

Persephone's Fall
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Chapter 1

Sometimes ...

Sometimes I think about letting go.

Up here, the sounds of New York recede into the wind, the wind recedes into the blood rushing in my ears, and it all becomes a throbbing roar behind my temples. I think about letting go, about that one perfect, crystalline moment of true freedom; the one time in the world when my actions would really be my own.

I'd like to believe I wouldn't make a sound, falling down. I'd be a comet. A meteorite, burning in the atmosphere as I fell to earth, silent and beautiful. I think about that, and I feel my fingers loosen on the railing. The roar in my head becomes a howl, a force that's physically loud, that pushes at my eyes in their socket and makes me open them and look down. Down. And I smile.

And then I think about what it is I have to do. The jobs I've left unfinished. The things I swore to take care of before I let this happen. So my fingers tighten up, and my arms flex, pulling me backward, and I start to breathe again, and the rush in my ears falls into the background. The sun, red and bloated like a tick, continues its descent. Somewhere down below, a car honks and a man responds. I can't make out the words, but I can tell they're angry. This city's always angry.

But up here, where I come to taste freedom, to remind myself of the rewards that come as part of the promises I made, there's no anger. Up here is only peace. Up here is only freedom. Up here is only me, and the wind, and the sun.

It's down below where all the problems are.

* * *

Sounds behind me: footsteps on stairs, the door to the roof opening, a sigh. I know who it is without having to turn around. Hades. Of course it's Hades. He's the only one who knows I come up here, and he's got this talent for showing up at bad times.

Hades wants to marry me. He's been telling me this for years, telling me that one day he's going to drag me out of my little rich-girl world and down into the Bowery, where we'll live on bread and water and love. Forget my mother, he tells me, forget Demeter. Oh, she'll cry, and she'll rage, and she'll storm around when she hears about it, but in the end what can she do but accept it? After all, does not love conquer all?

Except I don't love him, is the problem. Half the time, I don't even like him.

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"You should know better than that," Hades says, and I roll my eyes even though he can't see it. I know exactly what I'm doing, thank you. I'm looking into the future. It's like seeing into a crystal ball. I know everything about it. I know how the wind will feel rushing through the tiny hairs on my arms. I know how the sounds of the Manhattan streets will rise to engulf me as I plummet toward it. I could tell Hades, right now, all about it. I could tell him about beauty.

Instead I stay facing away from him, holding onto the railing, not yet ready to climb over and go back to life. And I say "You wouldn't understand."

"You never think I'll understand," Hades says. I can feel him wanting to put his hand on my shoulder. I've been able to feel that sort of thing from Hades since we were kids. And truth be told, it was cute when we were fifteen... sixteen... if he had done it then, and spun me around to kiss me, Christ, I'd probably have let him. But he never did. Poor, persecuted Hades; too shy and too scared to do things the right way.

Poor, persecuted Hades, who was too smart for me, and caught me instead in a trap I can't escape.

* * *

"There are people who might say that a pretty girl with everything to live for, who spends her time dangling off the side of buildings, is more than a little crazy." Hades is trying to sound tough, or angry, or something other than scared, but that's what I hear in his voice. He's worried I'll fall, and that the beautiful dream he put together for us will never happen.

Boo fucking hoo, Hades.

Before I can stop myself, I swing one leg way out over the edge, and I know it looks like I'm going to jump. I hear the scrape of heels on the rooftop gravel as Hades starts to move. Too slow. If I wanted to, I'd have plenty of time. Months. Years. Eons of time before he could get to me. I'm grinning, hanging there, hearing the sound of his footsteps in slow motion.

Hades shouts "You promised!" and the smile leaves my face just as if he'd slapped me. He's right, I promised, and this isn't the way things get to end. So I pull myself back, and swing a leg over the security fence, and turn to face him for the first time since he got here.

* * *

Hades grabs my wrist and pulls too hard, which gets me the rest of the way over the fence and very nearly face-first onto the roof. I pull away from him and say "I can manage, thanks."

"You almost managed to get yourself killed!" Hades' face is flushed an ugly, mottled pink. He pulls nervously at his shirt sleeves, bunching them up and then smoothing them back down, then runs a hand shakily through his too-hip-for-you perfectly chaotic hair.

"If I want to be dead, I'll be dead, and you won't be able to do a thing about it."

"And then your father goes down, and your mother goes with him." Hades has this smug little grin on his face now, and it makes me feel like digging my nails into his eyes. I press them into my palms instead, and say nothing. Finally, the silence gets to Hades. It always does. I've always been able to outlast him.

"We should get going. Lots to do. We're supposed to meet the florist in half an hour."

And he's right, of course. Have to see the florist. And the caterer. And the organ player. And the priest. When you're getting married, the florist is just the tip of the iceberg.

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Chapter 2

I like rosebuds more than I like roses in bloom.

The buds are like pure potential all wrapped up in a tiny package, protected by thorns and waiting for the right time to burst open and display their beauty to the world. As soon as a rose blooms, it loses the magic. It's the difference between Christmas eve and Christmas. It's the reason the first bite of an apple is always the best.

Hades doesn't want roses. He says they're too expensive, that we should go with something cheaper. When I remind him that money is no object for Zeus and Demeter, his lip curls up a bit and he shrugs. "There are better uses for that money."

I want roses. If I'm going to get married, then the least he can do is let me pick out the stupid flowers. If you're going to blackmail a girl into marrying you using information that could get the rest of the board ready to lynch your chairman father, the least you can do is let her pick the flowers. I remind Hades of this, and he relents.

"Fine. Whatever. Get what you like, then. It's your money."

Actually, it's my Dad's... but to Hades it's all the same. Dirty spoils of a capitalistic war. He hates all of it, or at least, he professes to. Sometimes I wonder about that.

* * *

Hades insists we take the subway home, rather than a cab. I hate the subway. It's filthy, it's cramped, and it smells. I can't even get a seat because no one will move, so here I am, standing next to an obese woman playing a hand-held video-poker game with the sound turned up too loud.

The train clicks and thumps its way down the track, the rhythm of a diseased heart, a sickly pulse flowing underneath the streets of New York. Click-THUNK. Click-THUNK. Outside the window, under every light that flashes by, someone's tagged "JA" not in the ornate ghetto-script that you normally associate with graffiti, but in harsh, quick lines. I guess when you're dodging trains, cops and hobos to write your initials in the most remote spot of the city, artistry has to take a back seat.

I can feel a headache coming on.

He's somewhere behind me, Hades. There wasn't space to stand next to him, and I'm not sure I would have even if there was. We're headed to my parents' house. I'm going to have to sit next to him then, and pretend I'm in love, so that they won't know the real reason we're getting

married. If I'm going to do that, then right now I need my space. Hades didn't make a big deal out of it when I pushed my way over to the other side of the car, and he didn't try to follow me.

One thing I will say about the guy: he understands me.

* * *

We're going to see the apartment, now. Hades picked it out last week. The smell's not great here, although it gets a lot worse further over toward Canal street. Smells like rotting meat there, most of the time. Which is why I don't go there. Hades says I need to get out more, and experience the real New York.

I guess the real New York smells bad. I guess it's full of loud, rude people who stand too close to you, who bump into you and don't excuse themselves, who shout things at each other and at the traffic. It's full of car horns, and bike messengers dodging in and out of traffic. It's full of people I don't want to know, people that I'd just as soon ignore. People that Hades wants me to love.

It's not that I'm shallow. At least, I don't think I am. I understand that not everyone has it as good as I do. Not everyone's got the CEO dad and the corporate attorney mom, and the maids, nannies, private tutors... I get it. I'm privileged. I even understand the point Hades is trying to make when he starts lecturing about my responsibility to those in need. But Jesus, couldn't I just write a check to the Salvation Army? Do I need to live here?

Maybe I am shallow, but these places give me the creeps. I bet they're full of cockroaches and rats. Makes me shudder just thinking about it.

Behind me, Hades starts laughing.

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"What's the matter, Seph? Don't like what you're seeing?" Hades' tone is light, barely even mocking. He seems genuinely amused by the whole thing. I guess that's why I bother to answer.

"Not particularly."

"The real world's not very pretty, but I still like it here. Does it look different from forty stories up?"

It sends tiny prickles down my spine, when he puts it that way. Hades doesn't understand the beauty that I see up there. He makes it sound stupid, or crazy. I wish he wouldn't

treat me like a blind little rich girl. It's not like I don't know that Manhattan's not all black tie dinners and in-home servants.

Before I can yell at him, and probably because he knows I'm going to, Hades asks me if I want to stop for coffee. And I have to admit I do. Say what you will about lower Manhattan... you're not going to find better coffee anywhere outside of Europe. There's a place on the corner that smells like heaven, and we swing in there.

On the way in, Hades touches my arm and I instinctively move to the left at his guidance. A customer that I would have otherwise collided with brushes by me. I'm not sure that Hades even knows he did anything; he's been doing things like that for me for so long.

And I'm not sure why I noticed this time.

* * *

It's not until we sit down that I realize I don't have much of anything to talk to Hades about, these days. He and I don't have much in common, outside of a shared childhood, and memories from a time before we really understood what it meant that I was rich and he wasn't.

Hades sits down with some sort of vegetarian-vanilla-chai-latte thing. Indian spiced tea with soy-milk and honey. Very tasty, very trendy. He's also got some chocolate-dipped biscotti. I'm just having a non-fat latte.

People say it doesn't mean anything, being rich or poor... that it should be easy to overcome that particular difference. But it's usually people who aren't very rich, or haven't known others who are very rich. It does mean something. It's not better... I'm not quite that arrogant. But it's not the same. I've been exposed to all sorts of things that most people never even think about.

I speak three languages fluently, because I had private tutors who forced me to learn them. Hades speaks english, and a sort of gutter spanish that's good enough to keep you from getting knifed in the areas he sometimes used to hang out. I like tiny, neuvau bites of foi gras, and watercress finger-sandwiches. Hades likes burritos. And that horribly unhealthy, turn-the-plate-translucent style of pizza that you can buy around here.

