

# The Winter of Springtide's Queen

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## Part One: The Death of Verdancy

### Chapter One

At a little past 1 am, Stephanie and Jane parted at the top of the stairs.

"You set your alarm, right?" Stephanie asked.

"Yes, did you set yours?" Jane raised one eyebrow.

They both laughed. Two weeks ago they'd almost had a disaster of their own making at the last wedding held in the large Victorian, when they'd both forgotten to set their alarms. They'd scrambled to get five hours of preparation finished in three. Jane had gone through half the reception with her blue dress mis-buttoned until the bartender pointed it out.

They said goodnight and Stephanie headed to her bedroom. She shivered as she closed the door. It had steadily turned colder over the past few weeks, and the leaves now lay in brown drifts underneath the naked trees. She wondered again why she had decided to move to such a cold place. She threw open her window and breathed the crisp air. It held the promise of snow. Tendrils of Boston ivy trailed around her window, their leaves bright orange. A leaf brushed against her arm. She shivered again.

Winter. It was just a season, right? She knew she was lying, trying to cajole herself out of this mood. It had been almost five hundred years since her last imprisonment. She shouldn't be so obsessively afraid of winter.

The tendril of ivy responded to her unspoken need and snaked itself around her wrist, a living bracelet of bright coral. She stroked the leaves with her fingertip, humming a little, and they trembled as they grew.

She leaned out the window and breathed another gulp of air. When she'd escaped, she'd vowed to never take her freedom for granted. Perhaps, lately, she'd been renegeing on that promise. "I treasure my life," she said, knowing this was no lie.

The ancient pine tree, standing guard across the garden, quivered although there was no breeze. "*Pinus strobum*," Stephanie whispered. It quaked again, and a shower of bronze needles fell to the ground. She smiled at the pungent piney scent, then gently disentangled the ivy from her wrist and closed the window.

After her shower, which she set so hot it scalded her skin, she wrapped her green robe about herself and sat at the dressing table to comb out her waist-length, wheat-blond hair.

When heat began to ripple the surface of her mirror, she thought it was

her imagination. She dropped the comb and reached out to the undulating glass. The flesh of her fingertips tingled. Almost pleasant at first, she knew the pain was waiting. After a moment her skin began to burn. Wisps of smoke rose from her fingertips.

A man's laugh filled the room, and then his voice, "If I had any doubts, you have dispelled them. It is truly you."

She snatched her hand away from the mirror. Each god had one weakness: fire was hers. Four red ovals burned like embers where her fingertips had rested on the glass. She knew who had sent such a custom-made message.

All at once a man's face replaced her reflection. The one face she had never wanted to see again in eternity.

"Persephone," Hades said, "I've found you at last."

Her mouth, as dry as his shadowy realm, opened. She could find no words.

"Five hundred years you've hidden from me," he said.

She'd forgotten the depth of his beauty. He had cut his black hair short. Her traitorous hands yearned to touch the exposed length of his neck.

He frowned, the muscles of his jaw clenching at her silence. "What have you to say, Persephone?"

"My mother didn't tell me you'd changed your hair."

He gave one short laugh. "Your mother. She thought herself so crafty."

Despite his words, Stephanie felt a momentary triumph at her mother's stratagem. Danica had commanded Helios, the god of the sun, to blind Hades whenever she traveled from Olympos to Earth to visit her daughter. Thus, Hades had always been prevented from finding where Stephanie had hidden herself.

He narrowed his eyes. "In the end, though, it was through her that I was able to find you."

Stephanie forced herself to speak through trembling lips, showing a bravado she didn't feel. "Her craftiness worked for five hundred years, Hades. There is something in that."

He gazed at her, and the heat of Hell burned her worse than if Helios himself stood before her.

"I've missed you, Persephone," he whispered. "My Queen. Eternity is too long if I cannot spend it with you."

Her pulse quickened and her breath came short. She felt she was drowning. It was the reason she had hidden from him for so long.

"You'll come to me tomorrow," he said. "November first."

Dread filled her. A low, animal keening rose up to fill her mind, so intimate that only she could hear it. "I-impossible! How can I leave my life?"

"Your life is with me. November first to March first. That is the pact."

She stood up, paced the room. Hades watched her from the mirror.

"Give me a month," she said, spinning around to face him.

"No."

"Two weeks."

"No."

"A week, Hades." She detested herself even as she begged. "Give me a week and I'll come to you voluntarily."

He leaned forward and she jumped back, muffling a scream. It looked as if he would come right through the glass. He could, she had no doubt of that. And he saw her fear. His eyes brightened with Nike's gloating light, though he tried to hide it.

"Remember when you tried to defy me before," he said.

