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# *For Love of Persephone*

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The autumn harvest was in. The land heaved a soft sigh of relief, as if it looked forward to the coming rest. *If only I could*, Persephone thought. She had more in common with the squirrels than the land. She felt restless, edgy, as if there was something she should be doing, but what? Somewhere else to be, but where? She glanced up at the last vestiges of colorful leaves that clung to the branches of the old maple. They glowed red in the setting sun. Mortal voices rang in her head:

"I'm thankful for my health."

"I'm thankful the plant reopened."

"I'm thankful for my new puppy, Lucky."

That last one made her smile, at the innocent love in the child's heart.

"Why do you smile, daughter?" Demeter held a basket of apples.

"This upcoming holiday mortals call 'Thanksgiving.' Such a joyous time and there's much to be thankful for. Can we celebrate it this year?" Persephone blinked at the fleeting sadness that crossed her mother's face. "Mother, what's wrong?"

Demeter's smile trembled. "Nothing," she said, but her red-rimmed eyes gave her away.

Persephone didn't believe her. Why did her mother always seem so sad this time of year, when all others rejoiced? The question nagged at her, like there was some clue she missed. Perhaps her mother would share. "I'm going for my walk. Join me?"

"No, you go on. I'll make some cider."

Persephone strode along the jagged cliff's edge, savoring the salty tang of the foaming white breakers that crashed on the black rocks below, the spicy aroma of pines dancing in the whistling wind. She loved her daily walks. Usually they relaxed her, but not tonight. Tonight an almost-familiar yearning tugged at her heart.

*"Come to me...I need you..."*

A cloud passed over the sun, and she shivered with the sudden chill as she watched terns soar overhead. She'd never heard voices before – until now. Well, one voice. Deep. Compelling. Male. Achingly lonely, foreign yet familiar. Heat pooled low and deep in response to that irresistible voice.

Sweet Zeus, her mind had snapped. No wonder her mother looked so mournful.

Persephone imaged the Olympian gossip already – “poor Demeter and that crazy Persephone.” Darn Sirens probably rolled on the floor laughing.

Tired, she turned back toward home, determined to put the voice from her. A wave of sleepiness washed over her. Demeter greeted her at the door with a cup of hot cider. Persephone stirred it with a cinnamon stick and sipped the steaming brew. She yawned, realizing she’d no idea what her mother had just been saying.

“Sorry, Mother. I’m tired. See you in the morning?”

Demeter’s eyes shimmered. “I love you, Persephone. Never forget that.”

Persephone shed her clothes and slid beneath the covers, but the cool Egyptian cotton irritated rather than soothed. She tossed onto her stomach and hugged her pillow, trying to get comfortable. At last her mind blurred and the world fell away...

*“Persephone...my love...”*

She never heard him approach, but his scent curled around her. Warm, male, a hint of musk and spice. Rough fingers slid over her skin in a sensuous caress, raising tingles of awareness in their wake. His lips followed, down her back, and she gasped. Every feathery kiss was a lick of flame...or was that his tongue? She squirmed at the rising heat, the need to turn over and embrace her dream lover. She tried to open her eyes...

*“Nay, sleep, Persephone, for dreams are all we have on this plane...”*

That voice! She knew that voice! How? When? She moaned as his hand delved between her thighs, and the questions slid away in a haze of sensation and need. He touched her with the absolute mastery of one intimately acquainted with her body. Feathery, teasing caresses tightened her muscles and made her tremble. His body, hot, hard, covered hers, and she cried out as he nipped the tender skin beneath her ear, then soothed it with a flick of his tongue.

“Please...” she whispered.

*“Close your eyes, Persephone. Keep them closed. Hold onto the dream...”*

He teased her with his mouth, with his hands, pushed her to the very edge countless times until she was incoherent and begging.

*“Say you want this. Say you want me...”*

*“Y-yes, please...D-don’t stop...I-I n-need yooou...”* Her voice had long since failed her, but her mind screamed as he suckled the tiny bud between her thighs and the pleasure crashed over her. A sharp pain pierced her inner thigh and she flew again, dimly aware of a fading as she came down, a growing coolness that lingered. His tongue teased her wet,

swollen folds, and she moved on his mouth, even as he took her blood, her life.

