threatened to break what control Deina had left. She fought against the sorrow, determined not to give Hades the satisfaction of seeing her weep. ‘So here is my question. You want to keep me here forever, and you want to make me a god – why? It can’t be for my benefit. So, I assume that somehow it is for yours.’

A spasm of anger twisted Hades’ perfect features. She jumped up from the throne and shifted her shape into the male form that Deina and the other Severers had been expecting when they had first entered the throne room: huge, strong, with thick black hair and a flowing beard, carrying his tall wing-topped sceptre. The god stormed up and down the dais, growling, shoving the thrones out of the way, smacking the end of the sceptre so hard against the tiles that flakes of green marble skittered across the floor. There was some shadow trailing behind him; something older, darker, that spoke to Deina of the corruption of the grave. Without even meaning to, she shuddered and took a step back.

Hades paused in his raging, staring at her. As the god’s breathing slowed, he shifted back to his female form. The sceptre became a bangle adorning Hades’ wrist. A wave of the god’s hand righted the thrones and repaired the floor. She sat down again.



‘Why, you ask. And my answer is, why does it matter? When I want something, Deina, I’m used to getting it.’ Leaving the throne, Hades stepped off the dais and approached Deina. ‘The seeds you ate have taken root within you, binding you ever more firmly to the Underworld.’ Smiling, the god flattened her palm against Deina’s stomach before lifting her hand to caress Deina’s cheek, healing with the lightest touch the injury she had caused. ‘Let us not argue like this, daughter. Let me at least show you what your future might be, if you were to accept the divinity you are so quick to reject.’

The throne room disappeared and Deina found herself seated on an ornate chair in a courtyard open to a night sky blazing with stars. The courtyard itself was filled with so much glittering silver it made her squint. Silver ivy wreathed the blue marble columns that marked its perimeter; cloth-of-silver wall hangings shimmered in the glow of oil lamps strung between the columns; pelts of some silvery fur covered the floor and the couches that were scattered about the open space. Some of the couches were occupied by women clad in elegantly draped gowns the colour of ripe plums. More women, identically dressed, were waiting near the throne; some carried wine and platters of fruit, while others sang and danced for Deina’s entertainment. Too beautiful to be mortal, Deina guessed they were Lampades, the nymphs of the Underworld said to wait on Persephone and Hecate. And now, apparently, on her. Deina’s red gown had been transformed into one of pure white, its folds encrusted with tiny pearls. The golden belt and sandals were now silver, studded with gems she didn’t recognise but which



flashed with blue fire as she stood, planning to find Hades, to tell the god that none of this would convince her to –

‘Deina . . .’

Theron’s voice. Shock took her breath away. Shock, mingled with a spark of hope that she couldn’t quite extinguish. It couldn’t be him. It was impossible. And yet . . .

Deina looked back over her shoulder. There he was, standing just behind the throne, whole and uninjured, smiling at her in that way he had. The kind of smile that, even when she’d hated him, used to make her stomach flip. Now it was enough to send desire pulsing through her. He strolled towards her and caught hold of her hand.

‘Come, my love, my divine mistress. It’s time for bed, surely?’ Theron winked at her. But behind the mischief, his dark eyes were filled with warmth and want. Deina let him lead her out of the courtyard and into one of the adjacent buildings, into a room adorned with brightly coloured frescos and scented with rosemary and mint. Let him lead her towards a huge, fur-strewn bed. Let him stand behind her with one arm locked around her waist while his free hand scooped her long, loose hair out of the way so he could gently kiss the nape of her neck, over and over.

‘I’ve dreamed of this, my Deina,’ he murmured. ‘We’re together now, and we’ll never be separated.’ The touch of his lips sent a ripple of pleasure across her skin. She sighed and relaxed against him and closed her eyes. ‘Do you want me to stop?’

‘No . . .’

The sound of her own voice broke the spell. Deina opened



her eyes to find herself back in Hades' throne room, but Theron – Theron was gone. She took a deep, shuddering breath, feeling the empty space behind her as if some part of herself had suddenly been ripped away.

Hades, who was watching her, smiled very slightly. The movement revealed the god's sharp, white teeth.

