



THE GATEKEEPER'S HOUSE

Gatekeeper's Saga, Book Four

Eva Pohler

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BOOK FOUR

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Published by Green Press

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Therese stood in the doorway, twirling a strand of her red hair round and round her index finger. There was only one bed in the center of Hecate's room. That could be a problem, even though Therese only slept about once a week.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea." Therese took a step back, knocking her quiver and bow against the cold stone wall.

"It will be fine." Hecate skipped forward and snatched up Therese's bag. "You can unpack your things in my closet." When she spun around toward the back of the room, her black and white hair fanned out around her slim shoulders.

Hecate didn't look like a witch or a hag or the dozens of other descriptions Therese had found on Google while visiting her family and friends in Colorado a month ago. She was an inch taller than Therese, and, in spite of the white streaks in her hair, she looked young, closer to Hermes's age, mid-twenties, with a delicate nose and thin lips. Therese knew Hecate was ancient—older than Than—but one thing she'd learned since becoming the goddess of animal companions was that immortal beings aged at different rates from humans and from one another.

"You aren't what I was expecting," Therese said with a smile.

"Mortals get me confused with Than's sister, Melinoe. That's probably it. Were you expecting someone more terrifying?"

Therese pulled her eyebrows together in confusion. "Do you mean Megaera?"

Hecate's face broke into a grin. "Those two are nothing alike." Then, in a somber voice, Hecate added, "I'm not surprised Than never mentioned Melinoe."

"Well that makes one of us," Therese said. How could he omit such an important detail? She'd told Than everything about herself and her family. Why wouldn't he have ever mentioned Melinoe? "Does she live down here, too?"

"She used to, until Hades banished her a few centuries ago. Now she lives on the outskirts of the Underworld in a cave on Cape Matapan."

"And that is..."

"On the southernmost tip of Greece." Hecate stepped forward. "Where are my manners? Melinoe will scold me later. Please come on inside. It's so nice to have company. I get lonely here when Persie moves in with Hades." Hecate slipped Therese's bag behind a wooden door, as though she wished to give Therese no opportunity to change her mind. "In the springs and summers on Mount Olympus, Persie and I share rooms with Demeter. Down here, I have a lot of time to myself."

Therese looked around the chamber for the first time, its dome ceiling high and covered with dancing shadows, cast by the light of the Phlegethon, the river of fire. A stream ran from an upper crevice down a series of rocks and pooled in a six-foot-wide basin before thinning and disappearing

behind another smooth boulder.

“That’s where I wash,” Hecate explained. “The spring is fresh and good enough to drink.”

Beside the basin and curled on a pillow was a small animal, a cute brown fur ball Therese had never seen. “Who’s this?”

“Galín, my polecat. This is the time when she likes to sleep.”

“I won’t disturb her, then.”

“My dog is awake and around here somewhere.” Hecate glanced about the room. “Cubie? Where are you?”

A black Doberman pinscher with tall ears and a long tail crawled out from beneath the one by the bed.

“There she is.” Hecate reached over and patted the dog on the head. “Were you spying on us?”

“Absolutely,” the dog answered.

Hecate laughed. “Cubie, this is Therese.”

“Pleasure,” the dog said.

“Likewise.” Therese stroked Cubie’s back, wishing Clifford had taken her seriously when she announced that she was moving out of Than’s rooms. Instead, he’d given her an unconcerned stare as she had said *goodbye* and *I mean it this time*. “I have a dog, too. Maybe you would like to meet him.”

“Is he intelligent?” Cubie asked.

“He’s pretty smart.” As the goddess of animal companions, Therese had met quite a lot of dogs and she felt positive that Clifford was as smart as any of them.

“But probably not as smart as Cubie,” Hecate said. “She was once the Queen of Troy.”

Before Therese could ask why a former Queen of Troy was now a dog, the floor trembled beneath their feet, followed by a loud *boom*.

Therese clutched the wall as Hecate fell back on the bed and shouted, “Ahhh!”

“What was that?” Therese asked when the floor stabilized.

“I don’t know.” Hecate’s voice was frantic. “I can’t get a prayer through to Hades or to Persie.”

Therese tried, too, but sensed no response. Blood pounded in her head as the ground began to quake again. She clutched the locket at her throat and prayed to Athena, but got no answer.

“Will these walls hold?” She glanced up at the ceiling, a host of scenarios playing through her mind. If the walls of the Underworld were to crumble, what would happen to its billions of inhabitants, including the souls of her mom and dad?

“Where are they—Hades and Persephone?” Therese asked.

Hecate winced as another *boom* sounded throughout the chamber. “Mount Olympus.”

Just then, a crack ran across the ground, up the wall, and through the dome ceiling.

“It’s going to collapse!” Therese shouted.

Small chunks of the ceiling fell on the bed, on the golden table by the hearth, and in the water.

basin, causing Galin to leap from her pillow and into Hecate's arms.

"Clifford and Jewels!" Therese cried. "They're in Than's rooms." Her stomach balled into a knot when she imagined them harmed.

"I'll go with you." Hecate set Galin down on the bed and spoke to the shivering weasel. "You and Cubie go to Demeter's winter cabin, and wait for me there. Okay?"

More rocks crumbled down the walls as a series of *booms* sounded throughout the chamber. The stream, which once ran gently down the wall, shot out, spraying in all directions.

"I'm not leaving you!" Galin returned to her mistress's arms.

"Nor I!" Cubie declared.

Soaked and trembling, the four of them rushed down the winding path along the Phlegethon, dodging the falling rocks. Cracks chased them all across the walls, and loud *booms* shuddered through the air. Therese was afraid to pray to Than, worried he'd god travel straight into danger. Even in her limited experience, she knew that if you arrived at a point occupied by solid mass, such as a large boulder, your body composition would momentarily meld with it. She'd discovered this problem when she once arrived in a brick wall. It had taken over an hour to recover, and the pain had been excruciating.

