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KING'S CAPTURE

WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLER

VIVIAN WOOD

KING'S CAPTURE

A DARK CAPTIVE ROMANCE

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CONTENTS

[Author's Copyright](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[About Vivian Wood](#)

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TRIGGER WARNING: THIS BOOK CONTAINS GRAPHIC DEPICTIONS OF SEXUAL SITUATIONS, PHYSICAL ABUSE, AND BOTH NON-SEXUAL AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE. IT IS INTENDED FOR MATURE AUDIENCES AND LOVERS OF DARK ROMANCE.

This book is dedicated (as usual) to my beta readers: Patricia, Rachael, Angela, and Jenn. Thanks also to the ever-vigilant Sammye, Bev, and Belinda.

This book has a number of secret, sneaky details suggested by fellow fans to form a scavenger hunt! You can win cool prizes by playing along.

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CHAPTER ONE

HADES

In a small, dark room near the Turkmeni shipping docks, I huddle. Dust drifts around the dank space, pervading it as it does every single place I've been in this damned country. Eros fidgets and looks toward the back of the room, pulling out his weapon. He's not especially trigger happy, so I am not particularly concerned. It just tells me that the tension is getting to my brothers too as we stand at the ready.

There is little to do now but wait to see how everything that I have planned plays out.

"Hades..." Ares warns, his voice low. "We shouldn't wait."

His Highland Scots accent is as strong as ever. My brothers and I will always sound rough and coarse, as though we were all born in the middle of a Highland winter storm.

I lift a hand in response, watching the video camera intently. Behind me, my two brothers stand and await my orders. They silently sweat in their black suits, Eros clearly the more nervous of the two.

It's unseasonably hot today, even for a Turkmeni summer. I can feel the perspiration dampening my expensive white button-up shirt on my lower back, sticking it to my skin. The need to take off my black Brioni suit jacket and roll up my sleeves presses down on me.

I dart a glance at Eros. His expression is drawn, his high cheekbones and smattering of freckles across his nose and below his eyes less striking than the grimace on his pouty lips. Eros is the bonniest of the three of us, his dark-haired good looks almost feminine, his striking features carved from the finest marble.

Ares leans forward, his eyes on the video screen. If Eros is a finely carved marble statue, then the same artist surely formed Ares by bluntly bashing a piece of rock until the edges are roughly hewn into shape. He's all sharp edges and craggy flesh stretched over bone.

And me? I'm somewhere in between.

"Oi." Eros calls my attention, snapping me out of my thoughts. "There's movement."

My eyes travel back to the screen. I need to focus now. This deal has the potential to make me over a hundred million dollars and it will be my largest international arms deal to date.

Assuming that this doesn't suddenly go very, very wrong.

I tuck one hand under my chin and watch the figures on the dingy little screen in front of me. Two suited men stand on one side, the posture standoffish. Those are the agents I've hired to conduct today's business.

Mateen Abdul and Soban Sadat make perfect straw men. They have immaculate criminal records. They also have a small shipping business that has existed in Turkmenbashi for several years prior.

They are currently squaring off with several men in uniform, members of the police force that watch over the shipping docks. I hold my breath as one of the policemen examines a thick sheaf of papers. He frowns, looking up at Mateen. He asks a pointed question, jabbing his finger to indicate the papers.

I turn my head, looking past my brothers to the local man I've hired as an interpreter. He looks to me automatically, even though there has been no explicit mention of which of the brothers Lyon is in power here. I'm the oldest brother. In personality, the natural leader.

Ares is the bravest brother but also the hastiest, prone to bloodthirst.

Eros is smarter than the two of us combined. But he also lets his heart and his libido lead in lieu of his head.

Which leaves only me. I think everything through, seeing everything from multiple angles. I am the most intractable of the three of us, the most decisive.

The interpreter senses that I am the one he needs to please. He scuttles forward, bowing his head.

"What did he say?" I demand.

The man seals his lips and looks at the video camera screen. The policeman asks another question, and I can tell by the anxious look on our

interpreter's face that the answer isn't good.

"He is saying that the documents are a mess. That..." He pauses, listening. "He asks for identification from both men. And he just told his men to open the first shipping container."

"That should be fine," Eros says. "We have made plans for our cargo to be searched."

Ares shoots him a quelling glance. "We made plans to have it searched by friendly agents that we have paid off. Not by some random police. The cargo is barely hidden by a few inches of rice. It gives way to what's underneath with a quickness."

"There is another contingency if the shipment is discovered." Eros fidgets. "Right, Hades?"

My brothers usually like to argue. But just now, it is raising my blood pressure and making it hard for me to listen to what is going on.

"Haud yer wheesht. Shut the fuck up."

Ares chafes at my order, his body tensing. But he and Eros both fall silent at once. This is exactly the reason we have a chain of command. At this exact moment, we are arms dealers first, family second.

Looking at the screen again, I watch as the policeman dispatches his associates to look in the container. Few things have the power to enthrall me. But we have spent months putting this deal together. Tens of millions of dollars are riding on this moment.

And the people involved in the deal? They are not the kind of clients that I want to let down. I crack my knuckles as a trickle of sweat slips down the side of my face.

This must go well.

A few seconds later, there is a shout that comes from one of the men.

My whole body tenses up, my eyes narrow, and my jaw juts out. Here it comes.

That's the moment that Mateen straightens his tie pin, a signal. Mateen is saying that he plans to abort.

"Fuck," I mutter. I watch, brooding.

Even though I already know what's going to happen.

The main policeman waves the sheaf of paper in Mateen's face again and shouts something. A lot of it sounds like gibberish to me. I speak a little Farsi, I'm fairly well-versed in a stilted form of Arabic, and I'm almost

conversational in Hebrew. But Turkmenistan has its own language, Turkmen. And I'll be damned if I can make heads or tails of it.

Out of that, I can make out one two word name. Clear as a bell, I hear it. *Henri Constantine*.

My heart starts to beat double time.

“Nae!” I snap, clenching my fists.

As if I, from the safe distance that I've chosen to watch, can affect what is about to happen.

The interpreter goes white as a sheet.

“He says that he knows that the men are not legitimate. He says he can tell that their papers are forged. Says that the person they got them from was very sloppy. And now he is going to—“

He's cut off by a gunshot. The policeman flails and falls backward. It takes me a second to realize that the shot came from Mateen.

That's when shit really starts going sideways. Granted, the second I heard that name — Constantine — I saw this outcome clearly. He's been trying to fuck me over from the jump.

Several more shots are fired from the police and my two agents. The straw men are excitedly good shots because they take down the other cops while sustaining no damage themselves.

“Hades!” Ares grabs my arm, shaking me. “The deal is buggered. We must move. We have to start tying up loose ends.”

There is a moment in which the tension in the air escalates. The interpreter suddenly turns to flee the room. Eros pulls out his gun, silencer already attached, and shoots him in the back of the head.

“Jesus,” I curse, looking at the interpreter's body, and yank my arm from Ares's grip. “Let me think for a minute.”

He hisses. “The gunshots will draw more police. If we contain this now — “

I point at the screen. As Ares turns to watch, the straw men go down in a hail of bullets. The police swarm in and they are alerted by their associates that they should take a look inside the shipping containers.

I take a breath, the gears in my head clanking to life. “Eros, blow up the cargo. If the client can't have it, neither can anyone else.”

Eros fishes his phone from his jacket pocket, still gripping his gun. “On it.”

I turn to Ares. His look is eager, the look in his pale green eyes hungry.

“Is that a kill order?”

I nod. “Kill everyone that isn’t dead from the bombs we have planted in the shipping containers.”

A second later, there is a blast so loud that it rocks the whole entire building we are in. Everything seems to skitter to the side.

Silence reigns for a count of three.

Then car alarms start going off, people start screaming, babies start crying. Walking toward the room’s exit into the street, I can already smell the tinge of acridity of the smoke.

It’s definitely time to go. I wave to my brothers, motioning them forward. Sirens wail distantly as we step outside. The air is full of sooty smoke that smells heavily of chemicals. A young boy calls for someone as he stands in the middle of the street, disoriented.

It will only be a few minutes before this place is crawling with government agents. Ares tugs at my elbow and jerks his head. I nod at him as he slinks off, pulling a kufiyah over his head and covering his face.

In all the chaos, I feel my satellite phone vibrating in my pocket. I have absolutely no doubt that the Ukrainian nationalists that are my would-be clients are now calling me, wondering what went wrong. They probably would be surprised to hear the sounds of the melee as Eros and I slip through the crowded streets, tucking our red and white patterned headscarves on as well.

Soon, Eros waves me into the backseat of a black Mercedes sedan. I sit down and Eros slides in beside me. When he closes the door with a thunk, the sound outside is instantly muted.

“Go,” Eros tells the driver. The sedan pulls away from the curb, driving us away from the smoking, noisy mess that we have just created.

“Fucking forger,” Eros says, watching out the window as the city passes by. “Did ye hear the guy say that that’s how he knew that the papers were fake?”

I press my fingers into my temple, where a low throb has only just begun. “He also mentioned Constantine.”

“Fucking *sleekit* bastard. He’s not the only other person...” He licks his lips, darting a look at the driver. He disguises his next words, but I know the meaning all too well. “Person who does what we do. But that motherfucker is everywhere recently. He’s messed with at least three other deals in the past year.”

I ignore the vibration of my sat phone and crack my neck. “He’s going to have to be taken care of.”

Eros steals a sideways glance at me. “Ye know that Ares has been chomping at the bit. All ye have to do is say the word. Hell, even think it.”

I draw my hand in a line across my throat. “Ares is bloodthirsty.”

“Yeah, well. Every family has to have their rabid dog. Yer the cautious one. Always thinking things through, planning and making backups for when that plan fails. And I’m the clever one.”

“Turn on the air conditioning,” I say to the driver. I don’t know if he speaks English or not, but he stares at me in his rearview mirror for a moment and then flicks the air on.

I lick my top lip, tasting sweat. “Is that how ye see us?”

Eros shrugs a shoulder. “It’s the truth. I’m the smartest one of the three of us. Yer the most decisive. And Ares... well, Ares is always spoiling for a fight.”

“Hm.” I look out the window, a frown on my face.

“Yer phone is ringing,” Eros points out.

“I know.” My face tightens. “This cannae happen again. We have to figure out a plan for dealing with Constantine.” I narrow my eyes, absentmindedly reaching in my sleeve to stroke a scar that peeks out. “We need a whole new crew. And for god’s sake, a better fucking...” I pause, looking at the driver for a second. “Document artist.”

He nods, his expression unreadable. I look away then, wondering how I’m going to kill Henri Constantine and burn his fucking empire to the ground.

CHAPTER TWO

PERSEPHONE

A hundred and fifteen dollars.

I count out the bills, mostly in ones. They are bent and folded every which way. So smoothing them out on the side of a table is an absolute must if I hope anyone will accept them as legal tender later. I flex my right hand a few times, grimacing.

My right hand is slower to open and close than it should be. It's a partially healed over wound from a different time in my life.

Constantine's last gift.

One that will stay with me forever.

The music throbs, growing more frenetic as the door is opened. I turn to find my shift manager Mike closing the door to the dressing room behind him.

I straighten and stash my earnings in the bra slash top, my lips thinning as I survey Mike. "Slow night tonight."

Mike crosses his arms and gives a half shrug. "Rules are rules, baby. I'm still going to need twenty five bucks. That's my part of your take, sugar."

The way he says it, so cocky and selfsame, really pisses me off. "I thought you said I would be rolling in the money I make here. You come around, asking me for the money I made busting my ass, passing out drinks while these guys fucking leer at me..."

He smacks his lips. "When I said that, I thought you would be working the pole. If you would just agree to dance two or three times a week you would make a killing. That face? That body?"

He sucks in his lower lip, looks at my body, and makes a sound. “You would kill it, baby girl.”

It’s everything I can do not to glare at him. I dart my tongue out, wetting my lips. “And what percentage would you make from me then? Hmm?”

He smirks. “You’d still be making more money.”

I pull out the wad of cash and count out his twenty five bucks. It hurts to see the money leaving my possession so soon. But I have better things to do than stick around and argue with Mike.

“Here.” I hand it to him. “I have to get going. I have a long walk home.”

He catches my wrist, tugging me closer. He has my right hand in his grip, my damaged hand. If I wasn’t already on edge, that fact makes me out-and-out defensive. I tug my hand, but he doesn’t let go.

Instead, he gives me what he must think passes for a sultry look. “If you won’t make me money, why should I even keep you on the payroll? Huh? Unless you can think of some other way that you could convince me to let you stay?”

My heart leaps into my throat. I rip my arm from his grasp, on high alert. “Don’t fucking touch me!”

“Come on, now.” He chuckles and saunters toward me.

My heart thrums. Prickles of sensation run across my skin. I step backward and my ass hits the wall.

Shit, he’s got me trapped.

Mike just has the same stupid smirk on his face. “Don’t act like nobody has ever asked you to get on your knees for them before—”

My body is already in motion before he can finish his sentence. I pull his shoulders in and shoot my knee upward, then dig my nails into the flesh on his cheeks. Feeling like a trapped animal, I fight dirty.

“Shit, what the fuck?” Mike shouts, pushing me away. “What the fuck, Cora? You are so fucking fired—”

Cora. That’s the name that I go by now. I swallow, darting toward the door. My brain is more interested in helping me escape than bandying words back and forth with my manager, who is bent over and clutching his face. He starts to straighten while I make a beeline for the door.

Just as I’m about to open it, someone beats me to it. I rear back, ready to fight some more. But it’s only Jazmine, the dancer I have come to know pretty well these past eight months. She takes one look at Mike’s face and my panicked fight-or-flight stance. She leans in, grabs my wrist, and yanks

me out of the dressing room. She slams the door in Mike's face and turns me loose, herding me toward the exit door.

"Come on," she says. "Let's go. Outside..."

I push through the bar of the exit, emptying myself into the back parking lot in the Louisiana heat. Stepping out into the night air feels like pulling on a thick sweater. The lighting out here is harsh, bright streetlights huddled around the whole lot.

I don't slow down or stop moving, though. Rushing by the dented and rusting cars that seem like a permanent fixture in the lot, I keep going until I am bathed in velvety shadow.

Breathing hard, I lean down and rest both of my hands on my knees. Looking back, I see Jazmine come up behind me. She purses her lips, her gaze measuring.

"You okay, Cora?"

I blush, looking at the ground, and nod. "Fine."

The word comes out strangled. I put my head down, feeling dizzy. If Constantine saw me right now, he would die laughing.

Little Penny can't even run away from people right.

I squeeze my eyes shut, like that can somehow stop my ex's voice from filtering through my head.

"All right," Jazmine says. "Come on. You probably don't want to go back inside The Pink Pony tonight. Maybe ever. You should let me give you a ride home."

I look up at her, willing my heartbeat to slow down. "I'm fine."

She gives me a pointed look. "Get in my fucking car, honey. You can't be walking anywhere dressed like that."

I look down at my lacy bra and the barely-there shorts I'm wearing. She's absolutely right. Swallowing, I nod and follow her to her car.

Judging by her rusting Chevy Malibu, you would never guess that Jazmine is one of the more popular entertainers at The Pink Pony. As I climb in and buckle my seatbelt, I am sad to realize that it's probably the last time I'll get a ride home from her.

She sucks in a deep breath and starts the car, pulling it slowly out of the parking lot. I watch her carefully. There is a ton of glitter on her face, and it makes her dark skin seem to glow for a moment as we pass into the dark country roads.

Eyeing me, Jazmine gives me a small smile.

“You really gave Mike the business.” Her lips twitch. “That’s good, honey. I’ve seen a lot of girls put up with his shit. The ones that do never seem to stay at the Pony for long.”

Abrupt laughter bubbles up from deep inside me. “He cornered me. I had no choice.”

“Yeah, well. Maybe he’ll think twice before he backs some other bitch up in a corner.” Her laughter is somehow both mean and melodic at once.

“I still have rent to pay. Even out here in Cameron Parish, you still gotta pay the bills every month.” I push out all the air from my lungs and scrunch up my face. “I’m going to have to find a new job, I guess.”

She shrugs one shoulder. For a half minute, silence stretches between us. I pick at my spandex booty shorts.

Mostly, I’m thinking about how this is the third job I’ve been fired from in the last two years. This town is tiny so if I’m not careful, I’m going to run out of places to work soon.

“You know, I came here to escape my ex-husband. He was a real mean son of a bitch. Especially when he was drinking.” Jazmine looks straight ahead, pursing her lips. “He was almost always drunk by noon.”

I blink, looking at Jazmine. My heartbeat, which has only just returned to normal, takes off at a gallop again. My mouth goes dry.

What does Jazmine know? Is it possible that Constantine somehow got to her?

My whole body begins to tremble.

“Err...” I stammer. “That’s good. That you escaped him, I mean. I’m not sure what that has do with me though.”

The lie feels like sandpaper on my tongue.

“Relax. I can see you tensing up.” Jazmine frowns, looking away out the window. “I’m just telling you why I’m here. When I first got to this town, I jumped every damn time anyone raised their voice. I shook any time that I smelled gin.” She looks down her nose at me. “My ex liked gin.” She shakes her head and purses her lips. “And most importantly, if a man laid his hands on me, if I thought a stranger was going to hurt me... I went nuts. Scratching at his face, kneeing him in his balls... anything to get away.”

Perspiration breaks out across my forehead. I can barely breathe, much less make eye contact. What if I say the wrong thing and Jazmine somehow finds out that I’m on the run from my ex?

Worse, what if she digs a little bit deeper and finds out that I am wanted for questioning in a murder?

She pulls the car up outside of my house, looking me up and down. "I see you, sis. That's all I'm trying to say. You didn't say anything. I'm not asking you to either. But I just want you to realize that you can reach out to me if you need to. You hear me?"

I nod stiffly, reaching for the door handle. "Uh huh. Thanks."

I open the door, starting to get out. Jazmine reaches her hand across the seat, tapping the upholstery by my thigh. "Whoever you're running from? You're safe here in Cameron. Ain't nobody looking for nobody. And if you ever feel like talking, I'm here."

I pause, wavering for just a moment. On one hand, I want badly to grab the olive branch that she's clearly extending to me.

Her story might even be every bit as real as mine.

But in the next second, I know that it would be stupid of me to tell her anything. It's just too risky to tell anybody anything about my past.

So I offer her a fleeting smile. "Thanks, Jaz. See you around. Okay?"

She nods, her smile a little sad. "Be safe, Cora."

I climb out of the car and slam the door. The wind coming off the beach is hot and stale as I approach my little house. One teeny tiny story of dingy white clapboard and a metal door that's long ago rusted from the salty air. This place sat empty for years before I rented it under my brand new assumed name. It has dark water marks all over the outside, signs of hurricanes past. Hey, at least it sits right on the beach.

I cast a glance over my shoulder as Jazmine pulls away. She honks and I raise a hand in thanks. Exhaling a deep breath, I pull my key from my booty shorts and let myself in. After locking the three deadbolts behind me, I turn and survey my humble house. My bed in one corner. My art studio set up in another. Then the rest of the place is taken up by the small kitchen and dining room table. All of it is overlooked by a large window that looks directly out onto the rocky, empty beach. There is never anyone outside, even in the middle of summer like it is now. Not enough sand and too many brambles for anyone to enjoy it.

It's not much, but it's what I call home these days.

I toss my key in a bowl on the dining room table and change into sweats. I wrinkle my nose. I should start looking for jobs immediately.

But I don't. Instead, I lie down on my bed, pulling my sleek black cell phone off the rickety bedside table. I want to talk to someone.

Maybe see a friendly face. My brother is one of two people who has this new prepaid cell phone's number. Not my mom. Not my dad. Not any of my friends from my partying days.

And if I'm not mistaken, Lawrence will just be getting off his shift bartending on Bourbon street about now. I send him a text — *hey. how are things?*

But I wait for ten minutes with no real answer.

I look at the screen and a notification pops up. It's from Etienne, the other person who has my number.

Degas. Title is In A Café. \$5000. Interested?

I stare at the screen, nibbling on my lower lip. Etienne is someone who I used to know in my old life.

Someone who I forged paintings and wine labels for, before I was almost murdered by my insane fiancé. Before I fled, leaving behind questions surrounding the death of my best friend and my sudden disappearance.

Etienne feeds me little bits of work, here and there. He keeps the lights on in my tiny house, if I'm honest about it.

Pursing my lips, I type out a reply.

\$7500. You source appropriately-aged oil paints.

Putting the phone on my chest, I sigh. I close my eyes, drifting off into a fitful sleep, all the lights on in my apartment.

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CHAPTER THREE

HADES

In the short walk from the air conditioned sedan up the block towards the bar, I feel the intense heat of the New Orleans sun beating down on me. Eros is right on my heels, taking off his jacket as we walk down the street.

“It’s hotter here than fucking Turkmenistan,” Eros mutters. “Who the fuck wants to live in this heat?”

“It’s something about being on the water,” Ares chimes in. “It’s stifling everything.”

“Turkmenistan is on the water too, ye daft idiot.”

Ares growls at him. “Fuck ye. I’ll fight ye.”

Making it to the doorway, I pause and look back at both of them. “Shut the fuck up. We are about to enter this bar, on good authority that it’s where Constantine likes to hang out. So, get yer shit together and do what yer supposed to do. At least try to appear both silent and intimidating.”

At my sharp words, both of my brothers straighten their spines. Ares sneers and plays with his tie clip. Eros grimaces and flexes his hands.

“Aye,” they say as one.

I run my hand down my suit jacket and turn to pull the heavy metal door open. Outside didn’t look like much. Inside the bar is the opposite, though.

An immediate gust of air conditioning hits me as I walk in, looking around at the dark bar. Everything about this place is sleek and chic, from the black walls to the elegantly and minimally designed back wall of the bar. Bottles seem to float in the air, the ledges of floating shelves stacked all the way up the wall. There are a few tables and booths to my right. To my left is a glass door that leads to a neatly maintained patio space.

My gaze locks onto a familiar looking figure standing with his back turned to us. Blond hair. A white button up. Slim fitting jeans. Those god awful red snakeskin boots.

Constantine turns his head, showing the briefest flash of surprise. Then he gives a big, toothy grin, one of his front teeth glinting faintly silver.

In the back of my head, Constantine is superimposed over that of Rory Lyon, the first of many bullies I've come to know in my life. By contrast, Constantine looks puny, but my fists still tighten as I stalk over to him.

I hear my father's voice echoing silkily through my mind. *He knows just how worthless ye are, boy.*

My posture stiffens and I'm ready to take a swing at Constantine, even though he hasn't said a fucking word to me yet. Eros steps beside me when I plant my feet and glare at him.

"Constantine."

Constantine flits his gaze over my brothers, smirking. "If it isn't the Lyon family. Tell me, what brings the second best arms dealers in the world to my doorstep?"

His accent smacks of the old South. It makes every word out of his mouth sound dirty and disingenuous.

Ares lunges forward with a snarl. "Ye know why we're here, Constantine. Ye fucked with our deal in Turkmenistan. Now we're going to fuck with ye."

I lift a hand, which in itself is enough to restrain my brother. Constantine leans on the bar, picking up his tumbler of clear liquid.

"I guess putting the word out that someone was trying to bring guns into the Turkmeni port really did throw a wrench into your plans." He sips his drink and looks like a cat that ate the canary. "I'd say sorry, but how can I apologize for something that worked exactly as I intended? The Russian separatists came running straight to me, by the way. I sorted them out nicely with even an even bigger arms deal. So, thanks for playing into my plans so perfectly. Let me know when you have plans to do a big deal like that again."

He laughs into his drink. I stare at him, completely cool on the outside. Inside though, I'm a seething morass of hatred.

"I thought ye might say that. So, I have had yer top five goons taken out of operations." I cock my head to the side, giving him a calculating look.

“Three Russians, one Jordanian, and one Saudi. It’s funny how willing people are to turn over the details on completely unlikable bastards.”

I catch the quickest glimpse of rage on Constantine’s face before he catches it and covers his anger with a smooth mask. He glances behind him at two very attractive young women who are looking our way.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about.” He shrugs. “I’m just a lobbyist, working to support the second amendment of the United States of America. I realize that you’re not from around these parts but let me tell you something. Anything that helps my government and hurts your business is just a cherry on top of my already overflowing sundae.”

I step closer, using my imposing height to loom over Constantine. “My next deal is going to be the biggest arms deal ever done. It’ll launch my family into the stratosphere.” I reach out like I’m going to hit him, then slide the flower in his boutonniere over by an inch. “Ye’ll be back here, breaking yer back and trying to sell handguns while I’m on my yacht in the Black Sea, counting my money.”

Constantine smiles grimly. “You have made so many fucking enemies, Hades. You’ve double crossed and done wrong more people than I can count. I have a feeling that you and your idiotic brothers are living the last of your miserable days on this planet.”

Ares pulls his gun out, pointing it straight at Constantine. Constantine is just as quick, poking at my gut with his own weapon.

Ares looks like a man willing to burn the entire world to ash. “Go ahead.” He shows his teeth as he talks. “I fucking dare ye, ye daft *eejit*. Seriously, I need to work out all this aggression I’ve been feeling lately.”

Trust my brother to taunt the man with a gun on me just now. I step back slowly, pushing my cheek off with my tongue. “That’s not why we came, Ares. We were just here to tell Constantine in person to not fucking mess with our business. Right?”

The corners of Constantine’s mouth curl up. “Your message was received. But unless you want to turn my favorite bar into the site of your murder, I suggest that you and your brothers get the fuck out of here.”

I smirk. “That would be a lot fucking scarier if ye didn’t have that wee tremor in yer hand, eh?”

His nostrils flare and the tiniest shudder does go racing through the left side on his body. “I’m going to bury you.”

“Not if I kill ye first.” Smacking my lips, I give him a contemptuous glare.

I back up another pace, then spin on my heel. Feeling like I’ve made sure the message was heard, I stalk out of the bar and into the dying brilliance of the New Orleans sunset. I just keep walking as if I have not a care in the world.

It’s a couple of minutes before my brothers trot up behind me, breathing hard.

“That fucking *bawpot!*” Ares calls. “He’s stupid and mad in equal measure.”

I look back at him and he has a grimace contorting his face. Checking my watch, I shrug.

“Constantine took the threat just about as well as I expected.” I tap my expensive timepiece. “Let’s meet with our man so we can get the fuck out of this godforsaken hell scape.”

“That’s for damned sure,” Eros mutters.

We hop in the car for the twenty or so blocks through a mostly residential part of New Orleans. I stare out the window, deep in thought.

Outside, the poverty-to-wealth ratio of the neighborhoods we drive through vacillates wildly. Sometimes it fluctuates block to block, swinging from affluent and well maintained to broken down and neglected.

New Orleans is a wild city.

I get out of the car at the address Etienne gave me. It looks like little more than a cracked concrete slab with a little metal shack operating in one corner. There is a park next to it with a few picnic tables sitting on the trampled down grass.

I swing my gaze around and Etienne straightens from where he was leaning against the table. As I approach, I notice that he is holding some sort of snow cone, smirking into it as he watches the three of us approach.

Etienne is dressed in a white t-shirt, black shorts, and black sandals. As I stalk up to him, he can’t suppress a grin.

“Y’all walking around here, lookin like the three grimmest motherfucking undertakers I ever did see.” He pops a spoonful of his red snow cone in his mouth. “You be careful less’n you start a rumor that somebody done set all the *haints* free.”

His New Orleans accent is so thick that I can barely understand what he’s saying.

I look up at the setting sun, pulling at my collar with a finger. “It’s good to see that ye haven’t changed from when I saw ye last, Etienne. Ye were eating then as well, I think.”

He grins around the white plastic spoon in his mouth. “Hope so.”

Ares fidgets and nods to the snow cone. “We are going to get one of those wee things. We’ll be back.”

“Sho nuff,” Etienne says agreeably.

I purse my lips and squint. “So? What do ye have for me?”

He flashes me a toothy smile. “You was asking everybody who has the best forger. And I’m happy to say that I already done got her for ya.”

“Her?” I cross my arms and narrow my eyes. “I talked to Smithson and he has a guy he swears by.”

Etienne snorts. “Maybe he do. But I’m telling you right now. You need art replicated? Wine labels done up just so? Documents forged? Then this is the woman ya need to speak ta. My girl does it all. And she’s cheap, too.”

I spear him with a glare. “If she’s so great, why isn’t she here?”

“She’s an artist, baby. She likes to hide out by herself. Probably because of who she used to date, ya heard?” His eyes shine with mirth. “She’s a real beauty. I’m telling you, she look like a fuckin model. And this is the best part...” He pauses, as though for dramatic effect. “My girl used to run with Constantine.”

My eyebrows rise. “What does that mean? She worked for him?”

He shrugs. “Work for. Date. Fuck. I heard that she and Constantine got real close with another girl, her best friend. And then one morning, the friend showed up on the coast, dead. My girl vanished. Constantine is still hunting for her, looking high and low.” He grins. “But I know where to find her.”

“Constantine has an ex-girlfriend on the run?” I run my tongue over my teeth, my mind turning over the near endless list of possibilities. “Where can I find her?”

“Hold up.” Etienne points the spoon at me. “I got conditions. One, you never mention that I told you where to find her. She doesn’t want anything to do with this kinda business. She don’t want to be found, you dig?”

“Aye.” I wave a hand, impatient. “Get to the point.”

“I’ma need to be paid too. I think a finder’s fee of ten thousand will do it.” He arches a brow, as if he has now presented me with a challenge.

I turn, looking for Ares. I wave him over. He trots up, his mouth red from eating the bright red snow cone.

“What’s up?”

“Fetch ten thousand for Etienne.” I turn, expectant. “Okay? Now give me the forger’s name and tell me where to find her.”

He wanders over, his voice dropping a little bit. “Her name is Penny Corbin. And here...”

He moves quickly, surprising me. Wrapping his arm around my shoulders, he drops a tiny envelope in my pocket.

I freeze for a second before my animal instincts kick in. Instantly I buck his arm, turning and striking his throat. My other hand comes up, driving open palmed into his chest, shoving him away forcefully.

Etienne makes a gagging sound, his hands going to his throat. His eyes bug out and he backs away from me. “What the fuck?”

My heart rate is through the fucking roof. My blood is made of pins and needles. I shake my hands, my gaze fixed on his face.

“Don’t fucking touch me. Nobody should ever touch me when I’m not expecting it.”

Etienne looks at me like I’m crazy.

Ares comes trotting up, holding out a neat envelope of cash. “Ye two playing nice, are ye?”

Etienne snatches the money from Ares, glaring at both of us. “Don’t call me again, motherfucker. I don’t need to take money from people who is bat shit crazy, ya heard?”

Then he turns, one hand still at his neck, and starts to bolt across the park in the opposite direction from where I came. Ares shrugs and pulls a face, looking at me.

“Did ye get something good?”

I push out a breath and uncurl my fists. “Maybe.”

Fishing in my pocket for the info, I open the tiny envelope. Inside, there is a plain index card with a name and address printed on it.

“Persephone Corbin,” I read off. My heart starts beating at the sound of her name although I don’t exactly know why.

I squint over my shoulder, looking back toward the little shack where Eros stands. Two girls stand next to him, talking and flirting. Girls are always drawn to my brothers, presumably because they look handsome in their suits and they are so rich that money just drips from them. Eros also

happens to be so fucking charming that it's a surprise when women don't slip him their panties under the table.

It's disgusting to watch.

I jerk my head toward Eros. "Let's go. Grab that *bawbag*. I think we have a girl to hunt down."

I slip the card into my pocket and feel the edges of my mouth curling to a smile.

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CHAPTER FOUR

PERSEPHONE

At Cameron's small grocery store, I push around a cart with a wonky wheel, lost in thought.

No, that's not quite right.

As I walk down the aisle with all the colorful cereal boxes next to the bagged macaroni and rotini, I'm absorbed by a dark memory.

Running along the beach at night, my fancy dress whipping around my body. I'm afraid, my pulse pounding in my head with every stride. Maddie is running right beside me, her blonde hair rippling in the icy wind. A frightened look takes up all the real estate on her gorgeous face.

She points to a cluster of rocks. Let's go there.

My fists tighten. Maddie and I scamper up the rocks. I throw a look over my shoulder and of course he is there. Constantine, pupils gone small from doing rails of coke, his expression dark and ominous. He's gone off the deep end before, but this time...

“Excuse me!”

I blink twice and suddenly I'm back in the grocery store. Not only that, but I've stopped my cart directly in front of the queue to line up for checkout. An older woman is scowling at me, her arms full of toilet paper and eggs.

“Sorry.” I blush and pull my cart out of the way.

What am I doing?

My right hand tingles and I clench it into a fist. Nothing is ever solved by reliving the last moments of Maddie's life. I'll never get my friend back. I will never be able to go back and not climb those rocks.

Never find the exact right words to say to drug-addled Constantine. Never stop him from pushing Maddie and me off the cliff and onto the rocks below.

My eyes tear up. Embarrassed at my complete lack of self-control, I swipe at my eyes. Grabbing the few items that I've collected in my cart, I haul them up to the register. My cheeks burn as I check out, barely able to meet the gaze of the young grocery clerk.

When she offers to take my groceries out to my car, I blurt out, "no, thanks!"

I bolt out of the store like a woman on fire. Flashes of that same tragic memory plague me as I hurry home, my footsteps harried.

Maddie's scream as Constantine pushes her off the edge.

Blood washing around on the rocky beach.

The sensation of falling down, down, down. It feels endless and at the same time, all too brief.

Constantine's smug smirk as I reach for him, my arms jerking out as I lurch away, pulled down by gravity.

Looking at the weedy side of the road as I make my way home, my mouth squeezes into a small pout. My right fist clenches, a constant reminder of Constantine.

Maddie is dead.

I will never be the same again.

I will always be damaged.

No one can ever truly love me again. Not that I want them to.

I'm done with men.

Actually, I'm just done with everyone.

I'm so sucked into my bitter, dark thoughts by the time I reach the gas station closest to my house that I don't even notice the gun at first. Trudging across the Chevron's broken square of pavement, I notice some commotion happening between the three men to my right. Their raised voices nudge my plodding footsteps into a scurry. Then one of them hurls a command at me in a youthful, almost squeaky tone.

"Are you fucking kidding me? Stop!"

I blink, freezing and looking up. I see two white men in dark hoodies, boys really, with their guns trained on me and a young black girl with her hands in the air. I realize that she is wearing a yellow and red polo that probably marks her as an employee.

She's also crying, big fat tears running down her scrunched up face.

I take it all in, my brain overheating. The grocery bag drops from my fingers and I raise both my hands in a sign of surrender.

One of the young men motions me closer, toward them. "Get the fuck over here, bitch."

I ignore him for a second, making eye contact with the woman that they have hostage. It may be stupid, but all I can see when I look at her face is how young she is.

Younger than Maddie, even.

I know in that moment that I can't leave her. She shakes her head miserably when I make eye contact with her, but I don't know how to interpret that.

My blood pressure is sky high as I look at the young men.

"What do you want?" I ask. "I don't have a phone. I'm not going to call anybody. Neither will my friend here. Right?"

I ask the cashier a pointed question. She nods her head, holding back a sob. "That's right."

I swallow, my nerves almost getting the best of me. My body flashes hot and cold. "Let us go. Or let her come over here. I can keep her calm. Y'all can take what you need from the store and then go."

The two young men share an uneasy glance. "That's not going to fucking happen," one of them says, his lip lifting in a snarl. "Now get the fuck over here. I ain't asking you again."

I wet my lips with my tongue. "I'm not coming any closer."

He steps closer, raising the gun to my head. I can't help my response, which is to cower. I drop my gaze and my whole head moves further away from the gun, closer to the ground.

"Move, you dumb bitch!" he shouts.

"Okay," I whisper. "Okay, I'm going—"

I hear the crack of a gunshot. I flinch, thinking for a split second that the gunman pulled the trigger. But in the next breath, the gunman that threatened me is on the ground, a bullet hole still smoking right between his eyes. All the air is sucked out of my lungs as I watch the life flicker out of his eyes. His face falls to the side and his body goes slack.

For a second, I can hear nothing but the gunshot reverberating as I stare at him in horror. I look up and see three dark haired men approaching, their

suits all black and their weapons drawn. They look like avenging archangels as they move into the parking lot with quick, practiced steps.

Who are they? Where did they come from?

Why the hell do they have guns?

The three men work as a unit, forming an obvious and cohesive triad. But it's the first one who I make eye contact with, the leader of the pack.

I have the strangest sensation of connection in that moment. I don't know how to explain it properly.

For a solitary moment, it feels as though the fabric of the universe reveals itself to me, thousands of invisible strings connecting me to everyone and everything around me. These cobwebs are mostly the stuff of gossamer, too delicate and fragile to see.

But the webs connecting him to me are stronger somehow. A pulse of pure energy travels directly between us, shuddering along those strange strings.

I look into his exquisite, darkly lashed pale green eyes and I swear, I see a moment of recognition in their depths. I find him deeply attractive.

The men I find attractive are villains, nearly by their nature.

Then reality comes crashing in on me, time speeding up as if playing catch up for the moment before. One of the other men in suits shoots the other young man, dropping him where he stands. I straighten and turn, already running away.

“Fuck,” I hear one of the men mutter. From the sound of his voice, low, deadly and still so melodic, I know it is Him. “Get her.”

There is a grunt. My eyes widen as I flee across the parking lot. For a second, my heart pounds, and my brain allows me to think I might get away.

But then my right hand is grabbed. A scream escapes my lungs as I am ripped away from escape. I turn my head and look at the one that captured me. Not Him.

No, this one has the same dark hair and large frame. But he is rougher, his expression meaner. I feel his arm slip around my waist at the same time as I feel the push of cold steel into my belly.

He's got his gun pressed flush against me, a wicked glint in his eye. My whole body revolts, kicking at him even though I know that he is probably going to shoot me. He reacts by jamming the gun into my tender belly. His face twists with a grimace.

“Quit resisting.” His lilting accent, I realize now, is Irish or Scottish.

“No!” I scream, fighting his hold. “Let me go!”

He jerks my hands behind me, neatly zip tying them together. He does it so fast that I have no doubt that he’s done it a thousand times. Then he grabs my arm and hauls me over to where the other two men in suits wait.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see that the young woman has fled. Maybe she will get help.

The main one of the three men in suits snaps his fingers in my face. “Hey. Right here.”

I focus on him, hearing blood rushing in my ears. He looks at me, a moment of humor passing across his face. It’s gone before I can name it, though.

“Persephone Corbin, I presume.” He tilts his head, waiting for a response from me.

I swallow, nodding. “Yes.”

His eyes rake over me body. I don’t know what conclusions he’s drawing about me, but I feel as though I am a fat pig being considered for slaughter.

“I am Hades Lyon,” he says, his Scotch burr rounding the vowels in his pronunciation. It’s pleasant enough that it sends a hot shiver rushing through my blood. Admittedly, I catch myself thinking that I could listen to him talk in this low, urgent voice all day.

He clears his throat. “These are my brothers, Ares and Eros. We are looking for someone with just yer skill set.”

I lick my lips, darting a glance to the bodies that the men left on the ground. “I’m... I’m not interested.”

My voice sounds desperate and cornered. I flush, though I don’t know why.

“We were told ye might feel that way.” His lips curl faintly at the corners of his mouth. “Ye didn’t ask what the skill set we require is.”

I look at Hades, feeling my heart skittering in my chest. “I don’t care. I want to be left alone.”

The one who holds my arm, the one Hades referred to as Ares, releases a sound of disgust. “Who cares what ye want?”

Hades keeps his eyes trained on my face. “We came here looking for a very talented forger.”

The second he says it, I can feel the blood draining from my face. I give my head a tiny shake.

“No. You have the wrong person.”

Hades trades a sideways glance with the other brother, Eros. “I dinnae think we do. We are looking for ye, lass. An angel beset by devils, on the run from the law.” His lips twitch. “Or is it Constantine yer running from?”

At that moment, all hell breaks loose inside my head. I thrash violently, trying to get loose. All while, Hades just stands there, seeming almost amused by my struggle for freedom.

“Yer just going to hurt yerself, Persephone.”

Ares jerks my arm. I reflexively bite him, burying my teeth into the flesh of his shoulder.

“Fuck!” He jabs me with the gun again, but I don’t care. There are worse things than dying.

Never, ever let a kidnapper take you to a second location. Those words keep playing repeatedly in my head, an incessant loop.

I start screaming. Hades flicks his fingers at me, dismissive. Ares digs his hand into the flesh on my neck, his fingers forming a band. My air is cut off at the slightest pressure from his fingers.

I look to Hades, my expression pleading. He smirks as he looks at my face. “Shut up. Dinnae make any more fuss. Or I’ll let Ares render ye unconscious.”

“Maybe ye should let me do it anyway,” Ares grits out.

My struggles do not cease, but they do slow down. Ares still chokes me as I stand here, waiting to hear Hades’ decision.

He flicks his fingers again. “Get her in the car. We need to be going.”

Then he turns on his heel and heads away, leaving Ares to scoop me up and manhandle me all the way to the car.

CHAPTER FIVE

HADES

We are an hour from a private island in Turks and Caicos when Persephone finally quiets down. I find it harder to notice the absence of sound. Especially when I'm wearing a truly magnificent pair of headphones that drown out the sound of her muffled struggles.

After she was less than compliant during the boarding process, I ordered her gagged.

But eventually I sip my whiskey cocktail and I notice that the stewardess's posture is less tense. For the first part of the flight, Persephone begged the attendant to do something to help her. Told her personal details, like her full name and that she has a brother that will miss her.

Trying to make herself more memorable, I would guess. And once I had Persephone gagged, the stewardess only seemed even more frightened.

But now she flicks me a worried little smile as she refills my drink. So I take off the headphones. Persephone doesn't make a sound. All I can hear is the faint clink of the glasses on the stewardess's tray as she retreats.

Blessedly, all that is left is silence. Standing up, I turn and walk to the back of the plane.

