Seeds of Hunger
by auri_mynonys

Summary

When Merle Highchurch is kidnapped by a powerful force known only as the Hunger, both his friends and his god will do anything to get him back. But the Hunger, and Fate herself, have other plans... Hades & Persephone AU.

Notes

OH BOY OH BOY I'M SO EXCITED AND NERVOUS ABOUT THIS ONE, Y'ALL. I'm absolutely obsessed with these two and while sitting at my desk the other day, it occurred to me that they make kind of a perfect Hades & Persephone. Thus this self-indulgent AU was born. I really hope all you beautiful people enjoy!

Other characters including Taako, Magnus, Lup, Lucretia, Davenport and Pan will all make appearances later on in the fic.

Some lore bent to make the concept work.

Also ALL CREDIT for my glitchy John headcanon goes to transmerle on tumblr because that's where I first saw the idea and I absolutely love it.
Merle Highchurch wasn’t exactly sure how he’d ended up at a table in a boardroom on some hellscrape of a plane, but there he sat: stunned, dirty from falling through the literal, actual earth, and still holding a flower in his wooden hand. At the other end of the table sat a man: human, lanky, impeccably dressed, and watching Merle without blinking, chin resting on his hands. There was something deeply unnerving about the man’s stare, though Merle couldn’t put HIS finger on what. (The lack of blinking probably didn’t help.)

“Uhhhh,” said Merle, glancing out the room’s enormous windows and back. “Hail and well… the… fuck?”

The man across the table tilted his head, brows furrowing. “You seem surprised to be here,” he said. His voice was odd in that it sounded so ordinary; but coming from him, nothing should have been ordinary. Even dressed in a nice suit, with perfectly coiffed hair, everything about him screamed abnormal.

The blinking eyeballs on his expensive silk tie probably had something to do with that.

“Well… you did kinda kidnap me,” Merle pointed out. He was still reeling from the whole experience, but that at least he was certain of now. Last time Merle checked, there wasn’t a word for being devoured by the earth and finding oneself somewhere else. “That’s what this is, isn’t it? A kidnapping?”

The man sat back in his chair, pursing his lips. He had a very nice mouth. A nice everything, now that Merle was really looking, which definitely offset the weirdness of the shifting shadow tentacles lurking somewhere behind his chair -

“You said you wanted to talk,” said Merle’s kidnapper. He sounded - Merle couldn’t think of a phrase other than put out. “That you liked our afternoons together. That you wished they could be every day. I am more ancient than you can ever imagine, Merle, but my hearing’s as good as the day I joined my world together to form the Ascendant. I’m not mistaken, am I? Those were your words, weren’t they?”

He had the nerve to sound accusing, as if it was Merle who had done something wrong. Merle’s thoughts raced, turning the phrases the man had repeated over in his head. Had he said those things? Had he ever known this man was listening?

Oh. Oh.

“D’you mean the things I was saying in the Temple?” Merle asked, pointing upwards - mostly for lack of a better place to point. He wasn’t sure the world as he knew it was actually above them anymore. Wherever it had gone, there was a field there where Merle went to nap sometimes and talk to Pan: hours of idle chit-chat directed towards the god he worshipped. He very much doubted Pan ever bothered to listen, but that was fine by Merle; he never had anything important to say. It just seemed, to him, the best way to get closer to his god.

It seemed it may have accidentally brought him closer to something else instead.

His host arched a perfectly manicured brow. “I don’t recall a… temple… anywhere in sight, but I admit I find it flattering you would see fit to build one for me, as useless as that is to me.”

Merle waved a hand. “No, no, that’s just - that’s what I call the field,” he said. “It’s my temple to my
god. See, I’m a cleric - ”

“I’m perfectly aware of what you are, Merle Highchurch,” said the man. “I’ve been chasing you for years. Why you thought to send that little flower smell to torment me....”

Now Merle was thoroughly lost. “Ok,” he said, drawing in a deep breath. “Let’s just… take a moment to slow down, yeah? Back it up a little bit here.” He forced a smile and an exaggerated wave. “Hi, I’m Merle Highchurch, a cleric and adventurer. And you are?”

His host looked half-amused and half-annoyed, the tentacles behind him lashing out. “As if you don’t already know,” he replied. “But very well, if that’s how you would prefer things… you may call me Ascendant, if you have no other name for me already.”

The way he said it - so proud - pissed Merle off. He snorted. “Now that’ll be a cold day in hell,” Merle said. “Try again, sweetpea. Give me a name I can really work with - something I’d actually use in a casual conversation. You do know how to have one of those, don’t you?”

The man cleared his throat and smoothed his still-blinking tie. “It… has been awhile since I conversed with anyone, frankly. Not in the way we’re talking now.”

