

She never knew he loved her until...

Tarma is a sea-nymph who believes she's in love with the daemon-god Hades. The only glitch is that he doesn't seem to know she exists; and the harder she tries to catch his attention the further he runs. Tarma will soon learn how blind her love has been when she seeks the Goddess of Love for help.

Stephannie Beman

*Love
is
Blind*

Nymph
Chronicles

LOVE IS BLIND

Nymph Chronicles

Stephannie Beman
<http://stephanniebeman.com>
Barnes & Noble Edition

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either used fictitiously or the product of the author's imagination. Except for review purposes, no part of this book may be reproduced in whole or part, without written permission of the author.

This book is non-transferable and it is an infringement of the copyright to re-sell, share, or give away. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Warning!

This book contains graphic language, sexually explicit scenes, and violence. It is intended for the enjoyment of adult readers. Please keep out of the hands of children. All sexually active characters in this work are 18 years of age or older.

Cover by: Stephannie Beman
Cover photo courtesy of dreamstime.com; Sergey Pristyazhnyuk
Ruis Publishing
My Lord Hades © 2011 Stephannie Beman

Dedicated to Karen and Jennifer who asked for this story.

To my editors,
Ruth Ann Nordin and Kaylan Beman,
who took the time to read through this story and tell what they liked,
what they didn't, and what they thought would make it better.

Note to Readers

Every effort has been made to cleanly edit the text. However, typos do happen. If you find any errors, please email stephanniebeman@aol.com so I can continue to provide better books.

TARMA GROANED AND brushed a lock of long blue hair out of her sweaty face. Why did it have to be so hot? At the rate she was sweating sea water, she'd be absolutely dry.

Rayes didn't seem to notice the excruciating heat as she prattled on about a new god in the ranks of the Olympians, her gait quickening as they reached the Olympian encampment. Tarma sighed. What did she care if another self-centered god joined the ranks of the Olympians? This stupid war was about power and dominance! It wasn't as if any of the nymphs would benefit from the change of regime. One god was as bad as another. They all wanted the nymphs as willing bedmates, although they would accept the unwilling ones too.

"There he is," Rayes said, jumping up and down excitedly and pointing to the right of them.

Tarma blinked at the very uncharacteristic, emotional display playing out before her. Rayes had the personality of a leaf; in other words, none. She was too serious and too composed for one of the fun loving nymphs. Nothing like the emotional species they were. If a God could make Rayes throw her dignity aside and act as a child, Tarma had to see him.

Turning toward the practice ring, she scanned the area, searching for the object of Rayes' excitement. All she saw was Ares and a man in rags circling the arena with swords in their hands. A few feet away, several nymphs and gods she recognized watched. "Where?"

"Fighting Ares, of course. Isn't he magnificent?"

Tarma arched a brow. The man was dirty and disgusting. She glanced at her companion to see if Rayes could possibly be joking. She wasn't. "I don't see—"

A sound drew her eye back to the arena. Ares and the repulsive man were moving...circling. At first they were slow, testing each other. The speed of their movements increased as they danced around the arena.

Amazingly, the man kept pace with Ares. He barely looked able to stand on his own two feet. He was tall and painfully thin, closer to emaciated, with greasy hair that snarled over his bowed back and a scraggly beard that had been wrapped around his neck to keep it out of the way. She thought it might be black, but it could also be brown, or even blond.

She didn't see what Rayes saw in him, until he attacked. Weaving and twirling, the blade glittered in the sunlight, slicing through the air, ringing off metal. It was a deadly dance of blades that the man was more than adept at playing. He moved with the fluid grace of a panther, attacked with the speed of a viper, and stuck with the strength of a God.

She'd never seen its like. The strange, new God was built for war, even more so than Ares. While Ares hacked away, missing the lithe man more often than making contact, the man's blade struck every time. He was taunting Ares, sparking the God of War's anger, and the angrier Ares became, the more mistakes he made.

And then the man made a fatal error. He came too close to the swinging blade. Tarma cringed at the thought of the blade slicing through flesh and muscle, embedding itself into bone. She hated the thought of this magnificent man dying so soon. One moment the glittering blade was descending toward the man's neck and the next the blade was sailing through the clear morning air, a deadly glitter of cold steel. It landed in the grass with a thud.

Tarma looked back at the man. Was he a god? A Titan? Or a Daemon? For no mortal could do what he had.

Ares cursed loudly and glared at the man. "You're a dirty cheat, Hades."

Tarma started at the name. Hades? The immortal enemy of Cronus? The prisoner of Tartarus for the last thousand years or more? The daemon of awesome power? How had he gotten out of Tartarus?

"I fought to win," Hades said. His voice was deep, soft, and deadly as he sheathed the beautifully crafted sword.

Ares glared at Hades, his hands balled into fists. Tarma held her breath. Ares' temper was legendary.

"You cheated," Ares growled, stomping away.

Tarma and Rayes scampered out of his way. No one wanted to incur the wrath of Ares when he'd been thwarted. It was a death sentence...or some wished it was.

Hades watched Ares disappear into the village of tents, before he bent to retrieve Ares' sword from the grass. He cleaned the blade on his ragged clothes.

Startling blue eyes met Tarma's over the distance. The grief in that one look struck Tarma to her heart. This was a man worthy of her attention. This was a man she could love. In that moment, Tarma knew she wanted this daemon.

TARMA JOINED RAYES AND her sisters at the forest's edge. The peaceful setting of the forest and valley below seemed a strange backdrop to the devastation before them. The battle was well on its way. The clang of metal and war cries were the only sounds to be heard.

The Nymphs watched with a strange mixture of fascination and horror as the men, Gods, daemons, and monsters met on the field of battle. Blades flashed; glittering arcs of death, hacking through armor, flesh, and bone. The men were seeking to maim and kill each other.

It was a foolish attempt at war. So few of those down below were mortal and only they could die. It was an ineffectual way to prove who was right and who was wrong, or even who should rule. Strength of arm didn't make a good ruler.

The nymph society was so much more civilized. No leader ruled forever. They voted and the winner lead for several years before another was elected. It didn't always work, but anything was better than this butchery.

Tarma turned away from the bloodshed, ready to return to her water grotto and wait to hear the outcome of the battle from Keran, or one of the other nymphs. But then she spotted Hades. There was no way to tell for sure that it was him, but she knew it was. He was dressed as no other god she'd seen on the battlefield.

His armor was as black as the darkest night. It didn't shine or sparkle. It actually appeared to draw in the light, nullifying the bright day. And then there was the awful sword. She shivered at the sight of it. The blade was long and jagged, covered with red blood. It was a deadly and horrible thing, slicing into gods and monsters, ripping large holes through them.

Hades hacked a path through the army before him. Titans fell before him, bloody messes of immortality. She'd thought Ares and Enyo had been terrifying to watch, but next to Hades they were children. Hades was a warrior, like his mother Eris. A dangerous daemon. A dangerous God.

She watched in awe as he grabbed the shoulder of a Titan, ramming the length of his jagged blade through the man's chest, and tore the blade free while shoving the howling man from him. Her mouth opened, the scream bubbling upward, warning him that another Titan approached from behind.

The hilt twirled in his hand and Hades thrust the blade behind him as he dropped to his knee. His other hand shoved against the hilt, forcing it to pierce the body. His battle cry could be heard above the den of sounds. She shivered at the raw fury and pain in his voice.

Hades didn't hesitate. He rose, the skewered Titan falling to the ground behind him. Hades glanced down and yanked the jagged blade from the body. He turned to find the next combatant, but there were few left standing on the field. Bloody bodies littered the ground, groaning and twisting with the pain of their wounds.

Tarma glanced toward her sisters, their faces as horrified as hers must be. Was this truly the end of the conflict? Or was there to be more of these battles for supremacy?

She turned back to the field. Eris stood before Hades in black armor and with no helmet. The sharp tip of her serrated sword pointed at his throat. Tarma waited for the blow that never came.

Hades vanished. One moment he was there, head held high, ready for the blow, and the next he was inside her guard, grabbing her around the waist and tossing her like a doll. Eris spun through the air, landing on her toes.

Hades stalked forward, a lethal panther set to maim and possibly kill. Their deadly dance became a black blur of attack and defense. And then as suddenly as it all began, it ended.

Eris threw back her head and laughed. Tarma shivered at the cruel sound of Eris' laughter. She sheathed her sword and put her hand on her slender hip. They were too far away for Tarma to hear the conversation, but Hades' stance didn't relax and he didn't sheath his sword. He was prepared for another attack.

Tarma lost interest in their exchange, looking toward the movement behind Hades. Zeus, Poseidon, and one of the disgusting Cyclops' were making their way across the battlefield. She cringed as the lumbering monster crunched over the dead, dying, and injured without regard to friend or foe. Their screams were distant and small, for which she was grateful. What stupid creatures Cyclops' were!

