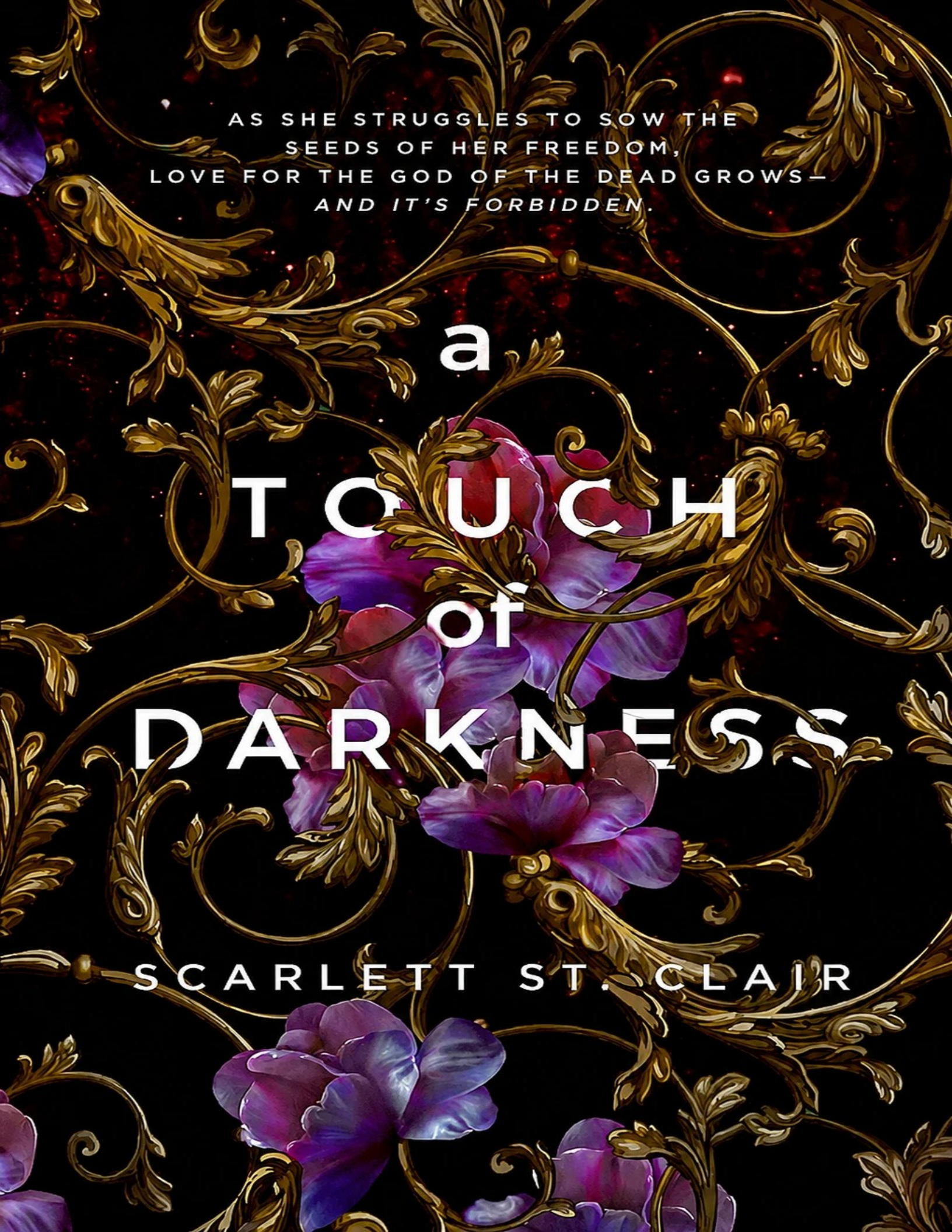
