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DEMICHOIDS AND MONSTERS

R A Y E W A G N E R

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Demigods and Monsters

by Raye Wagner

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Dedication

For my siblings: Nate, Jay, Luke, Sam, D.J., Mari and Pete
Somehow we finagled our way to be a part of each other's stories.

Apollo's Curse

*On this night, and in this land
Hear the curse, how it will stand.
Your body and your beauty be
Touched and marked eternally of me
And when your family is complete
Then Death will visit on swift feet
And rob you of the joy divine
The joy that should be yours and mine
Until we wed, and love, and more
This shall stand forevermore.*

PROLOGUE



GLASS SHATTERED, FOLLOWED BY a *thud*. In one fluid movement, Athan slid his hands under the pillow, grabbed the matching silver blades, and sat up. The thin sheet fell from his shoulders, and he shifted to the edge of the bed.

The night was dark and thick with humidity. The ceiling fan continued to whirl despite the escalating tension in the small motel room. Through the broken window, the sour stench of rotten humanity wafted from the street. Athan waited to hear what, if anything, else was coming.

He'd been following a lead, a mere rumor from an acquaintance of a friend. The message came via text a week ago and spoke of a golden girl at Athena High in Seattle. Thought to be a demigod, the girl didn't blend in with the rest of the senior class and made no attempt to. By the time he'd arrived, the mysterious girl had disappeared. Vanished. No forwarding address. No next of kin listed on the records, no emergency contact. Just gone. The apartment was vacant despite the rent being paid through the end of the six-month lease. Even more frustrating, the girl had withdrawn from school weeks ago. Any trail she'd left was now cold. Bitterly so.

Desperation made a foolish companion, and he wore his recklessness like a heavy cord, tangling his intuition and instinct into a messy knot.

Regardless, he'd spent the next several days talking to students, searching popular hangouts, even going so far as to call the conservatory.

Unfortunately, he'd gotten voicemail. Not too surprising. Most demigods carried their own cell phones. It was rare to use the conservatory's line, and even more rare for someone to call it. Perhaps it would be worth a brief visit to see if there was any news of Hope, or rather the Sphinx. The thought of a visit to the demigod residence made his stomach roll. But if it led to finding Hope, it would be worth it.

No sound came from the small sitting room on the other side of the bedroom door. If there were visitors, they weren't human. He stood and crossed the room.

As he reached for the handle, the door crashed open, and a thick, pale hand grabbed his wrist in a crushing grip.

Athan ducked as black steel swept over his head. He tilted away from the hulking figure and kicked his heel into the Skia's stomach. The soft give told him he'd missed the ribs. Not that the dead needed to breathe, but a punctured lung might've slowed the monster down.

Crouching low, he swung his leg close to the ground in a smooth arc. The minion from Hades anticipated the move and closed the gap with a knee to Athan's face. The taste of copper filled his mouth, and warm blood ran down his chin. He spit a mixture of saliva and blood and then swung his jeweled dagger at the Skia restraining him.

Before he could connect, his wrist was released and he received an upper cut to his solar plexus. The air rushed from his lungs as he fell backward into the coffee table. The cheap furniture splintered to the ground.

He rolled to the side, onto his hands and knees, allowing one gasping breath before forcing himself to his feet. The small amount of light coming in through the window was enough to confirm what he'd suspected. Pallid skin,

onyx eyes, the telltale leer. Minion of Hades. Zeus Almighty! Would he never catch a break?

He wiped the blood from his chin and faced the Skia. “You know I’m going to send you right back to Hell.”

The only response was a wheezing crackle.

They circled the debris, measuring each other, anticipating the first move that would begin the dance of death.

Athan kicked a piece of the broken table at the Skia, but the monster skirted away. He kicked another and another, and the creature slapped each down before it made contact with his body.

This was not going to be easy. The man was tall, taller than Athan, which would affect his reach, and judging from the two blows he’d taken, the demon knew how to fight and he was strong.

He weighed his daggers, wishing for a distraction.

A heavy thumping sounded through the thin ceiling.

“Hey! Keep it down!” The deep male voice from above was loud and angry.

The Skia’s head tilted up.

Athan threw the dagger in his left hand. Anticipating that the Skia would move left, he spun that way and hooked his leg hard, catching the moving figure in the crook of his knee. Both of them crashed to the ground. The Skia swung his black knife, and Athan felt the pressure of the deadly blade on his leg. Gasping, he lurched up, drove his blade deep into the Skia’s chest, and rolled away. Bright light pulsed from the wound. Then the Skia began to hiss and fade.

“*Skata.*” Athan pulled his leg close. His pajama bottoms were ripped where the Skia had tried to slice him, but the skin was unbroken. He exhaled his relief and tension all in one breath. That had been close. Too close.

He staggered to his feet and picked up the knife from the carpet where the Skia's body had dissolved. A few more steps and he retrieved the second blade from the kitchen where it was lodged in the wall. The adrenaline coursing throughout the fight began to wane, and his body shook.

No time for a meltdown. He had to leave. He grabbed his duffle bag and threw his clothes and toiletries inside it. He slipped his shoes on, not bothering to tie them. No time. Opening the door into the dingy hall, he spotted a heavyset man with a red face headed his way. Athan backed into his room and locked the door, hoping to delay the man long enough to get away. Crossing the room to the broken window, he acknowledged his luck at being on the ground floor. Using the curtain, he pushed the broken glass away from the sill.

A heavy pounding came from the front of the motel room. He yanked the window open and pushed out the screen. The angry beating urged him to hurry. The splintering of wood announced his human visitor right as Athan dropped the duffle to the dirt. Another second later, he pulled his body through the cramped opening. As soon as his feet hit solid ground, he ran toward his car on the other side of the lot, pushing the key fob to unlock and start the car. He needed to be gone.

He slid into the driver's seat and put the car in gear. As Athan merged onto the street, the sounds of sirens drew closer. He cursed his own stupidity. So focused on looking for Hope, he'd left a trail a mile long and a mile wide. It was a wonder Skia hadn't attacked sooner.

The ringing from the console pulled him from his morbid thoughts.

"Athan Michael."

"It's Peter Stanley." The butcher Hope had befriended in Goldendale, the one that just happened to be a demigod son of Hephaestus.

"Peter. Nice of you to call." Athan couldn't help the sarcasm leaking into

his voice. “And at three in the morning. What’s got you up at this fine hour?”

“Oh, did I wake you?” He knew he hadn’t. It was clear in the mocking tone of his voice.

Athan sighed. His frustration wasn’t with the butcher. No sense in taking it out on him. “No. Sorry, rough night.” He released a long breath. “What’s up? Everything okay there in Goldendale? Have you heard from our friend?”

“I’m not calling just to chat. You’re not that charming.”

Athan snorted. “I’m well aware.”

“She and Haley just talked. She’s still in Seattle.”

It was something. “Did she mention where? I’ve been in Seattle for a couple months, and the closest thread I’ve picked up was a week old.”

“Sorry, no. But she did say she’d met someone that knew me.” A heavy pause. “And you. Do you think she could be at the conservatory? They have someone new. Thenia called and asked for a phone chip a couple weeks ago,” Hephaestus’s son whispered.

It better not be Hope. The demigods would crucify her if they discovered her true nature. Priska would know better. She wouldn’t let her. Hope couldn’t be so stupid. “No.”

“If the other demigods found her, wouldn’t they take her? It makes sense. And it would be safe for her there.”

Of course it made sense. *Until you knew what she really was!* “Um, yeah. Right. I’ll check it out in the morning.”

“You could go now and find out.”

Athan glanced at himself in the rearview mirror. His lip was busted, and his eye was puffy and purple. His chest was covered in his own sticky blood, and his plaid flannel pajama pants were ripped and stained. There was no way he was going right now.

“I need to clean up first and maybe grab a few hours of sleep.” He paused

but couldn't think of a reason not to tell the other demigod. "Skia attacked, and I'm a bloody mess."

Peter laughed as if Athan had shared a joke. "Well, you'd best get yourself all spiffed up then. After all, you never get a second chance to make a first impression, or, in this case, a first *second* impression." He chuckled again. "Good luck, son of Hermes"

Without a goodbye, the line went dead.

Athan thought about his options, but this was the best lead he had. And hopefully, *hopefully*, Xan wouldn't be there.

ONE



“WHEN WE GET THERE, let me do the talking, okay?” Priska’s gaze darted to Hope and then back to the road. “You’re only going to get one shot at this here—”

“I know.” Hope blew out her breath, trying to expel some of the anxiety coursing through her. The plan had seemed like such a good idea last night. Now she wasn’t sure. No. She *was* sure. She was just scared. Did Priska really believe they could summon a god? Hope wanted to believe it. Because she didn’t know what else to do.

Apollo’s curse made it impossible to love anyone without putting them at risk, *and* her. She thought of her mom’s death and Paul’s fear. Hermes’s words to Athan, warning him. Didn’t that speak volumes? And on top of that, there was the whole morphing into a monster, and demigods and Skia hunting her. She was ready to do whatever it took to get rid of the curse. Ready to take whatever chances were necessary. She wanted her life back.

Hope had left Goldendale three weeks ago, after overhearing Athan and his father, Hermes, talking about capturing her to use against Apollo. Hermes had given his son an ultimatum, and Hope wasn’t going to stick around and see where Athan’s loyalties lay. It was a risk she couldn’t afford. Two days

as a Sphinx had given her time to think, and when she'd morphed back into human, she drove into Seattle to stay with Priska. Hope wasn't going to be a pawn for the gods. But she wasn't above asking for a little help either.

"Do you have the puppy?"

Hope rolled her eyes. Where would it have gone?

They'd spent hours searching through breeders' ads online until they found a purebred Labrador retriever at the right age. When Priska had said they needed an offering, Hope balked at the thought. The idea of sacrificing a puppy was abhorrent, but Priska explained, with an exasperated shake of her head, that they weren't going to kill it. The dog would be a token gift for the goddess, something that would show she'd done thoughtful preparation before seeking a petition. Yesterday, Priska flew to Colorado to pick up the eight-week-old pup.

"Angel's right here." Hope held up the sleeping fur ball. The puppy cracked open an eyelid and licked her hand.

"Don't get attached. We're giving it away in thirty minutes. Maybe sooner."

They exited the freeway and followed the off-ramp back around. Five minutes later, they pulled up to a white stone temple. The grounds surrounding the structure were lush and green with statues of minor gods scattered throughout. The concrete bases of the statues were littered with tokens: food, coins, an envelope, a brush. A brush?

Hope stepped forward to get a better view of an offering to a young male holding a bow and arrow, and the puppy scampered on her heels. There was a plate with a cinnamon roll on it, the frosting dripping down its sides. It smelled good; the spicy sweetness perfumed the air and made her stomach growl. Eros better hurry up and get that, if he wanted it. And if he didn't, would it be offensive to take a nibble?

“Don’t get too close, or you might offend by not leaving a gift,” Priska pointed out.

Hope drew back from the marble statue of the god of love. Angel yipped, and Hope scooped up the floppy dog as it beelined for the food.

“Not for you.”

Priska disappeared between two of the columns of the large temple, and Hope rushed to catch up.

Hope had never been inside a temple before. She’d been sheltered from so much of the world while she and her mom hid. Seeking a divine audience went against everything she’d ever been taught.

She felt like a tourist as she absorbed the surroundings. Humans had left offerings in hopes that the gods would take notice of them. If only the gods had never taken notice of her or her family. Life would have been much simpler if Apollo had never butted in when he wasn’t wanted. Her great-grandmother had refused the god’s advances, and he’d killed her and cursed her offspring. The root of all her problems came back to Apollo’s curse.

She crossed the threshold and stopped. Twelve giant-sized marble statues, one of each of the major Olympians, lined the walls. Offerings littered the steps leading up to the daises of each god. These offerings were more than mere tokens. In front of Athena was a large planting container, and in it an eight-foot tree. Several cases of what she guessed was wine sat in front of the statue of Dionysus.

Circling through the open room were several men and women dressed in traditional chitons. The flowing robes were of different colors, and the priests and priestesses only talked with those who wore their same color.

Priska spoke to a young woman wearing midnight-blue trimmed in silver. Of course. Hope went and stood behind her aunt.

“Artemis hasn’t responded to anyone this year.” The priestess appeared

older close-up, maybe in her twenties. Her dark hair was pulled into a simple braid, and she wore no makeup.

“I understand. But it’s important for us to make our own plea, and it needs to be in private. Is there anyone in the inner sanctuary?” Priska stood with her shoulders back, chin held high, and gave the priestess a direct look.

The woman’s posture stiffened. “The inner sanctuary is sacred. I’m sorry. I’m happy to take your gift there, but you are far too old to be allowed to make an offering to the Virgin goddess.”

She was implying there was no way Priska was still a virgin and, therefore, unworthy to go into the inner sanctuary. Hope wondered if there were such rules for each of the gods, and were they all so hypocritical?

Priska raised her eyebrows. “What is your age limit here?”

“Sixteen. Unless you are an *Arktoi*.” She bowed her head. “If your companion would like to act as your surrogate . . .”

Hope suppressed the urge to roll her eyes. She was *seventeen*.

“That won’t be necessary. Is there a restroom nearby?”

The holy woman pointed to a doorway behind several hallowed icons.

“I’ll be right back.” Priska’s posture softened as she addressed Hope. “Stay here, please. And keep Angel on a short leash.”

Hope nodded at her aunt, then turned back to the woman in blue. The silence stretched into awkwardness.

“How long have you been here?” Hope asked, more for something to say than actual interest.

“Five years in May.” The priestess tilted her head to the side and examined Hope. “Are you thinking of becoming an *Arktoi*?”

Hope’s mouth dried up. “I . . . haven’t—”

“She wouldn’t be able to serve,” Priska said.

Both Hope and the priestess stared slack jawed. Priska no longer appeared

to be in her thirties. Now, she seemed no more than sixteen. Her dark, straight hair now hung well below the shoulders, and her face was fuller. She still wore the fitted skirt and tailored jacket, or Hope might not have recognized her.

“Is this young enough? I can drop a few more years if I need to.” Priska sniffed.

The priestess’s jaw moved up and down, but no sound came out.

Hope had never seen her aunt shift either, but she knew it could happen. Demigods could recapture the ages they’d lived. Priska had allegedly allowed her body to age until she was quite elderly, but for as long as Hope had known her she’d always been in her early thirties. This Priska, teen Priska, had more softness in her appearance, but her personality was still sharp.

“The inner sanctuary, please.” Priska held out her hand and deposited several coins into the priestess’s.

The priestess closed her hand, but her eyes remained wide, and she swallowed several times.

“We really don’t have all day.”

As if someone had pinched her, the priestess jumped and led them between two pillars into a narrow hallway. She repeatedly glanced from Priska to Hope, and while her eyes were filled with questions, her lips pursed until the edges were blanched.

Hope felt the same way.

The hallway was lined with intricately carved doors, and they stopped in front of one with a forest scene. Deer lapped from a river that wound through a copse of evergreens. The length of the door was carved into a long bow on one side and several arrows on the other.

“Your worship will be uninterrupted here,” the *Arktoi* said. “Please be sure to close the door on your way out.” The woman pulled a key from her belt

and unlocked the door. “May the Goddess grant your petition.” She bowed and left.

Priska eyed Hope. “Are you ready?”

With a deep breath, Hope opened the door.

The smell of fresh rain and dirt wafted out from the room.

Hope stepped through the door and held her hand up to feel along the wall for a light switch. Only there was no wall. Her eyes adjusted quickly to the dark, and what she saw took her breath away.

A crescent moon hung in the night sky. Patches of gray still covered the stars, and the air was thick with moisture. The ground was spongy, and Hope knelt to run her hand over the mossy covering.

“This is impossible.” She glanced up at Priska. “How?”

“This sanctuary is dedicated.” Priska’s face radiated reverence and love. “If Artemis is willing to visit, it is always on her terms and in a setting to her liking.”

“Priska!” An exuberant young girl ran from between the trees and launched herself at Priska. “I’m glad you’re safe.”

The two young women embraced. “It has been far too long since you’ve visited.”

“I’ve been busy with my charge.” Priska rested her hand on Hope’s shoulder.

Hope gaped at the goddess of night. Artemis’s dark umber skin contrasted with her pale, almost silver hair. Her slight figure was clad in black, fitted garments, and as she pulled the silver bow and quiver of arrows from off her back, her midnight eyes settled on Hope.

“You are very young.” She set her weapons on the spongy moss and stepped up to Hope. “Very young, but not too naïve, I think.” Her gaze held Hope captive for a moment, and then the goddess contemplated the puppy

struggling in Hope's arms. "Who is this?" Artemis giggled as Angel licked her face.

"She's . . . she's for you." Hope held the pale Labrador out.

Artemis peered from Hope to Priska and back to Hope again.

"You are giving me an offering?" She raised her brows but did not take the dog.

Hope shifted her gaze to Priska for help. Hadn't she said she would do the talking? Priska was studiously examining the night sky.

"No . . . I mean, yes. Yes." Hope shook her head. "We got her for you." She extended her arms again, the dog's back paws dangling in the air.

"Hope wants to break the curse," Priska said, taking the puppy from Hope. "The Lab was my idea. She comes from a long line of hunters. She will be loyal and easy to train."

Artemis extended her hands. "Loyalty is difficult to come by. I will accept this with gratitude." She took the puppy and set her on the ground. The pale fur glowed in the moonlight, and the puppy scampered about. "What do you need my help with, Hope? It was my brother that cursed you, not I."

Hope shifted her weight. "Yes, but do you know anything that could help me? Has he said anything to you?"

Artemis drew in a slow breath and closed her eyes.

Hope again looked to Priska, but she'd chased after the puppy, leaving Hope alone with the goddess.

"She's scared," Artemis said, breaking the silence. "She feels responsible for what happened to your mother. And she feels bad about what could've happened to you." She grabbed Hope's chin and forced her head side to side. "You want to break the curse?"

Hope nodded.

"It won't solve your problem," the goddess warned, dropping her hand.

“It won’t solve *all* my problems.” Hope took a deep breath. “But it will give me freedom to love who I want, and no one will hunt me.”

“Perhaps.” Artemis grabbed an arrow and strung her bow. A faint *twang*, and the arrow lodged in a tree at least a hundred feet away. “Do you believe you are more deserving of this freedom than your mother or grandmother?” She released another arrow, which embedded in the trunk next to the first.

“No. No more deserving than they. But no one deserves to be cursed by a god.”

Artemis dropped the bow and arrow to her side and faced Hope. “Who are you to decide that?”

Anger fueled her courage. “Really? Your brother got dumped, and he killed the girl who dumped him, *and* her husband. In the mortal realm, that’s murder, and in some states it will get you the death penalty.” She took a deep breath and continued, “But he didn’t stop there. In his infinite *wisdom*, he cursed their baby and changed her into a monster. Along with that, he made it so if she didn’t choose to sleep with him and have his babies, her posterity would continue to carry the curse. How exactly is there any shred of *fairness* or even a modicum of rationality to that?”

Artemis did the last thing Hope expected.

The goddess of night broke into peals of laughter. She dropped her weapons and held her sides as she chortled.

“Dear gods, what did you do?” Priska walked back to Hope with Angel in her arms.

Hope shrugged.

“She is . . . very much . . . like you . . .” Artemis took lungfuls of air, her smile bright like the moonlight. “When you were younger, you had a very strong sense of justice.”

“Most youth do.” Priska grimaced. “It doesn’t make them right.”

“But their naivety doesn’t make them wrong, either.” Artemis sobered.
“You are becoming cynical, Priska.”

“No, Mother, just pragmatic.”

Artemis’s focus shifted to Hope. “I can’t take away the curse. No one can. Even the Graeae have said as much.”

Hope stomach dropped. “Can you help me?”

“No.”

Her heart stopped. Then why had they gone through all the—?

“I can’t help you directly. There would be . . . problems on Olympus, if I did.” Artemis scanned the night sky before facing Hope. “You need to start with all the facts. Which means you need to go to the *Olympian* library and do some research on my brother. Then, if you have time, read up on divine law. Do you understand what I’m telling you?”

“Yes.” No.

Artemis rolled her eyes. “Priska will help. After you get your information, you’ll need to see an oracle. Be careful who you choose.” She bit her lip.

“The rest will be up to you.”

Research Apollo and divine law. Go see an oracle.

“Got it.” Sort of.

Artemis turned to Priska. “I am proud of you. No matter what, I love you. You have become far greater than I ever could’ve imagined.” The two hugged again. Artemis pointed at Hope but kept her gaze on her daughter. “Keep her safe. I will talk to my mother. You’ll be able to get her in, but the others will be very angry if they figure it out, so be careful.”

