

# Chapter 1

Hermes, the messenger of the gods and, at the moment, Demeter's personal servant, took off like a shot, flying toward the nearest mountain range. He wanted to start the quest; he wanted to find Persephone, and he wanted, above all else, not to be killed by Demeter. He could only accomplish that by moving, by putting as much space between himself and the place where Persephone wasn't as possible, and finding her.

"Why would she be in these caves?" Hermes moved through the caves like a flash of lightning. He was pouring all of his godly messenger abilities into moving as fast as he could.

Panic drove him.

Cold, hard panic about what Demeter might do to him. After all, this was his failure. He'd been so sure that Persephone was going to be in the desert. So sure. Two different sources confirmed it. She'd never been that wily before; she'd never even really tried to escape from his watchful eye. A thousand years he'd been observing her, and in all that time all he'd done was see a lot of sex and small, cute animals frolicking.

Now? Now—now he was about to lose his life because he underestimated her.

"Maybe she thinks that's what we'll think." Hermes stopped in a small cave in the center of the mountains. A pool in the middle of the chamber reflected the light of his godly person, and he could see small, blind cavefish swimming around. "Maybe she's actually here, hoping that we'll overlook them because they're so close to where she isn't. Persephone!"

No answer.

"Persephone!" Hermes' voice echoed around and around and around the cave complex, but still no answer.

"I'll find you!"

He took off again. Within moments he'd finished the caves and burst back out into the light of day, frantically looking around. There was a lot of the world that Helios couldn't see, that he couldn't ever see. And Hermes had to search all of it; he had to cast his keen eye to every inch of the world because if he didn't find her, he was dead.

"I don't care how long it takes!" Hermes spotted another series of caves, far to the East, and he was off.

"Persephone!" No one was in there but a few hunting cats and a lost nomad.

"Persephone!" He searched the bottom of a deep freshwater lake and found only confused fish.

"Persephone!" He searched the top of the tallest mountain he could find, where a small crevice big enough for a worm might hide the goddess of spring. Nothing.

An afternoon and an entire world later, Hermes crashed into the ocean and lay there, staring up at the sky. The cool, salty waves lapped at his body and, even though they were soothing, they reminded him of what Demeter could do. There was no salve that could fix her burns without her permission; there was no way he could stand against her power. He'd nearly died and the only thing that saved him was Demeter's own mercy.

Hermes let his mind wander through everything that he'd seen that afternoon, trying to see where he'd gone wrong. Had he not looked in enough caves? Had he avoided too many canyons? Had he not gone to the bottom of every lake?

The ocean.

Hermes opened his eyes and turned his head and looked at the endless waves around him.

She could be anywhere in there. She was a goddess, so she didn't need to breathe. All she had to do was hide from Helios, so her best bet would be to go down, down, down into the murky waters until she found the places where the light no longer reached. Hermes did not spend a lot of time down there, but he knew that Poseidon was constantly boasting about how deep and wide his oceans were, about how big his realm was compared to anyone else's, and how lucky he was to be able to command so much territory and respect, with his reach even extending onto the land itself where people asked for calm seas and light storms.

"I need Poseidon's help."

He shook his head. Would the old sea god help? There was more snow falling with each minute, and as Hermes had been flying across lands that were usually burnt with the heat of summer, he'd seen blankets of the stuff starting to form, great white sheets covering the Earth and killing the crops.

Hermes took a deep breath, realized how silly that was, and then looked down into the ocean. Finding Poseidon was the only way. He could not possibly search the entire ocean himself, and certainly not in the time that Demeter wanted him to.

Hermes, messenger of the gods and the fastest immortal in all the heavens and earth, dove beneath the waves in search of the elusive god of the sea.

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Deep in the darkness of Tartarus, the blood of spring sprouted and grew. A few simple drops of blood became a flower with iron roots, digging deep into a chain forged by a god and weakening it ever so slightly.

In his tortured slumber, a half-sleep where he didn't have to think about the pain and despair of his bindings, Iapetus felt something. It was subtle, almost not there at all. With a body as large as his and in as much constant pain, it was hard for any single sensation to get through. Even when Persephone had been in the room, he'd been only dimly aware of her and the light of Hecate's torch.

Being suspended, forever, by chains and unable to even move your head had a way of making you go insane.