“That explains a lot,” Merle muttered. The kidnapping, the wide-open earth, the strange offense the man seemed to be taking to this entire absurd situation - all of it could easily be attributed to an awkward extradimensional being attempting to be sociable.

That was fine, right? That wasn’t… weird. Was it?

“Very well,” said the man, steepling his fingers. “If you must, you may call me John.”

“John…?”

“John… Hunger, I guess, if you really want a surname.”

Merle paused. Stared at him. Then absolutely roared with laughter. “Well if that isn’t a goddamn porno name,” he wheezed, clutching at his chest. “Yeah, ok, Johnny Hunger, I’ll totally roll with that. If you wanna sound like a d-class porn stud, be my guest.”

When he looked up, he was relieved to see that John was smiling - laughing, even, albeit a little strangely. It was half-laugh, half-shudder, like the whole gesture was unfamiliar to John. “You amuse me, Merle,” John said. “I like that about you. It’s been a long time since anyone could hold my attention for this long. You may count yourself unique among the many thousands of beings that make up my Ascendants.”

That sounded ominous. Merle ignored the unpleasant twinge of anxiety in his gut and leaned closer, taking a moment to look John over. “Well, thank you, John,” he said. “I do pride myself on my sparkling personality. Kind of important as a priest, y’know? We’re sorta like salesmen, but for god.”

John laughed softly, then conjured a glass of water - seemingly out of nowhere. Merle tracked the movement of John’s hand as he brought the glass to his lips, taking a long drink. “You don’t need to peddle your wares here,” he said. “I’m afraid you won’t get very far with me. The gods and I aren’t on great terms.”

Sad to hear it.” Merle’s mouth felt very dry as he watched John set down the glass. “Listen, so, speaking of gods - ”

“You don’t have to worship me, Merle,” John said, with an absolutely insufferable smirk. He
glanced up and met Merle’s eyes, and Merle froze as though pinned by a predator. “Unless you’d enjoy that. I am not one to refuse a freely offered gift.”

Merle felt a hot pit open up in his stomach, his pulse throbbing hard in his throat. *Ok. Alright. Ok. I don’t know what to do with that, but ok.* “Uh, you’re a really… uh… put together guy, John, but for now the talking is great. Just the talking. Hey, so, speaking of talking… that field thing I mentioned?”

“Mmhmm?” John hummed, half-interested, running a finger around the edge of his glass. “The conversations you’ve been having with me in the… did you call it the Temple?”

“Yeah.” Merle felt sweat bead up on his brow. He had a hunch his next revelation wasn’t going to go over very well. “Listen, those conversations… I was… actually just there to chat with my god. Who is Pan. And… not… you. Uh.”

The temperature in the room dropped by at least ten degrees in the space of a few seconds. Merle thought John’s well-manicured form glitched out for an instant, but he had returned to his solid, human form when Merle blinked. “You’re saying,” said John, “That you did not know I was there, watching you. That you couldn’t sense me. That you didn’t call to me with the scent of flowers, across the planes, to drag me here. That all of the afternoons I’ve spent observing you… you did not intend for me.”

Shit. “It sounds real fuckin’ bad when you put it like that,” Merle said, more irritable than he’d intended. “But honest to Pan, John, I don’t know anything about that… that flower scent you mentioned, and I really didn’t know you were watching.” He paused. Perhaps that wasn’t fair of him to say; he’d felt someone watching him lately, over the course of many afternoons. It had become par for the course, and he’d learned to ignore it. “I guess maybe it’s fairer to say I didn’t realize you were watching me,” he corrected. “So the whole thing’s just a big misunderstanding, and you can take me back to the temp - field, and I’ll go my merry way and you go yours. Yeah? Sound good?”

John tapped his fingers atop the table. The darkness behind him writhed. “Well,” said John, his voice cold and clipped. “That is all very unfortunate. You see, I thought we’d developed a rather excellent rapport.”

“Yeeahh… funny, right?” Merle laughed, but it was forced, and John didn’t join him this time. Merle cleared his throat. “I mean, we still could, in time, if you wanted to hang out and chat again at the temple on a different day.”

“No.” John leaned forward, folding his hands in front of him. “I don’t want to hang out on another day, Merle.”

Merle swallowed hard. “Ok,” he said. “We don’t have to do that then, that’s fine. I get it. You’re disappointed, you’re hurt. I hate that it’s like that, but you gotta know I meant no -”

“You see, Merle,” said John, as though Merle wasn’t speaking at all. His voice cut through Merle’s cleanly, coldly, like a surgeon’s knife. “I don’t see why I should bother with waiting when I have you right here.”