Persephone is still right where I left her, tied and bound. Her eyes are closed, her dark eyebrows delicately arched and her rimmed lashes lying still against her heart shaped face. Her dark head has fallen to the side and her long, raven locks move ever so gently when the plane bumps. She has devilish, pouty lips and a button nose that make her appear more innocent than she should dare to look.

I can't make heads or tails out of the bulky sweater she's wearing. But I know that despite the dynamite of her theatrics earlier, she's just over five

feet tall.

All that fuss. Yet here she is now, sleeping. There is something about her mouth that's so fucking alluring. I rub the scar that peeks out of my left sleeve, my left eye twitching just a little. It takes me a minute to realize that the alien feeling inside my chest is something akin to desire.

Strange. I almost never feel such wasteful emotions. The lass is a siren, no doubt about it. But the fact that I'm moved by her innocence is... puzzling.

Why should I care about her in the slightest?

She stirs, waking gradually. I sit down in the seat across from her, watching her face closely.

She makes a soft sound against her gag. Then she looks up and startles, seeing me. She pushes up in her seat, glaring at me.

I purse my lips. "If ye promise not to scream and carry on, I can take the gag out of yer mouth."

She looks at me for a second, taking my measure. Then she nods once.

I arch a brow. "Ye promise?"

She nods again. I rise and cross the cramped space, removing the balled up tie from her mouth. She glares at me again, working her mouth and tongue.

Her first question is pointed and unexpected. "Constantine sent you?"

I raise my brows and my mouth draws down into a frown. "Why would ye think that?"

Her eyes narrow on my face. She has lovely hazel eyes, the green-brown colors nearly electric.

"Why else would you mention his name and then kidnap me?"

She pulls at the plastic zip ties that bind her hands and feet. I consider her for a moment.

Can I let her go? Where exactly would she run?

I dart my gaze around and sigh. "I want to let ye out of yer bonds. We are far enough over the ocean by now that ye have nowhere to go but with the airplane."

Her tongue darts out, wetting her lips. "Okay..."

"If I release ye, ye have to promise to behave. If not, I'll have to tie ye up again."

She lifts her chin, frowning a little. "Okay."

I pull out the knife I keep in the trouser pocket, springing the rather wicked blade open. A flare of fear splashes across her face as I approach. She swallows tightly and looks away.

I'm not sure what kind of life this girl has led. But I am damn sure that she's deathly afraid of me.

When I reach down and slide the knife through her bonds, my fingers touch her bare skin only briefly. But there is no disguising the way her entire body trembles.

Nor the strange electric spark that seems to jump between us in the few moments my skin brushes hers.

Persephone flinches. She doesn't move right away.

No, she waits. All her muscles are tensed, coiled, ready for her moment. And the look on her eyes is one of profound disgust.

I step back and she touches both of her wrists. Her eyes flit to the window, avoiding my curious gaze.

"I'm not with Constantine."

That gets Persephone's attention. She shoots me a look that is nothing but bewilderment. "I'm not entirely sure that I believe you."

I shrug, retaking my seat. "That's really not up to me, is it?"

Her answering scowl is expected. "I really have to use the restroom. And drink some water."

I give her a grim smile. "Ye do that. We're going to land shortly. Then we should talk again." I pause. "Dinnae try to get the stewardess on yer side. We know everything about her life. Where she lives. The names of her kids. *Everything*. It would be unwise for ye to ask her to choose between all of that and helping a total stranger."

Persephone looks startled. Good, let her be afraid. That's what I want from her.

I stand up, finding the stewardess just behind me. "Can ye please see that our guest makes herself comfortable?"

She flushes and bows. "Of course, sir."

I spend the next twenty minutes on a deadly boring but extremely important phone call about finding an appropriate cargo ship that's already near Algiers. Lining up the contract with a shipping company is not exciting work.

And making sure I have a backup ship is literally twice as dull. But it is vital that everything goes smoothly. There can't be a single thing left to

chance.

Not on the biggest arms deal of my career.

I hang up after the plane lands. Looking over my shoulder as I clatter down the stairs, I see Persephone emerge from the dark plane cabin. She shields her eyes and follows me, a glum pout on her pretty face.

I stride to the waiting limo, holding the door for her. Her footsteps slow as she gets to the dark sedan.

She glances behind her to the plane, pressing her lips together. Looking for a last ditch rescue, perhaps.

I grab her elbow, impatient. “Get in the fucking car, lass.”

Her eyes flash as she tries to shake me loose. “Don’t touch me.”

I let her go, glowering. She slides in the car and I shut the door with more force than is truly necessary. I get in on the other side and then wave a hand to the driver.

As he pulls off, I roll up the partition and glance at Persephone. Her face is screwed up and pinched as she surveys the sandy ground. I can see the shore just beyond her, hear the swell and fade of the waves, feel the hot, salty wind whipping around my face.

“Where are we?” she asks.

Arching a brow, I tilt my head at her. “We are on a private island in Turks and Caicos.”

Her blue eyes narrow and her lips twitch. “And what happens now? You haven’t said why exactly you fucking kidnapped me and brought me here.”

“I need ye to forge some documents for me. And I brought ye here because I want to use the documents before ye get the chance to run and tell anyone about what I’m up to.” I suck in a breath and lift a shoulder. “Ye shouldn’t be detained more than three months. And I’m not expecting ye to work for free, of course.”

She crosses her arms, her eyes turning into slits. “This in the most insane way to conduct business. You could’ve just contracted me to work at home. Instead, you have broken any number of laws against kidnapping and... like, human trafficking? To bring me here.” She shakes her head, agitated. “Who would I have told, anyway?”

I squint out the window. “The FBI. The CIA. Or maybe yer ex-boyfriend.”

Her sharp inhale brings my attention back to her. “I’m not on speaking terms with Constantine, to put it mildly.”

I give her a cool glance. “I dinnae really care.”

Her grimace is enough response, I suppose. I sit back as the driver starts his way up a little hill. At the top is a beautiful beachfront mansion, white stucco walls and an elegant dark wood roof. Two stories sit on immaculately kept shady green grounds.

When we pull up to the large wooden double doors, I glance at Persephone. “Ladies first.”

Shaking her head, she refuses. “I don’t want to get out.”

I crack my knuckles, looking at her mildly. “Are ye asking for my help?”

Her cheeks flush a pleasing shade of scarlet. “I won’t tell anyone. Honest. Just let me get back on the plane and fly home.”

As fast as lightning, I move over toward her and shove her out of the vehicle. She fights against me as I wrestle her toward the front door.

“No! Help!”

She looks behind her, frantic. “Driver! Help me! This man has me hostage!”

The driver is standing nearby. But he nervously looks away, licking his lips. Smart man.

I stop, grabbing both her arms and pulling them behind her back. “Should’ve brought more zip ties, I guess.”

Lifting her slight body, I sling her over my shoulder as if she were no more important than a sack of flour. She shrieks as I carry her through the threshold, flailing and pounding her fists against my back.

“Let me go! Let me go, you fucking asshole!” she howls.

As her fists rain down on my back, I shudder. I don’t like to be touched on my back.

Actually, I prefer that no one touch me, period.

But I ignore Persephone’s protests, carrying her straight upstairs. It’s been a couple of years since I’ve been in this house, but my near-eidetic memory is helpful when I decide where to take her.

I bust into a bedroom, not stopping until I swing her down onto the broad king sized bed. Then I step back, my body shuddering once more.

That’s the most contact I have had with another person in a while, captive or no. My heart is pounding, and my breathing is a bit unsteady as I look at her.

All my nerves are jangling, going haywire at being suddenly stimulated after being accustomed to not touching anyone.

She stares up at me, full of hatred. “I won’t be kept in this room. I’m here against my will. And I’m not here to do your bidding.”

I lean down, invading her personal space. “Listen to me, lass. Follow the rules. Do the work I ask of ye. Keep yer head down. Yer life will be much, much easier that way.” I pause, enjoying the moment of tension that blooms in the air between us. “There are many less pleasant ways of getting ye to work. But I’m hoping that ye’ll be smart and not force me to use them. Hm?”

She sucks her lower lip in her mouth, taking a breath. Then she shocks me to the very core.

Persephone places a hand on the lapel of my suit jacket. She looks deep into my eyes.

And she pleads with me in the gentlest tone.

“Hades...” Her eyes mist over. Her hand digs into my jacket. “Please. Just let me go.”

The depth and intensity of anger that bubbles to the surface in an instant surprises even me. I sneer, ripping her hand away and stepping back.

“Ye think ye can charm me, my pretty little lass? Ye think ye can use yer sexuality and yer little help me looks to trick me?” I thunder.

I’m shaking with rage as I stand before her, accusatory.

Her wide hazel eyes darken with fear. “Hades—”

“Stay put,” I command her. “Do not fucking test me. Ye’ll live to regret it.”

Then I spin around on my heel, march to the door, and slam it closed behind me. That fucking manipulative little bitch. I hate the fact that I tremble with anger and some darker, named emotion as I turn and storm down the stairs.

CHAPTER SIX

PERSEPHONE

I wake up with the strange, prickling sensation I am being watched. Shooting out of bed, I look toward the door, a growl in my throat. The bedroom door is wide open, the dark hallways just beyond gaping like a missing tooth.

I suck in a lungful of air and fix my gaze on the doorway. But nothing moves.

If Hades was watching me while I was asleep, he is gone now. I shudder. It's beyond creepy. Just like everything has been since I was kidnapped.

I smack my lips, tasting something sour in my mouth. My stomach gurgles. My hair is a little matted where I slept pressed against it.

I guess my body doesn't care that I've been kidnapped. It still needs to eat and be cleaned, regardless of my current location.

Getting out of bed, I slam the bedroom door closed and go into the bathroom. Turning the water on, I wait for it to get hot and clearly stare at my right arm. I clench my fist, but the fingers are very slow to unfurl themselves when I relax them.

Damage done to me when the back of my head struck the rock after Constantine chased me off that cliff. I carry it with me to this day.

Whoever stocked it with fresh, fluffy towels and luxurious shampoo did their job well. I close myself inside and shower quickly. The hot water rains down on me, the forceful pressure feeling amazing to my faintly achy muscles.

My mind wanders, circling back to Hades and his brothers. Three tall, broad shouldered Scottish men with the same dark hair and light

complexions. That is where the comparisons end, though.

Eros is very attractive, his high cheekbones and full lips almost pretty. Ares is too scary to have the same said of him. He's more... bluntly handsome.

Hades, though...

I shiver even though I am under the shower's hot downpour. Pretty and handsome don't really capture Hades' aura of raw power and muted sexuality in the least. He reminds me of nothing so much as a big cat, stalking its prey, sleek and muscular and dark all at once.

I hate to admit it, but I still find him attractive. Even after he kidnapped me, dragged me to the island, and literally carried me into this bedroom.

Attractive but deadly. It's important to remind myself of that little fact. In the past, when I dated Constantine for instance, I ignored all the red flags in favor of his sheer beauty.

I won't ever make that mistake again. Not when I know Hades is toxic. He practically tells me so every time he touches me with such disgust.

Blowing out a huge breath, I turn off the shower and wrap myself in a thick, pillow-y towel. Then I step into the adjoining walk-in closet, which I found last night.

Hades obviously planned to snatch me far enough in advance to have clothes in my size brought here for me. Not just clothes...

Reaching out with my damaged hand, I run my touch along the silken garments that hang here waiting for me. Hades has a specific taste.

Expensive. Feminine. Almost exclusively black.

And if he is the one that picked out the drawers of tiny black thongs and lace balconette brassieres... I shiver as I pluck one of each at random.

It takes me a minute to dress myself in the most modest garment hanging in the closet. A slinky black silk dress, the bottom hitting the floor when I pull it over my head. It fits as if it were tailored just for me, even though I have basically no ass or tits. The dress miraculously doesn't demand any.

If anything, its spaghetti straps hug my shoulders a little too tightly.

I pull a slinky black off the shoulder sweater over it that feels expensive. It's not the greatest combination but I've managed to cover everything from my toes to the tips of my fingers. The only skin I'm showing is a portion of my left shoulder.

That'll have to do.

Slipping on a pair of dark flats, I head to roam the house. Specifically, I need to find Hades. Yesterday ended on a frustrating note for the both of us.

I'm hoping that I can appeal to his sense of decency. Assuming he has one, that is.

I find nothing but bedrooms upstairs on the second floor. The ground floor is expansive, and I wander through the living area and the open kitchen before I find him in a sort of breakfast nook that is a little hidden away from the rest of the house. The room has a breathing view of the ocean. He admires it, leaning in the corner, eating up all the space in the room as he scowls into the distance.

I stop and stare for a moment, taking in the white sand beaches and moody aqua blue of the sea.

What is a man who has a view like this so angry for? If I were him, I would retire and try to be happy right here.

Hades turns, sensing that he is not alone. He pushes his cheek out with his tongue, already impatient. He bristles, winding up for a fight.

"What?" he asks.

I step in the room, sticking close to the door in case I have a reason to bolt. "You don't like me very much."

His brows lower. A frown touches his lips. "I dinnae understand yer point."

"Well..." I clear my throat, cursing myself for being such a timid little mouse. My heart is pounding in my chest. "I don't like you either."

He runs his tongue over his teeth.

"Ye are trying my patience, Persephone."

"Penny," I correct him. I flush. Perhaps I didn't think what I want to say to him out particularly well, but I can't stand the way he says my name.

Persephone. Like a curse in his native tongue.

His eyes tighten on my face. "Get to it, lass."

"Whatever work you have for me, I should go ahead and do it. Then you can let me go. Like I said before, I won't tell anybody. It's a win-win. No offense, but I can't wait to see the last of you."

He pinches the bridge of his nose. "Yer giving me a hell of a headache for it being so early in the day."

"I'm ready to leave." I shrink back against the wall, wincing.

"Yer not leaving me," he says, enunciating each syllable. His accent grows thicker as he gets angrier. "Nobody leaves me. I do the leaving

around here. Ye hear me?”

I toss off the first thing that floats up from my subconscious, not fully thinking it through.

“That sounds like something that you should be talking to a therapist about.”

Hades lunges toward me, a deep growl barreling from his throat. “I could fucking kill ye. Ye know that?” He corners me, moving so fast that I don’t have time to escape. “Yer lucky that I need a forger still. Because otherwise...” He steps so close; he’s almost pressed against me. Not touching, but almost. “I might like to find out just how sweet yer last gasp sounds while I slowly choke ye to death.”

I swallow and look up into his face. Without a doubt, there is little to read there but violence and mayhem and a twisted sort of beauty. I tremble.

He’s a hair away from wrapping his fingers around my little neck and squeezing, I can tell. I suck in a breath, wishing away the tears that threaten to break free.

Hades grabs me then, making me cry out. He turns me around, crushing me against the wall briefly. He pulls my hands behind my back and a tear breaks loose, rolling down my cheek.

He manhandles me, roughly pulling me away from the wall and pushing me back to the kitchen. Then suddenly, he lets me go.

I gasp, whirling around and backing away. He clenches his fists, as though I’m too caustic to even touch with his bare hands.

Hades raises one finger, commanding me. “Wise men know that patience is a virtue, Persephone. Dinnae forget it. Ye’ll be paid handsomely for the whole time ye are with me, so bide yer time.”

I raise my hand to my cheek, trying to remain unemotional. “There are people that will miss me, you know. I’ll be national news before you know it.”

His lips twitch with a dark humor. “I highly doubt that anyone even knows yer name, Persephone. Much less likely is that someone can be arsed to report ye missing.”

Another tear falls. I dash it away too. “You keep acting like I’ve agreed to this. I haven’t, Hades! You kidnapped me! I’m not going to do anything for you unless you let me leave!”

Another flare of anger crosses his sullen expression. “I dinnae care about yer feelings, lass. I could literally give a fuck about yer opinions. And

ye leave when I tell ye to, not a second fucking before that.”

I’m going to burst into tears. I can feel the anger, frustration and sadness welling up inside me, pressing to be let out, smothering me. The last thing I want is to cry in front of this... this monster.

So, I turn around, running toward the relatively safety of the bedroom I woke up in. Half expecting him to chase me.

To continue to terrorize me.

But he doesn’t. He just stands there, watching me climb the stairs, my tears beginning to fall.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

HADES

In the darkness, I lie in my bed, the covers and sheets wrenched aside. I dream restlessly of my past, as I do far too often.

It's a warm early evening when my mother hauls her bags down the stairs. She's been fighting with my father all day. My father's fiery temper usually flares a few times a day, his booming voice sending my mother or one of us boys skittering across the house. Sometimes it is accompanied by violence too.

Slapping, hitting, and choking come with my father's reactions to nearly anything. It's a normal part of the texture of any day. When I go to sleep, I count my bruises and check the spots where my father's heavy blows have landed, unfazed.

It's normal to hear my father erupt over the smallest thing. It's standard to crouch down on the floor, eyes clenched, silently enduring my father's fists. That's how it has always been since I can remember.

But today my mother, with her soft voice and her stooped shoulders... she stood up to him. Got in his face, despite his abuse, and wouldn't back down.

And now she has to go.

"Hades," my mother coos. There are tears running down her pale, bruise-mottled cheeks. She licks her cracked lips, darting her gaze at my father, who is smoldering as he watches over us.

I'm standing here, blank faced, not able to show her how wretched she's making me feel. Even on the eve of her leaving I dare not let my feelings show.

Not if I want to keep my father from combusting and pulling my brothers and I into his fury.

My mother pulls in a breath, refocusing on me. “Ye understand, right?”

Her words are more a plea than anything else. My breath catches in my lungs. “When will ye come back?”

“Oh, my darling boy.” She kneels down, pulling me into her arms. My face presses into her long, dark hair.

She smells like soap and heather and very faintly of cheap whiskey. I inhale her scent, as if trapping that little bit of her in my lungs forever could keep her from leaving.

“I don’t know,” she murmurs, her voice filled with tears. “But I need a favor. Okay? I need ye to take care of yer brothers while I’m gone. Be their champion.”

I nod, feeling a strange numbness. I should feel something. I’m sure of that. But I don’t. Or I can’t.

Instead, I feel this dullness where I expect my heart should be breaking.

“That’s enough,” my father says. “Leave the boy alone.”

My mom keeps on hugging me tightly for another half a minute. She whispers in my ear. “I love ye, Hades. And yer brothers. I dinnae want to leave ye—”

“I said that’s enough!”

My mother and I are roughly parted by my father’s big hands. I stumble back and trip as I try to catch myself. I look at my mother, feeling a tear slip down my cheek.

“Ye dinnae have to go,” I tell her.

She swallows and glances at my father, shaking his grip off. “I do.”

My father points out the front hallway, where the open door catches the last pool of sunlight for the day. “Go on, then. If yer going to turn yer yellow tail and run like the coward ye are, now is the time.”

I wrap my arms around my thin frame. My parents stare each other down, their gazes contemptuous. For a moment, my heart rate skyrockets. I can feel the tension in the air.

Something is about to happen.

My father draws himself up a few inches to his full height, like a deadly cobra rearing to attack. My mother flinches.

She sends one last look over her shoulder, her expression tight and drawn. “Remember me.”

“Get. OUT!” my father roars.

And as if his words were some kind of magic, she runs to the door, closing it behind her. She’s gone.

I count to five, thinking that she might turn back.

My father pushes his cheek out with his tongue, looks at me, and smiles without an ounce of humor. “See? Fucking women. They lie and manipulate and for what? They always leave ye in the end. Always.”

“She didn’t leave us,” I say, frowning bitterly. “She left ye.”

His grimace is all too familiar, as are his next actions. “Ye stupid little fuck.”

He reaches out to grab me. My heart rate shoots through the roof as his fingers grip my dirty shirt.

That’s the moment when my eyes snap open. I surge upward in bed, gasping for breath. I’m trembling all over and the sheets around my body are absolutely drenched in sweat. The scars that cover every inch of the flesh of my back ache.

The signs that my father went out of his mind as soon as my mother left are still very much here.

I rub a particularly deep groove that is carved out of my left arm. My father beat me to within an inch of my life more times than I can count. Flayed me with a length of electrical cord that he preferred.

And I took it, knowing that if I was the one to provoke him, he would run out of steam before he could get to either of my brothers.

I pull on a long-sleeved button up, gritting my teeth. My scars are a secret part of me. A sign of my weakness.

They aren’t seen by anyone these days. Not while I am still awake and alive to fight it.

Getting out of bed, I stumble into the bathroom and splash my face with water. It’s the millionth time I’ve had that dream.

When will my body learn that those events, although real, happened so long ago as to be of no real importance? My father has been dead for two years. My mother turned into a walking question mark when she disappeared that day.

Who cares what happened so many years ago? Old feelings echo around in my chest like wandering spirits. It’s down to me to banish them.

I stare at myself in the mirror in the darkened bathroom for a half a minute. There are real things happening right now.

Things that could potentially impact my life in real ways.

After a few more seconds, I unlock my door and pad out into the hallway. My feet automatically carry me to Persephone's door. This isn't the first night I have found myself just here on her doorstep.

Last night, chased by the same dream, I watched her sleeping. And I felt...

Better, somehow. Or less alone.

Not that I would want her to know that, of course.

I stealthily swing the door wide and look at where she should be sleeping. I'm expecting her to be in the same spot on her side, blankets pulled up to her chin, a restless frown puckering her sleeping face.

But instead, I find the bed bare. There is no one sleeping here.

An instant feeling of anxiety churns in my gut. Where is she? My fists clench and my heart beats hollow in my chest.

No one leaves me.

I'll hunt her down.

Make her stay.

I whip out my phone, ready to pull up the security cameras. There is a text from Ares.

Tangiers is a go. We've established contact with four ship's captains. How are the papers progressing?

Shaking my head, I ignore the text.

I swipe through several screens until I open the security camera app. I have cameras installed on all my properties; they often come in handy, though I'm not often presented with such an obvious need for them.

It only takes a little bit of sleuthing for me to catch her leaving her room. About five more minutes, and I know exactly where she is.

Sitting by herself at the sandy cove that slopes down from the mansion.

Heading there is a few minutes' walk. Then again, the furthest point from the house is only ten minutes away. It's a very small island.

I trudge onto the beach sand and spot her. She's still slumped there, staring off over the moonlit sea. The rush of the water disguises my footsteps and allows me to creep up on her.

I'm only ten feet away when Persephone notices me with a start.

"Jesus!" she mutters, her hand flying to her heart. "Someone should tie a bell around your neck."

I fold my arms, vexed. "What are ye doing here?"

She looks away with shrug. “I’ve been asking myself that since I arrived.”

I walk a little closer, coming around to see her face. “That’s not what I meant, and I think ye know it fully.”

She shoots me an exasperated glance. “If you must know, I came out here to flee. Only to find out that there isn’t anywhere to go but out into the water.”

Her mouth tightens and she looks down, dropping her gaze to the sand. I tilt my head, pursing my lips.

“Ye thought... what, that there was civilization just beyond the house?”

Persephone glares at the sand dunes all around her. Digging her hands in, she raises her hands and lets the sand filter through her fingers.

“I don’t know what I thought. I can’t simply trust that you are going to be truthful. You’re just some psycho that I don’t know. Not to mention the fact that you kidnapped me! How am I supposed to believe anything you say?”

Her voice wobbles and breaks on her last word. I stride over to her, peering down at her. The urge to grab her and shake her is nearly unbearable.

“Listen to me, lass.”

At the sharp tone of my voice, she makes eye contact with me and swallows.

“Ye dinnae make the decisions here. I took that right from ye the second I got ye out of that little nothing town in Louisiana. Now I get to dictate when ye leave. I decide where ye go, what ye do, and who ye talk to. Ye ken?”

Her chin juts out. “You can’t decide everything, Hades. You’re not god.”

Leaning down, I grab her by the elbows and jerk her to her feet. Her pupils contract as her hazel eyes go impossibly wide. Her breath leaves her in a rush.

I can’t help but shake her just a little to make sure that I’m making my point.

“God is dead. D’ye hear me?” I leer down at her face, which is mere inches from mine. “And that means I’m yer only hope now.”

She bares her teeth, her face livid. “Don’t touch me, Hades.”

“I’ll touch ye whenever and wherever I feel like it, lass. And ye’ll learn to like it.”

She fights against my grip, writhing. I pull her closer, gritting my teeth.

“Stop— “

“Let me— “

For a split second, it seems as though she has enough strength to break my hold. But it comes and goes in a flash, leaving me the obvious winner. I grab her and toss her over my shoulder.

“Stop! Hades!”

I ignore her, heading back across the gentle sand dunes toward the trees.

She struggles against me, pounding her fists against my back again.

“Let me go!”

“Never. I’ll never let ye go,” I tell her.

A scream erupts from her and her thrashing turns violent. But I just keep going, ignoring her jerky movements. And soon enough, her struggles subside. I release her and she runs away. I watch her as she goes, a dissatisfied frown tugging at the corners of my mouth.

CHAPTER EIGHT

HADES

In the moonlight, I slip into Persephone's room. A bright strip of light illuminates her torso as I approach on silent feet. She's stretched out on her back, one arm flung over her head, her face twisted away so that it lays in shadow.

Usually I would stop, take pleasure in the fact that the thin ribbed camisole she is wearing has slipped down ever so slightly over her breasts, nearly exposing her ripe nipples to my gaze. I would definitely at least take a moment to appreciate them, maybe even become silently aroused.

But tonight, I move stealthily through her room, one eye on her open window. I crawl onto the bed next to her warm, sleeping form and fit my hand over her lips.

Persephone comes awake in an instant, a protest rising on her lips, her hazel eyes already wide and fixing on my face. I bring my finger to my lips to shush her.

"Shh. Dinnae make a fuss. There are men with guns coming to the house." I pause, glancing over my shoulder. Always alert, always listening. "We have to go."

Persephone sits up, pushing my hand aside. She tugs her camisole up, casting a fearful glance at the window. "Who are they?"

"I dinnae ken." I shake my head. "Maybe Constantine's men. Maybe someone else who wants to fuck with me. Ye get used to being on the run and not knowing exactly who is chasing ye after a while. Now hurry—"

I get up, pulling back the covers and baring her body. She is wearing nothing but the camisole and a pair of lacy black panties. Again, at any other time I would be riveted by her near-nakedness.

But there isn't time. It's been about three minutes since my security system beeped, alerting me to two boats full of men dressed all in black, stealthily dropping onto the shore. Since they dropped anchor at the far end of the island instead of at the nearby dock, I am willing to bet that they don't know the layout of the island.

"We have about twenty minutes to find our way off the island. Maybe thirty, at the outside. Which means we have to move now."

She swallows. "How do you know?"

"Security cameras. Ever since ye slipped out onto the beach, I've had the motion sensors turned on." I lean over, tugging at her wrist as I stand up. "Come on. Get dressed. Wear layers." I think about that for a second, then refine my instructions. "But dinnae overdo it. If ye fall off the boat, I dinnae want ye sinking like a stone."

Persephone licks her lips and casts an anxious glance at the window again. "Okay."

She disappears toward the closet. I cup my hands around my mouth, trying to project a stage whisper. "Meet me at the front door when yer ready."

I head downstairs into the living room, my whole being on edge. I'm ticking off the list I've made as I go straight to the safe, which is hidden behind a large painting of the sea.

I grab four large black duffels that I brought from my room. Into them, I load the contents of the safe. Bags of diamonds. Half a dozen complete sets of false identification bearing my picture. Several bills of sale for properties that I have amassed around the world but simply haven't been able to send to the bank in Zurich yet.

And then almost four million dollars in pound, euro, and dollar denominations. I zip up the duffels and slip one onto my back.

The other three I can carry with some difficulty. I carry them over to the front door, waffling. I think I can carry them down to where I keep my small, sleek powerboat with some effort.

If we are chased or somehow bogged down in the middle of our trek down to the boathouse, though... I do some quick reorganization, making a throwaway duffel bag full of heavy paper cash.

Persephone appears in the entryway door, her dark hair pinned up in a bun, heavy lines under her eyes. She heeded my instructions in dressing, seeming to be warm but not too over bundled.

“Are they close by?” she asks. She tiptoes to the small window just beside the door and peers out.

“Dunno.” I shake my head and lift the duffel bags. “I dinnae plan to stick around and find out. Will ye get the door?”

She jumps to pull the door open, sticking her head out. I crowd her out the doorway, my ears pricking up.

I scan the dark palm trees, the scrub brush, the sand dunes. It makes me anxious, knowing that they are there and not being able to pinpoint their exact locations.

I don’t hear the men approaching yet, either. Then again, that was probably their intention. I think of the security camera app on my phone, wishing I didn’t have to carry so much. I can’t manage my phone and the duffel bags.

My eyes slide over to Persephone. I drop a bag, grab my phone, and swipe the screen to let her see the bank of screens.

“Here. Hold onto that. It should keep us from running into the men.”

Persephone swallows and nods solemnly, giving a distinct shiver. “I will.”

“Good. Let’s go,” I say, jerking my head toward the boathouse. “We’re going to head down this path.”

She looks at the cell phone screen, nodding as she presses a thumb against it to keep it awake. “I’m following you.”

I nod, heading away from the mansion and toward the beckoning trees. The tree cover is light, and it will not really do much to obscure us from view. But something is better than nothing in this scenario.

We make it to the trees and start down the little rutted path worn into the scrub brush. I keep checking behind me, making sure that Persephone is keeping up with me. Every time I glance back, she seems glued to the phone screen. She trips over a branch, stumbling, and I slow down.

“Sorry,” she mouths, her face tense. “Go, go.”

We’re almost halfway down the path when I hear Persephone suck in an alarmed breath. I glance back, my steps slowing. She looks up, her face seeming to pale in the light of my phone screen.

“Men at the house,” she says, her voice low and fervent. “It’ll only take them a minute to realize that we are gone. We have to go faster!”

I step aside, waving her ahead of me. “Go. Go!”

She tucks her head down and stops looking at the phone. I follow her steps as she makes her way down the sloped terrain, cramped by the close scrub brush on both sides.

All I can hear for a couple minutes are the sound of Persephone's breaths and that of our bodies as we knock tall grasses and brush back out of our way.

We burst into a clearing and the rusting old boat shed is there, a rickety little dock protruding from the white sandy beach just beside it. The dock itself is probably only fifty feet long, the little shed just big enough to hide my small powerboat. My heart thumps loudly in my chest as we rush toward our obvious exit.

Persephone breaks into a trot, slipping and sliding as we make our way across the sand to the dock. I'm slower for some reason, my footsteps more hesitant. My eyes fix on the darkened doorway of the boat shed.

Is that normally closed? I can't remember but it gives me pause.

Then just before Persephone steps on the dock, I hear something.

It could be nothing. After all, we are outside now and all I heard was a very gentle rustle that came from the same general direction of the silent boat shed.

But something in me, some lizard-brained instinct, makes me freeze. I hiss at Persephone.

“Stop— “

But it's too late. She turns to look back at me, stepping onto the dock, her face a question mark. At the same time, two hulking men in matching black hoodies and pants run out of the boathouse.

Fuck.

I drop the bags, pulling out my gun. The weight of the weapon feels heavy and cool and oh so right in my hand.

Persephone swings her gaze to the two men and lets out a fearful, excited yip. She tries to backpedal, her slight weight on the docks enough to make the old, slatted wood groan.

The two men seem a little surprised to see Persephone and I, but in two seconds flat, they lunge for her.

“No!” Persephone whispers, trying to dodge around them.

One of the men calls out. “Down here!”

I aim at him and my gun fires, neatly dropping him where he stands. He falls into the water with a messy splash, but I have already forgotten him.

Because the other man has his hands on Persephone, yanking her closer. I fire a haphazard round which misses him completely and he turns, pulling her up as a human shield.

“I got them!” he yells. “I got—”

Persephone lashes out, struggling and biting his hand. The man falls silent, trying to keep her under control. He pulls out his gun and brings her to heel with it, but she doesn’t stop squirming.

Good lass.

I raise my weapon and run a few feet to the side, drawing a bead on him.

I fire again but the gun jams.

“Fuck!” I grit out, tossing the weapon aside. I pull a pair of brass knuckles and a switchblade from my pocket, picturing the backup guns in one of the duffel bags. I hear men come crashing down the ridge behind me, pinning me in from two sides.

It only takes me a split second to calculate that I can’t reach them in time. Instead, I lurch toward the dock, where the man is currently dragging Persephone backward toward the shadowed door.

“Get in here,” he growls.

Her only answer is to struggle against him more violently. I make it to the dock just as he backs her into the doorway.

If they disappear inside, what should I do? I need a gun, I realize.

Turning away from them, I swing my gaze wildly toward the men on shore. One black-clad man is much closer to me than the rest, his facial expression pure determination.

When I turn around and careen towards him, surprise flickers across his face. It only takes him a few seconds to raise his gun and fire at me.

Once.

Twice.

He’s a bad shot. But I lunge for his body, closing the gap between us in another fifteen seconds. I grab the gun with my left hand and force it up, then sling my arm around his body, stabbing him viciously and repeatedly in the lower back.

His breath seizes and I use that momentum to overpower him, pulling the gun away from him. He blinks, stunned, and starts to fall. I pull my knife blade free in a gory, blood drenched mess. Then I drop my knife in the sand and grab the extra ammo from his belt.

That's the point at which men in black uniforms clamber closer.

"Don't kill him!" I hear. I don't even have time to process what that could mean, though.

Without even thinking about it, I shoot three men dead where they stand. A fourth yells and tries to tackle me but I take him out, too.

Three men are trying to watch me as they huddle close to the duffel bags that I dropped on the sandy beach. As one of them unzips the bag, I shoot at him, but I miss.

I let the magazine slide free and reload, counting men. There are at least ten of them and I have no more than six bullets left.

I have to make a decision, then. Is it better to have Persephone with me or to have the bags stuffed with money and gems?

In an instant, I know what my answer is. Money is a constant thing in my life and nearly always replaceable.

Persephone, though... I need her, for the time being at least.

I aim and shoot down the closest thug, backing away toward the dock. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the boathouse door open. Persephone shoves the man who was holding her out the door. He isn't motionless or anything, it seems like she just caught him off balance somehow.

She looks at me, her breathing ragged, and brandishes his small black gun.

Oh, fuck yes.

I lick my lips, aiming and firing my gun at the guys on the beach. I hit five of them, killing three.

"Give me the gun!" I shout, holding my hand out flat.

Without a moment's hesitation, she slaps it into my palm. I take aim at the remaining men on the beach, killing three more. Their bodies make soft sounds as they hit the sandy beach, dead before they hit the ground.

The other men look at each other, apparently making the same decision. They pull back as a unit, retreating up into the scrub and trees.

I pretend to give chase, barreling up the beach toward them. I can hear their frantic footsteps as they retreat through the bushes.

Stopping as soon as I reach the duffel bags, I scoop them up and awkwardly sprint back toward the dock. The guy that Persephone disarmed struggles as he heads up to the shore.

"I wouldn't," I comment out of the side of my mouth. But I dinnae wait to see what he does.

No, I run down the rickety dock, toward the doorway that Persephone waits by. I barrel past her and inside the boat shed. My big, dark boat takes up nearly all of the room in the little shed. I throw each of my duffels on board and turn to Persephone, my heart pounding.

She's already clambering on board, which makes my stomach do a quick flip flop. I step over and give her a boost. She climbs in, darting a nervous glance at the two seats and the bow.

I leap into the boat, jam myself behind the steering wheel, and start the engine. Persephone sits down heavily beside me as I throw the boat into drive.

I glance at her as I nudge the boat out of the little shed, busting the doors open.

“Hold on, sweetheart.”

I crank up the speed and the boat takes off.

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CHAPTER NINE

PERSEPHONE

After all the excitement of last night, this morning was anticlimactic. Hades drives the boat straight across the water through the dark, rough seas until I can see land. Wild, overgrown, and sandy, this beach is shockingly similar to the one we just escaped.

In the early hours of pre-dawn, we disembark. As I open my mouth to ask where we are supposed to go, I see a bunch of palm fronds piled high right next to the dock. Hades doesn't say anything to me.

He just jerks the duffel bags off of the boat and heads down the dock. In less than a minute, he has pulled the palm fronds away to reveal a battered old Jeep. When he starts to pile the bags in it, I slide in with only a moment's hesitation.

My brow is furrowed, though.

"How did you know that this Jeep was here?"

The wind suddenly picks up, ruffling his hair as he takes the driver's seat. He spares me a glance as he pulls out. "In my line of work, it's important to have contingencies. This was our first option if we were driven away from the island by force."

I squint at him. I'm even more confused than ever. "You didn't think we were safe back on the island?"

"No. On the contrary, I wasn't particularly worried about anyone finding us." Hades exhales and looks straight forward. It's hard to read his expression just now. The Jeep climbs up a little path cut into the woods and he splays his arm across the back of my seat as he navigates. "But knowing that I had four backup plans in place made me sleep more peacefully. And I'm sure that yer glad that we have somewhere to go now, too."

I turn and aim my frown out the open passenger door. A million questions bubble up inside me. But Hades seems to be fixated on driving. So I guess they will have to wait.

We pull onto a paved road. The Jeep follows it around as it cuts a wide arc through the brush. At last, we head down a little flattened track.

The beach blooms before us, the sun just beginning to brush long fingers across the horizon. There is a tiny, gray-slatted cottage that we drive down to and park nearby.

He gets out of the vehicle and starts grabbing the duffel bags. I shiver and hug myself as he opens the front door of the little house. Inside is spartan and not lit at all. A little kitchenette, a cheap faded white plastic patio table, a mismatched set of dingy wood chairs. He jerks his chin toward the door.

“There’s a cot in there.”

With that, he vanishes back outside. I hear the Jeep start up again and start to reverse up the beach.

I go into the bedroom and find the cot, the only piece of furniture in the entire room. It’s musty and so I sit down on it, putting my back against the wall. I glance out the window at the beach, my thoughts whirling.

I keep thinking that I thought I had Hades fixed in my mind. And yet, when he was threatened...

He changed before my eyes, completely and irrevocably.

He’s a lot more dangerous than I thought.

A shiver races up my spine as I close my eyes and remember how unbelievably deadly he looked on the beach, squaring off against all those men.

He was protecting me, after a fashion.

Do I find that attractive? Yes, I do. I’m ashamed of it, but the fact is that dangerous men just *do* it for me, every time.

I feel my body beginning to relax. It seems like I’ve only been sitting here for a few minutes when I flutter my eyelashes open again. But the sun pouring through the window is bright and my body is stiff.

God, time has not been my friend ever since I was kidnapped. Standing up gingerly, I stretch and think about what I will do now. The memory of the amazing shower at the last place I was held comes to me, unbidden. The amazing closet full of fresh clothes in just my size, too. I might not have been there by choice, but at least I was *comfortable*.

I wince at the crick in my neck. I need to get out of this house. Preferably away from Hades, too.

When I head out into the main room, he's there, sipping a coffee mug. He looks handsome, his dark tousled hair grown out to chin length and pushed back, his eyes the same eerie green that pierces straight through me. His normal few days facial hair has settled into the beginnings of a beard.

As usual, he wears a dark button up and dark slacks but the suit jacket I'm used to seeing is nowhere to be found. His sleeves have been casually rolled and pushed up to expose his muscular forearms. He looks up as I come out of the bedroom, his eyes narrowing on my face.

He sets down his cup and he starts rolling down his sleeves. I tilt my head just a little, watching him do it. I wonder what the impulse inside his head is that makes him do it.

Does he not want me to see him like that for some reason? Is his suit more like a metaphorical suit of armor?

I dare not ask. Instead, when I hit the floor, I turn and move toward the front door.

His voice rings out, his words falling like a snare. "Where are ye going, lass?"

I come to a halt, turning my upper body back toward him. "Out."

Anger flares on Hades' face. "Out where?"

Growing exasperated, I shrug my shoulders. "Does it matter? You know as well as I do that there is nowhere to go."

He shoots me a glare. "That's why I'm asking."

I exhale through my nose and roll my eyes. "I'm going for a walk. I'll be back at some point."

I move toward the front door again, only to be brought up short by his voice. "Give me a second. I'm going with ye."

Feeling for all the world like a brooding, mopey teen, I stomp out the front door. The heat is immediate, pressing in on me, making me wish that the lovely air conditioning from the last house came with me. The sun beats down on me mercilessly.

Still, that doesn't hold me back as I stalk out onto the broad white sand circle that is the driveway. I take a beat, then head straight down toward the shore. The white sand beach is still here but this one is different from the other. More rocks jut from between the dunes.

Sand and rocks fall in clumps as I go down a steep slope, crumbling and falling to the bottom on the rocky ground at the bottom. I get to the place where the ground begins to flatten out and the sand stretches before me, the aquiline sea beckoning to me. I hear crumbling just behind me and turn to see Hades making his way down the steep hill.

He wears thick black boots on both feet and a look of something like derision on his handsome face. "I told ye to wait for me."

I toss a scoff over my shoulder. "You've already trapped me on your private island. You don't get to set any more rules for me unless you plan on tying me to my bed."

His brows lift. "Oh, lass. Ye dinnae want to be putting ideas in my head like that unless ye would like actually like me to tie ye up..."

My cheeks go red, and I jerk my eyes away from his, scowling. "Fuck off."

I set off at a lope, trying to ignore the feel of the desert island sun on my skin. I'm also not entirely sure that the interaction Hades and I just had could not be counted as... well, flirtation. I mean, Hades is twisted and cruel. And his intentions are surely the worst.

But that doesn't mean my mind doesn't flit to me on a bed, bound and gasping while Hades hovers over me, his eyes burning with malevolent intent. And it definitely doesn't stop a small throb of need from beginning somewhere low in my body.

I grit my teeth and run to the water, stopping just short of plunging myself in. Why do I find guys like Hades so fucking sexy? They do such dirty rotten things to me, after all.

The surf crashes, the water rushing up toward me, fanning out until it just kisses the tips of my sneaker-clad feet.

