

Chapter 1

Heléna Katsaros, exhausted and sweaty, returned to her apartment in Athens. She had just finished taking her neighbor's dog for a run. Her job as a fundraising coordinator meant that she traveled too often to keep a pet. She had to be content with the occasional favor of being a surrogate dog-walker.

Just when she was about to turn on the shower, her cellphone rang. It was her assistant from work.

"Hi, Cynthia, what's up?" asked Heléna.

"Oh, hi. I'm so sorry, Heléna. There's a potential donor who also wants to hire you for a job. He insists that he meet with you today. I tried to explain that it was your day off and that he'd need an appointment. He wouldn't take no for an answer."

"Did he say why he's in such a rush?"

"No, but he spoke with Nico in accounting and gave him a very large sum that he'd like to donate. But only if he meets with you. Nico almost passed out, then relayed the message to the boss who, of course, agreed."

"You made it clear that I was off today?"

"Yes, Heléna, I explained all that, but Leda said this could be huge and wants you to meet with him."

Heléna sighed and looked at the clock. "I suppose I can take a quick shower and meet him downtown in about forty-five minutes."

There was a long pause on the other end of the phone.

"Heléna, he wants to meet at your apartment."

"What? That's ridiculous. I don't have time to set up for entertaining. I'm not cooking for him if that's what he thinks."

"No, I'm sure it's not that. I told Leda that it didn't sound right, but she said that if anyone could take care of herself, it's you."

For a moment, Heléna seethed. *How annoying and inconsiderate of this jerk.* But then she thought about how much good they could do with a large donation. Her main job was securing these funds, and she was good at it. Sometimes she had to schmooze, and sometimes she had to be firm with the facts. She worked hard to ensure that the non-profit organizations she worked with could build educational and artistic centers for communities.

"Okay," she said finally. "Somebody owes me one. Who's this guy anyway?"

"His name is Haidês Plutonier. Weird name. We couldn't find anything on social media, which was strange. But Leda said she'd heard of him before through some of her associates at the bank. He must be loaded."

"Yeah, well, being rich doesn't excuse being rude or demanding. I'll do my best to be cordial. Give me an hour and a half then."

"Got it. And Heléna, be careful."

"I will, Cynthia."

After the shower, Heléna sat at her desk and logged on to her laptop. In her fluffy robe, with her hair still damp, she attempted to find out what she could about the mysterious donor. Something about his name was so familiar, but she couldn't put her finger on it. As the searches came up empty, Heléna sat back in the chair and stared at the surrounding bookshelves. One huge case was devoted to history, while many shelves were occupied with biographies, atlases, and writings on philosophy. One long shelf housed several books on mythology. Those were her favorites.

"I wonder..." she said as she got up.

She walked over to the dozen or so books on the Greek myths and pulled one off the shelf. It was an old tome, its pages yellowed and thin. The smell of must and ancient days filled her nose when she opened it.

Thumbing through the index Heléna found what she was looking for. Her mouth dropped open, and she swore audibly.

In the H section, under Hades, were all the name variations of that god. Hades was the most common, which was Latin; then came Pluto, the Roman name. After that was the original Greek version, which was seldom used: Haidês.

Was this some kind of joke? Did this mystery donor find it funny to assume names of mythological characters?

Heléna's brain jammed momentarily. Visions of a cruel, dark god riding his chariot up from the Underworld and showing up at her door filled her thoughts. *That's nonsense*, she thought.

Nonsense or not, *someone* was coming over for a meeting. She needed to get ready. She actually found herself intrigued. If he really was Hades, Heléna was completely confident that she could handle any trickery.

Ψ

When Heléna heard the sound of a very expensive car engine through her open window, she took a peek out. An Aegean blue Ferrari was stopped at the curb. Without knowing why, she quickly stepped back instead of watching the driver exit the car.

She smoothed her saffron blouse and took one last check in a mirror. She was going for business casual with a pop of color. Light gray wool trousers and red wedges completed the look. She had left her dark, wavy hair down. It framed her face softly. Her light eye make-up accentuated her hazel eyes.

The doorbell rang. She took a breath, smiled, and answered the door.

The figure who stood on her threshold was wearing a silk suit the same color as his car. He gave a slight bow, smiled, and held out a small bouquet of flowers to Heléna. He was gorgeous.

"Ms. Katsaros, I presume?" he asked with a voice like honey.

"Yes, and thank you for the flowers," she said while taking them. "You must be..."

"Henry. Call me Henry, it's easier."

She paused for a moment. "Henry, please come in."

He entered the apartment in smooth strides.

"Let me put these in something," she said and went into the kitchen. She placed the flowers in a small cobalt vase and filled it with water. Upon taking a closer look, Heléna realized they were asphodels. *These only grow in the Underworld*, she thought. *Okay, I see how it is.*

When she re-entered the living room, she found Henry perusing the bookshelves.

"You've got quite an interesting collection," he said. "I see you like mythology."

"Yes, I do. Please have a seat, Mr. Plutonier."

"Please call me Henry. May I call you Heléna?"

“Yes, of course, Henry. May I offer you tea or coffee? A mineral water?” she said while gesturing to the refreshments and glassware on the table between the chairs.