Persephone no longer felt the sheets, the softness of the pillows or mattress, but she was acutely aware of the strong arms wrapping her in a warm cloak of velvety black and bearing her up. She was so tired, almost too tired to open her eyes as he carried her outside, under the harvest moon. A horse snorted and he climbed onto a platform. Chariot, she realized. Her dream had taken a peculiar turn, and she risked a peek. Darkness swallowed them as they raced toward the mountain and then through it. The horses galloped through twisting turning passages. Down. Deeper into the earth. Cold gripped her bones, seized her heart, but Persephone couldn't summon the strength to shiver.

*"I'm a ghost..."*

*"Hang on, my love. We're almost there..."*

The horses halted at the edge of a black river, where a boat was moored. A cowed-and-robed skeleton awaited with outstretched hand, palm up.

*"Don't be cute,"* her dream lover growled. *"You're not amusing, Charon."*

*"You can't blame a guy for trying to make an honest living. Sheesh, boss."* The skeleton bowed to her. *"Welcome home, my queen."* He poled the boat into deeper water as Persephone's captor settled her back on a bed of velvet cushions...and himself.

*"Nay, not captor,"* he corrected her. His voice was like a tomcat purring in her ear. *"Try 'lord and master'."*

Her ghost self bridled at his teasing tone. *"You wish."*

The motion of the boat rocked her against him, against a hard erection. Her treacherous body wept with need. He nuzzled her ear, and she gasped at his warm breath on her sensitized skin. His curled fingers brushed the sides of her breasts. Almost touching...

*"You two need to get a room. Sheesh - I'm going blind over here,"* Charon complained.

Persephone jumped. *"You are a bad, bad man,"* she whispered. This was the weirdest, most vivid dream...

The boat bumped to a stop. *"This is no dream, my love, and I am no man. Charon?"*

The skeleton handed half a glowing green apple out to her. *"Here, my queen. You must eat this before you set foot on these shores."*

Persephone tried in vain to see what "these shores" entailed, but they were shrouded in mist. An ominous growling rumbled through the fog from some dread beast. She eyed the apple. *"Half an apple?"*

*"Half of everything,"* Charon corrected. The growling grew louder. *"Hurry, my lady."*

She bit into it and almost swooned. Sweet with hopes, dreams and promises kept, tart with bitter tears of loss, mortality and death. Complex duality – ambrosia had nothing on this. Strength flowed back into her. The mists beckoned her.

Home.

Charon helped her onto the pebbled shore. *"Farewell, my queen."* He poled the boat away. *"I'll take care of the horses, boss."*

*"Persephone."*

She turned at the pain, the yearning in his voice – and froze as she looked up. Piercing blue eyes blazed down at her from a tanned, chiseled face, framed by a cascading mane of tawny hair that just brushed his broad shoulders. She knew him. As well as she knew herself. "Hades?" She laid her palm against his cheek.

Warm. Solid. Real.

He closed his eyes, covered her hand with his own as he leaned into her touch. "I've waited so long for you, my love."

And she was his love, as he was hers – her love, her everything. Persephone pulled his head down to her, captured his lips with her own. Love...pain...joy...sorrow...love. Hades took full advantage of the kiss, stroking his tongue over hers, robbing her of breath until she clung to him. He reached down to cup her backside, haul her against an impressive erection.

A whine in three-part harmony broke them apart. Breathless, laughing, Persephone turned to the three-headed drooling canine monstrosity straining his chain to reach them. "All right, you big baby." Trying to rub three pairs of velvet ears while dodging three giant tongues took a dance worthy of Terpsichore. "Cerberus, if anyone ever discovers what a big baby you are..." His dragon tail wagged, slamming into the adamantine gate to Tartarus until it shook on its pillars.

"Only for you," Hades stated. "You bring light back to this place. To my heart." He waved a hand and the gate swung open. "Cerberus. Sit. Stay."

The dog obeyed, looking positively doleful.

As did the three sour-faced judges awaiting them on the other side of the gate. Didn't Aeacus, Minos and Rhadamanthus ever smile? Not even at the good souls headed for the Elysian Fields?

"Welcome home, my lady." Minos sounded as welcoming as the Plague.