'You see what riches might be yours, Deina, if you would simply stop this foolish resistance. Give up the human part of you – it's only holding you back. Submit to me, swear to use your power only as I direct you, and take your rightful place as my daughter. Become an immortal goddess.' Hades began to walk around Deina, so close that Deina could feel the heat radiating from the god's form. 'You could have everything you desire and more. No more pain, no more running, no more fighting. You could have Theron. Here. Now. I'd allow you to grant him immortality.' She leaned closer and whispered in Deina's ear. 'He could be at your side forever, ready to do anything you ask of him.' Hades put both hands on Deina's face, forcing her to look at her. 'Don't tell me that you're not tempted. I know what is in your heart.'

Deina wanted to lie. To dismiss Hades' offer with a scornful laugh. But she *was* tempted. More tempted than she could have imagined. After all she had been through – their adventure in the Underworld, Drex's death, Chryse's betrayal, the unforgettable agony that came from eating the seeds Thanatos had given her – the thought of having peace and rest and her friends beside her filled Deina with longing. Her mind cried out for respite even as her body hungered for Theron's touch.

'I could bring them all here? Aster and Dendris, as well as



Theron? Others from the House?’ Deina remembered with a stab of sorrow how much she missed Anteïs.

‘Whoever you like,’ Hades replied. ‘You are my daughter. Obey me, and I will deny you nothing.’

Deina wavered. Giving in suddenly seemed like such an easy choice to make. Her friends would be with her. They’d be safe.

Yes, they'd be safe.

Thanatos’s voice, somehow speaking in her head.

They'd also be dead. Oh, Hades might allow you to grant Theron eternal life, though even then I'd make her swear to it first, but as for the others – the gods do not willingly confer immortality on mortals. She'd free the others to be with you here by killing them, most likely. Even if she didn't, you know the living cannot survive in the Underworld indefinitely. Besides, wasn't there something else you wanted? Something I saw in your room one night, not so very long ago? Something that Hades could never truly give you?

An image slipped into Deina’s mind: a crude sketch of a ship, its sails straining against the wind, riding wild waves. The picture that had been – still was, she guessed – pinned to her wall, back at the House in Iolkos. Her own personal vision of freedom.

That was what she’d wanted. And what of Theron’s wants, and those of Dendris and Aster? Who was she to be deciding for them? Deina’s hand went to her neck, to where a spell-cast torc had so recently been fixed. To take their choice away from them would make her no better than the Order, no better than Orpheus, no better than a god –

Which, of course, was the point. She’d become a god, if she took the path Hades had shown her. A god who treated Theron



and the others as her playthings, who made them do what she wished and punished them if they refused.

Deina glanced at Thanatos and nodded her thanks for his intervention. A mistake: Hades threw her head back and let out a shriek of rage that made the throne room tremble. The bracelet transformed back into a sceptre and then into a bident, and she jabbed the two dagger-sharp prongs in Nat's direction, hurling the god of death right out of the throne room.

'You will pay for this interference, Thanatos! I will see you strung up in Tartarus, and you will have an eternity of pain in which to contemplate your errors. As for you, Deina, the time has come to make your choice. What is it to be?'

Slowly, Deina shook her head.

'What you're offering me is a lie. If the only way for Theron to be with me is for you or me to force him into it, to take away his choice, or even his life, then –' Deina stood up straighter, defiant – 'then I'd rather be alone. I stand by what I said, Mother: I despise the gods. I will never willingly become one of you.'

Hades' mouth twisted into a snarl. An enormous hammer appeared in the god's hand and she drew back her arm. Deina forced herself to keep her eyes open, to keep her gaze fixed on her mother's face as the god dealt the blow that would surely destroy her.

The blow never fell. The hammer disappeared, and Hades swept back to her throne.

'No. I will not give you death. That is too easy. Instead, you may spend eternity alone, shut away from everyone and everything, with only remembrance of your mistakes to keep you company.'





Deina spun, searching for Nat. He owed her – he had to help her. The god of death staggered back into the throne room and reached out one hand towards her.