What kills me is that Hades should be prince charming. He's good looking, he's street-smart, he's politically active. He's supposed to rescue me from my rich-girl world and show me that there are better things out there, they just don't come wrapped with diamonds. Sometimes, like when he touched my arm as we were coming in and kept me from crashing into that person, I almost think things could go that way.

Then he opens his mouth.

* * *

"Your father's company laid off four hundred people today."

Ugh. Christ. We have to talk about this? "Yeh, I saw that in the paper. Times are hard, Hades."

"Mmm Hmm..." Hades has a small smile on his face. He looks at me over the rim of his vanilla-chai-whatever-the-fuck, and his expression says he's not buying a word of it. My own drink tastes suddenly bitter.

"What do you want me to say? That he's wrong? How would I know, Hades? It's not my company. It's got nothing to do with me."

"It bought you those clothes. And that jewelry. Those four hundred people bought you that coffee you wouldn't let me pay for."

Smug bastard. It's so easy to point fingers. I motion to the cross around his neck. "It bought you that necklace, too. Or did you forget who gave you that?"

Hades' smile falters for a second, and he glances down at his chest. Ah, the savage thrill of victory. It's rare that I'm able to interrupt his rhetoric.

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Hades is spared having to fess up to his little hypocrisy by the goth chick waiting tables. She swings by and picks up his empty cup, asks if he wants another. He tells her no, and gives her a big smile. She cute, in a dark and sickly kind of way, and her pale cheeks flush a bit at that grin. Her eyes flick over to me, note that my cup is still half full, and return to Hades.

"Let me know if you need anything," she says, and turns away. We both watch her go. When I turn back to Hades, he's smiling, and it's a bit infectious.

I laugh a little, and gesture with my head. "She's cute."

"Mmm."

"Maybe you should get her phone number."

"Maybe I will." Hades rolls his eyes. He hasn't dated anyone in two years. He's been too busy courting me. Or stalking me. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference.

I look down into my coffee. "You have to promise me that I won't have to hear about my father for the rest of our lives, Hades."

"He doesn't make it easy. You don't make it easy. I'm only trying to show you how wrong his way is."

"It's the only way he's ever known. Zeus is the master of all he surveys. He may be blind to some things, Hades, and maybe you're right about them. But please. I can't do this for the next twenty... forty... sixty years. It'll make me old before my time."

"That'd be a shame. I'll try, Seph. Someday you'll understand, though. You'll turn to me, and believe it or not, you'll thank me."

I don't have an answer for that. So I finish my coffee, and drop a couple dollars on the table, and get up to go.

* * *

I'm not sure I've ever seen Zeus, my father, smile.

Maybe way back, when I was little and cute and not yet old enough to piss him off all the time by being so frivolous with the cash his success provides me. But even then, it must have been a rare occasion. Zeus doesn't smile. He's got too much to worry about. He sits in his office like a captain in his quarters, charting the seas ahead of him. He's got seven TVs in there, all muted, financial information ticking by at a mile a minute.

We live in the top four floors of a hotel. My father owns plenty of property, but living in the hotel affords him a lot of convenience. The kitchen staff, the maintenance staff, the cleaning staff... the hotel manager that can get him anything he needs. It's indispensable to him. So we live in the hotel. It's not really that bad, and I know from experience that the roof's got a great view.

The top floor is my parents' private space. Well, mostly it's Demeter's space. Zeus pretty much lives on the second floor down, which is almost entirely devoted to his office and data storage. The third floor down is shared living, dining room, tv room, all that stuff. It barely gets used anymore.

Last floor is mine, and doesn't that crack Hades up. I have a whole floor all to myself. That was my sixteenth birthday present. Before that I lived up in the penthouse with my parents. They had the fourth floor remodelled for me for my sweet sixteen, and I celebrated with a huge party that I wouldn't let them attend. There must have been two hundred people there, all drinking, most illegally. I christened my new floor by giving my virginity away to some drunk asshole who wasn't as drunk as I was. I think I remember Hades trying to stop me.

To this day I wonder if he was doing it out of concern, or because he was pissed it wasn't him.

* * *

I like leaning out over the edge of the subway platform. It's like a miniature version of standing at the top of my building, outside of the railing, with only the strength of my wrists and my ankles keeping me from being swept away by the wind. Then there's the oncoming train, which is scary and exhilarating, all rumble and light in the darkness. I also like it because it makes Hades nervous.

You may notice a couple of recurring themes here.

I don't normally like taking the subway. Cabs are generally cleaner, although not by much. And you only have to deal with one idiot stranger jabbering at you, instead of a car full. And you don't get hit up for money. But Hades says it's ridiculous that I'm willing to spend twelve bucks to get to the same place I could get for a buck fifty. So the subway it is.

It's hot down here. Stuffy. Doesn't smell so hot, either. There's a guy taking a leak just inside the tunnel proper. I'm trying not to look. Not so much because I'm disgusted by what he's doing -- this is New York after all -- but because he's staring at me with a giant grin on his face.

This is the New York that Hades loves. Dirty and hot, stinking, smoking. It makes him feel like he's a part of something. It's the way he reconnects with society. Hades may have not been born with a silver spoon in his mouth, but he was a far cry from poor. I wouldn't have known him otherwise. He doesn't like to admit to that, though. That's really the main difference between us. My wealth has never bothered me.

Hades was the only person in his family to turn down his share of the inheritance when his grandfather died. Nevermind that the old man was the one who was responsible for getting him into all of the best schools, all of the places that helped fill him with righteous indignation at his own position in society. He alienated a lot of his family doing that... posturing like that. But he earned some grudging respect, too. It's been four years, and he hasn't come to any of them looking for cash. He hasn't even asked me for any.

* * *

On the subway, there's a guy sitting next to me who keeps making noises like he's going to puke. I'd get up, but there's nowhere to go. We stayed in the coffee shop too long, and now it's rush hour. The car is shoulder-to-shoulder. I only got a seat in the first place because someone told me that "baby, that ass is so fine it deserves a rest."

I think about riding this train every day. I think about people staring at my ass. I think about what Hades is bringing me into, and what my life is going to be like for the next... God, who knows how long? And the next thing I know, I'm crying.

I know, I know. Boo Hoo, right? Poor little rich girl, has to ride the train and hear comments about her ass. What a horrible life, right?

But that's not what I'm crying about, not really. It's not about having to live in a brownstone, instead of a hotel. It's not about having to ride on the subway. It's about choice.

All my life, I've never really had the chance to make a choice. About anything. I didn't choose to be born rich. I didn't get to choose my education. No one does. You get what you're given, and you look forward to the time when you're allowed to begin choosing for yourself. Maybe you fuck up, and your choices are stupid, and you end up dead, burnt out, a drug-addict, a whore. But you still, at some point, have choices to make. Something that goes beyond what channel to watch on TV, or what to wear to the prom.

When I'm on the roof, it's the choice that makes the drop so appealing. Do you see?

Hades took all of my choices away from me, just as I was getting to the point where I would be able to make them. And the crazy thing is, I don't hate him for it. In a way, I feel like he earned it, putting up with my shit for so long.

* * *

I'm not a loud crier, and if anyone notices, they don't say anything. After I'm done, I just lie my head back against the window with my eyes closed. The rhythm of the train is soothing, a low rumble, a slight swaying. It's an express, so we're not making a lot of stops. Headed uptown. Headed toward home.

I think of Hades when he was sixteen. He basically lived in my apartment. He and his parents didn't get along, and they couldn't afford to rent him a floor of a hotel. My parents made a token effort to discourage my having boys over, but for the most part they ignored him. It was probably for the best. If they'd heard the particular views he was developing, and expressing to me, there probably would have been all sorts of drama.

I drank a lot as a teen. Hades never touched the stuff, so I knew I could rely on him to keep me from doing anything stupid. Well, except that whole virginity thing, but I was dead set on that. "I'm sixteen, it's time." There's only so much Hades could do. But other than that, he was my stupidity safeguard.

Sometimes when I drank too much, Hades would help me get ready for bed. I know this sounds hard to believe, but our relationship's been platonic all the way through. He must have been dying, some of those nights. I'd be laughing hysterically, pulling off my pants, parading

around in my underwear. He'd be telling me to settle down, put my pajamas on, drink more water so I wouldn't have a hangover. Other times, he'd hold my hand while I was puking in the toilet. In a lot of ways, Hades has taken care of me more often than my parents... and he was usually better at it.

One night, drunk and horny and bored, I decided to find out how he'd react if I started coming on to him. He earned a lot of the respect I still have for him that night. He allowed himself one kiss, which is only fair, and then he pushed me away, and told me I was drunk, and smiled this sad little smile that told me he knew full well I was only doing it to amuse myself, and not out of love.

That's important to him. I guess he doesn't realize that I've never kissed anybody out of love.

* * *

My mother, Demeter, doesn't like Hades. Actually, let me rephrase that: she detests him. She did a decent job of masking the depth of her dislike while I was younger, but the fact that he never stopped hanging around continued to grate on her. Now that we're getting married, she thinks we're in love, and the gloves are off. The second Hades excuses himself to use the bathroom, she starts sniping.

"I don't understand why he feels the need to dress like some sort of hippie punk rocker!" Demeter doesn't really understand modern culture. The hippie movement was something that happened to poor people that she didn't know. The punk rock movement was something she must have read about in one of her women's magazines. I don't bother to mention that Hades' shirts come from Eddie Bauer, and his jeans from a rather pricey boutique. I also don't mention that he listens mostly to jazz and coffee-shop folk.

In fact, I don't say anything at all. Demeter takes this as a sign to keep going.