Home sweet home. Persephone walked the familiar path through rolling meadows of pallid asphodel flowers, wrinkling her nose at their sulfurous odor. "Really Hades, I must have a word with our gardener. There are these wonderful bushes called lilacs...or peonies. They both come in ghostly white. You should try them."

"You did try them." Hades sounded amused.

Persephone blinked. "I did? When? What happened?"

He nodded. "Last year was lilacs. The year before it was peonies. Both times they died." He shrugged. "Welcome to Hell."

"Well, crap." Hell, one. Goddess of spring, zero. Persephone's shoulders sagged and she tried to breathe through her mouth. It didn't help. As they approached the palace, Persephone's eyes fastened on the six-foot-tall Dominatrix stomping toward them. She took Hades' hand and edged closer to him. The Furies and she had a mutual-antipathy relationship. Megaera looked none too pleased to see her.

Ditto.

"My lord." Megaera bowed to Hades, ignoring Persephone. "My chamber awaits General Araxes, but you've not yet signed off on Rhadamanthus' order." Three-inch blood-red claws drummed on her leather-clad thigh.

Persephone shivered at the thought of any soul, wicked or not, condemned to Tartarus and the nonexistent mercy of the Furies for all eternity.

The Furies thought her compassion weakness.

Hades slid an arm around Persephone's waist. "Can't it wait?"

Megaera shot a pointed look at Hades' crotch. "My lord, you have responsibilities. While you were gallivanting off to the mortal realm, things are backing up down here."

Hades' eyes flashed and the ground rumbled beneath Persephone's feet. "Watch yourself, red hair."

Megaera looked less than impressed, rolling her flat serpentine eyes as she held out the stylus. "Just sign the damned thing already."

Hades waved his hand over it. "Done. Now go away."

"Gladly." Megaera sneered at Persephone and continued on her merry way.

Hades swept Persephone into his arms and carried her up the stairs of his palace. Hard and cold, mostly black marble and obsidian, with twisting spires and all manner of carvings of mythical beasts and monsters. Persephone had always thought it ostentatious, but Hades insisted the God King of the Underworld needed a dark splendor to match that of

Olympus above.

"People expect a certain image when they think of me, and I dare not disappoint."

Persephone had seen the terrible public faces of Cerberus and Hades, had seen demi-gods piss themselves in the presence of her love. But she alone knew he had a soft spot for kittens and was ticklish...right about...here...

The room spun as he jumped.

"Damn it, woman – I almost dropped you," Hades snapped. "That was not the first impression I wanted you to have. Knock it off."

She kissed the frown away, then moved lower, to the side of his neck, and smiled when he staggered. A shudder rippled through her – from him.

"Ugh." Thanatos, Death, walked in with his arm draped over Alecto's shoulder. Megaera's blonde sister Fury, even less charming. "Get a room, boss."

Persephone laughed. "Where have we heard that before?" She slid her fingers through Hades' hair, pulling him close for a torrid kiss that drove their underlings from the hall. Hades braced against the nearest wall to take control of what she'd started, all but devouring her then and there. Persephone lost herself to the passion, the taste and feel of Hades. Her love.

"Sweet Zeus, I missed you," she panted, the first chance he gave her to come up for air.

"My brother's been called many things, love, but 'sweet' was never one of them." Hades grimaced and shifted. "I'll be lucky to walk to the bedchamber." He captured Persephone's hand and curled her fingers around his immense erection. "See what you've done?"

"Ooh, poor baby. Does it hurt? Want me to kiss it and make it better?" She teased him by squeezing gently.

He closed his eyes and groaned. "Wicked woman. What a wanton I unleashed."

Persephone sobered. "Only for you, my love."

He opened his eyes. They glittered with passion. "I know. Why you chose to remain, to return, year after year..."

"I love you."

His response was a heartfelt kiss of infinite tenderness that melted Persephone to her bones. She closed her eyes and sagged against him. A second later, cool satin sheets and velvety black rose petals caressed her bare back. Her eyes snapped open. They were in

Hades' bedroom, in a canopied bed the size of a football field. Well, near enough...

"You cheated!"

He grinned, the playful Hades no one ever saw. "I found I was in a hurry." He pinned her beneath him and bent down to take one of her nipples in his mouth, drawing hard, teasing the tip with his tongue.