‘Deina –’


Too late. Nat and the throne room vanished. Instead, Deina and Hades were in a small, empty space, no more than four paces by four paces, utterly bare except for a single glowing orb – a faint source of light that served only to emphasise the deep shadows. No windows. No doors. No features of any kind; the floor was indistinguishable from the walls, and the walls were indistinguishable from the ceiling. Yet they were real enough. Deina spun, pressing her hands against the nearest wall. Her palms and fingertips met solid, unyielding stone, as cold and smooth as ice.

Hades smiled.

‘Your new home, Khthonia.’ The name that Hades had given her; Deina’s true name, or so the god claimed. ‘There is no time here. You may thirst, you may hunger, but there will be no actual need for you to eat or drink. You will not age. You will not die. No escape through death for you, though I suppose you may go mad, eventually.’ The god paused, watching Deina, a faint smile on her face. ‘If you want to beg me for mercy . . .’

Dread pinned Deina in place, making her squirm. Part of her wanted to plead, but she couldn’t even speak. The horror of never-ending isolation in this place was overwhelming.

Hades clicked her fingers. A small table appeared, set with a stoppered silver jug, rich with jewels, and a matching cup. The god lifted the stopper briefly; a sweet scent filled the room, reminding her of honeysuckle, or a field of wildflowers, or cut grass on a summer’s day.



‘I do not propose to trouble myself with you any further,’ Hades said. ‘This is the last time you’ll ever see me, or anyone. I am not unkind, however: I will leave you with one final chance. If you do change your mind, your way out lies there.’ The god gestured towards the table. ‘A sip of the nectar will be enough to start your transformation into a god. If you take that course, I will know about it, and I will release you from this prison. If not . . .’ She shrugged.

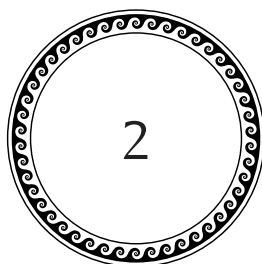
‘Why must I choose?’ Deina’s voice was hoarse. ‘You forced me to kiss Thanatos. Why don’t you force me to drink?’

‘I suppose I could.’ Hades laughed mirthlessly. ‘But where would be the fun in that?’ The god clicked her fingers again and vanished.

‘Wait!’ Deina cried out, raising her fists and hammering on the wall. ‘Wait! Come back!’

There was no answer.





The only damage Deina's fists did to the walls and floor of her cell was to stain them red with her own blood. But she didn't dare stop. Taking the silver cup, she clambered onto the table and hammered the cup against the ceiling, tried to open a crack or even make a dent. Useless; the whole of her prison was constructed of the same indestructible stone. She didn't try to use the glowing globe as a weapon – the thought of being plunged into darkness was even more terrifying. Instead, Deina turned her attention to the table. As strong as she now was, it took only a moment for her to loosen and free one of the legs. There was barely room to raise it over her shoulder; still, she did her best to smash it against the walls. Smashed it to bits in her desperation to escape. She pulled off the next table leg, and the next – until all that was left was the tabletop. Surrounded by fragments of wood, Deina sank to the floor and wrapped her arms and bloodied hands around her knees, hugging them to her chest.

She could not take her eyes off the jewelled jug containing



the nectar. The drink of the gods. Her escape, but her death sentence too. If she gave in, whatever humanity she had left, whatever part of her loved Theron and wanted to help her friends, would wither away.

Deina soon lost any sense of how long she'd been sitting, staring at the finely wrought silver. There was no time here. Hades had reminded her of that. Her silent heart offered no rhythm by which she might measure out her captivity. Still, she kept pressing her fingers to her pulse points, feeling – hoping – for some sign that she was still alive, still human – at least in part.

At some point, her attention was claimed by a soft noise: one of the rubies on the hem of her gown tapping against the floor as she moved position. It gave her an idea. Deina ripped the gemstone from the red fabric. The edge was sharp enough to mark the soft wood of the table. Perhaps she could somehow create time in this empty eternity by counting her paces and scratching a line for every thousand steps? She began the experiment – but the room was too small. In a space where the length of each wall was only a little more than her own height, there was more turning than walking.