By the time the Gods joined Hades, Eris had once more disappeared. The Cyclops spoke briefly to Hades, handing him a shiny object that looked to be a helmet. Tarma wasn't really sure why Hades bowed to the creature. Was it some old custom upon receiving a gift? If it was, it was wasted on the giant. Cyclopes' were too stupid and uncivilized to understand the gesture of respect.

The Cyclops moved away, leaving Zeus and Poseidon with Hades. They spoke as nymphs and Goddesses emerged from the forests and encampment of the Gods, venturing into the battlefield to retrieve their husbands and lovers.

Tarma sighed. At least the whole sordid affair was over now. Maybe the gods could focus on more important things, like flirting and dancing and parties. Oh how she missed the parties at Mount Othys and Mount Olympus. But lately no one seemed that interested in celebrating anything. Maybe now the whole sordid war was over; they would start again. She could use the opportunity to seduce Hades.

Tarma frowned as Hades stiffened at something Poseidon said to him. Hades spoke to Zeus and disappeared. It was strange to see. Unlike some of the older gods who slowly faded, Hades merely vanished. He was there one second and completely gone the next. If only she had that ability, she'd follow him.

Pouting at the lost opportunity to speak with Hades herself, Tarma turned away from the battlefield and headed for home. She had a little time to prepare for the plan forming in her mind. She'd need Iris' help with this one.

TARMA HAD A PLAN. Well, she had a partial plan. But first she needed to revitalize her body.

Stripping off her pale blue dress, she stepped into the cool water of the grotto, and sank into the ocean's welcoming embrace. The water swirled around her, seeping into her dry pores, and her body soaked up its healing magic. Like usual, she'd been away too long.

Relaxing into the smooth indentation carved into the rock, her tense muscles relaxed as her pores drew in the life-sustaining water. She really needed to be more careful. Oceanids should never remain so long away from the salt water, not if they wanted to keep their youth. Hyba was a good example of what could happen when a nymph was trapped away from her power source.

Hyba was a river nymph who'd been taken by a Titan and kept from her river. Every day away she'd looked older and older until the Titan had released her in disgust. Hyba had never recovered. She looked like a human of seventy, instead of an ageless immortal of twenty.

“Tarma!”

She squeaked, throwing a hand over her mouth to muff the scream. Keran’s head surfaced a few yards from her feet. “Keran!” she shouted, splashing water at the offending water sprite. “Idiot! You scared me!”

He laughed, that low, sexy laugh she adored, and swam closer. “You looked so cute sitting there naked and so deep in thought, love.”

She snorted, trying to remain angry at him despite the smile curling her lips. He was possibly the most gorgeous, annoying, and incorrigible sprite she’s ever met. And the smirk on his face said he not only knew it, he knew how he affected her.

The look on his face was filled with dark promises, intimate moments, and sexual potential. Her belly fluttered and her thighs clenched as wetness flooded her pussy. It spelled trouble for her and her plans.

She shivered and stood. The cool sea breeze washed over her wet skin and her nipples hardened to points. He took a step toward her. “Oh no you don’t,” she said, spinning around in an attempt to escape.

She scrambled up the gentle slope of the ghetto, her feet slipping on the slick stones. In her urgency, she lost her footing and started to fall. Keran caught her hand, twirling her into his strong embrace. Her naked flesh slithered deliciously over his wet, muscular one, momentarily distracting her.

She stood on one leg, the other wrapped around his. Gripping his shoulders to steady herself, her body pressed tightly to his, she inhaled the salty scent of the sea that clung to his warm skin. Just one taste. One blissful taste couldn’t hurt, could it?

“Why not?” he asked, tilting his head to the side, looking at her with those large blue eyes and pouty lower lip.

Yes, why not? Why not indulge in him? Why not enjoy his expertise? Why not kiss him as she longed to do?

Caressing the back of his neck, her fingers tangled in his black-blue hair, drawing him even closer. His eyes met hers, seeing something in their depth, probably acceptance. His mouth descended upon hers, soft as kelp and tasting of brine, claiming her.

All thought fled in the wake of his kiss. Her body undulated against him, seeking him, seeking an end to the torment flaring to life in her belly and burning through her veins. The shaft of his engorged cock brushed against her entrance and her pussy muscles clenched, trying to grab hold and draw him inside her. Keran lifted her up, his lips moved over hers, and she opened to him, surrendering to the desire.

His strong hands encircled her thighs. Her long legs wrapped around his waist, dragging his rigid cock hard against her clit. He stirred against her, tickling her pussy lips, teasing her. She groaned, breaking their kiss.

He walked toward the shore, his feet sliding on the rocks, and suddenly they were falling backward. Cold, crisp water washed over her head, clearing her mind. She had to stop doing this! They could not keep on this way!

Shoving off Keran’s chest, she waded through the shallow water, leaving Keran to struggle in the water alone. She had to get away. She had to keep her mind clear. She needed clothes!

“Oh, come on, Tarma. Don’t be mad.”

She glanced at him in all his naked glory with that adorable, crooked smile on his face. Oh how she wanted to run her fingers over those wiry muscles and wrap them around his hard cock. How she wanted to bury him deep inside her and ride the wave. How she wished things were different between them, but she refused to be a pawn in her father’s bid for domination.

Keran wasn’t going to trick her into bedding him with a few well-placed smiles and kisses. “It’s

not going to happen.”

“I hear the war is over and life can get back to normal,” he murmured from behind her.

She shivered and bent to pick up her discarded dress. She had to be strong. She had to remember why sex with Keran was a horrible idea. “The Olympians won.”

His arms wrapped around her and she melted into his embrace. It wasn’t fair to either of them. They’d agreed to part ways years ago and live their lives a part from each other. They’d both moved on.

“Let me go, Keran,” she whispered.

“You don’t want me to, Tarma.” His breath fanned across her neck and liquid heat flooded her thighs. She hated when he resorted to cheap tactics. She had little defense against him. “I can—”

She jabbed him in the solar plexus, struggling in his grasp. “Let me go, Keran!”

He released her with a frown. “What’s wrong?”

Tarma turned away from him and dove into the water, heading for her underwater home. As expected, Keran followed her. He’d been her best friend and confidant years before they’d had sex, after parting ways they had returned to being friends. But right now she really didn’t want his company.

He was different today, demanding and persistent, as if he wanted something from her but refused to tell her what it was. Any other day she would have strived to figure it out. Today she was too busy to figure out why. There was so much she needed to do before she implemented her plans tonight.

She entered her home through the short passage, pulling herself from the water into the cavern inside the biggest of the shoreline rocks. As she stepped from the water, every drop that hadn’t absorbed into her skin, slid from her body and hair, pooling around her feet, leaving her clean and dry.

Crossing the small living space to her wardrobe, she opened the large doors and looked at the dresses she’d collected over the years from the Titan and Olympian Goddesses. What would be the best choice for a seduction?

She didn’t have the breast size to pull off Persephone’s old red dress. She could probably use one of Aphrodite’s wraps. They single pieces of cloth that could be wrapped around her slim body. She could add padding to her small breasts, allow it to dip low in the front, and hug what few curves she had.

“Tarma, what’s going on?”

She shrugged and pulled out a dark sapphire dress. “I have plans tonight and I need to get ready.”

“Who are you visiting tonight? Aphrodite?”

Tarma frowned and turned on him. Was that jealousy she heard in his voice? If it was, he didn’t have the right to his envy. She wasn’t his concern anymore.

“Of course not! She’s busy with Hephaestus.” Tarma draped the cloth over her shoulder and started wrapping the length around her slender body, clasping the edges at her shoulder with a pearl broach Hephaestus had made for Hera. “Can you believe he’s denying her his husbandly duty? With his looks he ought to be happy to have a goddess like Aphrodite willing to bed him.”

Keran’s blue eyebrow disappeared beneath his curly dark hair. “That was shallow.”

“Well it’s true,” she huffed, embarrassed by her unthinking comment. She picked out a pearl necklace and wrapped it around her neck, knotting the end. “Hephaestus... Well he’s Hephaestus!”

“Maybe she likes him.”

Tarma grunted. “He’s kind enough, but he’s dirty and crippled and short tempered—”

“Maybe she sees what others don’t.” Tarma turned on Keran, a retort on her lips, but he added, “Hephaestus is a good God, unlike some of the others you chase!”

She closed her mouth, teeth clenched tightly. How dare he! What she did or did not do was none of his concern! He'd made that abundantly clear when he walked out of her life all those years ago.

"At least I go after what I want!" He blinked, his face shocked. She stepped into the water, creating a protective bubble around herself. "See you later, Keran; I have a God to seduce."

Before he could say another word, she walked into the sea, struggling to purge his big, blue eyes from her sight. He looked like one of the wolf pups that Persephone sometimes found. The ones who stared at her with sad eyes and she just wanted to hold and snuggle until the hurt went away.

Shrugging, she shoved aside the twinge of guilt and regret, and tried to focus on the night ahead of her. She wasn't going to let Keran's words affect her. There was nothing she could do to fix the problem anyways. After all, what could she do if her words had struck a nerve with Keran? If he couldn't handle the truth, then he shouldn't have fought with her.