“Thank you. I love you.” The women embraced again.

“Work hard and be smart, young Hope.” Artemis clicked her tongue, and Angel bounded over to the goddess and wagged her tail. “Come, young pup. We have much training to do.” The two walked into the forest and

disappeared into the darkness.

The trees shimmered, and the surrounding forest's colors blurred with a soft breeze, like watercolors running down a page. The moon waxed full, then waned to a sliver of pale light. Hope's eyes adjusted, and they stood in a plain concrete room with a statue of Artemis with her bow drawn. The air was stale, and at the base of the statue lay a sundry of offerings, forlorn in their abandonment.

Priska sighed. "Let's go home."

Hope's shoulders sagged as the weight of the encounter settled. "How do we get into an Olympian library?"

The young Priska gritted her teeth and pulled the ornate wooden door open. "There's only one."

TWO



“HOW DO WE GET INTO the Olympian library? And where is it?” Hope asked when Priska walked in the door. She wasn’t willing to remain silent forever. In the almost week since their visit to the temple, Priska had talked of her work, getting Hope enrolled in school, and how to spend the rest of summer. Not once had they discussed the subject of the library or the curse. But not for lack of Hope trying.

Priska had morphed back into her older self and was back to work at Mr. Davenport’s office. “Good evening to you, too.” She set her bag on the counter. “Are we eating out again tonight? What sounds good?”

Hope stared blankly at her aunt. She didn’t care if they ate in or out. She didn’t care if they had Italian, Chinese, Mexican, or Indian. What she wanted was answers.

“My choice? Excellent. Let’s have Italian.”

“It’s not going to go away because you won’t talk to me about it. I know that’s what you want, but I’m not going to do nothing. If you won’t help me, I’ll—”

“Stop.” Priska closed her eyes. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. You don’t know—”

“I would know if you talked to me. You used to talk to me, tell me stuff. Now it’s like you don’t even care.” Hope flopped down on the couch. “If my mom were alive—”

“I said stop!” Priska glared at Hope. “You want to know? The Olympian library has two ways to access it. Two.” She held up a finger. “The first is from Olympus, where the gods live. The only way to get to Olympus is by invitation. Not going to happen.” She held up a second finger. “The only other entrance is through a conservatory. A home for demigods. Which you are not.”

Olympus was definitely out, so a conservatory was the only way in. “But —”

“To refresh your memory, I escaped from a conservatory about a month ago. Barely alive, I might add. And I feel the need to point out that the sons of Apollo are probably still hunting you. And did I mention that they were the ones that almost killed me?” Priska dropped her head into her hands.

What had happened to her fearless aunt? Where was the woman who hunted Skia and laughed about it? “Tell me what I need to do to be safe?”

“You need to not go.”

This wasn’t a whim. It was her life! “But Artemis said you would be able to get me in.”

“She did, and I can. But before you decide—”

“You want to tell me all the risks?” Hope sucked in a deep breath, preparing for rebuttal.

“No. It wouldn’t do any good anyway.” Priska’s shoulders dropped, and she studied Hope. “Your chin juts out when you get stubborn. Just like your mother. I can see it all over your face that you won’t let it go.” She picked up her phone. “Let’s order dinner. Then we’ll come up with a plan.”

“I AM SICK OF THIS,” Hope muttered to herself as she trudged up the sidewalk on her way home from school. She kicked at a pebble on the ground and listened to it skip up the street.

After all that planning with Priska, nothing was happening. Seriously, nothing.

Demigods used the conservatory as a safe haven, and young demigods stayed there to get training and education. They’d moved close to the one in Seattle, and the goal was to have the demigods “stumble across” them, invite them in, and then, somehow in the course of her studies, Hope would sneak into the library and do her research. Priska had made it sound easy, and of course Hope trusted her. But seriously? Were all demigods on holiday?

The overcast sky hung heavily with moisture, and rain oozed from the clouds, unable to be contained. Nothing like cold, damp weather to explicitly state that the extended summer was over.

Not that she even cared about the weather. Or school. Or that Priska was likely already at their new apartment, baking cookies. Well, actually, that sounded kind of nice, but the rest of it was all-around sucky.

All Hope wanted was for the stupid demigods to find her so she could get to the conservatory, find out how to break her curse, and maybe apologize to Athan. Maybe.

She still wasn’t sure about that last one. In hindsight, she’d jumped to conclusions. He’d told her he’d been sent to hunt her. He’d also said he’d keep her safe. But when she overheard him talking to his dad, Hermes . . . No, it didn’t matter. A relationship between Hope and Athan wouldn’t work. Hermes had even said as much. And if Apollo found out, he’d kill Athan.

But she couldn’t help the guilt that gnawed on her, especially late at night. Especially when she thought of how stupid she’d been. She shouldn’t have let Priska talk her into another new phone and number. She shouldn’t have put

off calling him. Because when she *finally* had, he'd changed numbers too. And even though Haley still kept in contact with Hope, her best friend had no forwarding number for him.

She wanted it to be over already.

If patience was a virtue, Hope was a serious detriment to the moral fiber of society. Actually, the fact that she was a cursed monster would probably be considered worse than her impatience.

But really, what was taking so long?

Priska's brilliant plan was to get Hope "discovered." Like Athan's initial misunderstanding, they were banking on the demigods assuming she was one of their own, and then *hopefully* she'd be invited into the conservatory. At that point she'd have to figure out how to get into the Olympian library.

The Olympian library, where she could peruse every book ever written, every story ever told. It was going to be like finding a needle in a haystack. She'd need to figure out how it was sorted so she could focus on Apollo and her curse.

The whole thing would be overwhelming, except for the little hang-up of not being able to even get to the haystack. She couldn't do anything until she was found by some stupid demigods.

Stupid demigods.

She pushed through the glass doors into the sparse lobby of the high-rise apartments and strode toward the elevators. The doors were starting to close, and she cursed as she ran, sliding her arm into the shrinking gap at the last second. The doors slid back open, and Hope stared at the male occupant.

He was young, certainly less than twenty. He exuded a strength and power that made her want to back away. It wasn't just that he was well built, although he was. His shirt hugged his body, and the tattoos on his arms accentuated where his muscles dipped and curved. His hair was dark, almost

black, cropped short, and although disheveled, it appeared to have been spiked up in the front earlier in the day. His eyes were a striking ice blue. Everything about him seemed hard.

She hesitated, debating if she should back out, and then he smiled. Not in a friendly way to put her at ease. His smile mocked her, like he knew the effect he was having on her, and she was somehow beneath him because of it.

“Are you coming in?” His accent was Irish or British . . . or maybe Australian.

She frowned.

“Or did you want to wait for your own lift, princess?”

Definitely not American.

“Hello?” He waved his hand at her.

Yikes. She was still standing with her arm blocking the elevator doors. She shook off the shiver of fear.

“Excuse me.” She stepped onto the elevator and gave him her most withering glare. “Would you push twenty-one, please?” While her words were polite, there was no warmth behind them.

“Oh, but of course.” He inclined his head, pushed the button, and then leaned back as the elevator doors slid shut.

Hope watched the numbers light up, one by one. A spicy smell, both strong and masculine, filled the small area. Hera and Zeus, he smelled good. Seven . . . eight . . . Trying to be discreet, she glanced at the young man.

He met her eyes with appraising ones of his own, and he lifted his brows. “See something you like, sweetheart?”

“*You* were staring at *me*.” It felt imperative that she correct his blatant misrepresentation. “Didn’t your mother ever tell you not to stare? It’s rude.” There was something arrogant and irritating about the stranger.

He laughed, a short guffaw, and a dimple appeared. “I’m certain she did,

probably right afore she boxed my ears.” He straightened up and held out his hand. “I’m Xan.”

Hope refused to act intimidated, regardless of the butterflies in her stomach. Taking his hand, she replied, “I’m Hope.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Hope.”

“It’s nice to meet you, too.”

His hands were rough and calloused, and the handshake was brief. She took a step back as soon as her hand was released.

After a brief silence, the elevator doors slid open with a ding, and Hope moved toward the exit. A firm grasp pulled her back from the door. The contact was brief, but a whirlwind of anxiety coursed through her.

“I was thinking you don’t want to get off here.”

She looked at him again and couldn’t help but feel like he was laughing *at* her. Even his dimple mocked her. Disgusted, she eyed the monitor. They were on the seventeenth floor. Someone must have pushed the call button and gone back to their apartment.

She backed into the elevator. “Umm, thanks.”

“Right.” He smirked.

The door slid shut, and they started climbing again.

An unsettling feeling gnawed at her stomach. Hope fixed her gaze on the climbing numbers. It was only another moment before the elevator stopped on the twenty-first floor.

“Um, thanks for uh . . . you know, making sure I didn’t get off on the wrong floor, and uh . . . yeah.” She forced her lips into something she hoped resembled gratitude and glanced at the keypad, making sure she was on the twenty-first floor. She also saw that Xan was staying on the top floor. Penthouse.

“You’re quite welcome.” He met her gaze, and his lip curled. “Have a nice

day, Hope.”

“Um, yeah. You too.” The doors slid shut and she stood frozen, seeing only her reflection in the polished metal. Could she have sounded any more stupid? What in the name of Hermes . . . Her train of thought skidded to a halt.

Hermes, god of linguistics. Athan’s dad.

Athan. She shook her head.

She needed to get over him. Because it was over. She’d probably never see him again. And even if she did, it wouldn’t matter. She’d never put him at risk.

What Hermes had said about Apollo was true. He’d killed her mom because she’d married someone else. Apollo would never let her be with anyone but him. Ugh. And he was like a million years old.

No. She needed to focus on breaking the curse. Because that was the only way for her to be free. Free to make her own decisions about life and love. She swallowed her emotions and locked her memories of Athan away in the darkest corner of her mind.

She opened the door to the scent of chocolate chip cookies.

THREE



“HOW ABOUT I GO PICK up dinner tonight?” Priska set down her book and stood up from the couch.

The weekend was drawing to a close. Hope had spent the bulk of it studying her *Book of the Fates*. Priska insisted that she read the whole thing and was taking it to the extreme by supervising.

Their small two-bedroom apartment was sparsely furnished with a sofa and love seat in the living room and a dinette set with two chairs just off the kitchen. The worn suede couch faced a gas fireplace where orange, yellow, and blue flames danced in the grate, and three cinnamon candles glowed on the mantle next to the statue of Hecate. Hope stretched out her legs to the now empty side of the couch.

“Does steak sound good?” Priska asked as she walked to the kitchen and grabbed her purse.

Hope rolled her eyes.

“Steak always sounds good. What are we celebrating?” She pulled the pillow out from under her knees and set it on top of the book.

“Nothing,” Priska answered. “You look like you could use a little pick-me-up.”

True. “And we should leave our shrine a little offering.” The effigy of Hecate, goddess of the crossroads between life and death, kept the Skia from being able to come into their apartment. Hope had no idea how it worked, only that it did. “Our plan isn’t exactly going well.” She fiddled with the fringe of the chenille pillow. “Do you think the demigods will ever find us?”

Priska flinched. “Have some patience, Hope. I’m very good at hiding, as are you. We’ve had heaps of practice. Perhaps we’re not good at being found.”

Hope was about to agree, but the words wouldn’t come. It wasn’t true. Shortly after Athan had come to Goldendale, he’d suspected her. And they weren’t exactly being subtle now. Besides, Priska was good at everything she did. “We’re both on the same page about this, right? You agreed to help.”

The older woman bit her lip, and something in her eyes remained wary. “I’ll always act in your best interest, no matter what. My very purpose is to keep you safe.”

Hope frowned at the non-answer. Demigods, the offspring children of gods and humans, were everywhere in Goldendale. Now, mere minutes from a conservatory, there are none to be found? “I don’t get it. Where are they?”

Priska grabbed her car keys and phone. “Maybe we can come up with some ideas to help you get discovered after we eat.”

“Will it put us in danger? Of Skia?” Despite wanting to be found by demigods, nightmares of the leering creatures from the Underworld still woke her from her troubled sleep.

“Don’t worry about Skia,” Priska answered. “When we catch the demigods’ attention, they’ll protect you. And until then, we’ll manage.” She went to the door. “I’ll be back in an hour with dinner. Stay put and get your thinking cap on.”

Right. Because if Hope thought hard enough, it would change something.

She blew out a breath of disappointment and stood to get a drink of water.

Hope sat curled up in her green chair, reading, when the buzzer drew her back to the present. That would be Priska with dinner. Hope jumped up and buzzed the building door open. She grabbed silverware and plates and filled two glasses, one with water, the other with wine.

A few minutes later, a knock announced her arrival. Her stomach gave a growl, and Hope hurried to open the door. Her jaw dropped, and she took an involuntary step back. Xan stood outside her door in shorts and a tank top, glaring at her. His skin glistened with sweat, and she could smell the musk from his deodorant. Or maybe that was cologne.

“I forgot my key, so thanks for buzzing me in.” Despite the expression of gratitude, his muscles were corded and tight and his eyes cold. He tapped on the door jamb. “Just a reminder; check to see who you’re letting into the building. Preferably *before* you let them in.” He pressed his lips into a white line.

She gaped at him, speechless.

“I would hate for you to let a monster in.” He clenched his jaw, and balled his hands into fists.

Hope nodded. “No monsters in the building.” Was he talking about monstrous people or *monsters*? Her anxiety spiked with the thought. She should’ve checked who it was. Why hadn’t she?

“And no bad guys. I’d hate for you to get hurt.” He took a step back and punctured the air between them with his finger. “Right?”

“Right.” She glared. More than anything she wanted to hurt him.

Without any departing words, he strolled back toward the elevator.

“Next time, remember your key,” she mumbled. “Idiot.”

Without glancing back, he raised his hand and waved. “Touché.”

Hope slammed the door and stomped back to her chair. But the still voice

of her conscience nagged. He was right. And she hated him for it.

The security bell chimed again. This time she picked up the phone to confirm it was Priska before buzzing the building open. Priska came through the door, carrying a bag from The Met in one hand and a shopping bag from a trendy boutique in the other. She'd changed from her contemporary suit and now wore fitted jeans, an orange tank top, and a chunky cardigan that slid off her thin shoulders.

Hope's stomach gave another involuntary growl.

"Are you ready for dinner? I'm starving." Priska pushed past Hope into the apartment, and went into the kitchen. "Close the door and come into the dining room so we can eat."

Hope closed the door and walked into the kitchen.

"What happened? Why did you change again?" She fell into her chair with a *thunk*.

"Let's eat first and then we can talk, okay?"

Hope studied her aunt. "Okay, but you'll tell me?"

"I promise. It's all part of my plan."

When the containers were empty, Hope gathered the last few bits of plastic, put them in the now empty bag, and crammed the bag in the garbage. "What's going on? Why did you change your appearance?"

Priska cleared her still-full plate and dumped the contents in the sink.

"Have you met anyone you think is a demigod?"

Hope thought about Xan. He was gorgeous, certainly, and he'd mentioned monsters . . . or had it been bad guys? Either way, there was something about him. "There's a new guy in the building, and he's kinda . . ."

Priska drilled Hope with a hard look. "He's kinda what?"

She crossed her arms, and her gaze darted around the small apartment.

"He's really . . . attractive." She couldn't help the blush that flamed her face.

“And he’s really arrogant.”

Priska pursed her lips. “An arrogant, attractive boy, so you think he’s a demigod? Did you catch his name?”

“Xan. I didn’t get his last name. He was in the elevator after school.” Hope didn’t mention their interaction before dinner. It was bad enough she’d let him in and he’d chewed her out. She didn’t need another lecture from Priska.

“Xan.” Priska tugged on her ear and stared up at the ceiling. “I’ll see what I can find out.” She bit the inside of her mouth and was silent.

The quiet stretched, and Hope became uncomfortable. “Are you going to tell me why you’re a teenager?”

Priska’s head jerked as if being startled from deep thought. “Oh, sure.” She pulled on her long raven locks. “Hopefully I appear young enough that I can say I’m your cousin and it will be believable. I’m going to start school with you.”

She did not just say that. “Why?”

“Obviously what we’re doing isn’t working. If we want the demigods to find you, two of us will double the beacon.”

“Double the beacon?”

“Yes. Brighter light.” She flashed her fingers in and out. “I’m tired of trying to protect you and remaining *invisible*.” She made air quotes as she said the last word. “There are a lot of Skia here, and watching you is practically a full-time job, so I may as well make it such.”

“I don’t want to be a burden.”

Priska waved her hand as if the words were nonsense. “We’re a team, and I think we both want this to move along a bit faster.”

“NO, CHARLIE. I TOLD YOU it will be at least another month before I can be back

in the office.” Priska held her phone to her ear, a frown creasing her face. She was silent for a moment before continuing, “She can’t be that bad.” Another pause. “Fine. I’ll come in. Give me a half hour.”

Hope sat on the couch, watching her aunt pace in the kitchen. No matter what Priska said, her job with Mr. Davenport was important, and not because of the money. Hope knew Priska was rich, so why did she work? Priska said it was something to do, but then why was she insistent that it be this job?

Priska disconnected the call and came over to sit on the arm of the couch. The frown still marred her flawless features. “I’m sorry. The temp agency sent another Melody or Melanie.” She waved her hand, dismissing the past temporary assistants. “I’ll only be gone for an hour or two.”

This wasn’t the first time Priska had taken time off from her job to help. Not even a year ago, Priska had searched for answers regarding Leto’s death and ended up getting kidnapped and beaten by sons of Apollo, barely escaping alive. Months of time away from her job and only a few days back before Hope had begged for help again. And for whatever reason, Priska wouldn’t just let the job go. Maybe there was something more with Mr. Davenport. Regardless, it wasn’t fair that Priska was giving up her life.

“If you need to go, it’s okay. I’ll be fine here.” Hope shifted and dropped her feet to the floor to make room for her aunt.

But Priska didn’t sit. “Of course you will.” She pulled her hair up in a twist to hide the length and went to her room. She came back tying a cashmere wrap sweater around her tiny waist. “Make sure you lock the doors. I’ll be back in time for dinner.”

“No problem.” Hope tried to reign in her frustration. She felt bad for Priska, but she was tired of this.

The door closed, and Hope let her face fall. Nothing was going the way it was supposed to. Priska was always insisting that Hope stay indoors for her

safety, but how was she going to ever get into the conservatory when she was practically hiding in her apartment? And there was something wrong with Priska. She seemed paranoid now. And way more bossy. Hope's heart hurt. For her mom, for Priska, for Athan, and for herself. None of it was fair. None of it, and the load was far too heavy for her broken heart.

She picked up her phone and dialed the number from memory.

The number you've dialed is no longer in service. Please check the number and try again.

She knew he'd changed his phone number. Was it wrong that she still held out hope? Or was it stupidity?

She tapped *End* and then dialed the only other friend she had.

"Hello?"

Something deep within Hope burst with warmth and sunshine. "Haley?"

Hope's eyes welled with tears.

FOUR



“HOPE? OH MY GODS! Where have you been? Are you okay? You just disappeared, and then Athan flipped out and disappeared too. And all the texts but no calls?” Hope’s best friend took a deep breath. “What happened to you?”

Hope cleared her throat. “My aunt came back.”

Silence.

“I moved back to Seattle to live with her.”

“What the Hades?” Haley let out a long breath. “Did you have to disappear? I mean, you didn’t come back, and . . . I mean, you said you had to go . . . I don’t even remember what you were going to do, because that was like *three months ago*.” Another breath. “*Three months ago!*” Another breath. “Okay, I’m done. And I’m glad you’re okay. And that you called.”

“I miss you.” Hope’s emotions bubbled. “I mean, I don’t have friends here like you . . .” And Athan.

Haley laughed. “Of course not. You should come for a visit. You wouldn’t believe how crazy it’s been. Krista is such a Gorgon. Do you remember that guy, Tre, that moved in? Was he here before you took off?”

“Was he tall and blond?” Hope vaguely remembered a new boy at school

before the year had ended. “Didn’t he have a couple of brothers?” The memory of him and his brothers at the Red Apple surfaced. Mostly she remembered the warning from Mr. Stanley, Haley’s dad, to stay away from them.

“Yeah, well, rumor is that he and his brothers are demigods.” She snorted. “Anyway, they’re majorly rude. Tre asked all kinds of questions about you and Athan, as if the two of you were demigods, I mean.”

A twinge of guilt nagged at Hope. She’d continued to maintain her status as a mortal teenager, even with her best friend.