And all the time – such as it was – the fear of madness haunted her. Deina had seen it, back in Iolkos. After too many rites and too many hours spent walking through other people's memories and regrets, Severers were liable to lose their reason. Their minds broke. Though their bodies were anchored to the present, the rest of them wandered, lost among the Thresholds they had created. There was no recovery – no chance for one; most of those afflicted soon wasted away. Deina suspected the



Severers who cared for them were told not to try too hard to keep them alive. There was no place in the House for those who couldn't work.

Terrified of forgetting that she needed to escape, Deina began to use the gemstones on her gown for a different purpose. Somehow, the two rings she wore were still on her fingers. The plain gold ring given to her by Leida, and the more ornate band holding the agate carved by Drex. Both people she'd loved, both victims of the Underworld and Orpheus. But the rings would only help her remember the dead. She needed to remember the living too. She couldn't write – the letters Drex had taught her had already ebbed from her memory – but she could carve rough images into the tabletop. The sigil of Hades, the same symbol that was on her forehead, to remind her who she was. An arrow, to remind her of Theron, the best archer in the House. A spear for Aster. A tree for Dendris. A wheel with five spokes, representing the rivers of the Underworld, so she didn't forget where she was. And a ship, just like the drawing pinned to her wall back at the House. An emblem of the freedom she'd dreamed of for so long.

Every so often, she slept, more from boredom than exhaustion. While she was awake, she sat next to the tabletop and traced her fingers over the images she'd created, starting again as soon as she'd finished, willing herself to remember. Or she stared at the image Drex had carved of two warriors locked in perpetual combat within the agate of the ring, trying to think of a plan. Because there had to be a way out of here. If she stopped believing *that*, there was no point in resisting any more.



Thanatos began appearing in the cell. At first, she ignored him because she decided he was just a figment of her imagination, a sign that her mind was fracturing. Then, after he'd taken her hand and spoken to her, she ignored him because she was angry with him and hadn't forgiven him for lying to her about the seeds and delivering her to Hades. She ignored him, but she still listened. He spoke of Theron and Aster and Dendris and the Bronze Guards who had helped them escape the Cadmea, the citadel of Thebes. He told her how they'd burned Chryse's body before fleeing the city. How they were trying to reach Iolkos, surviving on meagre rations, theft and ingenuity. Each time he appeared, he let her know they were still alive. That for them, at least, there was still hope.

Until Deina couldn't bear her own silence any longer.

'How much time?' she asked Nat, her voice rusty with dry air and disuse. 'How much time has passed in the mortal world?'

Nat stared at her, then broke into a smile.

'You're still there. I was getting worried that –'

'How much time?'

'It's autumn in Iolkos. The harvest is just over.'

Only a few weeks since that night in the Cadmea. Nat must have seen her confusion. He added, 'The Underworld does not obey the same rules as the mortal world, you know that. Years in the mortal realm may pass here in the blink of an eye. A day there might feel like an eternity in the Underworld.' A snap of his fingers conjured a cup. He crouched down in front of her and offered it to her. 'Water? You must be thirsty.'

'I am, but I'm not stupid. Do you really think I'd accept a cup of water from you?' Deina scoffed. 'Have you forgotten what happened last time I swallowed something you gave me?'



Nat shook his head, as though he didn't want to remember.

'I swear by the Styx that this is water. Nothing more. Please, drink it.'

She was thirsty. Reluctantly, Deina took the cup and sipped the ice-cold liquid inside. It refreshed her a little.

'Are you hungry? I think I can risk a little more . . . acquisition.' Without waiting for her answer, Nat conjured a wooden platter into existence; it was piled with flatbreads, crisp and steaming and drizzled with oil and oregano. 'It's just bread – I swear on the Styx. Someone in the mortal world is wondering where their supper has gone right about now.'

The aroma made Deina's mouth water. She tore off a piece and began to nibble at it, not taking her eyes off Nat.

'Aren't you supposed to be persuading me to give in? I assume that's why you're here. Hades sent you to convince me to drink the nectar.'

Nat shook his head.

'As far as Hades is concerned, I'm back in my cave. Defeated. Humbled. If she looks, she'll see me there – or she'll think she does. What she'll actually be seeing is my twin brother, Hypnos, the god of sleep.'

'Who's helping you because . . . ?'