She found Clifford barking nervously by the hearth. "Come on, boy! We've got to get Stormy!"

Therese carried Jewels like a football in the crook of one arm as the group scurried down the narrow passageways toward the stables. She wondered if Than would be angry with her for not calling to him right away. He was already angry with her, and she didn't want to put another rift between them.

As they passed by the intersection of the Lethe and the Styx, deities cried out, and, although Therese and Hecate slowed down and searched the waters, they could not find the source of the cries. Cubie said she'd stay behind and keep searching.

When Therese rounded a corner, a colony of bats whirred up from a crevice below and fluttered past them, and then out climbed Tizzie, up from Tartarus with blood dripping down one arm.

"What is happening?" Tizzie demanded, her black serpentine curls covered in dust.

"We don't know," Therese replied.

"Well that's just great," Tizzie said, waving her hands. "The souls are in chaos. And if the ruptures, the Titans will be unleashed. Where the devil is my father?"

"Mount Olympus," Hecate said, dodging a falling rock that landed with a clack beside her.

Sensing Stormy's danger, Therese sent a prayer to Tizzie as she hustled toward the stable, explaining why she was on the run instead of god traveling to the gate.

I'll meet you at Cerberus, Therese added.

The three judges floated by her in their long robes headed in the opposite direction, toward the gate. Perhaps their demigod status kept them from god travel, she thought. Hecate was no longer

behind her as Therese reached the stables with Clifford and Jewels. When she opened the wooden door, she found the walls had completely collapsed, and Stormy lay on his side crushed beneath the rubble with blood pouring from his flanks.

Among the weeping women and children, Than pulled the soul of the Chinese man from the limp body on the bed. As sorry as he felt for those left behind, Than's own troubles distracted him beyond measure. He tried to put the doubts out of his mind, but with no success. They appeared against his will: *Therese had used him so she could become a god. She had never loved him as he loved her. The death of her parents, and so many after, had motivated her to find a way around her own mortality.*

He ushered the soul across the heavens and then down through the deep chasm, where hundreds of his disintegrated selves led other souls from different parts of the world. Like a great machine—the greatest conveyor belt imaginable—he swept along, an automatic cog in the wheel of life. And there below him on his raft, long pole in hand, was his fellow cog, Charon, ready to carry the souls to the judgment.

For centuries, he'd done this same work, longing for a change, and now that he'd finally found his wish, he was only more miserable.

Therese never meant to marry him. He'd been a fool.

In the weeks since she moved in, her eighteenth birthday and their wedding date had come and gone. Therese had said she wasn't ready, postponing their marriage indefinitely. When he asked her why, she had repeated, "I'm not ready."

Than was a patient god. Although disappointed, he could wait for as many years as Therese needed. But it wasn't her *spoken* objection that had his stomach in knots and his emotions unstable; it was the physical distance she put between them of late that made him shiver and regret the day he met her.

How could the same touch of his hands on her that had once made her smile and cling to him cause her to avert her eyes and pull away? If she once loved him, it was clear she did no longer.

Aphrodite had warned him this might happen.

As he neared Charon, he noticed Cerberus whining, and beside him stood his sister Tizzie. Then he saw a great explosion beyond the gates, and red and orange sparks flew through the sky. Rocks tumbled down the walls of the chasm, like the beginning of an avalanche. In all the centuries Than had lived in the Underworld, he'd never witnessed anything like this before.

"Charon," Than said. "What's happening?"

"I believe the Underworld is under attack," the old man replied in his husky, gravelly voice.

At that moment, Than sensed Stormy's death in the stables, and he disintegrated and dispatched

where he found Therese, with Jewels clutched to her chest and Clifford barking hysterically at the crushed body that belonged to Stormy.

“What in the hell is going on?” Than asked.

“I don’t know! We can’t reach your parents. We’ve got to get out of here.”

Before Than could respond, a thick black boulder loosened from the ceiling and landed square on Therese’s head, knocking her and the tortoise to the floor. The tortoise slid across the ground spinning on its back, and stopped several feet away, safe from harm, but Than heard the crunch and thud of Therese’s body beneath the weight of the massive rock. His heart stopped beating as he held his breath and stared in shock.

“Father!” he shouted into the falling debris surrounding him. He felt like a helpless, desperate child. “Father!”

Hypnos lifted the saddle onto the beast and tightened the tack. He still wasn’t used to the sharp smell of hay and feces, stirred about by the brushing by humans of the other beasts surrounding him. It wasn’t a bad smell, really. Having spent most of his life in the Dreamworld, where sensory perceptions were dulled by a degree of separation between the mind and the body, he rather liked the pungent assault on all of his senses, not just the olfactory ones. Besides, his eyes were continually pleased by the prettiest girl he’d ever seen who was now bent over in front of him. The corners of his mouth twitched, and he fought the urge to slap her on the rump. Instead, he patted Hershey, the horse in his charge, and told him what a good boy he was, as he’d often heard the other humans say to the beasts.

Hip was grateful to the old Holt woman for taking him on as a horse handler yesterday when he’d shown up, unannounced. He’d finally won his father’s permission to follow in Than’s footsteps on his journey to the Upperworld as a mortal in pursuit of a queen. Whether Hip would actually marry her was a different story. Hip realized that his brother had the right idea in finding a way to spend time in the Upperworld, and Hip wanted his turn. All these years of visiting girls in the Dreamworld didn’t compare to the feeling of being in the physical presence of one.