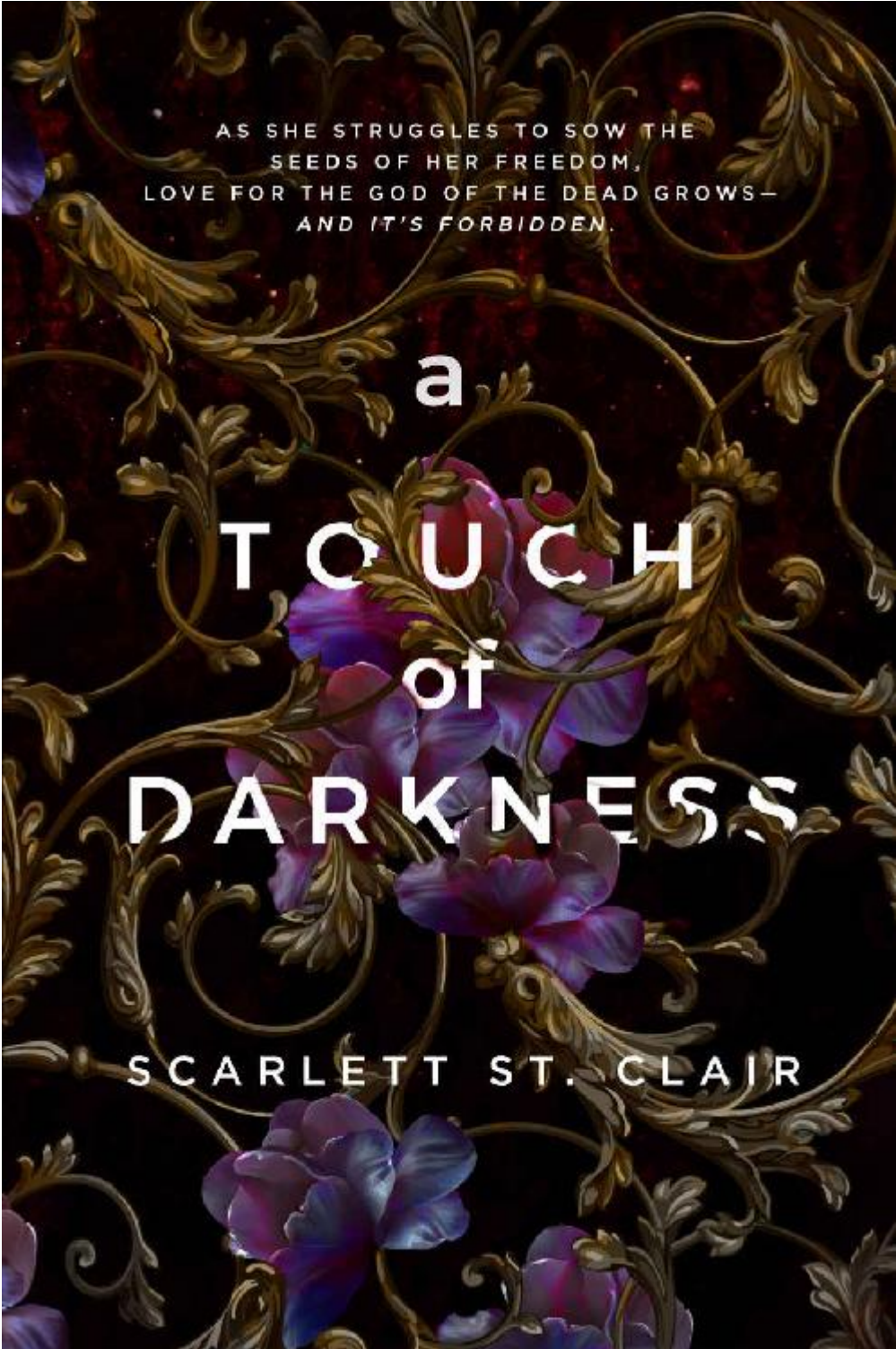