Oh, boy. Merle’s blood ran cold, his body tensing in his overly large chair. “John, buddy -”

“No,” John snapped. “Don’t do that. Don’t condescend. Don’t lie. It’s unbecoming of you.” He looked up again, and this time Merle was sure of it: his form seemed to be glitching at the edges, like static. “You know where this is going, don’t you? You can’t leave here without me, you see. I’m sure you’d guessed that by now, you’re a smart dwarf. You can’t leave until I say you can.” Now
John smiled again, but it was far less pleasant than before: his teeth looked sharper, his eyes looked
darker, everything about him was more horrifying than when Merle had first entered this plane.
“And, Merle? I don’t say that you can.”

He sat back, his body reforming into a solid, human shape. He smiled smugly and gestured to the
boardroom, the darkness behind him withdrawing and going still. “Welcome to the Hunger, Merle,”
he said. “Make yourself at home.”
John who was Ascendant, who was the Hunger, who was More Than Any God, gambled on Merle Highchurch and lost. (In which John ponders his guest/prisoner/captive/friend.)

Even now, sitting across from the dwarf, John felt something thorny clutching tight around the place where his heart had once beat. The scent of roses lingered in the air, and John struggled not to flinch, to maintain control of the form he’d taken on again to please his new companion.

A lot of good that had done him. John could barely keep that form stable and presentable right now, and Merle was staring at him like he was a monster.

*I could be a worse monster, Merle. I have it in me to be far more deadly than you seem to know.*

This wasn’t what John had hoped for when he had taken Merle from the sunny field called the ‘temple.’ Truthfully, John wasn’t certain what had possessed him; only that the taunting scent of lilac had drawn him to that field and caught all around Merle, surrounding the dwarf like some floral halo. He could not count the small infinities he had spent chasing that illusive scent: rose petals and carnations and daisies and forget-me-nots, and so on. It hung now in an endless aura around the dwarf and tempted - lured - captured John.

It was supposed to *mean* something. John was sure of that. But if Merle hadn’t meant to summon John - if Merle wasn’t deliberately causing that smell - then why did it still surround him?

The more pressing matter at the moment was what John was going to do with Merle while he sorted things out.

“Normally one joins the Ascendant by being consumed,” John said. His voice was too bright, the forceful politeness of someone about to snap. He was talking to fill the space, as he once had in another lifetime, centuries before. “I made an exception for you. You are welcomed among the horde as your own separate entity… for now.”
“Well, ain’t I the luckiest dwarf this side of Neverwinter.” Merle’s sarcasm was not lost on John. “Guess that makes me your prisoner then, doesn’t it?”

John gritted his teeth and scraped his fingers atop the table before him. The tips of his fingers scattered in a series of opalescent lines, running and then congealing back into their proper shape. “If that is how you choose to think of it,” he said. “I would rather consider you my exalted guest, here on special invitation - but if you’re intent on being rude, I certainly can’t stop you.”

Merle leaned towards John, eyes narrowing in his rounded face. John caught another whiff of lilac and struggled to stay still. The scent of those flowers was doing… things… to him. Things he had not experienced since he had shed his mortal form. It wasn’t unpleasant, but it was certainly alarming. “Couple’a points of contention, here,” said Merle, holding up a hand. “One: y’didn’t really invite me here so much as straight-up kidnap me. Remember? The whole earth opening up and swallowing me bit?”

John did remember. It had been a feat of unusual strength to tear the ground apart, catch Merle, and transport him to another plane. The expulsion of that much magic had run John a little ragged, but he had assumed it would be worth it to have an actual conversation with his small worshipper.

It angered him how very much he wanted Merle to worship him, even now, when he had been so soundly rejected. When he himself had claimed it wasn’t what he wished for.

“Two,” Merle continued, raising another finger. “You literally just said I’m not allowed to leave without your permission - that, in fact, I can’t leave unless you let me. Funny thing about guests… you usually give ‘em access to the door and let ‘em go when they’re ready to head out. Prisoners, on the other hand? Those you just keep around until you’re done with ‘em. Q.E.D, I’m no guest.”

John wanted to protest, but Merle wouldn’t let him interrupt. “Three,” he said, holding up a third finger. “This is a whole lotta effort to go to over a little ol’ dwarf you found in a clearing one time - especially one that’s already offered to be pals if you just be a good dude and release him.”

John laughed, but it was brittle and pained. “And you expect me to take you at your word?” he said. “When I have what I want right now? Nice try, Merle, but I’m perfectly happy with this arrangement. You will stay here with me, and we will talk, as you talk to your god. And maybe one day, you’ll see things as I do, and know that all gods are false. Maybe one day, you’ll be Ascendant, like us.”

“Yeah… you know what? I’m good just as I am, thanks.” And with that, Merle gathered his full height and rose, raising a hand in John’s direction. “Sacred flame!” he shouted, thrusting the hand forward.