Iapetus cracked open one of his big eyes and looked. There, in the darkness, glowed a single point of light. The life force of spring glittered on the chain that attached to his waist. Iapetus shifted his hips and felt that tiny sensation again: the chain moved.

Just a little.

Less than a hair's breadth, but it was more movement than the chain had made in millennia. Iapetus closed his eyes and tried to wiggle his hips again.

Again, the chain moved.

A smile, the first smile to grace Iapetus' lips since the failure of the titanomachy, spread across his face. That tiny weakness in the otherwise invincible chain was not much but, maybe, it was enough.

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"Where are we going?" Corella had to scream to be heard over the sound of wind rushing around her, and then she had to scream again for the sheer joy of the moment.

She was astride Athena's horse, so far above the world that there was nothing but a patchwork of fields and the occasional cloud to see. She couldn't imagine how they would find

Persephone like this and at the same time, she didn't care. This was amazing. Wind whipped her hair into a frenzy. The chill air felt good and clean in her lungs, and she'd never felt the thrill of flight quite so keenly as she did now.

Often, Corella would fly with Persephone on a spring zephyr. It was nothing like this: it was quick and painless and over within moments, depositing them wherever the goddess wanted to go. Persephone was not as fast as Hermes but she was close. This was something else entirely.

This was the thrill of flight, the joy of the air. This was the visceral feeling of being miles and miles above the ground, and even though it was probably slower than any other godly form of transportation, Corella wouldn't give it up for anything in the world.

In addition to all that, the flight was a good opportunity for her to wrap her arms tightly around Athena's waist and press her cheek against the goddess' shoulder.

Of all the things she should be thinking about, of all the problems that Corella should be juggling right now, her strange feelings for Athena should be very, very low on the list. Corella should be thinking of ways to improve her lie, she should be practicing ways to say the necessary lies without giving away the truth, and she should be trying to save her life.

Instead, she was cuddling against Athena's shoulder and reveling in the feelings of the goddess' skin against her own. She was breathing in the scent of Athena's hair and loving it. Smoky and spicy, muddled up with the smell of sand and flowers, whatever perfume the goddess put on was intoxicating. Corella loved it, and she hated that she was distracted by it.

"We're going to see the one person who can tell us where Persephone is!" Athena turned back and her face was fierce. There was determination there, a need to accomplish the goal and to keep the world safe. Was there something else? Corella searched and searched for tenderness in Athena's gaze, but she didn't know if she found it.

"Who's that?" Corella dreaded the answer, mostly because she didn't know who it could be.

Zeus? He could destroy the two of them with a thought if he knew something was up. Everyone was hoping that he wouldn't find out the truth until the wedding didn't happen that afternoon.

Coeus? Corella had heard Hermes muttering about the titan of knowledge before he zipped off on his errands, so it was possible that Athena was going to interrogate him more intently.

Who else?

"Hecate."

Athena's voice was firm and Corella's stomach did a flip and then a flop. Hecate was indeed the one person who might know where Persephone was. She quite possibly knew everything about the entire plan. Corella closed her eyes and hoped that the goddess of sorcery wouldn't give up the whole game. In truth, Corella wondered how Persephone thought she could get away with any of this. There were too many powerful people arrayed against her, too many interests that ran counter to her own.

Could Persephone really hide from every eye in Olympus, including the ones that saw into the future itself?

"You're worried." Athena glanced back, just enough to look into Corella's eyes, before returning to vigilance about where they were going. The horse seemed to know the way, but Athena was clearly not the kind of goddess who left anything to chance.

"I'm worried I might fall off." Corella lifted her head from Athena's shoulder and looked down.

Down, down, down, the drop to the ground would be deadly to any normal mortal. Corella had never tested the limits of her own immortality before. Would she also die from a fall like that? She wrapped her arms more tightly around Athena just in case.

"You'll be fine!" Athena laughed. Laughed. "I'll catch you if you fall."

"Really?"

"Of course. I only ride the horse for the impression it makes. All gods can fly."

"Oh."

"So, um, Corella." Athena was looking firmly ahead but under that helmet of hers, the nymph could see a blush spreading across her cheeks. "About that kiss."

"I had to save you. Who knows what Demeter did with those blows?"

"Yes. Of course, yes." Athena's blush deepened.

Corella pondered the intelligence of saying what was on the tip of her tongue. "I felt it, too, Athena." Corella squeezed the goddess of battle, just once, to reassure her.