“But Krista set that record straight. She really hates you.” There was muffled yelling on the other end of the phone. “Crap. Sorry, Hope. My dad just got home. I’ll call you later, ’kay?”

Hope said goodbye and hung up the phone. She should’ve felt better after talking to her friend. Better than the heaviness pressing on her chest or the gloom seeping its way to her heart.

The walls of the small apartment seemed to contract. Almost like the space was shrinking. She had exactly no one she could talk to. Her emotions ballooned, and she knew she’d go crazy if she obeyed Priska. It took less than a breath to decide and only a few seconds for Hope to grab her wallet and keys. At the very least, she could go shopping.

Forty minutes later, she was trudging back along the cobblestone of Pike Place. It wasn’t that the bags were heavy, but she’d bought too much, and it was an awkward balancing act. In retrospect, she shouldn’t have bought the bouquet of daisies and lilies, but the scent had reminded her of her mother, and she wanted something nice for Priska. After all, she was doing so much.

Hope had spoken to the vendor without considering the extra bulk, and now she was carrying her food and trying not to crush the flowers as she avoided puddles and potholes in the street.

A mirthful chuckle carried on the breeze, and Hope turned toward the sound. Xan stood on the street corner, by the cheese store, staring at her. His dimple mocked her, and when their eyes met, he strode toward her.

“You look like you could use some help, young lady.”

“I’m fine,” she replied stiffly, still irritated by their last encounter.

He reached toward the bags in her left hand, taking the large honeydew melon that was throwing off her balance.

“I’m sure you are, but I’m walking to the same location, and my hands are empty. Let me be a gentleman.”

“Ha!” As if. But Hope let him take a couple bags. Shifting the remainder, her stride became smooth again. “Thank you, Xan.” The gratitude was uncomfortable and bitter on her lips, and she studied the ground as she extended the proverbial olive branch. She took several strides before realizing he was no longer next to her. Instead, he stood rooted to the spot where she’d thanked him.

His lips pulled up into a half smile, and his dimple made another appearance. “You’re welcome.”

Yeah. She pretty much hated him.

Hope said nothing more the remainder of the walk to their building. Wanting to be rid of him, she kept a brisk pace, but Xan easily kept up. When they were both in the lobby, she extended her hands for the bags.

“Thanks again.” They were just as bitter as the first time she’d said them.

“Always happy to help, lass.” He took a deep breath. “Hey, sorry I was rude the other day. I know there is no excuse for rudeness.”

“No. There’s not.” She set down her stuff and extended empty hands.

Still, he kept the bags. “Which is why I apologized.”

“Fine. Right.” She dropped her hands. Maybe she wouldn’t hate him completely. “Why did you jump all over me like that?”

His eyebrows went up as she spoke. “*Jump* on you?”

She narrowed her eyes. “You know what I mean. There was no reason to —”

A *ding* announced the arrival of the elevator. The doors slid open, and a floral scent spilled into the lobby. Hope glanced at the elevator, and her words evaporated.

The young woman exiting was stunning. Not pretty. Not even beautiful. But striking in a way that Made. You. Stop. Her dark, almost black, hair cascaded down her back in soft curls. Her warm russet skin was flawless. She was tall and thin, but in a way that spoke of athleticism, not starvation. She had rich brown eyes and full, pouty lips. Hope had never seen anyone so gorgeous.

“Xan! Where have you been?” The attractive girl’s voice held the smallest amount of irritation, as if speaking to a beloved but naughty child. She glanced down at his hands. “Shopping? Now? We don’t have time. We need to . . .” She glanced at Hope, and it was as if her eyes and brain had caught up with her mouth. “Well, well, well.” She leaned forward and studied Hope’s face. “Look what the cat dragged in.”

Hope narrowed her gaze. *How dare she?*

Xan smirked. “Dahlia, this is Hope.” He addressed Hope. “This is my . . . cousin, Dahlia.”

His cousin? They were nothing alike. No, that wasn’t entirely true. They were both incredibly attractive and apparently rude. But they didn’t resemble each other. At all.

Something akin to insecurity snaked through Hope. Not like it should matter. Swallowing her pride, she extended her hand.

“It’s nice to meet you, Dahlia.” The words were almost painful to choke out. No one should be that beautiful.

“Um-hmm.” The flawless beauty’s eyebrows were still raised as she took Hope’s outstretched hand in a firm grip.

Curious. Dahlia’s hands were calloused similar to Xan’s, like too much time spent shoveling or wielding a sword. Maybe she did a lot of manual labor.

There was another awkward pause.

“Did you guys just move in?” Hope tried to fill the uncomfortable void.

“Uh”—Dahlia peeked at Xan before answering—“yes. And you? Have you lived here long?” Her voice had the clip of British English to it, each word distinct and clear.

“Not very long.” Hope shifted on her feet and glanced at the elevator. There was no way to leave until she got her stuff back from Xan.

“Where did you move from?” Xan asked.

Hearing him right after his cousin made their accents distinct. His speech had a lilt to it that almost slurred the syllables. They definitely hadn’t grown up together.

“Hello?” Xan waved his hand in front of her face. He was laughing at her. *Crap!* He’d asked her a question.

“I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“I asked where you moved from.” The corner of his mouth pulled up.

“Oh, uh, eastern Washington. A little town south of Yakima called Goldendale.”

“Are you a small town lass?” Xan drew closer, and his gaze danced over her eyes, her nose, and stopped on her lips before sliding back up.

She couldn’t help the blush that spread over her skin. “No. I mean, not that there’s anything wrong with that, but I . . .”

Why did she need to defend herself to him? And why was he in her face? She stepped back.

There was another awkward pause.

“Xan?” Dahlia broke the tension. “Are we going to that, uh, *thing* tonight?”

Embarrassment stained Hope’s cheeks. “I’m sorry to delay you.” She reached out and grabbed the bags from Xan. “Thanks for your help.”

Xan’s gaze stayed fixed on Hope, and he pursed his lips. He paused only a moment before relinquishing the bags.

“Right. It was my pleasure. Really. And sorry again, ’bout yesterday. Be careful, okay?” He shifted toward Dahlia. “All right, Dahl, let’s go.”

The two left, taking the warmth of human interaction away with them.

With a forced exhale, Hope glanced back to the elevator only to see the numbers lighting up as it climbed. Ten . . . eleven . . . twelve . . . Irritated, she set the bags down to wait.

“Where were you?” Priska stopped mid-pace in the living room, cell phone in hand, as Hope stepped through the door. She held up the small black object. “I’ve called you three times and sent you four texts.”

Hope set the bags in the kitchen and held out the flowers. “I went to the market to get stuff for dinner.” She offered the bouquet. “I didn’t hear my phone.”

“No? Well, you scared me nigh to death.” Priska accepted the bouquet. “These are lovely.” She sniffed at the blossoms. “And the lilies remind me of your mother.”

At the mention of her mother, Hope’s chest tightened. “She said daisies were your favorite.”

“They are.”

The two went into the kitchen. Priska filled a vase with water, and Hope started putting away the groceries.

“Holy Demeter, you got a lot of stuff. How did you carry all of that

home?” Priska asked as she clipped the stems and arranged the flowers.

“I met one of our neighbors, and he helped.”

“One of our neighbors?”

Hope nodded. “That guy I told you about, Xan. We keep bumping into each other. He has a cousin named Dahlia.”

Priska’s eyes widened a fraction of an inch. “Xan?”

“The one I said might be a demigod.”

Priska focused on the flowers for several minutes, and small pieces of stems fell into the sink.

“Because he’s handsome?” Priska finally asked, but it was more of a sneer as she shoved the last stem into the vase.

Hope pulled on her sleeves, the tension between her and her aunt ballooning discomfort. Why was her aunt so weird about this? “It’s like they seem almost too perfect. Beautiful, like you. But they don’t look like you. Almost otherworldly.” She sucked at this. “Not like aliens or anything, but . . . not quite mortal.”

“Like Athan?” Priska’s stare pierced Hope.

She bit the inside of her lip as she thought. “Yes, but Athan seemed more human than these two. Or maybe I was too ignorant before.”

Priska said nothing while she put the produce in the fridge.

“Do you think they could be demigods?” If this was the case, Hope could finally start making some progress.

Her aunt kept her back to her. “I wouldn’t get your hopes up.”

The excitement that had been building in her chest deflated like a balloon. “Why not? You haven’t even seen them.”

Priska shrugged. “Call it intuition. I don’t think they’re who you’re expecting.”

“Well, I hope you’re wrong.” Because she was tired. Tired of nothing

happening. Tired of being cursed. Tired of being alone. Tired of all of it.

Priska held out the package wrapped in white butcher paper. “Should we grill the chicken or would you rather roast it?”

Hope didn’t want to fight again tonight, so she let Priska change the subject. “Let’s grill it with the summer squash.”

Hope thought she might see Xan or Dahlia in school. At the very least, she’d run into them again in the lobby. But as the days passed, it was as if they’d just disappeared.

And she hated that Priska was right.

FIVE



“I’M GOING INTO THE OFFICE,” Priska said as she stirred cream into her tea.

“Charlie’s behind on transcription, and he can’t afford to have Melinda mess it up again.”

“What’s with all the M names?” The last three temps that had filled in for Priska were Melanie, Melody, and now Melinda?

Priska grimaced. “The temp agency must be fixated on them.” She sipped her tea while Hope poured syrup over her toasted waffles. “I’ll be gone most of the day. Lay low, please, and maybe catch up on your homework.”

“Sure. I’ll get right on it.” Her previous straight-A record had taken a nosedive into barely passing. It wasn’t that she couldn’t do the work, but Priska’s “gentle reminders” rubbed Hope the wrong way. It was like her aunt was *always* telling Hope what to do. And since Priska had started school, it seemed she was *always* hovering.

The previous warmth of their relationship had almost disappeared. It was now spiked with discomfort, a sense of vigilance that made Hope want to run and hide.

The only time Priska sounded like her old self was when she talked about Charlie.

Priska rinsed out her mug. “I’ll be on my way then.” She stood watching Hope until Hope met her aunt’s gaze. “Be safe.”

There it was again. *Safe*.

Hope curled her hands into fists, her nails digging into her palms. “You, too.” She swallowed the rest of the words that wanted to spill out and instead tore at her waffle with her fork.

Seconds later, she heard Priska’s key in the lock.

Hope contemplated her options as she regarded the sparsely furnished apartment. There was no way she was staying holed up in the cramped space. She needed to get out. She shot off a quick text to Haley and went to change. Twenty minutes later, Hope was on her way to Goldendale.

The sun burned through the clouds as Hope drove over Snoqualmie pass to eastern Washington. The evergreens stood stalwart against a backdrop of blue sky. The signs said it was forty-two degrees outside. Hope slipped on her sunglasses, easing the bright rays. Her thoughts drifted from her mom to Priska to Haley. It would be great to see her best friend. Hope had missed having someone to confide in.

Music pulsed in the air, and Hope’s anticipation continued to rise. She exited the freeway onto the arterial that would take her to Goldendale. She hit the town of Toppennish, bright murals painted on the sides of buildings welcoming her. Then the sight of a run-down motel slapped her, and guilt wiggled into her chest. Memories of Athan pulled and tugged at her heart. Their fight and then their agreement to trust each other. She’d broken it. Or he had. But then she had run. What a mess. And she *couldn’t* let it go. Was it wrong that she missed him? That she wished it were different?

She was going to drive right by Myrine’s house. It wasn’t even out of the way. Maybe Myrine knew where he was, or at least how to get ahold of him. Then Hope would at least have the option to call him, if she decided that was

really what she wanted.

Hope's hands were sweating, and her heart stuttered. With a deep breath, she knocked.

Myrine cracked the door; her blue eyes widened when they met Hope's. The older woman appeared every bit a paradox. Her soft, white hair fell from the loose bun at the crown of her head and was a stark contrast to her unlined face. Her green T-shirt was singed at the hem, and she was barefoot despite the coolness of the year. Before Hope could say anything, Myrine spoke.

"Kitty cat, kitty cat." She tsked. "He's not here, not here. Gone. Gone. Gone." She shifted to close the door, still mumbling to herself. "Flew away, far away. Gone for months, you will not stay."

"What?" Hope slipped her foot in the doorway. "When did he leave? Where did he go?"

Myrine drew back, and the door opened wider. "Not safe for you." She shook her head. "Not safe for him. Riddles and death . . ." Myrine tilted her head. "What month are we in?"

Hope hated the nonsense rhyming. It made her want to shake the poor lady. But she wanted answers, and Myrine was her only chance of getting them. "September."

Myrine closed her eyes and pursed her lips. The silence was as uncomfortable as it was odd.

"It was last month. He continued to check in until last month." Myrine took a deep breath and opened her eyes. She gritted her teeth and swallowed. "Why don't you come in? We'll both be more comfortable inside, and despite what either of us wants, this conversation isn't going to be short."

Whoa! Myrine wasn't rhyming. Or chanting. She sounded lucid. Hope stepped into the house, her skin crawling with anxiety. Her heart stuttered as she glanced at the surroundings. The last time she'd been in the blue house it

was so cluttered she could barely get down the hall. Now, it was immaculate, well decorated, and inviting, giving every impression of a quaint bed-and-breakfast. Hope's jaw dropped.

"Amazing, isn't it? I've decided to sell, and I'd like to get back what I put in. I used a little elbow grease"—she lowered her voice—"and a bit of magic. You know, spruce up the place."

Myrine led Hope into a small sitting room off the entryway. Two overstuffed chairs faced a fireplace, and a floor lamp of stained glass softened the light. Embers of an earlier fire left lingering warmth. Over the fireplace hung a watercolor landscape, and several pillows were arranged on a window seat. It was probably the most perfectly comfortable room Hope had ever seen.

"Isn't it relaxing?"

Myrine's voice seemed softer, soothing. The room called to Hope, drew her in, and she nodded at Myrine as her tension melted away.

"I cheated in here," Myrine whispered as she pointed at herself. "Oracle." She broke into a bright smile. "Not only can I see across time, I can manipulate what you're seeing now." She sat in one of the chairs and indicated for Hope to sit in the other.

Something about Myrine's words gave Hope the distinct impression that she should run away, but a lassitude washed away the impression before it could become action. Hope sank into the chair, and the cushions molded to her, making her feel like she was sitting on a cloud. She could live in this chair for the rest of her life. And, oh, if she could read a book or two, right here . . .

"You know they're not real." Myrine's voice buzzed at the edge of Hope's awareness.

Grudgingly, Hope pulled her focus and zeroed it in on Myrine. She was

saying something. Was it important?

“The chairs.” Myrine tapped the arm of the one she sat in. “I mean, they are real chairs, but your perception is different than the next person’s. Yours are quite nice, actually. But it gets confusing when there are two or three other people in the room.” She mumbled something to herself. “Somehow, I’ve got to get that figured out.” She looked at Hope again. “But that’s my problem. What’s yours?”

Listlessness soaked into Hope, and she frowned. What was her problem? She’d come to Goldendale. She wanted to see Haley and talk to Myrine.

“Athan?” Myrine prompted.

“Yes. I mean, that’s my question. Where’s Athan?” Hope pushed herself to the edge of the chair, but it was as if she were pushing through quicksand.

“He’s searching for you.” Myrine leaned forward and studied Hope. “You should stop running away from people who are trying to help you. If you had a little trust, you’d probably be a lot safer.”

Safe. There was something familiar about that word. Her brain was fluff, her eyelids heavy, and she leaned back into the chair.

“What should I do?” Her words fell to the floor in a heap, barely decipherable. Hope felt almost as if she were having an out of body experience.

“Do? Well, you can’t stay here. You’re having some kind of reaction.” Myrine yanked Hope up, then jerked away from her touch. Myrine’s eyes rolled back, then glazed over when she focused back on Hope. “Cats and bats and lots of boys.”

What the Kracken? Really? Hope took three steps then slouched against the wall in the entryway. Her head felt funny, like she’d had too much cold medicine. The seconds ticked, and it slowly cleared out of her system.

Myrine followed her, peering at Hope as if she was under a microscope.

“Kitty cat, kitty cat . . .”

Hope was tired of playing games. She only wanted one answer. “Do you know where Athan is?”

Myrine’s eyes narrowed, and she clucked her tongue. “Pretty, pretty monster, why so blue?” *Cluck, cluck.* “You’re here for an answer, to find a clue. Riddle, riddle, riddles, puzzles, and words. The answers you seek aren’t in this world.”

Nope. She was back to rhyming gibberish. Hope concentrated, trying to make sense of the words. *Not in this world? Like not the human world?*

Myrine closed her eyes. “Careful, careful, careful. You must beware. Lies and trickery where lies the helm. The dead have no secrets in that far realm.”

Was she talking about the Underworld? Artemis had told her to go to the conservatory.

“Listen here.” Myrine put her finger on Hope’s temple. “And here.” Myrine touched her chest. “Look with your heart *and* your eyes, and you will find with your soul.”

What a waste of time. “Thanks, Myrine.”

Hope walked to the door. Coming here had been ridiculous. Besides the headache, she’d only learned that Myrine could use magic to make you fall asleep.

“You don’t know. You can’t see. Your journey’s just beginning. Don’t thank me.” Myrine held Hope’s shoulders until their eyes met. “You really need to stop running away.”

Hope caught herself mid eye roll.

“Okay, I won’t run away.” She extended her hand.

Myrine glanced down at it and then leaned forward, wrapped her arms around Hope, and whispered in her ear, “I know you won’t listen.” She pulled away and stepped back into the house. “Be careful.”

Five minutes later, Hope was standing outside her best friend's house. Haley Stanley lived with her parents in a small two-story cottage. It was painted a soft latte color with vibrant teal trim. Haley's father, Peter Stanley, worked at the Red Apple as a butcher. Hope had met him right after moving to Goldendale, when she'd first gone grocery shopping.

It had taken weeks of friendship with both of them before Hope connected the two. Haley had the same almond eyes as her mother, as well as her light brown skin. But personality-wise Haley was more friendly and gregarious like her father, which was why Hope loved them both.

She knocked once, and the door swung open. A thick arm shot from the doorway, and meaty fingers grabbed her shirt. Instinct took over. Hope grabbed the hand with both of hers and pushed it flat against her chest. She twisted the arm and ducked underneath while applying pressure on the nerve that ran along the triceps.

"Hope?"

"Mr. Stanley?" Hope dropped her arms to her side, and she stared up in confusion. "Wha—"

"Hurry. Come inside." He pulled her in and peered up and down the street before he closed the door.

His hands were clammy, his hair stuck up in the back, and he smelled as if he hadn't bathed.

Hope scooted back a step.

"What are you doing here?" His normally cheerful features were morphed into a grimace.

It was like a slap to the face. He'd always been nice to her in the store. She'd thought they were friends. "I . . . I came to see Haley. She said it would be okay if . . ."

His tight shoulders relaxed a fraction. "Of course, of course." He licked

his lips. "I'm just surprised to see you." He yelled over his shoulder, "Haley, come say goodbye to Hope!"

Hope gawked at an all-too-familiar sight. Moving boxes. Everywhere. "You guys are moving?"

Mr. Stanley blinked but said nothing.

"Hope!" Haley jumped the last two stairs and ran to her friend. "I'm glad you're here." She offered a brief hug and then pulled Hope toward the stairs. "Dad, can Hope stay a little bit? Please?"

Mr. Stanley gave a wave of his hand. "Five minutes," he said, then he disappeared into the bowels of the home.

"What's going on?" Hope asked as they climbed the stairs. "You didn't tell me you were moving."

"Yeah, I know." Haley opened the door to her bedroom and stepped in, motioning Hope to follow. The sun streamed through the window, slashing the room in half, and labeled boxes were stacked by the closet and bathroom door. "Dad wouldn't let me tell anyone." She glared at the door as she closed it. "Like no one."

"Why?" Hope sat on the floor and crossed her legs. The sun's rays warmed her, making the chill of her heart that much more pronounced.

Haley threw her hand up in the air. "Get this. I don't even know. He came home from work two days ago, shut himself in the basement for *hours* while talking to himself, and then came upstairs and announced we were moving. He wouldn't even let me go to school yesterday." She sunk to the floor. "Ever since you left, he's been all weird."

"Does he hate me?" The idea made Hope's heart hurt. Mr. Stanley had been the first friendly face in Goldendale. He'd shared riddles with her, saved the best cuts of meat for her.

Haley frowned. "No. In fact he always asks how you're doing." Haley

studied Hope. “How *are* you doing?”

Hope shrugged. “Okay, I guess. My aunt—”

Mr. Stanley opened the door. “Time to go, Haley.” His gaze settled on Hope. “You should go too. Best for you to not be in Goldendale any longer.”