Centuries ago, he’d come close to marrying one of Aphrodite’s youngest Graces, Pasithea, but she overwhelmed him with her neediness, and he finally broke off their relationship. Since then, he’d been content playing with mortals in their dreams, but his brother’s recent love affair, he had to admit, had made him jealous. He couldn’t help but wonder what real girls were like and if they’d be as eager to put their arms around him in the Upperworld as they were in their dreams.

Hip hoped to soon have a taste of Jen’s pretty lips. Maybe he’d get lucky and taste all of her.

Mrs. Holt looked at him now from behind the big stallion they called The General.

“You’re as handy as your brother,” Mrs. Holt said. “Too bad he couldn’t come with you.”

Jen stood up and brushed her mare's mane. "He's too busy with the wedding plans, I bet."

Hip couldn't stop the smile from crossing his face every time Jen looked at him through narrowed eyes. She recognized him, he was sure of it, but she was having trouble admitting to herself that she knew him from her dreams.

"I doubt that," Hip said with a shrug.

Jen whipped around to face him with her hands on her hips, her pretty mouth making a perfect "O." Then she said, "He better not make her do everything by herself. Damn your brother if he does."

This tickled Hip beyond control, and he couldn't stop himself from busting out laughing. Who mortal had the gall to damn the god of death? Of course, this girl had no idea what she was saying.

"Language," Mrs. Holt said from the back of the barn.

Jen ignored her mother. "What's so funny?" She moved closer, her brown eyes glaring up at Hip from beneath her pretty blonde bangs and equally blond lashes. "Don't tell me you're a chauvinist pig."

"Jen!" Mrs. Holt scolded from behind her beast. "Don't talk to Hip like that."

Jen kept her eyes blazing on Hip, but spoke to her mother. "I have the right to talk like that to anyone who laughs at me, Mama."

"My apologies," Hip said, reining in his chuckles. "But you misunderstood. That's not busy with the wedding because, last I heard, Therese called it off."

Jen's mouth dropped open. Then, after staring incredulously at Hip for an uncomfortable amount of time, she threw her hands up in the air and presented him with a smile he hadn't earned. "Alleluia! Praise the Lord! It's about time she came to her senses."

Was she praising *him*? Had he become her *lord*? Somehow he doubted it, but he was amused by how quickly Jen's demeanor changed from attack mode. She looked about to hug him. He liked being the bearer of good news.

"When's she coming home?" Jen asked him.

Hip shook his head. "I don't think she is. I, I..." He wished he'd kept his mouth shut. It wasn't his job to explain why a goddess couldn't live among her mortal friends and family.

Jen stepped between the horses and planted her feet inches from his. He wanted to reach out and touch her to see if she felt as good as she did in the Dreamworld. Her eyes narrowed and then widened and for a moment, he thought she had figured out who he was. But then she said, "Don't tell me she's going to stay in Texas."

"Why would she..." Hip stopped himself. "Maybe you should talk to her yourself." He turned his back to her and continued to brush the horse. This conversation was over. He'd never had to make explanations to mortals, and he wasn't about to start doing it now.

But Jen moved close behind him, so close, he could feel the heat from her body. He could smell her sweat and something else. Something fruity and sweet.

“I can’t get a hold of her,” Jen said in a desperate voice. “She hasn’t returned any of my texts and calls in over a month. I don’t know if she has her new email yet. She’s not on Facebook anymore or Instagram. Nothing. It’s like she’s disappeared off the face of the earth.”

She has, he wanted to say. That’s exactly what’s happened. But, of course, he wouldn’t.

Jen put her hand on his shoulder and he felt every part of him come to attention.

“Please,” she said softly. “Please help me get in touch with her.”

He turned and saw tears welling in her eyes. “I’ll do what I can.”

Jen was surprised by the sudden tenderness in the new handler’s voice. It reminded her of something from a dream. She closed her eyes and shook her head.

“What?” Hip asked, his face close.

She took a step back. “I need to get back to work.”

As she brushed Satellite, Jen stole glances at Hip. He’d taken her out to a movie over a year ago when his brother had introduced them, but then he’d never called her again after that. He’d said he’d never been to this part of the world, as though he were from another country. But he was from Texas. He spoke as if Texas were in a different part of the world.

Well, maybe all Texans thought that way.

Now he had the gall to show his face and ask for a job. He could have called her just to say hello. “Hey.”

She glanced at him once more, and this time she noticed a look of worry come over his face, even horror.

“You alright?” she asked. He was freaking her out.

He turned to Jen’s mother and said, “I’m sorry, Mrs. Holt, but I have to go.”

“What is it?” Jen’s mom asked, also noticing the obvious look of horror on their new handler’s face.

“I can’t explain,” he said. “Something’s not right. I need to go immediately. My apologies.”

“Do you need a ride anywhere?” Pete asked, having just walked in from the pen and having overheard the last bit of their conversation.

“Um, no thanks,” Hip said. “Thanks anyway, man.”

Jen’s mouth dropped open. This made absolutely no sense. She followed Hip from the barn and stood at the gate, where he let himself out of the pen.

“Are you coming back tomorrow?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I hope so.” He didn’t even look at Jen, which hurt after the tenderness between them moments ago. She’d begun to forgive him. And now he was leaving?

“Will I ever see you again?” she cried out as he jogged down the gravel drive from her house

the road.

“I hope so,” he repeated, but again without turning and meeting her eyes.

Overcome with a sudden feeling of dread, Jen opened the gate and followed him down the path. She watched him turn past a line of oak trees. When she rounded the corner, her throat pinched close by the shock. He had disappeared.

She looked all around the one-mile stretch of road from her house to the Melner Cabin, where he was staying. Panting for breath and trembling, she knocked on the door of the cabin and got no answer.

“Hip? Are you there?” she called again and again, but the boy had vanished.