'Because I've lost count of the number of favours he owes me. There have been innumerable escapades, usually involving severely disappointed nymphs . . .' Nat shook his head, a look of disdain flashing across his face. 'Even for a god, my brother has a short attention span. Anyway, all he has to do is lie there with his eyes closed, which is what he spends most of his time doing anyway.' He sat next to her, stretching his long legs out in



front and silently tracing a pattern on the floor with one finger: an all too human gesture. Deina had to remind herself. Despite appearances, Nat was not a mortal.

‘You still haven’t told me why you’re here, Thanatos.’

‘Nat. That’s what you called me before.’

‘That was before you betrayed me to Hades.’

‘The seeds worked, didn’t they?’ he demanded, turning his head to face her. ‘You defeated Orpheus. You defeated fate – but only because you ate the seeds. You had no choice, Deina.’ He lifted his fingers towards her face; Deina shied away, and he let his hand drop again. ‘If I’d told you the truth – if you’d been fully aware of the consequences – you’d still have eaten the seeds. You know you would, because you knew what the outcome would be if you didn’t. Theron would have died an agonising death. Your other friends would have been enslaved or killed. And you would be locked up in the Cadmea with a spell-cast torc around your neck and no hope left.’

No hope. But what hope did she have now, sealed up in the Underworld for eternity?

‘You could have killed me, after we’d taken Orpheus to the Threshold. I’m a demi-god, supposedly, like Eurydice was. I wouldn’t have become one of those blood hunters. You could have killed me and set me free.’

‘I’d sworn not to. Hades endowed the seeds with magic and gave them to me, but they were not a gift.’

No such thing as a gift from a god – the Theodesmioi knew that as well as anyone. The best you could hope for was a debt, Deina reflected. If a god gave you something, you’d end up paying for it sooner or later. Nat was watching her, looking almost downcast.



‘I am sorry, Deina. I’m not good at apologies, I so rarely feel compelled to give them, but I honestly want to make amends for what I did. To help.’

‘Then explain to me why Hades is so desperate to keep me here. And don’t try to convince me that she’s suddenly been overcome with parental affection . . .’

Nat smiled slightly. ‘The gods, old and new, are not noted as being particularly careful or affectionate parents.’ He raised his eyebrows and spread his hands wide. ‘Truthfully, I have no idea what she wants with you. You’ll have noticed that we’re not exactly close.’ He studied Deina, his dark blue eyes glittering slightly in the faint light cast by the globe. ‘The first time I saw you, I knew you were linked to the Underworld. I could sense the power running through your veins, and the – the –’ he paused for a moment – ‘I suppose the closest word for it would be *taste*, or perhaps *fragrance*, or *colour*, even – it’s very difficult to express within the limitations of –’

‘Are you saying,’ Deina interrupted, ‘that I taste or smell of the Underworld?’

Nat hesitated. ‘Sort of.’

Deina pulled a face.

‘But in a good way,’ Nat added hurriedly. ‘For gods, the taste of power is like the most intoxicating wine. And I suppose, as human wines from different places taste different . . .’ He trailed off, rubbing one hand pensively against the back of his neck. ‘My point is, I could tell that some part of you came from the Underworld. But there’s also something else there, something I can’t quite pin down. Some other sort of power, I think.’

‘That tastes different?’





The god pursed his lips. 'Yes. If you like.'

Deina couldn't help laughing.

'I'm so glad I'm amusing you,' Nat snapped, with a flash of his old petulance. 'I happen to be speaking seriously. This other power I can sense within you, that's the only thing I can think of that would make Hades so interested in you. Otherwise, you're just another demi-god, and not even a particularly gifted one—'

'You really are bad at apologies.'

'Sometimes the truth is unpalatable, Hades' daughter.' He smirked and settled back against the wall, staring up at the ceiling of Deina's prison. 'My point is, I wanted to save you, Deina. That's why I agreed when she offered me the seeds. I wanted to save you, and I couldn't think of any other way to do it.'