Sighing, she headed for Mount Olympus. There was a god waiting for her and she was looking forward to the night ahead with Hades.

SLIPPING THROUGH THE DARK halls of Mount Olympus, Tarma stopped before the door Iris told her that was Hades' room. The scarred wooden door to his room resided in the farthest corner of the palace, in a section of rooms meant for a servant or an unwanted guest, not for a daemon-god that had changed the tide of battle and freed them from the tyrannical rule of Coronus.

The heavy door opened easily on well-oiled hinges, and she slid through the crack and into his rooms. From the light of the small window, she could see Hades laid out on the bed, his breathing deep and heavy, almost a snore. He didn't even twitch as she slipped out of her dress and into his bed.

Curling up beside him, she watched him sleep, the light of the moon highlighting his handsome features. He was handsome despite the scars curving over his shaved cheek. They appeared to be claw marks and she wondered how he had gotten such fearsome wounds.

His beard wasn't the only thing he'd trimmed. He'd hacked his black hair short. She reached out to touch his hair, the soft locks curling around her finger. She played with the springy curl for a few moments before settling in beside him. Closing her eyes, Tarma drifted into a deep sleep, waking again as the first light of morning flickered across her eyes.

Hades was still sleeping, his arm curled protectively around her shoulder and his hand resting on her hip. His breath fanned the small hairs of her neck and she shivered with the delicious sensations flooding her belly.

Tarma stretched against him, moving ever so slowly. Her hand sidled over his chest and down his lower abdomen, swirling lower and lower. He was amazingly muscular and well-built for being in prison so long.

Her hand dropped lower, stroking the tip of his engorged penis. His hips bucked under her hand and his breathing changed. If she didn't move soon, she would lose her advantage, and she'd need all the advantage she could get to conquer Hades.

Rising up, the wiry hairs tickled her face as she kissed a path over his chest, down his abdomen, and...

His body stiffened. His breath ceased. Torches flared around the room and his huge body disappeared under her.

Tarma blinked several times and sat up. She looked around the room and found Hades standing across the room, breathing hard. He was a glorious sight. All lean muscle, coiled strength, and scarred flesh. His erect phallus rose proud and tall against his belly, bobbing gently with each breath he took.

Crawling naked across the bed toward him, Tarma keep her eyes locked on the object of her

desire and licked her lips in anticipation. What would he taste like? Would he be salty as the sea? Or would he taste of his soap?

“Who are you?! And what in Tartarus are you doing here?!”

Tarma smiled up at him, sliding off the bed and walking toward him. “Isn’t it obvious? I’m looking for a little fun,” she murmured, happy at the sultry, smoky flavor of her voice.

“Look for it somewhere else.”

Tarma’s eyes dropped to his groin and she reached toward his large cock. “I can bring you such pleasure.”

Hades’ eyes dropped, following her gaze. He frowned, as if not understanding what he was looking at and then his face flushed scarlet. “I don’t think so,” he said, his voice strained and colored with some unnamed emotion.

He disappeared. Tarma blinked and glanced around the room. He was really gone.

“Damn man!” she huffed, sitting on the bed. What was his problem?

She glanced down at her body and frowned. She wasn’t too skinny or fat. Her frame was tiny, some gods called it child-like, but she wasn’t that small, just delicate. She wasn’t as curvaceous as Aphrodite or Demeter, but she wasn’t as boyish as Artemis or Athena. Her breasts were a nice handful. She had no disfiguring scars or unsightly marks. Her body wasn’t suffering the effects of being too long from the water. So what was wrong with her?

Crawling back into the bed, she pulled the sheet over her body, and snuggled into the warm impression of the bed. She wasn’t about to return to her home until sunrise. She wasn’t going to give Keran the satisfaction of learning about her humiliation.

TARMA DIDN’T HAVE TO worry about Keran. He wasn’t there when she arrived home. She tried to convince herself that it didn’t matter; that he was probably off with the other nymphs or water sprites, but it did matter. He was always there for her, waiting for her to return, ready to listen to her exploits or hold her as she cried. Not today. And it hurt to know that she was cause of his absence.

Stepping into the water, she let the regenerating power of the water wash over her, to revitalize her body and her soul. She relaxed into the water and dozed, until the distant sounds of laughter could no longer be ignored. Rising from the pool, she wrapped her dress around her and headed towards Demeter’s Valley.

“Tarma,” Rayes greeted her as she entered the forest clearing. Two other nymphs stood with her, Myena and Kyara. “Are you coming with us to see Persephone?”

Tarma shrugged. It’s not like she had anything else to do. Hades hadn’t come back to his rooms and she thought it unlikely that he would. She would have to try another way to get him alone.

Maybe she could visit Aphrodite and ask her for help. Aphrodite always seemed more than willing to aid the nymphs in their love interests, especially when it involved the other gods. Tarma secretly thought Aphrodite enjoyed causing havoc with the Olympians, although she wasn’t really sure why. Zeus had rescued her from Coronus’ clutches and given her a place to live.

Regardless of the belief of most the gods and Goddesses who thought Aphrodite an unrepentant whore, Tarma sensed a brewing anger inside the Goddess. Most of the time she hid it, but there were times Aphrodite seemed to take an unholy pleasure in tormenting the Olympian Gods. Her favorite of late was Zeus.

Tarma wondered what he had done to anger Aphrodite. She thought it might be because Zeus had given her to Hephaestus instead of Ares, although why Aphrodite would prefer Ares over some of the other gods out there, Tarma wasn’t sure. Even crippled grouchy Hephaestus was better than Ares. Then again, Aphrodite had been baiting Zeus for years, so maybe that wasn’t the reason at all.

“Come on, Tarma!” Myena called.

Following, the others through the forest, she barely noticed when Rhea joined them or when they started reenacting the battle yesterday. It wasn't until Rayes thrust a stick into her hand and demanded that she defend herself that Tarma snapped out of her melancholy. At first she was angry that they wouldn't just leave her alone, but then she started to enjoy herself.

They fought and laughed and tumbled in the grass all the way to Demeter's Valley. Rhea led them up the hill to where Persephone was weaving flowers into crowns. Tarma felt a twinge of sorrow for the young Goddess. Life had been so unfair to her.

Three years under the complete law of her overprotective mother, who'd refused to tell her the truth of who she was due to her fear that Persephone would leave her alone, wasn't healthy for the girl. She looked like a wane, wax doll playing with her flowers. Something the real Persephone would have never done.

Rhea hollered a battle cry and swung her stick, forcing Rayes back. Rayes tread on her dress and stumbled. Rhea poked her with the tip of her play sword and Rayes grabbed the edge with a mock cry of dismay. In an act so unlike her, Rayes fell to the ground, rolled to her side, and closed her eyes. Her limbs twitched a few times and Tarma rolled her eyes, breaking away from the rest and heading toward Persephone.

She was done playing child games. She wanted to talk about Hades and she knew Persephone would listen without rancor. “You should have seen him, Persephone!” Tarma said, taking a seat on the grass beside Persephone. “He's wonderful. So big. So handsome. So strong.”

“He was magnificent in his black armor!” Rayes gushed from her place on the ground. Tarma looked at her and stuck out her tongue. Rayes was ruining her moment. “And fearless as he met the Titans on the field of battle. It nearly took my breath away.”

Persephone shook her head, laughing. “Who are you speaking of? I take it another man has caught your attention?”

Rayes laughed, tossing her blonde hair behind her as she took a seat beside Persephone. “Not just a man. A god. And he would catch your attention too, young Persephone. The quiet dignity of his presence, so unlike the other gods' empty posturing. The mask of determination on his face, the pride of his stance, the kindness in his touch—”

Tarma leaned in and whispered, “She tripped in front of him and he lifted her up as if she weighed naught.”

Rayes glared at her and she grinned. “He's a gentle man. Unlike some of the gods who would have fallen or walked over me!”

Tarma couldn't deny that. Hades was so different from the other gods.

“Zeus and Poseidon brought Hades from the Underworld to aid their fight,” Rhea interrupted. Tarma glanced at her, curious at what her real game was today. Rhea always had a reason for visiting Persephone, though why she did so in the disguise of a nymph they called Julas was beyond her. “'Twas wonderful to watch ten years of war finished in a day. He defeated them!”

Persephone's eyes widened and she leaned forward, her interest in the subject plain. “Alone?”

“No, silly Goddess.” Rhea tapped the tip of Persephone's nose with a smile. “The Olympians helped. But it was amazing. He's six feet tall. Dark complexion, though pale from his time in the Underworld—”

“He hides a deep inner hurt in those blue-black eyes,” Rayes said. “Reminds me of the injured animals you sometimes tend, Persephone.”

“He's handsome.”

“With lovely silky hair. Black as coal.”

“Don't forget that face. He even puts Apollo to shame.”

Persephone sighed. Myena and Kyara stopped long enough to look at each other and rolled their

eyes. Tarma frowned.