Hades strolls up and stops beside me. I cast a glance over at him, frowning. He is exactly my type, tall and broad shouldered, mean as the day is long. His lips are set in a grim line. He doesn't speak, doesn't share the reasons why he is so cruel.

Yep, I want him. I hate myself for being so weak but that doesn't stop the fact that I'm attracted to him.

He cocks a brow at me. "Is this as far as we go?"

Making a disgusted sound, I turn and trot along the shore. Hades keeps pace with me without so much as breaking a sweat. The heat begins to set in as my body works beneath my hooded sweatshirt and jeans. I can feel

perspiration beginning to stick the sweatshirt to my skin at the lower back and underarms.

Christ, it's hot. I slow my pace to a walk and ignore the way that Hades does the same. He keeps looking at me, making me blush even though I'm not exactly sure why.

"Could you stop?" I ask, aggrieved.

His eyes narrow. "Stop what?"

I stop, spearing him with my gaze. "Stop following me. Stop looking at me. Just stop everything."

An amused look crosses his features. "I dinnae think so, lass."

"Stop calling me lass, too." I cross my arms. "I am never going to understand why you're just keeping me here."

Hades sucks in a deep breath. "I already told ye why."

My mouth turns down and I shake my head. "I want to leave, Hades."

"We will leave, Persephone. As soon as we have the materials ye need and a place for ye to start working."

I push my cheek out with my tongue. "I hate you."

He opens his mouth, a retort apparently ready. But I start off again, running this time. I don't harbor any illusions about outrunning him. I know that he barely has to trot to keep up with my much shorter stride.

I drop my gaze, keeping an eye on where I step. The sand shifts beneath each step. It's tricky and a misplaced foot could become a turned ankle without a second thought. I puff out my cheeks, my heart rate rising. I have to work to control my breathing and keep watch of where I step.

For a good fifteen minutes, I run unchecked along the beach. There is no one else in sight, no one but me and Hades.

My left hand starts tingling and bothering me. I flex my left hand and grow aware of how much harder my left foot and the entire left side of my body are working to keep up with the pace I have set.

But I can't let it show. That would be declaring my weakness to the enemy.

Not here, with Hades.

Not ever.

When I finally slow again, my left hand is so tingly that it verges on pain. I halt, squeezing my hands into fists. Dropping my hands to my knees, I suck in breaths and feel sweat slipping down from the sides of my face and my lower back.

I look out over the sea, trying not to glance at Hades. Shaking out both hands at once feels strange but I am at least attempting to mask my discomfort.

Hades clears his throat, which causes me to startle and swing my gaze over to him. As I do, I realize that I've been running toward a steeply sloping rock jutting forty or so feet out of the sandy beach. I do a double take, catching sight of a little rocky outcropping on the ground nearby. The sea laps at it gently, gurgling as it washes over the rocks.

I pull in a breath, feeling my chest tightening. For a second, I stare at the rocks on the ground and watch the sea as it recedes gently.

I can smell the thick tang of blood in the air. I can see it, smeared across the rocks in a haphazard manner.

Maddie's blood.

I can feel myself begin to shake.

Dark water swirls around my knees as I climb to my feet.

It can't be Maddie's blood, I tell myself. Maddie is dead.

Remember?

"Persephone."

I swing my wide eyed gaze over to him, my heart beating a mile a minute.

Hades tilts his head, his gaze calculating. "Lass. Have ye seen a ghost? Ye've gone pale."

I lick my lips, my gaze nervously flitting back to the rocks.

I'm stunned to see that I find just that. Rocks.

There's no blood.

There's nothing to be afraid of.

Just the water, gently ebbing and flowing. I wonder if I may have made up the cliff's edge, even.

But I'm too terrified to look.

I turn my back on the scene, nodding vaguely. "I'm fine."

He gives me a troubled look. "Ye dinnae look it, lass."

I summon a glare, shooting it his way. "And how would you know how I'm doing? Hm? You've known me for barely a week."

I'm trying to tamp down my strong emotions here and the last thing I need is for Hades to sniff it out. But as much as I protest that I'm fine, I'm betrayed by my own body. As soon as I try to take a step, I wobble. My

hands fly out to try to balance me. I lurch forward, eyes widening, completely off kilter.

Hades steps in smoothly and slips his arm around my waist to steady me. He grabs my right hand, bunching it in his fist. My whole body goes haywire at the brush of his skin against mine.

He is so much bigger than me that he could easily sweep me off my feet again, taking all my autonomy from me. I can't let that happen even though I might be uncertain on my feet.

I grit my teeth and growl at him. "Don't touch me!"

Even as I protest, I can feel my body beginning to slump. It's not the first time I've been betrayed by my own body. But this might be the most humiliating time for my body to simply choose not to do what I ask of it.

Hades glares at me as he wraps his arms around me. His face is only inches away from my mine when he grips my back and scans my face. "What is going on with ye? Are ye going to faint?"

I swallow, not quite able to meet his eye. "Nothing," I rasp.

His hands grip me, shaking me. "Look at me. No, dinnae look away. Look at me!"

Tears press in on me as I lift my gaze, taking in his green eyes and concerned scowl. I don't say anything. The only options are to lie, to tell him the complete truth about my medical problems, or to stay silent.

I choose the last option because I'm not sure what will come out of my mouth if I open it. I'm uncomfortable being pressed against him. Being touched by his hot hands is a new kind of torture.

Certainly, I will do what I have to do to keep my own counsel.

But what real choice do I have?

"What aren't ye telling me, lass?" he whispers. "Hm?"

I muster all the strength left in my body to raise my hands to his chest and shove him away. I look at him, warning him with a steely gaze.

"Don't," I say softly. "Please, Hades."

Last time I used this voice on him, Hades roughly pushed me away. And this time is no different. He releases me instantly, a sneer lifting his lip. I stumble back, my steps unsure.

"Be careful what ye wish for, lassie."

He stalks away, his expression imperious. I watch him go, waiting until he is nearly out of sight before I sit down, my muscles trembling with the effort I expended to stay standing.

The soft sands greet me like a long lost lover. I turn my gaze toward the ocean, repressing tears.

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CHAPTER TEN

HADES

That night, it rains for the first time since our arrival on the island. This is no mere sprinkle. This is near-hurricane conditions, driving rain hurtling in seemingly random directions, wind whipping around, debris from palm trees flying every which way. We don't have power or electricity in this place, nothing to distract from the howling winds that shake the entire cottage.

I text Eros an update but hear nothing in response. Strange, but I'm sure he has his reasons his silence. Hours later, I get a single mysterious message.

On the way.

Where he's on the way to, I couldn't say. Sighing, I put my phone away and stare out the tiny window.

Eventually the storm outside causes Persephone to come out from the bedroom she's been hiding in since this afternoon, a hesitant look on her face. She finds me staring broodingly out as the wind snaps a tree in half and flings it across the beach.

"How long will the storm go on?" she asks.

I glance over at her. She doesn't seem to worry about the chaos outside. Maybe living on the Gulf Coast has something to do with her calm questions.

It's annoying.

"Do I look like I would know?" I ask.

Persephone sighs silently, removing her ugly sweatshirt that she's had on since we arrived. Underneath she wears a long black dress with elegant

spaghetti straps. As she wriggles free of her sweatshirt, she leans forward, and I get an eyeful of her perfectly shaped breasts.

My eyebrows rise slightly. *Holy hell.* Her slim neck, delicate collarbones, and the swell of her breasts almost knock me back.

She glances up, realizes that I've been staring directly down her top, and flushes a brilliant scarlet. Crossing her arms over her chest, she lifts her chin and tosses back her dark mane.

"It's getting really hot in here," she says. Defensive, as if she needs a reason for showing off her pretty décolletage.

My body tightens and I am aware of having half an erection. I clear my throat.

I should say something. Tell her she's fine as she is.

Or maybe I should just yell at her to leave me alone.

The two warring factions in my brain make it hard for me to decide anything at all. I open my mouth, my brain queueing up words without me even really thinking them through.

But I'm saved by the front door slamming open. I blink as Ares shouts to me.

"Hades! Come on out. We know that ye aren't screwing yer pretty little captive..."

Eros is right behind him. "He's been yakking nonstop about whether or not we would find ye two fucking or not. Do me a favor and kill us both."

I catch Persephone's eye for just a moment. My neck heats at my brothers' less than gentle jibes. They are right of course; under normal circumstances, I wouldn't even find someone weak enough to be kidnapped to be attractive.

I stare at Persephone, my mouth creasing on one side. Is she different, somehow? I'll admit to fighting an attraction to her since the moment I met her.

Ares swings his gaze from Persephone to me, looking us up and down. "It's like I said," he calls over his shoulder to Eros. "Poor sod hasn't even gotten his dick wet even though the girl needs us to survive now."

I crowd Persephone behind me, backing up until she is in the tiny bedroom.

Persephone moves closer to the door, trying to see Ares. But I don't move. Instead, I stand firm, taking up too much space in the doorway.

I shoot Ares a fiery look. "Fuck off."

Eros appears behind Ares, shoving him aside with a shoulder. I glance behind me and lick my lips. For some reason, I hate my brothers knowing that I was in this claustrophobic cottage with Persephone.

Nothing was happening...

But there is an undercurrent of sexual tension between the two of us, nonetheless.

Ares peers behind me and sees Persephone. He looks her up and down, a devilish smirk appearing on his face. "There ye are, sweetheart. I was starting to wonder whether Hades had locked ye away or something. He's pretty mental at times."

Persephone shoots him a tiny glare. "You kidnapped me from another country. You don't get to ask how I'm doing."

Eros grins and Ares chuckles. "She's got a little bit of snap back, doesn't she? I like feisty girls. They are all hellcats in bed."

"Shut up, Ares." I hold my arms out, ushering my brothers back into the cramped main room. "I need updates on what's going on. Are the plans still in place for Tunisia?"

Eros glances back over my shoulder and sends a wink to Persephone. She gives him the most dramatic glare that I've ever seen.

Inside, I puff up a little, feeling a strange mote of pride. She's prickly with me for sure. But not as standoffish as she seems to be with my brothers. Being the single one among us who she doesn't outright hate is...

Well, let's just say that women don't generally choose me when given the choice between all of us.

"Constantine has been making overtures to the Algerians," Ares says.

A rumble bursts from my chest. I turn away, following my brothers into the main room and dropping onto one of the chairs. "How does he know about what we have planned?"

Eros sits down, shaking his head. "I dinnae ken. We have played our cards very close to our chests this time around. Kept a tight circle."

Ares stays standing, aggravated by Eros's words. He ticks names off on his fingers. "Who could it be?"

"Etienne," Eros suggests.

My gaze hardens. "We just told him that we were looking for a forger. Nothing more specific than that."

"He probably ran straight to Constantine and told him who we were looking for," Ares said. He lets out a hiss, rubbing his hand through his dark

wavy hair. “Fuck. If it was Etienne, he also told Constantine that we have his ex-girlfriend.”

A heavy weight settles on my shoulders, like a blanket made of lead. “Fuck.” I cast a glance behind me, but the doorway where Persephone stood is empty. “That’s not good news, Ares.”

Eros flits his gaze over to the bedroom. Then he leans in. “Should we get another forger? Dispose of this one?”

My heart rate begins to thrum. “And how exactly would that help us?”

“Relax. We aren’t going to kill yer little girlfriend,” Ares says, rolling his eyes. “Eros is just brainstorming.” He pauses, yawning. “Did ye notice that it is hot as balls in here?”

Eros’s face tightens. I know that look. He was in fact trying to suggest that we should kill Persephone and start over with a new forger. That’s bloody obvious.

It’s important to me to seem impartial, so I let it slide.

“Constantine might just be sniffing around, trying to figure out when and where our next deal is going to take place,” I say. I purse my lips. “He might be relying on us to lash out when he gets too close to uncovering our secrets.”

“That is entirely possible.” Ares yawns, glancing at his watch. “I have to get some shut eye. We’ve been up for almost a whole day.”

He stands, using his meaty fist to bump Eros on the shoulder. Eros yawns too, cracks his neck, and heaves himself up. “Fucking time differences.”

“Ye’ll have to sleep in yer car,” I tell them.

Ares yawns and flips me off, but he doesn’t argue as he heads out the door again. Eros is right on his tail, starting to argue with him over who should sleep where in the car.

I stand as they head out, watching them silently. Planning my next move, as it were.

I guess I should first check on Persephone. When I lumber into the bedroom, I find her crouched by the corner.

“Lass?”

She nearly jumps out of her skin. Looking at me with wide eyes, she silences me with a finger placed against her lips. When she moves back, she reveals a little bundle of twigs that has been stuffed with bits of fabric and wool. Something wriggles inside.

I lean closer, frowning, and I can just make out a pink, wrinkly newborn rabbit.

My eyes widen. I glance at her.

Rabbits have always been close to my cold, dead heart. They remind me of when I was young, when I would care for wild rabbits in the lush green springs of the Hebrides.

I often thought of them secretly as my friends.

Now, though, I tilt my head at the little clutch secreted away in the bundle of twigs.

“Where did they come from?” I ask, my voice low.

Persephone glances back at me with a shrug. “I don’t know. I just found them here. It seems foolish to bother them.” She frowns and looks around. “I’m not sure where their mother is.”

I watch her face for a second as she looks at the little bundle. She frets, her brow creasing.

I remember all too well having tender feelings about beasts just like these rabbits. Something inside me seizes and jerks, finding common ground where none was expected.

So far, Persephone has shown me prickly, weepy and pleading. But I haven’t had a chance to see this softer side of her.

A side that beckons to me, whispers that there is so much more of this woman yet to be discovered.

She looks back at me, her hazel eyes concerned. “Do you think that the mother will be okay out there with all this going on?”

She motions to the roof so that I know she means the weather. Her distress seems genuine.

“If I had to guess, lass, this weather is a part of everyday life here.” I suck in a breath.

She nods, looking at the rabbits. “I would hate for them to be without their mother. That’s all. No one should be motherless.”

At Persephone’s mention of being motherless, I back out of the room. A pang strikes at my heart. I know what it is like to grow up without a mother.

There is one little part of me that desperately wants to know what Persephone’s story is. Need to have her tell me everything, no holds barred, from her birth to present. I’m just dying of curiosity.

But I am at my emotional limits for today. So I don’t say another word to Persephone. Instead, I turn and walk away from her.

If my life were different.
If I wasn't such a cold, heartless bastard.
If she weren't such a weak, caring woman.
Maybe I would seduce her.
Maybe we would spend the night together on a beach in Malta.
Maybe that would turn into a week, a month, or a summer.
I walk into the living room, closing my eyes. A summer of Persephone would be nice.
I want her. I think that she wants me too, in her way.
But no.
I can't get distracted. I have this mission, to ruin Constantine. And I'll be damned if I'm led astray from it, even by a raven haired beauty with enchanting hazel eyes.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

PERSEPHONE

I avoid leaving the bedroom later that night because I can hear their voices. Hades, Ares, and Eros.

All three villains. All three intriguing.

All three utterly off limits to me. I've been down the garden path before. The last time I followed my heart, it led me straight into Constantine's arms.

Where did that land me?

Almost dying on a beach, with Constantine screaming that I had betrayed him. I still don't fully understand exactly what set him off. All I can say is that he had done so many lines of blow and maybe he just... snapped.

In any event, Constantine left me for dead. And it took so long for me to free myself of his nettling brambles that I'm forever wary now.

Besides, that assumes that someone who looks like Hades would want this new, damaged version of me. After Constantine backed me off a cliff and I tumbled to the ground, I hit my head hard enough to have a bruise on my *brain*.

But that's not the worst of it.

That kind of misplaced trust causes permanent damage. That's what I now associate with following my heart.

Clenching my right fist, I wallow in the bedroom until the voices die away. I wait by my door for twenty minutes just to be absolutely sure that they aren't coming back.

When I open the door, though, the house seems to be at rest. Ares and Eros are nowhere to be seen. I catch the scent of simmering onions and garlic in the air as I approach the kitchen.

Peeking around the wide doorframe, I find Hades standing at the counter, a wooden spoon pointed at a burner. I raise my eyebrows, surprised.

I wouldn't have guessed that any of the three knew how to boil water. I edge closer, trying to determine which brother it is.

My breath catches as Hades turns around and spots me. I think I see a note of amusement in his face before he looks back at the stovetop.

"I was wondering when ye would show yer face," he says. "Driven out by hunger, then?"

My cheeks heat and I step out into the doorway. "Your brothers are too loud for me." I raise up on my tiptoes, trying to see what he is cooking on the stove without moving closer.

"Aye. They are quite brash. But ye have naught to fear from them just now. They are both asleep in their car." Hades looks at me, gently nodding his head at the stove. "Shakshuka."

I crinkle my nose, stepping into the kitchen. "Pardon?"

Curiosity pulls me toward the stove, though I stay far clear of Hades' big body. He sends me another look laced with amusement.

"Shakshuka. It's a middle eastern recipe. Eggs poached in tomatoes." He raises an overflowing measuring cup full of stewed tomatoes, showing it to me before he pours it into the frying pan where the onions and garlic have been popping and crackling.

"That smells amazing," I say, edging cautiously toward the stove. "Kind of reminds me of the smell of crawfish etouffee."

His brow furrows. "Cannae say that I've had that."

"It's a creole dish." I take a deep breath and my mouth starts to water. "Where did you learn to cook that?"

He clears his throat, turning the heat down and putting a lid on the dish. "In my later teenaged years, I suppose. I was with the Special Air Forces, stationed in Casablanca." He purses his lips and lifts a shoulder. "We had a lot of free time. Free time and a fucking lot of sand."

My eyes widen. "You were in the military?"

I look at him, trying to imagine him wearing a deep blue khaki shirt and pants. I would bet anything that he filled out the uniform perfectly.

"Yes." He smirks. "I haven't always been in my current line of work. Though I have to say that I vastly prefer the freedom of my new job, not to

mention..." He gestures around to the house. "The pay is substantially better, if ye can imagine."

My lips twitch. "You seem to gravitate toward very dangerous career paths."

A rumble of something that might be laughter leaves his chest in a huff. "Yer right about that, lass. I dinnae mind living on the edge."

My stomach growls audibly. Hades slides me a look. "Sit down. I'll feed ye."

Wrinkling my face, I do as he says. For a couple of minutes, I watch as he adds eggs to the mixture and pulls a golden loaf of crusty, tantalizing bread from the kitchenette's tiny oven.

Soon enough, Hades slides a steaming hot bowl of poached eggs and tomato in front of me, accompanied by a fragrant hunk of bread.

"I need—" I start.

He cuts me off. "Ye dinnae need a fork, lass. That's what the bread is for."

He sets down a bowl in the spot beside mine and sits, picking up his own piece of bread. "Like so."

Hades scoops his bread into the tomatoes, raising a heaping bite to his mouth. He blows on his food for a second before he devours the tomatoes and peppers off the bread. I watch him for a second, my lips puckered in a frown.

I don't understand why Hades is suddenly being so... well, so damned hospitable to me. Picking up the hunk of warm bread, I sniff it.

Hades stops eating, looking at me. "What? Ye dinnae trust my food even though I am eating it too?"

I drop my gaze, my face warming. "Why should I trust you? You took me from my home and keep holding me hostage."

He takes a big bite, shrugging. He chews and swallows. "So? That doesn't mean I'm going to poison ye, lass. Ye might be here against yer will, but we dinnae have to be enemies. I bear ye no ill will."

My brows rise at his words. "But I have to get back to my life!"

Hades squints at me, his mouth flattening. "What exactly are ye so fired up about getting back to? Before we found ye at the gas station, we visited yer little hovel."

Anger flashes through my veins, quick and hot as lightning. "It's not a hovel."

He shrugs. “I’ve been all over the world, including extensive travel in countries that could be considered the third world. Trust me when I call it a hovel.” He takes another bite of tomato, this time careful to add some egg to it.

“Fuck off,” I say, raising a finger in warning.

He rolls his eyes and shakes his head in response.

I look down at the food. My stomach growls again so I tear a tiny piece of bread off, stuffing it in my mouth. The groan of satisfaction that slips past my lips is entirely unintended.

“Umf,” I sigh, closing my eyes. It is very good bread, crunchy on the outside and soft on the inside, buttery through and through.

“So,” Hades says, studying me. “Are ye hiding out from Constantine, then? Is that why ye live in such reduced circumstances?”

I dart a glance at him and then busy myself by loading a heap of steaming tomatoes and peppers onto the bread. The aroma itself is tantalizing. I can practically taste the hot, savory, salty mixture before it even hits my tongue. When it does, my toes practically curl up in satisfaction.

Hades is actually a good cook, despite my doubts.

I chew and swallow, trying to parse the flavors of the tomato-pepper blend. When I look up again, Hades is giving me a rather impatient look.

I lick my lips, savoring how the dish has a little spice that still clings to my tongue. I wave my hand at Hades.

“I didn’t just decide one day to leave Constantine,” I explain. “There was...” I pause, thinking of how exactly to say it. “An incident.”

“Would that be the murder that ye are wanted for?”

“I didn’t murder anyone,” I fire back, my expression hardening.

“No?”

I look up, my chin rising, my mouth turning down at the corners. “I’m wanted for questioning. There is no one that actually believes that I murdered anyone. Especially not...” I trail off, my mouth twisting. “Constantine chased my best friend and I off of a cliff. He wanted us dead. Maddie... Maddie died. And he was almost successful in killing me, as well.” I bring my hand up, touching the back of my head. “He put me into a coma for three days. When I woke up, I figured it was as good a sign as any that the breakup was final.”

Hades cocks his head, his eyes tightening on my face. “Why didn’t ye just stay and tell the police what ye just told me?”

I snort, shaking my head. “The New Orleans police would have pinned it on me. Either because they were in Constantine’s pocket... or maybe just because they are too lazy or incompetent to find out what really happened. As soon as I could walk, I got the hell out of Dodge.”

He considers me for another few seconds and then nods. “I’d have done the same.”

“Thank you,” I reply, my tone tart. “Are you satisfied now that you’ve dug around in my past?”

A blip of humor passes over his expression. “No. I’m never content. Not really.”

“No?” I ask. I use the corner of my hunk of bread to break the yolk of one of my eggs. “Well, at least you can be certain about one thing. I make terrible decisions when it comes to men. I dated Constantine for two years, even knowing that he was a drug addicted piece of trash who did illegal things. And before him, my high school boyfriend was a psycho too. After we broke up, he killed two people in an attempted liquor store robbery.”

Hades is quiet for a long moment. “So ye are attracted to criminals, it seems.”

I crack a cruel smile as I take another bite. “Yup. There is something seriously wrong with me. After Constantine, I just decided to take myself off the market permanently. One brush with death was enough for me. For a whole damn lifetime.”

Hades scrapes the last bite from his bowl into his mouth, chewing. All the while, his gaze is heavy on me.

“Can I ask ye something?”

I give a humorless chuckle. “Why not? I’m an open book today, apparently.”

He pushes out a long breath. “Ye said the Constantine chased ye off of a cliff. Ye hit yer head?”

I nod, my mouth twisting to the side. I am not sure I like the area Hades is probing. “Yeah...”

“I noticed when we were on the beach the other day that ye were heavily favoring yer left side. Is that because—“

“I don’t like to talk about it.” I shoot to my feet, my face radiating heat. “Look. I know that I’m damaged. There is no need to rub my face in it,

Hades.”

“What? That’s not—I do not think yer damaged. Jesus.” For the first time ever, he looks like he’s at a loss for words. “Lass, I didn’t mean anything by it. Ye can’t honestly blame me for my curiosity.”

I clench my right hand, grimacing. I feel myself begin to tremble and tear up. “I’m going out for a bit. Alone.”

He scowls at me but I just whirl, heading toward the front door.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

HADES

In the darkness, I head outside to the beach. The moon is high, scattering shadows over the sand dunes on the beach. It's still sticky and warm outside and the water stretches out before me like a dark, sleek cloud. I listen to it lap gently against the shore as I disrobe. First my shoes, then my pants. I glance back at the house for a moment before I unbutton my shirt and slide it off, carefully folding it and placing it on top of my pants.

As I take off my boxer briefs, I try not to shiver at the unusual sensation of wind brushing against my back. The scars on my back form an intricate, crisscrossed pattern, all the way from one side of my back to the other. There are even some stray marks that go down to my elbows and even my wrists.

My father was too drunk to be careful when he beat me. And he left behind traces of exactly how weak I was.

The fucking bully in him couldn't bear to see my weakness.

So, he left me with these scars. Scars that I don't like anyone to see. Not even my brothers, who were there when the scars were still fresh abrasions and welts.

I prided myself on never flinching or showing any pain then. And my choices in adulthood have only doubled down on that.

No mercy.

No weakness.

No justice. No judges either.

I live my life on the brink of everything. Just outside of normal people's field of vision, unafraid of their judgements.

I stride coolly down to the water, sinking in as soon as I can. The water is not refreshing, exactly. But it is warm, warmer even than skin temperature like being in a giant bathtub that's only just started to cool off. I swim out, freestyle stroke, hand over hand, splashing quietly in the water. I don't keep track of the distance, merely swimming at a breakneck pace I have to stop, treading water and gasping for breath.

I dip my head under the water and then resurface, pulling in heavy gasps of air. How alone I am right now, I think. Would anyone really care if I simply did not ever make it back to the shore?

I probably couldn't kill myself like this. As I tread water, I think about my brothers. They still need me, whether they'd like to admit it or not. And there is my enemy, Constantine.

I feel the prickling, burning need to see his little empire burn to the ground. It would happen. That much was certain.

All that was left was for me to watch, like Nero watching Rome crumble before his very eyes.

I turn around, bobbing my head under the water one last time. Then I swim back to shore, moving more slowly this time. When my feet hit the sandy ocean shore, I dash the water from my face. I make it halfway out of the water before I realize I am not alone.

Standing next to my pile of discarded clothes is Persephone. She cocks her head and takes in my naked torso, glistening and bare under the sultry glow of the moon.

She's wearing the silky black dress that I remember seeing earlier, her breasts only held in place by the fragile spaghetti straps of her top. The sweater that I remember is nowhere to be seen. She seems to glow in the moonlight, as if lit from within.

"I wondered whether you were awake," she ventures, her voice carrying the ten yards between us with ease.

"And now that ye've found me... are ye satisfied?" I ask. I realize that I am hovering in the water, behaving like an idiot. Like a teenaged boy, too scared of being naked in front of a girl.

That won't do.

I surge forward, moving out of the water. Persephone licks her lips, glancing nervously toward my cock once. Her pupils dilate, just a hair. Then she flushes and diverts her gaze.

She doesn't leave, though. She just... waits.

I stalk up the beach, snatching my black boxer briefs off the ground and stepping into them. Once I have them on, I pick up my shirt. Persephone turns and her eye catches on the scars covering my back.

Her jaw goes slack. She reaches out, her fingers barely touching the back of my muscular arm. “What... what?”

“Stop,” I warn her, pulling away. My tone turns lethal. “Dinnae touch me.”

Her hazel eyes are wide with disbelief as she keeps looking. “Does... does that hurt?”

“It’s fine,” I hiss. I yank at my shirt, but my wet skin stops it on my forearms. It’s halfway on and my hands are shaky as they pull at the material. “Fucking hell.”

“Hades,” she says, her voice plaintive. “Wait. Please.”

At that, my breath seizes. I grimace at the ground, torn.

I want her to look away. I want her to not have seen the scars.

But her melodic voice, at just that soft timbre... that makes it hard to keep moving away from her.

Persephone looks me in the eye, moving her hand ever so slowly until her fingers touch the back of my arm. She waits, perhaps checking to see if I am going to cry out or lose my cool. But when I simply don’t react, I can feel the heat of her fingers tracing an arc across my back.

I have the sudden, violent urge to physically make her stop. To whirl, grab her hand, bend her fingers back until she cries out in pain.

But I don’t. I’m not my father.

I just stand here, my hand clenching into fists, my eyes sinking closed.

Persephone’s voice is hesitant. Shaky, even.

“How did you get these scars, Hades?”

I weigh my options. Lie? Tell the truth? Something in between?

A minute passes while I wrestle with what to tell her. Finally, I just tell her what I am able to.

“I was a child,” I say, my voice gone to gravel. “Dinnae ask me for more.”

I feel the warmth of her hand dip to my lower back. Spreading her fingers, she trails her touch up my spine. “This is okay, right?”

I shiver. My thoughts are a tangled snare of dark, unnamed emotions. I can’t formulate any words. So, I just nod stiffly.

To be touched like this... Persephone's delicate fingers trace the lines of my scars as they arc across my flesh, back and forth. Almost no one has seen my scars since I was a kid.

To have this woman bear witness, to have her touch my back and ask me gentle questions about how they came to be...

It is both pleasurable to an extreme degree and at the same time deeply humiliating. My body almost hums at her innocent touch. But in the very next thought, I want to kill her for taking such liberties with me.

That doesn't stop me from leaning into her touch. The sensation of her fingers touching the skin of my back... even the girls I fuck don't touch me like this. I never take my shirt off, doing the deed quickly and in dark places where my wearing a shirt doesn't really matter at all.

Persephone brings her other hand up, rubbing away a knot of tension just beneath my right shoulder blade. The sensation switches from heavenly to painful, then from overwhelming to eyes-rolling-up-in-my-skull blissful.

I can't get enough.

Her touch is killing me.

I must have more of it.

Finally, when I can't bear another second of her touch, I lurch away from her.

"Enough," I grit out. "Get away from me, lass."

"Hades—" She clings to my arm.

I rear up, whirling to face her. I get close to her face, my entire body trembling, my chest heaving. "Dinnae," I grit out, a single word of warning.

Persephone's mouth opens, poised to say something. My gaze slides down as if drawn by sheer magnetism, fixing on her pink lips. I pull my shirt up onto my shoulders, provoked by her very presence.

It's only the work of a second to spear my hand in the back of her hair. My fingers pull her head back, my mouth descending to press against hers. Her lips are tense, and she makes a tiny sound of shock. The second I brush her mouth, I know that there is no going back.

The honeyed heat of Persephone's lips. The crisp, wet slide of the tip of my tongue against hers. The scent of her in my nose, floral, clean and delicate.

The unintended noise I make in the back of my throat, halfway between a growl and a purr.

But the most shocking part is the fact that, after a moment of utter surprise, she kisses me back. Her hands curl in the darkness of my shirt as she tugs me *closer*.

I love her reaction every bit as much as I am disgusted by the whole interaction. I allow myself a few seconds of bliss, working my tongue and lips against hers, breathing her in.

And then I pull away, my chest heaving, pushing her back a step.

“What the fuck?” I ask. “No. That’s not... I shouldn’t be *kissing* ye.”

I catch a glimpse of her face. She wipes her lips and looks at me out of the corner of her eyes, bewildered. Her expression slips into a careful mask, giving nothing away. She watches as I redress, buttoning my shirt and yanking my pants up my legs.

I clear my throat, feeling that it is stuffed full of that same dark, needy, unnamed tangle of emotions. Persephone pushes out her bottom lip and considers me after I get my shoes on.

“Hades.”

I glance up at her, a sigh on my lips. “Aye.”

“Thank you for...” She gestures, looking for the right word. “Trusting me. To touch your back, I mean.”

I shoot her a tiny glare. “I dinnae trust ye, Persephone. I dinnae trust any woman. Ye all lie. Ye all manipulate. Ye all act innocent when ye know yer at fault.” I finish tying my shoe and rise, pulling myself to my full height, stepping toward her. I stand over her, making myself the dominant one once more.

I pin her to the spot with only my prickly stare. “Ye just happened to walk out here at the right time.”

She looks up at me, swallowing thickly. Showing signs of nervousness, which is just what I wanted. Her mouth twists with a mote of displeasure.

“I see you, Hades. It’s taken me a while, but I can make out your angles and corners now. Don’t think I haven’t seen you looking at me with a longing expression when you think I’m not paying attention.”

My answer is a derisive huff of laughter. “I haven’t been longing for anyone. I dinnae long.”

The tiniest smirk crosses her expressive mouth. “I’ve got your number.”

Rolling my eyes, I shoot her a final glare. Then I bump her shoulder with mine as I stalk back toward the house.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

PERSEPHONE

“**W**here are your brothers?” I shade my eyes and pin Hades with a look.

He squints across the water. “They are catching a plane to London, I think.”

“Ah. So where are we going?” I ask, squinting into the bright midday sun. Usually with the sun comes heat, but not right now.

No, the breeze coming off the water is actually pretty brisk, no matter how bright it may be. We are on an incredible glittering mega-yacht, cruising steadily away from land. The island is somewhere behind us now, almost out of sight.

We’ve been on board for a couple of hours, each luxuriating in the privacy that the yacht affords its extremely wealthy clientele. Everything I have laid eyes so far on is teak and marble, accented with what I’m fairly certain is real gold. I counted eight fully made up, pristine king sized beds in eight gleaming bedrooms. Each one has its own full bathroom, too. I’m talking marble soaking tub, curtains drawn back to show off the ocean view, and gold-finished fixtures everywhere I look.

There must be so few people in the world who can afford to travel in this sort of... extravagant *luxury*. Perhaps Hades is even richer than I thought. That, or he knows someone who just has a ship like this lying around.

I grew up solidly wedged in the middle class. The product of a flighty, at times manic painter and a stoic, married local politician who carried on an affair discreetly for almost fifteen years. My brother and I were kept

quietly out of the way; everything was provided for us and in return, we took my mother's surname of Corbin.

So, the view from the top deck of this freaking ship? It is honestly breathtaking.

Hades turns from the railing, eyeing me. "We have a plane to catch in a few hours."

I shoot him a glare, sipping the drink that the waitress brought me. "That doesn't even vaguely answer my question."

He cocks his head, his gaze cool and calculating. Ever since he left me on the beach a few days ago, he has been distant.

Cold, even.

I can only think of his hot mouth pressing against my lips, his tongue stroking mine firmly. The little growl of satisfaction that buzzed in his chest and excited me like nothing ever has before.

Adding all of that to how he's been behaving only makes me feel confused, honestly. My cheeks burn faintly as I feel his disdainful stare.

He quirks a brow. "We're heading to Valencia."

I blink several times, setting my drink down. "Valencia, Spain?"

"Yes." Hades releases a silent sigh and stalks over to the cluster of white wicker couches where I am perched. He drops into a chair and his lips purse. He looks out at the ocean, but I can feel him purposefully not looking at me.

It has been a trying couple of days, to say the least. Thank god we were given a place to shower and change once we stepped onto this yacht.

"Fuck off!" he shouts, his voice a warning. I turn my head and see the waitress scurry back out of sight.

Idly, I wonder if he's about to tell me the same thing he said on the first day I met him. Something about how he will kill the family of any of the yacht's crew if he so much as thinks I'm trying to win the crew member over to my side. I tense, leaning forward on the couch, a tiny grimace on my face.

Hades smooths a hand down his crisp black suit, his lips twitching. "I find myself worrying far too often about ye."

It catches me by surprise and causes my heart to thump against my ribs. I glance at him, trying desperately to read his face for some clue as to what he's talking about.

"You do?" I ask.

He shoots me that same cool look again. “We need to settle some things between us. I have too much on my mind to be worried about ye trying to run away.”

I swallow, lifting my chin. My heart gives a sympathetic squeeze in my chest.

He hadn’t meant what I thought, then.

“Oh,” I say.

He flicks his fingertips, sitting back in his chair. “Ye can’t run off. I will find ye. I will hurt ye. And if ye try to alert anyone to yer situation — anyone — I will kill them.” His voice is flat and emotionless, almost bored. “But if ye behave, if ye do as I request... then I will pull some strings for ye. I can make it safe for ye to go back to New Orleans.” A tiny frown crosses his face. “Eventually.”

My heart skips a beat. “What do you mean by that, exactly?”

He squints out across the water for several seconds. “If this deal goes well, I can bribe or intimidate the New Orleans police into not hassling ye. If ye decide ye want me to do that, of course.”

I look down, frowning at my knees under my long black dress. “That sounds great, but—”

Hades cuts me off with a gesture. “I can do it. It’s definitely in my power. And I can pay ye handsomely. But I need ye to promise me that ye won’t tell anyone what we are doing or try to send out a distress signal of any kind.”

I lick my lips, hesitating, uncertain. “Okay...”

“Okay, what?”

I pull in a breath and push it out. “Okay. I agree to your terms. Though you probably could have just offered to pay me a lot rather than going through the motions of kidnapping me first.”

“I couldn’t be sure that ye were not in Constantine’s pocket.” He settles back with an aggravated sigh. “I’m still not absolutely sure.”

I roll my eyes. “That’s wishful thinking on your part, it sounds like.”

He stares me down for a few seconds until I flush. He reaches in the pocket of his suit jacket, producing a list handwritten in tight, masculine capital letters. I pick up the piece of paper and sit back, my brow furrowing as I read it.

It’s a list of documents that he will need forged. My eyes widen as I take in the breadth of exactly what he is asking for.

“This is...” I glance up nervously. “You really want to smuggle eight shipping containers into...” I reference the sheet again. “Four different ports in four different African countries? Plus, you want new identification papers for everyone involved at all four ports—“

He crosses his legs, his expression carefully blank. “Are ye saying ye can’t do it?”

“I didn’t say that,” I hedge. “But you’re asking for a lot. I mean... what could you possibly want with eight shipping containers? Those things are massive!”

He tilts his head to the side. “The client wants a lot of guns. So I am giving them a lot of fucking guns. If ye’ve got a problem with that, I would say ye can go fuck yerself.” He looks directly at me, his green eyes pinning me in place. “Can ye do it?”

I swallow, nodding softly. “Yes. I’ll need... things. Reference materials. Several printers. Probably some special inks and waxes for seals. Contact paper.”

He stops me by putting up a hand. “Make me a list. I’ll get it for ye.”

I scrunch up my face. “Hades?”

He rolls his head on his shoulders. “What?”

“I’ll need a phone.”

His head snaps toward me, his look black as night. “What for?”

I straighten my spine, shooting him a glare. “Research.”

He studies my face for a few moments, clearly measuring my worth. “Okay. But Persephone...”

He leans forward, catching my hand. I still, my eyes widening. His free hand comes up to cup my face, then it slides around to grip the back of my neck.

“Dinnae forget what we have just agreed upon. And dinnae think that I’ll forget, either.”

I stare into his green eyes, blinking rapidly. “Of course,” I whisper.

His lips twitch. His eyes slide down to my mouth, then to my tits even though they are covered.

My nipples pebble, stiffening at the attention. The breath leaves my lungs in a soft gasp.

He could have me right now. Right here, on this uncomfortable wicker couch, out in the open where anyone could see. I would let him.

No, I would encourage him.

I think that fact is written across my face. He smirks for a half second before he turns me loose, shoving me back.

He points a finger at me. “Make the list, sweetheart.”

Then he gets up and swaggers off, disappearing from view. And I am left, cursing myself and my terrible taste in men.

If I had any sense, I would take that sexual tension and shove it deep down somewhere.

I would certainly be safer that way.

Hades is a vicious psychopath. I know that.

And still...

Standing up on wobbly legs, I head to my room to start making my list.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HADES

As I step off the plane onto the tarmac at a private airport, I stretch. The Valencia sun beams brightly, drenching the entire world in light. It's less hot here than it was in Turks and Caicos, thank god. As a Scot who wears black suits almost without exception, I was definitely ready to get the fuck out of the tropics.

It's warm here, but it's a sultry Mediterranean heat. I glance toward the little airport, fishing a pair of sunglasses out of my pocket.

The tiny building reflects the city; white sandstone walls, neat shadowy portcullis style windows, red clay tiles on the roof. It feels so distinctly European that I let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding in for the last few weeks.

Persephone descends the staircase just behind me, shading her eyes. She points to the outcropping of the city only a few miles away, sitting high on a cliff overlooking a truly spectacular aqua ocean.

"That is just..." She shakes her head, something like awe in her eyes. "Stunning. When I was in art school, I wanted to study abroad in Barcelona. But my parents said it was too expensive."

She wrinkles her nose delicately.

My lips twitch. "Well, now yer here. Maybe we can see art while we are here."

She looks at me, her eyebrows rising. "Really?"

I want to roll my eyes at her eager enthusiasm, but I don't. Offering her an elbow, I jerk my head toward the city. "We'll see. Come on."

She gives me a cool little smile and takes me arm, allowing me to guide her to a waiting limo. As we drive into Valencia, I watch her as she presses

against her window, trying to take in every sight.

Her straight, dark hair is tied up in a loose bun, stray hairs beginning to fall out around the nape of her neck. She wears a long black dress with a strappy top. It is made of some lightweight knit material and my fingers itch to touch it. My eyes fix on a spot just where the fabric pools in the middle of her back, the material dark against her tanned skin.

But for so many reasons, I don't. Not only do we not have that sort of relationship. But I feel like touching her so casually would be opening a door to something else entirely.

Besides, watching Persephone as she gawks at the architecture is enough for right now. Soon we get into the city though, turning down roads with clusters of white buildings on each side of the car and people crossing the streets.

Persephone seems to withdraw, looking vaguely nervous and chewing on her lower lip. She glances at me, her cheeks heating, and her fingers trace the lines of her collarbones.

"What happened?" I ask, scrutinizing her. "Did ye see something ye didn't like."

"No." She shakes her head. Her cheeks darken and she frowns slightly. "I'm just tired."

I narrow my eyes, but she looks away, clearing her throat. Sitting back in my seat, I look on as she grows more and more agitated. First, she picks at an invisible thread on her dress. Then she starts bouncing her knee, seeming jittery.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. A text from Ares, updating me on their latest exploits.

Heading to meet a contact in Cairo. Are we on track with getting our documents as planned?

I think for a moment before texting back. *I'm on top of it.*

When we get to downtown Valencia, I tell the driver to stop. "Just let us out here. And make sure the bags get to the villa."

Persephone looks at me with those wide hazel eyes, swallowing. "Hades..."