AS SHE STRUGGLES TO SOW THE
SEEDS OF HER FREEDOM,
LOVE FOR THE GOD OF THE DEAD GROWS—
AND IT'S FORBIDDEN.

a
TOUCH
of
DARKNESS

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

Ashley Elizabeth Steele
&
Molly Kathleen McCool
Thank you for loving me.
best friends forever.

MORE BOOKS BY
SCARLETT ST. CLAIR



COMING SOON



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CHAPTER I – THE NARCISSUS

Persephone sat in the sunlight.

She'd chosen her usual spot at The Coffee House, an outdoor table in view of the crowded pedestrian street. The walkway was lined with shade trees and box gardens teeming with purple aster and pink and white sweet alyssum. A light breeze carried the scent of spring and the honeyed air was mild.

It was a perfect day, and though Persephone had come here to study, she was finding it hard to concentrate because her eyes were drawn to a bunch of narcissus flowers that sat in a slender vase on her table. The bouquet was sparse—only two or three slender stems—and their petals were crisp, brown, and curling like the fingers of a corpse.

The narcissus were the flower and symbol of Hades, the God of the Dead. They did not often decorate tables, but coffins. Their presence at The Coffee House probably meant that the owner was in mourning which was really the only time mortals worshipped the God of the Underworld.

Persephone always wondered how Hades felt about that, or if he cared. He was more than just the King of the Underworld, after all. Being the wealthiest of all the gods, he'd earned the title of Rich One, and had invested his money into some of the most popular clubs in New Greece—and these

weren't just any clubs. These were elite gambling dens. It was said Hades liked a good bet, and rarely accepted a wager other than the human soul.

Persephone had heard a lot about the clubs from other people while at University, and her mother, who often expressed her dislike for Hades, had also spoken out against his businesses.

“He has taken on the role of puppet master,” Demeter had chided. *“Deciding fates as if he were one of the Moirai himself. He should be ashamed.”*

Persephone had never been to one of Hades' clubs, but she had to admit, she was curious—about the people who attended and the god who owned it. What possessed people to bargain their soul? Was it a desire for money or love or wealth?

And what did it say about Hades? That he had all the wealth in the world and only sought to add to his domain rather than help people?

But those were questions for another time.

Persephone had work to do.

She dropped her gaze from the narcissus and focused on her laptop. It was Thursday, and she had left school an hour ago. She'd ordered her usual vanilla latte and needed to finish her research paper so she could concentrate on her internship at *New Athens News*, the leading news source in New Athens. She started tomorrow, and if things went well, she'd have a job after she graduated in six months.

She was eager to prove herself.

Her internship was located on the sixtieth floor of the Acropolis, a landmark in New Athens as it was the tallest building in the city at one-hundred-and-one floors. One of the first things Persephone had done when she'd moved here was take an elevator to the top floor observatory where she could see the city in its entirety and it had been everything she'd imagined—beautiful and vast and thrilling. Four years later, it was hard to believe she would be going there on an almost daily basis for work.

Persephone's phone buzzed on the table, drawing her attention. She found a message from her best friend, Lexa Sideris. Lexa was her first friend when

she'd moved to New Athens. She'd turned around to face Persephone in class and asked her if she wanted to pair up for their lab. They'd been inseparable ever since. Persephone was drawn to Lexa's edginess—she had tattoos, hair as black as night, and a love of the Goddess of Witchcraft, Hecate.

Where are you?

Persephone responded, *The Coffee House.*

Why? We need to celebrate!

Persephone smiled. Ever since she'd told Lexa about landing her internship two weeks ago, she'd been hounding her to go out for drinks. Persephone had managed to postpone the outing, but she was quickly running out of excuses and Lexa knew it.

I am celebrating. Persephone texted. *With a vanilla latte.*

Not with coffee. Alcohol. Shots. You + Me. Tonight.

Before Persephone could respond, a waitress approached holding a tray and her steaming latte. Persephone came here often enough to know the girl was as new as the narcissus. Her hair was in two braids, and her eyes were dark and laced with heavy lashes.

The girl smiled and asked, "Vanilla latte?"

"Yes," Persephone said.

The waitress set Persephone's mug down, and then tucked her tray under her arm.

"Need anything else?"

Persephone met the girl's gaze. "Do you think Lord Hades has a sense of humor?"