Haley rolled her eyes. “Come on, Dad. Quit being—”

Mr. Stanley silenced her with a glare. He went to the window and pulled the drapes shut. Then he went to the door, looked into the hall, and closed them all into the room.

SIX



HOPE'S HEART STARTED TO POUND. What did he know? This was a mistake. She shouldn't have come.

Haley opened her mouth, but before she could say anything Mr. Stanley spoke.

"Don't." He held up his hand. "I'm going to tell you, but I want you to listen, okay?" His gaze darted back and forth between the two girls.

Dizziness washed over her, and she braced herself physically as well as mentally for what could only be horrible.

"Hope, you need to leave Goldendale and never come back. Do you remember those boys? The ones who moved in at the end of the year?"

Hope remembered. She'd seen them at the Red Apple the last time she'd gone grocery shopping. Mr. Stanley had warned her to stay away from them, and Haley had said they were jerks.

"They are here hunting the Sphinx."

Hope's heart stopped. Her mouth fell open, and her breath caught as she wanted to defend herself, scream, and run all at the same time.

"Don't say anything, Hope. I mean nothing."

Her mouth snapped shut. She needed to leave. She stood, but Mr.

Stanley's next words made her freeze.

"They know about Athan and that you two were involved." He took a deep breath. "They know you're a demigod, and they know I'm one too."

Wait. What? Mr. Stanley was a demigod? And he thought she was one, too? She looked at Haley, who was directing all her attention on scuffing her shoe. Haley knew? Why hadn't she said anything? Hope faced Mr. Stanley, who held up his hand.

"No questions. Please, just listen." He rubbed his thick hand over his bald head. "The problem is they want to question all of us to find out what we know about the monster. They know we've been in the area since she started making an appearance."

"So what? Let them question you." Moving seemed awfully drastic for another demigod. Hope, however, did need to get out of there. Unless, maybe they would take her to a conservatory.

Almost as if answering her unasked question, he continued, "I have my family to protect. These boys, they don't talk. They interrogate. My father, Hephaestus, warned me, and . . ." He gestured at Haley. "My family means everything to me."

His *father* was Hephaestus? Oh, gods!

His gaze fell on Hope with sad resignation. "I'm sure Athan knows something; he's *Psachno*, after all. If he told you anything, please keep it to yourself. But you should know, Athan came by the store after you left. He's out there searching for you. For what it's worth, I think that boy really does care for you."

Her heart swelled then contracted. It didn't matter even if it were true. Which it probably wasn't.

"The best thing you can do is get in your car—"

A booming voice yelled from outside, and Mr. Stanley flinched. Seconds

later, a pounding on the front door commenced.

Haley stood up, and Hope saw her own fear mirrored in her friend's eyes.

Peter Stanley grabbed at Haley and pulled her to the door. He motioned for Hope to follow, and then put his finger to his lips.

The beating got louder, and a man swore.

Mr. Stanley held his daughter's arm in a firm grip, his face blanched with fear. "Go out the back and cross into the Williamsons' yard. I'll meet you at the store, Haley. Hope, you'd better get out of here."

She didn't need to be told twice.

All three ran downstairs, but Mr. Stanley went to the front door, getting there in time to stop his petite wife from opening it.

"Soo-Jin, go with Haley," Peter whispered.

Hope could hear Haley's mom behind them as they went through the kitchen. Haley reached out to open the back door, and Hope snatched it back. *Check first*, she mouthed, pointing at the curtain on the door.

Soo-Jin frowned at the girls, then peered out the window. She drew back with pursed lips.

"No one," she whispered.

Hope took a deep breath, trying to steel herself for what was to come.

"Stop pounding on my door!" Peter roared.

It was as good of a distraction as they would get. Hope yanked the back door open. The three of them took off at a run. Hope flung herself at the chain-link fence separating the yards. There was a shout behind them and then the pounding of feet. A glance over her shoulder revealed a tall, blond man closing the distance. There was no way Haley and her mom would both get away from him.

If there was time, Hope would weigh her options. But really, there was no option. She leapt from the fence, her face contorted in anger, and she

screamed her rage and fear. The man grabbed at Soo-Jin's shirt and pulled the petite woman to the ground. Hope tackled the bigger man, and as they went down, Hope capitalized on her momentum with several hard punches.

"Coward! Bully!" She struggled to her feet and kicked the man again and again.

Soo-Jin scooted away, her eyes wide. Haley grabbed her mom and backed away from the beating Hope was delivering.

"Go!" Hope yelled at them. "Go now." She waved at her friend and prayed they would be safe.

She watched as the two women climbed the fence and then dropped to the other side. When they disappeared the next street over, Hope thought of Mr. Stanley and the other men. She hoped he made it out okay. She would have to trust that he did.

And she'd better go now, too.

She kicked twice more, once to the man's face and the other to his midsection. The hulking figure was still, and Hope knew she would have to take her chances at some point.

She darted to the side yard, climbed the fence, and dropped into the neighbor's yard. Another fence and another yard, then into the alley. Before crossing the street, she regarded the surroundings. A familiar truck sat outside the Stanleys' home. Athan's obnoxious vehicle screamed betrayal. Had he told those demigods about the Stanleys?

Her car was parked on the other side of the truck. She'd need to walk past it. It'd be okay. She smoothed her hair back, and pieces of leaves and grass fell out. Great. Her clothes were rumpled, and her jeans had mud caked to the knees. She brushed off the worst of it, but much of the mess transferred to her hands.

She needed to leave. Hope took a deep breath and tried to act natural as

she crossed the street. Her heart pounded. Fear danced up her spine and pricked her neck. The sensation of being watched was a physical gnawing, clawing its way to her chest.

Two blond men tumbled into her path, one of them bumping into her.

“Out of my way, Gorgon,” he hissed.

“Excuse me,” she replied as she stepped back. She inched around, keeping them in her peripheral vision.

These were the same men she’d seen at the Red Apple months ago, before she left Goldendale. The more muscular one unlocked the door to the truck, and the other young man grabbed a handle and froze.

“Where’s Prax?”

The other boy swore and opened the door. He poked his head in the interior of the cab and swore again.

Hope reached her car, her heart thudding. With a click of a button, she unlocked the door.

The truck door slammed shut.

Hope opened the door and slid in her seat. She heard yelling as she started the car. And even more yelling as she pulled off the street. But she didn’t look back. Even if it was for her, she wasn’t going to stop. And she’d never come back.

When she got back to Seattle, Priska was still at the office. For once, Hope was glad.

THE NEXT DAY, HOPE received a text from Haley to say they were fine but that she was going to “disappear” for a while. She apologized, but Hope understood. She *completely* understood.

Priska also seemed to disappear. Not literally. She continued to attend school with Hope and hover around Hope in the mornings and evenings, but

she was busy with her “after-school” job at Mr. Davenport’s office. Outwardly, Priska was present, but, when it was just her and Hope, she was jumpy, paranoid.

While Hope adeptly slid back into shunning any and all of her classmates’ attention at school, Priska reveled in the attention. Oddly enough, her ability to become the top of the social ladder was similar to Athan. Priska had the same confidence of one that knew how to play a part. But while Priska would defend Hope, she made no effort to pull her into the students’ activities.

The days added up into weeks, and Hope didn’t see Xan or Dahlia again. She wondered if they’d moved, or maybe they had only been here visiting. Any hope that they were demigods disappeared. Nothing was working out. Nothing.

“Hope?” Priska stood at the stove, making dinner. The smell of garlic and onion permeated the air.

“Yeah?” Hope stopped randomly skipping through channels on the television and glanced toward the kitchen, but she didn’t get up off the couch.

“Did you get your homework done?”

Hope snorted in response and went back to flipping through the TV channels. Talk show, talk show, news, rerun of sitcom. Ugh. The channels were almost a blur.

“Hey, I asked you a question.” Priska poked her head out and pinned Hope with a glare.

Hope avoided meeting her aunt’s eyes but turned off the TV.

“Yeah. I’m done with it.” She wasn’t really lying. She hadn’t even peeked at it, but she was *done* with it.

“Okay. Well, if you need something to do, maybe you could go read some of your history.”

Irritated with the push, she stood. “Yeah. I’ll go to my room and get on

that.”

Hope could hear the heavy sigh before she closed the door.

Whatever.

She fell on her bed, frustration and hopelessness filling her. Picking up the large leather volume from the Fates, she opened it to the middle so she could have the pretense of reading when Priska came to call her for dinner. Hope stared out at the gray Seattle sky, and, when her eyes grew heavy, she gave in to the pull of slumber.

The sense of falling jerked her awake. The sky was dark, and the large tome rested heavily on her chest. The clock’s red numbers noted it was barely shy of midnight. Her stomach gave a rumble. Why hadn’t Priska gotten her for dinner?

Priska’s voice hissed like steam as soon as Hope opened the door.

“No, *you* don’t understand. You don’t even know her. She’s not doing well, and I’m not going to have her whisked away by the most irresponsible people on the face of the Earth. She will know no one, and who would watch after her?”

It was quiet, and in that moment Hope realized Priska was on the phone. Hope slid to the floor and listened.

“You’re right. I don’t trust you.” A brief pause, then, “Don’t be ridiculous. You think you’ll keep her safe? You aren’t exactly stable, and your family is just as bad, if not worse.”

Hope had never heard Priska talk to anyone that way before.

“Ha. Like that would *ever* happen. No, *you* listen to *me*. I told your sister —” Pause. “Whatever.” Another pause and then, “You listen to me because I won’t say it again. Don’t even think about coming around here. If you so much as make contact . . .”

There was silence, and then Priska let out a stifled scream. Something

slammed onto the counter. Footsteps and then the restroom door closed.

She wondered if Priska or the other person had hung up first. Hope put her money on the other person. If anyone spoke to her that way, she would've ended the call. Well, she would've wanted to. This new Priska scared her. Despite her diminutive stature, power radiated from the pixie-like demigod, but that wasn't new. It was the anger that flashed and flared in an unpredictable pattern that was frightening.

Hope climbed back in bed, her hunger forgotten as she digested what she'd overheard. If that conversation was about her, then someone was looking for her.

No. Someone had found her. Someone Priska thought was unsafe.

As Hope lay back down, her mind reeled, and she tried to process what this could mean.

It was still dark when she woke up to Priska banging on the door.

"Time for breakfast. We've got twenty minutes before we need to leave for school."

Hope groaned. "I don't think I can go today." Who knew what time she'd finally fallen asleep. Besides, she couldn't face Priska. Not yet.

"Are you sick?"

The question was ridiculous. An immortal couldn't get sick.

"Uh, sure." The response was laced with sarcasm.

"Fine," Priska said. "We'll call it a mental health day. You can stay home."

Hope couldn't believe her luck. Once Priska left for school, maybe she could—

"Do have anything you want to go do?" Priska asked.

Surely, Priska was kidding. There was no way she would let Hope leave the apartment. She cracked the door. "What?"

Priska leaned against the wall as if it were holding her up. “On our mental health day . . . is there something you want to do?”

Hope caught the pronoun and what it inferred. “You don’t need to stay home with me.”

“I’m here to protect you. I’m not going to let you stay here by yourself.” Priska’s tone was resigned.

Hope was safe in the apartment with the statue of Hecate, and they both knew it. “But—”

“No, buts. If you want to stay home, that’s fine, but I’ll be here, too.”

Hope glared. “What happened? Why don’t you trust me?” Even as she said the words, she knew this wasn’t about not trusting her. She staggered back as if struck as the pieces came together. “Oh gods. That was them? The demigods found us, and you . . .” She couldn’t even make the words come out. The accusation sat bitter on the tip of her tongue.

“Oh, Hope.” Priska’s severe expression fell, and her shoulders sagged. “I’m sorry you heard. I can’t let you go with someone who I *know* can’t keep you safe. We will find someone else.”

She scowled, the betrayal swelling until it threatened to consume her. “How could you?”

“I have to keep you safe.”

“No! Demigods were here. They found me, and you . . .” Hope glared. The whole plan hinged on her getting to the conservatory, and it was right there. Priska was the one holding it up!

“I would let you go if it wasn’t them. Anyone but them. They will—”

“Don’t.” Hope held her hand out as if to push the words away. “Just . . . don’t.”

Priska took a step toward the door, but Hope closed it before her aunt could cross the threshold.

An icy chill settled over the apartment.

SEVEN



HOPE GRABBED HER BACKPACK to leave. Two days. It almost felt like she was going on vacation. She was so excited to get away from her aunt and out of the tension-filled apartment that she was practically giddy. It would give her time to think of a plan to find the demigods.

“Where do you want me to take you?” Priska asked, breaking the three day, mutually imposed silence.

Words lodged in Hope’s throat. “I . . . I’m going to change.”

“I know you’re going to change. We’re going to go somewhere safe, you can morph, and we can hang out ’til you change back.”

“Are you kidding me?” Hope’s mind stuttered over Priska’s outlined plan. No way. “I’ve been doing this *by myself* for a year.” Almost. “I don’t need you to tag along.”

“What’s your problem?” Priska pursed her lips as she inhaled through her nose. “Why are you copping an attitude?”

Hope coughed, and her chin dropped. She wasn’t trying to cop an attitude, but she needed a break from Priska and her hovering.

“*None* of this is for me.” Priska’s eyes flashed fire. “I’m trying my best to keep you safe. Doing everything in my power . . .” She waved her hand. “I’ve

killed three Skia this week. *This week!* And we are staying in this cracker box for you, with a scheme that borders on ridiculous. Because this plan *might* lead you to an answer that none of your ancestors could figure out, despite the fact that your grandmother was brilliant. Somehow your strategy will work. Maybe. If we're really, really lucky."

"But you said—"

"Furthermore," Priska continued as if Hope hadn't said anything, "You've sulked around the last week as if I'm thwarting your super awesome plan and it's you against the world. You don't play nice at school, where honestly, it's your best shot at getting noticed by a legitimate demigod, a *psachno*, and not some loser . . ." She shook her head. "Hera and Zeus! I am trying to help you."

Hope seethed. How could she even respond to that without yelling at Priska?

Priska closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. Silence settled in the cracks and the fissures of empty space. "If I let you go by yourself, will you stay out of sight? Go somewhere on the other side of the mountains and leave tonight?" The bright hazel eyes held only the embers of Priska's earlier emotion. "I want you to be safe."

There was that word again. *Safe*. A hopeless mantra of paranoia eating at Hope's life. *Exactly* why she needed to break the curse.

"I'll go tonight and get a hotel in Wenatchee. Then I'll drive out early in the morning."

"And check in with me tonight and tomorrow morning, please."

"Fine." She grabbed her bag and her keys and, without another word, fled the apartment.

IT WAS A QUARTER AFTER five in the morning when she sent Priska a text.

Going to pull off now. Will likely be out of range 'til tomorrow night. Will check in again then. Hope hit send and climbed out of bed. It was easier to send the text now than have to worry about it later.

The cool air hit her bare legs and made her shiver. If she didn't hurry, she would be stuck in the stupid motel for the next two days. She pulled on her sweats and slipped on her flip-flops as she zipped up her hoodie. She grabbed a bottle of water from the table and shoved it in her bag as she walked out the door. Her thoughts went to Hermes, patron god of travelers, and she sent a silent plea that there would be a suitable exit within ten or fifteen minutes of getting on Highway 2.

Perhaps the gods did listen. She saw a "No services" sign and followed the road through the foothill of the Cascades. She took the first dirt road past a barn and a trailer on blocks, and drove until there was nothing. The road forked, but grass had claimed the path on the right. She pulled into the thick brush.

Pale pink tinged the horizon.

Hope jumped out of the car and frantically pulled at the drawstring at her waist.

Too late.

Her body burned, cramped, prickled, and stung. With a whoosh, her amber wings unfurled, tearing holes through her white tee. Her legs pulled in as they morphed into the hindquarters of a great cat, her gray sweats tangled around her lower extremities. The stinging released as golden fur covered her skin.

At least she'd managed to get her hoodie off in time. She pulled the sweats off and inspected them. No holes. That was good. She could still wear them home. She picked off the scraps of pink fabric that had been boy briefs seconds before. Her bra fared better, still in one piece, and was itchy against the golden fur that covered her from the chest down. It was a struggle to get

the undergarments off, and she put the wisps and fragments into her bag, along with her pants, hoodie, and car keys.

She faced the morning, letting the sun's rays bathe her face. She unfurled her wings, letting the crisp air tease her feathers. With two strong beats, she pulled herself into the sky and flew.

As she sat in a clearing on a distant mountaintop, her thoughts turned to Priska, swirling dark and distrustful. Hope didn't know who the demigods were, or where she could find them. Priska might know, but it was clear she wasn't sharing. Except what she thought was "safe."

Hope resigned herself to hopelessness. What could she do? How much longer would it take to find demigods Priska approved of? Would she approve of *any* demigods? Doubts seeped into the corners, at first unnoticed, then oozed like spilt honey sticking to every thought.

Hope spent the two days in her cursed state, wallowing deep in a well of self-pity. If Priska wasn't helping her find a way into the conservatory, perhaps it was time for Hope to do something about it herself. She refused to let Priska's fear become her own. Life was meant for living.

The golds in the sky melted into soft pinks, and with deep resolution Hope knew what to do. She needed to have a serious talk with her surrogate aunt. If Priska wouldn't help, Hope would move out on her own.

With a burst of motivation, Hope beat her tawny wings and took flight. She soared down from the mountain range to the fields below, eagerness pulling her to action. But the tall grasses of fall hid several previously unnoticed cars. How had she missed that yesterday?

The sun lolled through the pink taffy and cotton candy sky, pouring its last rays across the mountain range. She dipped low to find vehicles on cinderblocks, or those abandoned without hope of fixing, but her car—

"Hades in Hell!" A deep baritone hollered. "Steve! You gotta see this!"

Another head popped up from the tall grass. The men were dressed in camouflage with bright orange vests screaming their presence.

How had she missed that? And where was her car?

“What the . . .” A gasp of disbelief.

She pulled higher but could still hear the shouting.

“What is that thing? Is that a monster?” Excitement laced the words.

Indecipherable shouting. A heavy *thud*.

She needed to get higher. She needed to get away. How could she have missed them? Panic made her thoughts run in a loop. Get away . . . Get away . . . Get away.

“Good gods! Get a picture!” The same enthusiasm. The same tone. What was he twelve?

She scanned the ground. The grass, the barns, dirt . . . Nothing was familiar. Nothing.

“What are you doing?”

Her heart was race, race, racing. Her breath only short gasps. This was wrong. Priska was going to kill her!

“It’s a monster,” one of them said in a dispassionate voice. “We’ll be rich.”

A loud bang disoriented her, and then white-hot pain seared her arm. Warmth trickled down past her elbow to her wrist.

“Don’t! Don’t shoot.”

Oh, gods, they were shooting at her! She scanned the dead grasses beneath her. Where in the name of Gaia was her car? Her eyes welled. Another shot echoed through the air, and stabbing agony hit her shoulder, and she faltered, her body tumbling toward the ground. No. No. No. She was immortal! These bullets couldn’t kill her.

Gritting her teeth, she beat her wings and banked hard to one side and then

the other. It was all she could think of to make herself more difficult to hit. Her blue Civic peeked out from the growth, the last rays of the day turning the amber grass a chocolate brown. Hope pushed toward her salvation.

The sun dipped behind the mountains, the pinks darkened to purple, and Hope's wings disappeared. Tumbling through the air, fur floated on the breeze, and then sloughed off in clumps as she hit the dry grass.

Silence.

Nothing. She allowed the pent-up whimper to leak out. It took several minutes before the pain lessened enough to sit up, and then several minutes to crawl to her car and get dressed. She sat in the driver's seat for over an hour. When the darkness settled from dusk to night, she started her car.

"WHAT THE KRACKEN, HOPE?" Priska held out her phone. The fuzzy grain of motion made her features blurry, but the video was of her. "I thought you said everything was fine?"

"It *is* fine. You can hardly even see my face." She pulled the covers back over her head.

"It's definitely *not* fine. Your curse has been hidden from the world for centuries. Mythology texts had the Sphinx killed by Oedipus in Thebes. Your grandmother wanted it that way. She sacrificed, risked her life, to go to the Graeae and have the curse interpreted by primordial power, to get as much security, as much privacy, as possible. But in the last year, you've announced, in no uncertain terms, that the Sphinx still exists. Artemis, what a mess."

Despite being under the covers, Hope closed her eyes and willed Priska to disappear.

"You would think after everything you've been through that you'd have some understanding of the need for concealment now."