I open the door and jerk my chin toward outside. "Come on. You need some fresh air."

Climbing out of the backseat of the limo, I help Persephone out. She shades her eyes again, glancing around with an anxious expression. I bang

on the roof of the car and it pulls away, leaving us on a cobblestone street. To our right, there are shops in neat little rows of white sandstone. To our left, the land starts to gradually give way to the sea.

I stand to head down the street and Persephone hurries after me, tossing a glance at the crowded street just behind her. After a few moments, I have to ask.

“Are ye looking for someone?”

I crane my neck but the only people I see are a bunch of high school aged girls wearing Catholic school uniforms pouring from the steps of a church as we walk past. But Persephone?

Persephone flinches.

“No,” she says quickly, looking down at her feet. She draws her arms around herself, hugging herself. Her footsteps on the cobblestones are loud and hurried.

I glance around again and then shrug. “Okay. Our villa is up there...”

I point to a spot in the middle distance, sitting at the top of a hill.

Her tongue darts out to wet her lips. She nods and heads in the direction I pointed. My eyes stick to her body. I can tell something is off, but I can’t read her mind.

Her breathing is visibly faster, her chest rising and falling as she walks. And her golden green eyes flecked with brown rove over every face that she sees.

Expectant.

As soon as we pass the church, I grab her arm and pull her roughly into a little sheltered alcove just beside the next staircase.

Persephone looks up at me, her face narrowing and her expression growing hard. She wriggles and tries to shake off my steel grip. “Hades, will you let me go?”

A man passes on the street behind me. I know this because she looks at him, her eyes widening alarmingly. I turn my head and do a double take.

“What?” I ask. “Do ye know him?”

For a second, Persephone swallows and looks at the man. He’s just an average guy in black board shorts and a tight white t-shirt. He doesn’t give us a second look and shuffles on down the street, earbuds in his ears.

“Persephone,” I say, shaking her. “Do ye know him?”

She pauses, then shakes her head. “I... I don’t think so.”

She sounds like a mousy little girl. Not at all like the stubborn, odd girl that I've come to begin to know over the past weeks.

I grip both of her arms, forcing her to look up at me. She's shaking like a leaf and I move closer out of some unknown instinct. "Who are ye looking for, lass?" I ask, scanning her face as I block her from view. Protecting her, I guess ye could say.

Her eyes shine with a sudden sheen of tears. "I don't know. I just... Whenever I am in public, especially around large crowds..." She sucks in a breath to calm herself. "I worry that Constantine might be there. Or he might have someone working for him, feeding information back to him." She chews on her lip, her eyes sliding away behind me, hyper vigilant. "He might have somebody walk right by me that could stab me with a syringe. My life would be forfeit, just like that."

My brows rise. I glance over my shoulder. "Is there some reason that ye think he would know where to find us right now?"

She flushes, looking down at my chest. Her denial is barely a whisper. "No."

I ease my grip, rucking my hands up and down her arms quickly and giving her a hard look. "Do ye think that I should worry about Constantine more than usual here in Valencia?"

She swallows and still doesn't meet my gaze. "No."

She sounds like she's holding back tears. I don't know what to do with her other than to get her out of the street so that she can stop shaking and jumping every time she hears a loud noise of any kind boom out in our vicinity.

I lick my lips and look behind me a final time. No one is approaching. There is nothing to raise any sort of alarms at all.

"All right." Stepping out, I pull her away from the wall and put my arm around her. I tuck her under my arm and start to stroll toward the villa, casual yet with purpose. "Stay close. Okay?"

Persephone nods, her eyes fixed on the hilltop that I pointed out earlier. I tense up when I feel her slide an arm around my waist. But she looks so completely freaked out that I just let it slide.

I would be lying if I said that the gentle pressure of her arm pressed against my lower back felt sinfully good and at the same time extremely alarming.

I need to say something, anything, that will get us both talking. Get us out of our heads, just for a little while.

I end up with, "What did ye study at school?"

Her steps slow for a moment. She looks up at me, her brow furrowing. "What?"

I clear my throat, acutely aware of her arm against my back, my arm laid over her shoulders like a battle cloak.

As we walk, the houses that line the street begin to shift. They grow larger at first. Then they disappear behind white sandstone fences. Instead of seeing doors and windows close enough to touch, now there is only the occasional arched trellis and wrought iron gateway. In between, smooth white sandstone gates rise above my head.

I think about my own question again, my face narrowing with concentration.

"Ye said ye went to art school. What did ye study?"

Persephone's lips quirk. Her eyes slide away, as ye often see when someone is trying to remember something. "Painting, mainly. A lot of studio work. But also, the history of painting. Art history, too."

I purse my lips. "Those sound like the same thing."

She slides me a glance. "They aren't."

We pass a large cemetery on the left, overlooking the sea. The street turns and begins to climb upward. The pave stones rise gently at first, getting steep and more crowded further on.

"Who was yer favorite painter? Or... I guess, what period?" I narrow my eyes, feeling like I'm not entirely sure what I'm talking about. "That's a thing, is it not?"

"It is." Persephone looks up at me. I see a tinge of relief on her beautiful face. "I like the English and Spanish Romantics quite a bit. Friedrich, Lorraine, Roussy- Triesson, Goya. They were quite expressive."

I nod. "I've heard of Goya, I think."

She sends an amused glance my way but I'm not particularly offended by it. I'm an expert in a lot of things, but painters are just so clearly not part of my world.

Around us, the crowd has now thinned and mostly dispersed. As we hike upward, we leave behind the ocean with its rocky, sandy views. We also leave nearly everyone behind.

Persephone's breathing returns to normal. Her eyes stop roving. But I don't drop my arm until we hit the steepest part of the hill. She squirms a little and I let her go.

My skin aches bittersweetly where her arm pressed into my lower back. I move away, huffing and puffing a little as we reach the hilltop. Glancing around, I see the gate to our villa on the left and a breathtaking vista spilling out from our feet, down the hill to the ocean.

"Not bad, eh?" I offer.

Persephone looks at me, giving me a small smile. "Now that there is no one on the street?" She looks around, sucking in a breath. "Yeah. It's beautiful."

I run a hand over the white sandstone wall, parking my chin toward the wrought iron gate. "This is our stop."

She wrinkles her nose, pushing her cheek out with her tongue. "Thank you. For... you know. Talking to me. I think I was freaking out."

I swing the gate open, smiling at her coolly. "Oh, ye think so?"

She blushes and ducks her head, shaking it as she heads in the gate. "I'm just trying to show a little gratitude, Hades."

She bends over and plucks a tiny flower from the otherwise perfect green carpet of grass. I can't help but glance at her ass.

My cock stirs. The black fabric of her dress seems to grow thin as it stretches.

My mouth begins to water.

She straightens back up, looking at the tiny blossom clasped in her fingers.

I close the gate after us. The villa is set back a way, white sandstone rising against the crisp green of the well-manicured lawn.

But my eyes are glued to Persephone's ass as she strolls toward the villa. I can't help it. Her ass sways ever so gently as she walks, seeming well muscled and perfectly plump.

I tilt my head, trying to figure out whether she is wearing any panties. It's impossible to tell. But for some reason, I want to believe that she's not.

That I could skim her dress up her legs, exposing her flawless ass. And there would be absolutely nothing between me and her. I could push her down with one hand, spread her thighs with the other, and press my whole face into her creamy ass—

"Hades?"

I blink a couple of times. I'm staring off into space, ignoring what is in front of my face. My neck heats and I realize that I have a full-fledged erection.

I clear my throat and try to subtly draw her attention away as I adjust my hard cock in my slacks. "What?"

She gives me a funny look then turns away, walking toward the front door of the villa. I trudge after her, feeling like a true villain.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

PERSEPHONE

I t's our third day in Valencia. Hades hasn't gotten up yet. Or at least, he hasn't made his presence known. But I'm up early, having tossed and turned all night.

Yesterday, I used my brand new iPad to email my brother Lawrence. Younger than me by two years, he has always been closer to me than either one of my parents.

Which is why I stayed in touch with him, even after I disappeared from New Orleans.

I feel more nervous than I should as I check my email. But there is nothing from him.

My inbox is empty.

I get up and make some coffee, staring off blankly. Before me is a picture window with a view of the ocean. But I'm acclimated to it now.

I am thinking about my brother and the reasons why he didn't respond. Is there a chance that he didn't get my email?

As the coffee maker brews, I check my sent mail. The email I sent him last night is first email listed.

I purse my lips, rubbing a spot between my eyebrows. Letting out a huge sigh, I pour myself a cup of coffee.

"Hey."

I practically jump out of my skin, sloshing the hot coffee over the rim of my mug. Turning around, I see Hades stride into the room, already dressed in the same style of black suit, black pants, and a black shirt. He's eschewed wearing a tie this morning but otherwise, he's a perfect, handsome robot.

I scowl at him and the corners of his lips lift just slightly. His version of a smile.

“Jumpy, jumpy. Careful, lass.”

I glare at him, taking a too-hot sip of my coffee. Without asking, he pours himself a cup from the pot I’ve made.

He takes a sip and then eyes his mug critically. “Ye call this coffee, do ye? I’ve had stronger milk tea.”

“If you don’t like it, you should get up earlier and make your own pot of coffee,” I snap.

Hades feeds me the faintest smirk. “And what has got ye in such a temper?”

My iPad chimes. I look over at it, biting my lip, my breath seizing. Hades didn’t explicitly forbid me from contacting anyone... but at the same time, I know that it’s probably not exactly welcome, either.

I don’t really want to hear him shouting me down for emailing Lawrence. So, I wrinkle my nose and set my cup down, ignoring the chime.

Hades squints at the iPad. “It seems that Apple wants ye to know something, lass. What do ye think it is?”

“Oh...” It feels strange to lie to Hades. “I don’t know. I haven’t really set it up right yet. It chimes and buzzes all the time and I’m not really sure why.”

His gaze flits to me, studying my face. He sips his coffee as casually as you would please. But his eyes are calculating.

If only I could keep the flush from my cheeks.

“Ye wouldn’t be trying to contact the authorities, would ye? Because I can assure ye that would be a very poorly thought out idea.”

I look up, drawing a breath. “No. I understand our deal all too well, Hades.”

His green eyes seem to see right through me, illuminating all my dark, hidden depths.

“Mm,” he says at last, a frown tugging his mouth down. “Well then, lass. I have someone for ye to meet. He has ink and contact paper. But I would rather ye see it first-hand rather than just trust it. He’s charging exorbitant prices, but ye never know with men like him.”

I nod slowly, sipping more coffee. “When?”

He glances at his wristwatch. “Now is as good a time as any. We can stop for some real coffee on the way. Plus, it’s too early for crowds.”

I stretch my neck to the side, pulling a face. I don't particularly want to leave the relative safety of the villa. But at least leaving will give me a reason to tidy away the iPad and its' chiming.

"Okay. Give me a minute to get dressed."

Picking up my iPad, I head into the bedroom that Hades had set up for me. Tossing the device onto the bed, I stretch again and head into the villa's walk-in closet.

Like the island mansion, this villa has a closet of beautiful, expensive clothes already curated for me. I'm not sure who was in charge of the wardrobe choices... but they have sleek dresses in solitary colors, trendy black jumpsuits, cashmere sweaters, and even ballet flats and stiletto heels in just my size.

Pulling on a long white silk dress and a pair of plain black flats, I pull my hair up into an elegant pile on the back of my head and pin it into place. The scoop neck of the dress suggests that I should wear some jewelry, perhaps. But whoever picked my clothes out apparently did not think to buy anything decorative.

Wrinkling my nose a little, I sigh and flounce out of the bedroom. Hades is frowning at his nails rather impatiently near the front door. When he hears me approaching, he straightens. His expression tightens when he sees me, his eyes traveling from my face down to my chest, his nostrils flaring slightly.

My neck gently flushes as I feel his eyes roaming my body. I clench my right fist, a flare of exquisite awareness shuddering across my bare skin.

"Ready?" I ask. My voice is too high and my tone too bright.

He clears his throat and I notice the way his big hands clench into fists.
"Aye."

Hades holds open the front door. I step outside, wincing at the sunlight. Already the entire world is sticky with brightness and it's only a bit past eight in the morning. The heat hasn't quite kicked in yet, but I have no doubt that it will as the morning progresses.

Hades reaches in his pocket and offers me a white leather pouch. I take it, squinting, only to find a pair of sunglasses.

"Ah," I murmur. I put them on, looking at him. "Thanks."

He gives me the faintest smirk as he slides on his own sunglasses.
"Come on."

He leads me out through the gates. We head down the hill. I am alert, watching for signs of a crowd. But he was right; it's too early for most people, it seems.

We walk back down toward the sea. Hades takes us on a slightly different path than we took previously. Still the beautiful light blue of the sea stands out against the multitude of white and off white sandstone buildings and their distinctive red roofs. From a distance, the businesses and houses look like rows of imperfect white teeth against the darker paving stones of winding streets.

I take it all in silently, chewing on my bottom lip and darting anxious stares at the smallest noise. When Hades touches my elbow to steer me into a shop, I jump at the graze of his skin.

“Easy, lass,” he says. He slides me a frank look as he points to the little coffee shop. “Maybe ye should get decaf.”

I glare at him. But I don’t shake off his touch. Instead, I let him anchor me as he urges me into the shop.

The unmistakable scent of roasting coffee beans hits my nose the second we enter. It’s a small, cramped space, room enough for a barista working a little cash register, a stack of paper cups, and four air pots of coffee. The rest of the space is dominated by a huge cylindrical copper coffee roaster, easily ten feet long and half as many high.

There are also two tables crammed into the shop. One is empty but the other has a young family sitting at it, dressed for a casual day at the beach. A young fair haired man, his dark-haired young wife, and a little boy with dark hair and glowing red cheeks remind me of nothing so much as Pinocchio for some reason. The man scowls at the boy and pushes a piece of breakfast pastry across the table at him.

As Hades steps up to the cash register, speaking to the barista in very broken Spanish, my gaze catches on the family again. The father says something sharp to the boy in a foreign language that doesn’t sound Spanish.

The boy is more interested in his action figure, a little green piece of plastic that he moves across their table. The mother says something quietly, reaching over to push the hair off the little boy’s furrowed brow.

The boy looks over in our direction for a moment and I smile at him. He studies me with a very intent look for a few seconds and then returns to playing.

I have the exact reaction I've had for years upon seeing this content, cozy little family. A distinct pang of longing.

Someday, I hope to have that idyllic family.

Hades shoots me a look as the barista fills two cups of coffee for us. I clear my throat and jerk my gaze away.

"So, this man we are supposed to meet. What's his story?" I ask.

Hades raises an eyebrow. He picks up the two cups of coffee and carries them over to the empty table. I follow him, casting a dubious glance at the young family.

But Hades just sits down so I do too. He passes me a steaming cup of coffee, the taste of which is exactly as rich and nutty as this entire tiny room smells.

"I dinnae really know anything about him, other than that I have worked with him before," Hades rumbles.

I nod, sipping my coffee. The warmth of it combined with the sunshine outside feels right in some way I can't put my finger on.

"The coffee is good."

He angles a vague smirk at me. "The best cup I've had in the city. It's too bad that no one seems to know about it."

I'm facing away from the family now, but I am still aware of them. A whispered argument breaks out between the man and woman, though I can't understand what it is about.

"At least there isn't a line to get a cup of coffee," I say, trying to keep the conversation going. I'm distracted, though. Hades purses his lips and shifts his gaze behind me, his eyes narrowing.

There is a loud bang, followed by the boy's soft whimper. I turn around and look at the family just as the man stands straight up, a menacing scowl fixed on the little boy.

His mother intercedes, putting a hand on the man and whispering plaintively. I lick my lips nervously and glance at Hades.

His coffee sits on the table, forgotten. He rises slowly from his seat, his gaze riveted on the man, his fists bunching.

The man yells something at the little boy, who bursts into tears. When he makes a move towards his son, his wife lurches from her seat.

Hades grimaces and yanks me out of my seat, pushing me behind him. The husband rears up, his hand rising as if to hit the wife.

Instantaneously, Hades surges forward and grabs the man's hand. He twists it in a way that makes a distinct crunching sound.

The man struggles, shifting his murderous gaze to Hades, and lets loose a bellow right in his face. The guy is big, but Hades is bigger; besides that, I think Hades is taking up all the air in the room right now, absolutely radiating hatred for this stranger he doesn't know.

Hades hits the guy right in the solar plexus without letting the man's hand go. The stranger howls and makes a halfhearted attempt to scratch at Hades' face with his free hand.

Hades doesn't even flinch. Instead, he uses his strength to find a pressure point near the man's wrist.

"Fuck off, ye fucking bully," Hades grits out.

In seconds, he manages to twist the bully's arm at a painful looking angle and back the bully up a full step. The mother is sobbing, her son clutching at her skirts.

My heart thumps against my ribs as I watch Hades continue to twist the man's arm. There is a shout and the man's step falters.

The stranger goes down onto his knees, a look of shock and rage on his face. He bleats out a curse and tries to get away.

Hades releases him, squares off, and punches him right in the nose. Blood spurts from his face but that doesn't deter Hades.

Hades punches him again and again, kneeing the stranger in the stomach, stomping on his ribs. I hear the sound of bone splintering as Hades punches him in the face again.

The mother wails and backs into the corner, clutching at her visibly distraught son.

I flatten myself against the wall. My eyes are on my captor.

This unhinged side of Hades, the one who is currently beating a total stranger to a pulp?

It scares me more than anything else he's done or said.

Hades, for his part, looks as though he could potentially kill the man shouting incoherently at his feet. When he stomps on the man again, I shudder.

"Hades—" I try. I realize that I'm trembling all over as I reach out a shaky hand towards him.

The woman finally rouses herself, pushing off the wall. She looks afraid, of Hades or her husband or both, but she still flings her hands out

over his body slumped on the ground.

“No!” she yells, her breathing ragged. She catches Hades’ eye, sheltering the body of her husband.

She keeps talking, ignoring her young son who tugs at her skirts. I can’t make out any of the rest of her statement, but Hades gives her a moment.

I seize upon that moment to pull at Hades’ arm. “Let’s go. You won, okay?”

Hades glares down at his fallen counterpart, wiping a sheen of sweat away from his forehead. He rears up for a second and I jerk back.

But he only spits on the man, who has stopped moving entirely.

“Coward,” Hades grits out.

He straightens, swinging his wild green gaze around the room. I shrink back as he turns his glare upon me.

I catch a brief note of confusion on his face before Hades pushes past me. I watch, wide eyed, as he plucks a napkin from the table in the back in the shop. He wipes his hands with it and then returns his scowl to me.

He doesn’t say anything, just jerks his head. I practically run out of the shop, my whole body shaking, my thoughts a mess.

When Hades stalks off toward the sea, I bolt back toward the villa like a frightened rabbit.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

HADES

I lie awake in the middle of my bed, staring up at the ceiling. There is a pattern of stars repeated there, cutouts and slightly gray shadows. I exhale deeply and try to figure out what the stars remind me of. Something vaguely Moroccan or Turkish, perhaps.

I groan and shift onto my side. Cramming a pillow under my head, my thoughts turn once more to Persephone. The back of my neck warms as I relive the last few days.

She's been tiptoeing around, trying to remain unnoticed, looking at me with that wide hazel gaze. She's clearly scared of me now, ever since I lost my temper and beat that man in the coffee shop.

I flex my fists. Across the knuckles of my right hand is a healing cut created by that bastard's front teeth as I knocked them in.

It wasn't my fault. The stranger provoked me by mercilessly bullying his wife and his young son in front of me. I couldn't stand by and do nothing.

If anyone had stepped in even once when I was a child, straightened my father out like I did to that stranger...

Well, it probably wouldn't have changed anything. But I still can't stand bullies.

It's just unfortunate that Persephone seems as skittish as a kicked cat when I'm around her now. I haven't raised a hand to her.

I would never hit a woman.

I sigh, letting my breath out slowly. Rolling out of bed, I pull on my black slacks and a black silk button up. I check my phone for news from Ares and Eros but there is nothing.

My mouth pulls into a tight grimace. I pull on my heavy black combat boots automatically; it would be strange to be caught with bare feet, even here in my own house.

I do leave my jacket behind, though I do reach across the bed and pluck a handgun from underneath one of the pillows. I tuck it into the waistband of my pants smoothly and robotically. It's a gesture that comforts me in its regularity.

No one will catch me unaware and unprepared if I can help it.

When I step out into the hallway, bound for Persephone's room, I hear a sound. Faint but high pitched, just the tenor of someone scratching their nails down a faraway chalkboard. I have no idea what it is but it's enough to make goosebumps break out across my entire body.

I pull my weapon, listening very carefully. The noise stops after a second. But it is followed by a very low creak.

If I had to guess, I would say that someone has just breached the back door.

Fuck.

Someone found out that I'm in Valencia, it seems.

I stand still, my heart hammering in my chest, thinking through the possible exits.

The main stairway descends right into the path of the intruder or intruders. Normally I would love using the stairs as cover while I shoot down at the trespasser.

But if I have Persephone with me, that way would be too dangerous. There are too many factors that I can't control.

Damn. Maybe we can go out the window in my room and jump into the big oak tree in the yard. I don't love being rushed into any plans but time is of the essence in this case.

I spin towards Persephone's room, keeping my footsteps light. An acrid smell reaches my nose and slows my steps.

It takes a second for me to register the smell as something burning.

Fuck!

I hurry to open Persephone's door, moving stealthily as possible. There is a loud thump downstairs, and the acrid scent of smoke fills the air.

Persephone is already sitting up in her bed, her dark hair spilling over her shoulders, her red lips standing out from her suddenly pale face. As I enter her room she swallows and pushes the comforter off her body.

“What’s going on?”

Her voice is high and tight, tension practically coming off her in waves. She’s wearing a large bulky sweater and nothing else; for a second, there is war within me for my attention, because I am fairly sure I can make out the shape of her nipples through her sweater.

I lick my lips, forcing my mind back to the moment at hand.

“Hades!” she says, a wild look in her eyes.

I raise my finger to my lips. “Shhh.” I beckon for her to move closer. As she scrambles to the edge of the bed, I lean down and whisper close to her ear. “Someone is in the house. The air smells like they have started a fire.”

Persephone’s lips part. Her hands fly to her mouth. “Oh my god.”

I hear a stair squeak. “Shit. They are coming. We have to move.”

I head to her window, pushing the curtain aside to peer out. The tree is a little farther from here but there is a thin ledge that runs along the rooftop. The far edge of the rooftop practically dead ends into the twisted, gnarled branches of the oak.

Heaving the window sash up, I jerk my head toward the warm night air. Persephone has pulled on a pair of ballet flats and looks around.

“Let me just find my iPad,” she says.

My eyes narrow into slits. “Fuck the iPad. We have to go.”

She licks her lips and nods almost absently. I move toward her with a growl, and she fixes me with a wide-eyed look.

“I’m coming,” she says, raising her hands. She sidesteps in order to avoid me, scuttling toward the door.

Trying to avoid being touched, I suppose. But I don’t care what she wants at all. As soon as she approaches the window, I grab her by the arms and hoist her outside.

She makes a soft sound of complaint, but I ignore it. Instead, I’m listening intently for footsteps outside in the corridor while I jam my big body through the window. I take a breath and lower the window sash before I turn to size up the situation.

We are standing on a very narrow ledge. Beyond the little strip of roof is the darkened yard. Other than the tree at the far end of the roof, I can’t make out a damned thing.

“Go,” I grate out, jerking my head toward the tree. “Be quick.”

She gives me a dazed glance and then starts cautiously making her way down the long edge. Listening intently, I realize that there is someone

clunking around upstairs.

It won't take them very long to realize that we're not in bed. And if it were me searching for someone, my next logical guess would be to look out the window.

"Hurry," I say, low and urgent.

Persephone nods and picks up the pace. Her eyes are glued on the darkness below, gauging the distance.

"Just get to the tree," I hiss. "Quickly, lass."

It's only a few hundred feet but it feels interminable. Persephone clings to the house and stares at the tree like it's her only lifeline.

Below, the smoke rises in the air. I can actually feel the air growing hotter but now is not the time to say anything. My brain is trying to think through all the possibilities of where we should go once we make it to the ground. Persephone gets to the end of the ledge and tries to turn. She gives me a heart attack when she stumbles and throws her arms out, trying to balance herself.

I reach out and grab her, keeping her from tumbling off the roof.

Her relieved glance is all the thanks I need. She takes another two steps and then jumps to the tree.

Then all hell breaks loose. Behind me, I hear a distinct shout. I brace as a shot whooshes past my ear.

"Fuck," I mutter.

Another shot is fired, this one sinking into the house very close to my head.

Time slows. I have to make a decision. Jump or maybe get shot.

I know which one has better odds.

I drag in a huge breath and launch myself off the roof, covering my head. I hear two more gunshots before I hit the ground hard, landing on my right leg. The ground beneath me is soft grass but I still land awkwardly, the breath knocked out of my lungs in a sharp jolt.

I see Persephone climbing down the tree trunk and I start to rise. Pain shoots through my right leg but I ignore it as best as I can.

I jog the couple of steps to where Persephone stands, breathing hard. I grab her hand and turn toward the back of the lot, where I know there is another fence.

And then I begin to run.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

HADES

We slip away into the sultry Spanish night, our cheeks red with exertion, our panicked pulses racing as we head down Valencia's winding, hilly streets. I clench Persephone's hand in my fist as I hurry her along, trying to glance in the windows of shops to check if we are being followed. She keeps casting fervent glances over her shoulder as we come down onto the broad sweep of highway that stretches along the beach from one end of the city to the other.

"Raise yer hand," I say, nudging her. "Hail one of these taxis."

She pins me with a desperate look and pulls free from my touch. She flags down a cab, leaning down to talk to the first driver that stops for us.

I pull her back. "No. Never go with the first one when ye are on the run." I make a puzzled face and wave the taxi on. Once the car pulls off with a screech of tires, I urge her to raise her hand again.

"I really never wanted to know how to evade people like this." She flags another car down, a haunted look crossing her fatigued expression.

"And yet, I'm going to do my best to save yer fucking life," I say, eyeing her with a sick sense of mirth.

She presses her fingers against the bridge of her nose for a moment, highlighting the dark shadows beneath her eyes.

She doesn't say it aloud, but I have the distinct impression that she blames me for being dragged out of not only her bed tonight but of her entire life, generally. Which isn't completely fair, but there is no time to debate who did what to whom, not just now.

We take a taxi in the wrong direction for about ten miles. I pull out my phone and send a quick text to Eros.

Villa was attacked. Made it out okay. Going underground. Wait for word from me.

I leave the SIM card in the phone and wedge the whole thing behind the gray plush of the seat. For anybody really searching for us, the phone will be a red herring, driving all over the city in circles.

It's probably not much of a distraction but I had to get rid of the phone anyway. Better do something with it that someone may take the time to chase down rather than just throwing the phone out.

We get out, tipping the driver, and hail another taxi to the ferry terminal. Persephone blinks as I pay the driver, climbing out to look at the large ferry boat. She waits until we are alone before she asks me any questions, though.

“We’re crossing the water?” she guesses.

“Aye,” I say. I peel off a few hundred euros and push her toward the terminal. “I’ll get the tickets. Ye take this money and get us both a change of clothes in the gift shop. We want to blend in with the tourists for a time.”

She nods, her brow furrowing as she walks toward the neon colored Ibiza t-shirts. I watch her for a moment, wondering if I should trust her. She scuttles along, her dark head bowed, her arms wrapped around herself. After all, I did just hand her cash and send her on an errand.

I suppose I will just have to trust her. So far as I trust any woman, which is not very damned much. It would be a lie to say that I wasn’t expecting her to disappear as soon as I take my eyes off of her for a few minutes.

When I return from the ticketing booth, though, Persephone is standing in the middle of the open terminal. She’s still wearing her own clothes, but she has a bulging tote bag full of items from the gift shop.

I jerk my head toward the unisex bathrooms. “Come on. We have to get rid of everything.”

She screws up her face, looking at me. “What do you mean?”

I catch her elbow and steer her into one of the cramped, metallic bathrooms. “Everything that yer wearing right now goes into the trash. And I do mean everything.”

Her brows rise delicately. “Even my panties?”

I shoot her a look, locking the bathroom door and beckoning for the bag. “What did ye get?”

She sets down the bag and shows me her haul, day-glow colored t-shirts with Ibiza on the pockets, odd khaki-colored shorts, two tie-dyed Ibiza

hoodies. I'm glad to find sunglasses and sandals in the bottom of the tote bag.

"Strip," I tell her pointedly. I start unbuttoning my dress shirt, feeling a little strange. It's not often I am naked in front of other people.

Not to mention a woman like Persephone, who could easily be a fucking runway model in Paris if her life had played out slightly differently. But I rip off my shirt and unzip my slacks, pushing away the material as if I have nothing to hide. And really, I don't, except that I am very careful to keep my back facing the wall.

I don't need Persephone getting a good, long look at my ravaged skin. I know she has seen it before. Touched it, even. But my walls are up just now and I don't need Persephone ripping through them with a tiny, tossed off comment.

Hurrying myself into the tourist clothes, I don't say another word.

Persephone for her part turns her back to me and changes quickly. I only see her naked back for a half minute. And when she takes her panties off, she makes sure to use the hem of her fluorescent t-shirt to hide her shapely ass from my view.

It doesn't stop me from taking in her miles and miles of long, toned legs though. She whips around as soon as she pulls up the shorts, her cheeks burning.

Seeing the clothes in her hands, I point to the trash can. "Hurry. Our ferry leaves soon."

She heaves her old clothes into the bin with a silent sigh on her lips. I toss her the smaller flip flops, strapping the larger sandals to my feet. And then we leave the bathroom, putting on our neon tie-dyed hoodies in unison.

Once we get on the ferry, Persephone curls up in the seat beside me, leans her head against my arm, and promptly falls asleep. It's an odd feeling, the sensation of being trusted.

But twice this morning now she has clearly trusted me. Once when she actually turned up with an overflowing tote bag of items from the gift shop. And again now as she wordlessly slips into a doze while she rests against my body.

For a second, I just stare at her. People filter in and out of the seating area we are seated in; aside from the shelter of the high-backed seats, absolutely anything could happen to her.

But I'm here, so I know nothing will.

I raise my arm, settling it around her shoulders, and urge Persephone toward my lap. She lets me pull her down and her head finds a comfortable-enough spot on my right thigh.

Her hands ball into fists and rest on my knees, the right one eventually unclenching. She looks like a Venus in repose. Her face seems etched into marble by some incredibly talented artisan. Her dark hair swirls in waves around her face. The perfect bow of her lips parts as she is pulled deeper into sleep, her face wrinkling in the echo of a frown every so often.

God, she smells heavenly, like lemon and lavender and just a hint of freshly baked bread. I lean down for a moment to press my nose into her hair, inhaling deeply.

My cock stirs, excited when she turns over in her sleep and brushes it through my shorts ever so gently.

I find myself moving, shifting, adjusting this way and that to make her more comfortable. Taking her trust seriously, I mostly keep my gaze turned outward, studying every single person who strolls by.

But Persephone keeps distracting me with the shift of her warm body against my own. Her sweet scent beckons as I study her finely hewn face.

What would it be like to kiss her lips? To brush back her dark locks and pull her close, tasting her perfect full mouth? To draw a gasp from her lungs, bruising her upturned lips?

The temptation to wake her, to find out by jamming my mouth against hers and feeling the flutter of her pulse racing as I grip her neck is almost too much to bear.

I look out as the ferry begins to pull away from the dock. A muscle ticks in my jaw. My cock stirs again.

Damn Persephone.

She might not even realize what she's doing. But I recognize the signs all too well.

She is laying her spell down all around me, not caring if I become enchanted. I stare out the window at the waves breaking against the shore and grit my teeth.

I can't let that happen. I won't.

But I just might let her sleep on my lap for a few more minutes...

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

PERSEPHONE

“Lass.”

My eyes flutter open, focusing blearily on the dashboard of the 1967 Ford Mustang. It's painted this slick cherry red color and the engine is super loud; when we first climbed into it, I fished the manual out of the glove compartment to find out what kind of muscle car Hades had gotten to transport us up the French coast.

Hades is in the driver's seat and he presses a button to roll the roof of the car back, shining bright light on my sleepy face.

I yawn. Outside the car, the coastal French countryside is flying by in swashes of sand-colored khaki, dashes of brilliant green peppered with yellow, and a fat palette brush of deep ocean blue. I sit up and rub my eyes. Ahead of me is the road, climbing up and rocketing down the hills outside Monaco. The road twists and winds like a snake and the car flies down them at a breakneck speed.

In the distance, I can see the clash of the coast with the ocean and the distant wink of what I think might be a large city.

“We're almost to Monaco City,” Hades rasps.

I dart a look at him. He's been moving non-stop for two days straight, ever since we ran from our villa in Valencia. His tie-die hoodie is rumpled. His hair is loose and it streams around his head now, a shock of dark against his tanned skin. He looks straight ahead, and he still wears the fluorescent orange sunglasses that I bought at the gift shop.

Under all that, though, I can sense how tired he must be.

“Are you all right?” I ask. I draw my hood up to keep the wind from whipping my long hair around my head madly.

"Aye," he says grimly. "I was hoping that ye would talk to me a little. We've only got about ten minutes more to go. I'm just not as alert as I'd like to be."

"Of course." I stretch my hands up over my head. "I didn't think I would sleep for so long."

Something like humor flits across his face. "Ye seemed like ye needed it. I'm used to crisscrossing the globe when I need to do it. I forget that other people aren't suited to the lifestyle that I lead."

I scrunch up my face. "No offense, but it doesn't seem like much of a life. Never the same people. Never the same places. How can you live so..." I pause, trying to think of the right word. "I would say you're like a nomad, but even they travel to the same places every year."

He shrugs a shoulder. "I have my brothers."

"Don't you long for a piece of land with a big house and a cute dog? Where will you put down roots? Where will you like... have a family?"

I squint at him. He just shrugs again. But I do notice that his body language is tighter, more closed off. I screw up my face.

"I want to live in a massive, old, rambling French farmhouse. And I want all kinds of animals... cats and dogs, chickens, ducks and horses. I'd like an orchard, too. Oh, and a great big studio in the attic space above the house. The closest people will be miles away. That's the kind of house that you raise a family in. The place where you grow old."

Hades snorts. "That's yer fantasy?"

My cheeks tinge with warmth. "Isn't it everyone's?"

"Not a chance."

He turns off of the windy coastal highway we've been following, nosing the car down a small, paved road. I glance to see how close we are to the city and find to my surprise that it is much closer now. I can make out the tall white buildings. Behind them, a stark white wall of stone dusted with emerald greenery seems implacable.

"Are we going into the city?" I ask.

"No. I've arranged to meet a friend just outside. I asked him some time ago to procure a place where ye can do what ye came here to do."

My heart starts beating fast. It isn't like I had forgotten that I was here for a reason. My brain has just been scrambled over the past forty eight hours. It seemed almost normal at this point that I should be on the run with this ruggedly handsome arms dealer.

You could get used to anything, given enough time.

Hades pulls the car to a stop in front of a set of docks in obvious disrepair. The docks themselves had rotted and were half fallen into the churning ocean. There was an ancient piece of machinery, overturned on its side and grown brown with caked rust from contact with the sea air. Scanning the vacant-looking warehouse standing a bit further back from the water, I purse my lips.

“What are the chances that your friend is going to kill us and sell our organs on the black market? Because this place gives me the heebie-jeebies.”

“I’d give the over-under at one to ten.” He climbs out of the car, his face contorting. Only now do I realize how freaking uncomfortable he must have been, jammed in that small convertible. “Jaysus.”

“I guess your friend is running late.”

“He’s on his own schedule. He’s from an old money family with connections to everyone in Monaco. He owns half the damn real estate to be had here.”

I look down the beach to the line of the steadily lapping water where it surges against the land. What little shore there is seems rockier here, with less sand a lot of white pebbles of varying sizes. The water is the perfect hue of deep marine blue.

It’s beautiful, absolutely no doubt about it. Then again, the last two locations Hades has dragged me have been charming, too.

A sleek black limousine pulls up, its tires crunching on the sandy gravel. Out of the back pops a dark-haired man in a blue pinstripe suit.

Lithe and muscular, he reminds me of a once-pretty professional mid weight fighter. He has a scowl on his proud, Gallic face as he approaches us, sizing us both up. Whatever he thinks is a mystery to me though because he doesn’t seem like the type to share anything.

He’s more like a shark. Always on the prowl, forever assessing who is a threat and who is his next meal.

I instinctively move a little closer

“Hades,” he says, bowing his head. He has a thick Southern French accent, so his pronunciation of the name sounds like Ay-Dis. “And you must be the artist, no?”

He arches a brow and my cheeks warm. I swallow and glance at Hades, but he makes an easy gesture.

"This is Lincoln Theroux," he says coolly. He stretches his hand toward the other man, shaking his hand.

"Linc," he corrects. His gaze slides between me and Hades, as if calculating some statistic. "It's not the first time you have called on me for help, mon ami. But it is the first time you've showed up with someone prettier than Eros in your company."

Hades' eyes narrow on Linc's face. "I'd be careful planning yer next words, Linc."

Linc gives a tiny, halfhearted shrug. "I'm French. You cannot blame me for asking whether your beautiful companion is already claimed. No?"

"It's Persephone," I cut in, trying to ease the growing tension. "And I'm not here with anybody. I'm not interested in being with anybody, either. I'm just here to make art."

Hades cocks a brow and Linc smirks faintly. "Just testing the waters."

He says the word like shah-ark. I shake my head and roll my eyes. "Do I dare dream of a shower here, Linc?"

I notice that Hades yawns. He is surely ready to pass out the second he's allowed.

"Oui," Linc says. He waves a hand to the warehouse. "I have had this place outfitted with everything you will need."

"Great. Thanks," I say, heading toward the warehouse. Leaving the two men to talk, I slide open the barn-style door.

Inside, the warehouse is large and mainly dark. It has obviously been sitting disused as well, until someone came in and cleaned up three huge areas. One has been set up as a sleeping area with a big, soft-looking couple of beds and two racks of familiar black clothes. Another area is a rather confusing giant box. A quick glance inside makes it a bathroom, complete with a shower, a toilet, and what looks like an old-fashioned ladies changing area, stolen right from a Victorian tale.

And the third area, most interesting to me, is the worktable.

I walk over to it, running my hand over the smooth surface of the drafting table. Next to it is a huge broad worktable, stacked high with boxes of what I think are the supplies I requested.

My fingers itch to rip into the boxes, to spill all the inks and the pigments out, to examine the quality of the paper. But first...

I really do need that shower.

Finding a set of clothes in my perfect size already hanging on one of the racks, I dump them in the changing room and turn on the water in the shower.

The shower is amazingly hot, and the pressure is strong, despite the fact that I'm in a warehouse in the middle of nowhere. I take my time in there, lathering and soaping every inch of my body until I am glowing bright pink with warmth.

When I get dressed in a loose, flowing black silk dress and an oversized black sweater, I feel like I just may be okay. My life might have been turned upside down by forces beyond my control, but—

I step out of the bathroom. My gaze sweeps across the room, finding a dark figure lying prone on one of the beds. I stumble, my thoughts snarling.

Drifting across the squeaky-clean floor, I chew on my bottom lip. As I circle around and see Hades lying there, eyes closed, my heart gives a strange kick.

For a second, I let my mind wander, traipsing across all kinds of scenarios.

What would Hades be like if he wasn't a villain? What if he were the hero to my blushing virginal heroine in a romantic dream state?

I'm such a sucker for the softer side of a bad, bad man.

Without opening his eyes, he mutters. "Are ye okay, lass?"

My heart is in my throat. I nod, even though he can't hear me.

"I need to sleep." His voice sounds deeper than gravel.

I take a step toward him. He opens his eyes the barest slit, then heaves himself up with a heavy sigh. He rips back the covers and beckons to me.

"Come here, if ye will. Otherwise—"

I rush toward him, drawn in like a moth to a newly lit flame. "I want to lie down."

That isn't exactly the truth. I'm not tired anymore, not after sleeping for several hours in the car. And my thoughts keep drifting back to work, back to ink and paper and all that comes with it.

But I do want to be near Hades. I can't help it. I want to be closer to the thing that causes me pain, because it's so damned *moving*.

Hades looks a little surprised. But he points to the bed, holding the blanket draped over his arm. "In the bed with ye, then."

I lie down on the pillow-y mattress. Hades presses his body up against me, covering us both with the comforter. I shift onto my side, uncertain.

Will Hades think I'm being too forward if I—

He rolls over on his side, spooning me, tucking me against his big body. In the summer air he's already like a furnace. I can tell that if I do manage to fall asleep, I will wake up sweaty and clawing at the blankets, trying to get free.

Hades brushes my hair out of the way and lies his head just behind mine. His breath teases my neck; I suck in a breath when I imagine him placing the softest kiss just where my neck and my shoulder meet.

I shiver and Hades puts his arm around me, pulling me flush against the hard wall of his body. I'm trapped, ensnared so wickedly.

My breath seizes in my body.

"Shh," he whispers. "I can hear yer mind workin. Just settle down now, lass."

And after a moment? I do.

I listen to his calm breathing even out, growing deeper. Before I know it, I'm pulled into a light doze, aware no more.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

PERSEPHONE

When I wake, I find Hades gone, his side of the bed cool to the touch. Judging by the sunlight slanting through the warehouse's dingy, dust-covered windows, it's only early evening.

My stomach rumbles and I think of my last meal. A hastily-chewed vending machine sandwich, a handful of mixed nuts, a can of sparkling water. It was the best that the gas station had to offer.

Now I look around the warehouse, pursing my lips and wondering where my next meal will come from. I stand and wander over to the worktables, my curiosity from earlier still piqued.

Heading to the stacked boxes of supplies, I bite my lip. My heart skips a beat as I tear into the first box. Despite having been literally torn from my life and kidnapped to be here now, I still feel it.

