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THE WRATH GODS REAP

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PREFACE

Gone. It's all gone. The entire world, everything we can see, is burned to a crisp, leveled. And the oceans…the oceans are on *fire*.

We almost had it. The end of the Deceiver. The Titans released from Tartarus. And Hades… We were going to rule the Underworld together as King and Queen.

But it turns out the prophecy *was* inevitable. The proof is in front of me. A thousand thoughts bombard my mind. Question after question.

What if we'd discovered the Deceiver's identity sooner?

What if I hadn't used up all my power over time?

What if…

I look at Hades. He hasn't given up—I can see that in the hard set of his jaw. I adore him even more for that. I also know there's only one thing left to try. But I have to do it alone.

I dash an arm across my cheeks, which are soaked with tears. And then I summon the Helm of Darkness to me.

Hades goes still a beat before he jerks around, already reaching for me. "Lyra, don't go—"

But like everything else, I'm already gone.

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PART 1

THE PLAN

In the history of the world,
only the victor's version of the story is accepted as the truth.

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1

SCHEMING GODS

LYRA

Fuck death and all the gods and goddesses who rule over it.

Sure, technically I'm one of them now, as Queen of the Olympic Underworld, but those assholes *punished* Hades. They judged him and then stripped him of his powers and made him mortal. *They* are the reason we're having issues down here at all.

The reason *I* am having issues.

The dead need to be processed. Missing a king is one thing, but we have *no* god of the dead. Just me and Persephone—co-queens whose natural powers cover spring, glamours, and time. Though my power over time is glitching at the moment. Regardless, none of those gifts have anything to do with death or the dead.

And it's showing.

I can only hide some of it. But the lines of souls backed up and waiting for me to get to them is a big godsdamned clue.

Of course, there's a way for Hades to get his powers back. It won't even take three guesses to figure out how it's done: trials. The answer is a series of trials.

More damned trials. The cosmic joke of my life.

So yeah…fuck them.

I cast my gaze over the view from the terrace of our home in Erebos, in the Underworld I now rule. Water gardens sprawl below, and mountains rise all around us, eventually blending into the cavern ceiling so high up, it looks like a night sky, dotted by points of light that glow bright blue. Our

version of stars. The colors here are deeper, brighter, and more brilliant than in the Overworld or even Olympus. Every phosphorescent leaf and flower and blade of grass blends into the tapestry of natural wonder.

But I'm not going to find answers down here.

That's what worries me most. No answers. And we've been looking.

I don't realize I'm fidgeting until Hades steps in close from behind, easing a hand around my waist to pull me against him, pressing a kiss to the nape of my neck.

"Play nice when Anubis gets here," Hades whispers in my ear. His voice is a slow, delicious slide against my senses, but the words are an order.

I twitch against him but don't break his hold. "I don't like involving him."

"So you've said." Seduction takes on an edge. "Several times."

"Yeah…well…" I mutter.

Hades chuckles. Mostly because I couldn't come up with anything better.

At least Hades told me his plan this time. Correction: *plans*. There's always more than one with Hades. That's progress from all the secrets we've both been forced to keep from each other in the past. We still have secrets.

But now…they're *ours*. It's us against the entire immortal world.

No big deal.

Still holding me against him, Hades trails the fingers of his other hand down my bare arm. "I could distract you until our guest arrives, if you like."

Cerberus, our three-headed hellhound standing guard, tilts all three of his heads. *"Actually,"* Cer, the serious head in charge, drawls. He only speaks telepathically to the people he wants to hear him. *"We'd rather you didn't."*

"Definitely not," Ber grumbles.

Rus' tongue lolls out of his mouth. *"Yeah. Gross."*

Persephone doesn't say anything. Delicately feminine with long, midnight black waves of hair that fade into a rich burgundy rose and then pale pink at the tips, she's wearing a flowing pink dress in a modern cut that still manages to reflect ancient fashion. The color is striking against her deep-brown skin.

For all her effortless beauty, she's practically vibrating with tension. She's not exactly sitting—she's teetering. Right on the edge of her seat.

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Back straight as an arrow, hands folded in her lap, trying to appear serene but failing by a long shot.

Her darting glances toward the stairs are a dead giveaway of what… or more particularly who…she's looking for.

"Boone's not coming." I try to say it gently.

Now the god of thieves, Boone was with me growing up in the San Francisco den of thieves, with me again in the Crucible, where he almost died, and then again in Tartarus. He and Persephone have their own history that I'm trying not to get in the middle of, though curiosity rides me hard.

She straightens, cheeks taking on a rosy glow. "Who says I was looking?"