Rhea definitely had an agenda today. She was gushing about her nephew as if she was in love with him, and yet, Tarma knew she had no romantic feelings for Hades. Rhea was still deeply in love with the husband that betrayed her. So what game was she playing, and why was Rayes the only one invited to participate?

“What face?!” Rayes asked. “Half of it’s covered by a beard longer than my leg. All you can see are those gorgeous eyes.”

“Haven’t you seen him of late?” Myena called out, ducking under Kyara’s swinging stick. “He’s trimmed the beard and cut his hair.”

“I think he has a nice piece of man flesh beneath that tunic,” Tarma added, just to be spiteful. They’d ruined her fun. So she’d ruin theirs!

Myena and Kyara halted and stared at Tarma. Rayes and Rhea straightened.

“You’ve seen his man parts?” Rayes asked, envy plain in her voice.

Tarma nodded, gloating over the fact that she of all the nymphs had. They didn’t need to know the whole story or how he’d rejected her. “A few hours ago.”

“What did you do, Tarma?” Rhea demanded.

Tarma gulped and looked at Rhea. The Earth goddess was furious. Most couldn’t tell, but Tarma could see it in every line in her body. She was in so much trouble and she wasn’t even sure why. And she sure as Tartarus wasn’t going to say anymore and get herself in any more trouble.

“His what?” Persephone said before Tarma was forced to share what she’d done. All four nymphs and Rhea shifted uneasily and grew quiet. Tarma wanted to disappear. She was in so much trouble now. If Persephone said anything to Demeter...

“Come now,” Persephone cajoled. “Surely I’m old enough to know such things. Please tell me what this ‘man parts’ is.”

Rayes shook her head. “Your mother wouldn’t approve of such talk.”

When had that really stopped any of them from speaking? Persephone knew far more than Demeter would ever approve of. Except this was one thing Tarma wasn’t ready to tell her about.

“Please, I’m old enough to know what this ‘man parts’ is.”

Rhea glanced toward the house, plucking a blade of grass and twirling it between her fingers. A glimmer of determination lit her dark eyes. Tarma so didn’t want to be here anymore. She knew that look. Rhea was about to do something she’d hate.

“Most women are married at her age with a tassel of children following them,” Rhea said. “Would you rather have her know the truth of her gender or be taken unaware? Would you have her be like Hymenia?”

Kyara and Myena shrugged and stared at the grass with unusual interest. Tarma spoke for them. “We want nothing to do with this, Rh-Julus.”

Julus nodded. “Then go. We’ll speak of Hades later.”

Tarma cringed. The other two nymphs giggled and continued their mock battle, heading for the beach. Tarma reluctantly followed them. She’s almost slipped and broken Rhea’s one rule. Never tell Persephone her real name. As for Hades, Rhea seemed to have other plans for him, ones that Tarma knew she wouldn’t like. If she was only to have one chance at bedding Hades, she had to go see Aphrodite now.

APHRODITE WAS WHERE SHE usually was since marrying Hephaestus, alone in her atrium tending to her flowers. In previous weeks Tarma might have had to wait until after Aphrodite was finished with her latest lover. But since her marriage, Aphrodite had withdrawn from life and Hephaestus was rarely far from her. Today was no different.

Hephaestus answered the door, saw who was there and bid her enter. She waited in the seating room, trying not to gape at the changes to the room. It was nothing like she remembered with the jewel tone pillows and sheer curtains hanging from the ceiling. This room was like Aphrodite's atrium or bathing room. Tastefully done and soothing.

"Aphrodite's in the garden room with her flowers," Hephaestus growled, pushing past her to the door, which closed behind him with a clunk.

Tarma hurried to the atrium, ready to empty her heart to the Goddess. Aphrodite sat on one of the stone benches waiting for her. Tarma collapsed beside Aphrodite and the story poured from her mouth and into the listening ear of the sympathetic Goddess—from the moment she first saw Hades to her failed attempts to seduce him.

"Please make him fall in love with me," she concluded. "I'll do anything."

Aphrodite said little during the whole story, but with Tarma's heartfelt plead, she finally moved. Smiling sadly, she patted Tarma's wringing hands. "I can't force him to love you—"

"Of course you can!" Tarma protested. She wiggled her fingers. "Do that magic thing you do and make him love me."

"That isn't love, Tarma. It's enslavement. I won't do that to either of you."

"But I love him!" Tarma wailed, throwing herself to her knees before the Goddess. How could Aphrodite be so cold to her plight? "If he'd but—"

"Hades is all wrong for you—"

"Please, Aphrodite."

Aphrodite sighed and laid her hand upon Tarma's head. Her head tingled, the warmth spreading outward, washed over her, hot, bright, and loving. Her skin prickled from head to toe. Her belly fluttered and moisture trickled from pussy. Her nipples hardened to small, almost painful pebbles.

She needed sex. She craved sex. But it wasn't Hades' image that flooded her mind.

Tall. Blue haired. Strong, but not overly muscular. Lean. With an, oh so adorable, sexy grin.

"What have you done?" she cried, her body shuddering.

"Giving you what you needed and what you wanted. Hades can never be yours. His heart and soul belongs to another. As does yours. Be not blind to love. Open your eyes, Tarma. Go to him."

KERAN SAT ON THE sand of his beach. Waves lapped at his toes, slithered up his legs, pooling around...She shook her head and tried to force her steps in the other direction. This was a mistake. She couldn't do this to either of them.

Her feet continued to move toward him. He turned his head and stood, his face worried. "Tarma, I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by what I said. I was..." He frowned. "What's wrong? What happened? Are you all right? He didn't—"

"He didn't do anything," she whispered, looking at her childhood friend and sometime lover with new eyes. "Nothing happened."

She stared at him, entranced by his powerful body, by each curve and shadow. They begged to be touched, kissed, and licked. Except for the small piece of cloth covering his manhood, Keran's naked, gorgeous body was on display for her pleasure. He was all lean muscle, more sinewy than bulk. His broad chest and shoulders tapered down to a slim waist and hips and down to muscular legs. Like most of the water nymphs and sprites, Keran was hairless apart from the long blue-black hair on his head adorned with braids, shells, coral, and bits of shiny stones.

He strode toward her, opening his arms, ready to comfort her as he always had. His face creased with concern. She knew it was wrong, and a very bad idea, but she stepped into his comforting embrace regardless. His strong arms encircled her, holding her tight. For the first time she felt safe and protected. She never wanted to leave his strong embrace. Inhaling, she breathed in his scent.

Masculine and salty, like the brine of the sea. Home. She was finally where she belonged.

He murmured gently into her hair, his voice rising and falling, like waves on the stone, soothing her. His rough palms caressed her back, the tender gesture a startling contrast to his tough exterior. She wanted those long fingers moving over her body, touching her everywhere.

Keran was her friend, one that she occasionally had sex with, but she'd never thought of him as anything more, at least not before Aphrodite had cast her spell over Tarma. Now he was a delectable morsel she wanted to devour. A man she was desperate to possess. And yet, she feared destroying her friendship with him for a little roll in the ocean.

She sighed, cursing Aphrodite in the same breath she thanked her for opening her eyes. She had to stay away from him. She was poison to his life. Her father would use her to make Keran do as he wished.

Another wave of desire crashed over her and her knees gave under the scorching rush of magic. He caught her, pulling her closer. The cloth of her dress brushed against her sensitive nipples, hardening them to twin peaks, and feeding her already rampant arousal.

"Tarma? Are you all right?"

His warm breath fanned across her neck, sending chills down her spine. "No," she mumbled against his shoulder, tasting the salt on his skin. One little taste couldn't hurt, could it?

Gently, he grabbed her arms and held her at arm's length, studying her face with a frown. She met his gaze, letting him see it all in her eyes. Everything she felt for him and hidden these past years. Everything she wanted and needed from him.

"What happened to you, Tarma? What did he do?"

"Nothing. Everything." She sighed. "Hades didn't touch me. He ran." She licked her lips and his eyes followed the movement, the blue eyes darkened to the blue-gray of a storm cast sea.

"Aphrodite was right; Hades wasn't for me."

Keran looked relieved and nodded, his grip loosened on her arms. "What---?"

She halted his next questions with a kiss. A kiss full of passion and need. A kiss that held everything in her heart. A kiss that laid bare her soul.

Hands tangled in his hair and her hips bucked against him, seeking. The thunderous waves of Aphrodite's magic crashed inside her, driving her forward, overriding her good sense in her basic need to take what she wanted. He responded to her kiss, crushing her to him, warm lips moving over hers, coaxing her, accepting her.

Keran's calloused hands, a stark difference to her soft flesh, slid over her breasts, cupping the globes in his hands, rolling her nipples as he kissed a path down her neck, edging her dress down, and exposing her breasts to his lips. She gasped when his hot mouth closed over a nipple. His tongue swirling around the hard pebble, flicking it, sending lightning to her mons.

Her hips bucked, and she whimpered. The raging maelstrom Aphrodite set brewing beneath her skin magnified every touch, every sensation. Her body was electrified by his touch.

"Keran!" she moaned, her nails biting into his shoulders. "Please!"