Hope knew she was referencing the previous picture and the article in the newspaper. She threw the covers back. “I do! It’s just—”

“Funny way of demonstrating it.”

Hope rolled her eyes. “Fine. You’re right. I should’ve been paying better attention and seen those men.”

“No. That’s what you’re not getting. You never should’ve been in that area to begin with. If there’s even a chance of any population, you shouldn’t be there as a Sphinx.” Priska dropped her head into her hands. “I put a call into Charlie. I’m hoping the video will be off the Internet before morning. Maybe we’ll be lucky and no one local will see it.”

“Even if they did, it’s not like you can tell it’s me.”

“It makes that whole area off-limits. You can’t go over to eastern Washington at all. The sons of Apollo *will* investigate, and if you keep popping up where the Sphinx appears, they will want to investigate you. We don’t need that.”

Ha! Actually, she *did* want the demigods searching for her.

But a shiver of terror reminded her, not the sons of Apollo. And not as the Sphinx.

EIGHT



WHAT A SUCKY DAY. Typically, November meant gray skies, at the very least, which would match her overcast mood. Usually, it meant rain. But the sun was out, mocking her. Hope walked down the crowded hall, glanced out the windows, and furrowed her brow. It was just wrong. People bumped and bustled by, words dropping in her ears, small tinkling sounds that meant nothing to her—football, party, dance.

It wasn't the sun that caused the crease in her forehead. No. She'd failed her calculus test, and not because she didn't know the answers. Her mind had drifted to her fight with Priska, and like magic, twenty minutes had disappeared.

The sun teased Hope, and she stared through the glass at the waning warmth of fall, the bright leaves burning against the blue sky. When the bell rang, her thoughts solidified into decision. She'd had enough school today.

She spent the next several hours wandering the streets downtown. She stopped at a newspaper stand after noticing headlines she wished she could forget: *Sons of Apollo Closing in on Sphinx, Monster of Poseidon Spotted Off Coast of Mexico, Did Scylla Escape Again? Mermaid Sighting at Half Moon Bay*. Had the world gone mad? She'd never heard of many of the monsters

being spotted. Granted she'd only started paying attention after her mom died.

As the sun dropped lower in the sky, she made her way toward the market and bought a cup of tea. She was putting off the inevitable. The temperature continued to drop, and as the last rays dipped below the horizon, Hope knew it was time to head home, face Priska, and find something for dinner.

Hope walked up Market Street and was almost to her building when someone grabbed her wrist. His skin was pale, and his fingers seemed more apt to play piano than fight. Nevertheless, his grip was a rough vise.

Her breath caught, and her training took over. Hope twisted to the side, pulling her attacker toward her while she rotated her hand to take control. With her free hand, she torqued the arm and applied pressure on his elbow.

Then she looked up at his face. What the Kracken? She released some of the pressure but maintained the offensive position.

"What are you doing?" She hissed at Xan.

He laughed. "I had no idea you could move so well."

Hope scowled and twisted his arm. "What do you mean?"

"You blend in pretty well, considering."

Hope tilted her head, trying to decipher his cryptic meaning.

"Considering?"

He smiled, and his dimple flashed. He leaned forward, and his breath warmed her skin as he whispered in her ear, "Considering you're a demigod, lass."

She let go of his arm, and dropped her hands to her sides. "What?"

He laughed again as he pulled away. "Immortal, unable to die by mortal means. You'll live forever. That kind of immortal." He pulled his hand away from hers and tapped himself on the chest. "Demigod."

Fear. Excitement. Trepidation. "What took you so long?"

He quirked an eyebrow. “What are you talking about? It’s been what, a few weeks—?”

“It’s been months!”

Xan exhaled forcefully. “Right. There were a few hang-ups.” He pursed his lips as he studied her. “And you were worried about a few weeks? How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“Shocker,” he said, his voice laced with sarcasm.

A brief flash of irritation made her bite her tongue. What was that for? She wanted to snap a witty retort, but what came out was, “Where have you been?”

He chuckled, and a dimple flashed. “Why?” His head dipped, and he whispered in her ear, “Did you miss me?”

She blushed, and then blushed deeper as she increased the distance between them. “No, I was . . .” She stopped talking and took a deep breath. “I thought you might be a demigod.”

“Now, Hope, why would you say that?” He took her hand and placed it in the crook of his arm as he led her toward the apartment building.

She should have pulled away. And she would have. If she weren’t so cold. “Where are we going?”

“What do you think? I’m here to collect you.”

“To collect me?” Like she was a package? She pulled her arm free and stepped away from him.

Xan stopped, his chin lowered in a condescending glower. “Yep. You need some education.”

“You can’t make me—”

“No?” His face hardened, and his eyes were ice. “Perhaps not. But if you don’t come with me, we won’t protect you anymore either.”

This was what she'd been waiting for, so why was she nervous? And not just about the plan. There was something about him.

"Are you coming or staying?"

"What about school? What about Priska?" She grasped for straws, her words surprising her. Not even ten minutes ago she'd been ready to dump both.

"School." He stopped walking and regarded her with a smugness both brash and irritating. "Uh, yeah. Your primary education is going to take a bit of a shift. Consider yourself a high school dropout if you'd like." He smirked, then continued, "Or, better yet, think of it as homeschooling." He continued to lead her toward the apartment building.

"And Priska?"

He clenched his jaw. "The demigod living with you?"

"Uh, yeah." Was she supposed to disclose that or keep it a secret? "I mean, I think . . . How can you tell?"

He stopped walking, and his ice blue eyes pinned her to the spot. "Does she have a Mark?"

"What are you talking about?"

"All of us have a Mark, a birthmark. Given to us by our immortal parent." He pulled up the sleeve of his shirt and started to take off his watch.

Like the birthmark of the lyre Athan had. Hope couldn't help but compare the thick muscles of Xan's arms to Athan's ropey ones. Her gaze travelled up to Xan's face, and she studied his pale skin and striking features.

He cleared his throat and pointed to his hands. There, on the inside of his wrist was the outline of a helmet, almost as if it were a stamp, in angry red tissue. "Lucky for me mine can be hidden. Ugly, eh?"

Hope pushed the sleeves of her sweater up, but there were no marks. "I don't have anything like that." Crap! Of course she didn't. She pulled the

sleeves down.

He nodded. “Yeah, you do.” He started walking again, and she hurried to catch up. “You may not know where it is, yet, but you’ll find it. Or someone else will.” He wagged his brows. “It can be anywhere on the body, and it can be any one of the symbols of your parent. I’m told I had an ancestor with a vulture scar on his face.” He laughed again. “That would suck!”

Hope said nothing as he kept up the constant chatter. Her stomach churned with her warring emotions.

They walked into the lobby, and Xan pushed the button for the elevator. “How long will it take you to get your stuff together? I’m ready to be out of this Hades-infested hole.”

“We’re leaving now? Like right now?”

“I’m sorry. Is this a bad time? Do you have a pressing engagement?” he mocked.

“Well, I should . . .” She began to protest but caught herself mid-sentence. There would never be a better time. “No, now is good.”

“Great. This is all working out so well for everyone.” His lips curled in a sneer, and there was no warmth in his expression.

He was annoying. And a little scary.

They got on the elevator, and Hope pushed number twenty-one.

“What if Priska’s home?” She peeked at him from the corner of her eye. His white shirt hugged his broad shoulders and hung loose at his narrow waist. Dark tattoos were visible under the pale cotton sleeves.

“She’s not. She left about twenty minutes ago. Out looking for you, actually. Perfect time for our escape.” He smirked as he said the last bit. “You don’t really like her much, do you?”

Hope flinched with the accusation. “Why would you say that? How would you know?” Then it registered. “Have you been *spying* on me?”

“Spying? That sounds awful. No, we don’t spy. We’ve been *observing* you.”

She seethed in frustration, and the only sound was the ping of the elevator as it climbed.

“I will say Priska’s made it difficult,” Xan said.

The light went on, and her anger flared. “Was that you on the phone with her?”

Xan frowned but didn’t answer.

The small amount of guilt she had for leaving evaporated.

“She doesn’t care for us, huh?” He fidgeted, his thumbs beating a rhythm on his thighs.

“What?”

“The other demigods? She doesn’t like us.”

Hope forced her gaze away from his hands and risked a glance at his face. “No, she doesn’t care for you. I mean, not *you* personally. She probably doesn’t even know you.”

His eyes hardened. “Oh, she knows me.”

“How?” Oh, gods, was he a son of Apollo?

The elevator pinged again. The doors slid open, and Xan waved her off.

“How does Priska know you?” Hope stood in the middle of the hall, her surprise rooting her to the floor so that even a Mack truck couldn’t move her.

Xan passed her and went right up to her door.

“You owe me an explanation,” she yelled at him.

He tapped on the door just above the handle. “Waiting for you, sweetheart.”

“I’m not your sweetheart,” she snapped.

With two steps, Xan was nose to nose with her. “You are my responsibility right now, and besides keeping you safe, I don’t owe you

anything. Unless you've changed your mind about coming to the conservatory"—he stepped back and gave her a once-over—"sweetheart."

She needed him, so she swallowed the retort and stepped around him. Her hands trembled, and she fumbled to get the key into the lock. Her palms were wet with perspiration. This was the right choice, the only way. She was going to take it. With a deep breath, she opened the door and went straight to her bedroom.

Part of her mind screamed to hit the arrogant demigod, the feeling pulsing through her chest and into her fists. But another part, the rational part, insisted she needed him to get to the conservatory. She would get in, get what she needed, and get out. She didn't need to like him or even trust him. She only needed him to get in.

She pulled large, heavy canvas duffle bags from the closet and packed her clothes, taking extra care to wrap the statue of Hecate in the middle. Within minutes, she came out of the bedroom with a bag in each hand and dropped them on the floor.

She was about to tell Xan she was ready, but the words died in her mouth.

He stood by the couch, his back to her, and his head bent over his hands. Something held his attention, and fear gripped her.

"Hey."

"Yeah." He turned to her with the red volume of her history in his hand.

Fear shifted to fury. "What in the name of Hades? What are you doing?" She strode to him, snatched the tome from his hands, and held it up. "This isn't yours!"

"What?" His hands came up in surrender. "It's not like there's anything to read there." His eyes narrowed. "Is there?"

She said nothing but held the book close. "I'm ready. We can go."

"What about the rest of this stuff?" He waved at the furnishings.

Hope was glad she wouldn't be around to deal with it. Not that it would matter. "I'm sure Priska will figure something out."

"Great." He grabbed one of the two green duffle bags, hefting it as though it didn't weigh anything at all. "Here"—he extended his other hand—"give me the other one. It'll balance out."

After handing him the other bag, Hope surveyed the apartment. She grabbed her backpack, shoved the leather book inside, and then slung it over her shoulder. "Let's go."

"Get the door." His head bobbed at the front of the apartment.

She moved in front and opened the door for him, sweeping her arm into the hall. "Anything else?"

He raised his brows and squared off with her. "Did you want to make me a sandwich?"

If looks could kill, she'd be glaring daggers. *What a jerk.*

They went back to the elevators, and Xan shifted both bags into one hand. "You pack pretty light."

Unsure if he was being facetious, she responded evasively, "I knew you'd be coming."

He raised his eyebrows. "You knew *I'd* be coming?"

"No. Not you, just . . ." What was she saying? "Priska said the best way to be safe was at the conservatory, and eventually demigods would show up." She tried to stick as much to the truth as possible. "I didn't know it would be you, obviously." She rolled her eyes, but her heart pounded.

"We could have nabbed you sooner, but with Priska . . . well, we had to delay." He flattened his lips into a straight line.

She'd said as much. "Do you hate her?"

Xan became absorbed with something on the floor, and his expression went blank. "I don't really know her, actually." When he looked back up, his

face was devoid of emotion. “Only of her. She’s done an excellent job at keeping you safe.”

“She said there are a lot of Skia here.” Hope wondered what was truth and what was lie. Priska had said she would help Hope, but had she?

“Aye. We’ve had to fight several off from the area.”

“You and Dahlia?”

“Aye.”

The elevator dinged and slid open. The smell of body odor clung to the small space. Hope stepped in, and pushed for the ground level, but Xan reached over her and pushed for the lower level.

“Let’s take your car. No reason to walk, right?”

Hope blushed. “Right.” Gods, could she be any more stupid? She fished through her backpack and grabbed her keys.

The grinding of gears was interrupted with a click as they passed each floor. When the doors slid open, Hope held out her keys. “Do you want to drive?”

He angled his body toward her and furrowed his brow. “You don’t want to?”

“No. You know where we’re going.” She dropped the keys into his outstretched hand. “I don’t.”

He smirked. “True.” He took the keys. When they entered the underground concrete garage, he pushed the fob, and a beep and flashing lights identified her car. “A Civic?” He glowered. “You drive a Civic? Don’t you have enough to buy a nice car?”

Hope glared. “I have plenty. I don’t see a need to flaunt it, and certainly not on something that’s only good for getting you from one place to another.”

“Spoken like a woman that’s never been in a nice vehicle.” His face brightened. “I’ll take you driving. Maybe we can change your mind. We can

count it as a lesson of sorts.”

Xan popped the trunk, tossed in the bags, and closed it in one fluid gesture. Before she could get there, he’d opened her door for her. She took a step back with surprise.

“What? You think because my dad is a god, I don’t know how to be a gentleman?” He punctuated the question with a flourishing bow.

She climbed in and pulled the door shut.

He rounded the car and crouched low, pushing the buttons to adjust the seat before getting in. Everything about him was a contradiction. Rude and polite, friendly and nasty.

“Your dad is a god?” She laid on the sarcasm with a glare.

He put the key in the ignition, but instead of starting the car, he stared her down. “I can do this all day, so let me give you a little advice. Don’t kick off something you can’t finish. And there’s no way you can best me, sweetheart.”

“Don’t be condescending. It’s rude.”

“Yeah, I know.” He started the car, eased out of the garage, and then began maneuvering through the maze of one-way streets in Seattle.

Hope was silent in her contemplation. The demigod next to her was brash, but there was no pretense. Everything about his appearance seemed hard, but then his dimple, which was incongruous with his other features, would flash and make him seem almost friendly.

“You’re quiet. What are you thinking about?”

Blushing, she pulled her gaze from the busy city streets. “Nothing.”

“When people tell you they aren’t thinking about anything, it’s usually because they’re too embarrassed to share.” He glanced at her. “If you don’t want to share, say so.”

“I don’t want to share.” She shoved her hands under her legs, effectively

sitting on them so she didn't physically strike out. She stared at the hem of her plain t-shirt, contemplating ways to 'accidentally' hit him.

"Fine."

She bristled and ran her hand through her loose hair. Anxiety clawed through her, and the simple desire to control something had her pulling her hair up into a bun. The activity soothed the frayed edges of her nerves, and she could think again. She needed to not let him get under her skin. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"You have to know. You're all nice one minute, and then you say something snide or rude."

"It makes you want to hit me?" The corners of his mouth twitched.

"Yes! I mean, uh, kinda. Sometimes." It was like a game of cat and mouse, and the role of mouse was wholly unfamiliar to her. "You're really confusing."

"Hmm. Really?" He shifted his hands on the wheel, fiddled with the radio, and finally pushed it off.

Hope watched his parade of energy.

"Honestly," he finally broke the silence, "I don't really think about it. I say what I think. Sometimes people like it, sometimes not." He waved his hand in a dismissive gesture and then made a left turn. "Whatever. Why should I care what you or anyone else thinks of me?"

"Don't you want people to like you?" She did.

"Nah. I like me." He put on the blinker as they inched their way to a three-way stop. "Most of the time, anyway. And I have a few friends who like me regardless of how I am." He pulled onto a curvy side street lined with trees, and the city traffic seemed to disappear. "I don't *need* people to like me."

Hope mulled over his words as she stared out the window. Then her mind

went blank. She knew this area. The weeping willows and tall maples. The small azaleas and butterfly bushes. As they drove through Madison Park, she remembered, her mother had taken her to the Arboretum for a picnic a couple of years ago when they lived in Kent. Right here. Emotion choked her.

She swallowed the lump in her throat.

“Are you okay?” Xan brushed her arm with his calloused hand.

“Yes,” she choked out. She wiped away the tears with the sleeve of her sweater. “I came here with my mom once.”

Xan said nothing.

A few minutes later, they pulled into a circular drive and parked in front of a large Tudor home with stucco finish. The lot was large, and the hedges of trees made it disappear into itself. The grounds were immaculate. Beds of roses, lilac, lavender, and azaleas framed the house and lawn.

The conservatory. This was it.

Xan came around and opened her door. Then, not waiting for her to get out, he went around to the trunk and pulled out her bags.

Hope sat rigid in her seat. Only demigods were welcome. They would kill her if they found out what she was. What if she couldn’t do this?

“Hope, you coming?” Xan stood at the door, her bags in one hand and his other hand on the door handle.

She would do this. She would figure it out. This was the only way.

“Yeah, I’m coming.” She got out of the car, slung her backpack over her shoulder, and followed Xan inside.

NINE



THEY STEPPED INTO A LARGE FOYER. A cut-glass chandelier hung from the ceiling, and in the middle of the open space sat a circular table, just under the chandelier. A beautiful flower arrangement of lilies, roses, and daisies perfumed the air. Scattered keys, books, and wallets sat discarded on the table.

Xan threw Hope's keys into the group and faced her. "You may as well put your phone there. It won't work here until we get you a chip."

Hope frowned but held fast to the phone. "A chip?"

"A little device that attaches inside the phone. Hephaestus's son makes them. Something about the immortal plane coexisting on the mortal one and crossing signals. I don't really understand it, but I can tell you regular cell phones don't get reception in a conservatory. You can leave it there until Thenia installs a chip."

She wondered if Mr. Stanley was the son of Hephaestus he was referring to. If that was the case, she didn't think there would be a chip coming anytime soon. "I'll keep it all the same."

Xan shrugged. "Suit yourself. When we get the chip, you can have Thenia put it in. You ready to go to your room?"

Was he serious? “I have a room? Wait! Am I in trouble?”

Xan laughed. “Nah, you’re not in trouble, and it’s a guest room. But I thought you’d want a mite of time to get settled before we have a bit of supper.”

As if on cue, Hope’s stomach growled. “Maybe we can drop my stuff off and get something to eat?”

“Absolutely.” Xan picked up her bags and walked past a sitting room.

Hope peeked in and looked at the leather chairs with longing. She could sleep in those chairs. They passed a gourmet chef’s kitchen on the right, which appeared spotless and empty, and headed toward a set of hardwood stairs.

Halfway down the upstairs hall, Xan opened a door and dropped her bags onto plush white carpet. The room was severely decorated like a piece of modern art. The lines were clean and crisp, the room sparsely furnished. A queen-sized bed sat squarely in the middle of the room, the linens bright white, a stark contrast to the black frame and decorative pillows. A single black upholstered chair with a white pillow sat by the window. There was a black desk with a matching chair in the corner, and a black dresser. The walls were painted white with black crown molding. The one piece of art was a geometric print in black, red, and white.

It was disgusting.

“Seriously?” She refused to hide her loathing.

“I know, I know. It’s awful,” he said, indicating the space. “But the other guest rooms are spoken for over the next few weeks. I’d rather not have to move you when Praxis and his brothers come, and Dion said he’s coming. So yeah, this is it.” He let out a sigh. “If you’re still around in a month, you can make it over.”

She hoped not, but . . . “Why would a demigod leave?”

Xan's voice dropped, and he focused on a spot Hope couldn't see as he spoke, "Some think they're invincible; others have dreams they want to pursue." He paused a moment and then faced her. "We'll see what you're made of and what you're best at. If you stay."

"Whatever." Hope tilted her head at the room. "Maybe it will look better after I eat." She turned her back on the sterile environment and headed toward the stairs.

Xan closed the door and followed her. "Don't count on it."

"Why would you say that?"

He passed her to lead the way down the hall, his gait relaxed and loose despite how well built he was. He reminded her of a panther, and she wondered if he knew Tae Kwon Do.

"You don't seem the deco type. More soft and mushy under that cold, prickly exterior. Warm colors, lots of pillows, overstuffed furniture."

She stopped. He could tell all that about her? "Did you pick that up while you were observing me?"

"I'm right?" He came back and held out his fist.

She examined his hand as if it might tell her what she was supposed to do. It was nothing like a high five.

"Fist bump." He raised his eyebrows. "All right then." He dropped his hand and continued walking. "It was only a guess, Hope. Don't freak out."