She arched into his mouth, crying out and holding him closer. Her fingers sought the hard muscle underlying hot male flesh, clutching at his back, his shoulders. He switched to her other breast, his own fingers teasing between her nether curls. Persephone jumped as he stroked her swollen folds, drenched with her need for him. "Hades, don't tease!"

He raised his head to meet her gaze, his eyes dark and a little wild. "I've waited too long to rush now."

"Next time," she panted. "I need you *now*."

With a growl he surged into her – hot, hard, huge. She gasped as he stretched her, as her body adjusted. He captured the sound with his mouth, in a relentless carnal kiss that demanded her surrender. She stroked his tongue with her own, rocked her hips to take him deeper. Let others call this Hell. To her it was heaven, paradise.

How she'd missed him.

He took her higher, deeper, faster. The world spiraled out of control until all she knew, all she *had* was Hades. Passion transcended want into need, into love. The scent of his heated skin, the tickle of his breath against her neck, the taste of his kiss. He drew her legs over his shoulders, deepening his thrusts to rub that sweet spot over and over until the splendor shattered her into a million stars and she cried out his name. His whole body shook with his own release as he joined her.

She returned to awareness, to the scents of sweat and sex mingled with crushed rose petals. To the familiar feel of Hades rolling over to haul her into his arms, the familiar sound of his heart beating in her ear as she cuddled against him. To the realization that here was where she'd been trying to return – and her mother knew it, too.

"Why do I always forget?" Persephone asked. "How many times do I replay scenes like the meadows over and over again?" No wonder the Furies hated her – they probably thought she was an idiot.

Hades tensed, but then sighed and relaxed. "After the first time, we decided to have you drink from the Lethe."

"The River of Forgetfulness?" Anger rose, hot and swift. "How could you?"

"You were miserable when you returned to earth above. Your mother was beside herself. She and I decided that it would be kinder if you weren't torn in two every time you left."

"Like you were?" Persephone searched his eyes. "I didn't recognize your voice, but I felt your pain. You didn't drink, too?"

"It doesn't work on me." The truth – and his pain – was there for her to read.

"So you suffer year after year, while I go on my merry oblivious way? That's not fair."

His eyes blazed. "I would do anything to spare you pain."

"But not death?" She frowned.

"What?"

Persephone rose onto one elbow. "You killed me. Again."

"Not exactly." Hades bared lethal-looking fangs at her. "I'm God of the Underworld and King of the Dead. Only the dead can cross the river. If I hadn't, you'd never make it here. Charon and Cerberus would have stopped you. The apple finished the job of crossing you over."

"Half an apple. For half a year." Persephone tried to ignore the warmth of his hand, stroking soothing circles down her back. She wanted to stay mad at him a little longer.

He nodded. "Correct. Half lets you return to your mother and the sun. Half calls you back every autumn to winter here."

*Just one more bird-brain flying south for the winter...*

"You're the spring that breaks your mother's winter grip, that lets life begin anew above. It's vital you return. It's the best compromise your mother and I could work out." He sighed. "She really hates me."

"She's just overprotective. I'm all she has."

"Well, you're all *I* have."

She reached out to touch one of his fangs with her finger. "Why take my blood? Why that way?"

"You really don't understand?" Hades sat up, raked a hand through his hair. "Without you, I dwell in darkness. I hang out with Death and the Furies and the three happy amigos at the front gate. I *am* Tartarus, Persephone."

She rested her hand on his cheek, turned his face toward hers. "No. You're my love, guardian and protector of the Elysian Fields."

He shook his head. "Only because of you, your light and the goodness in your heart. You bring that here. To me. Your blood warms my body, softens my heart. I remember what it is to care. To feel love and compassion. I *need* you. Without you, I'm lost."

Such beautiful words. Persephone's eyes burned and a tear slid down her cheek. She moved to brush it away, but he beat her to it. She watched him bring it to his lips. Her heart was so full she thought it would burst as she curled her arms around his neck. "Come here."

"What do you think you're doing?"

"I'd say we've got a lot of catching up to do." She licked at his lips, nipping gently at the lower one until he growled and tried to deepen the kiss. But she drew back and pushed him down onto the mattress. "Nope. My turn to show you how much I've missed you – Lethe or no Lethe." Persephone rained feathery kisses over his collarbone, down across his chest to tease his nipple with the tip of her tongue. "Let's say I start here..." When he groaned and fisted his hands in her hair, she moved lower. "And down here..." Trailing her fingers up his thigh...almost but not quite reaching... "...and we meet in the middle?" Hades arched off the bed with a hoarse cry as she took him in her mouth, swirling her tongue around the head while cupping his stones with gentle fingers.