She remembered. Of course she remembered, though it had been more than a thousand years ago. He'd caused a fissure to open in the earth in front of her feet and she had fallen down to him, along with hundreds of innocent people. Their deaths had blighted her for endless seasons.

"The human race has multiplied until you can hide in their millions, for a time," he said, "but I've found you. Unless you return to me, I'll destroy everyone you love."

And he would, too. She had no doubt of it.

"You have one day."

Despair again welled up from deep inside herself. "You wouldn't dare destroy what I love," she said with a bravado she didn't feel. "Eternity is too long to spend with someone who despises you."

His perfect lip curled in the disdainful smile she knew like her own essence. "Yet you already despise me. What are a few deaths more or less? No. I've waited five hundred years, I will not wait one day longer."

His gloating smile was too much. She could not bear his victory. He had her, and he knew it.

"Begone!" She thrust her arms out toward the mirror. "*Parthenocissus tricuspidata*, grow!" The vine of Boston ivy shot in through the window, its tendrils reaching out to shield her, smothering the table and mirror. The glass cracked and a gout of steam escaped the fissure. She felt Hades' presence withdraw.

She was alone.

Sleep evaded her. She rose out of her pitiless bed at five am and stumbled downstairs in a fog. His command, *one day*, echoed in her ears.

Jane already clattered around the kitchen, making them breakfast.

The smell of cooking eggs cloyed in Stephanie's throat. When Jane

handed her a plate she tried to force down a bite of omelette, but her throat closed and she couldn't swallow.

"What's wrong?" Jane asked as she poured herself a cup of coffee. Her uncombed short red hair stood at attention.

"Nothing. I think I stayed up too late."

"But you're never tired!" Jane sounded more cheerful than she had in over a year, ever since she'd signed the divorce papers.

How could Stephanie tell her best friend what had happened last night?

*"Hi, Jane, actually I'm just sick at heart because I must go down to Hell, as the bride of Hades. To be the Queen of the Underworld. And oh, by the way, I'm leaving tomorrow."*

"Come on, Stephanie!" Jane nudged her with an elbow. "Here you go."

Stephanie took the mug of coffee, drawing the heat from it as she turned to begin the day's work. Her last day of freedom. Half of her wanted to run screaming from the house, never to return, but how could she do that? It would only consign her friends to Hell in her place.

Thirty minutes later, as she had just begun to emulsify the Hollandaise for the artichokes, the doorbell rang.

"Danica, how nice to see you," Jane called from the entry, loud enough for Stephanie to be forewarned.

A few seconds later, Danica stood in the doorway to the kitchen.

“Persephone, my only daughter!”

Stephanie glanced up. Her mother, resplendent in a green wool suit, with an azure silk scarf at her throat and matching azure shoes, looked barely ten years older than she did herself. And though Stephanie knew how to age herself gracefully, living out her life—time after time—growing old with her friends and family, her mother’s vanity never allowed her to do so. Danica just found new friends when her current ones grew too old.

“I can’t talk now, Mother.” Stephanie turned back to her saucepan.

“But I just heard. Eos brought the news with the dawn. Hades, my scoundrel brother. He’s found you. And he claims it’s all my fault!”

Stephanie glanced over her shoulder. “Hush, Mother, or Jane will hear.”

“But you must be distraught!”

“I’m all right,” Stephanie said, though her hands shook so much she almost dropped the whisk.

“Oh, how can you be so stoic?”

Stephanie turned the burner off, set the whisk on the counter, and wiped her hands on her apron. Like gorge in her throat, the taste of pomegranate arose. The four damnable seeds she had eaten. Such little things, *punica granatum*, she had thought nothing of them.

She led her mother out into the cold back garden. Long shadows cast themselves over everything, but wherever sunlight fell the dewdrops sparkled.

"I am so sorry, Daughter." Danica held her hands at her side and stood precisely in the center of a grey slate paving stone so as not to stain her fine shoes with the dew.

Stephanie didn't answer. Instead, she coaxed a few fat flowers from the tired chrysanthemums, and asked the blue mist shrub to grow three inches to cover a bare patch of ground. In the silent moment that followed, she mourned her powers over all growing things, which would disappear for four months starting tomorrow. Not until the earth awakened again with the coming of spring would she again command everything that grew.

"I quarreled with Hera yesterday," Danica said in an unaccustomedly tentative voice. "It was so silly, over a handsome boy in California. We had a contest over who would attain him."

Stephanie didn't look at her mother, but she heard her shift her weight from one foot to the other.

"She challenged me to a duel," Danica said, "decorating the new library Zeus had delved out of Mt. Olympos."

Despite her worries, Stephanie laughed out loud. "Trust Hera to come up with such a mundane contest."

Danica laughed as well, for just a moment. "I know. Hermes judged our efforts, and I was the victor, of course. Hera, that vengeful daughter of Titans...."