It wasn't a serious question—and Persephone thought it funnier than anything, but the girl's eyes widened, and she responded, "I don't know what you mean."

The waitress was clearly uncomfortable, probably at hearing Hades' name. Most tried to avoid saying it, or they called him *Aidoneus* to avoid drawing his attention, but Persephone wasn't afraid. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that she was a goddess.

“I think he must have a sense of humor,” she explained. “The narcissus are a symbol of spring and rebirth,” her fingers hovered over the wilted petals. If anything, the flower should be her symbol. “Why else would he claim it as his?”

Persephone stared back at the girl, and her cheeks flushed. She stammered, “L-let me know if you need anything.”

She bowed her head and went back to work.

Persephone snapped a picture of her latte and sent it to Lexa before taking a sip.

She put her earbuds in and consulted her planner. Persephone liked organization, but more than that, she liked being busy. Her weeks were packed—school on Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday, and up to three hours each day at her internship. The more she did, the more excuses she had for not returning home to see her mother in Olympia.

Next week, she had a history test and a paper due for the same class. She wasn’t worried, though. History was one of her favorite subjects. They were discussing The Great Descent, the name given to the day the gods came to Earth and The Great War, the terrible and bloody battles that followed.

It wasn’t long before Persephone became lost in her research and writing. She was reading a scholar who claimed Hades’ decision to resurrect Zeus and Athena’s heroes had been the deciding factor in the final battle, when well-manicured hands slammed Persephone’s laptop shut. She jumped and looked into a pair of striking blue eyes, set in an oval face framed with thick, black hair.

“Guess. What.”

Persephone took out her headphones. “Lexa, what are you doing here?”

“I was walking home from class and thought I’d stop by and tell you the good news!”

She bounced back and forth on the balls of her feet, her blue-black hair bobbing with her.

“What news?” Persephone asked.

“I got us into Nevernight!” Lexa could barely keep a handle on her voice, and at the mention of the famous club, several people turned to stare.

“Shh!” Persephone commanded. “Do you want to get us killed?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Lexa rolled her eyes, but she lowered her voice. Nevernight was impossible to get into. There was a three-month waiting list, and Persephone knew why.

Nevernight was owned by Hades.

Most businesses owned by the gods were insanely popular. Dionysus’ line of wines sold out in seconds and were rumored to contain ambrosia. It was also exceedingly common for mortals to find themselves in the Underworld after drinking too much of the nectar.

Aphrodite’s couture gowns were so coveted, a girl killed for one just a few months ago. There was a trial and everything.

Nevernight was no different.

“How did you manage to get on the list?” Persephone asked.

“A guy at my internship can’t make it. He’s been on the waiting list for two years. Can you believe how lucky? You. Me. Nevernight. Tonight!”

“I can’t go.”

Lexa’s shoulders fell. “Come on, Persephone. I got us into Nevernight! I don’t want to go alone!”

“Take Iris.”

“I want to take *you*. We’re supposed to be celebrating. Besides, this is part of your college experience!”

Persephone was pretty sure Demeter would disagree. She had promised her mother several things before coming to New Athens to attend university, among them that she would stay away from the gods.

Granted, she hadn’t kept many of her promises. She’d changed her major halfway through her first semester from botany to journalism. She would never forget her mother’s tight smile or the way she’d said, ‘*how nice*’ between gritted teeth when she’d discovered the truth. Persephone had won the battle, but Demeter declared war. The day after, everywhere she went, one of Demeter’s nymphs went, too.

Still, majoring in botany was not as important as staying away from the gods because the gods didn't know Persephone existed.

Well, they knew Demeter had a daughter, but she had never been introduced at court in Olympia. They definitely didn't know she was masquerading as a mortal. Persephone wasn't sure how the gods would react to discovering her, but she knew how the entire world would react, and it wouldn't be good. They would have a new god to learn and to scrutinize. She wouldn't be able to exist—she would lose the freedom she had just gained, and she wasn't interested in that.