"Far be it from me to criticize..." That's how Demeter leads off all of her criticisms, which -- contrary to her apparent belief -- sometimes come so fast and furious that I have a hard time keeping track of them. "... but that boy doesn't understand the way the real world works. He can't provide for you, Persephone. Not the way he should."

This is my fun life. I get to pretend that I'm in love with Hades while my bitch mother yells at me about it, and my disinterested father sits on the floor below, staring at his monitors and tracking his numbers. For someone who is apparently so disappointed in her daughter, Demeter sure is pissed off that I'm finally going to be leaving the hotel. From her attitude, you'd think we actually saw each other more than once every few weeks.

* * *

It's funny... as much as Hades annoys me, I can't stand listening to other people bitch about him. It drives me crazy. Demeter's an expert at that, really. If the Hades button wasn't so big, and obvious, and glowing yellow with the words "PUSH ME!" emblazoned on it in bold letters, I'm sure she'd have found something else to push. I guess this is her desired reaction, because when I finally open my mouth, she can't hide a momentary expression of satisfaction.

"Enough, mom. I really can't handle this today."

"It is not enough. You won't allow me to be a part of the planning for your wedding. It's a shame, Persephone. When you're divorced in a year, I assure you it will come as no surprise to me. My only daughter, getting married so young, with no input from your father or I. Such a shame."

"Yes, mother, you and Dad are the model couple. I've no idea how Hades and I will follow in your perfect footsteps..." Sarcasm doesn't register with Demeter. I'm sure in some academic way she understands it, but it's never had any effect on her. She just steamrolls right along.

"Your father's no happier about this situation than I am, you know."

I open my mouth to say that he might be, if only he knew why the wedding was happening, and then close it with a snap. Now is not the time to clue my parents in on what Hades knows. Not now, and not ever. Well, maybe after I finish my affairs on the roof. I'll leave them a letter.

* * *

I've always known that I'm a good looking girl.

Some women legitimately don't realize it, or don't believe. Others know it, but pretend they're not, either to fish for compliments or because they're too modest. And there are plenty of girls who know they look good, and use that to gain all sorts of presents and favors from men.

I never needed presents and favors from anyone, so that was never me. I don't normally flaunt it. But the way Hades' eyes light up when I walk into the room makes the temptation to strike a bit of a pose too much to resist. Old habits... used to be, when I did this, I was teasing him with something he couldn't have. Now he's got it. He just has to be patient.

"It's a bit revealing..." Hades' voice is tight, but not because he's really concerned about how low the skirt sits on my hips.

Demeter finally let us escape down to my floor, after haranguing Hades for a while about his choice of an Episcopalean priest. Not that Demeter's particularly religious, mind you. Hades could have chosen a Rabbi, and he'd have gotten the same reaction. He's used to dealing with Demeter. Just apologize in the right places, look penitent, and wait to be let go.

We're going out to dinner. Not that either of us really want to, but part of the deal with Demeter letting us go so quickly was that we agreed to drop by the gathering she and Zeus are having at her social club. Some up-and-comers are being inducted. Hades hates it, of course, but even I'm not at all fond of it. It's basically a bunch of rich people patronizing a bunch of fawning, not-yet-rich people who may be rich some day. As a child of a member, I've been a member since I was born. Hades became one the second I let him put the ring on my finger.

It's strange... knowing you're going to be proposed to, knowing what your answer is, and having to force your mouth to say something else. It's like a sketch comedy gone horribly awry... the sort of thing that's funny when it happens to someone else. To give Hades a little credit, his expression when he got down on one knee was pretty apologetic. That's something, at least.

* * *

I'm six champagne flutes into the evening before it occurs to me that getting lit up at Demeter's party is probably a bad idea.

Of course, I didn't care much to begin with, and at this point, I don't care at all. I can feel Hades' eyes on me from somewhere in the room. He knows I'm drunk. There's a blur of a crowd in front of me, and I realize that I've been going on and on about something that I can't really even remember. They've all got vapid smiles on their face, enraptured expressions like the words I'm speaking are the most important thing they've ever heard.

Anger flashes through me, hot and red, like touching your hand to the burner on a stove. I open my mouth to tell these vacuous shells exactly what I think of them, and I feel something clamp around my wrist and pull me backwards, gently but firmly. Some part of me, almost buried beneath the anger, is thankful that Hades is there once again to take care of me. I hear him say something about having an early morning, got to get home, people to meet tomorrow, things to do. He's talking a mile a minute, and by the time we've reached the door, the anger's evaporated into giggles.

I'm hot, flushed from the alcohol and the crowd and the laughing. The hallway is cool relief. Hades is trying to help me into my coat, but I don't really want it, and I spin away from him and stand up on my toes and kiss him on the lips. He looks at me, confused and frustrated, and I'm laughing again.

"Don't lecture me, dear. It's been a long week. A girl has to let her hair down once in awhile."

"And where better than at her mother's big party, in front of her entire social circle?"
When he's sarcastic, Hades sounds like a tired parent. This makes me laugh all the more.

"You... don't even like them. Or this place. You don't like anything!"

Hades shakes his head, and then knocks the laughter right out of me. "That's not true. I like you."

I don't know how to respond to that. All of a sudden I feel like I want to cry. Hades likes me, even though I'm a bitch and a drunk and obsessed with the view from the roof of my building. Even though he shouldn't. Even though he could walk down any street in the city and find somebody better.

I shake my head at him, and say "No," but I can't really explain what I'm trying to express. I'm not sure I could do it even when sober. So I just look at him for a while, and then I hit him in the chest. Not hard, but enough so he knows I think he's being stupid.

Hades smiles, and takes the hand I hit him with, and says "Let's go home, Seph."

* * *

Chapter 3

It's been four months. The cool days of early April are gone, and we're sweltering through a typical New York August. Hades wanted a late-September wedding, and I don't blame him. August is way too damn hot to get married, even if you want to.

Hades and I never talked about that night at the social club. I woke up the next morning in my bed, comfortably wrapped up in pajamas that he helped me put on, confused by the feeling that something significant had happened. How can something significant happen between two people if one of them doesn't know what it was?

Hades was asleep on my couch. The morning sun was streaming in the window, illuminating his face. Hades is a good-looking guy, and when he's asleep, he doesn't have that school-marm look of concern on his face. He looks normal. Handsome.

I woke him up by throwing stuffed animals at him from the pile on the shelf above my bed. Typical Hades, he scolded me for acting childish.

Now we're out finalizing the arrangements with the wedding cake people. We chose a vanilla cake with light chocolate frosting... that kind that's almost moldable like clay. I thought it was cool, and Hades didn't care. Right now, he's paying, and I'm sitting in a chair, hot and pissed off.

The bride and groom on the top of the cake are grinning like happy idiots. I think that's what put me in a bad mood. I kept thinking about having to fake a smile like that. I kept thinking about the Bride's father, standing somewhere behind her, angry that her daughter is marrying this groom. Totally unaware that she's doing it for him.

The secret that Hades has, he found through a combination of random luck, and concerted effort. It was random luck that he ran across the accounting error while interning at my father's company (not that he wanted to, mind you. His parents made him take that one). It was concerted effort that allowed him to trace it back to its source.

This was four years ago. Hades knew everything there was to know about my father's embezzlement, and he sat on his knowledge for four fucking years. He might have stayed quiet forever if my visits to the roof hadn't forced him to open his mouth.

See... Hades thinks he's saving my life by doing what he's doing.

* * *

When Hades first came to me with the info, I was dating this guy Auriga. He drove race cars, I think. I don't really remember much about him, which is pretty pathetic since we dated

for six months. He was blonde, handsome, built, pretty good in bed.... dumb as a brick and uninteresting, but then I already had a smart guy available to me. I had fun taking Auriga around town, showing him off. Then we'd go home and fuck, and he'd fall asleep, and I'd lie there and stare at the ceiling.

One night I finally got up and went to the roof. I remember standing up there in a pair of panties and a t-shirt, standing at the railing and looking down at the city. I put one leg over the railing, and stayed like that for a while. Then I swung the other over. The gravel was biting into my bare feet, the wind had long since chilled the skin on my arms and legs. I was shivering when I leaned out over the ledge.

I waited for my grip to give out. My wrists hurt, my fingers burned, my arms ached. The city swam below me like some fever dream, lit up like day by streetlights and neon. I felt one hand beginning to go.

What stopped me that night, what made me pull myself backward and gave me the strength to get myself back over the railing, was Auriga. Pretty funny, really. I didn't want to die with him asleep in my bed. I didn't want him at my funeral, or trying in his clumsy way to console my parents. I didn't want people to think I loved him.

So I went back downstairs, and took a shower to warm myself up, and when I got back into bed it woke up Auriga. He wanted more sex, and I didn't really give a shit, so I laid back and closed my eyes and thought of the view from the roof while he did his thing. It must sound crazy, but I barely even noticed him. I felt great. I felt alive.

I didn't make another trip to the roof for weeks, but I made the mistake of telling Hades about that first night. Before I could even get around to breaking up with Auriga, Hades sat me down in my bedroom.

"We need to talk," he said. "It's about your father."

* * *

I had to get outside. The heat in the bakery was going to kill me. I told Hades he could meet me at the coffee shop across the street. It's a two-story place, and I end up standing out on the balcony, drinking an iced tea and thinking about the things that Hades told me about my father.

There was a period of time in the nineties, before the economy started to swing back up, when things looked pretty black. My father apparently decided he needed to make sure that any looming dark clouds had silver linings. Hades explained this to me while we sat in my room.

"Listen, Seph. Here's the thing... about ten years ago, your dad stole a lot of money from his company."

This didn't make a whole lot of sense to me. "Why would my father need to steal? He owns the controlling interest in the company."

"He doesn't, anymore. But there was a period of time where he must have been worried. He was pretty subtle about it... and if he hadn't picked such an obvious goddamn password, I never would've found out at all. Certainly no one else noticed."