She frantically tore at his loin cloth, baring him to her gaze. His thick, slightly curved phallus leapt into her hand, semi-hard and handsome. She slid her hand down the velvety softness of his shaft, the loose skin tightening in her palm, and back up to the spongy tip.

Dropping to her knees, she took him into her mouth, relishing the taste of the sea and him on her tongue, savoring his choked cry of pleasure as she took his whole length into her mouth. A few strokes of her tongue over and around him, licking the underside of his shaft, and she had him squirming and gasping. His hand twisted in her hair, gliding her, pulling her away.

"Later," he promised at her protest, dragging her up against his solid chest. "I've wanted you for so long," he confessed, his warm breath puffing across her neck.

"Keran," she purred, grinding her hips against him. "I want you now."

He nodded and lowered her to the ground, his mouth and body covering her. But she would have none of that. She rolled with him in the sand, wiggling her way out from beneath him, shoving him down when he moved to join her.

Lifting her dress, she straddled him, reveling in the slide of flesh upon flesh. All hardness and softness. All she would ever crave lay beneath her.

She settled in the saddle of his hips, leaning down and kissing him, teasing his lips with her tongue. He opened to her and her tongue mated with his, sparred with him. His hands gripped her hips, pressing her into the hard length of his cock, grinding her against him, rubbing his length in her wet slit.

The tip of his erection nudged her entrance and he sheathed himself into her hot core in one swift movement. He stilled, straining and thick inside her. Her body arced, driving him further into her. The contrast of warmth and cold waves rolling over their legs almost send her spiraling into oblivion.

His hands cupped her small breasts, kneading and drawing them toward his mouth. He sucked and licked them, rolling her nipples in his mouth, arousing her further, and allowing her tight passage to accommodate his thickness. When she was ready she moved, her hips rocking back and forth, gaining momentum.

Her fingernails traced a pattern across his chest and along his ribs, drawing a satisfying rumble from Keran. Time seemed to stand still. Her body warmed. Her mind stilled. Her first orgasm rocked through her, startling her, and seeming to satisfy the magic riding her. Keran's face twisted in a grimace of pleasure as her hips undulated erratically on him.

Keran twisted under her and she found herself beneath him. "Not so quick, my love."

Before she could react, he grabbed her hands, stretching them above her head. And with a sexy smile he pulled out with aching slowness and she bucked her hips, striving to recapture his cock with a cry of protest. With a half growl he slammed to the hilt inside her. She cried out, throwing her head back. He licked the hollow of her throat, sucking the flesh into his mouth, marking her as his, claiming her.

Her soft cries became an accompaniment to the gentle slaps of the sea over them and relentless thrusts into her slick passage. The exquisite intensity of him slipping deep into her sent her over the edge. Her body tingled as the building tension crested, shivering through her, and crashed over her. Her inner muscles tightened around him, drawing him in.

He shouted her name as he thrust deep inside her. Warmth filled her as thin, ropey shots of semen emptied into her quivering womb. He collapsed on his forearms above her, and she enjoyed the feeling of him over her. His breath hot upon her breasts, his ragged breathing slowing. "I love you," he whispered drowsily.

She smiled. "I love you too, Keran."

Aphrodite was right. Keran was who she needed, who she truly wanted. And she'd fight to keep him.

About the Author



Stephannie Beman has been a storyteller since the moment she first learn to speak, an avid reader since before she could really read, a writer since she penned her first story at the age of eight, and a daydreamer on a mission. For her, fables have always been alive, fairy tales have lessons to teach, and myths are survivors of bygone years.

Stephannie, her husband, and two daughters presently live on a small ranch in Southwestern Wyoming in the original homestead cabin, surrounded by a forest, meadow land, mountains, and a river which only fuel her already fertile imagination. In her world legends walk, myths live, and love is eternal.

Email: stephanniebeman@aol.com

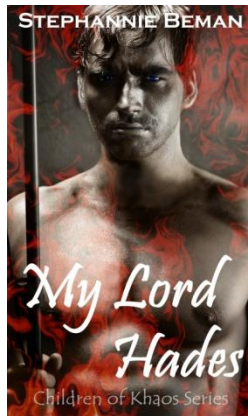
Website: <http://stephanniebeman.com>

Blog: <http://stephanniebeman.com/blog>

Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/stephanniebeman>

My Lord Hades

Book 1 of the Children of Khaos Series



In a world where Gods rule and Daemons are feared, Hades, the most notorious Phlegethon daemon-god to roam the ancient world, is released from his prison in Tartarus by the Olympian Zeus to aid in the war against the Titans.

Past shrouded in darkness, Persephone, daughter of the earth goddess Demeter, heals from the ordeal that stole her memories and the magic that is an integral part of who she once was. When she meets a stranger in the woods, her life is forever changed.

Betrayed by the Gods he once served, battle-weary Hades promised to never allow another god power over him, but he didn't plan on the intervention of the Fates intertwining his future with the stunning woman dancing in the moonlight, or the rise of his Phlegethon nature that demands he claim her as his own. Persephone has become the siren calling him, promising the completion of heart and soul, but only a fool accepts the gifts of a siren, or fight against the will of the Fates.

Chapter 1

“HADES,” HER soft voice whispered across his senses, a sudden and sharp relief to the screams whirling around him. “I know you can hear me, Hades. Wake up.”

He groaned, shifting his tired muscles. The effort to move taxed him, but the thought of seeing her again, even for a moment bolstered his failing strength.

Jagged stones and shards of broken pottery sliced the soles of his tattered feet as he placed his weight upon them and straightened. The chains above his head rattled and the pressure on his suspended arms lessened. Needles tingled beneath the surface of his numb limbs.

Peering through the greasy black strands of his long hair, he stared at the renewed torment that would be his. The pale cast upon her lovely features tore at his soul. She was dead, a mere shade of the woman he had known.

She stood before him, stunning and child-like, highlighted by the faintest glow in the cold, windowless cell of his prison. Her black hair was a tangled mess and her skin marked by bruises and smudges of dirt. Her white dress hung in soiled tatters from her willowy frame, revealing the fullness of her rose-tipped breast, the curve of her hip, and the length of her thigh. It was a peek and tease that held no desire for him.

But Coronus couldn't have know that when he sent her in to Hades. Leuce was here to break his will, his soul. She was here to destroy him.

“Go away, phantom,” he rasped.

“Look at me, Hades,” she snapped. “See what your pride has done to me!”

He winced, fighting the urge to play Coronus' game. She might look like his Leuce, but it wasn't Leuce. This was his enemy, his tormentor, his unwelcome king. This was Coronus and he had to be careful, because if Coronus realized how her presence affected him, she would be trapped in this cesspool of misery, her voice joining the masses inside his cell. He could survive anything they threw his way, but not that, not her.

She stamped her foot. “Look at me, damn you!”

He lifted his head. The coarse hair of his beard pulled against the half-healed scabs covering his chest. A triumphant smile twisted her innocent face. He knew if she stayed, he would grow to hate her with the same passion with which he loved her.

“Why? You're not her. You're a shade, paltry replica of the real thing.”

She glared at him, hands on her narrow hips, chin jutting out in that way he'd thought so adorable when she was a child, her black eyes blazing. She was as passionate in death as she'd been in life. “You killed me!”

“Killer! Monster!” the voices shrieked in unison.

Their accusations grounded him. The world condemned him. They reviled him. They hated him. They had made him the murderer, the assassin, and the killer. But he was also a warrior, a hunter, a hero, and a god. He was a Phlegethon daemon-god, a spirit of fiery passions given immortal form.

He faced her, he faced Coronus. “The Titans killed Leuce. If you're going to torture me, Coronus, stick with the voices of my victims. At least I killed them.”

“Murderer!” the voices screamed in agreement.

Her eyes narrowed, and she glided closer, her black hair whipping around her face as if she was standing in the middle of a maelstrom. “And you don't think you're responsible for my death?”

“No.”

“I'm a rotting corpse, Hades!”

A blue tinge spread across her lovely bronzed skin. The faint blue turned white then grey. Her

skin shrunk upon her bones and the stench of rot filled his nostrils. In seconds, her flesh showed the decay of decades.

She reached for him in a strange parody of death's embrace and he held his breath against the stench, waiting for to come to him. Globes of flesh dripped from her arms, plopping wetly against floor.

"You killed me as surely as if you'd thrown me from the cliff yourself."

"I won't take responsibility for Leuce's death, Coronus."

Her arms closed around him. Her rancid breath fanned across his face. "They came for you and they found me. You should have warned me."

So that was how they found her? Waiting for him to return and give her the news of his victory. But there'd been no victory, only defeat and death.

"This should have been you!" she snarled.

"Leuce..." Her name held all the emotion and sorrow in his soul. It also betrayed them both.

Triumph flared in the fiery depths of her eyes. Coronus had finally found the perfect weapon against Hades. Leuce would never know the peace she deserved. She would be bound to him forever, like the ghosts lashing at him. She would remain in this cesspool of despair, a pawn forced to play the game of her Titan overlord.