Out of nowhere, he produced a bottle as black as the ink from the Kraken. “I’ve brought something special for the occasion.” He proceeded to open the bottle and pour a faint green liquid into two glasses. He put the bottle down, handed a glass to Heléna, and sat. She sat as well, opposite him.

“Would you mind if I took off my coat? I’m a little warm from the drive.”

“Oh, not at all,” she replied and found she truly meant it.

While he removed the jacket, Heléna had some time to really look at him. He was tall and reminded her of someone. Who? Then it came to her: he looked like a darker version of Ryan Gosling in the movie *Crazy Stupid Love*. She wondered if anyone had ever told him that.

He picked up his glass and held it up in a toast. Heléna did the same with her own.

“To our potential partnership,” he said. “*Yia mas.*”

“*Yia mas.*”

Heléna took a small sip. The drink had a pungent taste with a hint of anise. She put it down and took a closer look at the bottle. It was labeled *Lethe*.

She made sure to keep her appearance calm while inside she heard alarm bells. Lethe was the name of a river in the Underworld where poor souls who pined for their still-living loved ones could take a drink and forget everything. *So, he is Hades!*

“I’m told you’d like to make a donation to our organization.”

“Heléna, what’s the hurry? Let’s just talk and get to know each other.”

“Mr. Plutonier,” she said with emphasis, “I am a busy person, as I’m sure you are too. I don’t want to play games, and I believe I know more than I need to about you.”

She knew taking this stance could potentially lose the donation. But good looking or not, she wasn’t about to join him in whatever scheme he had in mind.

He looked alarmed. “Heléna, I’m sorry, what do you mean by that?”

“I’m going to be straightforward with you, *Henry*, which is more than I can say you’ve been. Asphodel? Lethe? You saw my books. You must know who you’re dealing with. Either you are Hades, and only the gods know why you’re even here, or you’re some nut who has a strange sense of humor. In any case, I am an expert with pepper spray.” She then produced the handheld repellent from her pocket.”

Henry had a stunned expression on his face. Slowly, there was a hint of a smile; he looked down and then brought his eyes level with hers. “You’re absolutely right, but please don’t spray me.”

“I’m right about which one?”

He laughed. “I guess maybe both. My apologies for misleading you. I shouldn’t have tried so hard. It’s very difficult to have an audience with anyone who doesn’t hate me or is terrified of me. I did the research and hoped that you’d be neither.”

“So, there’s no donation?”

“Oh, I absolutely want to donate. I’m trying to change my image and the image of the Underworld. I want people to see me as someone who truly cares for the souls in the afterlife and not as a terrifying god.”

“What do you need from me?”

“I’ve been told by several people that I need to be more charitable, make more appearances above ground, show my humble side. I’ve even started some projects that have helped make spirits’ existence enjoyable. I built a baseball stadium in the Elysian Fields. They love it.”

“You didn’t answer my question. Why me?”

“Your reputation is well known. When your name is linked with a project, people take notice. I want to hire you to help me implement some ideas I have for Hades. You could be my companion.”

Heléna was stunned. Then she narrowed her eyes. “You’ve got nerve. You have a wife. Why would I even consider leaving my world to be with you?”

Henry looked alarmed. “No, no, I’m sorry I didn’t make myself very clear. We would work together.” He paused for a moment. “Yes, Persephone is my wife. But she only resides in Hades for six months of the year. We’ve grown apart over the centuries; she wants no part in helping me with the projects. I’m looking for someone who wants a challenge, who can work with me, who shares my interests in wanting to make my realm a better place. I was hoping that someone could be you.”

“What timeframe are you considering?”

He perked up. “Six months. Starting in the spring.”

Heléna mentally kicked herself for considering the offer. It could be the experience of a lifetime. But could she leave her life here for six months? “You’re asking me to trust you?”

He looked embarrassed. “I’m afraid I got a little ahead of myself upon meeting you. Perhaps my social skills need some finetuning. At times, I feel so ancient and lonely. I could use your company.”

“You want me to leave my family, my friends, and my job so that I can spearhead your projects in Hades and teach you some etiquette?”

“Yes, I guess I am asking that of you. It’s for such a short time. And you’d make a huge impact. I will sign any agreement you put before me and be bound to it. I know you love dogs. I have one who would love to meet you.”

Heléna couldn’t imagine being friendly with Cerberus.

“I’d starve to death. You know I can’t eat the food from there; otherwise, I can never leave.”

“Whatever you need, I’ll have your own food brought in. Just give me a list.”

What the hell was she thinking?

“Henry, I can’t give you an answer right now. My instincts say no, but a part of me says possibly. I need time.”

“Please take as much time as you need.”

“What about the donation?”

“That’s what I like about you, you’re persistent. I already wired the amount on my way over here.”

Heléna was surprised. “Before meeting with me? What if I’d pepper sprayed you?”

He smiled. “It was worth the risk.”

Ψ

An hour later, Heléna sat at the kitchen table sipping a strong espresso. She had seen him out, thanked him, and made sure he took the bottle of Lethe back.

It was an outrageous proposition. She had no idea how to bring it up with her family or her boss. Could she really help to make a difference down there for those departed souls? Hadn’t she always tried to make a difference for the living? Should it matter if they were dead?

She had some serious decisions to make. It wouldn’t be as easy as it sounded.

Heléna got up and walked to the large world map on the wall. There were push pins marking all the places she'd been. Where would she put a pin for the Underworld?