"So you were snooping around in my father's private files?" I didn't really care, but any excuse to get irate at Hades was a good one.

"Only after I noticed a math error in the stuff I was cataloging. Look, Seph... If anyone found out about this, your father could go to prison for a long time. Your mom... I don't even know what she'd do. It could wreck your family."

"Why are you telling me this, Hades?"

"I want a promise, Seph. For the sake of your mother, and your father. I know you don't even like them all that much, but I believe that you'll promise this."

"Promise what?" But I already knew, really. He was trying to keep me off of the roof, of course.

"Promise me that the drop can wait, until..."

"Until what, Hades?" I knew this, too. This whole scene felt like an act from a play I was already familiar with.

Hades dropped down to one knee, and I had to bite down on the inside of my lip, hard, to keep from laughing at him. You know that wild, hysterical laughter that sometimes strikes people when they're stuck in situations that are near-intolerable, and yet that they can't avoid? That's the kind of thing I was trying to hold back. I mean, here's Hades on one knee, and now he's pulling out a little box, and sure enough, there's a gold band with a big diamond on it, and now he's asking me the question he's probably rehearsed a hundred thousand times in his head, since we were kids.

"Seph... Persephone, will you marry me?"

* * *

I told Hades I needed time to think about it.

He seemed completely unsurprised by that. He took the ring, folded it backup in its little box, told me he'd call me later that night. On the way out, he turned back around and said "Look, Seph... someday you'll thank me for this. I promise. You'll look at all of this bullshit, and you'll hate it. You won't want any of it."

I shrugged. It's not like I liked it even then. Hades looked at me for a while longer, and then left.

I sat on my bed in the dark and wondered how the hell I was going to explain this to my parents. I suppose I should have cried, or torn my room apart in anger, or something... but you'd be surprised. When your entire world is ripped out from under you in the matter of a couple of minutes, it leaves you feeling pretty empty. I did my crying, and raging, and everything else later.

That night, what I did was call Auriga and cancel our dinner date, and then I took a long bath, and then I lay naked on my bed and tried to make peace with the part of me that wanted nothing more than to go up to the roof and end this stupid situation. It was a long process, and it ended in compromise. I would still visit the roof, but there would be no end until I found some way to get my parents out of danger.

Why do I even care what happens to them? You know... I'm still trying to figure that out.

* * *

Hades eventually escapes the bakery, and meets me across the street. A quick cab ride (I insist) uptown, and we're back in the climate-controlled bliss of my hotel. New York in the summer is sort of like being trapped inside the world's largest oven. It sucks.

I wonder if the apartment that Hades has always dreamed we would share will have air conditioning.

I'm going in for a fitting on the gown next week. Hades wanted something simple, I wanted something extravagant. We settled on a contemporary design with some added frills. The gown is costing something like eight thousand dollars. I thought Hades' head was going to explode when I told him that. I think he's starting to figure out though that every time he reacts that strongly to something, it just makes me want to push that button even more.

I'm getting bored. I look up at Hades, smirking, and say "I'm surprised you don't want us to elope and get married by some bargain-basement priest who wants to be paid in whiskey."

"I considered suggesting it, but decided that you would be unlikely to agree."

"You're no fun, Hades. That's your problem."

"Mmmm. You may be right. What time do you want to go argue with the people from Demetrios tomorrow?"

Demetrios is the trendy restaurant where we're holding the reception. We're renting out the entire place for the evening, something that they don't usually do, but money always talks,

and my father knows the owner. I'm sure they'll do a great job, but they'll also try to rip us off wherever possible.

"I don't know, Hades. Whenever. What are they going to do, use the cheap salad forks? Who cares?"

Hades looks up, genuinely annoyed. "You know, Seph, you could at least fake a little bit of interest in your own wedding. You don't seem to give a shit about any of this."

"I see little reason to pretend to be excited about something I have no real choice about."

"You don't understand, Seph. I'm saving you."

"You keep telling me that Hades, and I keep not giving a shit. You go ahead and save me all you want, but don't expect me to go down the path with you skipping and singing. You want this so bad? You get to drag me, kicking and screaming. And don't even start about how I'll thank you later. I don't care."

Hades gets up, paces back and forth a few times. He looks angry, but he also looks stressed about something. Eventually, he sighs, and sits back down on the couch. "I can't do this right now, so you win. You're right, it's stupid. I'll go by myself, and take care of it."

I hate it when Hades gives up before we can really even get into the good part of a fight. Truth is, if he'd just stood up for himself once in a while, I might have considered his romantic advances more seriously.

* * *

Chapter 4

The billboard is giving me a headache.

We've been on the subway for an hour now, stuck in one of the tunnels, waiting to start moving again. This evil clown-woman looks like she just chased down a handful of prozac with a thermos of espresso. The sign's in Spanish. I have no idea what it's advertising.

Hades notices me staring and grins. "It's an ad for a family planning center."

"I can feel her eyes burning into my soul, Hades. I swear to God."

Hades laughs, and nods. "It's a bit unnerving, I agree."

I force myself to look away. But that just frees up my mind to think about how little I want to be going to this appointment. This is the final fitting for the gown, where I try it on and they see if they need to make any last-minute alterations. I can't believe how close this wedding is. Two weeks left until I become a bride. I wonder what it's going to be like, pretending to be happy in front of an audience of about five hundred.

My current plan is to hit the bar early, and often. I'm sure Hades will object, but what's he going to do... start a fight at our wedding reception? I'm going to be good and drunk while people are laughing and smiling and congratulating me. I can't handle sitting through the garter removal, and the bouquet throwing where the stupid cows from the social club will stampede all over each other. Not without something to dull the edge a bit.

Drunk or not, if they make me do the chicken dance, I'm going to have to start breaking legs.

* * *

When I look into the mirror the first thing that runs through my mind is to wonder what happened to the sixteen year old Seph.

The drunk girl who took a boy to bed with her for the first time on her sixteenth birthday is staring back at me, all dressed up in virginal white and wondering where all that time went. I've changed so much, and I haven't changed at all. I'm not sure which is worse.

That was a decade ago. Ten long years, and I can't remember all that much, really, that happened. Certainly if you combined all the memories, they wouldn't amount to more than a year's worth. It seems like every year before that is something almost tangible. So many firsts. Maybe being an adult is when you run out of firsts, and all of the years start to grey together.

Is this what every bride sees when she stands in front of the mirror in her wedding gown? Does it matter whether she's happy or sad, excited or scared? I've prepared my whole life for this day, even though I never thought I wanted it.

Is this what every bride sees? I can find every iteration of the person I have been, pooled in this reflection of the light in my eyes.

I want to twirl around and laugh out loud like a princess. I want to scream and put my fist into the mirror and make those awful eyes go away. There's something here, fighting inside of me, and it hurts so fucking much I'm afraid my knees will unhinge. It's a white-hot spike in my chest. Is this what every bride sees? Why can't I look away?

Hades steps up behind me, and looks into the mirror, looks into my eyes there. "You're beautiful," He says, and puts a hand on my shoulder.

The sixteen year old in the mirror starts crying.

* * *

Hades takes me to a Ben & Jerry's and insists I get a double. It's enough to get me to stop crying, anyway.

What's funny is, the seamstress didn't care at all, once she found out that I wasn't crying over the dress itself. She said that she's had plenty of women burst into tears in front of that mirror, for a whole variety of reasons. "It's natural," she kept saying. "It's natural, honey."

Fuck nature.

I hate crying. It's what weak little rich girls do when things don't go their way. It's a cop-out. It turns on the defense mechanism of every guy in the general vicinity, turns them into a would-be hero. I'm not sure what I want, but it's not that. It's not Hades looking at me like he's worried that I'm going to knife myself right here in the store and have done with it.

"It's okay, Hades," I say after a while. I can barely taste the ice cream. My mind is elsewhere.

"No. Whatever that was, Seph, it wasn't okay."

"It's natural. Didn't you hear her?"

"I heard. Was it me, Seph? Is it... us?"

I shake my head. "No, Hades. I finished crying about that a long time ago. I don't know what it was. If I tried to explain it, you'd think I'm crazy."

Hades hesitates a moment. "I'd say 'try me,' but you won't."

"No."

Hades touches my hand, and I look up at him. The heroic, "I'll save you" look is gone. In its place is the old, familiar look that I'm used to. It's always seemed old-fashioned, that look. Stodgy. Fretful. But up close, there's something there that I've never noticed before, a sharp and calculating intelligence that makes me feel like he's looking through me, reading me like a book.

"I think you look in mirrors and know when you look good, Seph, but I don't believe that you ever like what you see. I wish you'd tell me why."

I can't think of any response to that, and I eventually give up. "My ice cream's melted, Hades. Let's go home."

* * *

Most of the cab ride is nothing but dead silence. Hades seems afraid to speak, and I have nothing to say. Finally, he looks over at me.

"This is harder than I thought."

Which part, Hades? The whole blackmail thing, or getting ready for the wedding itself? Or is it juggling the combination that really takes it out of you. I'm sure that's tough.

I don't say anything. Hades goes on.

"I didn't expect it to go like this, Seph. I thought eventually you'd get tired of dating stupid assholes, and realize you had a nice guy waiting for you. That's how it works in the movies, you know? Except that never happened. I just kept waiting."

Cry me a river.

"And now I had hoped that planning your wedding might at least be something you could enjoy, even if everything about it isn't exactly as pictured. But you're either apathetic, or bursting into tears you refuse to explain. Fair enough, I suppose. You're probably right not to be happy. I'm only saving your life."

Please, Hades. You're not saving anything. This is my penance for the sins I've committed. It's a delay, at best.

Hades sighs. "And now, of course, you're not talking to me."

"What do you want me to say, Hades?"

"Tell me a story, Seph. Make it a story about a girl whose only goal in life is to throw herself off a building. A girl who's spent the past ten years being cold and jaded, encased in ice you might say. And make sure to mention what's causing that ice to crack, all of a sudden."