"What? No. I mean, you did? Not that there was anything to feel. Nothing."

"It's all right." Corella laughed softly, and suddenly felt better about this line of conversation. "It was nice."

"Nice. Ahem. Yes. Nice. Definitely nice, like when two—friends have to tend to each other's battle wounds. I see. Of course." Athena was stumbling over her words as she tried to sort herself out of the mess.

Corella was tempted, very briefly, not to help her.

"You're cute when you're embarrassed, you know that?" Corella gave Athena a smile and her words gave the goddess permission to let out a deep sigh, a sigh she might not even have known she was holding in.

"I—I'm not embarrassed. I'm cute? No. Corella?"

"Yes, Athena?" Corella tilted her head up towards Athena so that the taller woman, the goddess of battle and strategy who was so tongue-tied over one kiss, could look down into her eyes.

"Can we— Ahem. No, we need to focus on the mission."

"Can we what, Athena?"

Corella closed her eyes and pursed her lips and hoped Athena took the hint. As much as Corella desperately wanted to kiss her, she knew this game. Athena was strong and powerful and didn't want to admit that, when it came to tender moments like this, she had no idea what she was doing. To initiate a kiss would be to take away Athena's power and would only serve to make her jealous.

Athena's whispered response was so quiet that neither of them heard the word she said. She coughed and spoke up again. "Kiss? Can we kiss?"

"Mmm, do you want to?" Corella ran her fingers through the goddess of battle's hair and she shifted closer so that they were touching as much as they could. Athena's armor was in the way, the cold metal getting between them even as the oiled leather lent a musky scent to their moment.

"I—"

"I'm right here, Athena." Corella cracked her eyes open and gave Athena a friendly smile. "There will never be a better time."

"Won't Helios see us?"

"Ha. What doesn't he see?" Corella couldn't take the aching need, the driving anticipation, any longer. She opened her eyes and she laughed. She kept it light and full of mirth, making sure

there was no mockery in her tone. "I'm serious. If you worry about what Helios might or might not see you doing, well, you'd never do anything."

"I don't. Ahem. I don't worry when he sees me take the head of my enemy in battle." Athena made a definitive chopping motion with her hand. "I'm proud that he knows about that."

"Well, be proud that he knows about this." Corella shifted herself in the saddle and wrapped both her arms around Athena's waist again. "Helios is very accommodating when it comes to ideas about sex, you know?"

"Isn't that worse?"

"How?"

"I mean, what if he sees us and he—you know?"

Corella drew in a deep breath and let it out as a long sigh. "If that's what you're worried about, it's a wonder you ever get intimate with anyone!"

Athena stared at Corella, not blinking. Her cheeks could not get any pinker than they were right at that moment.

"Wait. You've—never?"

Athena shook her head.

"Not even once?"

Athena shook her head even more emphatically.

"That—explains a lot, actually. Listen. Fuck Helios. Not, like, literally, even though it's pretty fun, I mean metaphorically. Fuck him. He knows so many secrets that it's insane. What are you going to worry about next? Hecate can see your future; maybe she's seeing you naked and frolicking right now. Coeus can see your past, so he already has the gist of this conversation. Zeus— I don't know a damn thing about what he knows, but it seems like nothing and everything all at once. It will drive you mad if you worry about any of it."

"I don't— How do you stop from worrying about it?" Athena was no longer even pretending to care where the horse was going, and he kept flying through the air as if he did it every day. He probably did.

"Now that is the question. Honestly? I don't know. I was, ahem, active before I even realized the problem. I didn't really think about it until the first time Helios gave me a wink and a nod."

"He didn't!" Athena laughed, easing more into the moment.

"He did. I mean think about it—how many people is he watching have sex right now? Probably a lot!"

"You're right. Corella?"

"Yes, Athena?"

She looked into Athena's eyes and nearly got lost in them. The goddess' gaze was like looking into the depths of infinity, beckoning Corella down and down and down into a world where she could share Athena's thoughts and fears, worries and hopes. There were occasional moments when Corella was reminded of the stark difference between a mere immortal like her and a god. Demeter nearly killing Hermes was one of those moments. This, looking into Athena's eyes and wondering if she could ever get back out again, was another.

"I don't think I can do it."