Persephone didn't often agree with her mother, but even she knew it was best she led a normal, mortal life. She wasn't like other gods and goddesses.

"I really need to study and write a paper, Lexa. Plus, I start my internship tomorrow."

She was determined to make a good impression and showing up hungover or sleep-deprived on her first day wasn't the way to go about it.

"You've studied!"

Lexa gestured to her laptop and stack of notes on the table. But what Persephone had really been doing is studying a flower and thinking about the God of the Dead.

"And we both know you've already written that paper, you're just a perfectionist."

Persephone's cheeks flushed. So what if it was true? School was the first and only thing she was good at.

"Please, Persephone! We'll leave early so you can get some rest."

"What am I going to do at Nevernight, Lex?"

"Dance! Drink! Kiss! Maybe gamble a little? I don't know, but isn't that the fun of it?"

Persephone blushed again and looked away. The narcissus seemed to glare back at her, reflecting all her failures. She had never kissed a boy. She had never been around men until she'd come to college, and even then she kept her distance, mostly out of fear her mother would materialize and smite them.

That was not an exaggeration. Demeter had always warned her against men.

"You are two things to gods," she'd told Persephone when she was very young. "A power-play or a play-thing."

"Surely you are wrong, Mother. Gods love. There are several who are married."

Demeter had laughed. *"Gods marry for power, my flower."*

And, as Persephone had gotten older, she had come to realize that what her mother said was true. None of the gods who were married actually loved each other, and instead spent most of their time cheating and then seeking revenge for the betrayal.

That meant Persephone was going to die a virgin, because Demeter had also made it clear that mortals weren't an option, either.

"They...age," she'd said in disgust.

Persephone had decided not to argue with her mother about how age didn't matter if it was true love, because she'd come to realize that her mother didn't believe in love.

Well, not romantic love at least.

"I...don't have anything to wear," Persephone tried weakly.

"You can borrow anything from my closet. I'll even do your hair and makeup. Please, Persephone."

She pursed her lips, considering.

She would have to sneak away from the nymphs her mother had planted at their apartment and strengthen her glamour, which would cause problems. Demeter would want to know why Persephone was suddenly in need of more magic. Then again, she could blame the extra coverage on her internship.

Without glamour, Persephone's anonymity would be ruined, as there was one obvious characteristic that identified all gods as Divine, and that was their horns. Persephone's were white and spiraled straight into the air like those of a greater kudu, and while her usual glamour had never failed around mortals, she wasn't so sure it worked for a god as powerful as Hades.

"I don't really want to meet Hades," she said at last.

Those words tasted bitter on her tongue because they were really a lie. A truer statement would be she was curious about him and his world. She found it interesting that he was so elusive and the bets he made with mortals completely appalling. The God of the Dead represented everything she wasn't—something dark and tempting.

Tempting because he was a mystery and mysteries were adventures, and that's what Persephone really craved. Maybe it was the journalist in her, but she'd like to ask him some questions.

"Hades won't be there," Lexa said. "Gods never run their own businesses!"

That was true, and probably truer of Hades. It was well-known that he preferred the dark gloom of the Underworld.

Lexa stared at Persephone for a long moment and then leaned across the table again.

"Is this about your mom?" She asked in a low voice.

Persephone stared at her friend for a moment, surprised. She didn't talk about her mom. She figured the quieter she was about her, the fewer questions she'd have to answer, and the less lies she'd have to tell.

"How did you know?" It was the only thing Persephone could think to say.

Lexa shrugged. "Well, you never talk about her and she came by the apartment a couple weeks ago while you were in class."

"What?" Persephone's mouth dropped open. This was the first time she had heard of this visit. "What did she say? Why didn't you tell me?"

Lexa put up her hands. "Okay, first, your mom is scary. I mean, she's gorgeous just like you, but," Lexa paused to shiver. "Cold. Second, she told me not to tell you."

"And you listened to her?"

"Well, yeah. I sorta thought she would tell you. She said she hoped to surprise you, but since you weren't home, she'd just call."

Persephone rolled her eyes. Demeter had never called her. That was likely because she'd been there looking for something.