Deina tore off another chunk of warm bread and began picking at it. Despite everything he'd done, she was finding it hard to stay angry at Nat. He was the closest thing she had in this place to a friend. Or perhaps just an ally. Either way, at least his was a voice she could listen to that wasn't the voice in her head. He could bring her news from the outside and stop her from going mad. Maybe he could even help her escape. Yet from the start, he'd never been honest with her. She studied his profile. All this could be some elaborate charade – part of Hades' deeper plan. How could she know whether to trust him?

'Why did you want to save me?'

Nat opened his mouth to reply.

'The truth, Nat,' Deina added. 'If you're really sorry, tell me the truth.'



Nat paused; she could almost see him weighing up his options. Eventually, he shrugged. 'As you wish. The truth is, you were supposed to die, Deina. Two years ago, or more now, as you'd reckon it. You'd caught whatever plague was ravaging your city at that time. I came to you at night. I was supposed to sever your lifeline and send your soul into the Underworld. I would have done it too, if you hadn't, at the very last moment, opened your eyes. I saw the burst of gold bordering your left iris, and felt your power, and I thought – I thought . . .' He sighed and closed his own eyes briefly. 'I'll tell you what I wanted: not to be the god of death any more. To be free of the Underworld. Free of Hades. Free of the relentless pain and suffering of mortal men. Perhaps because I am so closely entwined with finite mortal existence, I have a sense of infinity that the other gods seem to lack.' His mouth twisted with scorn. 'They are in many ways like human children, and the present moment often fills almost their entire perception. Whereas I have glimpsed the endless vistas of eternity, have felt its crushing weight, and it is monstrous . . .' He shook himself, as though trying to dismiss the remnants of a nightmare. 'When I first saw you, I thought you might have enough of the Underworld in you to take my place as god of death. So, I put my sword away, and let you live.'

Fight harder.

Nat's voice, and the scent of rosemary rising with the night air through the open window. 'I remember,' Deina said. 'You spoke to me.'

He nodded. 'I stayed close to you after that. Watched you, whenever you entered the Threshold.' He gave a short laugh. 'The Soul Severers thought they'd found a way to keep all the



gods out of that space, but no human construction can shut out Death.’ Thanatos’s features darkened, the air grew cold, and frost began to glitter across the wall and floor where he sat.

‘I kept you out,’ Deina reminded him. ‘When I opened the Threshold to imprison Orpheus, I kept you out. Not bad for a not-especially-gifted demi-god.’

‘I never claimed you were just an ordinary mortal.’ There was a hint of seduction in Nat’s smile. ‘In many ways, you are extraordinary, as I saw the night I came for you. So, I kept an eye on you. Waited, hoping that as your power grew, I’d discover some way of drawing you further into the Underworld. And then what do I find but you, trying to enter the Underworld as a living, breathing woman . . .’

Deina remembered. After they’d crossed Oceanus and had opened the gateway to the Underworld: Nat appearing in the darkness, guiding her steps, encouraging her onwards. And then he’d appeared again, when she was being deceived by the Dream Children. She’d always known that Nat, whatever he’d claimed, had wanted something from her in return for his help. A dull ache grew in the centre of her chest; Deina swallowed hard. To have her suspicions confirmed . . . Her heart had already been broken by Chryse’s betrayal, but if its beating hadn’t been stilled by the action of the seeds, she felt that this would have fractured it a little further. ‘You were using me.’

Something akin to regret flickered in Nat’s eyes.

‘At the beginning, maybe. I just wanted to be free.’

Deina recognised the note of desperation in Nat’s voice; she could have been sitting next to Theron, or Chryse – she could have been listening to herself. That same note of almost



defeated hope. The same recognition that what you wanted was, moment by moment, slipping ever further from your grasp.

Nat brushed his cold fingertips across the back of her hand, making her shiver.

‘And then I realised that what I thought I wanted wasn’t what I actually wanted at all.’

‘What do you mean?’ Deina asked.

If Nat had been human, she would have said the glance he gave her was nervous.

‘The gods know much of lust – for pleasure, for power – but very little of love. Nothing at all of friendship.’ He dropped his gaze. ‘I’ve never met anyone like you, Deina.’

‘You’re just trying to get me to stay so I can take your place –’

‘No – I mean, I want you to stay.’ He opened his hand and a purple flame sprang up in the centre of his palm, twisting and flickering. ‘I’d like you to stay here, with me.’