The thrill of opening new art supplies. Whether it be a new bright paint palette or fresh blank pages of paper or the crispness of unused charcoals, I still have the same giddiness. The sense of untapped potential, of materials needing only to be molded by my hands to be something great.

The first box is heavy and on the small side. Ripping the top open, I find all varieties of inks in tiny plastic bottles, each labeled by hand with numbers corresponding to their hexadecimal code. Some of the inks have more heft than others. Those are quite old and might even be a little gunky, having gone a bit solid in extended contact with air. Others are fresh and new, light and completely liquid.

I close that box, setting it aside. The next box I open is a heavy, wide, flat one. One of several such boxes, this one is thousands upon thousands of sheets of the thin clear plastic membrane that makes up contact paper.

My excitement begins to grow, tingling along my fingertips, making me smile almost reflexively.

The front door of the warehouse slides open with a loud thunk, making me jump. I turn to see Hades nudging the door closed. His hands are full of paper grocery bags and he walks them straight over to me, putting them down on the end of the worktable.

“You’ve been busy.” I amble over to him, pressing up on my tiptoes to peer in the bags. The aroma of buttery bread wafts up to my nose. “What did you bring me?”

He shoots me a quelling glance and reaches into one of the bags. “I got new phones for both of us. And I stopped at a boulangerie on the way back.”

“Oooh,” I say. As he hands me a phone and opens a box of croissants, I have trouble deciding which I want first.

“There are French macarons too. And a little pot of forest honey.”

He nudges the box of macarons toward me. I look at all the goodies for a long moment before I decide on a croissant.

In the end, I grip the phone in one hand and the pastry in the other, taking a huge bite. It’s maybe the best bite of anything I’ve ever had in my whole damned life.

Buttery, flaky, chewy. It melts in my mouth.

“Omigod,” I mutter, closing my eyes. “This croissant is better than sex.”

Hades looks at me sharply. “What kind of sex are ye having that is less good than a pastry, lass?”

Heat suffuses my cheeks. My mouth is too full of buttery goodness to speak, so I just glare at him. He starts to unpack the other bags and I turn my attention to the phone. Pursing my lips, I turn it on and scroll through the contacts.

“There is only one number programmed in here,” I say after a minute.

“Aye. That’s mine,” he says, holding up his identical phone. “What other numbers do ye need?”

“How very practical of you.” I roll my eyes. “I should email my brother. Let him know that I’m all right.”

“Lass...” He stiffens, pinning me with a hard glare. He prowls around the table, staring at me with an air of disbelief. “I’ve been trying to figure out exactly how our enemies came to know where to find us in Valencia. Ye wouldn’t have sent yer brother an email back there, would ye?”

My brows arch. My mouth opens, a quick retort on the tip of my tongue. I reply to him with all due venom.

“It’s not like I sent Lawrence a picture of the villa, our address, and the story of how you kidnapped me. I just emailed him a very brief paragraph letting him know that I was okay.”

Both of Hades’ hands shoot out, grabbing my upper arms and gripping me hard. His face contorts, looking as black as a thundercloud.

“Are ye a fucking idiot?” He pulls me closer, shaking me a little. “Ye went against my explicit instructions, lass. Anybody could have been monitoring his email. Ye might as well have lit a beacon and invited Ex-BF to come for us whenever he felt like it.”

“I... I don’t think so, Hades—” My heart starts beating fast.

“Ye feeble minded idiot.” He sneers, pulling me so close to his face that we are only an inch apart. “It’s a wonder they didn’t come sooner. The fact that we got away was sheer luck, ye know.”

I look up at him with wide eyes, swallowing heavily. “You don’t know that I was the one that tipped them off. You don’t even know who the bad guys were.”

My words cause him to rear his head back. “Are ye kidding me? I know that without me, ye would probably either be dead or sitting at Constantine’s feet right now.”

Ice slides through my veins at the very thought. I start trembling. “Don’t.”

“Dinnae what?” He grits his teeth, his slitted eyes scanning my face. “For all I know, ye wanted to be caught by Constantine’s men.”

I struggle in his hold, baring my teeth.

“Fuck you, Hades.”

“Ye little idiot.” He lifts me off the ground, looking ready to kill me. “Ye have to be punished, Persephone.”

I open my mouth to retort. But Hades throws me over his shoulder and starts carrying me toward the bed.

“What? Let me go!” I howl, flailing. My fists hit his solid back, my feet kick at his thigh.

He silences me with one incredibly brutal slap to my ass. It’s so hard that I cry out, my eyes widening, breath sputtering.

“Shut the fuck up, lass,” he grates out. “Ye won’t make the same mistake again. Not after this.”

He tosses me onto the bouncy mattress with a thud. I'm panicked, sweating, my heart pounding loudly in my ears. I try to scramble away but he grabs me by the ankle and jerks me back with a growl.

"Behave yerself, Persephone. That's the only way ye are going to ever fucking walk again."

I whimper as he turns me over to face him.

"Let me go!"

He shakes his head, his gaze dropping to my lips, then my heaving breasts, then lower.

"No. I have to punish ye. It's for yer own good." He darts his tongue out to swipe across his lips. His expression is haughty and defiant. "Ye pushed me to this point. Yer making me touch ye like this."

Keeping his iron grip on my ankle, he skims his touch up from my other ankle to my hip, taking my dress with it.

"Stop!" I cry out. I try to twist away from him, but he's too strong. "Please, Hades... I won't talk to anyone! I won't say anything!"

Hades doesn't even seem to notice my struggles or how afraid I am of him at the moment. He completely ignores the fear in my voice. His gaze is caught on the skin he's currently exposing at my hip.

"What will it be?" he asks absently. "Ye fucking tease. Do ye want to suck my cock? Hmm? Or would ye rather be stripped naked, bent over my lap, and have yer ass paddled?" There is a glint in his eye as he finally makes eye contact with me. "Or maybe ye would rather I truss ye, turn ye on yer stomach, and fuck ye until ye scream for me?"

At his distinct threat, something low in my body clenches. He arches a brow as he flips my dress up past my navel, exposing my quivering legs and dark silk panties. My heart pounds in my throat, a bass note.

"Hades..." I plead. "Don't."

He looks at me, a little smirk of satisfaction flitting across his mouth. He adjusts his hard cock in his slacks and leers at me.

"I think I heard ye asking me to tie ye up."

"No!" I protest, pressing my legs together. "Hades, please—"

He gives me a measured smile as he skates his touch up my thigh once more. This time he deviates and brushes the black silk triangle of my underwear at the vee created by my legs. I clench and jerk away from him.

Hades leans down, suddenly thundering at me. "Look at me!"

My gaze jumps to his. My mouth opens. He runs his fingers down my mons to the cleft of my pussy. I release a noise from my throat, a whimper and a gasp. My cheeks are already a deep pink, but I can feel my face get hotter as he rubs my pussy and flicks his fingers against me hard.

It's wrong. Everything about this moment is terrifying and I certainly don't want to be forced to spread my legs...

But I still feel a tendril of moisture slipping from my pussy. I may resist, but my body has its own ideas.

I stare up into Hades' face, paralyzed, my heart rate blindingly fast. He leans over my body and smirks.

"Oh, lass," he says, his voice gone to gravel. "I think it's been a very long time since ye've been touched."

A denial is on my lips. But when I start to say no, he forces my legs apart, moves my panties to the side, and rubs my clit. My entire body buckles. Fists clenching, back bowing, legs jerking.

He lets go of my ankle and continues rubbing my clit as he grabs my hip. He slides my ass down the bed so that I'm practically bumping up against his groin. He flicks my clit hard, and I gasp, trying to pull my thighs closed.

Hades smirks down at me, lifting his hand in the air, showing off his glistening fingertips.

I pant, staring at his dark figure as he bends over my body and forces me to look at the evidence of my excitement. My breasts tingle and I wish I were alone so that I could touch myself, make myself cum. It wouldn't take much, I'm sure.

"Ye wanted this," Hades rasps. He pops one of his wet fingertips into his mouth, *mmming* at my taste. "God, that is sweet. Ye need my touch, do ye not? Ye want me to keep going, to make ye cum, to fuck ye until ye scream. Just admit it."

My breath catches in my throat and I give my head the tiniest shake. "No."

My voice is so weak that I may as well not have said anything at all. Hades clears his throat and drifts his hand down to his waistband. The second my gaze flits down to his pants, I realize that his hard cock is pressing at his zipper, waiting to be unleashed.

And I know a moment of pure, selfish, urgent desire.

Whatever I say to the contrary, I do want Hades. He's so untrustworthy and villainous and yet...

When he unbuttons and unzips his pants with a lazy flick of his fingers, I dig my fingers into the sheets, unable to breathe. For a second, all I can look at or focus on is his fucking cock.

Hades shoves his slacks down to mid-thigh. He's not wearing any underwear, so I am basically making eye contact with his long, thick, finely veined penis. It's perfect, pink and uncut, jutting out from the bottom of the black button up he wears.

Swallowing, I make eye contact with him. "Hades—"

I intend to tell him that it's okay, that I want him. He grimaces and strokes his cock.

"If yer going to talk, I'm going to stuff my cock in yer mouth to keep it busy. Is that what ye want?"

Squinting at him, I push myself up, trying to reach for him. Hades quickly pushes me back onto the mattress.

"Stay put," he says, idly eyeing me. He steps back and moves away, heading to the corner of the warehouse. I can hear him moving things around, hear his grunt as he shifts something heavy.

When he returns, he carries a heavy coil of beat up, disused rope. My eyes widen a little bit.

"You—"

"Shut up." He cuts me off with a hiss. "Take yer clothes off."

My brows rise. I open my mouth, but he tosses the dusty rope on the mattress beside me and hisses again. "Get naked or I will hurt ye, Persephone."

I sit up, flushing, my eyes widening. His words are measured, matter of fact. As though my compliance isn't really the best or most interesting outcome for him.

That's scares the hell out of me.

My hands shake as I lift the hem of my dress up over my head and pull it and the sweater away from my skin.

I'm left in just a slinky little black bralette. But before I can even try to take it off, Hades leans forward and rips it in two between my breasts. The bralette pops opens and my breasts are freed, small and firm, pale pink nipples pebbling in the air.

He reaches out and cups one, his touch rough as he shapes the nipple.

I gasp at the sudden sensation of his hot skin and the way he pinches at my sensitive nipples.

He strokes his cock, biting his lip as he looks me up and down. He licks his fingertips and then rubs them against my clit again. “I quite liked the pretty picture of ye bound, trussed, and presenting me that gorgeous little ass of yers. I want ye to roll over, get on yer knees, and open those thighs.”

I don’t move for a second, staring at him, trying to decide how serious he is. Hades grabs my arm hard and wrenches me onto my stomach.

“On yer knees,” he husks. He slaps my naked ass. “Ass up. I want to see that pretty pussy of yers, Persephone.”

My pussy clenches and I shut my eyes and push my butt up in the air. Hades grabs my thighs and yanks me towards him, spreading my ass and my thighs open.

I make a noise, something between a yelp and a gasp. I’m rewarded by a stinging slap to one ass cheek.

“Oh, lass...” Hades mutters. He reaches out and grabs my ass, angling my pelvis so that he has a better view from behind. When I crane my neck to look at him, his eyes are fixed on my pussy lips. “I’m going to tie ye up and ruin yer delicate little pussy.”

My eyes widen and my breath catches. Hades slides the coil of rope off the bed and ties my ankles with it. The rope is heavy and scratchy, biting into my skin. He yanks my wrists behind my back, then loops the rope around my middle. Then, in a feat of magic, he pulls on the heavy brown rope. When I try to move my hands and feet, testing his ties, I find that I am utterly immobile.

“Hades—” I say, jerking at my bindings. “It’s too tight!”

He answers me with a smack on the ass. Then he leans me forward, pressing my face into the mattress. I can feel him moving onto the bed behind me.

“Seriously!” I protest. My voice is muffled by the mattress. It is hard to draw breath and voice my displeasure. “Hades, if you—“

“I thought I told ye to shut up.” He runs his hand up my inner thigh, probing, finding the seam of my pussy.

I suck in a breath and he places a kiss on my ass cheek. I clench against his invasion, a whimper leaving my lips. He spreads my pussy lips with his fingers. He lightly presses his entire face against me and a second later, I feel the wet heat of his mouth on my pussy.

My mouth opens in a big O. I start trembling; the sensation of his mouth is shocking and exciting. His tongue quickly finds my clit, swirling around it.

“Oh my god,” I whisper. “Oh... oh my god...”

I jerk against my restraints and Hades pauses. I can hear a low chuckle.

“That’s right, Persephone. I have ye exactly where I want ye. And I intend to use that to my advantage.”

His words make me clench. I am at his mercy. He can hurt me if he wants to, even kill me. A shiver races up my spine at that thought.

But even as I fear him, I can feel sticky, dewy moisture leaking from my slit.

My hands grip the blankets of the bed, forming fists. Hades keeps kissing my clit, circling his tongue around it. I close my eyes as he works, torturing me, bringing me so much pleasure that I almost weep. I can feel strings tightening and growing taut deep inside my body. My whole pelvis feels full and hot, as flushed as my reddened cheeks.

Hades plays me like a fiddle, knowing exactly how to move his tongue and where to press his fingers. I can feel myself growing closer and closer to the edge.

When I’m almost there, he places his thumb squarely on the balloon knot of my ass. My eyes open and I clench the blankets, unable to do much else. It feels... naughty. I’m so caught up in having Hades sink his thumb into my ass that I come, suddenly and unexpectedly, inner muscles jerking. I make a strangled gurgle and tumble over the edge, not seeing or hearing anything for a moment.

But I can feel every last thing, every flick of his tongue against my clit, every excited hum, every wiggle of his thumb as it slides into my ass.

I am stupefied, sucking in ragged breaths, forgetting who and where I am for several moments. I slowly come back to myself, realizing that Hades is still touching my pussy. But he has taken back his other hand and currently jerks his cock in long, hard pumps. I crane my neck to see him. He’s staring at my pussy, at the stickiness as he moves his fingers over my clit.

His expression is so intent that I don’t dare to interrupt. I watch with fascination as he closes his eyes for a second, his hand pumping lightning fast. Then he leans closer and presses the fat tip of his cock against the top of my ass.

Hades growls and his eyes snap open. He comes with a snarl, his eyes slitted and containing a violent fury. It's enough to knock the air from my lungs as he spurts five lashes of hot semen onto my lower back and ass.

He rests for several seconds, closing his eyes and breathing hard. But when he looks at me again, his expression and tone are businesslike.

"Here," he says. His voice is robotic, almost as if he hadn't just come all over my ass. He moves to untie my hands and my ankles. I sit up, rubbing my wrists. Before I can say anything, he turns his back on me, seeming like he is uninterested in anything I might have to say.

Acting like a man, then. The sheer disappointment I feel is a heavy burden.

He just wanted sex. In the end, that's what I gave him.

And now he's throwing me away like a used tissue. I watch him get dressed and pull up the blankets to cover myself, my hurt echoing louder and louder in my own head.

"We should talk," I suggest, my voice raspy.

Hades grits his teeth. "I think ye've done plenty, lass."

I don't have a snarky comeback for his words. So I just tug the blankets up against my chest and glare at him.

Then he tucks himself back in his pants, turns toward the warehouse door, and makes a beeline for the exit.

I stare after him, feeling dirty and trying to figure out what the hell I'm supposed to do now.

CHAPTER TWENTY

HADES

I take a very, very long walk down the beautiful French coastline. It's far too hot even though when I leave, the sun is already beginning to slip behind the distant horizon. I look out at the coast and instinctively turn away from the city, trudging along. It's hard to keep pace with my thoughts, which whirl around my head, spiked and spiny and violent, their rhythm stochastic.

What the fuck did I just do?

I keep picturing Persephone's look of perfect surprise when I untied her and then hurried to the warehouse door. She looked truly crestfallen, or at least hurt somehow.

Knowing that I am the source of that pain doesn't sit well with me in the least.

I put my head down and walk faster. Going for a run would be nice right now, but I don't have tennis shoes or nylon shorts with me. So, I have to content myself with angrily walking down the shore, startling the occasional sea bird that gets too near me. I kick rocks with my heavy boots, and they spin and bounce against the sandy ground, often sinking into the ocean as I move past.

If only I hadn't let a woman get so close to me... but it's too late for that. Pretty little Persephone is in my head and under my fucking skin. My expression twists into a grimace.

A quarter of a mile down the rocky shoreline, I stop and stare out at the sea. It's been windy since we arrived here, the sea restless. I understand that feeling all too well.

Perhaps the sea has made the same mistakes as I have. It's possible that the mysterious body of water before me has many secrets, some of them less divine than others.

I fish my new phone out of my pocket and screw my face up. Dialing Eros's number, I suck in a breath.

He answers right away.

"Hades! I was wondering where ye had gotten lost."

"Eros," I say, my voice gruff. "How are things going?"

There's a moment's pause as he presumably tries to decide just what I mean. "Things are progressing here. I just had a meeting with..." He pauses. "I would rather not get into it over the phone, where people can listen in. Let's just say I had good news. Ye'll be pleased."

I grunt. "Hmm."

Eros sighs. "Do ye have any idea who your visitors were back in Spain?"

"No. I have to think it was our American friend. But I didn't wait around to find out."

"I see." There is a long pause. "How are things with the girl, Hades? Are ye having trouble managing her?"

I can feel my neck grow warm. "What? No." I say it too fast though and my words don't sound convincing at all. "I can't wait until this job is over. That's all."

A few seconds of silence. "If she's causing ye problems, brother, just say the word. We can switch our tasks."

"I need ye right where ye are," I say.

"No, ye need a person ye trust in this position. Ares and I fit that bill."

My lips thin. "Those are the people I trust? It's not a very long list."

He gives a low chuckle of laughter. "Maybe instead of calling me, ye should be trying to expand that list. Ye know, ye could add Persephone to our members. Relax a little, have a drink together... maybe fuck the shit out of her."

My jaw clenches. "Fuck off."

Eros goes quiet for a beat. "What does that mean, Hades? Did ye already fuck her?" Then, softer: "Did it go badly?"

I snarl at him. "Mind yer own fucking business!"

He sighs, unperturbed. "If ye are looking for a way out, all ye have to do is say so. I'll come and take care of her. Ye can go about yer own

business. And I promise not to fuck her, if that's what yer worried about..."

I hang up, gripping the phone and staring down at its face. It takes every bit of willpower not to whip the phone into the ocean and walk away.

By the time I return to the warehouse, it has been dark for an hour or so. I roll open the door to find Persephone standing in the well-lit work area, unpacking boxes.

She turns her head to see me walking in. Her nostrils flare. Her chin lifts, her eyes tightening just a little bit, her body language growing taut.

Then she turns back to opening and spreading out thick sheets of paper. As I walk to the bedroom, I catch a distinctly frosty wave radiating off of her.

She produces the white earbuds that came with her phone, pops them in her ears, and proceeds to turn the music up loud in her phone.

Glowering at her back, I realize that my whole body is tense. I shower and change into a new silk shirt and fresh slacks.

The whole time I'm in the shower, I stand under the water and try not to think of how hot Persephone is. She's hot when she's angry, like she is right now.

But that has nothing on having her tied up and moaning underneath my body. The little gasping breath she sucked in right before her silky pussy began to spasm...

I swear, it was hotter than nuclear fission. Maybe that's why I'm still hard just thinking about it.

Imagining what it would be like to actually fuck Persephone is actually so hot it overloads my senses. I can feel my brain shutting down every time I start to fantasize about feeling her legs clamp around my body as her slick little pussy fucking drains my balls.

I clench my teeth, jerking my thoughts away. This? This is why I can't just fuck her.

She already owns as much of me as I can stand. And I can't afford to lose my shit over some raven haired siren.

Not now.

Not ever.

When I'm out of the steamy shower, I take care with dressing myself. Black slacks. Black shirt. Black tie. Black socks and matching ass kicking boots.

I catch my hair behind my head and tie it back in a low ponytail. Looking down at my hands, I catch myself thinking that something has fundamentally changed. Something essential. Something important.

But what that thing might be, I can't say.

Flexing both of my hands, I expel a breath. I have to talk to Persephone.

I should explain why what we did — what almost happened between us? That was a terrible choice.

For both our sakes, I have to keep my eyes on the prize and watch for any sign that we might have caught outside attention.

That's the most important thing. It also happens to be what I am best at.

Pushing my cheek out with my tongue, I stalk over to the work area. Persephone looks up, her eyes narrowing. She doesn't stop her task, standing paintbrushes upright and shoving them into mason jars.

I narrow my eyes on her hands. She is sorting the brushes by some mysterious method. Every once in a while, she stops, holds a brush up to the light. Then she makes some decision about it, sorting it into one of two piles.

The two piles seem almost identical to me. My lips flatten into a thin line as I walk up to the worktable, folding my arms and cocking my hip to rest against it.

She's doesn't acknowledge me in any way. Just glares at a pile of paint brushes like they have personally offended her.

I gesture for her to take out her earbuds. Persephone slows, taking one earbud out but leaving her music cranked up.

"Yes?" she asks. She is very careful not to look at me.

"We need to talk," I say. I lean over, planning on pulling her other earbud from her ear. But she rears up, catching my hand and pushing it away.

She takes a big step back. "I'm working. Can it wait?"

Tensing my jaw, I shake my head. "No."

Persephone finally gives me the eye roll I've been expecting and turns off her music.

"What's so important that it can't wait a few hours?"

I don't like this side of Persephone. She crosses her arms, hiding beneath another oversized sweater, and looks at her nails. She seems... disinterested in hearing what I have to say.

Clenching my fists, I pin her with my gaze.

"I think we can both agree that what happened earlier was a mistake."

Her nostrils flare. She sucks her teeth, pissed off. "Yep."

"I think it would be better if we kept our distance. I'll move my bed over to the other side of the room—"

She waves a dismissive hand at me. "Whatever you say."

I dart my tongue out, running it slowly along my upper lip. Persephone is intentionally looking anywhere but at me, which is driving me fucking nuts.

I don't dare touch her to get her full attention, though. There's something between us, some spark, that threatens to ignite every time I get close to this woman.

"Look. It was bound to happen. Two very attractive people. Close quarters. A volatile situation." I shrug, my chest tight.

She sends me a defiant, haughty look. "It's not as if I had a choice, is it?"

I glare at her. "Ye have never come so hard in yer fucking life. Don't pretend that ye didn't love every fucking second of it."

She crosses her arms, her face going red. She pushes her cheek out with her tongue and doesn't respond.

I wave a hand. "All I'm saying is, I don't want to repeat it."

Persephone licks her lips, something fiery passing through her gaze. She looks directly at me, almost sneering.

"Are we done?" She swallows, as if she is trying to stay unemotional. "I agree with you. Okay? Now let me get to fucking work. The sooner I start, the sooner I can get the fuck away from you. Permanently."

I grit my teeth. Hearing her say that is an awful lot like hearing the words *I want to leave you*.

"Go, then." I jerk my head toward her worktable, piled high with ink, paper and paintbrushes. "Let me know—"

She immediately starts cramming her earbuds back in her ears and gives me the cold shoulder. She's telling me to back the fuck off.

In that moment I understand her completely.

It's the reaction that I hoped to provoke, after all. So why the hell do I hate it so much?

Clenching my teeth, I keep my reaction to myself. Instead, I turn and walk back to the beds, beginning to move the untouched one toward the work area.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

PERSEPHONE

Squinting down at the crimson wax seal on a piece of intricately lined paper that I am attempting to replicate, I purse my lips. Spread around the delicate slip of parchment are a number of blocks of wax, a cluster of long handled metal seal markers, and a whole box full of tiny metal instruments with scoops and dull blades. Feeling stiff, I sit up and set one of the blades aside. Lacing my fingers together, I push my hands high over my head.

I've been working on this seal for hours now and my back throbs, angry that I have been bent over the worktable for so long. Pushing myself to my feet, I sigh. Staring at the glob, I try to figure out what is off. Something about the seal is wrong but I can't quite put my finger on it.

Have I used the wrong blend of waxes? Or do I need to use a different seal? None of the implements are quite right for the task but that's why I'm here, I suppose. I have used the scoops and blades and a tiny blowtorch to craft the impression of a crown in wax, the Tunisian royal insignia.

But there is something different between the seal and the picture I have on my phone. And it's driving me crazy trying to figure it out.

"Take a break."

Hades' sudden and unexpected nearness practically makes me jump out of my skin. I dart a glance at him, startled. He stands less than a foot away, a brow arched, holding two white paper cups.

My eye catches on the way his black button up gapes at the collar, two black buttons undone. For some reason that small lapse — either intentionally done or not — makes my cheeks fill with heat. I jerk my eyes away and touch my messy bun.

“What?” I ask.

His expression gives away exactly nothing. He lifts a cup, offering it to me. I stand up, moving a few inches closer and accepting the cup.

“Come on.” He jerks his head toward the door. “Let’s walk outside for a minute. I’ve bought sandwiches.”

I pause, casting a glance over my shoulder at my work. It’s not going anywhere, of course. I know that.

But my brain is still stuck on the same question. What is it about that seal that’s inauthentic?

Other than the fact that I am trying to replicate it in a darkened warehouse hundreds of miles away from Tunisia, of course. I wrinkle my nose and sigh.

“Okay.”

Hades reaches for my elbow, thinking I guess to steer me out of the warehouse. But I shoot him a sharp glance, just shy of a glare, and sidestep him altogether. He lets me lead the way outside without comment, but I can feel his heavy gaze on the back of my neck as I roll aside the heavy warehouse door.

I suppress a sigh and walk outside into the dying heat of the day. It’s nearly twilight, the sun drunkenly beginning to disappear behind the broad sweep of the azure ocean. The breeze picks up as I walk toward the shore, breaking what was probably an unbearable heat. I wouldn’t know, as I was utterly absorbed in my work all day.

Hades sips his coffee, watching me out of the corner of his eye. I suck in a deep breath and taste the drink he brought me.

To my surprise, it is a creamy, milky chai latte. I tip the paper cup up and chug a little, realizing only now that it’s been forever since I have eaten or drunk anything.

He doubles down, pulling a paper bag from his pocket and offering me a piece of baguette layered with cheese and butter. I walk along the shore, practically inhaling half the sandwich and chasing it with the sweet spice of the latte.

The wind picks up, clawing at my dress, whipping the waves into a froth. My footsteps sink into the sandy shore as I walk down to where the waves crash onto the beach, skittering up the already wet ground until it just reaches my feet.

I take another bite of the sandwich and mmm a little, appreciating how buttery and cheesy it is.

“Like that, do ye?” Hades asks.

I slice him with a glance. I finish chewing, swallow, and then retort.

“I’m sorry. Did I miss something? The last time I checked, we were not exactly on speaking terms.”

He glares at me. “That was certainly not my intention. I just wanted to make sure that we were both on the same page about... what happened.”

“What happened,” I repeat, my voice sharp. “You mean how you fucked me and then acted like I went out of my way to personally harm you?”

His brow descends. “Dinnae be a child.”

“I would say I have acted completely appropriately, and you are the one being a little kid about this whole thing.” I smack my lips, glancing out over the coast. “We’re both consenting adults. We both—”

The words snarl up in my mouth, stopped by what I see just up the shoreline. A few hundred feet down was an old parking lot, its pavement crumbling, its markings all but faded. A cheap little car stands there, its hood raised. A young man dressed in an expensive-looking outfit of designer denim and a Supreme hoodie leans over the engine, barking orders at a very young woman. The woman can’t be more than eighteen and wears a long, pink halter dress that falls to her sandaled feet. She looks terrified, nodding and jumping every time that the man barks something at her in a language I don’t understand.

Pressed against the woman’s legs are two children, girls that are maybe four and two, respectively. They are dressed in matching pink sweatsuits and they look at the man with something like terror written on their faces.

I don’t even have to say anything. Hades tenses, his hands curling into fists as he watches the scene for a few seconds. I watch the play of emotions as they filter to the surface; right now, it is easy enough to read Hades’ expression.

He’s near-violent, just watching this little operetta play out. The young man closes the hood of the car with a slam and points at the woman. Even from here, I can make out his vehement, angry words.

“Do you know what he is saying?” I whisper.

Hades shakes his head slowly. “No. They’re speaking a Slavic language, I think. Maybe Ukrainian or Russian.”

He hisses in a breath as the man bucks at the woman, a move meant to intimidate her. It works, because she takes a step back, dropping her head and holding up her hands defensively.

Just like that, Hades stalks toward the couple. I am not surprised in the least, but I still follow on his heels, my heart pounding.

I really don't want him to beat the man to a pulp the way he did to that stranger back in Valencia. Maybe someone should intercede, stop the man from hurting the woman... but that's a far cry from the energy that Hades is carrying as he approaches them.

Mayhem and violence are bleeding off of him, falling behind him in crackling waves. His expression is stiff and full of malevolence. Shoulders flattened, he storms up the beach, making it all but impossible to stop him.

I run, catching his hand and tugging on it.

"Hades..."

He freezes, turning his glare on me. When he speaks, his voice is gone to gravel and his teeth clenched. "Let go of me."

"I'm not going to let go until you take a deep breath." I grip his hand, beseeching him. "Please, Hades. You've got to take a beat."

Hades stares at me, violence crackling in his very bearing. "Let. Me. GO!"

I've never heard Hades raise his voice before. My heart pounds, my mouth goes dry as the Sahara on a hot day. I flinch.

I know that this man has the strength to hurt me. Hell, Hades could easily kill me with his bare hands if he felt compelled to do so.

But I don't let go of his hand. "Think about what you're doing," I tell him, trying to keep my voice from wavering. "One deep breath in is all I am asking..."

Against his will, Hades drags in a deep breath, his angry gaze still pinning me in place. The breath loosens his shoulders a fraction and he draws himself upright to his full, imposing, impossibly tall height.

His fists don't unclench, though.

"Let me go, lass."

I release him, having done what I could to mitigate whatever damage he might cause. Ahead of us, the young man takes note of Hades and I with mild interest. As soon as I let Hades go, the young man's face grows red.

He barks something at the woman, who throws a look over her shoulder at us. She pales and hurries the two little girls toward the car.

The young man is rounding the vehicle with a sneer curling his lips. He looks at Hades, his expression spiteful as he climbs in the car.

Hades starts to jog. "Hey!"

The doors creak closed. The woman arranges the little girls on her lap and throws another harried look at Hades. Her expression says that she's very worried about the stranger jogging straight for their car. She locks the doors, all the blood draining from her face.

"You're scaring her!" I call to Hades. "Please, come back!"

I stop at the edge of the parking lot, my heart in my throat, my voice sounding panicky.

There is a grinding mechanical sound as the man tries to start the car. Hades reaches the vehicle just as the young man manages to turn the engine over. He throws an angry look at Hades and puts the car in drive.

Hades, running up to the passenger side window, watches as the young man begins to pull the car away. In a fit of I supposed frustration and anger, Hades moves back, winds up, and throws a punch at the car.

He manages to hit the back window, his solid fist smashing into it, the safety glass cracking into a million tiny pieces and leaning inward with a shattering sound. But it doesn't break; it's not meant to.

The girl gives a shriek. The guy yells something at Hades and steps on the gas. In a second, their tires squealing, they are hauling ass out of the parking lot.

Hades stands, watching them go, his breathing ragged. I trail after him into the parking lot.

His knuckles are scraped and bloodied on one hand. He doesn't seem to notice, though. His eyes are fixed on the car, watching it drive away, tracing it across the highway until it disappears around a curve.

I move closer. Hades only notices me when I pick up his wrist, examining his injury. His eyes tighten and he pulls at his hand.

I don't let go, though. Instead, I shoot him a look and bring his hand closer, trying to see it better. There is a particularly wicked shard of glass sticking out. I wince, looking up at him.

"Let's go," I say, taking him by the elbow.

"Go?" His cheeks are still flushed. "Go where?"

"You are going to sit down and let me clean up the mess you've made of your knuckles."

Hades stops me, resisting. When I look back at him, he's giving me the most puzzled look.

“How could ye?”

“How could I what?” I tilt my head, narrowing my eyes on his face.

“Ye stopped me from saving that woman!”

I shake my head. “No. I stopped you from pounding that man’s skull in. She could’ve refused to get in his car if she thought it was dangerous. Instead, she didn’t even think twice before hopping in the passenger seat. She was too scared of you.”

That seems to knock some of the wind out of his sails.

“Scared of me?” he repeats. As if it’s a foreign concept or something. “Why would she be scared of me?”

He really doesn’t get it. I draw in a deep breath, making myself expel it fully before I answer.

“Because you are a big, strange man who looks like he’s going to beat the shit out of somebody. You don’t know the situation; you couldn’t even say for sure which language they were speaking. Yet you had already decided exactly what was going on and how you were going to handle it.” I suck my teeth, looking at him. “I would’ve been scared, too. Actually, scratch that… I was scared.”

He scrunches up his face. “What did ye have to be scared of?”

Heat blooms high in my cheeks. But I know that a moment of embarrassment is worth it, in this critical moment.

“I was scared for you,” I say, keeping my words quiet. “What if he had a gun? Did you even stop to think about that?”

Hades swallows, his green eyes hard on mine. He stares at me for a beat. Then he jerks his gaze away, out over the ocean.

“He didn’t.” His voice is a mere whisper. His expression is blank, but I can read that by now.

He’s thinking about what I said. Imagining what kind of chaos could’ve broken out if the stranger had pulled out a weapon.

“It was pure luck.” I slip my hand around his elbow, tugging him in the direction of the warehouse. “Now come on. You are bleeding like crazy. Let me get the glass out and try to wrap the hand up.”

He gives me the tiniest shrug, letting me pull him along. I tug my black sweatshirt off, wrapping it around his hand.

If Hades notices, he doesn't say anything. He's definitely on a different planet than me, sorting through his thoughts silently.

We trudge back to the warehouse in silence. He doesn't say anything as I spread out his hand on the table or douse it with a gallon of rubbing alcohol, purloined from my piles of art supplies.

He grits his teeth as I use a pair of long handled tweezers to remove the glass from the car's window. It isn't until I am wrapping his hand in strips of a shredded black sweater that I have the nerve to ask.

I crinkle my face, peering up at him. "Why do you always have to jump in?"

He looks at me, as if I've grown another head or something. "What?"

"When there is a seemingly violent man and a seemingly scared woman, you need to separate them. You play the white knight. It's clear that you're ready to pound the guy into the ground." I swallow, scrunching up my nose. "My question is, why? What makes you do that?"

His gaze flits to me, his green eyes all but on fire. "Maybe I just hate bullies."

"Hades..." I stare at him, tying the last strip of cloth over his injured hand. "You have a lot of qualities that... could be... desirable." I flush but I refuse to drop his gaze. "But that... that willingness to be violent? To jump in, to mix it up, knowing that there is going to be physical danger?"

I stop, pushing out my cheek with my tongue. Hades' gaze burns into my face.

"Yeah?" he asks quietly.

I suck in a breath. "It's not reassuring. I don't feel safe around you, knowing that you are going to fight every single guy who so much as looks at you wrong. So..." I shrug a shoulder. "Maybe think about that before the next time you almost beat the tar out of some guy."

He stands up, knocking his stool back and glaring at me. "Dinnae be such a fucking coward."

Then he turns on his heel and stalks out of the warehouse. I sigh and start cleaning up the bloody bits of cotton left from my first aid, shaking my head.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

PERSEPHONE

Hades is gone for too long. Half a day, almost. I spent the interim fumbling with wax seals and applying contact paper to make up the unstamped pages of three American passports. When he comes back in at the end of a long day, I'm just turning off my work lamps.

He rolls the big door open, and I turn toward the sound, my jaw tensing and my eyes narrowing on his face. Hades heads in the direction of his bed, as if nothing happened.

“Where have you been?” I ask, my tone sounding exasperated.

He stops for a second, clenching his fists before he turns back toward me. “I have a whole business, Persephone. I know that ye haven’t seen me working that much, but I can assure ye that is just because ye have been so needy. The business still needs tending. That’s the only way that I can have plans in place for every contingency.”

Crossing my arms, I pace over to him. His dark hair is shoved back from his face, his button up rumpled. Not only that, but he looks tired.

I try to sound reasonable as I take him to task.

“You can’t leave me here for so long. What if Constantine found me, somehow? It would take you a whole day to notice. I don’t feel safe in this place by myself.”

His mouth turns down at the corners but he just shrugs a shoulder. “We are well hidden here. I have no reason to suspect that anyone might know where we are.”

I want to strangle him because I feel like he’s not even listening to what I’m saying. Stepping closer, I lift my chin. “I could’ve been abducted this

morning. And you wouldn't even know I was gone until now. For all you know, I could've been taken out of the country by now!"

I'm not expecting Hades to grab me around the waist with so much force that it makes me tremble. He hauls me up against the wall of his body, his lips twisting bitterly.

"That won't happen," he growls. "No one is going to take ye from me, Penny."

A bubble of humorless laughter leaves my lips, unbidden. "You can't control everything! The fact that you think—"

Hades kisses me then, hard and punishing, stealing the very breath from my lungs. My whole body stiffens against him at first. I pound a fist against his chest as he bends me back, his tongue sweeping my mouth, his fingers finding their way into my hair. My heart pounds.

As much as I am loathe to admit it, this is what I knew would happen. Worse, I wanted him to kiss me. To fuck me.

To make me cry his name as I came.

He pushes me back toward the bed, half carrying me, the onslaught of his kiss never giving up an inch.

With every passing second, I feel my resolve against Hades weakening. Every brush of his lips on mine, every stroke of his fingers up and down my body. There's something different in him. I've felt him changing, slowly, a more vulnerable side emerging from the darkness.

But it requires anger to bring it out of him.

His tongue plunders my mouth and I find myself meeting it eagerly with my own. I can feel his desire to dominate, to possess me, and it doesn't scare me like it used to. I welcome it.

"Hades," I murmur against his lips. He takes my lower lip between his teeth and tugs, swift and hard.

He pulls a groan from my lips with the ease of a puppet master playing with a marionette.

"Quiet, lass." His growl sends shivers through my body and my nails dig into his chest. Slowly my eyes lift to meet his penetrating gaze, and what I find there makes me pause.

The familiar arrogance has lifted slightly, and a hint of vulnerability is there. "I'm not going anywhere."

My hands trail to the buttons on his shirt and slowly I slip them open one by one. His grip is firm on my hips, but when I hit bare skin, a slight

tremble rolls through him.

Leaning forward, I press my lips to the place that I can see his pulse beating strongly beneath his warm skin. I don't know how long this softer, gentler Hades will stick around, just as I'm not sure I want him to. There's something deliciously appealing about the darker, dirtier side that he presents to the world.

"Hades—" I try again.

A strangled groan escapes him seconds before he rips my hands away from him. I'm spun around and dropped unceremoniously into the chair I'd just vacated, then Hades is on his knees in front of me, yanking my dress up and pulling it off in such haste that it gets tangled around my wrists.

"I said, quiet," he commands with a fierce glare. He kneels down and pulls my ass to the edge of the chair, forcing my legs open with a ruthless grace. He rips my panties down my legs and puts his mouth on my slit. He moans as he tastes my dripping pussy, lapping up every drop that is escaping me. He takes no mercy on me, driving his tongue into me, holding my legs open with his large hands.

"Oh my god, yes," I breathe, my fingers reaching to tangle in his hair, but he stops me with one hand on my wrists.

"No. Ye dinnae get to touch."

There he is. That's the villain I know.

Hades dives back in, his fingers joining his mouth on his assault of me. Somehow, he manages to slide three of his thick fingers into my slick pussy, stretching me almost to the point of pain. But my discomfort quickly morphs to pure pleasure as he sucks my clit into his mouth.

"Hades. Please. I need..."

He sucks harder, his tongue greedily licking. In the deepest part of my being, I feel the orgasm building. But it isn't until he slides his free hand around to form a V around my clit that the combination of sensations has me chanting his name like a prayer.

The entire time I cascade over the edge into my release he doesn't let up, not stopping his assault until I'm a shaking mess, slumped back on the chair. Only then does he slide his fingers out, and when he captures my hazy gaze, he licks his fingers one by one.

"Come."

Hades stands up and lifts me into his arms in one move. It's an oddly intimate position, cradled against his chest. Unexpected coming from the

man who weeks ago was tying me up and putting his thumb in my ass.

He stretches me out on the bed. Propping myself up on my elbows, I watch Hades as he stands at the foot of the bed and agonizingly slowly removes his shirt, then his pants, then his underwear until he's naked in front of me. The man is truly a work of art, and unbidden a rush of warmth floods between my legs. I ache for him. All of him.

He fists his cock and looks me in the eyes.

"Are ye ready for me to stretch this pussy out and make ye scream my name?"

"Yes," I whisper, not taking my eyes off him.

"On yer knees."

I scramble to do as he bids me. He moves around to position himself before me, his cock jumping as I take him in my hands. The tangle of his fingers in my hair stings as he guides my head to where I know he wants me. Yet I resist when he pulls my head toward him. I want to push him, to see his reaction. My reward comes in the form of a deep growl. His hand tilts my chin upward.

"What are ye playing at, lass? Do ye want me to find the rope?"

I can't deny the thrill that runs through me, but no. I decide I don't. For all that I'm teasing him, taunting him, I'm enjoying this gentler Hades. I drop my gaze and my lips down to his cock. Running my thumb up the length, swirling around the tip that's already leaking. With one last glance up to see his blue eyes still fixated on me, I take him in my mouth.

His rumble of satisfaction spurs me to go deeper, until he hits the back of my throat.

"Fuck, lass," he gasps. He's clearly trying to keep himself in check.

When I gag and try to pull back, he holds me there and I take it.

This is my punishment for trying to resist earlier. He's in control and I need to allow him to do exactly what he wants to me.