"Did she come into our apartment?"

"She asked to see your room."

“Dammit.” Persephone was going to have to check the mirrors. It was possible her mother had left an enchantment so she could check up on the goddess.

“Anyway, I got the sense that she’s...over-protective.”

That was the understatement of the year. Demeter was over-protective to the point that Persephone had virtually no contact with the outside world for eighteen years of her life.

“Yeah, she’s a bitch.”

Lexa raised her brows, looking amused.

“Your words not mine.” She paused and then hedged. “Wanna talk about it?”

“No,” she said. Talking about it wouldn’t make Persephone feel any better—but a trip to Nevernight might. She smiled. “But I’ll go with you tonight.”

She’d probably regret the decision tomorrow, especially if her mom found out, but right now she was feeling rebellious, and what better way to rebel than going to the club of her mother’s least favorite god?

“Really?” Lexa clapped her hands. “Oh, my gods, we’ll have so much fun, Persephone!” Lexa jumped to her feet. “We have to start getting ready!”

“It’s only three.”

“Uh, yeah.” Lexa pulled at her long, dark hair. “This hair is gross. Plus, it takes forever to style and now I have to do your hair and makeup, too. We need to start now!”

Persephone didn’t make any move to leave.

“I’ll catch up with you in a moment,” she said. “Promise.”

Lexa smiled. “Thank you, Persephone. This will be great. You’ll see.”

Lexa hugged her before practically dancing down the street.

Persephone smiled, watching Lexa go. At that moment, the waitress from earlier returned and reached to take Persephone’s mug away. The goddess’s hand shot out, holding the girl’s wrist tight.

“If you report to my mother anything but what I tell you, I will kill you.”

It was the same girl from earlier with her cute braids and dark eyes, but beneath the young college girl glamour, a nymph’s features rang true—small

nose, vibrant eyes and angled features. Persephone had noticed earlier when the girl had delivered her drink but hadn't felt the need to call her out. She was just doing what Demeter told her to do—spying. But after the conversation with Lexa, Persephone wasn't taking any chances.

The girl cleared her throat and didn't meet Persephone's gaze. "If your mother discovers I lied, she'll kill me."

"Who do you fear most?" Persephone had learned long ago that words were her most powerful weapon.

She tightened her hold on the girl's wrist before releasing her. The nymph cleaned up quickly and ran away. Persephone had to admit, she felt bad for the threat, but she hated being followed and she hated being watched. The nymphs were like Demeter's claws, and they were lodged in Persephone's skin.

Her eyes fell to the dying narcissus and she caressed the wilted petals with the tips of her fingers. At Demeter's touch, it would have swelled with life, but at her touch, it curled and crumbled.

Persephone might be the Daughter of Demeter and the Goddess of Spring, but she couldn't grow a damn thing.



CHAPTER II – NEVERNIGHT

Nevernight was a slender obsidian pyramid with no windows. It was taller than the bright buildings around it, and from a distance, looked like a disruption in the fabric of the city. The tower could be seen from anywhere in New Athens. Demeter believed and often said that the only reason Hades built the tower so tall was to remind mortals of their finite life.

Persephone was beginning to grow anxious the longer she stood in the shadow of Hades' club. Lexa had gone to talk to a couple of girls she recognized from school up the line, leaving her to hold their place alone. She was out of her element, surrounded by strangers, preparing to enter another god's territory, and wearing a sexy yet revealing dress. She found herself folding and unfolding her arms, unable to decide if she wanted to hide the low cut of the outfit or embrace it. She'd borrowed the pink sparkly number from Lexa who was far less shapely. Her hair fell in loose curls around her face, and Lexa had applied minimal makeup to show off Persephone's natural beauty.

If her mother saw her now, she'd send her right back to the greenhouse, or as Persephone had come to refer to it, the glass prison.

That thought sent her stomach into a spiral. She looked around, wondering if Demeter's spies were about. Had her threat to the waitress at The Coffee House been enough to keep the girl silent about her plans with