Chapter Two: Souls Unbound

Therese felt as though she were attempting to squirm out of a wet pair of tight blue jeans. Her body, heavy as a truck, wouldn't move, and her mind felt hazy, her surroundings dreamlike. Than's fingers curled around her shoulders, and suddenly she was light again, light as a feather, floating.

Unfortunately she could no longer recall why she was here or what she was doing. She'd been in the middle of saying something, hadn't she? "What was I saying?" she now asked Than. It was on the tip of her tongue.

Than bent over a boulder and hefted it into the air. "It's going to be okay."

"What is?"

She looked down and saw her mangled body in a bloody heap. Jewels hid in her slightly cracked shell a few feet away. Stormy was as crushed as she. And Clifford incessantly barked in terror.

"I'm dead?" Therese asked.

No sooner had she asked the question than a shower of rocks pummeled Than and Clifford, and the force thrust her up into the air. She reached out her hand toward Than and the collapsing cavern below her but could not stop herself from floating away. Gravity no longer had an effect on her, and nothing was holding her down. She was like an astronaut who had fallen from her spacecraft, spinning in slow circles as she hovered among the clouds.

She felt as though she were on the scariest amusement park ride ever invented and was now tumbling out of her seat. She screamed in terror, reaching out her hands to grab onto anything solid within reach. She was dizzy, frightened, and...confused.

Her mind became muddled and she found herself struggling to recall what had just happened. Panic built up in her airy chest as she grasped to remember her own name. She nervously snapped her ethereal fingers again and again, trying to remember anything about herself, but came up with nothing. After an indefinite amount of time passed, she found herself floating among treetops in woods that seemed vaguely familiar.

Yes. She knew these woods.

She grabbed the branch of an elm tree and used it as leverage to lower herself to the ground. Once her feet were on the path, she found she could keep herself grounded most of the time. Every so often she'd hover a few inches up in the air, but she managed to stay in the forest.

A familiar sound a few yards away encouraged her up the mountain, and soon she came upon what she recalled were horses and their riders. Two of the riders looked familiar, so she inched closer to the group. Before she could get a better look, the horses lifted their front legs high in the air, made a sound of terror, and scattered in all directions.

One of the riders shouted, "Steady, Chestnut! Steady!"

The rider was a young man with blond hair cut like a bowl around his tanned face. He had broad

shoulders and thick, muscular thighs. She knew she'd seen him before, but where?

"Jen!" he shouted. "Where are you?"

"Pete!" a girl's voice replied from somewhere in the trees. "God, what happened?"

"Something spooked the horses. Maybe a snake."

The boy named Pete neared her on the horse, scanning the grass. She knew she'd seen him before. Then it came to her, and she remembered everything. She was Therese Mills and this was Pete Holt. She was in the woods behind her house, and she was...dead.

"Therese?" Pete whispered, looking in her direction.

Therese gawked at him. "What? You can see me?"

"Therese?" Pete asked again, apparently able to see, but not hear, her.

A second horse came alongside Pete's, and Therese recognized her best friend Jen in the saddle.

"Don't tell me it's a creepy ol' snake," Jen said as her body shuddered with disgust. "This time we're killing it. Therese isn't here to stop us."

Pete drew his eyebrows together and looked from Therese to Jen and back to Therese. "Yes she is. She's right there."

Jen gazed past Therese and then frowned. "That's not funny. You know I'm worried about her and dying to see her. Kill the snake, or whatever spooked the horses, while I round up the others."

Jen rode off, but Pete continued to stare at Therese. "I must be imagining things," he muttered. "Maybe I miss her more than I thought." With that, he took up the reins and trotted off.

"Wait!" Therese was left alone and frustrated, wondering why Pete could see her when Jen could not. She turned toward her Colorado house as she prayed to Than. *What's going on? Why aren't you with me?*

She stepped up on the wooden deck at the back of her house and peered through the kitchen window. Carol stood at the sink talking out loud, her red hair pulled up in a ponytail.

"Yes, you like grapes, Lynn. I know you do. Let me finish cutting them in half for you."

Two-year-old Lynn sat in her highchair. Wisps of Lynn's red hair and patches of her caramel complexion were covered with what looked like mashed potatoes. She held one hand out toward Carol and said, "I like gapes," over and over. "I like gapes." Therese smiled and resisted the urge to rush inside and kiss her little sister.

The memory of how Carol had nearly lost Lynn while she had been pregnant brought a wave of grief over Therese. If Therese hadn't succeeded in Artemis's quest to bring back Callisto, who had been turned into a bear by Hera and made into a constellation by Zeus, Lynn would not be a part of their lives. She would have been one more dead soul escorted by Than to the Underworld. It was only after Therese had proved herself beneficial to the goddess of the hunt that the life of Baby Lynn—Therese's natural cousin and her sister by adoption—had been saved.

Carol turned with a handful of cut grapes and laid them on the tray of Lynn's highchair. Lynn

pinched them up in her fingers one at a time and popped them into her mouth. Then Lynn m
Therese's eyes, recognized her, and pointed.

"Terry!"

Carol spun around, her eyes moving past Therese without recognition, just as Jen's had earlier. As Therese processed this new information (Lynn could see her but Carol could not), two figures entered the kitchen, and neither were her Uncle Richard. Her mouth dropped open when she recognized who they were: they were the souls of her parents.

Linda and Gerry Mills sat themselves at the granite bar as they had every day since Therese could remember, before they were killed three years ago by Ares's man, McAdams. Therese's mother had been on the verge of discovering an antidote for the Mutated Anthrax C, but Ares wanted no antidote as he urged the Middle East to make war with the Western World, hoping to see the US fall. Feeling nostalgic for those days when her parents were alive, Therese entered the room without opening the door (she didn't want to frighten Carol) and approached her mother's side.

"Mom? Dad?"

They looked at her blankly.