"You already know that story, Hades. You understand me. You always have."

Hades shakes his head. "Everything I've ever been sure of about you, Seph, you've proven wrong."

* * *

"You want a story, Hades? What about the one where the girl is minding her own business, and suddenly a guy is blackmailing her into marrying him. And not only that, but he expects her to be excited about it. He expects her to open up to him and tell him everything about how she's feeling."

Hades looks at me for a moment. "You always used to."

"I was always drunk!" I can see the cabbie eyeing me nervously in the rearview mirror, but I don't care.

"I know, and I thought that was bad enough, but the new, mostly sober Persephone is even more difficult to deal with."

"Then give up, Hades! Say 'it's not meant to be,' and walk the hell away, and let me do what I need to do."

Hades shakes his head. "I'm not letting you 'do what you need to do' until you explain to me why you need it so desperately. But wait, that would require you to talk to me about whatever it is that's going on inside your head. And that's not going to happen, either, apparently."

No, it isn't. I have nothing more to say to Hades, so I just wave him off in disgust and stare out the cab window. Stupid midtown traffic. We've barely moved for the past ten minutes.

It occurs to me that we'd be there by now if we'd taken the subway.

* * *

Eventually we make it home. After getting nothing but silence out of me for ten minutes or so, Hades shrugs. "See you, Seph."

The skies are clouding up. This is going to be one of those storms that drops the temperature by twenty degrees, and fills the air with sheets of rain. Before that happens, though, it's turning the whole place an interesting shade of purple-grey. It's like the air has leaked right into my whole apartment and leached the color out of everything. The light's gone, and the

apartment's turned into a series of blurry shapes, the type of things you stub your toes on when winter is moving in and the sun drops below the horizon before your brain remembers to turn on the lights.

There's electricity in the air. Up here in the tower, you can feel it sometimes, when a really good storm is rolling in. At least, it seems that way to me. Everything seems tense, charged. It heightens my perceptions, makes the back of my eyes hurt. Small jolts of adrenaline keep running through me, and I wonder if that's instinct. Something primal that I can't control. Something that wants to flee from the coming storm.

The real difference between humans and animals is that we pretend like we've somehow advanced. We laugh and call ourselves stupid. Truth is, it's only our technology that allows this. Take away our electric lights, and we're still a bunch of cave men, huddling in the dark and cowering from the thunder.

See? This is the sort of shit my brain starts turning out when a storm's coming in.

I could've done without this, today. It's just amplifying things already murmuring, angry and restless inside me. The wedding dress woke them up. The fight with Hades stirred them around. What's left is a soft sound in the background, rising and falling, like nearby sighs or distant screams. Like the rush of the wind and the blood in my ears when I'm up on the roof, contemplating the drop. Like the muttering of a crowd not yet ready to become a lynch mob, but working themselves up to it.

I look in the mirror and the sixteen year old who was so close to the surface earlier today has gone back into hiding. It's just the same dead eyes looking back that I've always known. No tears, no laughter, no hate, no joy. Just Seph, standing in her apartment in the growing dark, looking in the mirror and trying to ignore the voices in her head.

I'll be on the roof tonight. Those voices will wake me up some time in the early hours of the morning, when the wind is howling around the hotel and the rain is hitting the building like handfuls of stones being hurled by some angry God. I'll go out, I think, wearing nothing at all, and stand on the edge, and hold on until my arms hurt and I'm shaking from cold and I'm bruised from the force of the rain. I'll hold on until there's barely enough strength left in my body to keep from letting go.

But I won't let go. Not tonight. Not yet. Not until I've seen this thing through. After we're married I'll sleep with Hades. I'll make him think that he won, that I've given up on the drop, and I'll get him to tell me about the rest of it. Where the information on my father is. How to eliminate it. And when my parents are safe once again to continue leading their stupid lives, then I'll finish what started that night when I left Auriga in my bed and went to the roof for the first time.

I crawl into bed even though it's barely seven o'clock. It's like Christmas... the sooner I go to sleep, the sooner the time will come when I get what I'm waiting for.

* * *

Chapter 5

Night turns to day. Storm turns to sun. Life goes on. It's all a rich tapestry.

The rain turned to hail the other night, while I was up there. I was in some sort of daze, standing there naked, staring down at the neon smears below. I didn't notice at first, until it got really bad, and the pain went from the back of my mind to the front. I lost one hand, and for a minute I really thought I was going to drop regardless of my intentions. I didn't feel any fear at all... just a sort of anger. It wasn't supposed to go like this.

Instinct and adrenaline kicked in, and I managed to take the weight of my body swinging outward, and use it to spin around and over the rail. Scraped up my knees, crawled to the door, lay inside the stairwell for a bit shivering and bleeding.

Eventually, managed to find the strength to drag myself downstairs and into the shower, then I slept for about twelve hours.

I wouldn't let Hades over for a few days. I was pretty bruised up, and didn't feel like explaining it. Hades kept himself busy by calling me approximately seven hundred thousand times a day to talk about wedding stuff. I was as helpful as he's come to expect, which was not very.

Now we're headed out to talk to the priest. This has made me feel creepy, every time we've done it.

"I dunno, Hades... do you ever feel bad about lying to a priest?"

"No." Hades doesn't believe in a God, exactly. He holds some sort of 'we're all just energy, and energy never expires, it's just transferred' set of beliefs that he's tried to explain to me in greater detail. He wears the cross because I bought it for him. I did that because I thought it would be funny to see if he would wear it.

"Not even a little? You've got to have some ingrained guilt!" I'm jealous of Hades' ability to give up on religion completely. My parents are the closest thing to gods that he believes in.

Hades turns and smiles at me. "No, Seph. I don't feel bad about it. I tell him I'm Episcopalean. He signs some papers. We get married in a church, everyone's happy."

I shrug. "Guess so. Everyone who counts, anyway."

* * *

After half an hour of talking with the priest, I excuse myself to go use the lady's room, but actually I just want to get out of the stuffy office. The heat, combined with a lengthy discussions

on what psalms would be best to read, is putting me to sleep.

The interior of the cathedral is cool and dark, lit only by this sort of diffuse red glow coming in from the stained glass windows. I don't know what it is about dark churches, but they're not as comforting as they should be. It's a holy building, right? But sometimes it seems to me like the cleaner something is, the easier it is to corrupt. You hear about fallen angels, not about those of us in the middle, with souls dyed dirty grey by moments of both sin and righteousness.

We associate holiness with the light, so when you remove the light from a church, it seems more possible that outside sin might somehow infiltrate, subvert, defile.

Or maybe I am the darkness. My fascination with the drop is a sin. When I finally go through it, that will be a major sin. Unforgiveable. Maybe the church senses my intentions. Maybe it's trying to expel me. Perhaps I'm the corruption, already infiltrated, preparing to stand up before God and lie to him at the altar.

When Hades' voice rises up behind me, I jump about thirty feet.

"Get lost, Persephone?"

I manage to swallow the profanity that wants to jump off my tongue, at least. I turn around to yell at Hades for scaring me, and for that smirk in his voice that says he knows he caught me, but the priest is there with him. Instead, I turn the words into a sheepish grin, and say "Sorry, I noticed the door was open, and curiosity got the better of me."

The priest's name is Father William. Wilhelm. Something... he smiles at me. "Quite all right, child. It's lovely in here, isn't it?"

I force my smile to broaden. "Lovely. Yes."

"I think we're all set for next Sunday, barring a few minor things that your fiance said he'd take care of. You should be thankful he's so involved. Many grooms are overwhelmed and just give up, requiring the bride-to-be to take care of everything."

"He's has been incredibly helpful." I glance at Hades, who rolls his eyes. The smirk hasn't left his face, and it broadens slightly when I give him a 'get me out of here' look. But he steps forward.

"I'm sorry, Father, but we have to go. We have an appointment seamstress that we really need to get to." There goes Hades, lying to priests. He takes my arm and leads me gently to the door. "I'll get those documents to you soon."

"Ah. Very well. See you soon!"

As we leave, he's standing in the middle of the darkened cathedral, head cocked slightly to one side, at peace with himself and the church. The wind escaping as the door closes behind us sounds to me almost like a relieved sigh.

* * *

"Getting close now," Hades says on the cab ride home, and I shrug. Yeh, it's getting close. I should have butterflies in my stomach. I should be swinging between nervous giggling and raging over the stupid little frustrations that always come in the final days before a wedding.

Mostly, though, I'm just tired. Tired of bouncing from place to place, preparing. Priest, florist, seamstress, restaurant, priest again, seamstress again, priest again. It's maddening. I'm tired of pretending to be in love. I'm tired of arguing with my parents. I'd much rather go back to just not talking to them. I'm tired of thinking about it.

I just want it to be done.

Once things settle down into a routine, that's when I'll be able to get the information I need out of Hades. Hades, who's looking at me now with an expression I can't read, and suddenly I'm interested. Hades hasn't delivered me an expression I couldn't read in years.

"What?" I try to sound nonchalant, and because of the effort it comes out sounding forced.

"Seph..." Hades looks suddenly out the window, out at the traffic, away from me. Like he can't bear the sight of me.

"What is it, Hades?"

"Nothing. I just... nothing. It's been a long couple of weeks. I'm stressed out."

It's bullshit, but my intuition tells me not to pursue it right now. He'll tell me eventually. Hades tells me everything.

* * *

Even after we're inside, out of the heat, Hades is still moping around. This is unlike him. I've seen him mad, albeit rarely, but this particular mood he's in is new to me. It's somewhere between angry and sad. Like he's pissed, but mainly at himself.

My bedroom has one main window. It takes up half of the wall, and underneath it is a chest of drawers with a day bed built right into it. Hades logged more hours in that bed during high school than he did in his own, by far. He's there now, and he looks completely natural; a fixture of my room, like the big stuffed bunny in the corner which I won as a kid when we went upstate to visit the state fair.