They walked into a very modern kitchen. The room was half the size of her home in Goldendale. An eight-burner range, complete with double ovens, sat below a large hood. There was a built-in microwave, warming drawer, and small wine refrigerator. Another larger fridge took up most of one wall, almost as wide as she was tall. And side-by-side pantries. There must have been a lot of food in there, and she wondered how many demigods lived in the conservatory.

Xan walked around the kitchen as if he owned it. He pulled a large frying pan out from under the range and set it on top of one of the burners. From the fridge he gathered eggs, cheese, tomatoes, red and green bell peppers, mushrooms, and a ham. He handed her a knife, cutting board, and the peppers.

“Chop them, if you would.” Xan carved a chunk of ham and quickly diced it. “How did you meet Priska?” he asked as he continued chopping vegetables.

“She helped me after my mom . . . left.” She sliced the green pepper into thin strips, concentrating as she pushed away the pain of her loss. After a deep breath she continued, “Then again after Athan . . .” She froze. Should she have mentioned him? She began cutting the pepper again, and the silence ballooned. She stole a glance at Xan.

His eyes were dilated, and he pointed the knife at her. “Athan? Athan Michael?”

Hope nodded. He knew Athan?

He snorted. “Did he kiss you?”

She felt like she’d been sucker punched. “How is that any of your business?”

“Yeah. What a wanker.” He chopped at the red pepper, his hand heavy with the knife, making a *thud, thud, thud*. He blew out a long, slow breath. “Sorry.” He grimaced. “Sometimes, Athan’s a bit, uh, underhanded.”

Hope bristled. Even if that were true . . . “Why would you say that?”

Xan muttered something under his breath before he answered. “Don’t believe anything he did, or said, was sincere. He had a motive.” He pointed at her again with the knife. “I promise.”

Xan pushed the knob down and lit the stove. He added oil to the hot pan and tossed the peppers into the large skillet. The hearty smell made Hope’s

mouth water. She mulled over his words as she thought of the first time Athan had kissed her. He'd looked tortured. He couldn't have been faking that. But he *had* gone through her things and read the book of her history.

"How long have you known Athan?" she asked.

Xan eyed her, his head down as he stirred in the mushrooms. "A while."

"What does that mean?" As the mushrooms absorbed the oil, she debated reaching into the pan to grab a taste. One look at Xan made her decide against it.

"It means I've known him for a while. Certainly a lot longer than you."

Why was he glaring? She rolled her eyes. "As in a few years? A decade?"

Xan wet his lips and shifted to grab the eggs.

Hope leaned against the counter, watching him as he cracked and mixed the eggs. When she couldn't take his silence anymore, she broke. "Why are you being obtuse? It's a simple question. Can't you answer it?"

Xan chuckled. "Obtuse?" He set the eggs aside and stirred in the tomatoes. When he glanced up at her, his face had lost some of the frustration. "No one likes to admit their age unless it is their first time."

Her brow wrinkled in confusion. "First time for what?"

"First time being that age. You're seventeen, right?"

"Yeah. So?"

"Let's just say I've known Athan longer than you've been potty trained."

Whoa! "Really?" That couldn't be right.

Xan threw the eggs in with the vegetables and started folding it all into a scramble. "I've known him for almost fifteen years."

That would mean . . . She moved around to the bar and sat on a stool. "How old is he?"

He met her gaze and frowned. "He really didn't tell you?"

Hope shook her head, suddenly not sure she wanted to know.

“Well, that’s between the two of you.”

She glared at him. “Don’t patronize me.”

He met her eyes and continued, “I don’t want to get in between whatever the two of you have going on.” He covered his mouth but couldn’t quite hide the smirk. “Or whatever you think you have.”

“I doubt that,” Hope muttered. As soon as it was out, she cringed.

“You can doubt all you want, sweetheart. It doesn’t change the facts.” Xan threw grated cheese in with the eggs. He grabbed a loaf of bread from one of the pantries and then put two slices into the toaster.

Hope watched as he assembled plates for both of them. He handed one to her and took a bite as he came around the bar to sit next to her on the wooden barstools.

“Athan always does what is good for Athan,” he said.

She set her plate down. “You don’t like him.”

“Nope. Not at all. I don’t pretend I do, either.” He stuck another forkful of food into his mouth. After swallowing, he said, “Ask around, Hope. I’m not the only one. When you’re immortal, you need to learn to be able to read people. That includes their motives. It takes a while, but you’ll learn.” He pointed to her plate.

Hope almost clapped with pleasure with her first bite. The breakfast hash was delicious. She forgot all about Xan as she ate. Forgot about Athan. Even forgot about the curse.

“When you’re done”—he interrupted her shoveling—“I’ll show you around the rest of the house, eh?”

Xan’s words brought her back to reality. He’d already finished and was watching her eat. Like seriously watching her. Weird. She took another bite, chewing more slowly. Why was he staring?

“You should meet the other residents when they get back. Some of them

will be teaching you,” Xan said. “And we should probably come up with a schedule. Maybe you could take some of the same lessons as Endymion. He’s about your age.”

She shoved the food to the side of her mouth and asked, “Who’s Endymion?”

“Apollo’s son.”

Hope choked and started coughing.

“You okay?” Xan pounded her back.

Hope pushed his hand away. “I’m fine.” She coughed again. “Fine.”

She stood and went to the sink to do the dishes.

“Okay, if you say so.” He shifted back in his seat. “I’ll talk with Endymion about you joining him, although he’s been here a little longer than you.”

The idea of having classes with Apollo’s son made her want to throw up. She grasped for a reason to avoid him and stood immobile while water ran over the already scraped plate.

“Won’t he be more advanced than me?” she asked and then stacked the plate in the dishwasher.

“You would think that, but I suspect you’ll be able to hold your own. Especially on subjects like fighting and strategy. Endymion’s a bit of a gimp.” He grimaced. “That being said, most of Apollo’s sons are able to hold their own, eventually. And they tend to be wicked smart, so you gotta be careful of that.”

She thought of the nameless, faceless sons of Apollo who’d kidnapped and beaten Priska. Was this Endymion one of them? Probably not if he was a “gimp.”

“You’ll meet Obelia. She’s our resident historian.”

“Who’s her mom?” That was what Hope really wanted to know.

“Hestia. Think house and home. She tends to go from one conservatory to the next. Not much for the world since she came inside.” He cocked his head and looked at her pointedly. “I think Athan found her, too. You should ask her about him.”

Hope stopped washing the skillet. How dare he try to goad her like that? “Maybe I will.”

“Maybe you should.” He chuckled, and his dimple flashed an appearance. “I like when you get belligerent and your chin sticks out like that. It’s cute.” He came around the bar to the sink.

She glared at him and scooted away. “I’m not trying to be cute.”

“Of course not. That’s why it’s cute.” He grabbed a towel, dried the pan, and then put it away under the range.

They finished the dishes, and Hope wiped down the stone counters while her mind raced. She needed to find the library. Anxiety twisted her insides as she tried to think of a way to bring it up without sounding suspicious.

“Come on, Hope. Finish up already.” Xan stood in the doorway.

“Just because—”

“Easy. I’m sayin’ don’t dawdle. It’s been a long time since I’ve given a welcome tour.” He rolled up onto the balls of his feet. His bouncing made him seem very boyish. His dimple was strong, and any earlier coldness had thawed.

“All right.” Hope set the washcloth down. Maybe she wouldn’t have to say anything. Tour of the house. Library. Books. “Let’s go.”

As they stepped out of the kitchen, Hope noticed an old-fashioned land-line phone mounted on the wall. Weird that they would still have one with cellphones, but maybe this was for demigods that didn’t have chips. She’d have to remember that if she ever needed to call someone. As if.

The house was empty, not of furniture, but of other residents. Xan

explained that on certain days everyone would leave and run errands together. If they all left at once and stayed in groups, they were less likely to be outnumbered. It made for a long day, but they hadn't lost any demigods to Skia since the plan had been implemented.

They walked through the hardwood halls, both treading noiselessly. Xan took Hope into a room that appeared to be an armory and then outside into an area that resembled a Greek arena. They peeked into a formal classroom, an electronics lab, a makeshift hospital, the gardens, a distillery, a music room, and then were *finally* on their way to the library.

Hope loved books and the concept of libraries. All types of books in one area for a person to absorb. A book could take you somewhere, make you see the world through different eyes, transform you. The hallway seemed to extend forever, and then they were there.

Xan stopped in front of a set of heavy doors that extended from ceiling to floor.

The dark wood was carved with symbols of all the gods: pomegranates, doves, vultures, eagles, peacocks, dolphins, grapes, an anvil, snakes, dogs, cornucopia, owls, and much more. Hope reached out and touched the tortoise, then a puppy that looked oddly like the offering she and Priska had made to Artemis.

"Do you want to go in or continue to stare at the door?"

"Go in, please," she whispered reverently.

As soon as he opened the door, the smells assaulted Hope. Leather, musty pages, fresh paper. This was it. Excitement blossomed her chest. She would find answers here. She studied the endless bookshelves, and determination gripped her. She would break the curse. She would find freedom. She closed her eyes and pictured her mother. Memories of love, support, and faith washed over her. She would do this.

“You all right?” Xan’s voice shattered the memories.

Hope opened her eyes and wiped the moisture from her cheeks. “I’m fine.”

“You like libraries.”

It seemed such an inadequate a thing to say.

“I love them. I . . . I have heaps of memories of my mom and me in libraries.” And so much hope for being in this one.

“Yeah?” He cocked his head and lifted a single eyebrow. “Good for you.”

She crossed her arms. Did he take nothing seriously? “Are you mocking me?”

His eyes held hers, but he said nothing.

“You must not care for libraries much.” She wrinkled her nose. Just saying that felt wrong.

“Nope, not a bit. I don’t get it. What’s so great about a bunch of books? I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m all about learning, but to read for pleasure? I don’t get it at all. To each their own, I guess.”

It was practically a personal insult, and she glared at him. “Why am I not surprised by that?”

“What does that mean?” His demeanor had shifted since they arrived, and there was no hostility in the question.

“Nothing.” She didn’t want to fight. In fact, she needed to not fight if she was going to get what she came for. She pushed past him into the library and stopped. She blinked, trying to clear her vision. There was no way . . . The room was two stories—no, three. She glanced toward the back but couldn’t even see the wall. It was huge, amazing, and awesome. And she had no idea where to start.

“It is incredible, huh?”

He was still there. He took her by the elbow and guided her deeper into the

room. As the doorway grew smaller, Hope still couldn't see the back of the room. The smells of leather, paper, and dust grew stronger. Bookshelves filled the space, and the room wasn't two stories, or even three. She couldn't see the end of it. This would be a lot harder than she'd thought.

"How is this possible? The books go on forever. How do you find a certain topic? Is there a system? Is it organized?"

He laughed. "Power of the Gods. Every book ever written—ever published, I should say—is in here. All the conservatories share this same library. Even Olympus shares this library." He walked around in a circle, his arms opened wide. "And yes, there's a system to it."

"What is it?" She wanted to laugh. She wanted to cry. How would she find anything in here?

He dropped his hands to his sides. "No idea."

She frowned. How could you live here and not know?

"I'm completely serious." His eyes brightened with humor, and his dimple popped. His rugged attractiveness was at odds with the vast library.

"How does anyone ever believe anything you say?" She walked past him to the first shelf, brushing her hands over the spines as she read the titles.

"Everyone believes me. Implicitly. What you see is what you get. I don't have time for pretenses. Although I do like to tease"—he held his fingers a scarce inch apart—"a little."

She nodded, but her attention was focused on the shelves. She removed a book, and the title jumped out at her, *How to Read a Person Like a Book*. She re-shelved it.

"Seriously, do you know how it's organized?" she asked.

He tilted his head and pursed his lips. "Honestly, I haven't the slightest notion." He frowned. "Do you want to stay in here for a mite?"

"Yes, please," she answered, as she walked down the aisle. If she could

figure out how it was organized, she could begin in earnest.

“I’ll come get you in a couple hours, then.”

She glanced back to him. “Oh, I’m sure I can find my way out.” Even as she said it, she doubted it was true.

“Nah, you won’t. You might think that, but we’ve actually lost people in here.” He made a gesture with his hands. “*Poof. Gone.*”

He was teasing; he had to be. But she couldn’t even see the door anymore.

“I told you, every book ever published.” He grinned and waved her away. “Have fun. I’ll come get you.”

She turned back to the books. Hope walked down one aisle and up another, pulling books off at random. She found her way out of self-help and into science fiction, then fantasy. She pulled a hardback copy of a book with wings on its cover. Oh, it was that author who wrote post-apocalyptic angel stories. She’d been wanting to read this one. She kept it and hurried to the next aisle, hoping to find historical records.

Hope rounded the corner and jumped back. Someone else was there. Her heart pounded as she took in the massive figure. He wasn’t mortal. And he definitely wasn’t a demigod.

T E N



THE TERRIFYING CREATURE HAD the torso of a man with dozens of arms extending out like legs of a spider. A true giant, the monster was well over twenty feet tall. Instead of a single head, the beast had several thick necks and heads stacked in a conglomerate mass like the compound eyes of an insect.

Hope cringed.

His arms moved in a blur, pulling books down and putting them back up in a slightly different order. Next to him sat a mammoth-sized trolley, and several other hands were shelving books from it. The sheer number of his hands and heads allowed him to be moving at all angles at all times.

She'd heard of such creatures, other monsters created by the gods, but had never seen one. She shifted in an attempt to sneak away.

"Ho there, young demigod." The creature bellowed his greeting in a chorus of voices halting her retreat.

She swallowed back her nervousness and faced him.

"You must be new." He stepped down from the ladder and shrunk a couple of feet.

"Uh, yeah." She shifted from foot to foot then extended her hand, hoping it wasn't too sweaty. "I'm Hope."

“Aptly named, young immortal.” He smothered her hand with several of his own. “I am Briareus, the librarian. May I help you find something?”

The words simmered on the tip of her tongue, but she shook her head and stepped back several feet. Something told her not to say anything about her task. “I’m browsing.”

“But you have the look of a reader. I can see it.” Several of his heads faced her, his eyes focused.

“I do like to read.” She held up the book.

“That isn’t literature.” Several more heads focused on her, and hands froze midair. “That’s like cotton candy, little one. It will never fill you.” Several heads bobbed their disapproval and then went back to their task. “Tell me what else you like to read, and let’s see if we can find you something of substance to take back to your room.” He lumbered closer, his pace slow enough that he continued shelving books until he reached her.

Involuntarily, she stepped back again.

“Don’t worry, young Hope. My hands are not for hurting.” His eyes dropped. “Not anymore.”

Dozens of eyes watched her, and her head spun as she tried to meet his gazes, one after another. There was a story about the hundred-handed, and she should know it. “Who created you?”

“Mother Gaia and Uranus.” The sound of books sliding in and out of shelves continued, making a melancholy melody. “But Uranus hated us and had us thrown into Tartarus.”

It sounded familiar. “But Zeus freed you?”

Several heads bobbed assent.

“He needed help overthrowing the Titans. And, of course, we were happy to help.” He sighed again, a chorus of exhales from his many heads, and his shoulders slumped. “But we have outlived our usefulness for fighting, and

my brothers are gone.” He gave another small sigh, and from so many heads, it seemed to echo. “Now I’m a librarian.”

“You don’t like it?”

“Oh no. It’s not that.” The gaze from several sets of eyes darted around the shelves, and the one head facing her swallowed repeatedly. “I love books, but I miss people, activities, interaction.” His voice dropped to an almost whisper. “Would you believe there aren’t many that enjoy a good book?”

Hope could believe it. Besides that, Briareus would probably scare all but the bravest, or the most desperate. If she could get him to trust her maybe . . .

“Not a lot of readers here, huh?”

“Sadly, no.” He paused momentarily. “But you, you are a reader. Please, may I help you find a good book? Tell me what you like, and I’m sure I can make a good recommendation.”

So she did. She told him about her love of Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters, Emily Dickinson. They talked literature as they walked down one aisle and then another and another. Hope kept her distance at first, but as the conversation continued, the cautious gap disappeared.

“Can I ask you a question?” Hope probed.

“Of course, young demigod.” Briareus bowed.

“Is there . . . Where is . . .” She took a deep breath and stared at the floor. “Is there a section here about monsters?”

Time froze.

Now in the deep recesses of the library, the shelves and books lay covered in dust. Light filtered back from the windows, the air now musty with abandonment. She glanced up at Briareus and saw anger contorting his many faces. He leapt, and her breath was pushed from her lungs as he pinned her to the floor. Several of Briareus’s hands held her arms, legs, head, and torso in a vice-like grip. Two hands squeezed her throat.

“You dare mock me?” he yelled. “You call me monster, but look at you! A bastard child, completely rejected by your family.” Several more heads spun toward her, and his breath assailed her, hot and foul, smelling of rotten meat.

Her mouth formed the word no, but it wouldn’t come out. The pressure at her throat made it impossible to breathe. She gripped and scratched at his hands.

He laughed. “Do you think your mother loves you any more than mine did?” He squeezed harder. “I know your kind. You killed my kin. And now you want to know more about monsters? No one cares for us. No one!”

She wanted to tell him that *she* did. That she was just like him.

He leaned over her, dozens of eyes blinking. “Do you think if I kill you, anyone will care, little demigod?”

Dots swam in her vision, and she thrashed in vain.

“It’s no use. No one is here. No one will hear you. No one cares.”

His grip tightened, and her vision tunneled into darkness.

A shout.

A pinpoint of light broke through the darkness. The light spread ever so slowly. There was shuffling, the clatter of something falling, a *thud*.

Books were strewn in front of her, a blurry mess as her eyes struggled to focus. Another *thud*. And warmth splashed her. Were those . . . fingers?

She swallowed back bile.

An arm lay inches from her face, yellowed fingernails at the end of curled fingers. She tilted her head and saw Xan fighting Briareus. Another *thud* and another arm, dark hair against pale skin, fell next to her. Black blood pooled from the severed limb, seeping across the wood floor. Hope sat up, and her head swam.

Three Xans wielded broadswords with both hands, swinging at three of the monster, Briareus. She blinked repeatedly, and the six figures congealed into

two.

Braireus roared. His war cry from dozens of heads filled the air with a putrid stench.

Her stomach clenched, and she backed away from the fray.

Xan jabbed, pushing Braireus back. Braireus lunged. Xan ducked under the swinging arms and sliced into the monster's body. Briareus bellowed with his injuries but continued his flailing assault. Back and forth, again and again. But Briareus was slowing. Fewer assaults, more defense.

Then Xan brought the sword back for what Hope knew would be a fatal blow. As the sword whistled through the air, Briareus moved to the left. Two of his arms grabbed Hope from the ground, swinging her in front of the moving broadsword.

Hope cringed, and her eyes closed in anticipation.

"Let her go, Briareus." Xan's voice was commanding, cruel.

Hope opened her eyes to find the sword poised at her neck, only a hair's breadth away.

"Will you let me go?" Briareus rasped.

"If you let her go, I'll not kill you."

"Swear to me. Swear to me that you will not kill me."

"I promise in the name of my father that I will not kill you for this."

Briareus dropped Hope to the ground.

She landed on her side, and pain shot stars through her eyes. She clenched her teeth and scooted to Xan's side.

"You okay?" Xan asked, his voice soft, but his eyes and sword remained trained on the monster before them.

Hope attempted a nod, and the disjointed movement sent shooting pain through her head.

"Hope? Are you okay?" Panic laced through the words, but his gaze

remained fixed on the threat.

“Yeah.” Her voice came out barely above a whisper. She forced a swallow in her dry mouth.

“Good. Go get . . .” His eyes shifted to her for only a second before returning to Briareus. “Never mind. Stay back so you don’t get in the way.”

Hope was happy to comply. Still on her hands and knees, she pushed past the arms and books on the floor and scooted up against a bookshelf. Surely, this was far enough.

“Briareus. You have violated your agreement.” Xan’s authoritative voice spoke of consequences to come. “By such, you are to be banished.”

“No. No, sir. I’m sorry. I wouldn’t have hurt her, not really. I’m sorry. I lost control for a moment. But I promise . . .” He began to weep, tears streaming from the eyes on several of his heads, his noses running. “Please, sir, please.”

It was grotesque to behold.

“Briareus, you wrote the contract with Zeus. I cannot change or modify it.” Xan let out a long exhale. “I’ll send you to Olympus. You may discuss it with him there. Turn around.” Xan pointed the broadsword at the monster’s belly.

Briareus twisted, facing the dark recesses of the library. The fleshy stumps of his arms oozed, dripping blood to the floor.

Xan glanced at Hope. “You stay there. I’ll be right back.”