Just as I feel my eyes start to water, he releases me slightly, only far enough so that I can slide my lips up and down him, alternating strong sucks with lighter licks. I'm primed to his responses, and I know I've got him close to the edge when I feel his fingers tighten in my hair as I draw his tip between my teeth, grazing it lightly. I do it again, then suck him in deeply once more until I'm choking as he hits the back of my throat. Another graze of my teeth, another suck. I continue until he abruptly jerks me off of him and lifts me up on my knees and kisses me.

"I'll not be coming in yer mouth, Persephone. That privilege is for yer perfect pussy alone."

Hades lifts me onto the bed and tosses me down with no warning. He pushes me back, lifting my legs and holding them tightly together with his arms wound around my calves. Then he drives into my pussy without any warning. I cry out his name, instantly feeling my walls clench around him.

"Yer. Mine." He snarls the words with such fury that I would probably be shocked if he hadn't just slid himself so far inside of me that my jaw drops. "Do ye hear me, lass? Only. Mine."

Each word is punctuated by a thrust of his hips. I can't stop to think about what he means, as I get caught up in the overwhelming wave of sensation.

"Open yer eyes, Persephone."

I obey instantly, my eyes flying open to find his.

"Mine," He says, deceptively softly. His voice doesn't match the intensity of his hips pumping into me, or the piercing fire in his eyes that scorches me from the inside out.

He pulls out of me and I cry out at the sudden loss of him. But then Hades flips me over, forcing my hips into the air and slamming back into me with a roar. His hand lands on my ass with a crack.

"Hades!" My hands are grappling at the sheets, desperate to find something to anchor myself against the onslaught of him. Every slide of his cock is rubbing my already sensitized nerve endings. Another climax is hurtling towards me, but this time I won't be alone in my release. He's swelling inside of me, his movements becoming jerky and erratic. Suddenly his hand wraps around the front of my neck, tugging gently but commandingly, to lift me up.

"Say it, Persephone. Say yer *mine*."

"I'm yours," I gasp. I can barely think, let alone mumble out the words he's expecting.

He slams into me once, twice, then with a final roar I feel him pull out. In the next second, he jets hot streams of cum onto my inner thighs. My body answers in kind, spasming as the waves of my own climax hit me.

I feel Hades sag against my back, only for a moment, as if showing even that small amount of weakness is too much for him. Then he abruptly pushes my body away, letting me collapse onto the bed. I hear him stalk away without a word.

Blearily, I whip my head around to see where he's going.

Is that it? Is he done?

Before my mind can start to panic or overthink the tenderness mixed with pure lust with which he just fucked me, he's back.

In a gruff voice, he mumbles, "here." Then a warm cloth is dropped unceremoniously onto my legs. I twist my upper body only to see him walking away again.

"Thank you?" I call out.

The only sign I have that he heard me, that he was affected at all by what we just did, is a slight hesitation in his step.

Then he's gone, vanishing into the shower.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

PERSEPHONE

The next day, I pull my earbuds out of my ears. Standing up where I have been hunched over the worktable, I flex my right hand. I've been clenching it, trying to keep it out of my way while I trace a few doodles, testing out ink and paper and different paintbrushes.

My hand twitches a little. I stare at it, trying to block out the slow ache that has formed over the last two hours.

I guess I've just found a time limit for myself. Since that fateful night that Constantine pushed me over the cliff's edge, I have been treating myself with kid gloves. Things I used to do without thought? Working for two hours straight, trying to do the same thing over and over?

I consider that to be something I left behind in my art school days. Dead and buried, with my pride and ambition alongside it.

I shake out my hand. But it begins to really hurt, a pounding ache. Without some aspirin, I'm afraid that I won't be able to work anymore.

“Hades?” I call.

I expect him to be surly. To be hateful, even.

But I do expect him to answer. After all, this is his damned project that I'm killing myself to work on.

I turn my head. My gaze sweeps the warehouse and finds it empty. My gaze narrows.

“Hello?”

No answer.

I trail over to the bed that Hades has claimed for himself. It's the same one that we hooked up on.

I run my fingers over the downy comforter, tracing the place where I lay. Where Hades made me feel such extraordinary pleasure.

Heat shoots through me at the memory of it, so brief yet so exquisite.

The same place I was sitting when he turned cold as ice.

Yeah, I have to stop reliving those moments. I've been tormented by them for the last two days. My skin crawls.

I need to finish this goddamn artwork fast so that I can be rid of Hades forever.

I lean against the bed and hear a quiet crumple. I tilt my head, examining the side of the bed where my leg rests. A flash of colorful paper catches my eye. I see a thick stack of euros sticking out from under the mattress.

When I lift the corner of the bed, I'm stunned to see what a million euros is easily maybe, stacked under Hades' mattress as cavalierly as one might hide a diary or a baseball bat. There are also three sleek, shiny guns.

I make a face. Wherever Hades is, he's missing some hardware that I would rather not know existed.

I snag one of the stacks of money. The crisp bills smell new and are heavier than I imagined they would be, somehow. After a moment's thought, I pick up a gun, too.

You can never be too careful when you're a fugitive on the run from the whole fucking world.

It only takes about thirty seconds of hunting before I locate the keys to the bright red convertible parked outside the warehouse. Hades will likely be pissed when he realizes that I've taken the car... but he wasn't here when I needed some aspirin.

My stomach gurgles faintly. Make that aspirin and something to eat other than stale pastries. I don't need to go far... just the first gas station or retail pharmacy shop should do the trick.

I scoop up my phone, pocketing it and the stack of euros before I head outside. It's bright outside, the day as hot as all the others. Dust clings to my stylish black booties as I strut out to the car.

It's been years since I drove a car. Especially one as expensive and sleek as the little black two seater. I can't help thinking about that as I start up the Mustang, revving the engine.

Excitement makes me shiver as I turn the car around and nudge it toward town. The first car I ever learned to drive was a stick, just like this.

But I am a little rusty, especially starting out.

Yeah, I stall the engine a couple of times before I get the hang of it. The gears grind a few times.

But hey. It's not like Hades will care... right?

No, I shouldn't be worried about what he thinks. He deeply, truly sucks as a person anyway.

Gaining a little confidence, I zip along the highway and crest the last big hill separating us from the city. At the very top of the hill, the city spreads out below me like a pool of ink.

"Wow," I mumble to myself. "People that said Monaco was dazzling weren't lying."

I plunge the car down toward the tall, white sandstone buildings. They are one a grid, each perfectly placed, not quite skyscrapers but impressively tall, nonetheless. Around them are clusters of squat buildings, dense at the center and growing sparser as the city fans out its hands toward me.

I feel almost giddy as I push the car faster and shift into fifth gear. It's liberating, being free from Hades for a few minutes and flying down the highway at a breakneck speed.

I zoom right past a gas station without a moment's hesitation. Forgetting all about people hunting me down, I make a beeline for downtown Monaco City.

No one that is looking for me will find me. Not in the short time it takes to grab aspirin and maybe a fresh baguette from a nearby corner store.

I grin to myself as I fly by most of the sparse clusters of gas stations and banks. At length though, I cut my speed down, twisting my mouth as I look around. I speak a little Cajun French. I know how to ask for the restroom or where the nearest library is.

où sont les toilettes? où est la bibliothèque?

Basic high school French taught me that. But I can't for the life of me remember the word for pharmacy in French. All I can think of is *pharmacia*, which I'm almost certain is Spanish.

I stare at the signs as I pass them, slowing the car to a crawl. Horns blare behind me, making me panic a little.

Parapharmacie Édouard.

I slam on the brakes, jerking the little coupe into a spot outside the plain khaki building. Several cars honk their horns. But I pay them no mind.

Instead, I grab my purse, containing my car keys, my huge stack of euros, and the gun I *borrowed* from Hades.

I'm already halfway up the sidewalk, my eyes focused on the busy front door of the pharmacy. My nerves jangle unexpectedly as I reach the door...

But inside, the hustle and bustle of the store is almost calming to me. A cashier rings up a short line of people at the front register. There are orderly rows of shelves, people talking on their phones, an older lady explaining to a young male employee...

Well, my French isn't that good, but I assume that she's describing what she's looking for.

I sigh, my lips pressing into a contented line. Shining shampoo bottles and full-sized posters for cosmetics call my name as I pass by them, looking for where the aspirin might be.

To my right, I see a restroom. Vaguely, I feel the need to relieve myself. So, I stop there first, washing my hands and taking a long time to look at myself in the mirror.

I look stressed and a little tired. Not to mention the fact that now that I'm not behind the wheel of the car, my hand aches quite badly.

Taking my hair down, I spend a minute gathering it into a neat ponytail and pinning it back in place.

I leave the restroom, bumping into a stack of pill bottles left haphazardly on a tray used for restocking items. The top tray begins to tip, and I lean forward, catching it before it crashes to the ground.

Frowning, I grapple with the tray. It's wide and gray, made of flimsy cardboard. I'm trying to right the tray when I hear a voice.

"She's on this block somewhere."

A chill runs through my veins and I freeze. That's not just any voice.

It's Constantine's voice unmistakable Cajun accent, speaking English.

"Fuck. I don't see her anywhere," he says. "I'm telling you; she is wily. We have to catch her unaware, you feel me?"

Oh god.

Oh *god*. They are definitely talking about me.

I start shaking, my eyes widening, my pupils dilating. My heart thrums a wild tattoo against my ribcage. My mind flashes to a faraway beach. Maddie's blood on the coarse brown rocks of the beach, already beginning to wash away as the tide rolls in. Her hand, gone pale against the dark sand, lying sprawled out as if she were trying to reach for me.

"We know she is on this block, monsieur," a man's voice answers.
I can only swallow.

"What about the bakery next door?" Constantine suggests.
"Persephone's skinny ass never could say no to an almond croissant."
His accent makes the phrase sound like al-MOND CROIS-sant.
Pushing my fingers against my mouth, I feel ill. Bile hits my tastebuds.
Constantine is the only Cajun I've ever dated. Since him, I've been completely wiggled out by anyone with that specific Southern drawl.

My blood turns to ice. My hands don't work anymore, so I'm just hovering by a stack of crates, unable to move so much as a muscle.

"Oui, monsieur. I will check personally," comes a faraway reply. "Don't worry, we will find her."

"Be on the lookout for Hades. I showed you his picture, right?" A pause. "I'm not sure where he is. I haven't been able to track him down."

I move closer to the doorway, trying to see Constantine. Two men move slowly through the store. The stockier sandy-haired man is a stranger to me, but I glimpse just a fragment of tall, blond Constantine.

He looks the same as ever, stalking down the rows, a permanent sneer on his lips. He cocks his head as he looks around, dissatisfied.

"Watch out for him. He's apt to put up a real fight if we find him. You'd better hope to hell you see him first and fire a lucky shot off. The motherfucker has the best damned aim I've ever seen east of Texas."

I clench my fists, ducking back into the protection of the hallway, and pray.

Please, god.

Please make him leave.

"All right. I say we head next door." When I hear him again, his voice is moving toward the front door. "We got to get her before that bastard Hades realizes she's missing."

I tense up so much that the tray I'm holding buckles, spilling pill bottles everywhere. The pills rattle as the bottles fall to the ground, bouncing awkwardly, alerting everyone who has ears to my clumsiness.

I hear Constantine's sharp voice. "What was that?"

A murmured response. "I'll check it out."

I dart my gaze around the small back hallway I'm standing in. Other than the two bathrooms, there's a third doorway.... and a door labeled SORTIE in bold red letters. I hurry to the door, pushing the bar across the

middle. But it doesn't open. I try desperately to push against it several times before my brain catches up with reality. The door is stuck, somehow.

I flatten my back against the door. My purse hits the door with a thud and its heaviness reminds me of what I brought for protection.

A sleek black handgun.

I reach into the purse and wrap my hands around the grip of the gun. Shaking, pulse pounding a million miles an hour, I point the gun at the doorway leading into the store.

A second later, the man's blond head peeks in the back hallway. I grimace at him and point the gun at his face, stepping sideways. His eyes widen as he takes me in.

"Go," I hiss. "Just leave."

A calculating look crosses his face. "I cannot do that, *mademoiselle*. You must come with me."

"Like hell." I can feel the sheen of sweat as it breaks out across my brow. Glaring at the man, I think about firing a warning shot into the wall. My teeth chatter as I grip the gun harder. "That man tried to kill me. Do you understand? I'm not going to go anywhere with either of you."

"*Mademoiselle*—" he says. "Be reasonable..."

At that very moment, the door behind my back is yanked open. My eyes widen as I lose my footing. I am grabbed around the waist by strong, unseen arms. The blond man edges out from behind the wall, approaching with a determined look on his face.

A sharp scream escapes my lips. The arms that grip me pull tighter, wrapping around my body. I can feel something sharp and cold pressing in against my ribs.

My brain going into overdrive, naming the cold object a knife. I panic, flailing. The gun goes off in my hands, shooting the blond man in the chest.

The man behind me grunts and jabs me in the ribs with his knife. Pain shoots through my entire body but I'm too wrapped up in breaking the man's hold to focus on it. I make my body as pointy as possible, driving my elbows back into the man's solid core with swift force.

He makes a soft noise of pain and for just the barest second, his hands relax. I stomp my high heeled feet down onto his booted ones as I twist away from him.

"*Pute*," he growls. He tries to hold me, his knife slicing into my ribs and then my right wrist as I kick and punch my way to freedom.

I turn around, barely recognizing him as a person before I lift my gun and shoot him twice in the stomach. The gunshots ring out loud in the alley. He drops to the ground, squealing like a pig and writhing in pain.

For a second, my brain refuses to work.

I stare at him, horrified, as he slumps and gurgles.

The sound of the gunfire rings in my ears. My heart pounds.

I have to get out of here, I think. The gunshots will call the world down upon me.

I clutch at the neckline of my sweater. God gave me an opening, I'm pretty damned sure. I lick my lips, backing up, and consider my options. I look both ways down the alley.

If I run away right now, Constantine or his men might see me. They will give chase. And I'm not stupid enough to think that I can just escape capture a second time.

I bring my hand to my ribs, tears filling my eyes. I can't look down. I am badly injured, but I think that not knowing the extent of my injuries right now is somehow saving me.

Still, I can't go far without people following.

I push my cheek out with my tongue and think of the restroom I left not long ago. The door to the back hallway is still ajar. I head over to it, using my toe to nudge it open.

The man I shot is nowhere to be seen. There are several bloody handprints on the wall, where he got up and exited through the store.

Blood rushes though my temples, making it hard to think. In my limited capacity, I step into the building once more and find my way to the bathroom. It's my safest bet, for the moment at least.

I slink backward, opening and closing the door quietly. Then I lock the deadbolt.

As I pull out my phone, I realize just how badly I'm shaking. Going to the contacts, I select the only number saved in my phone.

I press dial, clenching my eyes closed and whispering a prayer.

One ring.

Two rings.

Three rings.

"Come on... come on..."

Hades picks up with a grumble. "This had better be fucking important, Persephone."

“Hades?” I whisper. “I’m in Monaco City... and I need your help... I just saw Constantine. He’s... he’s here. And I’ve been stabbed.”

The last few words are lost, swallowed by my tears. I try not to panic or get hysterical, but it’s almost impossible.

Constantine almost killed me once. I know too much, and I can testify that he’s a bad, bad man.

If he finds me, I am absolutely certain that he is going to finish the job.

“Fuck,” Hades curses. There is a pause. “Where are ye?”

I take a deep breath, trying not to cry. “ Parapharmacie Édouard. I’ve locked myself in the bathroom.”

There’s a silence on the line. For a second, I think he’s considering whether I’m worth the trouble of saving or not. Big, fat tears leak from my eyes.

“Please, Hades,” I beg. “Please, come get me.”

Another second. Then he grates an answer.

“Stay put. I’ll be there shortly. Do not open that fucking door for anybody but me.”

He disconnects the line before I can say another word. It takes a few seconds of gaping at my phone before I can put it away. I move away from the door, one eye on the tiny window, more afraid than I can ever recall being.

And my vision starts fading in and out. Touching my wound again, I look at my hand. It’s stained dark red with my own wet blood.

Shit.

I sit down in the middle of the bathroom floor, feeling woozy, and wait for my white knight to arrive.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

HADES

I wind our boxy SUV around the sinuous coastal road. The pale sunlight filters through the dark-tinted windows, casting a wide box of light that falls upon still-sleeping Persephone. She's been sleeping for hours now, ever since the doctor gave her some pain medication.

My eyes are fixed on the still silhouette of her face.

Even in sleep, her face is pale with two heavy smudges of shadow under each eye. I can't look away.

Ever since I found her, all but passed out from blood loss in that bathroom in Monaco City, I've been watching her like a hawk.

As if I could keep her here and alive simply through the force of my willing it to be.

As if I could bind her to my side, make sure that nothing happens to her. My brain knows that is not the way to keep Persephone from leaving.

But my gut is what drove me in the hours after I scooped her up in my arms and carried her away from any danger lurking in Monaco. It helped me to focus my thoughts, calling Linc and demanding the name of a discreet doctor.

I stood by while the woman cut Persephone's dress off of her body, trying to distract myself from the red slashes carved into Persephone's delicate ribs. Usually, no mere flesh wound would make my stomach churn like this.

But there are exceptions that prove every rule.

I held her hand and forced myself to think through what our next steps would need to be. Where would we go? How would we hide?

And for how long?

That same feeling still drives me now, as I bring Persephone back to the safest place I can think of. I'm operating by listening to my gut, which is totally unlike me. Usually, I'm so deliberate. If a plan doesn't work out, there are the second, third, and fourth back plans. All meticulously planned out, leaving nothing to chance.

But now? Now that I have a wounded Persephone in my care and I'm on the run? I'm a man wandering in the darkness, god damn it, and it's scaring the fuck out of me.

What else am I meant to do? I can't call anyone. I can't ask for advice.

It's just me and a badly-injured Persephone now. No time for misgivings.

No time for the anger that claws at me, demanding that she be held accountable for fucking up our entire plan in Monaco. No time for my mind to wander over what she said to me again.

I don't feel safe around you, knowing that you are going to fight every single guy who so much as looks at you wrong.

It echoes around my head, popping into my thoughts at the most inopportune moments.

She doesn't feel safe around me.

What am I supposed to do with that?

So, I came to the only place that I truly know we will be safe. Now that my father is dead, his house on Blank Island off the northwest coast of Scotland is an unassailable fortress.

It might be an obvious choice for a hiding spot. But with its age-old defenses and its distance from any civilization, I do not have to think twice about its safety.

I turn and look out the window, tensing as the SUV begins climbing the final hill. Rough blocks of white and khaki jut out against the pale blue summer sky. Ancient architecture, older than the dawn of time, indicating exactly where the manor lands begin. The tall, thick stone wall is bordered by long grasses and heather that grow wild at the bottom. My heart begins to beat faster as I drive the SUV under the curved stone archway.

The manor springs into view, massive and sprawling, the edges of its khaki roof and white stone walls worn with age. My fists clench as we pull up at the end the circular drive.

It's been a decade since I was here last. My pulse pounds as I stare the scene down. The massive oak front door, flaking off tiny pieces of shellac.

The same old haphazardly-placed chimneys. The exotic animal topiaries, my father's pride and joy. They've grown wild but remain standing before the house, still fanned out like spread fingers.

It's a bit rougher than when I last saw it. Less tamed, less cared for. But to my way of thinking, not a single detail seems to have changed. My stomach flip-flops and my gaze hardens.

I swallow thickly.

"Hades?"

I jerk my head toward Persephone. She is just stirring, dazzling me with those hazel eyes as she sweeps her dark hair away from her face. She sits up with a grimace.

"We're here," I announce. I clear my throat. "In the Hebrides."

"Oh," she groans quietly, her hand fluttering to her ribs. Her gaze sweeps out, taking in the manor, narrowing a little. "Scotland?"

"Aye." I climb out of the SUV, walking purposefully around to help her get out. "Dinnae ye remember the plane rides?"

She shakes her head, still clearly groggy.

"What happened to my project? The forgeries, I mean."

"I preserved them and have them packed up." I look forward, clenching the wheel tightly. "I did not think it wise to bring them here." Swiping my tongue over my lip, I check the rearview mirror compulsively. But of course, there is no one behind me.

There will be no one that follows us here, to the gates of my personal Hell.

Persephone puts her hand to her head, her eyes trained on the manor. There is no expression on her face aside from pain as I slide my arm around her and help her toward the house.

"How long was I asleep for?" she asks, her voice quavering.

"Ye've slept most of the day, lass."

I sweep open the front door and we step into the small, round foyer. It's my least favorite room in a manor full of memories. Memories of brutal beatings and cruel punishments. But Persephone doesn't know that.

She just winces and leans against me, frowning up at the low ceiling. "I feel like I could sleep for days."

"Ye probably will," I predict, hurrying her through to the main hall.

The main hall opens up rather spectacularly.

Persephone pulls to a stop, her eyes wide as she casts a glance around the massive room we're in. Huge antique chandeliers hang every few feet the length of the room, which is as long as two Olympic swimming pools. Just now there are dust cloths wrapping them, so they look like huge gray ghosts, dominating the whole room.

Windows are a relatively new invention, and this place definitely doesn't have many of them. Especially not here, in the oldest part of the building. There are very old Persian rugs laid over the stone floors; in some places, beneath the rugs the stone has grooves from the feet of generations of my ancestors, stretching far into the past.

"Where did you find this place?" Persephone asks. She motions to a high backed plum colored chair, ratty from age and with a thick coating of accumulated dust.

My face contorts and I make her keep moving toward the back of the room. "It was my home as a child."

Persephone looks startled, her mouth opening with a silent gasp. "Really?"

I nod, already weary of her questions. "Aye."

"Why didn't we just hide out here?" she asks, her eyes roving around the hall.

My jaw tenses. I look away, blanking my facial features.

"The years I spent here were not a happy time. This is not a joyous place for me. All it reminds me of is pain and loss. But I know it is safe, which is what we need right now."

Her eyes widen. I see her lips part to ask questions.

"Not yet," I say, cutting her questions off. "I promise, I'll try to answer your questions later. Let's just get ye settled."

To our left are the kitchens and the dilapidated servant's quarters. I pull Persephone along, not ready to let her explore on her own quite yet. And for her part, she seems pretty complacent.

I am sure that part of her docility is due to the pain medication, though.

Eschewing the bedrooms, which are undoubtedly so dusty and dingy as to be near worthless, I opt for hustling Persephone into my late father's office.

A library full of books covers the entirety of one wall. Several dusty wingback chairs sit clustered near the small window. My father's desk is exactly as he left it the last day he was alive, complete with his favorite

fancy pen. Meisterstück. Yellowing papers in a neat wire basket on one corner. A bit of his dusty blue stationary sits in the middle of his desk. He was in the middle of writing a letter to one of his political chums when he died of a sudden stroke.

I can see the flourished swirl of his handwriting. It wasn't necessary to read the damn thing to know that he was angry. He was always furious about something or the other, bitter until his dying fucking breath.

I swallow hard and half-carry Persephone over to one of the chairs. Leaving her standing on her own for a moment, I lift one of the smooth, butter yellow leather chairs over my head. It takes a minute of blowing on it and brushing my hands over it to remove most of the dust.

Persephone is suddenly wracked with a coughing fit, fanning a hand in front of her face. She looks as if she could keel over at any moment.

Gritting my teeth, I catch her by the elbow and lever her into the chair.

"Stay put," I tell her. "I have to use the landline to call in someone to clean."

"What?" She coughs again, her shoulders shaking. "I thought we were on the run. Why are you broadcasting our location to the world all the sudden?"

"Just relax." I shoot her a glare out of the corner of my eye and stride over to the phone on the desk. "My family owns the closest town and almost everything on this damn two-bit island. The school, the paper, the local mill? They all belong to me. And those that aren't owned by me are owned by friends of the family." I pause, my brows rising a little. "Besides. Who would they even tell?"

Persephone straightens and leans back in her chair. Her hand travels up to the bandages on her ribcage. "Constantine, for one."

I don't feel safe around you. The thought echoes around in the background of my thoughts. I grimace.

Persephone Corbin will feel safe here. I'm as sure of it as I am that the sky is blue, that the grass underneath my feet will one day again turn green. If it is the very last thing I do, she will know she is safe here.

"Yer untouchable while yer here. The island is distant from every other place on earth, lass. The house is remote. We are locked inside a manor surrounded by a very, very big wall." I pick up the phone, shrugging as if it's moot. "I'd love to see him attack this place. It's been in my family for a millennia, unassailable ever since the Lyons laid claim to it." I pause for a

second, my tongue darting out to wet my bottom lip. “I brought ye to the only place I’ve ever thought of as being truly safe.”

She arches a brow at me. But my explanation, my word, will have to be good enough for her for now. I turn, giving her my shoulder as I start to dial a number I still know by heart.

It rings three times before anyone picks up.

“Hello?” answers a young woman.

“This is Hades Lyon,” I say, frowning. “Please tell Mary Nightingale that I’m here in Blah House. I’ll need people to come right away to clean and make sure all the lights still work.”

There is a pause. “Did you say you were Hades Lyon?”

My frown deepens. “Yes,” I fire back.

“Hold on.” There is a muffled noise, as if the young woman has placed her hand over the receiver. She gives an inelegant squawk and seems to argue with an older, distant woman on her end.

She comes back suddenly. “We’ll be right there, Mr. Lyon.”

I hang up without another word. When I turn back around, Persephone is shivering in her seat. She’s still wearing the bright pink scrubs that she got after the doctor cut her dress off her body. It’s not even remotely cold but I guess she’s been through a lot in the past ten hours.

“Ach, lass,” I say, going over to rub her arms briskly. “I’ve nothing to give to ye to warm ye up. It’s been so long since I’ve been here that I’m not even sure where the wood is to light a fire in the fireplace.”

Persephone leans against me, accepting my touch without so much as a flinch. “S’okay.” She yawns. “I’ve been cold all day.”

“Persephone...” I look down at her, my hands still rubbing her arms and moving around to her back. “I dinnae ken what I’m supposed to do with ye.”

She scrunches up her nose, pressing her face into my stomach and weaving her hands around me. She buries her hands in the back of my shirt, pulling it free from my waist.

“What does *ken* mean?”

“It means... know. To have knowledge.”

“Ah,” she says absently. She slides her gaze to me. “And it’s Penny, by the way.”

I arch a brow, not sure what she’s talking about. Or how her little hands can be like two blocks of ice.

“What’s that now?”

She sighs, her hazel eyes slipping closed. “I think, after you saved my life, you can call me Penny. Persephone is like... some ancient woman that I don’t even know. You should call me Penny.”

My hands stop rubbing small circles into her back. I tilt my head, taking her measure for a moment.

She opens her eyes and peers up at me, her face both sleepy and completely, utterly open. Her brown-green gaze spears me; in this moment, touching her innocently, being so damned close to her heady scent and lovely warm curves...

It’s bewitching. Almost without thought, I say her name back to her, staring into her eyes.

“Penny.”

The word is soft, light on my tongue. I let it drift away. The corners of her mouth turn upward in the hint of a smile.

Her eyes close again. “Thanks,” she whispers.

I start rubbing her back again. She lets out a sigh, so soft as to be all but silent.

This girl?

She’s dangerous. I have no idea if she even realizes it. But she is definitely angling to entrap me.

For what purpose, I have no idea. But I can feel my heart thumping in my chest. Feel her soft, supple skin as I stroke it reassuringly.

I know what is happening. I am starting... beginning to...

Feel... things.

But for the life of me, I can’t pull away. I stare down at Penny, gently rubbing her back. And I wish that I could be different.

I wish... I wish I could be the type of man that keeps girls around him. The kind of man that could...

Could make her want to stay.

I know I can’t.

I know that trying would be a painful and embarrassing failure.

I can’t be like any other man. I know no other way.

But just for now... just while we are here, in this manor, in this place that’s full of ghosts... I can pretend.

I gently push her back. She protests but I scoop her up in my arms, taking the chair for myself.

Penny yawns and immediately makes herself at home in the crook of my arm. I stay like that, stroking her lovely raven hair and enjoying the feeling of her light weight against my lap until the house falls dark.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

PERSEPHONE

“W ere ye trying to run away?”

Brows arching, I look up from my breakfast tray in the huge navy-hued bedroom I woke up in this morning, Hades is leaning against the doorway, cutting a dark figure in his dark shirt and pants. Pushing away the toast and half-eaten egg, I try to sit up.

Pain radiates from my scabbed-over wound.

“Ahhh,” I hiss, pressing my fingers over it lightly. The dressing has been changed, although I don’t know by who.

Things just seem to happen around Hades. Unseen hands do much of the dull work.

Like magic, when I woke this morning there were dark, luxurious dresses and oversized sweaters hanging on a rolling stand beside the bed. A fire had been laid in the hearth of my bedroom.

I’m glad now that I took the time to painstakingly pull a fresh sweater over my head before my meal. I shake my head, wrinkling my nose.

“What were you talking about again?” I ask.

“I was talking about the day ye had your little run-in with Constantine’s men.” His eyes narrow on my face, but his expression gives nothing away otherwise. “Were ye trying to run away?”

“No.” I roll my eyes and lie back, the soft mound of pillows just behind me feeling as if they were made in heaven. I clear my throat. “I was looking for a bottle of aspirin. You were nowhere to be found. So... I took the initiative.”

A sour expression curls his upper lip. “I dinnae ken whether to believe ye or not.”

I pull a face. "Have I lied to you before?"

Hades shoots me a glare. "I wouldn't know."

"Yes, you would," I fire back. I cross my arms, annoyed at his questions. "You seem to know everything. And I do not mean that as a compliment."

He shoots me a look. "Get dressed. The doctor that stitched ye up recommended that ye move around, keep yer blood circulating."

I screw up my face. "What are the chances that yer just telling me that because you think it's true?"

He gives me a pinched look. "If ye get a blood clot out here, yer fucked. So, get dressed or I'll drag ye outside for a walk as ye are right now."

"That doesn't sound appealing," I grumble. "Get out so I can change."

"I'll be outside yer door." He cocks a brow. "But it's not like I haven't seen ye naked, lass."

I chuck a pillow at him, my face heating. He smirks and disappears, closing the heavy wood door.

I manage to dress myself with some difficulty. Every time I move my arms or torso or even breathe too hard, a throbbing pain radiates out from my aching ribs. When I pop my head out of the bedroom, Hades is slumped against the wall, frowning down at his phone. He looks up, brushing his hair back from his face. He hasn't shaved recently, and his chin-length hair looks a bit wild, turning into loose waves. His green eyes burn into me, making me very aware of exactly how handsome he is.

My tongue darts out to wet my bottom lip as he straightens and pushes himself off of the wall. He walks the couple of steps to loom over me, his mouth twitching with just the barest hint of humor.

"Stop looking at me like that, lass," he rumbles.

I blush as red as a beet. Without breaking eye contact, I tuck my hair back behind my ears, all nervous for no reason. When I speak, my words have a breathy quality to them.

"Like what?" I ask softly.

A rueful little smile passes over his features. "Like a little kitten in heat." He pauses, pushing his cheek out with his tongue. "If ye weren't injured, I would strip ye, tease ye, and make ye beg to taste my cock."

His words send a shiver of pure heat through my too-cold bones. I stare at him for a second, tempted to take him up on it. My ribs would heal in time... but how many chances would I have to seduce this man?

I lick my lips, opening my mouth to respond. But Hades gives his head a little shake.

“Dinnae, Penny.”

My brows arch. Before I can say anything else, he turns and starts walking away down the narrow hallway we are standing in. I follow him, my steps slow. Whenever I jostle my ribs too much, I feel like I might bust a stitch.

Hades makes it to the end before he realizes that I’m moving much slower than he is. He frowns and waits for me, his gaze sweeping over me from head to toe.

“Take my arm,” he says, sticking his elbow out when I get close.

I purse my lips and slip my hand into the crook of his arm. “Thanks,” I say faintly.

We head out into the large main room we encountered yesterday. With its vaulted ceilings, its worn stone walls, and its long and undoubtedly priceless Persian rugs, the room is already spectacular. While I slept the gray dust cloths have been removed from the enormous chandeliers and they twinkle as they spill light across the room.

I notice suddenly that everything has been cleaned, from the chandeliers to the formerly dusty side tables to the deep grooves in the stone floors.

I tilt my head. “Someone came and cleaned.”

“Yes.” Hades nods as he escorts me across the chamber. “The same family has been taking care of this place for a hundred years. Even in our absence, they come and clean once in a while.”

“Ah.” I scrunch my face up as we make it to the foyer again. “It must have been pretty great to grow up here.”

“What?” A startled look crosses his face. “I dinnae ken what would give ye that impression, lass.”

Hades shoulders the massive front door open. I step outside into the bright morning sun and shade my eyes as I look at him. I’m trying to read his expression, but he just seems a little disgruntled to me.

No different from any other time, really.

“It just seems...” I wave a hand to indicate the massive manor house. “Ye grew up with all of this, right?”

Hades closes the door, a deep frown on his face. “I did, yes. But—“

He stops himself mid-sentence, poking out his cheek with his tongue. He doesn’t say anything for a moment, so I walk the couple of steps closer,

taking his arm. The gesture feels cozy, intimate. My ribs are aching at this point, but I stifle a sigh.

Hades darts a glance at me, licking his lower lip. “My father was a very violent man.”

My eyes widen. I can’t think of anything cleverer to say than, “oh?”

His body language has gone rather stiff. He nods and looks away, off toward the wall. He doesn’t add anything, so after a few seconds I suck in a breath.

“Where are we walking?” I ask.

“Ach.” Hades starts walking down the circular driveway, toward the wall. “If ye feel up to it, we should walk around the house’s walls.”

“Okay,” I agree. I give him a quick smile. “But you may end up carrying me back up this hill.”

He glances at me, a flicker of warmth in his eyes. “It’s a deal.”

We head down the steep embankment and pass through the arched gateway. It’s beautiful out here, coastal and windy, sunny yet cool. There are long grasses and heather everywhere I look, the gray-green color blending in with the oatmeal color of the distant beach. Past that is the stark near-black stripe of the ocean, white peaks here and there, penned in by the endless gray blue sky. It makes quite a beautiful landscape.

I turn my face up to Hades, about to rem
ark on it. But his expression is heavy, bleak. His eyes have a faraway look, like he’s remembering unpleasant things.

“Hades,” I say, tugging at his arm.

“Hm?” He looks at me, his eyes refocusing. “I was just...” He pauses, sighing. “I was thinking of my mother.”

I squeeze his arm gently. “Tell me about her.”

“She was... complicated.” He sighs again, a forlorn sound. “My father was in politics. He inherited most of this island from his father and ran every single business with an eye to the profit margins. He didn’t care about people. He was only interested in amassing more power.” He licks his bottom lip and looks off into the distance. “He was known for being... intense, I guess.”

“You said he was violent,” I push, being as gentle as I know how to be. “Did he... did he have something to do with the scars on your back?”

A bleat of unexpected laughter bursts from his lips. “Every single day that I lived under this roof, my father found something to be angry about.

First, he'd go for my mother. Then when he'd beaten her into submission, he'd come after me." A tiny wince puckers his face. "My mother could never stand up to him when he got angry."

I run my fingers down his arm and pick up his hand. Hades looks at me, a brow arching.

"I'm sorry," I say, pinning him with my gaze. "That must have been scary for all of you."

"It was a long time ago." He shrugs as if he doesn't care, but I can see the misery in his eyes.

"Has your mom... passed away?" I guess.

"I wouldn't know." He snorts and starts walking again. "She left when I was young. My father found out that she planned to go. She had been putting money aside, I guess, and had us pack bags." His expression blanks into a mask. "As ye can imagine, my father absolutely lost his mind. He couldn't let people know that he beat his wife and children so badly that they ran away! So..." He stops, his tongue darting out to wet his lips. "He gave her a choice. She could leave without us... or stay with us. Obviously, she chose to leave."

"Oh, Hades." I tug at his hand, pulling him to a stop. I look up at him for a long moment, biting my lower lip. Then I slip my arms around his shoulders, bringing my head to his chest. My ribs ache as I lift my arms, but I ignore it.

For his part, he doesn't move. His body doesn't soften in any way. But he doesn't actively resist my attentions or try to pull away.

"Shit happens," Hades rumbles. "People had it worse. A lot of people."

I hug him harder, holding onto him. After half a minute, his hands gently come up to wrap around my waist. I add a little consoling rocking motion into my embrace.

And in exchange, I feel his lips graze the crown of my head.

In this moment, I can see him for what he really is. He's a strong man, yes. But he's also so violent and reactive to anything he perceives as bullying.

I can easily imagine him as a small child, dreaming of being exactly like this. Of needing no one, of making men tremble at the mention of his name.

It breaks my fucking heart. I close my eyes, pushing all of my care and all of my tenderness into a tight ball of energy. I feed that ball directly into Hades through my hug, my closeness.

I don't mean to cry, but a tear slips free and rolls down my cheek.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper against his chest.

It's an emotional moment for both of us. Hades clears his throat and straightens, easing back from the embrace. When he speaks, his tone is cool and distant once more.

"The best thing I can do now is not repeat the whole thing with a family of my own."

My mouth starts to open, a million questions on the tip of my tongue.

"Wait, that's what you drew from your experience?" I ask, puzzled.

He shoots me a look and starts walking again. "Come on. Dinnae dawdle."

I frown and trail after him, wondering what to make of his revelations today.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

HADES

I press my satellite phone against my ear with one hand. With the other, I rub the bridge of my nose.

“It can’t be helped,” Ares is explaining. “Any ship’s captain that comes to him with proof that we’ve contacted him can earn double what we’re paying. All thanks to Constantine.” He gives a little growl. “I think we have really fucked up by kidnapping Constantine’s ex, Hades. Every single time I try to do something sneaky, I turn around and find Constantine has already been there, throwing his money around.”

My temple throbs. I stand at the window of my father’s study and peer out the window, trying to think.

“Asshole,” I mutter. “I hate fucking bullies. And Constantine is the ultimate bully.”

Ares gives a snarl. “Look, Hades. I know that ye and I regularly disagree on how things ought to be run—“

“Only because I insist on thinking things through rather than just punching the first guy standing near my goal,” I interject dryly.

“That’s not the point, ye fucking cad. The point is that we made a mistake, but we might be able to fix it.”

I squint, not liking the sound of that. “And just what are ye proposing?”

He takes a deep breath. “Maybe if we just tied up the girl and dropped her on Constantine’s doorstep, he would let us get on with our lives instead of... of cock blocking us at every fucking turn!”

I grimace. “Yer saying that ye want to give into him? That’s not how ye beat a bully, Ares.”

“No one cares about yer vendetta!” Ares explodes. “So, he’s a bully! Who the fuck cares? I just want to be able to keep operating without being mired in all this shit that Constantine keeps throwing at our feet! We can’t afford to get buried in it forever!”

“I don’t care,” I tell him, struggling to keep my tone even.

He waits a few beats. “This is about the girl, isn’t it? Yer finally fucking her and ye are getting attached. Ye can find another girl to fuck, Hades—”

“Fuck off,” I snarl.

“We dinnae have any alternatives here!” he yells. “We have a lot of big guns and ammo sitting in the port in Tunisia. We have to move them—”

I cut him off. “Call me when ye’ve figured out another solution.”

Then I hang up, gritting my teeth. Looking out the window, I try to think.

Is Ares right?

No. I can’t just let a bully operate as normal. Especially not one that is after Penny.

Clenching my fists, I wonder what her connection is with this madman. I know that he tried to kill her and that she’s terrified of him... but I don’t know any of the details.

Maybe it is time that I find out the entire story.

Straightening my cuffs, I head to find her.

After ten minutes of searching, I find a note.

H—

Went to the beach.

Persephone

It's written in her cartoonish chicken scratch handwriting. I would have thought that an artist would have very neat handwriting, or an elegantly looping cursive hand. But her note makes some part of my stomach flip flop, churning uncertainly.

Why I'm so weak around Penny, I don't know. Especially here, in my father's house, I should remember to be better.

Have I learned nothing from watching my mother and father?

Still, I take a moment to tuck the note into my wallet before proceeding down to the shore. At the closest spot where the heather and tall grass give way to a short, sandy shore, I find Penny.

She seems lost in thought, a tiny figure dressed in a black dress and oversized sweater. The wind blows, a steady cool stream coming straight off the Atlantic. Penny's dark hair is a creature apart from her, whipping around her head and infused with life.

She turns when I am a dozen feet away, startling and blotting at her eyes. Her face is mottled from crying.

My footsteps slow and I tilt my head, puzzled. Women are emotional, fickle creatures. But this is the first time I have experienced one of them crying alone. In my view, they only ever cry because it brings drama. It's a tool they can use to manipulate men with, nothing else.

And yet, Penny stiffens as I approach. She turns back to look at the writhing, crashing water. As I draw level with her, I see a flush creep into her cheeks. She pretends that she was not crying, clearing her throat casually.

"Hades," she says by way of greeting. Squinting out across the waves, she avoids my curious gaze.

I stop an arm's length from her body. She shivers and draws her sweater tighter around her body. I read that as a cue to put my arm around her, offering her the heat of my body.

But she flinches when I get close. She studies me through her slightly puffy eyes.

"I came out here to be alone," she says. Her tone is soft, but the rebuke is still there.

I drop my arm, trying to figure out her mood. She doesn't seem withdrawn. Rather, she just comes off as a bit sad and deadened.

"And why is that?" I ask, after staring at her for a moment.

She pulls a face and looks out over the sea, wiping her cheeks with the back of her hand.

“I had a bad dream.”

I cock my head. “Bad enough to chase ye out of the house?”

She nods slowly, absorbed in her thoughts. “Yes. I had the same nightmare I always do.”

I wait for her to offer more. When she doesn’t, I sigh. “And that is?”

Penny sniffs, darting a glance at me. “I dreamt about the night that Constantine tried to kill me.” She sucks in a hissed breath. “I think he thought I was dead. And until I saw him in Monaco, I thought I had done a good job of living off the grid.”