He prayed to whatever gods listened to his kind, that the peace of death could be had for all the souls trapped with him. He prayed for vengeance against the Titans; not for himself, but for those who didn't have to die. He prayed for the passionate, beautiful Leuce he knew in life, for the woman who didn't deserve the fate she earned in death. He prayed for his freedom and the chance to make Coronus pay for every one of his mistakes. He would make the cruel god writhe in pain at his feet.

The last of the decaying flesh and hunks of black hair sloughed from her bones, leaving a screaming skeleton in tattered rags. But the lack of vocal cords didn't halt her voice.

"I was never good enough for you! I could never be what you wanted! All I wanted was your love!" Her hands swept down her skeleton. "This is what I am because of you!"

"You're not Leuce!"

"Murderer! Assassin!" the cacophony of voices hissed.

She slapped him. The force disturbed his precarious perch and he scrambled to right his footing. The chains drew taunt, his joints wrenched in their sockets, his abused muscles screamed as he swung by his arms. Wounds, old and new, split open, spilling blood and pus onto the ground.

She slapped him again and again. "You're a selfish bastard! I loved you! I trusted you! And you betrayed me!"

"Killer! Daemon!" the chanting voices continued their relentless assault.

Leuce grabbed his chin, steadying him. He stared into the empty eye sockets, every word burned into his mind. "You're a worthless god! An incompetent man!"

"Murderer! Assassin!" the voices of his victims echoed their agreement.

Squeezing his chin, her bony fingers dug into his flesh as she laughed. Her laugh, sharp and cutting, did more damage than the pottery slicing his feet to ribbons. "Pathetic fool!"

It wasn't her, he reminded himself. This wasn't his Leuce. It was Coronus.

The infinitesimal change in the stale air alerted him to the presence of others: an electric charge in the atmosphere and taste of sea mist. He breathed deep, savoring the scent. It gave him the hope of a reprieve.

Hades glanced past Leuce's bony shoulder, and his sharp eyes focused on the two gods shrouded in the gloomy dark of his prison. Not Titans.

The web of magic in the room drew tight. The power snaking along his skin felt wrong. The subtle shift in the dense net jangled through the tendrils, shattering the strands, and releasing the compulsion upon them all.

The voices ceased. Flesh reformed over Leuce's bones as she turned on the two gods like an attacking long-tooth tiger. Her finger bones scraped bloody furrows down his cheeks.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"A little dramatic," the shorter of the two gods said, stepping into the cell. He waved his hand in a half circle, obvious disgust in his eyes as they rested on Leuce. "Be gone, phantoms. Return to your rest."

Hades clenched his teeth. His hands curling into fists. Leuce was worth more than all the gods combined. If he was free of the chains binding him to this prison, even in his weakened state, he could crush the self-important god with practiced ease. He gave the appearance of strength, but he was weak inside.

Leuce sighed, a heavy sound filled with relief. She turned to Hades, her flesh completely reformed as she touched her lips briefly to his cheek. "I love you, too, brother."

She disappeared, leaving him alone with the two gods.

The smaller god stepped forward into the dim glow of the flameless torchlight, a charismatic smile on his red bearded face. He stared hard at Hades. "Are you sure this is him?"

The other hesitated a moment, a giant of a man with black hair and black eyes, before he moved to flank his leader. He would be a real challenge. "She said it was," he rumbled deep within his chest.

The red-headed god sniffed the air delicately and grimaced. Hades hoped the gods choked on the stench of a thousand years of old blood, infection, and stale sweat.

Smiling pleasantly, as if he wasn't standing in a room of torture, but a grand hall, the redhead asked, "Are you the man that defied Coronus?"

"We don't have time for this, Zeus. That guard will be found."

"Rhea and Eris told us to find—"

"I know what that deceptive bitch said! Warrior or no, we have to leave now."

"Eris sent you for me?" Hades interrupted.

Zeus nodded. "Are you the one imprisoned for attacking Coronus in his own home?"

"You can't believe anything he says, brother. He would lie to get out of here."

Hades chuckled. The dark god was right. He would do anything to escape Tartarus. "Why did she send you?"

The two brothers exchanged questioning glances. Hades processed the minute expressions and appearance of the two men. "You're the sons of Coronus." He licked his dry lips. They were his freedom! Only those who had the blood of Coronus could break the enchantment upon the chains and the room. "Release me, and I'll fight for you. I'll bring your enemies to their knees."

The dark one with the soulless eyes stepped forward. "You make hearty boasts for a dead man."

Hades smiled. It was a smile that suggested violence and unpleasantness. He knew its effect. He'd seen the horror or the uncertainty or the fear on the faces of others. These gods were no different.

Focusing his gaze upon the red-haired man, Hades knew he could convince the god to free him. All he had to do was dangle the prize before the god's eyes until he took the bait. And since the best way to convince a greedy man was to appear greedy himself, Hades demanded a reward. "I make no empty boast, but a promise. Free me, give me sovereignty over one of your kingdoms and a daughter to seal our alliance, and I'll bring defeat upon your enemy by the end of the week."

Zeus grinned, laying a restraining hand upon his brother's arm. "It's a deal."

"Swear by the River Styx," Hades said, leaning forward, uncaring of the pottery slicing his feed.

"Zeus," the dark god warned.

Zeus shushed him. "I swear by the River Styx, if you defeat the Titans within the week, I will grant you a kingdom and one of my daughters to seal our alliance."

Zeus reached towards the chains, and Hades sighed with relief as power surged from his

liberator's fingers. The air warmed, burning into Hades flesh. The locks clicked and fell away. His legs, unused to the weight of his body, buckled.

Hades fell upon the blood soaked stones and broken pottery, slicing his knees and hands. The first fiery ripples of pure, unadulterated power tingled along his skin. Oh, how he'd missed its seductive sweetness.

"I'm not carrying him out of here."

"Shut up, Poseidon. I lost nothing by freeing him. If he can't do as he says, he gets nothing but his freedom for as long as he can keep it!"

Released from the floodgates, magic crashed over him like a roaring deluge of water. It coursed through his battered body. It stole the breath from his lungs. It surged through his veins. It permeated every cell in his emaciated body. And it seared away the last vestiges of Coronus' enchantment.

He threw back his head, opening his arms to the power, to the centuries of magic denied him by Coronus, and screamed.

The pain was worse than anything the Titans had ever devised. It was every second of his imprisonment compressed into one moment. It was the beatings, the knives slicing deep into his flesh, and the swords sheathed in his body. It was falling from the cliffs of Mount Othrys and shattering every bone in his body. Crushing. Rendering. Splintering who was he was into millions of pieces.

And then it ended, and the absence of pain was worse. He felt nothing. He sensed nothing. He cared for nothing.

He staggered, teetering on the edge of the cliff, staring down into the dark abyss of his own mind. It would be so easy to pitch himself into the peace of oblivion, to lose himself within his mind. He was spiraling into madness. It would have been so easy to just let go and allow nature take its course. But he'd been conditioned to fight, to survive at all costs.

He needed a focus, a minor interruption. Because if he couldn't bring his will to bear upon power coursing unchecked through his body, he would be lost. Control the power or go insane.

He screamed his defiance.

I am stronger!

I am more powerful!

I won't let Coronus win!

He jerked his hand across a pottery shard. White hot pain seared across his palm and bright red blood splashed upon the floor. He focused his all upon the sensations. But it wasn't enough.

Through blurred vision, he forced his hand to rise, and dug his fingers into the wounded flesh. Severe pain brought him back from the edge of insanity. His mind veered away from the metaphysical absence of feeling and grasped upon the physical pain, clutching it tight. He directed his attention to the tingling flesh and raw nerve endings that was his body, and used all his self-discipline and self-control to still the rampant magic.

By sheer strength of will, he relaxed, seized the magic by the throat, and confronted the raging fire of extreme passion. Fury. Love. Hatred. Sorrow. Need. He promised them their chance at freedom and then thrust the intense emotions of a Phlegethon daemon denied his pleasures into the deepest place of his heart.

He was the only master of his battered and wounded body!

Enclosing the magic tightly in a cocoon of power, he opened his eyes and rose to his feet. He felt alive, complete, and healed for the first time in over a thousand years.

He glanced at the two stunned gods and grinned. "Who do I serve?"

Uncomfortable fear shone in Zeus' eyes. He'd seen it in the eyes of others who had good reason to fear him. A healthy fear could only benefit Zeus for Hades was starting to suspect that neither

god knew who they'd released.

Zeus swallowed hard, raised his trembling hand, and attempted to smile. "I'm Zeus, King of the Olympians. This is my brother Poseidon. What exactly are you?"

Hades laughed. Not who, but what. "She didn't tell you?"

Zeus shook his head. Poseidon glared at his brother.

The foolish god hadn't even thought to ask Eris. If it wasn't so sad, it might have been funny. "Isn't it just like her to leave out certain details?"

Drawing upon his inner power, Hades let his magic swirl around him, embracing him like a gentle lover, before he sent the awesome potency of his magic outward to stroke along the edges of the two men's auras. Zeus started, eyes wide.