Then her father asked, "Is there any coffee made?"

"Dad, don't you know me?" Therese asked, rushing to his side. She placed an ethereal hand on his transparent back, but could not quite feel the feathery soul beside her. "It's me. Therese."

At that moment, Lynn pointed once again at Therese and shouted, "Terry!"

Carol took a towel to Lynn's face and said, "You silly little goose. You miss your Terry? I do too. Her last visit wasn't nearly long enough."

Therese frowned. She had really wanted to stay longer than a week. Seven days hadn't given her time to do half of what she'd planned. She and Jen had gone to the movies with Todd and Ray one night, had gone dancing at the Wildhorse Saloon when Pete's band was performing a second night, and had gone for pizza with some friends from their swim team a third, so that had left only four evenings at home with Carol, Richard, and Lynn. But her duties as the goddess of animal companions required her attention, and she had to get back to them. Of course, she couldn't explain that fact to her aunt and uncle. And as much as she'd like to rush up to throw kisses on her sister's cheeks, she didn't want to frighten her. Therese was, after all, a ghost.

Then Lynn pointed again and said, "Cowboy!"

Therese followed her sister's finger and turned to the living room. To her horror, she found the room full of souls. They were mostly cowboys and Native Americans, and they wandered around the room as though they were looking for something.

Suddenly, Lynn started to cry, probably as overwhelmed as Therese at the sight of all these strangers wandering through their house. As Carol lifted Lynn from the highchair, one of the cowboys upset a lamp in the living room, and it toppled to the wooden floor.

“What in the world?” Carol muttered.

Then Therese’s father turned a page of the newspaper, and Carol noticed the paper flutter on top of the granite bar. With Lynn on her hip, she rushed to the kitchen window and closed it.

“A wind must be picking up.”

Therese rushed through the crowd of ghosts toward the front screened porch and out onto the wooden deck that wrapped around the house. Her jaw dropped when she saw thousands of souls wandering the land outside. Some walked and others floated. What on earth had happened?

Than pushed his way through the fallen rocks and debris of what was once the Underworld and cried out for Therese, but she had vanished. His disintegrated selves struggled to cling to the souls he was supposed to be transporting to Charon’s raft, but they had nowhere to go now that Hades was in ruins. He also could no longer feel the call of the newly dead. The thought of the mortals suffering on the verge of death but being unable to die filled Than with horror and rage. More alarming was the fact that many of the souls were no longer bound to the Fields of Elysium, and even some may have escaped from the pits of Erebus and Tartarus. Than could not sense where they went. He was no longer bound to them, and they were no longer bound to Hades.

Although he could not get through to his parents, his brother appeared beside him with a look of dismay.

“Who’s responsible for this?” Hypnos asked, as though he would take vengeance then and there before the souls had been retrieved.

“I don’t know. Do you have any contact with our parents?”

“None.”

“Then we have no choice but to go to Mount Olympus to report what’s happened in person.”

“What about the dead?” Hip asked. “And what about the Titans? Are they unleashed?”

“The dead, but not the Titans,” Than said grimly. “At least, not yet. Our sisters are holding the pit of Tartarus as we speak. Hecate and her familiars are helping.”

“What about Therese?” Hip asked as they prepared to god travel.

“Killed. Her soul left with the other dead before she could regenerate. I don’t know where.” Than had barely had time to register this fact. He had already disintegrated and dispatched in the hundreds to search the earth for Therese. Another one of him had gently carried her body from the ruins of the Underworld to Demeter’s winter cabin. He’d taken her animals there as well.

Than and Hip left the rubble around them and materialized at the gates of Mount Olympus. After asking the seasons to let them pass, they hastened up the rainbow steps and into the court where the gods of Olympus were convening.

Hades immediately heard and responded to Than’s prayers as Than and his brother entered the

room.

“Someone’s put a block around our court!” Hades bellowed. He looked at his fellow gods. “Who’s responsible for this destruction? Who would dare destroy my kingdom and upset the balance among the living and the dead?”

Than had never seen his father so upset before the other gods. His face had turned a hue of purple and his voice shook the court.

“Thanatos,” Zeus said. “Come forward and report to us what has happened.”

Than moved to the center of the ring and described the attack on his father’s domain. “The dying cannot die. Those already dead are no longer bound, and the Titans will be next.”

Zeus’s eyes widened. “The Titans? That can’t be.”

“The Furies are holding them for the moment,” Than added. He clenched his fists, waiting for the king of the gods to react to this bad news.

Zeus jumped to his feet. “This must be our top priority. We must all stop everything and put ourselves in the service of Hades.”

Than sighed with relief and unclenched his fists and was rather surprised at Zeus’s response.

“That’s impossible,” Poseidon objected, his sun-bleached beard framing a frown. “You know my duties consume me.”

Than could relate to that, and for a moment he felt sorry for those gods without the power to resist disintegration.

Zeus turned to the god of the sea. “Yes. What you say is true. You alone will be excused, brother.”

“But I’ve got several wars to mind.” Ares raked a hand through his bright red hair. “I don’t have time to clean up my uncle’s mess.”

Hades bolted across the marble floor toward Ares with a look of rage on his face, but Zeus beckoned Hades to Ares’s side. The two brothers stood with their faces close to the god of war.

“You will serve Hades now,” Zeus commanded. “Am I understood?”

Than blanched at the public reprimand Zeus gave to Ares.

Ares did not reply but gave a subtle nod before glaring across the room at Than.

Than suspected the god of war was behind the attack on his father’s kingdom, but, without proof, he would not speak his thoughts. What a brazen move, though, even for the son of Zeus.