He took two steps, his sword pointed at Briareus’s back, then stopped. Without turning his head, he said, “Don’t worry. There is nothing else in the library, no one else that would hurt you.”

Nothing else? The thought of anything else brought fear bubbling to the surface. She pulled her knees to her chest, put her elbows on her knees, and dropped her head in her hands. If Xan hadn’t come, she’d be dead. How

could she have been so stupid?

A bright light flashed from behind the shelves. Hope flinched and closed her eyes.

“Bloody hell. I get you off the street, safe from Skia, and one of our own attacks you.” Xan cleared his throat. “Tosser. What kind of protector am I?” He sat down next to her on the floor and tapped his knee against hers. “Are you okay? Really?”

Tears filled her eyes, but she blinked them back. She would be strong. “Yes.”

If he heard the quiver in her voice, he ignored it. “Well, I’m glad for that.” He scooted closer until their shoulders touched. “I’m sorry. I completely forgot that today was Briareus’s day in the library. He’s usually only in once or twice a month. I should’ve checked.”

She forced another swallow. “I’m okay.” She took a deep breath. Her heart rate was returning to normal, and her shaking had almost stopped. She released another shudder. Using the bookshelf behind her for support, she stood up. “Really, I’m okay.”

Xan stood and took her elbow. “What in the name of all the gods possessed you to follow him into the depths of the library?” He ducked his head to look her in the eye. “He’s a monster, Hope.”

She dropped her gaze to the floor. “I don’t know. I guess I figured if he was here in the house, he could be trusted.”

What kind of people put enemies in their house?

“Hope,” reproof hung in his tone, “don’t ever trust monsters. Ever.”

Right. Of course not. “Hey, where’s your sword?”

Xan grabbed her sleeve and gave it a tug. “Are you listening? Consider this your first demigod lesson, and the most important. Don’t trust monsters. Ever.”

“Why not?” she challenged. But there was no strength behind the words as she swayed.

He held her upright and quirked an eyebrow. “Really? They can kill you. And they will, at any opportunity.” He pointed at the severed arms and black puddles of blood. “Remember two seconds ago?”

She wanted to roll her eyes, but with her luck she’d end up back on the floor.

“I got it. Lesson learned,” she muttered.

“Good. You ready to go?”

She closed her eyes and willed her stomach to stop roiling. “Yeah.”

He strode across the room, away from the destruction that littered the floor.

Hope wanted to follow. In her mind, she’d sweep past him and maybe slam the door in his face. She let go of the bookcase and crumpled to the floor.

Warm darkness cradled her and smelled faintly of pine. “Are you going to throw up?” a man whispered to her.

“Throw up?” she croaked. Was it that obvious?

“Some people puke when they have a big shock. You know, life threatened and all that.” A chuckle rumbled from him through her.

Hope whimpered with the movement, and yet something inside her knew she was safe. She wanted to burrow into that safety. Cling to it. Never let it go.

“If you throw up, I’m setting you down.” But there was no bite behind the words, and his arms tightened, cradling her closer.

She kept her eyes closed and continued to focus on keeping her dinner inside her body. She heard the click of a door, and moments later she was set on a soft bed. Tears leaked through her eyelids, and she choked back a sob.

The bed dipped next to her, and warmth, and pine, and safety wrapped her up again.

ELEVEN



HER CHUBBY LEGS SWUNG against the warm wood, her feet dangling far above the ground. She turned to her mother.

“Please? I promise I won’t tell them.” Her eyes begged, and her little heart thrummed with anticipation. All she wanted was to play tag with the other kids.

“I’m sorry, baby. It’s not safe.” Her mom brushed her hand over Hope’s long blond hair. “How about I push you on the swing?”

Hope shook her head. “No. I don’t want to swing.”

“Then how about the slide?”

The slide was for babies. “No, thank you.”

“Then what do you want to do?” Her mom slid off the bench and knelt in front of her.

Their identical golden eyes met, and Hope risked the truth. “I just want to be normal, like the other kids.”

“Oh, baby.” Her mother frowned. “It’s not possible. The curse . . .”

Hope knew. She might not understand all the words her mom spoke, but she knew. She would never be normal. She would never have a normal life. Never get married and never have a family. She would never be safe.

“It’s not fair!” She scowled at her mom’s pretty face.

“Nope. It’s not. But it is what it is, Hope.” Her mom stood up and extended her hand.

With a sigh, Hope slid from the bench and took her mom’s hand.

“When I grow up, I’m going to break the curse,” she announced.

Her mom’s hand tightened around hers. “You are probably clever enough to do it, sweet girl.”

Hope swung their joined hands. “And then we can play at the playground whenever we want. And have lots of friends.”

“That sounds lovely.” Her mom smiled.

Lots of friends to play with sounded nice, so much better than just her and Mom. It would be like Priska coming every day, and more besides.

Hope jerked to a stop, and her mother swung her up into her arms.

“We need to go.” Her mom’s voice was quiet and tight. Worried. Scared.

Hope sat up, and her head swam. She surveyed the unfamiliar room and recognized her bags on the floor. The vision flitted through her mind.

Strange. That dream hadn’t come for months. But that wasn’t the end . . . What was the end?

And what—

The pounding came again, harder.

The door.

The geometric contrasts of the room were draped in shadow, but the harsh angles reminded her of where she was and why.

She cleared the sleep and dreams from her throat. “Yeah?”

“It’s Xan. I thought you might want to come down for breakfast.”

Hope cracked the door.

He stood in the hall, wearing jeans and a fitted long-sleeve black T-shirt. He was clean shaven, and his dimple made him seem boyish. “Morning,

sunshine.”

“Hey.” Memories from the library came rushing in, and Hope dropped her gaze. Had she leaned on him? Clung to him? By the gods, had she cried last night?

“Well?” Xan raised his eyebrows. “Breakfast?”

Her clothes were stained with monster blood, her breath probably smelled, and there was a fair chance her hair could nest an entire flock of birds. “Um, yeah, but,” she paused, “I really need a shower. Can I meet you in a few?”

“Sure.” He tapped her chin until she met his eyes. “You know the way?”

She rolled her eyes. The house wasn’t that big. “I can find it.”

“Great. See you in a bit.” He headed down the stairs.

Hope closed the door. She went to the window and peered out. The sky was overcast and drizzly. With a grunt, she pulled the curtains shut, blocking out the depressing morning sky. She checked her phone, but apparently Xan was right. No service.

The shower beat the tension from her shoulders and back, and the scent of grapefruit filled the bathroom. This would work. She was here, and the Olympian library was just down the hall. She could make this work.

She ran down the stairs to the kitchen, rounded the corner, and crashed into someone’s back. “Oomph.”

“What the—?”

Hope’s stomach gave an involuntary lurch. The young man before her looked to be about her age. His golden hair mirrored her own, and his skin was only a couple of shades lighter than hers. Most troubling were his eyes, the color of the sky on a cloudless day. Thin and wiry, he looked like he’d spent too much time in front of a computer. Nevertheless, he was more than handsome, and he smelled of sunshine. She didn’t need to be introduced to know who his father was.

“I-I’m sorry,” Hope stammered.

The young man laughed. “Of course you are. But then, I shouldn’t be standing in the doorway, eh?”

“Ummm . . .” Something was off, but she couldn’t place it. “Yeah. Right.” Her insides wound tight with inexplicable tension. She slid past him and his companion, entered the kitchen, and sought for a familiar face.

Their eyes met, and Xan waved for her to join him.

Hope grabbed a banana on her way across the room, and her stomach growled in anticipation.

“What is it with you guys?” she asked, her mouth still mostly full.

Xan’s brows drew together, and he held his spoon filled with cereal suspended in the air. “What?”

“What is it with the other demigods? Everyone is so . . .” She searched for a word that would convey her whole message. Nice, but not.

Xan shrugged. “It’s the conservatory.”

“What? You didn’t even know what I was going to say—”

“There’s no way to explain everyone’s personalities, their eccentricities, or some peoples’ stupidity, so we chalk it up to being at the conservatory.”

“That makes no sense.”

“It doesn’t have to make sense. If you live here, you get along.” He waved his spoon at her. “You don’t have to like anyone, but you do have to get along. Got it?”

“Yep.” She wouldn’t be here long enough for it to matter. “What’s the deal with breakfast?” She pointed to the cold cereal and wrinkled her nose.

“Get whatever you want.” He waved her away with his spoon. “But be sure you clean up after yourself,” he called after her.

She didn’t need to be told twice. After surveying the contents of the fridge, she layered ham, cheese, and tomato on whole grain bread and put it

under the broiler while she put everything away.

It took another minute to find a plate, and then she pulled out her open-faced breakfast sandwiches. She set the plate down to grab a drink, but when she returned, it was gone—the entire plate, sandwiches and all.

She spotted the blond boy holding it on the other side of the room. He picked up a sandwich while an exotically dressed girl with sepia-brown skin talked to him, and then he took a bite. Of Hope's sandwich.

Hope glanced at Xan as if he could help, but he was facing the opposite direction. Judging by his hand waving, he and Dahlia were in a deep conversation. There were three other people in the room, but none she recognized. Except the blond boy eating her sandwiches.

With a deep breath, Hope walked across the kitchen to where the young man stood. He and a petite young woman were talking, or, rather, she was talking to him while he took another bite of Hope's sandwich.

"Excuse me," Hope snapped at him.

"It's the unobservant newcomer," he mumbled past the food in his mouth. He glanced at her, and curled his lip up in a sneer.

"You have my breakfast," she seethed. She held out her empty hand for the plate. How could someone be so rude?

"I'm surprised you noticed." He took another bite, ignoring the outstretched hand.

Hope gawked at the girl, seeking confirmation that this was really happening.

The other demigod wore a blank expression.

Hope turned back to the young man. "Is this some kind of joke?"

He shook his head, his mouth full. Again. He held the almost-full plate in one hand, the half-eaten sandwich in the other.

The petite girl reached out and took a slice of apple off the plate. Meeting

Hope's eyes, she took a bite.

No freaking way! She grabbed the remaining sandwich and crossed the kitchen to Xan.

"Hey, you got some breakfast?" He pulled a chair out for her.

Hope nodded but didn't sit down.

"Good. You're going to need your energy."

She raised her eyebrows. She had plenty of energy to hit that blond jerk.

"We're going to do one of my favorite things." Xan smirked. "Do you like to spar, Hope?"

The thought of fighting Xan was a different story. "I used to take martial arts, but it's been a while."

"Well, we'll brush up on your skills."

Dahlia rolled her eyes at her cousin. "I swear you have a one track mind."

Hope glared over at the other side of the room but kept her eyes away from the blond boy, instead focusing on a cluster of framed roosters.

"I would love to hit something." She probably already would have if Xan hadn't warned her to get along.

Xan frowned. "Ten minutes ago, you were saying how overly nice everyone is."

"That was ten minutes ago."

He followed her gaze.

"Ten minutes can change that much for you?" He tilted his head as if trying to puzzle her out.

Dahlia laughed.

"Yeah." Hope gritted her teeth. "It can change a lot."

"Fair enough." Xan stood up and took his bowl to the sink.

"Did you see who she spent that time with?" Dahlia called after him.

Hope glanced up. The blond boy and his companion were both watching

Xan.

Xan's gaze went from Dahlia to Hope and then to the blond boy, eyes widening. "Do you want to talk about it?"

It wouldn't do her any good. She needed allies, or at least neutral parties. "No. Thanks," she said. "Are you ready to go?"

"You're not done eating." He pointed to her sandwich.

"I'll eat on the way. I'm kinda done in here." She shifted her weight. Better to remove herself than to tempt fate.

"Got it. Dahlia, do you want to come?"

Dahlia bobbed a shoulder, her dark curls bouncing slightly with the movement. "Sure, why not? I don't have anything pressing right now." She pushed her chair back from the table. "Let me call Max. I'll meet you in the gym. You going to be on the mats?"

"Yeah. I'll see her stand-up game. Then we can go from there."

"I'll join you in a bit." Dahlia pointed to Hope. "You might want to change your clothes. You're going to be dripping sweat."

They walked past the blond jerk and his friend, into the open halls stopping at the foot of the stairs.

"See ya, Dahl." Xan dismissed his cousin with a wave.

"Ciao." Dahlia took the stairs two at a time.

Xan grabbed Hope's sleeve and held her back.

"What happened in the kitchen? What got you bent out of shape?" His cold blue eyes met her gold ones.

Hope shook her head. "Nothing."

"Really?"

"It's . . . stupid. That blond boy took my sandwiches when I went to get a glass of water."

Xan snorted. "Endy. Total wanker. He joined us a few years ago. His mom

was trying to raise him. . . ” His lip curled with disgust. “But he’s here now. Complete tosser if you ask me. You should’ve hit him.”

“You said I had to get along with everyone.” She didn’t have the best social skills, but she knew hitting wasn’t considered good manners.

“I’m not sure he counts. Like I said, tosser.”

His English was spotted with an occasional slang term wholly unfamiliar. “What’s tosser mean?”

Xan laughed. It was so unexpected that a small droplet of spit flew out of his mouth. He reached out to stop it from hitting her. “Sorry,” he said with a chuckle. “Tosser. It means unpleasant.”

Unpleasant. And a jerk. She might just hate him.

TWELVE



“LET’S DO TARGET DRILLS for warm-ups. I know you have energy to get out, but I’d like to see your technique before we spar. I need to be able to fill the gaps, lessen your weakness. We don’t want Skia to kill you, right?” Xan pulled on hand “mitt” targets and held them out stacked one above the other. “Start with kicks.” He shook the targets. “Let me know if you want these lowered.”

She pushed his hands up to her head level. “I got good kicks.” She pulled her right knee into her chest, her heel coming up to her hip. With slow control she extended her heel until it touched the mitt, and then held it there.

“Ah, but can you put some force behind it, lass?” Xan pushed back with the thick pads.

Game on.

Xan ran her through front kicks, then round, side, crescent, hook, and twist kicks. Then, using both mitts, he pushed her on combination kicks, then combination kicks and punches.

Hope wiped sweat from her face, and Xan threw the pads to the ground.

“You’ve got the basics down. Come on. Let’s get sparring gear on and see how you do when it matters.” He grabbed a black mesh bag from a bench

near the door.

“Um, I don’t have sparring gear.”

He threw her the bag.

“I tried to guess your size. See what fits. We can change out what we need to.” He grabbed another bag from a hook on the wall.

Dahlia walked in wearing shorts and a tank top. Her dark curls were pulled into a high ponytail. “Here’s your mouth guard, Hope. Put it in now, while it’s still hot.”

Hope took the blue rim, stuck it in her mouth, and then bit down. The warm plastic molded to her teeth. She then strapped on the rest of her gear.

Xan stood in the middle of the mats and motioned for her to join him.

“Dahl, you can ref for us. Hope, I’ll only hit you as hard as you hit me. You’ll be setting the pace here.”

“All right.” Hope’s stomach churned, and her hands dampened with clammy nervousness.

“Fighting stance!” Dahlia’s voice was sharp.

Both Xan and Hope shifted their weight with their stances.

“Go!”

Hope circled Xan, measuring his steps, waiting for him to advance. She watched him, waiting . . . waiting . . . waiting.

After several seconds, Xan took out his mouth guard. “Come on. I know what I can do.” He waved her to him. “I need to see what you can do.”

Hope took a deep breath and advanced. She threw a front-round kick combination, and Xan deftly stepped to the side. The next several moves were just as awkward, and Xan’s ability to anticipate her strikes ate at her confidence. When her butterfly kick met nothing but air, she growled and backed away.

“Stop!” Xan called. “You’re spending too much time in your head. You

need to relax. Remember, this is for fun. Stop thinking. Stop holding back. Show me what you can do.” He put his mouth guard back in. “Let’s go.”

Pushing away her worry, she thought of Endy taking her sandwich. The desire to strike surfaced, and Hope moved forward.

How many times could she surprise him? How many times could she make contact with his gear? Hope threw a six-technique combination and then pulled back before Xan could counter. When he attacked, she counted the number of techniques he threw. Again and again. He always threw eight techniques. *One, two, three, four, five . . . six, seven, eight.* There was a slight hesitation. This was it. She’d found her counter time. On the next exchange, she exploited it. He came in for one, two, three, four, five. . . She scooted in, swept her leg up to block his jab, and then twisted to kick him in the helmet.

Xan straightened, and he shook his head once as if to clear it. A grin stretched across his face. “Nice.”

“Time!” Dahlia’s voice drew Hope’s focus away from Xan.

Hope had completely forgotten about Xan’s cousin.

“Bang on, Hope. Let’s get our face shields on and see what you can do with a spear.”

“A spear?”

“Yeah. Have you used one before?”

“Very little.”

“Good,” Dahlia interrupted. “I can play, too, then.” She raised her eyebrows at Xan.

“All right,” he answered her unasked question.

“We’ll be a team, Hope. We’ll knock him on his arse.” Dahlia strapped on her gear as she spoke.

Hope took the offered wooden staff. The tip was covered in soft foam. Unsure of how to wield it, she swung it around a few times. She felt like a

poser. Refusing to wallow in insecurity, she studied Xan, how he moved as he spun his staff, striking the air and ground with fierceness. Dahlia stood across from Xan and swung her weapon with precision. Hope watched and then tried to mimic the others' technique.

"All right, girls. Let's do this." Xan motioned for Hope and Dahlia to advance.

HOPE WAS SO SORE IT hurt to breathe; it hurt to think. She hauled herself up to her room, leaning against the wall for support.

"When you're done with your shower, we can get dinner," Xan said, pulling her up the last few stairs.

I can't even lift a fork to my mouth.

Hope hobbled through the door and stared longingly at her bed. Her clothes were soaked with sweat, her hair stuck to her neck, and she must have smelled fierce. But all she wanted was to collapse on the ugly bed. She kicked off her shoes on the way to the bathroom. She stood in the doorway and contemplated the tub and the shower. Two more steps, then she sat on the toilet lid, willing herself to find the energy to bathe.

A knock at the door startled her. She'd fallen asleep on the toilet?

"Come in!" she yelled, not wanting to have to move to get the door.

"You haven't showered yet?" Xan's warm laugh drew closer. "Here's your supper." He held out a plate of spaghetti and meatballs with roasted broccoli on the side. "Can you lift your arms to eat?"

As soon as the aroma of garlic and thyme hit her nose, Hope reached out greedily.

"I'll manage." She shoveled a bite of warm sauce and noodles into her mouth, groaning with pleasure.

Xan sat down on the edge of the tub and raised his eyebrows. "You did

well today. I've never seen a demigod with such a strong foundation."

She choked on her disbelief and coughed to clear it.

It was almost as if he understood. "Well, not this early in their training anyway."

Hope continued to eat, but a warm blush crept over her cheeks.

Xan told her she would be having lessons independent of Endymion, Apollo's son. "I don't think it's a good idea for the two of you to be fightin'. Not right now."

While she would like the opportunity to beat Endymion to a bloody pulp, she also understood it would do nothing for her to do so. "Fine by me."

When she finished, Xan stood. "Your blood sugar should be up now. Take a quick shower and then jump in a tub with some Epsom salts." He pulled a carton out from under the sink. "Then you best go to bed. Your body's gonna need its rest to recover from today." His eyes gleamed with pride.

"Thanks, Xan. For dinner, for the salts, and even for the . . . fights." Ugh. That was not the right word! She waved her hand, and it flopped back and forth like a fish. "Whatever. You know what I mean."

He laughed, a deep chuckle. "Aye." He put his fist up to her chin and bumped it softly. "Now, you better hurry. Your body's gonna call it quits in about fifteen minutes. You'll want to be in the bath by then or you'll miss out on your soak, and I promise, you don't want to miss it."

Hope had never taken a bath in salt water. "Why don't I want to miss out on a salt bath?"

He cocked his head.

"If you don't take a salt bath, you'll be really sore tomorrow. You might even need an ice bath." He leaned over and turned on the water.

Ice? Was he kidding? An ice bath sounded like torture. She could do this.

"Okay. Then get out. I'm not stripping down with you here." She pointed

at the door.

“All right.” His gaze darted from her to the shower, then back to her.

“I’m leaving.”

“Good night, Xan,” she hollered out to him as he crossed her room.

“Sleep well.” His voice floated back to her, almost a promise that she would. And then the door clicked shut.

Hope stripped out of her damp clothes, rinsed off in the shower, and then slid into the warm bath.

THE NEXT MORNING, HOPE woke up surprised at the soreness that still permeated her body. Rolling over, she gasped at the tenderness. It hurt to breathe.