Opening his arms wide, a gesture that was completely unnecessary, but dramatically satisfying in its effect, Hades threw wide the doors of Tartarus. He released the horrors from their deepest pits, all the monsters, mortal and immortal. "I'm Hades, son of the goddess Eris."

Zeus' eyes shifted to the dangling chains. Hades could almost see the thoughts tumbling around in Zeus' mind. He was wondering if Eris had tricked him. Hades knew she had.

"You're on our side, aren't you?" The uncertainty in Zeus' voice brought a smile to Hades' lips.

"You keep your word, son of Cronus, and we won't have a problem. Break it, and Tartarus will seem like Paradise in comparison."

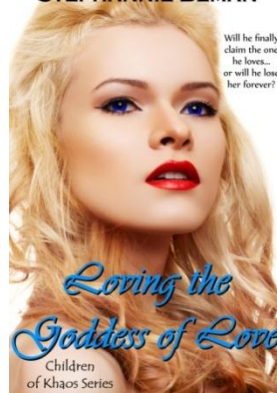
Hades drew in his magic tight to his aura, and then brought it closer. Only if someone touched his skin would they understand the truth of the man. It was one of many tricks his mother had taught him.

He winked at the two cowering gods. "See you later."

Loving the Goddess of Love

Book Two of the Children of Khaos Series

STEPHANNIE BEMAN



When Aphrodite is forced to marry the grouchy, crippled Hephaestus under the orders of the King of the Olympians, she is unable to voice the truth of her protests to the marriage. Her excuses fall upon deaf ears, but then why would they listen. Everyone benefits from her marriage to Hephaestus, except Aphrodite. She is not as other gods or daemons; she is one of the first, the spirit of erotic love trapped in an immortal form and her objections to the marriage are not the reasons everyone believes them to be.

Hephaestus has always been the outcast of the Olympian family since an accident twisted his leg and made him a cripple in his youth. He is none too pleased when his father Zeus comes to him with a request: Marry Aphrodite. What the King of the Gods commands of him, Hephaestus will do, even if it's giving up on his dreams of love to be tied to Aphrodite for eternity. But it doesn't end there. The King of the Gods last ultimatum is fidelity to the marriage. Hephaestus is stuck with a self-centered, unhappy, and vain goddess who is in-love with another, a goddess that he desires yet refuses to touch.

Chapter 1

498 years before story begins

APHRODITE WASN'T SURE WHAT HAD first drawn her to Tartarus. It was dark and horrible, filled with the screams of the damned. It was a place of cruelty and pain. It was Coronus' playground and not for the likes of her. Except here she was, creeping through the shadows, listening for the steps of the guard, hoping not to get caught or see anything more than the evil she had already beheld.

She could blame her rash decision on curiosity, although stupidity was a more apt description of what she was doing. Going to see the famed Hades in his prison cell was so not worth the punishment of getting caught by Coronus' guards. She shuddered at the thought of what the brutish Titans might do and contemplated returning to the Elysian Fields and the safe haven of Persephone's rule. But she couldn't.

She was being drawn forward, ever forward.

The scrap of feet and laughter of the guards sent her heart racing. This was so stupid! Using her magic to slither through the stone to the prison on the other side, she bit her bottom lip and listened to the boisterous voices of the guards as they neared. They paused before the cell she was hiding in and she held her breath in fear. Were they looking for her? Could they track her use of magic? She hoped not. She didn't want to spend an eternity as Coronus' pet.

His last one had displeased him and was now residing in a cell in Tartarus. Coronus wasn't a pleasant god. She still remembered what she had seen. Although a mere child, she'd gone with her mother Dione to the banquet at Mount Othrys to celebrate Coronus' defeat over the monsters. The greatest daemon-god and warrior of their time had burst through the doors, strode through the startled throng and demanded Coronus return the woman he stole from him. Coronus had thrown the helpless mortal daemon from the cliffs and Hades had dove after her seeking to save her life. He had returned, bound from head to toe in thick chains, so Coronus and the other Titans could gloat over him.

Even then she had known that the woman was in love, but not with Hades. She was in love with another. And while his love was true love, it was not the love of lovers, but that love of siblings. It was at that moment, she realized Coronus was flawed, and unworthy of the crown upon his head. She never returned with the other nymphs to Othrys.

It would be four hundred years before another would rise to oppose his rule. She wasn't particularly impressed with Rhea's choice of rulers. Zeus was a womanizing ingrate. He didn't want power, which was the only thing about him that made him worthy to rule; he was more interested in female company. He chased the nymphs like a randy satyr when he should be learning about his enemy, when he should be freeing his siblings from Tartarus. He finally got around to playing his part when he was nearly two hundred years old and she wasn't awed by him or his battle strategy.

She actually kept her distance from all the Olympian gods. She wasn't about to be another girl of Zeus', or his cold brother Poseidon. And Zeus' sons weren't particularly impressive either. Apollo and Ares were horny, self-centered pricks. She had never met Zeus' oldest son Hephaestus, but the still mortal god seemed married to his forge. She kept herself apart from them, not willing to be their next conquest. Although her mom didn't seem to mind. She was sleeping with Zeus for the moment and would probably move on to Poseidon when she was finished.

It was strange, because even though she had been born and raised by the very free loving Dione, She was unlike any of the nymphs. She was actually considered a prude because she was still a virgin at four hundred and fifty years. But she had yet to find a man who made her blood sing or her body

heat.

“Who’s there?” a man’s voice rasped beside her.

She yelped, her back slamming against the wall. She’d thought herself alone in the darkness. Since when had Coronus started using the dark to torture his hapless victims in this place?

“I know someone is here. Who are you?”

She shook her head, using her magic to pick out the faint aura of the man. He was no danger to her. She could see the faint blue, streaked with painful gray. He was hurt, bad.

She knelt on the ground beside him. She would give this man no name. “A lost soul.”

Laughter streaked through his aura, tainting his voice when he spoke. “Aren’t we all in this condemned place?” he whispered. “How did you get here?”

“I’m not a prisoner of Tartarus.”

“You’re visiting this cursed place?” he asked, his voice incredulous.

She shrugged. How could she explain to this mortal man that she was drawn to something in this place? That she had finally found it in him? That she didn’t even know him and yet she was drawn to him in a way she had never been drawn to another person, man or woman. It sounded foolish.

“I was looking for someone.”

“Did you find them?”

She nodded. She knew he couldn’t see her in the darkness, and yet she was not willing to voice what her heart was telling her. This prisoner was the reason she was here. He had drawn her to him. He had something she needed above all else. But she wasn’t sure what that was yet.

“I think so.” She cocked her head, using magic to listen to the guards outside his prison cell. “I have to go now. They can’t find me here.”

He reached out, his hand touching her bare thigh, little pin prickles of lightning struck the place under his hand. Her body warmed. She thought he might beg her to stay with him or return, but all he said was, “Good luck, lost soul. Go before they catch you here.”

She leaned over, kissing his dirty cheek, her lips tingling. “I will be back,” she whispered.

And she would, for she had found what she was looking for and nothing would stop her from returning to him. She now knew what he held. His battered and broken mortal body held something more precious than all the power in the world. He held a pure immortal soul within a mortal body.

~*~ ~*~ ~*~

HE CURSED THE ETERNAL DARKNESS that kept him from seeing the worst of the damage done to his oh-so-mortal body. The painful twinges were enough to tell him that it was bad. He shifted and his thrice broken hip protested, telling him that he had strained the muscle. His nose was definitely broken, as were two of his fingers. His back was too numb, which was a blessing after the flogging he’d received, though he was sure he’d feel it in a few hours. And his left arm was dislocated.

Starting with his arm, he began to fix the damage he could. Shoving his body against the slimy stonewall, his arm popped back into the socket. Using his hands, he straightened his nose, then his fingers. He hoped no permanent damage was done to them. If he ever got out of here, he’d need them again.

Searching his sketchy memories, he tried to remember if he had betrayed the others through his mortal weakness during the interrogation. He barely remembered the questions, let alone his answers to them. Not that Coronus was doing much questioning anymore. This was more about the pain he could inflict than the answers he could give Coronus. If he got out of here alive, Coronus didn’t want him to be able to aid Zeus.

Or maybe Coronus finally realized he was of no use to him. He didn’t have any information on

the movements of the Olympians and his parents definitely didn't care about their oldest son enough to rescue him. They probably hoped he'd die in Tartarus and erase their shame of having a 40-year-old mortal god. He was well-past the age when children of the gods reached their prime and inherited their immortality and their full power.

He had been an embarrassment to them since the day he was born a cripple. His mother had given him to the first water nymph willing to take him. Thetis was more his mother than Hera had ever been.

A cool hand touched his face. "How badly did they hurt you?" She didn't really expect an answer from him and she'd never be satisfied until she checked the injuries out for herself. So he said nothing and accepted the clay beaker she pressed into his hands. "Drink and lay down."