Persephone went to work with a will, teasing him with her mouth until he grew too large for comfort, then with her hands and tongue until he begged her to cease. But her body wanted him, too, and she didn't protest when Hades drew her over him. She sank onto him, gasping at the pleasure of their joining. His grasped her hips, guiding her in the age-old motion as he rocked into her. She rolled her hips in slow, shallow movements that teased, that heightened the anticipation to an excruciating crackle, pausing every time they neared the precipice.

Hades sat up to capture her breast, drawing deep as he stroked her nipple with his tongue. Persephone lost control, her body demanding fulfillment. Her nails tightened on his shoulders as she threw her head back and moved faster. He released her breast and wound her hair around his hand. "Look at me," he growled. Their gazes locked, and she wondered with her last shred of awareness if she looked as wild as he did. Then he reached between them, found the hidden bud she'd neglected. At his touch she flew, and he was right there with her as she pulsed around him, as he burst within her. A crackle of energy, like lightning. A connection – body, mind, heart and soul. He filled every last little cold corner, and she was complete.

Replete.

Hades fell back with a groan, Persephone sprawled across him. "I'm undone." He closed his eyes. His heart thundered under her ear. "Give me a minute. I've got a surprise for you."

She shivered as his fingertips trailed across her back. She loved his surprises...in a minute...or an hour. When she could move...

He recovered before she did, swinging off the bed to scoop her up. "Hold on." They flashed into a tropical paradise, into a deep bubbling pool of hot water. A warm waterfall cascaded into it from dizzying heights. Surrounded by ferns as tall as she and giant red flowers the size of her head, she yielded to a momentary frown. Why did flowers only grow in the Elysian Fields? She'd have to work on that.

He eased her into the glorious heat, and she purred as his fingers kneaded the tension from her lower back, then her thighs. She'd missed his touch, his smile, him.

"This is beautiful," she whispered.

"You're beautiful," he corrected her.

"This is a wonderful surprise." She smiled and sighed as his fingers released a knot above her knee.

"I'm glad you like it. But this isn't the surprise." He reached behind her and retrieved a velvet case from a rocky shelf. "Close your eyes."

She did, hearing something metallic clank and jingle.

"Open them."

Gold and precious gems glittered in his hands, but then their shape registered. "Matrimonial bonds?" she whispered. Her heart thundered in her ears as her gaze flew to his. The love in those melting blue eyes...she gasped and realized she'd forgotten to breathe.

"Aphrodite designed them, and Hephaestus made them just for us." Hades took a deep breath. "Marry me, Persephone. Be my wife, and queen, for all time. Topside or Under, wear them always. Bind me to you, forever and ever."

His taut face blurred in a rush of hot tears. She couldn't speak around the lump in her throat, and just nodded instead. He slipped the wide cuff around her right forearm, and she felt it seal with a click. No lock. No key. Permanent. Eternal. Hephaestus' finest work, with the beauty of Aphrodite. The beauty of their love, gifted to Persephone and Hades. She took his cuff, wrapped it around his arm. As it locked into place, the binding chains joining

them shimmered away. But Persephone felt them, binding her to Hades, heart and soul.

"Yours forever, husband," she whispered.

"Forever yours, wife." Hades pulled her into his arms for a tender heartfelt kiss. "This time around, we're doing this right. I love you. We'll find a way to get you flowers."

"All I need is you. I'm thankful for you." And Persephone meant that with all her heart.

### **About the Author**

Renee Wildes grew up reading fantasy authors Terry Brooks and Mercedes Lackey and is a huge Joseph Campbell fan, so the minute she discovered romance novels it became inevitable that she would combine it all and write fantasy romance. Renee is a history buff, from medieval times back to ancient Greece and Sparta. As a Navy brat and a cop's kid, she gravitated to protector/guardian heroes and heroines. She's had horses her whole life, so became the only vet tech in a family of nurses. It all comes together in her Guardians of Light series for Samhain – fantasy, action, romance, heroics and lots of critters!

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