Jen could not get the horses to settle after she and Pete herded them back to the pen. Her mother had had to reimburse the trail riders, because the horses had seemed to lose their minds. And they had been the last trail riders of the season, since Autumn had officially arrived. Even now, with her younger brother Bobby’s sweet talk, she and her brothers had a hard time removing the tack and

turning the horses out. Jen used this opportunity to remind her mother why attending an online university from home was better for Jen. The family ranch needed her.

To make matters worse, Pete was freaking out.

“What’s the matter with you?” their mother hollered at Pete when he had flinched, pale face for the millionth time. “You feeling alright?”

“No,” he said. “I’m having some kind of bizarre hallucination or somethin’. What was in the stew you fed us?”

“Same stuff is always in my stew,” Jen’s mom replied.

Once they had turned the last horse out, Jen overheard her mother sidle up next to Pete and ask softly, “You ain’t been drinking, have you?”

Pete’s eyes widened into a look of reproach. “How can you even ask that? God, Mom! You think I wanna turn out like Daddy?”

Mrs. Holt dropped her head. “No, son, but some people can’t seem to help themselves. I hope you’ll tell me if that ever happens to you.”

Pete glared at their mother. “It won’t ever happen to me.”

They all four headed back to the house, exhausted and nervous. The horses continued to fidget and buck out in the pasture. Jen’s mom took the behavior of the horses as a sign of bad weather coming and told the kids to get washed up and stay indoors. She turned on the Weather Channel and listened as she heated up the leftover stew for their supper. Pete didn’t seem to mind canceling his plans to go dancing at the Wildhorse Saloon. His face had taken on a hint of green.

When Jen returned downstairs after her shower, she was mortified by reports on the news of unexplained events occurring all over the world. Pete was glued to the screen, as though searching for answers to his own strange condition, looking less ill and a bit excited.

“People are seeing ghosts,” he said to Jen, as she took a seat on the couch beside him. “Not everyone can see them. That’s why they can’t explain all the crazy things that are happening—windows breaking, objects floating in mid-air, stuff getting moved around. It’s the ghosts that are making all that stuff happen, but most just can’t see it.”

“Are you saying you can?” Jen asked, afraid of the answer.

Pete looked at her with his mouth open, as though he might answer, but then he turned back to the television and said nothing.

Jen wondered if the disappearance of the new horse handler earlier that day had had anything to do with the chaos around the world.

A few moments later, Pete startled Jen by jumping to his feet and saying, “Oh, no.”

“What is it?” Jen asked, still not sure if Pete was running on a full battery today.

Pete turned to her and said, “We need to get a hold of Therese.”

“What? Why? I don’t have her new number and she doesn’t answer her cell.”

Pete grabbed his hat and went to the door and pulled on his boots. "Hip's gotta know where she is. I'm driving over to the Melner Cabin to talk to him. Coming with me?"

Hypnos appeared beside Athena among the rubble and debris that had once been his father's kingdom. Apollo, with his quiver full of silver arrows, and Hermes with his winged shoes, stood on the other side of him, forming part of a ring surrounding Hades and Persephone, who looked upon the destruction around them with utter shock. All of the gods and goddesses were there, save Zeus and Poseidon, whose own domains required their constant attention, and Hera, who had made some meager excuse that Zeus must have been obliged to accept because of some or another scandal. Despite the conflicts among the gods, all of them seemed to share in the grief felt by those who dwelled in the Underworld. Tears slid down Aphrodite's face, and Artemis raised her bow in sheer outrage.

"I know you all suspect me," Ares said, "but I swear before Apollo, before whom no one can lie, that I was not involved in this catastrophe. I've always strived to maintain balance between all forces to level the playing fields for all parties, and to encourage healthy conflict. What has happened today strikes no such balance."

Hip had to admit he was surprised and impressed by the words spoken by the god of war, but Ares hadn't been responsible, who had?

Hades raised his voice. "Everyone swear before Apollo and on the River Styx that you played no role in bringing destruction to my kingdom."

Hip swore and looked around at the others gathered as every single one of them echoed his response.

"We will get to the bottom of this," Artemis growled.

Athena lifted her spear in the air, as though she were about to second Artemis, but before she could utter a word, something zipped like a bullet directly at her, knocking her onto the rubble beneath their feet. The other gods surrounded her in a split second, ready to aid.

Hip found himself at the back of the crowd, trying to move in, when he heard Hermes shout "Close your eyes!"

Hip clamped his eyes shut but prayed to Hermes. *What's happening?*

Aloud, Hermes said, "It's Medusa. She's claimed her head from Athena's shield. Athena has turned to stone."

"Athena?" Hip cried.

I'm trapped! Came Athena's silent response.

As am I. Hestia and Persephone's prayers joined Athena's in Hip's head.

Hip could hear the hissing of Medusa's head of snakes close by as he felt along the backs of the

other gods toward Hermes. *Mother?*

Help me, Hypnos.

“I pierced the Gorgon with my arrows,” Apollo said. “But she will not die.”

Medusa laughed a shrill and rueful shriek. “Sticks and stones might break my bones, but they will never kill me!”

“My arrow struck between the monster’s eyes and hangs there, impotent,” Artemis said. “I see the reflection in my shield.”

“My sword is useless against her as well,” came Ares.

“*None* can die,” Than said. “Not until the power that binds the souls to me and to the Underworld is restored.”

This reminded Hip of another time in his ancient history when Sisyphus took Than prisoner back before Hades had given them the ability to transfer one another’s duties. No one could die the other either.

“I will destroy whoever is responsible for this!” Hades roared.

The ground beneath them shuddered, and something knocked Hip to the ground.

“You can open your eyes,” Hephaestus said. “I’ve encased Medusa in a locker of solid gold.”

Hip surveyed the scene. Athena had turned to white stone, with her spear raised and her mouth wide open, her knees bent. He could hear her prayers from inside the stone.