Her mother fell silent, and after a long moment Stephanie spoke. "Just tell me, Mother. It's already happened. We can't do anything about it."

"After I left Olympos," Danica said in a strained voice, "Hera ordered Iris to help Hades follow me. Iris led him down her rainbow pathway."

Stephanie imagined Hades, still blinded by Helios but intent upon finding her, being led like a blind man down Iris' glistening rainbow. The image made her shiver.

"Hades trailed me every second I spent with the boy, and then followed me back here, where he found you. Curse him."

So that was it. He'd found her so easily in the end. Hera's jealousy and spite had won out.

"Do you have anything to say, Child?" Danica said. "What can I do?"

"Nothing." Stephanie laughed, a sound that held a bitter taste. "What can you do? Take back my stupidity from so long ago? No, he found me. I must go. Or else he will punish my friends. Even you, Mother, perhaps. I must go."

Danica snorted, a shockingly unladylike sound coming from her. "Hades? Visit pain upon *me*? We are both children of Kronos, one not stronger than the

other.”

Stephanie turned away, unable to bear the conversation any longer. She asked the potted ferns to grow another half-foot, “*Nephrolepis exaltata*, grow!” she whispered. They obliged her, though complaining about the cold. She promised she would bring them in for the winter tonight.

“Here, let me do that,” Danica said, “you sit down.”

Stephanie perched on the edge of the dew-damp stone bench, and watched as her mother stood before the ferns, her blue-clad toes perfectly aligned with the edge of the stone walkway. Danica bowed gravely to the ferns, and they bowed back with a dry rustle.

She sang three notes to them, each as clear and wistful as the next, all full of longing and yet joy.

The ferns burst up in response to Danica’s song, dancing over her head, joyous and green and living.

“Mother,” Stephanie breathed. Even her own hair seemed to be growing. The grass, which just moments before had been wallowing in its last throes of brownness, sprang up green and thick. The roses, already wrapped for the winter, threatened to burst out of their burlap sacking. On the stone wall at the back, the red-leaved ivy rustled as it grew.

Danica stepped back from the fern, her face glowing pink with pleasure.

"I haven't done that in a while," she whispered.

"Why don't you use your powers more? I would have, if I hadn't been hiding from Hades."

The pink glow faded from her mother's cheeks. "Humans do not deserve it. They ruin what I work so hard to create. Each time I plant a tree, they cut down two. I grow a field of wildflowers and they build ten parking lots!"

"And yet humankind is why we exist. If no one worshipped us, we would disappear."

"Pah! They multiply too fast, without regard to anything. No wonder you were able to hide so long from Hades—he couldn't find you in their billions, to take you back to Hell. And now they all worship who they want, when they want. They create gods willy-nilly. Soon the gods will outnumber even their billions, and then what will happen?"

Stephanie shrugged. "I don't know." She rubbed her eyes.

Danica glanced sharply at her. "You look sleepy. There is no reason to look sleepy except that you were sleeping in the first place. You're living like a human!"

"I like to sleep, it makes me feel better. Anyway, no one else is up at night. What else should I do?"

"Do what I do! Have friends that stay up all night."

Stephanie set her jaw and shook her head. "I don't have the energy for that." She didn't want to tell her mother the truth, that she didn't want the kind of friends Danica had.

"I'll tell you one thing, Daughter," Danica's voice had the ring of serious intent behind it. "You are a goddess, though you have tried to hide it these past five hundred years. You'll be in for a rude awakening when you go back to Hell."

"What could I have done differently, Mother? I had to hide from Hades."

Danica shook her head. "It isn't your actions, Daughter, that I refer to. It's your mindset. Over the years, you've forgotten how to even think like a goddess. You've forgotten how to live with that responsibility."

A muffled shout and then curses emanated from the kitchen; it sounded like Jane had burned her arm on the oven.

Stephanie stood up. "I have to get back."

Her mother ran forward and grasped her hands. "Here you are facing tragedy and I'm berating you. Please, is there anything I can do?"

"Yes. You can come away with me, or at least say you are. I need to tell Jane something. Can I tell her you want me to come away with you for the winter?"

Danica clapped her hands. "I know. Say I have a *petit maladie*. She'll have to let you go, yes? Where should we go in this fantasy? Paris? Santa Barbara?

Somewhere away from this hideous Maine place. It's dreadfully cold, and I never wanted to live here. I told you that at the beginning."

Stephanie hugged her mother, and found her shoulders felt as thin as Jane's. "I know, and yet you came with me, and you've spent fifty years here already."

Danica sniffed against her shoulder, but when she drew back her face was dry. "I must go and make my arrangements to leave. Perhaps I *will* go to Paris. I'll be back tomorrow morning. My brother won't come for you until noon."