None of us says a thing, and she glances from face to face before she wrinkles her nose. "Was it that obvious?"

"Only because we know you." Rus nudges her shoulder with his nose.

Persephone sighs. "He's avoiding me. Again."

"We can't meet *all* together, or it would be suspicious," Hades reminds her. Charon's not here, either. The other player in our merry band of Team Underworld. The ferryman of the dead, who brings the souls across the River Styx, is on duty there now.

"That's Boone's excuse *this time*," Persephone mutters. "How am I supposed to fix things if he won't talk to me?"

Out of nowhere, a scream pierces my mind—something that happens a lot since I've taken my place as one of two Queens of the Underworld—and I don't quite contain my flinch.

"The souls?" Hades asks softly.

I fix my face into a less pained expression, but nod. Then catch Hades' glance in Persephone's direction. *She's* not struggling. We can both hear them, and she doesn't seem fazed.

Then again, Persephone doesn't handle the souls who earned punishment. She can't. The darkness in them, the lies they spew until commanded to confess the truth, the evil that often pours out when they do—the goddess of spring wasn't made for that kind of darkness.

So I deal with them.

She gets the easy ones.

"Are you okay?" Hades lowers his voice, the question just between us.

Okay is a relative term.

"I'm—" I stop myself.

Exhausted and struggling.

Not sure I can do this.

This felt so much easier when you were king.

Those are all the things I want to say. But not yet.

I'll tell him when it gets worse. *If* it gets worse. We have enough to deal with—a favor to beg from Anubis, trials to start, a Deceiver to hunt down, the Titans' names to clear, Hades' immortality to regain. Not to mention my power over time is glitching. We have so many issues to choose from. What we don't need is more.

But death stops for no one. Not even its queen.

So I'll deal with this as long as I have to. As long as I can, at least. "I'm fine."

His arms tighten around me. "Don't do that."

"No, really," I insist. Then I deliberately redirect with a grumbled, "How are you being so offhand about Anubis?"

There's a long silence, and I keep my eyes trained on the beauty of Erebos. It doesn't help quell my nerves.

"If I've learned anything…" Hades finally says. "It's that nothing lasts forever."

He doesn't miss the way I stiffen. "Wrong choice of words when you're mortal and about to compete in trials against…wait for it…gods." *Some even still think you're prophesied to destroy the world, and they might want to do something about it.* I keep that unhelpful reminder to myself.

"I promise it's going to be okay." Hades tucks my long hair behind my ear. "*Trust* me."

I turn in his arms with a scowl. Blue eyes. That's what I stare into. Not silver. Mortal eyes. What if I lose him again? "That's not something you can promise—"

"I do not appreciate being summoned, Hades." Anubis suddenly appears before us. No warning. Just there. "You know this well."

"Damn his timing," Hades mutters as we both turn to face the jackal-headed Egyptian god.

Power rolls off Anubis the same way waves roll onto the shore. Inevitable and constant. And intimidating. He's dressed in a simple linen, kilt-like schenti, his bare, onyx-skinned chest ridged with muscles. Inky black fur covers his head.

Despite his irritation at being summoned, Anubis' posture is more

curious than angry. His tall, pointed ears face forward, and his brown-and-gold eyes aren't narrowed. He's still unsettlingly direct. But not angry.

His sweeping glance takes in Persephone and Cerberus.

"I apologize, old friend," Hades says. But the ease in his voice is canceled out by the way his grip on my hip bites into my flesh.

I shoot him a questioning glance. Where is this tension coming from?

"*Are* we still friends?" Anubis asks, flicking a pointed look in my direction.

"Lyra knows that you were only doing your job when you judged me," Hades assures him.

"Does she?" Ber mutters.

Do I? I crank my head to give Hades my own pointed look. How can he say that? Maybe because Anubis was his mentor and, for a long time, one of the few beings who would go anywhere near him. He feels like he owes this god.

I, on the other hand, don't owe Anubis shit.

A burn of anger creeps up my throat, trying to drag words out of my mouth along with it. It takes a hell of a lot of effort to swallow them down.

Doing his fucking job? After I had already showed Anubis and all the gods of death the truth about the Titans, he still punished Hades for merely trying to protect me until I could escape Tartarus. Those gods of death were the catalysts, the instigators, not Hades. They tried to kill me, rather than risk me letting the Titans out.

The Titans who are innocent, who aren't the evil the world has been deceived into believing they are.

Hades takes my hand in his as we both face the Egyptian god. "Anubis," he says. "We need you to run the trials and be the ultimate judge to select a new god of the dead for our pantheon."

The screams that hit my mind this time steal my vision and hearing. The gut-punch impact knocks the breath out of my lungs.