Beside her were Hestia and Persephone, also solid stone and crouched in defensive postures, eyes wide. Hip rushed to his mother’s side where Than already stood, touching her shoulder.

Hades roared like a lion and raised his fists in the air. Then he moved to Persephone’s side and cupped her smooth stone face in his hands. “I will fix this, my love. You won’t remain in this state for long. I promise.”

Hip could see the look on his father’s face, and he hoped his mother and Hestia and Athena could not. For once, fear and vulnerability clouded Hades’s usually confident exterior, which allowed Hip’s own fear to magnify. He turned to see Deimos and Phobos, Panic and Fear, standing behind him beside their mother, Aphrodite.

“Please leave us,” Aphrodite told her sons. “Your presence cannot help us.”

The twins vanished.

Although their disappearance improved Hip’s mood, another crisis thundered inside his head. Amid the prayers he heard for a good night’s rest and sweet dreams were the shouts of two familiar mortal voices. Jen and her older brother were calling to him. He could see them above, pounding on the doors and windows of the log cabin near their ranch in Colorado.

Chapter Three: Restoration

Despite Lynn's unceasing cries, Therese remained with her parents, hoping for even the briefest moment of recognition. If they had found their way back to their house, surely they might also find their way back to their family.

"Your name is Gerald Mills," Therese said again. "And you are Linda. I'm your daughter, Therese. We lived here in this house. Dad, you were a writer. Mom, you were a scientist and worked at Fort Lewis College. That's your sister, Carol, over there."

"Oh," Linda said. "I remember Carol."

"You do?" Therese jumped up from the barstool. "You grew up in San Antonio."

"That's right," Linda said. "Gerry and I met in college."

"We did?" Gerry looked at her mother blankly.

"Therese?" Linda said, her face stretching into bewilderment. "I think it's finally coming back to me."

"You mean you can remember me?" Therese asked, trying not to get her hopes up.

Linda turned first to Gerry and then back to Therese. "I was shot. We drowned. Therese, are we aren't we..."

"Mom!" Therese flung her ethereal arms around her mother's transparent neck, and although she could not feel her, Therese was overcome with joy. "Oh, Mom! I've missed you so much!"

"I want to remember, too," Gerry said. "You said I was a writer. What did I write?"

"Crime fiction," Therese replied. "*The Catcher's Mitt*, *The Silent Key*..." Therese named off a few of her father's novels.

Her father shook his head. "Why can't I remember?"

Therese racked her brain for an answer. Why could her mother remember and her father not? Then an idea hit her, and she said, "Mom's memory was sparked by Carol. Maybe you need something from your childhood."

"Did I have any brothers and sisters?" he asked.

"No, but I have a picture of you and your parents up in my room. Will you follow me upstairs?"

The house was still crowded with the ghosts of many strangers wandering around, as though they were lost or looking for something to help them figure out who they were and what was happening to them. Carol sat among them in a rocking chair trying to soothe Lynn, who wailed in her mother's arms, apparently not interested in the bottle of warm milk Carol was trying to coax her into drinking.

"Hush little baby, don't say a word," Carol sang.

Therese led her parents up the stairs to her bedroom, passing by other souls on the way. Therese avoided making eye contact with any of them, hoping they wouldn't ask her questions, since she had no answers. Once she and her parents were in her room, she maneuvered through the crowd of souls

gathered there and found the photo album tucked beneath her old bed. She drew it out and opened it, flipping through the pages until she found the one she was searching for.

“Here you are.” She held the album out to her father and pointed to him pictured as a boy standing between his parents in front of an old barn.

“I remember!” he said. “I remember my parents. I know that barn.” He turned and looked first at his wife and then at his daughter. “Linda? Therese?”

“Dad!” Therese threw her arms around her father, and though they could not feel one another in an embrace, they nevertheless cried tearless sobs. “I can’t believe I’m getting this chance to talk with you two again! I didn’t think it would ever be possible.” She put one arm around each of them, not minding that she felt no warmth, no comforting flesh. “I missed you both so much.” Then a thought crossed her mind. “You aren’t figments, are you?”

“What’s a figment?” her mother asked.

“They’re eel-like nymphs that take the forms of people and things in your dreams. Figments, they can command you to show yourselves!”

The souls of her mother and father stared blankly back at her, and she sighed with relief.

Than watched on with a mixture of admiration and grief as his father lifted his arms and commanded the debris to retake its original form. The magnificence of the power Hades could wield was breathtaking and awe-inspiring, but Hades would need at least one day to recover from the excessive use of power. This would make the Underworld even that much more vulnerable to another attack.

At Hades’s command, the rocks lifted from the ground, causing a rumbling sound to reverberate all around them. One moment, the gods were standing in the soft haze of dusk beneath a cloudless sky on a giant mountain of rubble, and the next moment, they were standing in the beautifully restored jewel-encrusted palace that belonged to Than’s parents.

Than’s sisters, the Furies, arrived minutes later in response to their father’s summons. Hecate and her two familiars were with them.

Alecto, whose short red hair stood up like flames around her head, spoke first. “We kept all the prisoners of Tartarus secure save Medusa and one other.”

Hades, weakened, sat in his chair and frowned. “Who?”

“King Sisyphus,” Meg replied anxiously, averting her ice blue eyes. “I and my falcon chased after him for miles, but we’ve been unable to locate him. I’ve failed you, father.”

Hades’s face transformed into a smile as he put his hands on Meg’s shoulders. “On the contrary, you ladies saved the day. Had anyone other than old Sisyphus escaped, we would have had another epic battle on our hands.”

“We may still, Lord Hades,” Apollo said.

Hades turned to face the other gods gathered around him. “Right you are, nephew, but allow me a moment to express my relief and gratitude to my hardworking daughters and to dear Hecate, who haven’t yet heard the worst of it.”