My brows rise. “That’s why ye were living in the middle of nowhere? I hate to tell ye this, Penny, but I got yer name and address without much digging. If I was able to find ye with so little trouble, I doubt ye were ever truly hidden.”

“Yes, well.” She shoots me a little glare. “We’ll never know now.”

She turns and starts walking up toward the house, her steps wooden and slow as molasses. I follow, perplexed.

“I dinnae understand. What happened between ye two? Ye said that he tried to kill ye, but...”

She considers me for a moment as she starts wading into the long grass, leaving the beach behind.

“It’s a long story.”

I raise my hands, looking around. “Do we have something better to talk about?”

Penny cuts me with her hazel gaze. She is quiet for a moment, her eyes veering away from me entirely.

“We met when I was only fifteen. My parents are a somewhat successful artist and a local politician. My father is not just my father... he’s also married.”

“To yer mother,” I clarify.

She shakes her head. “No. He’s married to a New Orleans socialite. He also has made it clear from the get go that we are his second family. His secret. He lives a separate life from us. It isn’t so much that he is embarrassed of us, I guess.... my mom says that he’s just busy. Doing important things, being the man that he needs everyone to believe he is.”

I squint, trying to keep up with her narrative. “He sounds like a bastard.”

“He’s just... complicated.” She wrinkles her nose. “I promise, I’m getting to Constantine. You see, my brother and I were...” She pauses, stops walking. “I don’t like to say neglected. We had enough money. We had our mom around, some of the time. But we grew up...” Pain lurks in the shadows of her expressive face. “Let’s just say that when I met Constantine, I was looking for someone that would lavish me with attention. Constantine was friends with my mom, and he could tell, somehow, that I had this...” She scrunches up her face. “I don’t know, this need to be seen, I guess. A hole in my heart. And Constantine was good at that. He started showing up, bringing me expensive gifts, offering to take me places. And my mom just... let him. She encouraged the relationship. I was only sixteen and having the attention of an older man was everything I thought I wanted.”

“Sixteen? God, that’s young,” I say, being careful with my words.

“Yeah. I was such a fresh-faced little idiot. So stupid and naive.” Her expression turns sour. “I started running with him and his crew. Moved in with him at sixteen. Met my best friend Maddie, who was dating one of the guys that ran with Constantine. It just spiraled out of control from there.”

“What do you mean?”

“Constantine was an addict. Cocaine, mainly. He started doing risky things just to pay for his habit.” Penny shakes her head. “Selling drugs, at first. Then guns. Soon, it was selling big loads of weapons to sketchy guys overseas.” She looks down at her feet. “I should’ve left the first time he raised his hand to me. Or the second... Or the fucking tenth. But...”

She shrugs.

“Constantine hit ye?” I ask, my voice hard. The idea of someone as delicate and sweet being harmed by someone I already fucking loathe makes bile rise in my throat. I try to control the rage that surges up inside me, making my chest feel like it’s going to burst.

She nods, still looking at the ground.

“Eventually, I went to art school part time. And he took Maddie as a second girlfriend. I found out about them one night when we were at a party in Gulf Shores. The house was way up on these craggy rocks with the ocean beach just below. He... he did a bunch of coke, so much that I was sure he would overdose. And then he... he hit Maddie.” Tears shine in her eyes. “I

lost my cool and threw a book at his head. Which is when he started chasing us.”

She turns abruptly, walking quickly toward the house. I can hear her sniffing, but I hurry to catch up with her, grabbing her wrist and turning her around.

Big, fat tears roll down her face. Penny tugs at her hand, but I refuse to let her go.

“Tell me the rest,” I demand, my eyes searching her face. “He started chasing ye and...”

She wipes away tears. “It was dark. Constantine was out of his mind on blow. He chased us to the edge of a cliff. Maddie could have even been an accident, maybe...” She stops, sucking in a breath and shaking her head. “Once she ran off the cliff though, he knew. We both stared down at Maddie’s body, lying still in the wet sand below. But then he came for me. I begged him not to... And he pushed me off anyway.” She shakes her head, fighting off a sob. “I don’t remember anything after that until I woke up days later in the hospital. There was no sign of Constantine. No sign of my parents, either. Just Lawrence.” She raises her right hand, clenching it into a fist. “I couldn’t talk. Couldn’t walk. I was so freaking scared, and I didn’t really have anyone to tell me it was going to be okay.” Her expression turns bitter. “The doctors said my brain had gotten damaged. And that I would probably always have some paralysis on my right side.”

She flexes her fingers weakly, as if demonstrating the paralysis. I study her for a moment, my mouth twisting.

I think of the embrace she gave me a few days ago. Comforting, as much as anything can be after such trauma.

Swallowing, I hold my hand out, silently asking for her to put her injured hand in mine. Penny hesitates, pinning me with a questioning gaze.

“Trust me,” I whisper.

And after a moment?

She slips her hand into mine. I step closer, pressing her knuckles against my lips. The breath leaves her body in a shudder as I slowly turn her wrist and place a solid, warm kiss on her freezing cold palm.

Her tears fall freely, but she makes no move to stop them. She just looks at me, her expression unfathomable.

“I do,” she says crisply. “I do trust you, even though I think you are a villain.”

Her words strike a chord in me. I gather her in my arms, warming her against my body.

And then I tilt her chin up, angling it just so for my kiss. When I lower my lips to hers, it is perfect.

Hot, hard, demanding. Her fingers curl in my shirt as she pulls me closer, pressing up on her tiptoes. I use my tongue to sweep her sweet mouth, pulling and pushing against hers.

When Penny gasps, I surprise her by picking her up, throwing her over my shoulder, and heading back toward the house in a hurry.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

HADES

I carry Penny the last few steps into my bedroom. The room itself is a broad space with dark wood furnishings and heavy navy tapestries. The four poster bed is clearly the king of the space, a behemoth with fresh white linens and a navy brocade coverlet. It eats up all the space around it. The only light in the room is from the dying fire.

I'm too absorbed in thinking of all the ways to make Penny moan my name to give the low light a second thought.

I toss her onto the bouncy king-sized mattress, and she laughs. Stopping at the end of the bed, I stroke her silk-covered knee and look down at her.

Penny's raven-maned head is thrown back, her hazel eyes glittering. She props herself up on her elbows and one elegant shoulder is bared to my gaze beneath the bulky sweater she wears.

Penny starts to push herself upright. I stop her with a hard push, skimming her sweater up and over her head. I pull back a fraction of an inch, looking her up and down.

"Just let me drink ye in, lass," I rumble. My cock stirs, impatient, already hard as granite.

My gaze takes in the perfection of her pouty lips, the stark beauty of her collarbones, the clingy black silk neckline that dips down to reveal a glimpse of creamy, enticing cleavage. The material of her dress is tight against her waist and then it swells out just at the natural flare of her hips. She's a goddess in raven silk, made for me and me alone to touch and kiss and worship.

I reach out and pull the thin spaghetti straps down her arms, tugging until her breasts are exposed to the air. They beg for my touch and I palm

one, licking my lips.

Penny gasps very softly; her little noise is the first of oh so many I plan to make her call out. My cock presses against my trousers, uncomfortable. But I won't be rushed, not by my own hunger. I plan to take my time with my pretty Penny, make her beg for every touch, make her scream my name.

I feel the weight of her breast in my hand. She arches into my touch, making a pretty picture. I pinch her nipple hard and she cries out, her voice sharp in the cool air.

For some reason, hearing it makes me a little crazy. I release her nipple, grab her dress in both hands, and rip it cleanly down the middle. Her sudden inhale and her exposed torso excites me even more, makes me wish my cock was buried deep inside her pussy. My cock twitches and I grit my teeth.

Good things may come to those that wait... but I'm about to take what I need from Penny's body.

"Easy, Hades," she says, that bright pink tongue of hers darting out to wet her lips.

"I want ye naked," I growl, ripping at the ruined silk dress that hangs on her body in shreds. "I want to be able to see and touch and taste every inch of ye, Penny Corbin."

She shivers and wiggles out of the dress, then hooks her thumbs in the silky black triangle of her panties. She looks at me, hesitating for a moment.

I smirk down at her, skimming my hands over her breasts oh so lightly. Whatever she is looking for in my face, she must see it because she pushes the fabric down.

I impatiently rip them down her legs and push her knees up and apart. She makes a soft sound as I press my full-clothed cock against her pussy. A noise that is half-disapproving, half-wanting.

"Wait, wait," she demands, pushing my hands away. She sits up, looking up at me with such intense sweetness that I am pinned in place. "You should undress too."

I frown and press her back onto the mattress. "No one wants to see that. Not when yer bare before me."

Penny grabs my hand and squeezes hard. "No. I want to see it. I want to see all of you, right now."

I try to shake off her touch. "That's not how this works."

Penny grips my wrist and stares me in the eyes. “I’ll let you do whatever you want to me, but you have to be naked.” She waits a beat, then finishes with a plaintive question, her voice incredibly soft. “Please, Hades?”

Her other hand plucks at the waistband of my trousers. I study her for a moment, trying to decide what her motivations could possibly be. Why would she care if I wear clothes?

But try as I might, I can’t come up with any insidious reason.

“Why?” I demand to know.

She releases my wrist and untucks my shirt from my pants. “I want to know what it feels like with nothing between us. Skin on skin.”

Her reasoning moves me, makes my cock hard. I look at her for a moment longer, my hands trailing to my collar. “Okay,” I rasp. “Nothing between us.”

When I undo the first button at my collar, Penny bites her full bottom lip and starts unzipping my pants. She pushes my pants down to the top of my thighs and grabs my ass. My cock juts out, long and thick and perfectly pink.

I rip the last two buttons of my shirt open and pause, my hands clutching at my shirt. Penny grunts and reaches up to push my shirt down off my shoulders. Then while I slide the shirt off both of my arms, she shoves my pants down my legs. Then she lets herself fall back, taking in my body.

It’s an odd feeling, being stripped completely nude before her. I’m defenseless against her in a way that I’ve never let myself be with anyone else. The thought of being this way, of there not being anything between us, is exciting, frightening and dangerous. I shudder as she trails her fingertips from my shoulders to my pecs, down the rigid wall of my abdomen to the tight flare of my hips.

Penny pins me with that electric hazel gaze and grasps my arm with one hand. She pulls me closer, settling my hand on her waist. Then she traces her fingertips lightly up the scars that start on my wrists, tracing the whorls and lines cut into my flesh and they travel up to my shoulders.

I have to close my eyes as the sensation rips through me. It’s so damned exotic to be touched like this. When she sits up and lays her hands against my back, fitting her body against mine, my eyes snap open.

I start to pull away because I feel that at any moment, I'm going to grow overwhelmed. I don't know what that reaction will be like; it could be anything from shoving Penny away to the prick of holding back tears.

To my surprise, she doesn't push me. Instead, she brings her hands up to my neck and pulls my face down. My body pushes against hers, hard against soft, as my lips find her mouth. I groan as I lick along the seam of her mouth. She opens for me and I plunge my tongue inside. Her mouth is the sweetest fucking thing I've ever tasted, and I plunder it mercilessly, sweeping my tongue against hers.

My hand finds her knee and follows it down her silky thigh to her warm, kneadable ass. I pull her against me intimately, pressing my cock against her belly and grinding. She mimics the movement, rolling her body, undulating against me.

"Christ," I mutter. Wedging my hand between our bodies, I reposition my cock so that the thick head is pressed flush against the slick entrance of her pussy.

Penny digs her heels into the backs of my thighs, her back arching. There is a slightly dazed look on her face. Her lips are parted, her cheeks flushed. She rolls her body against me and tries to take my measure.

God, I have never wanted anyone the way that I want Persephone right now. I growl and kiss her again, then trail my mouth down to her ear and neck.

She gasps and her hands settle on my upper back, as if she has just forgotten my scars. I certainly haven't forgotten them, the skin she's touching so hypersensitive that it almost hurts for her to just rest her hand like that. But I suck hard on her earlobe and she releases the tiniest, breathiest moan.

It becomes very slightly easier to focus on her, on giving her pleasure, than to focus on my near-pain.

I move my mouth to her breast, finding her pert nipple with my teeth. She throws her head back, eyes closing.

"Fuck, Hades," she murmurs, rolling her body against mine. She digs her heels into my legs for support and I get a glimpse into the future.

When we fuck, it's going to be powerful and spectacular.

I drop my hands to her waist, smashing her lower body against mine and grinding my cock against her pussy. I can feel her beginning to blossom for me, her pussy beginning to get nice and wet.

It makes my mouth water.

Planting one big hand in the middle of her chest, I force her back onto the mattress. Penny's legs pull at me, trying to induce me into laying down on top of her hot little body. But I resist, breaking free.

I push her knees wide and move her up the bed, then kiss my way down the delicate inside of her thigh. When I reach the sparsely-haired apex of her thighs, she groans.

I place a single burning kiss on her mons, just above her slit. She shifts and moans, her heels coming down to the mattress. She thrusts once, nodding.

“Yes,” she whispers, her voice breaking.

“Yes what?” I ask, placing another feather-light kiss against her slit. “Tell me what I want to hear, lass. Tell me that ye want me to eat yer pussy.”

“Please, Hades.” She inhales sharply, her voice laced with desperation and need. “I need you to... to eat my pussy.”

The last few words leave her mouth in a rush, almost tumbling over one another. But no matter; she wants me, plain and simple.

Using my fingers to spread her pussy lips, I run my tongue up and down her entire slit, making a salacious sucking noise. I see her legs shudder as I use my tongue and circle her clit. She is hot and dripping wet and tastes sweet as fucking honey.

Penny digs her hands into my hair and groans, her hips bucking as I suck at her clit, feeling greedy. In my mind, I'm already trying to work out whether I can stand to make her come with my mouth more than once. Or whether I will brush my cock against anything vaguely soft and lose control. What little patience I've had this entire time has been stretched dangerously thin by now.

Before I can even slip a finger into her pussy, Penny's fingers tighten in my hair. Her hips begin rocking against my mouth frenetically. I glance up and see that her eyes are closed, and her mouth is open, releasing a series of tiny, breathy moans.

“Fuck... fuck...”

She's about to cum. After a moment's hesitation, I stop what I'm doing. Her eyes snap open and she looks at me, puzzled.

“Hades!” she hisses.

I climb up onto the bed, taking my cock in my fist. Her look of anger is actually pretty cute. My mouth twitches.

“I want us to come together,” I say, giving my shaft a single pump.

“Oh!” she says, her anger instantly draining away. “Fuck yes.” She touches the bulbous tip of my cock, feeling the slick leak at the tip. “Don’t... um... I’m not on birth control or anything so.... you’ll have to pull out.”

That sounds terrible, honestly. All I want to do is bury my cock so deep inside her pussy and fuck her till neither of us is conscious. But I nod, because I’m not an idiot.

“I’ll remember,” I grit out.

Penny grabs my cock and brings it to her hot, wet pussy lips. I stare down at her as I nudge my hips, lining up the fat tip with her tight hole.

I mean to hold back. To be restrained. Really, I do.

But the second I sink in the barest inch, Penny wraps her legs around me and moans. She’s so wet and so tight, the pressure on my cock is just perfect. She digs her heels into my ass, urging me onward.

“Fuck me,” she begs. “God, Hades, please—“

“I want ye to touch yerself again,” I whisper in her ear. “While I’m taking ye from behind, I want ye to make yerself come.”

She nods eagerly and I flip her over. She braces herself on her knees and elbows, showing her pretty pussy and ass to me. I grasp my cock, pressing the head to her entrance.

“Touch yerself,” I order. She reaches under her body and starts to play with her clit.

I plunge inside her and hear her gasp. She feels so hot and so tight that I have to go slow, otherwise I’ll come right away.

“Oh my god,” she gasps. “Hades, your cock feels so good.”

I grab her hips and use them as leverage while I fuck her, working my cock in and out of her pussy. She begins to tighten her innermost muscles even more as she plays with her clit. I focus, closing my eyes, and try to hit her g-spot every time I thrust.

Finally, she bursts, coming with a shout. I speed up as soon as I feel her begin to spasm, letting myself pound into her like a jackhammer. She cries out my name, which has never sounded better.

I feel my cock start to twitch and pulse as I drive home again and again. Even though I can barely think straight, I manage to pull out and come as I

fuck her tightly pressed together thighs. I feel like I'm coming like a fucking fountain, her pussy milking my cock for everything it's worth.

“Fuck!” I cry. “Fuck, lass.”

I try to suck in breaths, shifting my cock back and forth, enjoying the overloaded sensation of her thighs.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

HADES

We lie like that for a while. One of my hands in her hair, the other tucked around her waist. She closes her eyes and burrows against my chest, lying her thigh atop mine and tracing the whorls of hair as her fingers cross my chest in random patterns.

“Fuck,” I say, after a long time. “I think I’ve needed that since the very first moment I laid eyes on ye.”

Her eyes open and she looks vaguely amused. “I think that goes for me, too. That was...” She sucks her teeth. “The word explosive comes to mind.”

“Aye.” I nod, absently stroking her hair. “This complicates things, of course.”

Penny sighs, looking up at me. “I don’t even want to ask what you are thinking. Could we... could we just save that conversation for another day?”

I purse my lips, shrugging. “If that will make ye happy.”

“It will.” She smiles, reaching up for a kiss. “Especially if—“

My hackles rise even before I hear a faint, faraway noise. I shush her, my eyes on the door.

In an instant, I am bolting up from the bed, hunting for the gun I keep in a drawer of the bedside table. I hear the noise again, muffled but less distant.

“Fuck,” I whisper. “There is someone in the house.”

I grab my trousers, hastily climbing into them and zipping them up. Penny moves around behind me, rustling.

“Shh,” I warn her.

I look back to find her wrapping the navy coverlet around herself, her eyes wide and afraid.

I hate to see that look on her face.

“It’s okay,” I whisper. Jerking my head to the door, I raise my brows. “Get down on the floor and prepare to get under the bed. I’ll see who our visitor is.”

She swallows, nodding and getting to her knees. I nudge open the bedroom door, peering out.

“We should’ve called,” drones a familiar voice. “Ye know Hades doesn’t like to be surprised.”

I step out into the hallway, my gun raised, my expression grim. Eros and Ares turn the corner and stop, their faces showing surprise.

“What the fuck!” I shout at them.

Eros hides his surprise with humor. “Hello, big brother. We thought we would see how ye were getting on. It seems like you’re doing all right for yourself.”

“Eros,” Ares says, throwing an elbow into his ribs.

“Ow!”

I lower my gun, fury rattling around inside me. “Eros was right. I hate surprises.”

Ares strides forward, clapping me on the shoulder. “We didn’t mean to catch ye half dressed.” His gaze slides away, catching on the bedroom door. “Should I ask where the girl is, Hades?”

The back of my neck heats. I have been caught with a girl. It shouldn’t be a big deal; both of my brothers are absolute man whores, fucking different girls at any and every hour of the goddamn day.

And yet, because it is me, I still feel the sting of their judgment.

“The two of ye should go wait in the study,” I snap. “I’ll be there shortly once I’ve got myself properly attired. Yes?”

Ares and Eros share a little laughing look between themselves. I growl, stepping toward Ares with my teeth bared.

“Okay, okay,” he says, raising his arms and backing away. “We’ll be in the study, not talking about how we came home to find ye banging the help.”

They both burst into childish giggles. My whole body tenses with the need to reprimand them.

Except they aren't exactly wrong. Not about what I've been doing, anyway.

I glare at them until they turn the corner, vanishing once more. Then I tuck my gun in my waistband and head back into the bedroom.

I hear the sound of water running and see the light on beneath the door to the en suite bathroom. Walking over to it, I rap lightly with my knuckles.

Penny opens the door a crack, her expression unreadable. "Your brothers are here."

I bob my head. "Yes."

"Hm. So much for this being an impregnable fortress."

My brows rise. "They are Lyon blood. There would be no point in trying to keep them out, lass."

"Yes, well." Fatigue shows on her face. "I'm going to take a bath. Maybe with some bubbles and scented bath oils..." She wrinkles her nose and cuts her eyes at my brothers. "I'll... catch up with you all later. I'm sure you have plenty to catch up on."

Then she shuts the damn door in my face. For a second, I stare at the dark wood, blinking.

Her retreat is a little unexpected. Then again, what would I have asked her to do? Probably exactly the same.

"Fuck," I say, although no one is listening to my opinions just now.

I walk over to my clothes, putting my shirt and boots on. All the while I am ruminating over what exactly I could say to Penny that would...

Well, I don't even know what effect I hope to get out of it. She just throws me off my game, in every way possible.

God damn it.

Shaking my head at myself, I stomp out of the bedroom and down the twisting halls to the study. My brothers are waiting not-very-patiently for me. Ares is sprawled in da's chair, Eros standing by the window. I slam the door, wiping the smirk off both of their faces.

"So?" I demand. "What have ye got? It had better be good, ye complete idiots."

Ares gives me a look. "It is, as a matter of fact. That's why we flew straight here."

I glare at him, stalking up to the desk. "Spill it."

He rocks back in the chair, a smile splitting across his face. "We know how to ensnare Constantine. With a little help from Persephone, we think

that we have the perfect plan.”

“Lure him out with a juicy piece of bait...” Eros adds. “Then lead him into a trap of our own devising. Once he’s in, we crush him.”

He makes a fist, grinning.

I look back and forth between my brothers, my mind spinning. “Constantine would be gone? For good?”

“If our plan works, he will die.” Ares looks extra pleased at the very thought of spilling blood. “And we will slide right into place as the arms dealer of choice.”

“Sit down,” Ares says, sweeping his hand. “Hear us out.”

I cross my arms, glancing between my brothers. For several seconds, silence reigns.

Then I walk over to one of my father’s chairs, collapsing into it. “I’m listening.”

Ares and Eros both lean forward, excitement shining in their eyes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

PERSEPHONE

I look at the time on the new iPad that Hades gave me, sighing. It's almost three in the morning here in Rabat, a gorgeous city of gleaming white buildings built up on the sparkling Moroccan coast. After traveling for three days to arrive at our hotel, achy and covered in the city's dust, I broke off from the Lyon brothers. I said I needed a nap and a shower.

Really though, I wanted some alone time. Traveling with all three men left me uneasy. Hades I had a firm grasp on, so that was all right. But Ares and Eros, who looked so like their older brother, were very much not like him at all.

Ares is handsome, as tall and dashing as the other two. But I soon figured out that he's as boorish and crude as they come. When we were at the private airport in Inverness, the second that Hades left the room he came and pressed himself up against me. There was no pretense or guile when he propositioned me, either.

He simply arched an eyebrow and asked if I wanted to fuck.

Eros gave me no reason to outright dislike him, but I felt like he was watching me at all times. Always thinking and watching.

At least he didn't try to get me in bed, though.

I shiver, despite the heat in the air. It's full summertime in Morocco and even though it's dark outside, the heat still pervades every single space in the hotel. The room I'm in is luxurious and air conditioned, but I'm still just so hot. Come to think of it, it's not unlike being in New Orleans.

I lick my lips, thinking of my brother Lawrence. It's been so long since I've seen his face. Maybe... just maybe I should check my email again.

After all, I just heard Hades and Eros discussing how they planned to move us to a former royal palace...

So even if someone is tracking me, they surely won't be able to follow me once I've left this building.

...right?

I spend a few minutes on Google, trying to find research that backs up my supposition. Unfortunately, all I find is a bunch of tech nerds arguing. I can feel a headache building when I try to read any of that stuff, honestly.

What's the worst that could happen?

It takes a couple of minutes to pull up my email through the iPad's browser, but when I do, I'm surprised. There are ten emails from my brother, all with WHERE ARE YOU and ARE YOU OKAY followed by question marks.

My lips twitch. Lawrence is usually not the greatest at keeping in touch with me. The fact that he has been trying to reach me kind of tickles me.

I start to open the first email when a dialogue box pops up, beeping alarmingly.

INCOMING CALL - LAWRENCE.

ACCEPT? CANCEL?

I lick my lips, my finger hovering over the buttons. Lawrence must be going crazy if he is actually calling me. I know I should decline, but I hit accept.

In an instant, a video chat screen blooms, taking up the entire iPad. There I see my mom and Lawrence. My mom has straight, waist length silvery blonde hair that is piled in a gigantic bun on her head; she wears a loose gray t-shirt underneath tight black corduroy overalls. She's standing next to my impeccably dressed brother Lawrence, with his close-cropped dark hair, wire-framed glasses, and sleek black track suit.

My mom pops her rainbow colored glasses and arches a brow at me. "Are you there, Persephone?"

My brother skewers my mother with a glance. "Hello, Seppie. I've been emailing and calling your phone for weeks."

I squint at him, my cheeks coloring. "I left well over a month ago."

"Persephone, darling." My mother rips off her glasses and gives me an exasperated look. "You can't just run off like this. People will eventually ask around about you." She leans in, intoning the last few words. "Your father is quite worried about you too. Where are you?"

I swallow, giving my surroundings a quick glance. The dark wood and white linen of the bed behind me are not easily recognizable. Sucking in a breath, I know that Hades would kill me if I just told anyone our location.

“I’m safe,” I say, answering their questions in the only way I know how. “I’ll be back soon.”

“Persephone, I’m really going to need you to come back here right now. I let you hide out after that unfortunate accident...”

I close my eyes, stung by my mother’s words.

“Mom,” Lawrence chides her. “Constantine tried to kill Persephone. Whatever fantasy you are harboring...” He waves his hand over her, his face contorting. “You should get with the program. It’s like, hashtag believe women, hashtag me too.” He looks down his nose at me, his lips twitching. “I told you that Constantine was a bad guy, didn’t I?”

“Why did I answer this call?” I wonder aloud.

“Because we are your family, young lady.” My mom cocks her hip, taking the camera from my brother. She looks down into it, her expression turning strict. “Persephone Cora Corbin, you need to come home right now. I have enough going on here in my art studio, trying to teach all of my apprentices. You should try and re-integrate yourself with them, darling.” She pauses. “Maybe if you do that, Constantine will grow jealous and come back to you. You could do worse than having a powerful man like Constantine in your corner.”

“Mom!” I gasp, shocked. “He left me for dead on that beach! He’s not going to swoop in and marry me now.” My mouth fills with bile. “God, not that I’d want him to anyway.”

“It was just a misunderstanding, surely.” Mom flicks a hand at me. “You two should really try and work it out. You would make such lovely children.”

Lawrence rips the camera out of her hands.

“Bleh, stop talking.” He sets the camera upright, rolling his eyes. “That’s some kind of narcissistic mental illness just pouring out of her mouth. Ignore it. Just... you’re okay, right? Not hurt or anything?”

I instinctively reach for my ribs, which are still bandaged from being knifed in Monaco. Telling my brother about that isn’t likely to help anyone, though.

“I’m fine.” I purse my lips. “I should go.”

“No!” my mom howls. “You need to come back! Just tell us where you are, darling...”

There isn’t a chance in hell that I’m telling her where I am. Her insistence that I return home is weird, given that she couldn’t even be bothered to visit when I was in the hospital for over a month.

I grit my teeth. “I’ll call you later, Lawrence.”

I hang up the call, closing the iPad and flopping it onto the bouncy mattress. After a second, I fling myself down onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

It was nice to hear from Lawrence... but my mom is still living in a dream world. That’s been a problem my whole life; my mom never approves of what I’m doing. She always turns her nose up at it, telling me that if only I would do things her way, I would be successful...

My hands clench into fists. Typical mother bullshit. She’s only interested because she needs someone to organize her studio or make her apprentices healthy meals. I would bet my last gold dollar on it.

My right hand twitches and I raise it, staring at it. From the outside, I probably seem like a normal, slightly bumbling young woman. Inside though... I’m still a seething mass of pain, both psychic and real.

The knock on the door startles me, making me sit bolt upright. I frown, checking the time.

It’s barely three thirty. Standing up, I hustle to the door and find Hades standing outside of it. Opening the door a little wider, I look both ways.

Checking for his brothers.

“It’s just me,” he says, leaning against the doorway. “Thought ye might like a walk.”

“A walk?” I look up at him, frowning a bit as I straighten my dark dress. “It’s the middle of the night, Hades.”

“Yeah, well.” His expression is unreadable, which frustrates me beyond words. He steps back, inclining his head toward the front of the hotel. “Are ye coming or not?”

I stare at him for a few seconds. He fidgets, touching his dark hair that falls in gentle waves around his face. I expel a quick breath.

“Let me get some shoes on,” I sigh.

Not five minutes later we are exiting the hotel’s hushed white marble lobby. As we step out into the darkened street, a young man in a white hotel

uniform stands at attention. He bows very slightly and murmurs something to us.

It might be, “Lyon.” **monsieur** But even as I turn my head to look at him, Hades catches my arm and pulls me along.

I glance up at Hades as the first rays of purplish light begin spreading through the sky. He clutches my arm, looking around. I follow his gaze; against the stony gray of the long, uneven cobblestone road, the white and off white buildings rise in an endless row, seeming like mismatched teeth.

His gaze never stops, never lands on any one thing for too long. Checking behind me, I pull my sweater up around my neck.

Hades just pulls me down the street, seeming like he has a destination in mind.

“You are freaking me out,” I say, gripping his forearm gently.

“What?” he asks, looking at me sharply. His green eyes glint. “I’m not very familiar with the area. So, I’m on my game.”

He slips an arm around my shoulders, forcing me down a series of quick left and right turns. I feel protected in the vaguest sense of the word, but... a large part of me misses Scotland.

He let his guard down on Blank Island. Let himself breathe, give me an inch to peer at what is beneath his shell. But now?

That Hades is gone.

We walk by a merchant, just now opening for the day. He is unloading caftans and scarves, hanging them up for display at his stand. I tug Hades’ arm and nod.

“Would you feel better if we wore disguises?”

He stops, considering that. “Actually, yes.”

I wave my hand, indicating that he should buy two scarves. He picks out a red and white checkered keffiyeh for himself and after a moment’s consideration, he chooses a light blue scarf delicately stitched with pomegranates for me. My lips twitch as I accept the scarf.

“I love pomegranates,” I tell him as I don the scarf.

He gives a chuckle as he does the same. “Of course ye do, lass. I can absolutely see ye eating a whole pomegranate.”

Hades ties his keffiyeh on and then leans over to me, making a quick adjustment. My cheeks color at the casual touch.

How far we’ve come in so short a period of time.

He starts to pull away. But I kiss him on the cheek, quick as I can. His lips twitch and he runs his fingers over my cheek.

“Ah, lass,” he says, shaking his head. “What am I to do with ye?”

I shrug, blushing furiously. He drops his hand to mine and clasps my hand. I weave my fingers through with his, my heart skipping a beat.

This feels... dangerous.

I know that Hades is a bad man. And I have already learned that things don’t end well with villains. But my heart keeps whispering sweet lies to me.

Hades will change. One day he’ll want the same things you want... you just have to wait for him to be ready...

I squeeze his hand and he narrows his eyes on my face. Then he looks away, pulling me along a long road that slopes gently down toward the inevitable ocean.

I suck in a deep lungful of air.

“It smells so...” I lift my nose, trying to catch a note in the air. “I don’t know. Exotic? Like the air is made of different kinds of perfume, shifting and changing every few minutes. It’s driving me wild.”

His lips curl at the corners and he glances at me. “I can assure ye, most of Tunis does not smell like perfume.”

I roll my eyes. “I know. It’s just... it’s something different. It’s refreshing, after being stuck in that little shack south of New Orleans for so many years.”

Hades frowns. “How did ye end up there, of all places? I know that ye were hiding out from Constantine. But didn’t ye have family to protect ye?”

A bark of laughter escapes my lips. “Like whom? My mom, who I’m pretty sure is still rooting for me to get back together with Constantine? Or my dad? He’s barely in my life because he has a whole other family to attend to.”

Hades eyes narrow on a point in the distance. “Yer parents are divorced, then?”

“Nope. Better.” I shoot him a grin. “My mother is my dad’s long-term side piece.”

His brow furrows. “She’s... what?”

“They have been engaged in a twenty seven yearlong affair.”

He scrunches up his face. “Can ye call a relationship that long an affair?”

I shrug. "No idea. My dad is a local politician, a real fire and brimstone, church every Sunday, squeaky clean record type. He's married with a big, loving family. Buuuuutttt he's also been sneaking off for a little afternoon delight with my mom for almost thirty years. Hell, he had two kids with her!" I roll my eyes. "My mom would rather die than sully his reputation. And he would rather not be seen with any of us in public."

"Jesus." Hades seems to be working to keep up with the flow of information. "So that makes ye... a sibling?"

"Yeah." I scrunch up my nose. "To my brother Lawrence. He's... very sweet, but a little self-absorbed."

Hades nods, his pace slowing. "I see."

"You really don't, but I think it's better that way." I say it fast and add a wink in at the end, trying to put some distance between me and my family's dramatic history.

"Still. It sounds like ye were..." He stops, choosing his words carefully. "It sounds like they didn't care for ye as they should have. And for that, I am sorry." He glances away, sucking in a breath. "They missed out on knowing ye, I think."

My cheeks fill with heat. "They did their best."

He pulls a face. "They didn't protect ye from Constantine. They allowed me to kidnap ye. And to be frank, they haven't put up much of a fight back in New Orleans."

"How would you know?" I slice a look at him. "Have you been checking up on me?"

Hades frowns, shrugging a single shoulder. I look at him, expecting him to say more, but he doesn't.

Instead, Hades changes the subject. "We're here."

He takes me by the hand, pulling me down a little set of stairs that lead to a basement level. As soon as I make it to the second to last step, I smell something sweet, cinnamon and fried.

"Donuts?" I wonder aloud.

Hades shoots me a secretive smile and pushes open a door. "Harcha. They are like... imagine an English crumpet and an American donut combined. I have been missing them."

He gestures for me to step inside. The space behind the door is very small, just big enough for a gleaming silver samovar on a tray and a large

griddle. A woman works the griddle, pouring the whitish batter onto the hot surface. She turns around and Hades flashes her a sign.

She flips two fresh pancake-shaped pieces of dough onto a paper plate. Hades hands her a wad of cash and he accepts the harcha.

“Come on,” he says, opening the door again. “Let’s sit on some steps and eat.”

He walks only a handful a feet before he finds a stoop to sit on. He turns and waits for me to brush my skirt underneath me and sit down. Only then does he take a seat.

I nibble on the warm bread in my hands. It’s sweeter than a pancake and has more cinnamon than a regular ring donut. It does taste very buttery, despite having a texture of the outside of an English muffin, just where it is brown and covered in cornmeal.

I look up to see Hades practically inhaling his harcha. He eats with a single-mindedness that brain surgeons would envy. It makes the corners of my mouth tug up into a wry smile.

“You must have been a cute little kid.”

It pops out of my mouth without warning. Hades looks up, finishing the last bite of his harcha. “Why do ye say that?”

Shaking my head, I wrinkle my nose and try to ignore the slight flush rising to my cheeks. “Something to do with watching you eat your pastry as if it was the only thing in the world that mattered to you, I expect.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He rolls his eyes at me. “Better finish yers before I do.”

I purse my lips. Tearing off a piece, I hand the rest of it to him. He looks a little shocked.

“Dinnae ye like it?” he asks. He accepts it, looking at the harcha as though it were tainted.

“Of course I do.” I wave the remaining piece in the air. “I think you like it more, though. And I like watching you wolf it down.”

I punctuate my statement by popping the piece in my mouth and giving a loud mmmm. Hades shakes his head and eats the rest in three big bites. Then he drops his hand onto my lap.

I lean back and lace my fingers with his, a contented sigh on my lips. Several children burst out from around the corner, kicking a battered soccer ball between them. As I look on, they race around the block, darting to and fro, doing each other.

They stop near us, looking at the steps to the little harcha shop. A little boy shouts something I can't understand.

Hades apparently does, though. He reaches in his black slacks for his money clip, peeling a bill off. Then he nudges me with the money.

"Go give this to them."

I arch a brow, plucking the money from his fingers. "How unexpected."

He shrugs, leaning back and trying to pretend that he isn't being generous. I go over to the boys, leaning down and handing over the money. Then I pantomime the harcha that I just ate. They grow excited, dashing down the steps and into the harcha shop.

When I turn around, Hades is just getting up from the stoop and dusting himself off. "Are ye ready?"

My mouth twitches. "What, you don't want to see them enjoying their breakfast?"

"Not particularly, no." He eyes me and starts walking away.

I follow, smiling at him.

"It's too late!" I declare, catching his elbow. "Now I know your terrible secret. You're soft and tender on the inside, under miles and miles of battle-hardened armor."

He snorts, shaking his head. But I notice that he pulls me a little closer, settling my arm in the crook of his elbow.

"We should get back to the hotel." He squints into the distance. "Ares and Eros have some place for us to stay. It's a private palace, owned by some friend of a friend or something." He sighs. "Yer art supplies should be set up somewhere when we get there."

That gets my attention. "You are putting my stuff where just anyone can see it? Is that advisable?"

His lips twitch. "Wait and see for yerself. My brothers are bringing the trucks tonight—"

"What does that mean?"

He gives me a hard look. "Exactly what it sounds like, lass. They are bringing the supplies on trucks."

"What supplies?" I ask, confused.

He heaves a frustrated breath out. "What kind of supplies do ye think I'm talking about, lass?"

I screw up my face. "Guns?" I whisper.

Hades' expression tightens. "Supplies," he repeats. "As I said, my brothers are bringing the trucks tonight. So we are basically going to be waiting on ye to ship the cargo containers of... supplies."

I blink a couple of times. "Oh," is all I can think to say. "Well... okay."

Hades slides his arm around me and hurries me along the cobblestone road, back to the hotel.

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CHAPTER THIRTY

HADES

I t's well after noon by the time I get a text from one of my brothers. I feel my phone vibrate gently in my pocket but ignore it for the moment.

At the moment, I'm busy settling Persephone into the first floor ballroom of what may honestly be the most palatial estate I've ever set foot in. It's a massive four story mansion with white marble walls, rather extravagant fountains everywhere I turn my head, and a huge lawn laid with expensive, lush sod.

Penny takes a few steps inside, cocks her head, and looks back at me. "Umm... did the last tenants get evicted or something?"

I swing my gaze around, surveying the scene. Panels of sky blue silk that once hung from the ceiling have been ripped down, left strewn over chairs and tables. Several of the beautiful fountains, once shaped as lions and giant fish, have been cracked. A little water still bubbles in a couple of them, but the rest are dry.

Pieces of paper are scattered all over the floor, as though somebody opened a full briefcase and dumped the contents out. One of the lights flickers eerily, casting a pall over the palace.

"So it would seem." I raise my hand to touch her back, steering her toward the ballroom. "I dinnae ken the last people that lived here."

A short, rather squat man in a navy suit with a kerchief tied round his neck steps out from the shadows. I start; it's not every day a man in such shiny loafers manages to stand nearby without my noticing. I squint at the man; his skin is scar-pocked, and complexion is ruddy. His hair is slicked back, and he wears a very expensive watch. This must be Ares's friend, the tech genius.

“The Ashanis’ were chased out of here in the spring,” he says, looking pleased with himself. His Moroccan accent is strong, but he speaks perfect English, sounding perhaps as though he were educated in Cambridge.

That, or he merely has something snobby about him that I can’t quite put my finger on. I sigh, looking him up and down.

“Karim Tazi,” he says, extending a hand. “I stepped in and took over the payments in their stead. The family had apparently failed to pay their taxes for quite a number of years.”

I cast my gaze around once more. It is too chaotic a scene for them to have left entirely of their own accord. However, I get another text from my brother and I would rather talk to him than continue to find out about local politics.

“Fine,” I say, ending my sentence. “Would ye show Penny where her art supplies are set up?”

He gives a little bow, smirking. “Of course.”

Persephone presses her lips together. It is clear from her body language that she should rather not leave with Karim. But there is nothing I can do about that just now, not when I feel my phone buzzing in my pocket.

I jerk my head toward the ballroom. “Go get yerself set up. Karim will make sure yer taken care of.” I step closer to Karim, giving him a hard stare. “Right, Karim?”

“Of- of course.” He flushes ever so slightly, bowing his head again. “Right this way, please...”

Penny gives me a last look as she reluctantly follows him. I yank my phone from my pocket, already answering it without looking at the screen.

“I’ll be right bloody there.”

I walk out into the bright sunlight. Shielding my eyes, I see that my brothers have driven the big tan cargo vehicles right up to the gravel driveway and parked them in front of the house. Ares slumps against the side of his truck, looking at his phone.

Eros is nowhere to be found, his truck door hanging open, the seat empty.

“What the fuck?” I ask, jogging down the stairs. “Are ye two stupid?”

Ares scrunches his face up, straightening his body. His jaw tenses and his chest swells a little bit.

“There was nowhere else that we could drive them.” He looks around for Eros, shrugging. “When we picked up the trucks, they had already

started locking up the docks where they were kept. It was either take them now or when they open tomorrow.”

“Ye didn’t think that maybe ye should call me? I know at least a dozen other places in the city that ye can park a truck.”

He rolls his eyes, his expression sour. “We had to leave. We came straight here.”

Glaring at him, I shake my head as I walk around to the back of the truck. The trucks are open at the top and there is a large canvas flap at the back that I lift up, peering inside. Even at my height I can’t see much over the tall back door.

I toss the canvas back and tug at the door.

“I wouldn’t do that—” Ares starts.

The back door springs open and a mountain of dried lava beans flood out. I raise my hands to my head, my fury only growing.

And then I see the glint of shiny black gunmetal. I lean closer, my brows arching. I can just make out the outline of an assault rifle buried in the lava beans.

Rage boils over in my blood. Whipping around, I spear my brother with a furious glare. “Jesus mother of fuck, Ares! Did ye not even check the cargo before ye drove the truck all the way here? Anybody that even glanced in the back would have seen what we are carrying!” I lash out, banging my hand against the truck’s back door. More lava beans spew forth and one of the assault rifles slides along onto the ground.