I'm lying on my bed, feet at the headboard. This puts Hades to my right and a little behind me, and I turn to look at him. He doesn't return the glance, but he must have noticed it.

"It's unlike you to be so interested in my welfare, Persephone" Hades says to the ceiling.

"It's unlike you to give me cause for concern, Hades."

Hades shrugs, an awkward gesture from his position. "When did you start caring?"

I could probably get pissed at that, but I spend enough of my time pissed as it is, and to be honest, after almost two decades of putting up with my shit, Hades deserves to get in the occasional snippy comment.

"I've always cared, Hades. Just because I'm not always... nice to you... doesn't mean I don't care."

* * *

Hades sighs. "I know, Seph. I'm sorry. Like I said, it's been a rough couple of weeks. Don't worry about it, okay?"

"If you tell me what's wrong, I won't have to worry about it anymore."

"It's nothing, Seph. Pre-wedding jitters. But I'll make you a deal. Stop thinking about it, and I promise I'll tell you some time after we're married. I don't know when, for sure, but I promise that I'll explain everything."

"Hades, you can't tell me it's nothing and then promise to explain it later. That's a contradiction."

"Life is full of contradictions" Hades says in a far away, how-zen-I-am voice, and then turns to look at me. He smiles. "It's okay, Seph. Really."

But it's not okay. Hades has never held anything back from me in his life. It makes me a little angry, but more than that, it makes me nervous. Has so much changed? My whole life, Hades has been the guy I could tell my secrets, and the guy who would tell me his. I know things about Hades that you're just not supposed to know about other people. I know that his secret dream is to start a politics-based website that helps to elect in officials who actually give a shit about the American public. I know that a girlfriend once asked him to tie her to his bed. I know that he writes poetry, even though he knows it's bad. I know everything about Hades.

But I don't know what's bothering him now. And he's not going to tell me.

I wonder if that's the best way to start a marriage. Hades has spent his whole life telling me the things you tell no one else, back when there was nothing between us and seemingly no chance of that changing. Now we're getting married. In two weeks I will go to bed with this man

and share myself with him; the most open act I could possibly commit with him. Yet now he's holding back, and if I push, it's only going to make things worse.

"Okay, Hades. I'll leave it alone. I'm sorry we've reached a point where you can't tell me things."

Hades says nothing, but when I look over at him, he shifts his gaze away, not wanting to meet my eyes.

* * *

Chapter 6

I'm supposed to be out with my best girlfriends right now.

They're supposed to be getting me drunk, hiring me a male stripper, maybe even quietly ignoring one last illicit rendezvous with a member of the opposite sex. I'm supposed to get stupid presents: crappy sequined tiaras, edible underwear, flavored condoms. It's the night before my wedding, and I'm supposed to have my bachelorette party.

Problem is, my best girlfriend is Hades.

I've never been able to relate to other women; at least, not the kind of women I meet through my parents. They're vacuous, airheaded, greedy and bitchy. They turn on each other over nothing. I loved dating Auriga because I could walk him into a room and watch all of those stupid bitches turn green with envy. It made up completely for his utter lack of personality.

No... there's no bachelorette party. Instead, I'm in silence at a table with my parents, eating three-star pasta that I can barely taste. I want nothing more than to be away from here. Sooner or later, Demeter is going to start in on me, and I just don't have the patience anymore. I hate her, and I don't know how I will avoid using Hades' knowledge to hurt her.

I don't hate Zeus, though. Father. Daddy. I don't love him... not exactly. But he and I share a grudging respect for each other. He gave me everything I have, was the force behind all that which shaped who I am. In turn, he understands that I'm no longer his little girl, and he gives me my space. No, it's not love, but it's at least a fondness. That's something more than many women can claim from their fathers.

That's why he's worth protecting, I guess. Slim justification, but there it is. Agreeing to marry Hades and prolong my existence on this earth was my gift to him. Thanks, Dad. You managed to get through twenty-six years without giving me cause to hate you.

Demeter, on the other hand, has only to open her mouth.

* * *

"So..." Demeter says.

Silence. Zeus's fork clicks against his plate a few times. I stare at my pasta. This is the game. Demeter says "So..." and then waits. Sooner or later, I'll bite. Or Zeus will. Neither of us has ever been very good with long, uncomfortable silences, and Demeter knows it. She uses it, on both of us. Always has. I don't know why my father stays with her.

I don't want dad to have to start my argument, and I can feel him tensing up, so I get it over with.

"So what, Demeter?"

Demeter draws in a breath and across the table, Zues closes his eyes. It's the only acknowledgement he gives, though. Beyond that, he just keeps right on working away at his pasta. I want to laugh, but it's probably not a good idea right at this moment.

"So tomorrow's the big day. Are you excited?"

"Terrified." That much is true, but not for the reasons she'd think.

"You should be. You're about to make the biggest mistake of your life, Persephone. This boy Hades, he's so standoffish and rude. He's made you distant. We never talk anymore"

"We didn't talk much to begin with. Hades hasn't changed me."

"He has! Something has, at any rate. You're not the same Persephone I remember. You're not being the smart little girl I remember."

"I'm twenty-six, Demeter. The little girl is gone." I wonder about that, though. I saw her there in the mirror, not so long ago.

"This marriage is going to be a failure. Oh, everyone there will know it. They'll smile and shake your hand and give you gifts, but simply everyone will be talking behind your back, making wagers on how long until the divorce. He's not right for you, Persephone. You're of a different class. Everyone knows it." Demeter's voice is thick, almost like she's gloating. That's what gets me.

"Who cares what they think?! They're worthless! Every single stupid person you've invited to this wedding can go to hell, Demeter. They can rot there. I don't care what their opinion of me is."

Demeter pretends to be shocked. "Persephone!"

"Enough with this bullshit, Demeter. Stop pretending that you give a shit about me, or about my future. The only reason you care that everyone will be talking is because of how it will reflect on you. Admit it. Admit it! I'm just another one of your trophies, and you're angry because you can't own me anymore."

For the first time that I can remember, Demeter looks legitimately shaken up. Legitimately angry. She opens her mouth to say something, and I can see in her eyes that this will end it. Whatever she's about to say, it will be the last thing she says to me, because once she sets me off we'll never speak again. I'm scared, a bit... losing a parent is frightening whether you like them or not. I'm also looking forward to it. I'm almost smiling.

That's when Zeus brings the palm of his hand down suddenly against the table, a flat smacking sound that catches us both by surprise and makes us jump. He's squares his

shoulders, looks first at his wife, then at his daughter. I can feel the full weight of his authority pressing down on me. Zeus doesn't do this often. It's impressive.

"Enough," He says. "Persephone, have you finished your dinner?"

"Yes daddy." I haven't called him that in years. Years. My voice sounds like a little girl's. Funny how quickly we revert, in some situations.

"Why don't you go get some rest, then? You have a big day tomorrow."

"Yes daddy." I'm not afraid of Zeus... not exactly. He would never lift a finger to harm me, certainly. But there's something within him. So much power. I've seen him use it to turn other executives into nervous little boys. For me, there's no fear, but I can't disobey him. I'm not even able to conceive of it. So I get up from the table.

As I move down the hall, toward the door that will take me out to the elevators, I hear the clink of silverware against china. Zeus has resumed eating. I'll never understand him. I'll never understand either of them. But in that moment, for a split second, I'm so grateful it makes me weak in the knees, because now I understand why the information Hades has holds any power over me.

For all his faults, Zeus still loves me. He dismissed me when the natural parental instinct would be to keep me there as long as possible. He loves me enough to give me that.

He loves me enough to let me go.

* * *

The nightmare arrives like a malfunctioning movie projector, flickering images behind my eyes that refuse to coalesce into anything coherent. Warbling sounds like choked screams. The first recognizable image is Hades. The next is Zeus.

They both look so sad.

That rushing sound, waves of rain blown by the wind against glass windows. The sighs of old women, disappointed and disillusioned, tired of life. Ready to die. Where is Hades? Don't leave me here. Don't leave me here like this.

Part of me, some academic part with thick horn-rimmed glasses, perched on a stool with a thin cigarette clenched between her fingers, trying to look intellectual, knows this is a dream. That snob bitch is laughing at me. But the rest of me, the real Persephone, is terrified. Wandering lost in the dark, hurt and alone, that image of sadness, of Hades and my father, burnt into the backs of my eyelids.

I didn't know I was still able to be this scared. I've held my body out over three hundred feet of empty space, below me only cold concrete, and not felt one shred of fear. It's not death that scares me. There's no death in this dream. Only hollow winds and empty rooms, flickering lights that illuminate nothing except more blank space.

Hades and Zeus, looking so sad, only it's not really sadness, it's disgust. Behind their eyes, behind the tears, I see it in both of them, and this is the real nightmare. They don't understand. How can I make them understand? They never will.

I wake up gasping, shivering, soaked with sweat and tears. For all that, I can't even remember what the dream was about, if it was about anything at all. Only that final image remains. Hades and Zeus, looking down, anger disguised as sorrow. Disgust masquerading as grief.

It's cold and dark in my room, in this empty apartment, on this empty floor. It's cold and dark, and I'm so alone.

* * *

Chapter 7

I'm not a patient person.

So when Demeter steps into the bridal chamber, the little room in the church I've been sequestered into as we wait for this nonsense to be over with, I don't waste any time with pleasantries.

"What do you want, Demeter?"

She looks up at me, and the expression on her face is almost comical. It's a combination of surprise and disgust. She doesn't even make a token effort to disguise it. "When did we reach a first-name basis, Persephone? Where are your manners?"

"Does it really matter anymore? I'm not a child, Demeter. You don't gain my respect simply by being older than I am."

"Perhaps then you might consider everything I've done for you?"

"Mmm. Yes. You married Zeus, and apparently went through labor to have me, although I can't picture that at all. What am I missing? The next twenty-six years seem to be mainly blank."