“Of course,” Apollo said. “My apologies.”

“Tell us father,” Tizzie pleaded. “What’s happened?”

“Mother!” Meg cried. “Look!” She pointed to the statue of Persephone crouched in stone beside Hestia and Athena.

“She’s trapped in there!” Alecto moved to their mother’s side. “I can hear her.”

“Oh, Athena!” Meg gasped. “And dear Hestia!”

Hades explained what had happened and then instructed the Furies to assist Artemis and Apollo in discovering the culprit while Hephaestus and Hermes remained behind to help guard the Underworld from any future attacks. The latter would also check all of the entrances and make certain Cerberus, the Hydra, and the other beasts guarding them were properly restored.

“What about Ares and me?” Aphrodite asked, looking hurt. “Zeus commanded us to aid you as well.”

“Believe me, dear niece, the restoration of my kingdom will require all of our efforts,” Hades replied. “I need you and Ares to help my sons recover the billions of souls, which escaped the Elysian Fields, and bring them before the judges to be sentenced once again. You should also be on the lookout for Sisyphus. Who knows what mischief he will cause?”

“You don’t suppose that was the purpose of this attack?” Ares asked. “Who would gain by freeing Sisyphus?”

“The Furies will investigate that angle.” Then Hades added, “Hecate, I need you to stand guard over these three goddesses and make sure no further harm comes to them in their vulnerable state.”

“Yes, my lord,” Hecate said. “But, please sir, where is Therese?”

Hades turned to Than, who explained to the others what had happened. “I can sense those who are about to die, but I’m no longer bound to those who’ve already passed. In short, I can’t find her.”

The grim looks on their faces made him feel less, rather than more, confident that he would eventually successfully reunite Therese’s soul with her body and restore her as the goddess of animal companions.

After knocking on all the doors and windows for twenty minutes, Jen and Pete sat in rockers on the wooden deck of the Melner cabin to wait for their new handler to return.

“Tell me the truth,” Jen said again. She wanted to wring her brother’s neck. “I can tell something’s up.”

“I just got a bad feeling is all,” Pete replied. “Hip will know how to get a hold of Than.”

“There’s more to it than that. You saw her, didn’t you,” Jen said without inflection. “You won’t tell me, but you saw Therese’s ghost. You think she’s dead.”

Pete looked down at his boots.

Jen covered her face with her hands. “Just tell me. I can handle it.”

He was silent for several more minutes. Then he said, “Okay. I saw her.”

Jen’s face shot up. “Can you see her now?”

Pete shook his head. “It was in the woods, earlier, during the trail ride. You assumed it was a snake that spooked the horses, but it was her.”

Jen narrowed her eyes. She knew Pete wasn’t lying, but maybe there was something wrong with him. And yet, how could she explain all the other supposed ghost sightings and unexplainable events on the news? She thought of the crown and wondered if she should share its secret with Pete. Maybe whatever had made the crown work had also given Therese the power to be invisible, and maybe Pete had the ability to see her anyway. Maybe Therese was fine and was wandering around incognito, like Jen sometimes did. But then why couldn’t Pete see Jen while she was wearing the crown?

Jen hadn’t worn the crown much lately, now that her father was permanently disabled from a stroke and staying at the assisted living center in Durango. But there was a time when that crown had meant the world to her. It had saved her from running away—or from something worse. She thought of Vicki and of Vicki’s mother and shivered.

The sun was beginning to set behind the mountains on the other side of the reservoir, but the pretty pinks and orange hues spread across the clouds only added to Jen’s frustration. She was willing to sit on the deck of the Melner cabin all night, if that’s what it took to finally get some answers.

“Please, Hip,” she said in her mind. “Come back. I’ll do anything.”

Ah, hell, Hip thought as he flew alone in the evening sky in the treetops of Greece. Just when he was finally making a little progress with the mortal girl, all hell had to break loose. He’d been so close to touching her. Her face had been inches from his. He’d had the feeling Jen would have been in his bed within the week. He could hear her calling to him, prime for kissing. She was saying she’d do anything...

He held the siphon Hades and Hephaestus had constructed with a reservoir of water from the Lethe on one side and a funnel inlaid with magic crystals on the other. He’d never used one of these contraptions before, but apparently it was meant to suction up the souls, like a vacuum cleaner. That was Aphrodite, Ares, and he had divided up the global territories and, each with a siphon, had taken up the boring, uneventful task of sucking up the dead. Weren’t there lesser gods who could take this job? He had overheard Ares and Aphrodite recruiting their kids—the twins, Cupid, Harmonia, and even

Anteros, who often went and undid the very love Cupid inspired. Talk about sibling rivalry. Aphrodite and Ares seemed to have made a specialty of creating children of opposites. Cupid and Anteros kept mortal love interesting, and Harmonia and the twins made sure neither peace nor panic stayed too long in the mortal mind.

He wondered if Aphrodite and Ares had abandoned their mission and had snuck away for a little “something-something.”

Hold on, he thought, focusing in on Jen’s prayers. Now she was asking if Therese was dead. He had seen her ghost in the woods. If Hip could help Than reunite Therese’s soul with her body, he could have less work and make his brother grateful all in one fell swoop. He god traveled back to the Underworld, deposited the souls he’d accumulated so far with Charon, and, without telling anyone, decided to take a brief reprieve from soul sucking to call on his mortal girl and her brother.

Twenty minutes later, he sat behind the wheel of a red Ford Mustang convertible speeding down the country road toward Lemon Reservoir. He couldn’t very well arrive without any sign of transportation. There’d be explanations to make and excuses to give, and Hip didn’t want any part of that. He couldn’t help it if he had to take measures to blend in with the other occupants of the Upperworld. Might as well do it in style.

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