Oh, dear. They were going the magic route, it seemed. John had hoped to avoid this bit, too, but it couldn’t be helped now. He tilted his head and stared at Merle, waiting.

Nothing happened.

Merle’s eyes widened, and he tried again. A third time.

John smiled, lounging back in his chair and chuckling. “You aren’t, by chance, attempting to perform some sort of clerical magicks, are you?”

Merle glowered. “What did you do?” he asked. His voice was quiet and angry, his hand dropping to his side.

“What did I do?” John pressed a hand to his chest as if hurt. “Nothing of consequence, Merle - you
simply cannot reach your other deity here. Pan, did you say? I’m familiar with his work, but we’ve never met in person. I imagine he knows who I am even so.”

Merle sank back into his chair, looking sullen and defeated. A few flower petals drifted out of the crown circled around his head and to the floor, one landing atop the table. The purple color popped against the smooth black, and John focused on it instead of Merle. Something about Merle’s defeat didn’t feel right to him. He wanted to gloat, of course - he wanted Merle to know how powerful he was, that the dwarf had angered and rejected the wrong creature - but he felt something else besides, something more powerful even than his pride. Regret, perhaps?

It was hard to put a name to feelings after going without them for so long.

“Now,” said John, briskly, pushing himself to his feet. “Since that unpleasantness is out of the way, shall I show you to your room? I’ve not yet created it, so if you have any special requests, now’s the time to ask.”

Merle glanced up. “Got a great one for ya,” he said. “Why don’t you make the room connect to the temple, where we first met?”

John clicked his tongue, stalking towards Merle with slow, patient steps. “Let’s have no more silly escape plans, yes? Shake on it?” He held out his hand, morphing very suddenly beside the dwarf’s chair. Merle jumped and scrambled away from John’s looming figure, leaning far back in his seat for a second before cautiously extending his soulwood hand.

John took it and turned it over, running his fingers over the hard, carved palm. “You’ll have to tell me how this happened,” he said, tracing the long veins of age down to the wrist. “I admit to being… curious. And I think it would make good conversation. Yes?”

Merle was staring at him. Something about his expression seemed - caught off-guard. Pinker than usual. “Uh. Sure, John. If you want.” Merle cleared his throat. “If you tell me about that whole glitching thing you keep doing. Seriously, it’s creeping me out. There’s gotta be a story there, though, right?”

“Ah, quid pro quo, is it?” John smiled, unfurling Merle’s soulwood fingers and tracing those, too. They were surprisingly smooth to the touch, the pads of John’s fingertips only occasionally tripping over a knot in the wood. “Very well, I think that can be arranged.” He removed his hand and let Merle’s fall, watching it thunk against the chair’s armrest. “Come,” John ordered, sweeping past Merle’s chair. “Follow me. And please, forgive the mess - I’m still building, as it were. I’m not used to having to be somewhere - or, for that matter, to having to be. I hope I can create something somewhat to your taste.”

He paused at the door to the boardroom and swept it open, where millions of eyes greeted him. The Ascendants watched him narrowly, a cacophony of whispers building in his head: don’t-like-don’t-want-distraction-consume-finishhim-consume-hunger!!!-don’t-

John winced and snapped his fingers, and the eyes melted away, a corridor of sleek glass and cold steel framing itself there instead.

John turned and gestured to Merle, motioning through the door. “Guests first.”

Merle hesitated, but finally slid out of the chair, casting a suspicious glance towards the door. He paused in the frame and leaned forward, searching - presumably for the source of the eyes - but none were forthcoming, and he finally took a step outside.
He was only as tall as John’s hip. It was… what was the word? Adorable? Yes. Everything about Merle was adorable. Something hot and hungry coiled in John’s throat and squeezed. John was drawn to the smaller man, almost inexorably. In the dark and oddly-lit space that John had made, Merle seemed like a drop of sunlight, flower petals falling gently around him where he stood.

Merle Highchurch, John decided, was beautiful.

“Do you like it?” John asked. It felt like a stupid and childish question, but it was all he had at the moment.

Merle shrugged. “Not really my jam, to be honest - no offense meant. My aesthetic is more… beachy. Oceans and shells and shit.” Merle chuckled. “That could be a t-shirt. Or a junk shop. Might be a business in that, if I ever…” He trailed off, pressing his lips into a thin line. “You said something about a room?”

John wasn’t sure why he felt so disappointed, or what he had expected Merle to say. He wasn’t making this place for Merle’s pleasure. It was for John. John ground his teeth and gestured sharply for Merle to walk forward, waiting until the dwarf was a little ways down the hall to slam the door closed behind them.

Before the door snapped shut, John caught a glimpse of a stem unfurling from the petal atop the table.

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