Ares looks like he’s ready to take a swing at me. “Eros checked the trucks, not me.”

I bend over, picking up the heavy gun, and sock it back into the giant pile of lava beans. “Sort this out, right god damn now. If it’s really Eros’s fault, maybe he can come up with a better way to hide these. Jesus, Mary, and Josef too. The trucks have to be able to pass at least a brief inspection!”

Penny chooses this exact moment to come running out of the building, her mouth open like she is about to yell at me. But she slows when she sees Ares and the truck. She cocks her head, walking forward a few paces until she sees the contents of the back of the truck. She stills, paling a little, and darts a nervous glance at me.

“What the fuck are ye looking at!” Ares screams.

Persephone nearly jumps out of her skin, backing away from him and toward me. I step closer, instinctively raising my arm to shield her.

“Fuck off,” I sneer at Ares. “Go take yer anger out on yer brother.”

Ares cuts Penny and I both down with his gaze, stomping away with a growl.

“Fucking idiot.” I rub her upper arm, shaking my head at him. “I swear, I dinnae ken how we came out of the same mother sometimes.”

She gulps, her gaze slipping toward the back of the truck. I can tell she’s about to ask a question about it. So I turn her around, marching her back into the palace.

Over the next few days, I alternate between watching Persephone work and helping my brothers hide our cargo trucks far away from the house. Every time I get into a petty argument with Ares or an intellectual pissing match with Eros, I retreat inside to the cool chaos of observing Penny.

She has set up four folding card tables and spread her art supplies out, seemingly at random. She never seems to complete any one thing. Rather she spends an hour making folds in stiff paper, then dabs wax onto the page, then spends half an hour shuffling through a cardboard box of charcoals.

All the while, her card tables get more and more messy. A bottle of glue with no cap. A palette of earth toned shades. Multiple pieces of sheer contact paper, cut into small, jagged pieces. I look at her, glance back to the disorganized table, and start to have doubts.

What if she’s actually a terrible artist? God help me, but I’ve spent a month assuming that she was incredible. I can’t actually imagine having to tell her that I’m not going to use her work.

The pain in her eyes would be... unthinkable. I suck in my lower lip, wondering how on earth I’m supposed to do that.

If I don’t though, if I just use a bad passport in the wrong place... I’m risking my life. The lives of my brothers, too.

At the moment, Penny purses her lips as she flips through stacks of identification photos. I cross my arms and cross the empty, mostly dark ballroom.

There are bright photography lights set around her card tables. I stand under them, one eye on her.

Persephone blinks and looks up, smiling. “Hi.”

“Hi.” I nod at the pictures that she keeps rifling through. “What are ye doing with those?”

She stands up, stretching her arms high overhead. “Looking for good ones. And by good, I mean not tooooooo good. I need perfectly average

photos. Nothing too flattering.” She flashes me a picture of Eros, rolling her eyes. “Like any DMV or post office has ever taken a photo with any kind of sex appeal?” She snorts. “The more handsome you are, the harder it is to find an average picture for my purposes.”

The thought that she might find Eros attractive is a particularly nasty one for me. Of course, he’s the standout between the three Lyon brothers in the looks department. But the idea that he could steal Penny from under my nose is... haunting.

I think it is in this moment that I realize that I’ve sort of taken for granted that she is mine. At least for right now, she is my plaything, my possession.

Until I tire of her.

I shoot her a glare. “How can ye work in all this mess?”

“What?” She blinks at me, her hazel eyes narrowing. “What do you care what my work area looks like? It doesn’t affect you in literally any way.”

I shoot a hard glance at the glue bottle, its top not just open, but its brush top drying slowly in the cool air. Penny shakes her head and tosses the box of photos aside.

“I haven’t worked with that glue before. I left it open and exposed to the air to test its viscosity every few minutes. That way I will know when the perfect time is to glue everything together.”

She circles around to the glue, picking up a paintbrush and touching the very tip to the bristles on the brush. She pulls a fine strand of glue out, sucking her teeth.

“Not yet.”

“Oh.” I run my hand over the back of my neck, feeling stupid. “I guess that’s okay.”

“I say it’s okay. And I’m the one making your fucking papers, so kindly jam a sock in it, buddy.” She puts her hands on her hips, giving me a measuring look. “What’s going on with you, Hades?”

I shrug a shoulder, touching the tip of a paintbrush. “My brothers are already getting on my nerves.”

“Ah!” Penny says. “I know that feeling quite well. It’s pretty exasperating that you aren’t allowed to strangle your little brother. Or brothers, in your case.”

“Yeah.” I frown, stroking the tip of the paintbrush. “I like to think they are a type of cosmic revenge for all the men I’ve killed.”

She starts, looking up at me. “Are you fucking serious?”

I squint, considering. “Half the time.”

Penny shakes her head, tidying up some loose papers. “You are insane. You know that?”

“I’d be lying if I said that was the first time anyone had said that to me.” I lean my hip against the table, splaying my hands wide.

She gives a humorless chuckle. “It makes me miss my own family. Not that I’m longing to be reunited with my psycho family, exactly... But I think when I get back to the States, I’m going to try to find a place in New Orleans. That may not mean anything to you, but that’s a measure of how nuts you sound.”

I’m not sure if she’s teasing me or not. All I can hear is the bit about returning to the States. My jaw tenses and I shoot an accusatory look her way.

“Already planning to leave me, then?” I growl.

Her eyebrows jump up. “I don’t have a timeline. But I think it’s safe to say that I will return there...” She waves her fingers. “Eventually.”

I stalk around the table, closing the few feet between us. Penny looks up at me, watching me carefully, like I’m a mad fucking dog that’s loose in her yard.

Grimacing, I get in her face, invading her personal space completely. “Just admit it. Admit that ye are counting the seconds until ye can run away.”

Penny swallows, tensing when I grab her forearm. She tries to pull away but I’m much too strong for her. She turns those big brown-green eyes up at me, licking her lips nervously.

“Hades,” she says softly. “Why are you picking a fight with me? That’s not the way to tell someone you want them to stay.”

Grabbing her around the waist, I haul her soft body up against mine. Her face is merely inches from mine. I lift her, pinning her against the table.

I look up into her face, making her a promise. “I never said ye had a choice, lass. Ye dinnae decide when to leave me. I decide when to let ye go.”

She scans my face, her expression scrunching up. “Don’t threaten me, Hades. I’m not going anywhere. Okay?”

She says it so softly, touching my chest. In that moment, I hate her.

Hate the way she makes my insides so squishy.

Hate that I think of her as mine.

I put my arms around her shoulders, pulling her down for a kiss, and silence her on the topic once and for all.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

HADES

I t's several hours before I return to the ballroom. The space from Persephone, from her useless worry over my actions and my behavior, was good. It allowed my rage to simmer to a dull roar.

When I enter, the ballroom is silent. I make my way to the area where Persephone has set up her art, but I can see that she isn't there. Nor is she in the next two places I check. She didn't leave, that I'm certain of. Still, the anger I had managed to subdue comes roaring back when my possession isn't where I expect it, or her, to be.

"Persephone?" I roar into the cavernous space.

I hear an echoey reply. "Hades?"

My footsteps quicken, carrying toward her voice, until I reach the last place I thought to find her.

The bedroom I've been claiming as my own. In my mind, the space is the same as the warehouse where I first tasted her. The same place where I punished her last transgression.

Perhaps she needs a reminder.

"What are ye doing in here?" I demand, stalking over to stand immediately in front of her.

She doesn't move, and a small part of me admires her courage. She has fire in her veins. Fire that I want.

"Why does it matter? I can go where I please," she responds.

My hand itches to tame the little show of her defiance.

"It matters because I need ye."

Her eyes widen, then narrow into slits. The air is heavy between us, a pulsing, living thing. "I'll finish your fucking forgeries, Hades. Don't

worry.”

My voice drops low. “That’s not what I need, lass.”

Grasping her head between my hands I pull her up to meet me, capturing her lips in a punishing kiss. I’m relentless. Demanding. Forceful. And I don’t care.

She’s mine to do with as I please and right now, this is it.

“Hades...”

Christ. The way she whispers my name, her voice dripping with her own desire, is so at odds with the temper she’s showing. But it spurs me on all the same. All she’s wearing is a loose, soft sweater. I grab it and yank it over her head, setting free her luscious tits, covered in the barest scraps of white lace. My hands instantly cup them. I bend over to suck one into my mouth, clamping down on the taut nipple with my teeth.

Instead of pulling away, Persephone arches into me, her hands coming to my shoulders and digging into the muscles.

I take my time, teasing her over the lace of her bra, until I can’t stand not having her skin between my lips anymore. With one swift move I undo her bra and toss it behind me. My tongue flattens against her puckered skin, pressing circles around the tip of her breast. All the while I’m teasing the other side with my hand, rolling the nipple between my finger and thumb, squeezing it and tugging gently.

“Please... Hades...” she begs, but she doesn’t get to decide what happens.

I am in control. I snake my free hand down between her thighs, forcing them open just wide enough that I slip two fingers up and down her slit. She’s fucking soaking wet. She groans when I slide my finger between her slick folds, driving it into her.

Letting go of her nipple with a loud pop, I lift my head to sear into her. “When I call ye, ye will come. Understand lass?”

Her eyes are burning back into me. I pinch her clit with my free thumb and finger firmly earning an outraged gasp.

“Ye are mine, Persephone. In any way I choose.”

Her tight pussy starts to convulse around my fingers, but just as I sense she’s about to come, I pull out and step back.

“What are you doing?” Her chest heaves, and daggers shoot from her eyes. It’s killing me not to be tearing off my clothes and plunging into her, but she needs to learn a lesson.

“Whatever the fuck I want,” comes my ragged reply.

“No!” is her gasped response.

My brow lifts of its own accord. Persephone folds her arms across her torso, in a move that she might want to seem defiant and courageous, but the meaning is lost in her nudity. Her body is betraying her, telling me what she wants in the flush of pink on her skin, the rapid beat of her pulse, and the panting of her breath.

“Ye dinnae get to decide that.” I keep my voice deceptively quiet. Taking my time, never letting my eyes stray from her face, and never letting a drop of emotion show, I remove my clothes. Only when I am as naked as she is do I approach her again. “I am in control.” When I reach for her, she swats me away. I grab her hands and twist them up and over her head as I lower my head to hers. “I. Am. In. Control.”

I go to kiss her, and she turns away.

Oh no. That won’t do. That won’t do *at all*.

I push her backward, so she lands on the bed, then stride over to my bag of personal effects. Finding what I need, I turn back to Persephone, inordinately pleased to find her still on the bed where I left her.

Good. She’s learning to listen.

When she catches sight of the black silk tie in my hand, she pulls her lower lip between her teeth.

“What... what is that for?”

I give her my most wicked smirk. “To make sure that ye hold still while I remind you who exactly is in control here.”

Penny’s eyes widen.

That’s right. I remember how she responded to being trussed up the other night. She might say she hated it, and me, but the darker side of her craves it.

“Give me yer hands.” A moment passes between us where she doesn’t move, as I hold my hands out expectantly. I arch my brow. “Do I need to make ye?” The glare she shoots at me is begging me to prove that I mean what I say, so I do. She puts up a half-assed fight as I grab one arm and tie a knot around her wrist.

“Hades...” she growls out a warning, but she can’t hide how her pulse speeds up. Once both of her wrists are tied, I step back and take in the sight before me. She’s at my mercy now, and try as she might, Persephone cannot hide the fact that she desires this as much as she tries to protest it.

I'm done talking, however. It's time to show her I mean what I say.

With her hands stretched out wide, her tits jut out, tempting me. Fuck, I want to slide my dick between them until I paint them with my cum. But I don't quite trust her not to do something insane and try to bite my cock if I get too close to her mouth right now. So instead, I come to her hips.

Settling myself between her outstretched legs, I grab those luscious tits in my hands, and squeeze them as I drive my cock into her tight pussy.

She cries out at the force of my thrust. Sliding out, I push in again, just as strong, and her body slides up the bed. I bring one hand to hold her hips in place, as I ram my cock in and out, bringing her to the edge between pleasure and pain. I can sense when she gives in to me. It's clearly enough from the way her body simultaneously relaxes around me and lights up with her own lust and desire.

She may claim to hate me, but she doesn't hate this. Her body tells the truth in its response to me. And that knowledge, that power, drives me forward. With a grunt I lift one of her legs up and over my shoulder, my lips finding her smooth calf and pressing a kiss there before I can think about the action.

Persephone's eyes open at the touch of my lips, and I know she's just as confused by that second of tenderness as I am. But it's gone in an instant, as I hammer my cock into her hot, wet pussy. The new angle hits something inside of her that has her clenching and moaning my name.

My movements speed up as I dig to find the arrogance and the rage that fuels me. There is no room for softer emotions. The room is filled with the sound of skin slapping against skin, my grunts and her moans mingling together.

"Fuck," I cry out hoarsely as I grit my teeth, feeling my orgasm barreling toward completion.

I lose all sense of anything but the feel of her tight pussy holding my cock, as I thrust once, twice, then shout a curse as I feel my cum shooting into her in thick, hot ribbons. After what feels an eternity, I finish.

I pull out of her, noticing with no small amount of pleasure the sight of my cum dripping out of her. Marking her.

Fuck. I was definitely supposed to pull out. But I just lost my moorings for a moment.

I untie her wrists and she scoots away from me, rubbing them gently. Penny shoots me a look.

“You aren’t allowed to come inside me,” she says softly. “I thought we had agreed on that.”

“We did.” I shrug, shame skittering down my spine. “I think ye should be taking the pill. I’ll arrange to get ye a few months’ doses.”

She glares at me. “I am not a fucking sex doll that you just cum in. I’m a human being, Hades. And the contraceptive pill isn’t without risks. I would be taking on the brunt of them just so you can cum inside my body without worrying about the consequences.”

Ah, there she is. I was wondering where the Persephone I know was hiding.

I stand up, cocking a brow. But Penny shoots to her feet, already shaking her head.

“Never mind.”

She grabs her sweater, hauling it over her head as she storms off.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

PERSEPHONE

“W~~a~~ke up, lass.”

The words float down to me and my shoulder is given a gentle shake. I open my eyes to find Hades sitting on the bed beside me, fully dressed in his customary black button up shirt and black pants. Sitting up a little, I yawn.

“What time is it?”

It’s cool and dark in the empty palace, but I’m relatively sure that this place is always a bit like a tomb. Hades looks at me, running his finger down the bare skin of my upper arm. I shiver.

“Before dawn.” He draws my attention to the fact that he has a dress on a hanger, ready to go, presumably picked just for me. “Get moving. You only have a couple of minutes.”

I think of my work, sitting unfinished in the ballroom. “My art. You’ll pack it up for me?”

“Ye’ve completed enough,” he says gruffly. “We’re running out of time, lass. The next two weeks, we will be on the move almost constantly. So there is no time or space for ye to finish. We’ll have to go with what ye’ve already made.”

I rub my eyes, trying to make sense of his words.

“Hades—”

“Later. Get dressed now.”

He is out the door in a few steps. I scrunch my face up, blearily moving to the end of the bed. Due to the lack of running water in this place, I give myself a bath with wet wipes. The rest I give over to the gods of deodorant.

When I pull the dress on, I notice that it is the usual black silk... but instead of having spaghetti straps or two slits cut up the side, this dress is distinctly doll-like with an almost Victorian neckline. Its hem brushes the floor, and it doesn't quite fit me, not the way every other dress I've worn since I have met Hades has.

I feel quite dowdy in it. Is this on purpose, I wonder? Or perhaps it was more difficult for Hades to get his hands on something more modern and less modest. After all, we are in an Islam-practicing country...

When I head down to the empty ballroom, Eros is picking up the last storage box packed with my art supplies. He slides me a glance.

“Yer riding with me on the first leg of our drive.”

“What?” I scrunch my face up and follow him as he makes his way of the palace. “Where are we going?”

Hades is standing with Ares near two identical black sedans and looking rather irritated. “Ye ask too many damn questions, Persephone. Go with Eros. We’ll meet up with ye tonight.”

I raise my eyebrows and open my mouth. Eros puts the box down, clamps a hand on my arm, and pulls me away toward the waiting dark sedan. Instinctively I jerk my arm away, glaring at him.

“Don’t touch me!” I exclaim.

His grip tightens, easily bruising my skin. When I protest, he leans in close, showing me all of his teeth in a humorless smile. “Dinnae be difficult.”

“Enough!” Hades barks. “Let her go, Eros.”

Eros gives me a little shake, his eyes pinning me in place. Hades starts toward him and Eros turns me loose, raising his hands.

“It’s fine. Persephone and I have a lot of road ahead of us to sort things out. Isn’t that right?”

I glare at him, crossing my arms protectively around myself. I look back as I’m getting into the car to see Hades’ expression. He stares at me for a long moment, his jaw clenching. But then he turns away and gets into the driver’s side of the sedan.

Eros pops the trunk and moves the box of my art supplies into it. Then he slides into the driver’s seat, settling in as I close the door. He gives me a tight smile.

“Buckle yer lap belt. Wouldn’t want anything to happen to ye, would we?”

The way he says it has me grasping for my seat belt and feeling goosebumps on both my arms. If that wasn't a threat, I would hate to hear what Eros actually considers intimidation.

We pull out of the driveway and Eros snaps on the radio. He pulls onto a little highway, heading away from the coast. There are no streetlights after a certain point and no other cars on the road at this hour.

He distractedly flips through stations until he finds talk radio. I squint at him as I listen to the stream of what I assume is Arabic.

What am I supposed to make of Eros?

He's handsome. Or not that, exactly. He's pretty. The dark, carefully combed-back hair, moss-green eyes with their dark lashes, and cheekbones that look chiseled by a divine intelligence... it all works seamlessly to camouflage the actual man beneath. It would be easy to look at his obvious, in-your-face gorgeousness and dismiss him without giving it another thought.

But I suspect there is quite a bit more to Eros. The man is currently listening quite intently to the flow of information being broadcast in a language very different from his own. I try to piece him together, fitting him against Hades like a puzzle piece. It makes me curious, despite myself.

"How many languages do you speak?" I blurt out.

Eros shifts in his seat, his mouth tightening at the corners. "Why, do ye need something translated?"

I blush, shrugging a shoulder. "I'm just curious. I assume that you and your brothers didn't grow up speaking English. Or not only English."

He squints out the dashboard, taking his time to respond. "We all grew up speaking Scottish Gaelic."

"Ah." I nod, running my hands over the fabric that covers my knees. "I should have probably asked Hades that by now."

"Is that so?" Eros slides me a glance. "Tell me something. Do ye usually make a habit of getting so up close and personal with the men who hold ye hostage?"

My eyebrows jump up. My face suffuses with heat, the blush spreading all the way to my neck. I lick my lips.

"No," I murmur.

He purses his lips, turning back to look straight ahead. After a minute, he slows the car.

"We're going to stop for gas," he says. "Start looking for highway signs."

I glance out the window at the rocky, sandy landscape. "I don't speak Arabic."

His lips curl. "Of course ye dinnae."

When he finally finds a place to stop, he pulls the car in to the pump and climbs out of the sedan. My arms and legs aren't cramped yet, but I get out anyway, just to escape the car for a few minutes. Sharing a car with Hades' brother is starting to feel oddly like walking a tightrope in front of an expectant audience. I'm not sure what exactly it is that he wants but I have the feeling that it doesn't matter to him. Whether I balance perfectly or fall several stories to a grisly death, it seems like his mind was already made up about me before we even got in the car.

I stretch my arms over my head as he starts to open the trunk. Eros lifts out a black canvas bag, closes the trunk, and sets the bag on it. He nods at the bag.

"Go on, then."

I frown at him. "What?"

He lifts his chin, staring me down. "Have a look in the bag."

"What's in it?" Arching a brow, I drop my hands. I pin him with a suspicious look. "Is it a bag full of human hands or something?"

"Why the fuck would ye even ask that?" Eros shakes his head at me, unzipping the bag and flashing a rubber-banded wad of euros. "It's cash. A million euros."

"O-kay..." Furrowing my brow, I hug my arms to my chest. "That's nice for you."

He growls, pushing the bag closer to me. It slides off the trunk and hits the ground.

"Take it and leave," he bites off. "I'll drive away. Ye can flag a cab. We can separate, right here, right now. Ye can quit pretending to like Hades."

"Why are you..." I trail off, clutching at my chest, baffled. "Did Hades tell you to do this?"

He glares at me. "No. I'm just exhausted by the little act that yer putting on. The grateful, subservient captive and the unhinged, insane tyrant? That doesn't play well to anyone else who has to witness this little charade." He flicks his fingers, looking disgusted. "Take the money. Go whisper sweet

nothings into some other poor sod's ear." He spits on the ground. "We'll all be glad to see the back of ye."

My gaze darts down to the bag of money. Then I scrunch up my face and look back at Eros.

"Are you mentally ill?" I ask, a little heat behind my words. "Do you not care for your brother at all?"

He slams his hand down on the sedan's trunk with a metal BANG. It's loud enough to make me jump, my eyes widening.

"Dinnae ye think that I know what's best for him? Hm? He likes structure. He likes consistency. We've created quite a fair sized empire, big enough for just the three of us. No outsiders need apply."

I glance at the money again.

Is Eros right?

Would I be doing everyone a favor if I just left now?

"I don't think so," I say quietly, answering my own question. "Hades would come after me."

"A million euros will buy ye quite a head start, Persephone. Ye should take it. And ye should leave. Because nothing good can come of ye staying. Ye have to know that."

Is he right?

Can I actually picture myself staying with Hades and being content? Do I trust Hades to become a fixture in my life?

I don't know. And that fact kills me.

Eros turns around, searching the gas station behind him. "Ye've got three minutes to decide."

He marches off to the building, looking grim. And I am left with the bag.

When he returns, I'm sitting in the sedan, my seatbelt already tight across my lap. The black canvas bag sits on my lap.

He opens his door, peering inside. "What are ye doing?"

"I decided that I need more time to think it over." I shoot him an icy look. "So I will keep the bag. But I want you to drive on, as if this never happened. Then if I disappear in a few days, we will both know exactly what happened."

He tenses his jaw. "Yer in over yer head, Persephone."

I push my cheek out with my tongue. "I'll be the judge of that, Eros."

He gives his head a tiny shake and climbs in, starting the car. As soon as he pulls out onto the road again, he flips the radio station until it hits a woman wailing in Arabic. He turns it up and doesn't try to talk to me for hours and hours.

When we finally stop again, Eros pulls our sedan into a lonely roadside motel of sorts. Squat and single storied, the graying building splays out wide, with perhaps four or five rooms in the back and a large front check-in area. It seems noticeably dingier than any place I have been with Hades.

"Is this place even safe?" I ask.

Eros shoots me a hard look. "Depends on what ye mean by safe, doesn't it? Now, stay here."

With that, he gets out and hurries into the front of the building. I hold my breath; Eros is using one of the United Kingdom passports that I cobbled together in the last week. I know that my work is good.

And I realize that this little bungalow is the last place on earth that will look too hard at identification.

But that doesn't stop me from worrying that I have sent Eros on a dangerous mission. When he steps out of the building, bounding back to me in the car and tucking his passport in his pocket, I heave a sigh of relief.

If he notices, he doesn't say anything. He pulls the car around to the back of the little hotel, jumps out, and brandishes two old silver skeleton keys.

Tossing one to me, he points to the room at the very end. "Yer down there."

Without another word, he turns and wanders off out the back lot. I watch him for a moment before I realize that he has no reason to watch me closely.

If anything, he wants me to run and never look back.

Picking up the small bag of my things that I've brought and the black canvas bag stuffed with money, I wander down to the room I've been assigned.

I open the door, unsure what to expect. I'm greeted with a small, plain white room, a very simple and rather narrow white bed, and a framed photocopy of some well-designed Arabic calligraphy, black print on faded yellow paper.

I step inside and close the door, putting my bags down on the coarsely starched linens of the bed. Turning, I look out the little window beside the

door and wonder where Hades is.

He said he'd join me tonight, I think. But I have no idea of how long he'll be. Nor really any idea whether I'm even supposed to be here or if Eros might have just decided to keep me separate from Hades for a few days.

I sit down on the bed, looking around. There is a little door that leads into a bathroom with a sink and toilet. Other than that, there is no decoration whatsoever.

After fidgeting for a minute, I dig into the bag of personal items I brought, producing my iPad. Turning it on, I take a deep breath.

A little dialog box pops up.

CONNECT TO 100.65.278 WIFI?

I tilt my head. The hotel must have service, I guess. I thought that Wi-Fi was spotty on this entire continent... but maybe that was just me presuming things.

I click CONNECT.

Nothing happens. When I try to pull up my browser, I get an error message that says I'm not connected to the internet.

Strange.

I pull up a book about turn of the century women artists and leaf through a few pages. The day gradually loses sunlight and turns into the gray of twilight. I'm hungry but I have no idea where Eros is.

So I curl up at the end of the bed and let my eyes drift closed. I'm not asleep precisely, just... resting.

I'm conscious of a sound from outside my room. Maybe tires on the gravel lot. Nothing that would stir me from my doze.

My mind drifts and I shift against the hard bed.

Everything is calm.

Peaceful.

Quiet.

And that's when the door to my bedroom explodes inward. I bolt upright, rubbing at my face as I try to make sense of what I'm seeing.

Half a dozen figures, decked out in black tactical gear and carrying big, scary automatic rifles hurry into my little room.

I can't believe my eyes as I take them all in. They move as a unit, their steps practiced. And it's impossible to tell what race or creed they are

because they've done such a good job of covering every inch of visible skin.

I shriek as loud as I can and scurry backward, as if that will somehow help. My heartbeat pounds against my ribs painfully. I'm too shocked to even think of what I should do. Two of the men aim their guns at me; I scream again and duck my head.

"Get her up," one man says.

My mouth drops open an inch when I realize that he's definitely speaking with an American accent. It also kicks something wild into drive for me. The second that the man corners me and tries to grab at me, I wrench my entire body back, kicking and punching, making my limbs flail.

I punch at him directly, screaming again. He doesn't stop or even slow. He just backs me against the wall, pins my arms at my sides, and begins to secure my hands behind me with zip ties. I knee him in the balls and for a second, he staggers backward.

"Don't resist," he says, a little twinge in his voice. "It'll all be over soon."

I lunge forward, my mouth opening, intending to bite him. He brandishes a black cotton bag, gathering the material in his hands.

I can't make it easy for him. The other men look on, almost bored, as I writhe and fight with everything I've got. My feet still work, and I kick at him, landing a blow to his thigh.

"Fucking bitch," he mutters.

He manages to pin me down, using the weight of his big body to hold me as he maneuvers the black bag over my head. I scream again and he punches me in the ribs, swift and hard.

All the breath twists from my lungs. I struggle weakly as he lifts me over his shoulder and starts carrying me out of the room.

I can feel tears pricking the corners of my eyes as I am stuffed in a small, airless space. A trunk of a car, perhaps.

I get up the will to scream again, but it feels utterly useless. The car starts a second later and I am carried away. My mind whirls, wondering who the hell these guys are and what, exactly, they intend to do with me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

HADES

When I finally climb out of the car at the remote hotel, it's twilight. I give Ares a hard look as I scan the parking lot.

I see Eros's matching sedan not far away and pull out my phone to text him.

Ares gets out of the car and stretches. "That was longer than I like to travel in a day," he says.

"We should have been here over an hour ago," I fling over my shoulder. "If ye hadn't given me bad directions and had us running all over the countryside, our trip would've been shorter."

"Ye should've known better than to listen to me." He shrugs as I start walking toward the car. "Ye know that I'm an idiot."

I stop, sliding him a glance. Usually Ares is pretty defensive about his own intelligence.

"What?" he asks. "Ye know it's true."

"Ye started a fist fight with me the last time I merely suggested that ye were short sighted and hadn't thought something through."

Ares shrugs and raises his hand to shade his eyes. "Where are Eros and Persephone?"

"I'm not sure." I survey the scene, sweeping my gaze around the entire parking lot and the dingy little hotel building again. "Their car is here..."

Something is off. The hotel is too quiet. One part of me hopes that Eros and Penny are just resting... but deep inside, I already know that's not the case.

A chilled note of fear-spiked adrenaline slides down my spine.

“Hey.” Ares brings me back with a word. I glance up at my brother, who is squinting at the hotel. “Does that seem right to ye?”

He points at the faded gray building, motioning to the very farthest door. I look where he points and notice that the door is leaning against the doorway. It isn’t attached at all but has been arranged very carefully to look like nothing untoward has happened.

“Fuck.” My gun is tucked at the back of my waistband. I draw it and train the barrel at the doorway. Turning to the side, I start moving closer, my steps guarded and quiet.

My heartbeat pounds faster, all my senses on full alert. I’ve trained for moments like these but it’s still hard to stay calm when all this adrenaline hits my system.

Steps behind me, I can see Ares drawing his own weapon, moving in the exact same tactical manner as I do.

As we approach the door, we automatically split up so that I’m on the right side and he is on the left. There are little bits of splattered wood scattered on the ground and they crunch beneath my feet as I draw up against the wall.

I squint at the door, listening carefully for any signs that there might be someone still inside. Ares motions to a thin wire laid across the threshold of the door.

The hairs on the back of my neck rise. A trap has been laid for us.

I take a few steps back and jerk my head toward the doorway. Aiming my gun directly at the door to cover my brother, I try to control my harsh breathing. Ares puts his weapon in his waistband and kneels, examining the poorly-laid tripwire.

He grabs it with the precision and deftness of an old pro, lifting it very slightly. He frowns and looks up at the door for a second, then carefully places the wire back on the ground.

Fishing in his pocket, he pulls out a little black multitool. I glance behind me, sweeping my gaze over the lot and the building.

Everything is deadly still.

In seconds Ares has a pair of needle-nosed snips out. He looks at me, motioning that I should back up further. I drag my feet a few steps back, my gaze intent on what he’s doing.

He sucks in a breath and cuts the wire near both sides of the door. He double checks his work and stands up, working his fingers into the space

around the door.

I hold my breath as Ares lifts the busted up door up and moves it away, walking into the darkened room. Following him on quick feet, I'm inside the room in seconds.

Ares leans the door against a blank white wall. Nosing my gun through the door into the bathroom, I find no one inside. I return to see Ares doing a quick check underneath the narrow single bed. I scan the room, taking in the rough bedspread that has been mussed very slightly and Persephone's shoulder bag.

My heart slams against my ribs. The only sign of anything untoward is the iPad, which is laying on the floor, its navy cover hanging open at an awkward angle.

I gave Penny that iPad. But there is no Penny to be found.

My head pounds as I look at the evidence laid before me. I swear, I'm trying to fit all the puzzle pieces together, but I feel hopelessly slow.

Was Persephone actually taken? The scene suggests that she was. Just a busted door rigged with explosives in the middle of nowhere.

We didn't even pick this hotel until a few hours ago... so how could anyone have known where we would be?

Ares has turned his attention on the explosive device that is sitting by the doorway. He nudges it with a finger.

"This is staged," he says, his voice low and urgent. "I dinnae even think it is even capable of detonating."

"Fuck." I keep my gun trained on the doorway and slide my phone from my pocket. "Where the fuck are Eros and Penny?"

I sidle over to check the bathroom again. Ares shrugs, his eye catching on something on the floor near the bed. He bends down to pull back the thin duvet and reveals a black canvas bag.

He uses his booted toe to drag it out into the middle of the floor. His expression is unreadable as he unzips the bag.

"Fuck."

I walk over and see that he's exposed a colorful stack of euros. My eyebrows shoot up.

"What the fuck is that doing in Penny's room?" My mind whirls. Added to the other pieces of the puzzle, it doesn't seem to fit with what I've found so far.

"Uhh..." Ares says. "It could be from us."

I glance at him sharply. “What?”

Ares clears his throat. “Well, Eros and I—“

“Stop.”

We both glance at the doorway, surprised to see Eros there. I bound out of the room, shoving Eros aside. But Eros is alone.

“Where the fuck is Persephone?” I scream. Whipping around, I pin both of my brothers with an accusing gaze. “Ye had better fucking have a good answer.”

Eros puts his hand on his gun, looking cagey. Ares glares at Eros. When Eros pushes his cheek out with his tongue and looks pissed off, Ares explodes.

“Tell him where the girl is!” He steps towards Eros, puffing his chest out aggressively. “It was yer fucking plan.”

“It’s not that simple. I gave her money and offered that she could leave. Where she went...” Eros shakes his head and shoots me a pleading glance. “Persephone decided to leave, Hades.”

My breathing grows ragged. My heart squeezes in my chest.

“She doesn’t get to decide to leave!” I bellow at my brother. “Where the fuck did she go? And where did ye just come from?”

Eros raises a hand to calm me. From a lifetime of dealing with his bullshit, I can say for certain that raised hands aren’t a good sign.

“Hades, let me explain,” he says. “I dinnae ken where Persephone has wandered off to—“

Ares cuts in, talking over Eros.

“Shut up, ye fuckhead.” He points to the hotel room. “The money’s still here. All of it. And unless Persephone is a demolitions expert, she didn’t leave on her own. She was either taken or she had help in escaping.”

“The—” Eros’s eyebrows rise. His confusion is evident. “Why would she leave the money?”

My rage is hot and red and fast as lightning. I lash my gun out at his head too fast for him to protect himself. The gun connects with his skull and makes a satisfying soft crunch.

“Ye fucking idiot!” I rail at him. “Ye dinnae ken where she is? Ye want to know why she left the huge bag of cash ye gave her?” When I scream, specks of spittle fly out of my mouth. But I’m red-faced and beyond caring about that.

Eros doesn't cower under my abuse. He merely weathers it, looking aggravated.

"Hades—" Ares says, trying to calm me down.

"What were ye two doing, offering Persephone cash? Were ye trying to get her to leave?"

Ares screws up his face and shrugs. Eros folds his arms across his chest and stares over my shoulder.

"We could tell that ye were becoming too attached to her. Persephone is damaged goods, physically and emotionally. She can't just travel with us everywhere we go. She belongs in the States, with Constantine."

I raise my gun, pointing it right in the middle of Eros's face. I've been born and raised with guns, from childhood hunting rifles to slick M16's during my military service. Trigger discipline has been drilled into me every step of the way. Even now, it's hard to point my weapon at my brother.

And I know that I shouldn't point a gun if I don't mean to shoot.

But my finger rests on the trigger as I hold Eros in my sights. My head throbs. I can't quite hear anyone or anything else because I have the distinct feeling that my ears are stuffed with wads of thick cotton. I glare at Eros, my heart and gut and rational mind all playing tug of war.

He took Persephone from me.

Maybe she wanted to leave. Still, he helped her.

If he were anyone but my brother, I would have killed him already.

But can I even trust Eros now?

Before I can make up my mind, a blur appears, physically tackling me. Ares grunts as we both go down to the ground hard, me underneath him. I release the trigger before my entire body crashes to the ground. Eros scrambles to knock the gun from my hand, his glare lethal.

"What the fuck, Hades?" Ares asks. "Calm down! We can find Persephone, okay?"

I shove him off of me, cringing as I start to get up. Eros offers me a hand, but I smack it away, trying to convey my feelings for him at this precise moment without saying a fucking word.

To put it tersely, I fucking loathe the bastard.

Ares gets to his feet, his head swiveling as he senses movement. Not a second later a car starts around the front of the little hotel.

A possible witness, fleeing the scene. No fucking way.

I don't even have a weapon in my hand but I sprint toward the front in time to see a little rusty two-doored shitbox backing out with a squeal of tires. My brothers are right behind me.

Even if they don't want Persephone found so easily, they know that letting a witness hightail it out of here is a terrible idea.

"Stop!" Ares screams. "Stop the car!"

Eros stops moving long enough to aim at the car and shoot out its back tires. The car spins out wildly, spraying gravel everywhere. Eros takes aim a final time and fires again, hitting the front tire closest to us. The person driving slows the car as all of the Lyon men descend on it.

As I reach the driver side door, I can barely make out who is driving because the car's windows are so grimy and dusty. I see a person raising their skinny arms and determine that Persephone is not in the car. Yanking the door open is difficult. It creaks loudly and I lean down, grabbing at the person blindly.

Something sharp cuts my palm and I startle. I grit my teeth and reach in, grabbing a handful of fabric. It rips but I'm much stronger than our witness. In moments, I pull an angry looking young woman out.

Whip thin and shoulder height, she has warm tawny skin with a mane of obsidian hair that just brushes her shoulders. Perfect dark brows, brown-black eyes rimmed with long lashes, an aquiline nose, and cheekbones as crisp as well-honed blades. Two blotches of red outrage are splashed across her face as she fights me with everything she has. Her nails bite into my neck. I have to grab her hands to keep her from going for my eyes.

"Quit... fighting... me... I just want to know if ye've seen someone that is missing!" I tell her, my teeth gritted.

"Never." Her response is in perfect French, her accent as European as it is Moroccan. That's unexpected. "*I'm not your rat.*"

The fact remains that she knows enough English to understand me. She could have easily pretended not to grasp what I'm trying to tell her.

"What's your name?" I implore her.

She grunts, trying to worm her way out of my grasp.

"Hey!" I give her a sharp shake, causing her head to bounce around on her angular neck. "Tell me your name."

She looks at me from beneath her long lashes, her black-brown eyes crackling with heat. "Aphrodite."

I pause, my brow furrowing. Somewhere, in the back of my brain, I feel like I should already know that name.

Is she connected to my world, somehow?

“Aphrodite,” I repeat back to her.

I glance at Ares and Eros, who are both boldly staring at her with what feels like distinct notes of desire. Eros grabs her upper arm, and she grimaces.

“*You can’t touch me like this!*” she says in French. “*You have no idea who you are messing with, do you?*”

Aphrodite seems to vibrate with unease. I relax my grip, relying on Eros and Ares to step in, boxing her in on all sides and helping me control her.

I scan her face, reaching out to touch her chin. She hisses like she’s been burned and lifts her hand to block me.

“Please.” I implore her, looking deep into her eyes. “Persephone has been taken. I am trying to save her.”

“Save her!” Aphrodite spits out in English. She switches languages easily and fluently as a snide little laugh follows her words. “If she has been taken, it’s too late now. She’s well on her way to the coast. And then she will meet the man who threatened my life, the life of my family, the life of everyone in this whole damned town. If you were smart you would just forget about her.”

I grip her chin with my thumb and forefinger, looking at her with a ferocity that scares even me.

“What is that man’s name?”

Aphrodite darts her tongue out, wetting her lips. She glances at my brothers for a second as if sizing them up. Then she rolls her shoulder in an elegant shrug.

“You’re digging your own grave.” Her lips curl up in a cruel, tight smile. “His name is Constantine. And you do not want to cross his path.”

Her words put a cold knife in my heart and a sneer on my lips. I lean in, letting her feel the heat and sheer size of my big body.

“Constantine is a dead man. He’s fucked with me for the very last time. Persephone is *mine*. Nobody touches what’s mine.”

Aphrodite’s brows rise but she shows some sense and doesn’t say another word in response to that.

I shift my gaze to Eros, my sneer curling into a semblance of a smile.

“Let’s go.” My lips twitch. “Bring Aphrodite along for the ride. We might need her again.”

“What?” Aphrodite protests, starting to fight again. “I already helped you when I didn’t have to! You should be grateful!”

Eros reaches out and grabs Aphrodite by the throat, squeezing hard enough to make a strangled sound leave her mouth. “Do what he says, pet. Maybe ye’ll live long enough to get to come back to this shit hole.”

Her hands scrabble with his, clawing at his skin. But he’s too busy looking down the front of her loose caftan to even notice the bright red marks that her fingernails leave behind.

“I’ll get the car,” Ares says.

I turn, looking at the dusty highway stretching out before us. My thoughts have already shifted.

To Persephone.

To revenge.

To the cold-blooded murder of my fiercest enemy.

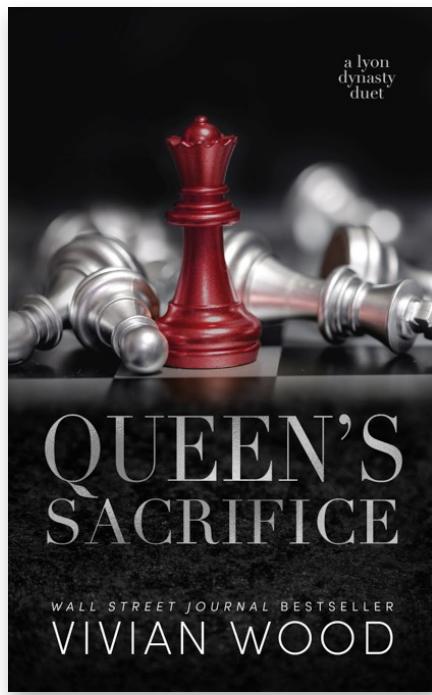
Constantine won’t even know what fucking hit him.

Ares pulls up the car beside me and I climb into the passenger seat, ready to feel the warmth of Persephone back in my arms and taste Constantine’s final bitter tears.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Hades and Persephone's story isn't over yet, not by a long shot. Raw, gripping, steamy, and emotional... Get ready for more of their story by [snagging Queen's Sacrifice](#) on pre-order right now. It comes out this March!



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ABOUT VIVIAN WOOD



Vivian likes to write about troubled, deeply flawed alpha males and the fiery, kick-ass women who bring them to their knees.

Vivian's lasting motto in romance is a quote from a favorite song: "Soulmates never die."

Be sure to follow Vivian through [her Instagram](#) or [join her email list](#) to keep up with all the awesome giveaways, author videos, ARC opportunities, and more!

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HEARTLESS
RECKLESS

HIS DARK OBSESSION
HER DARK VENGEANCE
THEIR DARK EMPIRE

SINFUL FLING
SINFUL ENEMY
SINFUL BOSS
SINFUL CHANCE
SINFULLY RICH

HIS BEST FRIEND'S LITTLE SISTER
CLAIMING HER INNOCENCE
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