"Sure you can. It's easy. Just—let go."

Corella closed her eyes, and it was much easier to concentrate. A part of her really wanted to look into Athena's gaze again, to drown in it forever, but the rest of her knew that Athena needed her here and present and of sound mind.

"Okay—let go."

She heard Athena close her eyes, too, and waited. There was an uncomfortable shifting in the saddle and the sound of metal clicking against metal, but no kiss.

"I can't." Athena sounded frustrated.

"Oh?"

She cracked one eye open and looked at the goddess, trying to be as friendly and nonjudgmental as possible. Not only did she desperately want to help Athena explore the wonders of sex, she also knew that this might be her only chance to save her life and the lives of all Persephone's nymphs. It was a surprising amount of pressure.

"I close my eyes and see Helios winking and grinning at me."

"That's terrifying." Corella laughed, trying to break the tension of the moment. It didn't work.

"Will you do it?" Athena was nearly begging at this point.

"I don't think that's what you really want, though."

"Okay. Phew. All right, you're right. How are you so right?"

"You remember, earlier today, when you were teaching me how to use a sword?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"I was—eager but unpracticed, willing but unfamiliar. Did you take the sword from me and spar with yourself instead?"

"No. Of course not. How would you learn then?"

Corella raised an eyebrow and nodded knowingly.

"Oh. Oh. Umm, all right. How, I mean—we're on this horse." Athena shifted and looked down at the saddle, trying to figure out how the logistics of the moment were supposed to work.

"If I turn like this, and maybe if you—"

"Just do it."

"What?"

"Just—you know, strike for my non-dominant side."

"Oh."

Athena kissed Corella. It was quick and unsure, and it was the most amazing kissing Corella had ever had while flying on horseback above the Greek countryside. Athena moved in quickly, not wanting to lose her nerve, and caught Corella's lips off-kilter. She put one hand on Corella's cheek while the other was still holding the reins and, finally, the goddess of battle closed her eyes and let herself relax.

Corella gasped, not in the least because she was glad that Athena finally seized the moment. The warrior goddess' lips tasted like fire and blood, her hand was like a hot blade against Corella's cheek, and for a long moment Corella wondered if she was up for this. The Athena on the hill, the unsure goddess who'd never kissed someone before and was surprised when it happened, was gone. The warrior with death in her eyes and whose name graced the lips of a million soldiers running into certain death was suddenly there, and she was intense.

"Ah, Athena!" Corella sighed in pleasure as Athena bent her backward, stretching her back against the saddle and the horse's rump, and roughly exploring the prize that she suddenly realized was hers.

The goddess' hands, suddenly eager and needy, roamed across Corella's tender body. Her tongue slid into Corella's mouth and danced like a livid snake, claiming Corella's desire for her own. Her body was alive with tension as she pressed the nymph backward, her armored self twisting and questing and reveling in the sensation of Corella's surprised desire.

Finally, after what seemed like the longest kiss of Corella's long life, Athena drew her mouth away. There was a fierce smile on her face, and now she was straddling Corella, pinning the nymph to the saddle and riding astride her like she was a captive in their suddenly very serious game of love.

"That was amazing!" Athena laughed for the sheer joy of it, leaning down once more and stealing a quick kiss from the nymph's surprised lips.

"I told you." Corella smiled back, glad to have broken through Athena's walls.

"Where were we going again?" Athena laughed and kissed Corella's nose, then her cheek, then suckled on her neck.

"Oh, wow. You. Ahem. Hecate's?"

"Hecate's—hmmm." Athena ran her hand, strong and sure and insistent, along Corella's side. Suddenly brazen in her newfound joy, Athena took a detour and slid it up to Corella's sensitive breast. They both gasped as Athena fondled the nymph, running her thumb along a perfectly pink nipple that stood at excited attention from the treatment. "I have a better idea."

"Good!" Corella said with a laugh, wondering why she'd ever thought Athena would be a tentative lover. Now that they were committed to the course, Athena had bloomed into a savage sensuality that promised to be incredible if Corella could somehow survive it.

"Come with me!"

Athena laughed, grabbed Corella's shoulder and—

Jumped off the horse.

"Ahh!" Corella screamed, at first in terror, and then in laughter, as Athena held her and they both zoomed through the air, faster than the horse could carry them, and headed distinctly upward, toward Olympus and the godly realms.