Demeter is silent, for once in her life. Thank god for small favors. Finally she says, "I don't know why you hate me, Persephone."

I shrug. "I don't hate you, Demeter. I just don't like you. And if we're being honest, I think it's safe to say you don't like me either. You think you're supposed to, because I'm your daughter, and maybe for some people it works that way. But not for you. Not for me. So why don't you go back outside, and sit down with Zeus, and pretend to be happy for me, like every other fake piece of shit you invited to this wedding?"

Demeter's mouth forms a perfect "O", but I don't wait for her response. I've had enough, and Zeus isn't here to stop me.

"My entire life, I've never been what you wanted me to be, Demeter. I never dated the right men, attended the right events, knew the right people. Now I'm marrying the wrong guy, and we're going to go live in the wrong part of town, and he'll make the wrong career choices. Christ, don't even get me started on the potential disaster that having children would be. I can't even imagine your response to that. You don't like me, Demeter. You think you're supposed to, because I'm your daughter, and so you put up the pretense, but enough is enough. I'm twenty-six, which puts you on the darker side of fifty. Don't you think you've pretended for long enough?"

"Persephone..." Demeter's voice is shaky.

"I don't even want to hear it, Demeter. I don't care anymore. Nothing you could possibly say is going to have any effect. What is it? 'He's wrong for you,' maybe? Or how about the old 'he can't provide for you in a manner that befits you,' line? That what you were going to say?"

Demeter casts her glance toward the floor. It's a momentary twitch, and she corrects it almost immediately, but she might as well have tilted her head back and exposed her jugular. I sweep in, ready to end it. Not with fire and brimstone. Not with raging and screaming. My voice is ice: collected, detached, distant.

"Just leave, Demeter. Go sit down in the church and wait for this to be over. Make your token appearance at the reception, stay the hell away from Hades and me, and privately tell all of your idiot friends how it's not going to work. I don't care. Hades doesn't care. So go."

Demeter opens her mouth, but I'm not having any of it. "Just go! This is the end. Goodbye. Thank you, and fuck you, and goodbye."

A moment more of silence, and then Demeter whirls on her heel and storms out. The door slams behind her, and I grin. Goodbye, Demeter. Thank you, and fuck you, and goodbye.

* * *

There's a knock at the door, and for a moment I think it's Demeter, returning now with some acid remark that leapt into her mind after her dismissal. But that makes no sense, of course. She wouldn't knock, let alone deliver a polite little tap. This is someone else. This, as it turns out, is Zeus, looking regal in his tuxedo.

"May I come in, Persephone?"

"Sure, Dad." In the old days, Zeus wouldn't have asked. I guess that's all the proof I need that things have changed. This room doubles as an office when no one's getting married. There's a desk at the far end of it. Zeus sits on one corner, and looks at me, not saying anything. It doesn't take me long to get uncomfortable.

"What?" I'm still tensed up from the fight with Demeter. If Zeus was hoping to catch my good side, his timing is poor.

Zeus smiles, a rare occasion. "Somewhere along the line, you changed from a pretty young girl, to a lovely woman, Persephone. I'm sorry I wasn't there for more of the transition."

I shrug. "You had things to do."

"I did. I wonder, though, if those things were as important as they seemed at the time."

Another shrug. I wouldn't know.

"You seem to have upset your mother rather severely. I thought we had avoided that unpleasantness last night."

"She brings it on herself. Are you here to make me apologize? Is that what this is about?" My voice sounds like it's trying to be defiant, but my heart's not really in it. I already did my big fight for the day, and now I just want this all to be done.

Another smile. "I have no idea what was said, but I'm certain Demeter deserved it. I don't think I could make you apologize even if that weren't the case."

"Yes you could. You're Zeus. No one says 'no' to Zeus."

Zeus chuckles to himself. "No, no one says 'no' to Zeus. But his daughter has a better chance than most. It's all right, Persephone. I only hope that your issues with your mother won't stop you from visiting on occasion. If you want to avoid her, we can always do lunch."

* * *

I don't believe I've ever seen Zeus this personable. It's calming. I smile back at him. "I'm sorry if our fighting upsets you, Daddy. I'm sorry for a lot of things, I guess, but I can't help it."

"Don't be sorry. You are who you are. Demeter is who she is. Those two people don't get along with each other. Life's like that."

"What about that whole unconditional love thing? Isn't that supposed to be a perk of being a parent?"

Zeus laughs. "There's no such thing as unconditional love. You can't even get love from a dog without feeding it and occasionally tossing it a frisbee, and dogs are stupid. You're not stupid, by any means. Parents have to earn their children's love. Demeter hasn't worked to do so, and neither have I, to be honest. I'm only glad that I've been less adept at earning enmity."

I still love Zeus. It's a dim, confused love, but it's there. Why is it so hard to tell him? Instead I just avert my eyes, wave him off, as if such a simple gesture could dismiss his concerns. "It's okay, Daddy."

Zeus looks around the room, sighs, seems to be considering his next words carefully. "You're going to be married shortly, Persephone. Will you indulge an old man and let him give you a piece of advice?"

"Of course."

"Be honest with yourself. It will help you be honest with Hades, and help him be honest with you. In the end, honesty will only strengthen what it is you have."

Honesty. God, I don't even know how to respond to that. Every waking moment for the last year has been dishonest. I look up at Zeus, but can't find a way to answer him. So I nod, and hope he'll take that as a sign of acquiescence.

* * *

Zeus has a strange smile on his face. He glances at his watch, stands up. "Thirty minutes, Persephone. In thirty minutes, your whole life will change."

And like that, I'm on the verge of tears. A scared little girl whose gotten into something she's no longer sure she can handle. Zeus seems to notice this. He steps forward, takes my hand, then embraces me completely. It's cautious, that embrace, but after a moment it feels right. It feels like home. I don't want to let go, but eventually I have to. Zeus holds me at arms length, surveys me, and smiles again.

"I love you, Persephone. I hope you know that. I'm sorry I haven't told you that more often."

Now that he's had the courage to say it, I can too. "I know, Daddy. I love you too."

"Then do me one last favor?"

"Yes."

"After I leave, look out your window."

I don't know how to respond to this, unexpected as it is, and Zeus doesn't give me the time to do so anyway. He kisses my cheek, lets go of me, and moves toward the exit. The door closes behind him with a soft snap, and I'm left once again by myself in this room, waiting for the inevitable. Look out the window, Zeus said, and so I do.

Below me, outside in the alley between the cathedral and the adjacent building, is a young man in a tuxedo. A young, good-looking man with dark, too-hip-for-you hair. A young man I've known for as long as I can remember. A young man I know so well that even though I can't see his face, it doesn't matter; I could recognize him in silhouette.

Below me, Hades is sitting on a curb, all alone, holding his head in his hands.

* * *

Getting out of the church without anyone noticing takes some effort. Were it not for the gown, I'd have simply gone down the fire escape, but that's not an option at present. Instead, I

settle for peeking out and waiting for people's attention to be elsewhere. Twenty minutes until the ceremony starts. What the hell is Hades doing?

There's a small kitchen to the left, which was where they'd jammed Hades. I find a staircase there, leading to the alley out back. I open the door quietly, and look out. Hades is still there, his position unchanged. He's not crying; I'd be able to see his body moving if he was. He's just sitting there, breathing gently.

After a moment, I say. "If you're going to try and uphold the whole 'not seeing the bride on the day of the wedding thing,' you might want to avoid sitting under her window."

Hades' head snaps up, and for a moment I read a completely alien emotion in his eyes. Not fear, or anger. I've seen those. Dissapointment? Old hat. Laughter and pain are nothing new. But this? What I see in Hades' eyes is something I'm on very familiar terms with, but I never believed he could truly understand. What I see there is despair.

It's only a moment, and then he looks away, down the alley. "Jesus you look beautiful."

"Then why is it so hard to look at me, Hades?"

Hades studies his hands, then tries another attempt at eye contact. This one goes a bit better -- he's masked some of what I saw in his eyes -- but it's still a long way from good. I feel myself softening, although I had resolved myself to making this day as difficult and obnoxious for Hades as possible. This is too much, though. Nothing I could throw at him could make him look like that.

"What is it, Hades? What's wrong?"

Hades shakes his head. Opens his mouth. Closes it. Opens it again. "I can't do this, Seph. I thought I could, but I can't. I can't force you to marry me."

"It's maybe a little late for regrets, Hades."

"Remember the other day when you asked what was wrong, and I told you I'd tell you later?"

I nod. "Yes, Hades. It's later, isn't it?"

"It's later. I can't lie to you anymore." Hades takes a deep breath. "I have nothing on Zeus. The information I found, I brought to him that same day. I'm certain he took care of it. I gave it to him that day because I knew if he was hurt, you would be hurt. I couldn't do that. I couldn't do it then, and I think I've done it now, and it's killing me."

Did I know it already, deep down inside? Had I already guessed at this little revelation? If I did, if I had, it doesn't change the way his words knock my entire world grey for a moment. What Hades says stops my breath, stops my heart, makes me wonder if I'm discovering first hand what death is like.

Hades puts his head in his hands again, and his muffled voice breaks in the middle of the next sentence.

"I'm sorry, Persephone."

* * *

My voice starts working before my brain does, so what comes out of my mouth seems perhaps a bit anticlimactic.

"What?"

Hades says nothing, just sits there with his head in his hands. He knows I heard him; he's just giving me time to process what he said. But I want it again. I want to make sure.

"What, Hades?" there's anger, there, that I'm trying desperately to contain. This is not the time for anger. I have forever to be angry at Hades. I have an eternity of hate and rage ahead of me, but right now I only have about eighteen minutes until someone knocks on the door upstairs and discovers that both the bride and the groom seem to have split town.