"Lyra? Lyra?"

Sensation comes back slowly, and I find myself crouched down, hands over my ears as Hades' face swims into view. Behind him, Persephone isn't crouched or freaking out. Why doesn't this affect her the way it does me?

"What happened?" His mouth forms the words, but they're muffled, like he's talking to me through a thick pane of glass.

My own voice echoes inside my head when I speak, bouncing off the

screams. "Souls. Too many—"

I drop my head, unable to hold it up under the onslaught, when a familiar pair of work boots shows up in my periphery.

Charon.

I'd recognize those boots and his wide-legged stance—a habit from sailing his pirate ship full of dead souls—anywhere.

"We're overrun down there." I vaguely hear him over the screaming in my head.

"No shit," Hades snaps. "We're coming now."

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2

MAYBE THE STARS GOT IT ALL WRONG

LYRA

Is this what being a rat trapped in a maze with only poison at the end feels like? I *just* came from there. I whittled down those waiting for punishment. I don't want to go back. Not yet.

Anubis' voice snaps over my head. "Explain."

My fault. I'm not going fast enough, and the dead are stacking up. That's what's happening.

"Not now," Hades says as, with his hands on my shoulders, he helps me upright. "Lyra—"

"I know." I snap my fingers to change our clothes into something more formal, for appearances.

Hades is in a dark suit that shows off the lean strength of his body, which incidentally also highlights the way he prowls when he moves. While I love him in jeans and tees, honestly, this look is drool-worthy. Meanwhile, I'm trussed up in a diaphanous, one-shouldered, ancient-Greek-inspired gown, also in slinky black. And, of course, we wear our matching dark crowns made of black gold, obsidian chips, and smoke. That was my touch. These outfits are basically the same, if a little darker, as those we wore the night Hades was crowned King of the Gods.

Now the gods have no king. The throne is empty.

That's a problem for Olympus. We have bigger issues down here in the Underworld.

Even the dead talk. To keep the gossip in check, we need a little PR razzle-dazzle—hence the intimidating clothes. Helps keep the souls in line

while we figure things out.

Or it *was* helping.

I guess I need to get them back under control. Now.

"Ready?" he asks.

Not even a little bit. "Do you still have the ring?"

The Ring of Gyges—it can render the wearer invisible. I had Boone pilfer it from the archives, where it was returned after the Crucible Games. A protection for Hades while he's mortal.

He pulls it out of his pocket to show me, then slips it back before he looks over my head at Anubis. "Please stay. We won't be long."

Don't be so sure about that. I don't bother to say it, instead teleporting us down to where Charon's ships drop off the new arrivals.

When we rematerialize, we're standing at the top of the dais in the throne room of the smaller "processing palace"—there's no other way to describe it—that sits just inside the gates to the Underworld.

The cacophony of screams and cries hits me first. Like a physical blow.

"The queen." The whispers start from the souls closest to the bottom of the three flights of stairs that lead up to the dais where we stand. "The queen is here."

More whispers chase their way toward the front of the room. Then the yells of the dead, already ringing loud, start to turn on us. *At* us.

"Hades," someone yells. "Isn't he mortal now? Why bother to come?"

Resentment quickly follows.

"About time."

"We've been waiting so long."

"You'd think they'd be able to keep their hands off each other long enough for her to do her job."

Cerberus chooses that moment to appear beside us.

The hellhound stands fifteen feet tall at the middle head, his smooth, shiny coat showing off his every muscle. If that isn't intimidating enough, the black, spiked armor around the dog's necks and shoulders, strapped under his chest and across the snout and crown of each head, should be.

All three heads give a single, sharp bark.

The grumbles of the dead cut off abruptly, leaving the massive, multi-storied, columned rotunda almost echoey with quiet.

I should have been the one to silence them.

This space is also about perception. Intimidation. All of it is cut out of

a pale-blue marble shot through with gold. It is crowned by an impressive beveled-glass ceiling showing the Underworld's "starry sky" of glowing blue constellations overhead. Hanging from the center, directly over the thrones, is a golden chandelier designed to look like falling stars, casting an eerie, ethereal glow over the room.

Persephone appears a moment later, taking her seat.

Her throne is awash in flowers that fill the room with a heavenly, delicate scent that has no business perfuming a place like this. The sharp smell of sulfur coming from Cerberus is a better fit. Not that I'd ask Seph to get rid of the blooms. The rainbow array of blossoms flows over the comfy mauve-cushioned, high-backed chair and down the floor, almost to where her line starts.

She shoots me a sunny smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes as Hades settles me into my own throne. It's your basic blue-velvet-cushioned, gold-scrolled monstrosity of magnificence. Uncomfortable as sand up my crack.