‘So you are still working for Hades!’ Deina shoved him angrily and got to her feet, trying to get as far away as she could despite the tiny dimensions of the room.

Nat jumped up and grabbed her wrists, pulling her close.

‘I’m not working for Hades, I swear. Why else would I have helped you in the throne room? Hades is trying to force you into this. I want you to *choose* to stay.’ Nat’s eyes blazed – with anger, or desire, or both. For a moment, Deina thought he was going to kiss her. Instead, he released her. ‘I want you to choose the Underworld and immortality over a few years in the mortal world.’ He tucked a loose strand of hair gently behind Deina’s ear, his gaze roaming over her face. ‘I want you to choose me.’



Deina turned to slam her fist into the wall – but what was the point? Whatever she wanted, the seeds she'd eaten bound her here as tightly as any chain.

'I can't leave the Underworld, you know that. My only choice is whether to stay in this prison as a mortal or leave as a god.' She pressed her palm to the wall, murmuring her fear to its uninterested stones. 'I'm Hades' daughter. If I give in, I'll end up like her. Think about that for a moment. There's more likely to be hatred between us than love. You might even come to fear me.'

She felt Nat's fingers trace briefly across her back.

'I can't imagine a world where I don't want to spend time with you.'

'Nat,' she began, turning to face him.

'I might be able to get you out of here.' Nat rushed the words out. 'It would only be temporary,' he added as Deina gasped and took a step forward. 'I'm not exactly sure how to do it yet and, if I manage it, the magic might not last long. But it would give you a little time to see your friends. To say goodbye, properly.'

'And what do you want in return?' Deina raised an eyebrow. Was he going to make her swear on the Styx that she'd drink the nectar? Did oaths made by the Styx bind demi-gods as well as gods?

'Nothing,' Nat replied. 'I want to help you, as part of my apology.' He waved one hand over the other; a rose appeared, the stem between his thumb and finger, the perfect white petals so translucent they might have been carved out of ice. The flower's perfume filled the air. Nat offered the rose to Deina. 'If you left this space, and joined me in the Underworld, we could



help each other. I can help you remember that you used to be human. You can help me forget that I'm still the god of death. All I ask is that you think about that. About the possibility of us.'

Deina took the rose. Nat hadn't given his beautiful imitation any thorns; perhaps he'd forgotten that the things people desired were sometimes the things that hurt them the most.

'I'll think about it.' Deina tucked the rose into her hair. 'So, how do I get out of here?'

Nat gave her one of his most brilliant smiles.

'I'm glad you asked. There are three problems to overcome. The seeds are actually the easiest. They are like a bow string: if you can find a way out, you can pull away from the Underworld, just as an archer might draw the string away from the bow. Sooner or later, however, the force is too much to resist. You'll be dragged back here with little warning.'

'And what are the other two problems?' Deina asked, not wanting to dwell on the image of being shot back into the Underworld like an arrow into a target.

'Hades will have put a spell on this room to alert her if you manage to escape. That means we need a substitute to fit exactly into your space. Finally, the most difficult problem: how to get you out of here without Hades noticing.'

'Hold on,' Deina frowned. 'There is no way out of this cell, at least not one that I'm likely to discover. She surely won't be expecting me to escape?'

Nat shot her an amused glance.

'Hades is a god. Being paranoid and suspicious goes with the territory. She'll be watching all of the gateways, and the wall of night, which is the way I move between realms.' Deina



remembered the doorway through which Nat had dragged her from the citadel in Thebes, and the dense, unnatural darkness that had lain beyond it – the same darkness that surrounded Hades' courts in the Underworld. She wondered briefly whether she'd ever really understand the workings of her mother's realm. Probably not, but then she'd rather never have to. 'Once we're in the mortal realm,' Nat continued, 'I can take you wherever you want to go – but we have to get there first.'

'So what alternative way out is there?'

'What's the one place that Hades can't get into and can't control? Think about it.' Nat lounged against the wall and examined his nails. 'I'll give your dull mortal mind a few moments to –'

'The Threshold,' Deina interrupted. 'She can't control the Threshold.'