He didn't have to be told twice. He gulped down the cool, clean water, and then lay down on his stomach. His angel in the darkness, the only thing in this place that made sense to him anymore, the only thing worth surviving this hell for, touched him in a way no one else had. As she had every time Coronus had come to visit his cell for what seemed like months, but was probably only weeks, she made the pain fade and disappear.

Her body flowed over him like water. Her lips grazed over his back. Her hands skimming over his flesh, touching everywhere, her magic tingled along his flesh, working with the healing properties of the water she had giving him to erase the smallest of wounds. Arousing his flesh in a way no woman had before her.

He wanted her. He wanted to be inside her. He desired her, dreamed of her, and waited days for her to return to him.

But he restrained himself, holding tightly on the reins of his desire. He would not be like his father or brothers. She was an innocent. Or at least her visits had started innocently enough. She'd used his cell to hide from the guards. And she'd keep her promise to return.

She visited him every few days to heal his body and they would talk for hours. She wanted to know everything about him, but never pressed for information. He told her about his smith craft and growing up among the water nymphs. She told him about her life among the nymphs, about how she felt different from them, like the outcast he was among the Olympians.

Soft, full breasts skimmed over his back, following the path of her lips. His body responded to her delicate touch. Warming. Hardening. Aroused.

He tried to think of something else, anything that didn't have to do with the tightening of his ball sack and hardening of his cock, or with her last visit. The peace and acceptance he felt with her. The way she breathed in her sleep, moaning gently as she pressed herself tighter against him. He tried to think of anything except the caress of her lips or the brush of her breasts upon his back. Anything except the way he wanted to replay the kiss she had given him last time. It had been inexperienced but passionate. She had thrown everything into that kiss.

He fought the urge to take her in the dirt of a prison cell. "I don't think..."

He couldn't finish. He didn't want to scare her away. She was his saving grace in the hell that was his life.

She paused. "What?"

"I...that is...I think this is..."

"I want you. Do you not want me?" she asked, her voice quivering.

Of course he wanted her. He wanted her in every way imaginable. He wanted to lie with her for eternity. He wanted to love her in every way she deserved. She deserved more, so much more than a crippled, mortal god, who'd never survive to leave this place. And he'd not do it.

He was a dead man. He should have been dead all those months ago when she first found him. Only due to her did he still live.

He twisted under, flipping onto his back, drawing her into his lap. She melted against his chest,

her head on his shoulder. “We can’t do this, my angel. Not here. Not like this.”

“And if now is all we have, would you deny yourself the joys of a willing woman?”

He leaned forward, drawing her face to his, his lips molding to hers as he tasted her. Strawberries. Sweet strawberries.

She swung her leg over his lap, pressing him to the ground with her weight and lowering herself against his hard erection, rubbing her wetness against his length. Her thighs cradled his hips, her cool hands running over his scarred chest, tweaking his nipples. He groaned, shocked by how a simple action could feel so good. Liquid heat flooded into his veins, throbbing through his penis, hardening the flesh even more.

She leaned forward, her breasts pressed flat against his hard, scarred chest. “Do you want me?”

“Yes,” he breathed, afraid she would disappear.

He slid into her hot, wet entrance, claiming her fully in a single, quick motion. His hips arched into her, thrusting deeper into her sheath. She gasped as the barrier was breached and he stilled, his muscles quivering, his body’s need to finish what they started nearly overriding his brain.

He held her to him, waiting. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he whispered against her temple.

“What does it matter? I want you.”

“You barely know me.”

“I know enough. I want you. And you want me.”

“I don’t even know your name.”

She claimed him with a kiss. Her soft lips slanting across his, her tongue tickling the edges of his lips. He opened for her. Her tongue danced along his, coaxing, sucking. His fingers tangled in her hair, drawing her closer, sparing with her. She flexed her hips and he groaned inside her mouth.

She rocked her hips against him. His cock slid out and back into the hot depths of her passage. The swollen tip of his cock met resistance. His eyes closed at the delicious sensation and he grew harder inside her.

She met his upward push with a downward thrust. “More,” she whispered, her breath hot against his neck.

He pulled her down to him, rising up to suckle her nipples. He nipped them with his teeth and flicked them gently with his tongue. Her sounds of pleasure exciting him and her nipples hardened in his mouth like pebbles between his lips. Her skin tasted like strawberries and cream.

“Yes! Hephaestus, yes!” she groaned.

Her whole body began to quake above him, the slick walls of her fluttering around his thick, hard length as her pleasure crested. His large hands gripped her hips, urging her down harder, faster, deeper. She bit into his shoulder, muffling her cries, the strong pulsing tightening around him as she came again.

His length pulsed between her slender thighs, his body stiffened beneath her, his hands pulling her down hard as he pushed himself deep inside her. His seed spilling into her belly in long, shuddering waves crashing down upon him. Something passed between them. He didn’t understand what it was, but his flesh tingled, every nerve ending sensitive to the touch of flesh on flesh.

She nipped his collarbone, her hand swirling around his shoulder. He grinned, cradling the woman against his chest, never wanting to let her go. Everything felt different, better. It didn’t change anything about his circumstances, but he felt stronger.

He kissed her temple, never wanting to let her go, but knowing he had to. If they found her in here with him, they’d use her against him. They’d break him. Because despite not knowing who she was or her name, he loved her with his whole heart and soul.

She nuzzled against his collarbone, her breath hot against his skin. “I love you too.”

He frowned, at her sleepy admission, ready to question her when the door burst open and light flooded into the room, blinding him. Adrenaline flowed through his veins as he rose to protect her

against the Titans flooding into the small cell. She rose behind him and he thrust her behind him, blindly facing the shadowed figures.

“Hephaestus, no!” she screamed, her hand grabbing his arm.

His skin warmed under her hand, spreading outward, her magic swirling around him, stronger than anything he had felt before. He heard her scream as she was ripped from his arms. Then silence. Complete and total silence. And it was dark again.

He blinked several times, realizing it wasn’t completely dark. Tiny stars sparkled through the leaves above his head and a sliver of the moon shone white in the sky. He was outside, standing alone in the forest. No Titans. No Tartarus. No lover.

He was alone with no way back and more questions than he had answers for. Who was the woman? He had never told her his name, so where had she learned it from? Was she Coronus’ creature? Was she now in his clutches? How would he find her again? He could hope she had escaped and would find him. But until he found her again, he would never rest.

SHE GLARED AT CORONUS AS he circled her like a vulture around carrion. He was shorter than all the Titans in the room but built like a bull. His hair was white as new snow and his face craggy. His aura blackened by greed and hatred. He was a nasty piece of work and she was in his grasp.

“Where did you find her?”

“A prison cell with Zeus’ boy.”

She refused to show surprise, struggling to recall Zeus’ sons and the man she had just had sex with. She couldn’t place what little she knew with him. Neither Ares nor Apollo were mortal. She’d never seen Hephaestus and knew even less of him. There were a few other bastard children, but she knew little of them.

“The mortal cripple.”

She bit her tongue on the words that threatened to spew from her mouth. She wanted to scream and tell this disgusting god what she thought of him. But she didn’t want to make it worse on herself. She would bide her time and regain her power. She would escape and she would find her lover. She would live happily with him. She would not have to leave her mother to go with her father, whoever he was. She would be happy.

“What was she doing there?!”

The Titan beside her coughed, choking on his laughter. The other Titan that held her arm so tight she wondered if it would fall off from lack of circulation, cleared his throat. “What nymphs do with men.”

Coronus raised his eyebrow and finally looked at her, not her ample cleavage or round ass, but at her. She wanted to look away from those cold, black, serpent eyes. “So you like sex with prisoners in Tartarus? All you had to do was ask.”

“I’ll not be your whore!” she spat, slapping his face.

Well she would have slapped his face with all the strength left to her, if the Titan hadn’t jerked her away. As it was, she clawed deep furrows into his cheek. She lifted her chin, expecting him to hit her back. Instead he laughed.

“Feisty,” he boomed. “Bring me Rhea’s collar.”

She wasn’t sure what that was, but by the looks on the faces of the Titans, she wouldn’t like it one little bit. She struggled, clawing at the Titan holding her. Her magic swirled around her, panicked. It wasn’t enough to let her escape like she had done for her lover, but it was enough to aid her. It slinked through the room, caressing, arousing every person it touched, awakening their passions.

She used the power her mother feared. The power Dione attributed to her father. The reason she

had come to her lover this day. She was leaving the valley of the nymphs to join her father and learn to control her latent power. It affected these Titans in the same way it affected the nymphs.

Her guard's hand loosened and she pulled her shoulder from his grasp, enhancing the pleasure coursing through his body. He groaned, tearing at his clothes, writhed on the floor. A partner wasn't necessary to slacken their lust upon. Anything would do.

She smiled and turned right into Coronus and his collar. It snapped around her neck. Ancient power seared through her body, enslaving her, binding her.

She fell to her knees and screamed for the loss of her lover. She screamed for the loss of her freedom. She was Coronus' forever, a slave to his whims.