"Oh God Seph I'm so sorry," Hades says to the ground. He sounds weak and shaky, like he's going to throw up. "I'm so sorry. There's nothing. No files. I told Zeus about it the same day, and then I stopped thinking about it for four fucking years, but then I had no choice. I thought I could do it, but I can't. I'm sorry, Seph."

It's a little late for apologies. It's too late for everything. Jesus... I thought this situation was bad before? How am I going to stand at that altar now, knowing that the one reason I had in the first place was a lie?

"Why, Hades? Christ... Why?" I'm yelling. I don't want to be yelling, but I can't help it. I'm still trying to process the ramifications of what Hades just said. All of those nights on the roof, wanting nothing more than to let go and have done with it. Waiting. Waiting for Hades. And for what? For an empty threat. I should have known. I should have fucking known.

Hades looks up at me, and he's crying now. I've never seen him do that before. It's not the sort of histrionics you see sensitive types pulling. Hades has always been more than he appeared. There's no carrying on, no sobbing, just two little tracks running down his face, bloodshot eyes, and another alien expression that it takes me a moment to identify. Self-loathing. More familiar territory that's completely unfamiliar when I see it elsewhere.

Hades looks up at me, and opens his mouth, and says something I never really expected to hear him say. That will sound crazy, I guess, since it should seem like he's said it before. But he never has, and up until this moment, this exact second in time, I wouldn't have believed him even if he had. Now, though, there's no chance that he's lying. Hades is done with lying. Hades' heart is laid bare before me, served up on a silver platter, for me to do with what I will.

"I love you, Persephone."

And there it is. My heart does another one of those skitter-steps, and my knees literally unhinge. I always thought that was something people made up in stories, and might have gone on thinking that forever, but here I am suddenly sitting down in my wedding dress on dirty pavement because I simply can't stand up any longer.

Hades goes on. "I love you. I've loved you for as long as I can remember. And every time I tried to push that love away, or give it to another girl, it never worked. It just came back stronger. So finally I gave up, and reconciled myself to just living with it."

I shake my head. My tongue seems thick in my mouth, but I manage a few words just the same. "No, Hades. You love somebody else. You love who you think I am."

"No." Hades' voice is certain. "I love you. I love the Persephone who stands on the roof and looks over the edge and thinks about how terrific it would be to throw herself off. I love the Persephone who pushes me away at every opportunity because she doesn't want to get too close. The Persephone who can't understand that I've never wanted anything else. The Persephone who hates subways and politics and makes fun of my hair. The Persephone who thinks I somehow deserve better, that she's not good enough for me, that I couldn't ever really love her."

"That's the Persephone I love. You're the Persephone I love. I love you so much that I'm sitting in an alley on my wedding day, and I'm telling my bride-to-be that the only thing holding her back from killing herself never existed."

"I love you, Persephone, and if that's what it takes to make you happy, then so be it. If the one joy I can give you is to let you go, then that's what I'm doing. We can leave right now. We can go to the top of your building, and I'll say goodbye. I won't stop you this time, Seph. No screaming, no words about promises or retribution. If this is what you want, then I have no choice but to give it to you."

And there it is. Permission at last to do what I've wanted to do for so long now. The chains are gone, there's nothing left to hold me back. We can go right now. Hades' wedding gift to me, a gift born out of love, is to let me kill myself.

The sun is suddenly scalding hot on the back of my head, the blood pounding in my temples excruciating. The world swims before my eyes, loses color, goes grey.

* * *

Hades has always been there for me.

I'm not exaggerating. Literally, my entire life. I can't even remember when I met Hades. We were just kids. It was before either of us had started school, I know that much, because I distinctly remember crying the weekend before I had to go off to kindergarten. Hades kept

telling me that it would be okay. That it would be fun. Pudgy little child-Hades, not yet grown tall and thin, already comfortable in his role as the shoulder to cry on. Already there for me.

Part of me is still sitting in the alley with Hades now, twelve minutes before our wedding. That part is currently blacking out. The rest of me is rushing back in time.

There's Hades using his own allowance to buy me Cheetos, because Demeter doesn't permit junk-food in our house, and he knows I like them.

There's Hades helping me study Modern Asian History every single night, a subject not even taught in his school, because I came sobbing to him that I was going to fail the class.

There's Hades, taking me to my junior prom on last-minute notice because the asshole I gave my virginity to decided to break up with me three weeks beforehand, and I couldn't bear the mortification of showing up without a date.

There's Hades, holding my hair back for me while I puke in the toilet, telling me it's okay, that he won't tell my parents I've been drinking again, because he knows that they'll send me to a clinic which will only make things worse.

There's Hades, listening to me bitch about how stupid Auriga is. Supporting me, even though inside he must want nothing more than to grab me and slap me and ask me how, how, how can I keep ignoring him when all he's ever done, he's done for me?

It occurs to me now how little I've appreciated Hades. Not for the things he's done. Truth is, Hades is a guy, and I'm a girl with a cute face and perky tits. Guys have done things for me all my life. No, what stands out about Hades is not that he was always there for me. It's that he's never expected anything in return. He's always been there, because he loves me, and he's never done any of it under the mistaken belief that he could somehow make me love him back.

My whole life, Hades has told me one lie, and he did that to keep me alive. Everything else he has ever said to me has been the truth. Now he says he loves me. He says he loves me for who I am, whatever I am. He loves me laughing. He loves me screaming. Happy or suicidal. Sleeping with someone else. Complaining about how there's no one good to sleep with. Teasing him, taunting him, acting like a bitch. He just... loves me. For me. I guess he always has, and I guess probably he always will.

How have I never noticed this?

The greying world floods once again with color, and there are words echoing in my ears. Not Hades asking me if I'm all right, though I'm dimly aware of that. No, the words I'm hearing came from Zeus, not half an hour ago.

"Be honest with yourself," he said. "Be honest with yourself. It will help you be honest with Hades."

There's something inside me, growing, pushing, trying to get out. Be honest with myself, and it will help me be honest with Hades. That was the advice my father gave me on my wedding day. It seems like good advice. God help me, I'm going to follow it.

* * *

"Are you all right, Persephone?" Hades asks me, and I'm really not sure how to answer. I suppose not. People who are all right don't faint, and then come to feeling like they've experienced some sort of rebirth. People who are all right are usually capable of forming a coherent sentence, but my first attempt is nothing more than a jumble of nonsense sounds. I try again, and manage something that sounds like "mokay."

And here's Hades, leaning over me, taking care of me, always there for me. And God damn if he doesn't look amazing in that tux.

And I say, without even thinking about it, "Jesus Christ, Hades... I love you so much."

Hades keeps looking worried for a moment, and then my words register with him, and he rocks backward like I'd punched him in the face. It's his turn for anticlimactic sentiment.

"What?"

"Be honest with yourself," Zeus told me, and God dammit, it's about time someone in a position of authority laid down that mandate. Because honestly? I love Hades. I love him more than I ever wanted to admit to myself. Stupid Persephone. Worthless Persephone. Hades didn't deserve to be saddled with my love.

But it doesn't matter. I'm being honest, right? It doesn't matter. Hades has laid his heart bare and told me the truth, and the least I can do for him now is the same. He loves me for me, drunk and bitchy and teasing... sorry and sad and suicidal. He loves me regardless.

And me? The truth? I say it again: "I love you, Hades."

It feels amazing to say that. I've wanted to say that for years now. Decades now. Hades helps me stand up, and I turn to face him, resting my arms on his shoulders and looking into his eyes. Big, confused eyes, but there's something dawning there now. Something that looks like hope.

"Seph, I don't understand. I don't... is it because of what I said? Because I'm letting you go? Because you can go to the roof now and take the drop?"

And I shake my head. No, that's not it. Oh, I remember the allure of the drop. I remember it very well, and I think probably I always will. But all of a sudden, there's a reason to postpone. I'm not ready to go anymore. Things just finally got interesting, after all these years. Because here's the choice I was waiting for, the chance to control my destiny, to truly know the

joy and the pain of being responsible for one's fate. The appeal of the drop was in the choice, but the choice I'm making now is even better.

Hades is talking again, asking for clarification. Fuck clarification. We've got five more minutes in this alley. This dirty, dim, disgusting, beautiful alley. Five minutes to finish this. I catch Hades' eyes and hold them.

"I want you to take me away from all of this bullshit, Hades. I want you to show me everything I've missed, drifting through my life. I want you to help me, and teach me, and put up with me, and just please, please love me as much as you've been loving me for all of this time. I promise I'll love you back. Okay? You've been with me through so much. Will you stay with me through this? Will you help me?"

Hades is clearly still confused, but his face is radiant. He's finally got what he wants, after all these years. He doesn't understand how it happened, and I'm not sure I could explain it, but he's not stupid, and he knows now that somehow, some way, he has at last what it was he wanted all along.

I ask him again: "Will you help me?"

Hades says "I will."

"Do you love me?"

Hades says "I do."

* * *

"I do," Hades says, and after a moment more, "God, Seph... is this real?"

And I smile. I smile because I know he means it. He means it when he says he loves me. He means it when he says he'll help me. Here in this alley, we're saying our real wedding vows, the ones that matter.

I can see my reflection in his eyes. The Persephone I see there is some new woman I've never seen before. Some combination of all of those I've seen reflected before. But this one wears an expression as beautiful as it is unexpected. She's smiling from ear to ear. Ecstasy and understanding and hope clearly printed on her face.

Life, love: It's all there before me. It's like the drop, in a way, and yet so much more. Where there I found only a final answer, here I see no end of possibilities. Maybe some are good, maybe others are bad, but for the time being I'm content to take my chances. I'm content with my choice.

Hades wants to know if it's real. "It is," I say, and oh how I want to prove it. I've never wanted anything more in my life, and I laugh out loud. I'm shaking. Hades is shaking, and laughing, and I can't wait one moment more. We've wanted this so much, and at long last we can admit it. At long last we can accept it.

When we kiss, it feels like falling.

The End