I perch on the end, stiff-backed, and give Cerberus a pat as he lies down beside me like a sphynx.

Hades is supposed to go to his place in the shadows, but he doesn't. Instead he bends over, hands on the arms of my throne so we're eye to eye as he cages me in. "If anyone thinks we're slacking off because I can't keep my hands off of you, my star…" His gaze drops to my lips. "Then they'd be dead right."

Despite putting on this show for the horde of souls, he allows me to see the very real need in his eyes. The heat. The tension of it swirls and eddies through the room. I feel it lick at me, surround me, even when he's not touching me.

Even in the middle of this mess.

And the tension coiled tight in my belly…eases.

Hades cocks his head, and I know with that tiny move what he's daring me to do. A power play.

Act like the Queen of the Underworld that I am, even if I don't feel it yet.

What if it doesn't work? What if Cerberus' bark proves more powerful than my own demands? What if—

Good grief, Lyra Keres, I snap at myself. *When did you start giving in to fear?*

I raise my voice without taking my gaze from Hades. "Any souls who

expressed displeasure—or even *thought* it—may go to the back of the line." With a bored wave of my hand and a whisper of my will, all those souls disappear to the back of the line, and an uneasy murmuring rises through the ranks.

"Nicely done," Hades mouths for me alone.

I'm just trying not to show my relief that it worked.

As he goes to straighten, I wrap a hand around his neck and bring his mouth to mine. The kiss is for show, but *every* kiss with him is real, true. I'm breathing hard by the time I let him go.

Hades' smile is pure, sparking devilry. Only *I* can see the pride.

He draws a line down one of his arms and awakens the tattoos I gave back to him—added protection while he's mortal. A blue owl, a green panther, a purple fox, a red tarantula, and a tiny silver butterfly that never left Hades to begin with.

Even through the sleeve of his fancy coat, they come to glittering life.

"Keep them in line," he orders.

All five animals leap from his arm into the air, becoming real and larger than their Overworld counterparts. The butterfly hovers between us, but the other four prowl down the stairs to herd the dead, pushing the crowds into some semblance of order.

Only then does Hades take his place in the shadows just behind my throne, leaving me free to look over the line of souls in front of me. I seriously wish this place didn't have so many windows—big ones—revealing exactly how many sentences I have to get through. My line winds out of the throne room, out of the castle, past the gates, and down to the River Styx.

This is what I blame the gods of death for. This is *their* fault. The dead are waiting for their punishments, and I can't keep up. That's where the fear is coming from. Not from the numbers or the chance of humiliating myself—both of which are high. It's more insidious than that.

It's doubt.

Because I'm not sure that Hades' power was ever supposed to be mine.

Charon suddenly appears at the bottom of the stairs, facing us.

The ferryman of the dead is total Jack Sparrow pirate material. It's not just the tousled sandy-brown hair and the blue-green eyes that look like the ocean after a storm—it's also the cleft in his chin and the devil-may-care grin. It could also be the swashbuckler way he usually stands, his feet

planted wide and arms crossed.

Right now, though, he stands formally at attention. Charon bows. "My queens, I present to you souls already evaluated by the three Infernal Judges, ready for your reward or punishment, as you see fit."

Then, with a click of his heels, he disappears. I see him reappear on the docks down the mountain a second later.

I glance toward Persephone, seated to my left. A line with seven souls. Only seven. Smiling. The souls stacked in front of me don't smile. They glare. They groan. They mutter. They can go jump in a lake of fire—

No. I close my eyes and inhale. *That's not how a queen thinks.* Emotions don't lead to fair punishments.

Facing forward, I try not to count the people in line. I tweak the skirt of my gown. The train flows down the stairs like Persephone's flowers.

An outfit meant for a dark queen.

Or a fraud.

It's all about perception.

I can do this, damn it. I won't let him down.

"Come," I command.

My mistake is immediately obvious when, with a cry, all the souls surge forward, some even daring to climb the stairs. I grab my half of Hades' bident that Anubis copy/pasted—one for me and one for Persephone—and bang it on the ground. The souls stop immediately.

But it takes Hades stepping forward, out of the shadows, before they back down.

Tartarus be damned, that could've been bad. The control we hold in here is as fine as silk thread, and just as easy to snap.

Taking a deep breath, I let it out like a disappointed sigh. Then I sit forward, pinning them all with a look I learned from Hades—a cat suddenly more interested in the mouse than it was a second ago. "Do you have somewhere you want to go in a hurry?"

After all, these are all the souls bound for the worst punishments.

It goes dead quiet once more.

Good.

I point a finger at a single soul. "You first."