Even with the muted light, Hope could tell she had slept late. She quickly dressed, despite her protesting muscles, and went downstairs to the kitchen.

As she came toward the room, she could hear several distinct voices in the midst of a heated conversation. Her feet slowed as she listened.

“All I’m saying is I think we should all be included in her training. You’re not in charge of her, Xan.” It was a woman’s voice, her accent thick.

“I’m not saying you won’t be included, but I’m Hope’s mentor, so I’ll decide when her training starts.” Xan’s voice held the same authority as when he had commanded Briareus.

“Why isn’t Dahlia her mentor? She was there when you found her. Aren’t girls supposed to be partnered with other females?”

“Why are you pushing this, Obelia? Why do you care?”

“Who did you say her mother was? How do you even know she’s a demigod? And how come we haven’t gone through the formal questioning with her?” The blond boy, Apollo’s son, fired off questions in a caustic voice.

“Really, Endy? She had a small army of Skia following her for weeks.

And if that isn't enough, Athan actually found her while he was searching for that monster, the Sphinx." There was a forced exhalation. "I would think you, Obelia, would understand the need for her to get adjusted, considering. And finally, Myrine said she'd be coming." There was a brief silence, and then Xan continued, "Now, I'm done. We'll get to the formal questioning. We always do."

Concerned about the course of the conversation, the shock at the mention of Athan, Myrine, and the Sphinx, Hope debated going back to her room and packing her bags. But they didn't know. They couldn't. And she couldn't quit now. The mention of Myrine jogged her memory. She had said *don't* run away. With a deep breath, Hope steeled herself and walked through the doorway.

The conversation stopped. Xan, Obelia, and Endy stood in the middle of the kitchen. Another brunette girl sat at the table, her nose in a book, seemingly oblivious to the conversation happening right in front of her.

Nerves raw, Hope said nothing as she crossed the kitchen. She pulled the fridge door open and let the cool air wash away some of the warmth staining her cheeks.

"Good morning, Hope," Xan said, his breath on her neck.

She turned to address him and stepped back into the shelves on the door of the fridge.

"Why are you standing so close?" She grimaced, even as her heart jumped an unsteady rhythm.

He leaned forward and whispered, his lips brushing her ear, "How much did you hear? A lot?"

She nodded as a blush spread across her face. Why was he standing so close?

"Don't worry. It will be fine." He kissed her on the cheek, then continued

in his hushed tone, “Let them think what they want.”

Her blush deepened.

“Umm, yeah, okay.” Had he just kissed her?

Xan finally stepped back. “What are you making? Can I help?”

Hope grabbed the first thing she saw. “Eggs?”

He took the eggs from her then grabbed a pan.

“If I help, can I have some?” He winked and twirled the pan.

“You two are disgusting.” Endy’s snide voice carried across the room. “Is that even allowed? Come on, Obelia.” He sauntered toward the door, the diminutive girl following right behind.

“Whatever, Endy. You don’t like the attention off of you”—Xan raised his head, his eyes lit with anger—“‘cause the sun rises and sets on you, eh wanker?”

Hope sucked in her breath.

In a streak of light, Endy was across the room and in Xan’s face. “What does that mean?”

While Endy was taller by a couple of inches, Xan was broader and a lot more muscular. And undoubtedly the better fighter.

Lips curled in disgust, Xan scrutinized the other demigod. “Exactly what I said, Sun-boy.” He poked the handle of the spatula at Endy. “And, unless you want me to focus my full attention on you, I suggest you shut your gob.”

Endy backed away a couple of steps. “I’m not afraid of you, Xan.”

“I should hope not. We’re all playing for the same team, right?” Xan glared at the eggs.

Hope stood rooted at the counter, watching the scene unfold, but when Xan returned to cooking, she forced her attention to grating cheese. She was in the middle of something, and this was bigger than she was. She kept her ears trained on the interaction.

“Uh, yeah. Same team.” Endy’s voice dripped sarcasm, but he backed up another couple of steps.

“Great. See you in an hour in the gym. In the meantime, don’t you have something else to do?”

Endy left the room without another word.

When he was gone, the girl with thick auburn hair spoke, “You shouldn’t provoke him, Xan. We were all a little sensitive when we first got here.” She set her book down next to the empty plate and glass in front of her.

THIRTEEN



XAN LAUGHED. “HE DIDN’T just get here, Thenia. And that was only a little payback for being an arse yesterday.”

“Are you keeping score?”

“Nah. I want him to remember we don’t mess with our own. Not without significant consequences.”

“Oh?” Thenia stood up and collected her dishes. “Because it almost seemed like you were marking your territory.”

Dahlia laughed. “Xan was mouthin’ off because Endy was a sod to Hope yesterday.”

Xan lifted an eyebrow at his cousin.

“What?” Dahlia pushed her hair back behind her shoulders. “He *was*. Don’t get all pissy with me.” Dahlia pointed back and forth from one girl to the other. “Hope, this is Thenia. Thenia, Hope.”

Hope extended her hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“You, too,” Thenia said with a brief handshake. She turned to Dahlia. “Gods, it’s been a while since we had a new girl. She’s going to cause some upheaval, huh?”

Dahlia looked away from the other demigod and shrugged.

“Are you talking about me?” Hope hated when people talked about her as if she weren’t there.

“Of course,” Thenia said. “You’re too beautiful to not be viewed as competition or a threat. Even if you were ugly, you’d still be like a new toy. We haven’t had a new girl for . . . Oh, it’s been since Marilyn, right?”

“Obelia,” Dahlia corrected.

Xan froze, but he said nothing.

“Well, I’m glad you’re here. It’s been boring as the Underworld. Even if you’re stupid, you’ll add some spice,” Thenia said.

Did no one here have manners?

“I’ll see you in the hospital later,” Thenia said, then she walked from the room.

“What does Thenia teach?” Hope asked Xan.

“Medical stuff right now, at least until we get Endy up and going. She also does some history, quite a bit of strategic planning, and the crafty stuff.”

Xan scooped eggs next to a piece of toast and then handed the plate to Hope.

She sprinkled cheese onto the eggs and spooned berries into bowls.

They walked over to the table and Hope sat first. With his foot, Xan pushed Thenia’s vacated chair close to Hope and then joined her at the table.

“Her mother is Athena.”

Of course. She’d need to be careful of Thenia. Athena was known for her exceptional intelligence. Hope didn’t need anyone figuring out who, or what, she was. She took a bite and surveyed the room. Everyone had cleared out. Even Dahlia was gone. Her stomach lurched with a sense of impending danger. She set her fork down and fought the urge to flee.

Xan took a bite of eggs. After swallowing he said, “I’m not going to ask you a bunch of questions. I’ll eventually need to know who your parent is,

but you can tell me when you're ready. At this point, I'm here to make sure you have a good education. Our parents might screw us up, but you don't have to pretend here. What you decide to do with your immortality is a highly personal decision."

Relief washed over her. Trust, an unfamiliar but rather pleasant sensation seeped through her heart. With the warm blossoming in her chest came a sense of empowerment. "Thanks."

"And I'm sorry about the cock-up at the fridge. I wasn't thinking about how that might make you feel."

Hope blushed but said nothing. *She* wasn't sure how that made her feel.

"Endy pisses me off. Talk about a god complex. I wanted him to know that if he messes with you, he messes with me."

Hope's jaw dropped. It was the first time, since her mom had died, that she felt like someone had her back. "I think he got that."

"I hope so." Xan's voice was unrelenting. When his eyes met hers, his smile was as fierce as his words.

They finished eating in silence, but it was comfortable—each in their own thoughts, neither needing to say anything.

"What's on the agenda today?" Hope stacked their dishes in the dishwasher, while Xan washed the pan.

"Well, how sore are you?"

Hope frowned. "Why am I still sore? I've never been so sore in my life."

Xan's low chuckle rumbled through the space between them. "Aye. I probably should've told you, but I didn't want you to hold back. The weapons were all immortal, so it might take you a day or two."

"Immortal weapons? How did you get so many?"

"Hephaestus. And his sons. They like to make them, and I like to use them." He rotated his neck in a quick stretch. "But they're immortal, making

the recovery extended. Sorry.”

He didn’t seem a bit sorry.

“Liar.” She slapped her hand over her mouth. Why was she always rude around him? It was like the filter from her brain to her mouth had been completely removed. Not that it had ever been a strong skill, but still.

He laughed. “You’re right. I’m not sorry, but I’m knackered too.”

“Well, that makes me feel better,” she chirped, her tone full of snark.

He raised his brows. “You should do a light workout today. It’ll help you not be sore. And your lessons start today.”

The berries soured in her mouth.

“What does Dahlia teach?” Maybe they’d ease her in with a friendly face.

“Well, her mom is Eris, so what do you think she teaches?”

Eris. Goddess of strife. Sister to Ares, right? Or was that too easy? She strained to put together the family tree of Greek deity. “You’re really cousins?”

Xan stopped picking at her fruit. “I told you I don’t lie.”

“Right. Sorry.” How many times was she going to put her foot in her mouth this morning? She racked her brain for something, anything, else to say. “Does every god and goddess have a demigod child?”

Xan shook his head. “Not all. The ones bound in the Underworld obviously don’t. And Persephone comes up, but she, Hera, and Artemis don’t have any.”

“You mean, they don’t have any right now?”

“What?” He narrowed his eyes at her.

“Hera and Artemis have had demigod kids before . . .” Her eyes widened, and panic beat in her chest. She blushed. “I mean, they would’ve had kids at some time, right?”

“Artemis is the goddess of *virgins*.” He looked at her like she’d sprouted

another head. “So no sex for her. No sex, no children.” He blew out a breath. “And Hera is the goddess of marital fidelity. It’s like her motto or something. No human kids for her, either. I don’t know about Persephone, but I doubt it.” He pursed his lips. “Anyway, some demigods have good relationships with their immortal parents, and some don’t. There’s no general rule.”

“Who’s your dad?”

Xan stiffened. “You can’t guess?”

All at once she knew, and she felt stupid for not putting it together right away. “Ares.”

“Right.” Xan grabbed her arm and pulled her toward the door. “Come on, sweetheart. Let’s go to class.” He led the way out the back.

Hope stepped out onto a large stone patio with pots and containers dotting the edges. A vibrant lawn extended way past what the yard size should have been. Across the grass were several outbuildings, a flower garden, and a stone pathway lined with spiky grasses and fuzzy, white plants leading out into the yard.

He whistled quietly and then crossed over to a greenhouse.

“Hey.” Hope ran across the lawn to catch up. “I thought we were going to work out?” As soon as she said it, she recognized she’d been looking forward to it. That was bad. She didn’t need to become attached.

“We will this afternoon. I think a little lesson in botany would be good this morning.”

Good for her or good for him? One glance at his face and she decided not to ask. Somehow, she’d made him mad. Again. It was almost like a special talent, putting her foot in her mouth. And she wanted him on her side, at least until she got what she needed in the library.

They entered the greenhouse and were greeted by Kaia, Demeter’s daughter, who was short. Like ten-year-old-boy short. Her dark, curly hair

was pulled up in a bun, and her thick glasses made her doe eyes huge. She was distracted, but nice, and she and Hope spent the next couple of hours digging in the dirt. When Kaia released her with praise, Hope wasn't even sure they'd planted anything.

Despite telling herself she wasn't going to get attached, Hope couldn't help the excitement that thrilled through her as she rinsed the dirt from her hands. It was time to work out. She raced inside to change before heading to the gym.

Xan greeted her with a pair of gloves, and they ran target drills. Over and over again, Xan called out combinations of punches, kicks, and strikes. It took all her focus to land what he called.

"All right. That's it." He tossed the targets against the wall.

"That's it?" Hope asked. "I was just getting warmed up." Her arms hung limp like they were filled with lead, and her shirt was dark with sweat.

Xan shifted back a step, his face deadpan.

"You have, uh, study hall in thirty minutes, and you'd better shower before you go." He indicated her sweaty clothes.

"Study hall?" Why would it matter if she were showered? "Like sitting in the library reading?" That would be perfect. Maybe she could get someone to help her figure out how the library was organized.

"Uh, no, not really. But you'll probably be doing lots of reading." He rubbed his bottom lip and threw the targets into a pile in the corner.

He was hiding something. She could feel it.

"You best hurry. You don't want to be late. Fifteen hundred in the library; if you get a minute, eat something. You might be in there for a long time."

"Fifteen hundred?"

"Three o'clock."

Hope glanced at the clock and then ambled toward the exit.

“Hope?”

She wiped the sweat from her face and pulled her wet shirt away from her body. “Yeah?”

“Can I give you a piece of unsolicited advice?”

She raised her brows. “Sure.”

“Seriously, don’t be late.” He paused and then added, “You’d better run.”

Hope started at a slow jog.

SHE SLID INTO THE LIBRARY at 3:01, her damp hair pulled back into a loose braid.

Hope scanned the front of the room and saw only the young woman, who was always with Endy, sitting at a table reading a book. Obviously Hope’s teacher wasn’t here yet. She let out a sigh of relief.

The young woman stood up and walked over to her.

“You’re late.” She slammed a folder down on the table.

Hope opened her mouth to protest and then snapped it shut.

The girl curled her lip into a harsh sneer.

“My name is Obelia. I’ll be reviewing the current demigods with you.”

She sounded formal, as if they’d never seen each other before, and she kept her gaze above Hope’s head, never meeting her eyes.

Hope measured the petite woman. Her movements were graceful, and despite being small, she was willowy with cropped, curly black hair. While the girl didn’t look to be very far into her teens, Hope knew appearances could be deceiving.

“It’s nice to meet you, Obelia. I’m Hope.” She held out her hand.

Obelia eyed it briefly then put the stack of folders into it. “Your reading. I’ve listed who the god is, the mortal parent, and the demigod children going back as far as we have records. In the case of demigods currently living, I’ve

tried to include whether or not the mortal parent is still living, and any other pertinent details. I'll check back with you in about an hour, and we'll see how you're doing."

"Okay." Hope hefted the thick folders of papers in her hand. Yellowed edges of paper stuck out with bright white pieces. There were handwritten notes and typed text. "Um, before I start this, could you tell me how the library is organized? How do you find certain topics?"

Obelia raised her eyebrows. "Yes. I could."

Excitement tickled Hope's heart, and she bit her tongue to prevent herself from saying anything to irritate the demigod.

Obelia stood silent, glaring at Hope.

The excitement turned sour as the silence grew awkward.

"Your reading." Obelia pointed at the folders. "Go ahead." With that, Obelia left, her pixie-like body disappearing behind a stack of shelves. A faint hint of something fruity hovered in the air, but it disappeared with the demigod.

With a huff, Hope sat down at the desk. She'd need to know how the library was organized before she went searching again. And with only an hour before Obelia returned . . . Hope sunk back into the chair in defeat. If she got lost, would Obelia even look for her? Or would she get in trouble for not following directions? It wasn't worth the risk. She opened the blue folder on the top of the stack and began to read.

Spidery script was mixed with clean print and text. The papers were varying degrees of weathered and aged. She read bits from each page, scanning through the contents.

She'd had enough history in school to know some of the famous people she was reading about. Hitler's father wasn't really Ares. It was Hermes. It was believable, considering the lies he'd told and the persuasive power he'd

had. Believable, but super creepy. Athan was Hitler's half-brother. Ugh. That was gross.

Ares had fathered Ghengis Khan. Endy, the obnoxious son of Apollo, was actually only a few months younger than Hope was, and he wasn't the only living son of Apollo, which she'd known. Cleopatra was Aphrodite's daughter. Shocker. But so was Gwen Stalio, the lead singer of Pradia, the blond bombshell who'd mysteriously died last year.

Hera's and Artemis's folders were empty. As were Hades's and Persephone's.

"You know, if you don't read all the information in the folder, you're going to miss something." Obelia stood at the edge of the desk, her hands on her hips, her face pinched with displeasure.

"I was skimming through them." Hope closed the folder. "I have every intention of reading everything."

Obelia sniffed.

Hope held up the stack of folders. "Why are some of them empty? Xan said that some of the gods and goddesses haven't had demigod children, but I mean Hera probably cheated on Zeus at least once, right?" She had to know. *A Book of the Fates* couldn't be wrong, could it? And if it was right, how could there be no other record?

"Are you kidding me?" Obelia hissed. She looked around, as if to make sure they were alone, then leveled a glare at Hope. "You shouldn't blaspheme like that. It isn't funny. Like, not even a little bit. And it could get you killed."

Okay. Maybe there was no record. "Right. So if the folders are empty, they don't have demigod children."

"That's right, Einstein. Why don't you start with Aphrodite and end with Zeus? Do you think you can do that?"

What had Xan called Endy? Dosser? Tosser? Ugh. Was that a male term only, because Obelia was awful. “Yes.” Get along. Hope needed to get along until she could get the information on Apollo and divine law. “I can do whatever you tell me.”

“Good. You know I’ve worked hard to compile all that data, and your tests aren’t going to skip around, all willy-nilly.”

Did she say willy-nilly? Hope bit the side of her mouth to keep her face straight.

“Maybe,” Obelia continued, “you can follow the outline so we don’t waste each other’s time, okay?” She pulled a piece of paper from under the stack of folders and set it on top.

It was a lesson schedule, listing the gods, their children, and dates of exams.

Hope’s stomach sank. “Oh. Sorry. I didn’t see that.”

“Of course not.” Obelia rolled her eyes.

The flame of irritation burned up Hope’s throat. If the outline had been on top, she would have followed it.

“I said I was sorry,” Hope bit out. It seemed like Obelia was *trying* to pick a fight. And if she was in charge of the library, Hope was going to need her help. Best not to piss her off.

“Yeah, you did. Which, of course, makes it all better.” The girl pursed her lips then took a deep breath. “Let me say how sorry I am, too.”

The words fell to the floor, the insincerity bouncing off the ground and pelting Hope from every direction.

Hope didn’t know what else to say. Everything seemed to make it worse.

Obelia frowned. “Why don’t you actually do some studying now? That way, when I come back, we can talk about what you’ve learned. You should be able to get through the information on Aphrodite.” She pulled a bright

yellow folder from the stack and set it off to the side. “Right here. I’ll see you in a bit.”

What a gorgon. It must have been torture to bring her in to a conservatory, and why? Why would Athan even bother? *Ugh.*

Hope opened the yellow folder and glanced at the top sheet. Time disappeared as Hope delved into the history of Aphrodite’s children. She read the story of Eros and Psyche with growing bewilderment. Hope couldn’t understand how the beautiful goddess could be jealous enough to want to thwart her own child’s happiness. There was much discord sewn by the goddess of love, much of hate, jealousy, and hurt. There were also tales of love granted, some which were exciting or refreshing; however, many were tragic. And when it came to her demigod children, Aphrodite’s daughters were often famous models, actresses, singers, and, more often than not, they met early, untimely deaths.

Clomping wood on wood drew Hope’s attention from the papers scattered across the top of the desk. Obelia crossed the room, several inches taller than earlier that day. She was dressed in vibrant colors that made her rich, reddish-brown skin practically glow. But the scowl she wore marred her beauty.

Hope saw the neon platform heels the young demigod wore and tried to suppress a grin. They had to be at least six inches.

“Something funny?” Obelia’s voice matched her frowny face.

Hope was never going to get on her good side. “No, ma’am.”

“Miss.”

Hope’s brow wrinkled in puzzlement, and she was at a complete loss of words.

“Miss,” Obelia repeated. “I’ve never been married, so I’m a Miss.”

Oh gods. Seriously?

“Of course. I’m sorry.” Hope glanced at the floor and wondered if she

could crawl under the desk and then somehow escape through a trap door. Somehow she doubted there was a trap door in the Olympian Library.

Obelia sniffed, and the tension around her eyes smoothed out with her exhale. “Are you ready?”

Now *what*? Hope rubbed her chin. “Ready for what?”

“For your quiz. You’re here to learn, and I’m here to make sure you’re learning. Put the folder down, and let’s see if you’ve retained anything.”

Hope closed the folder slowly. Somehow, no matter what she said, it wasn’t the right thing. But perhaps this quiz would be more objective.

Obelia gathered the folders together and held them to her chest.

“Tell me what you know about Aphrodite,” she said.

Hope took a deep breath. “What do you mean?”

Obelia glared at her. “Can you remember anything you read? Anything at all?”

Hope blushed. “Yes. I just wanted to know . . . I mean, what do you want to know about her?”

Obelia crossed her arms. “Tell me *anything* you remember.”

Hope began reciting. “She was born when Cronus castrated Uranus. She is the goddess of love, sexuality, and beauty. Her symbols are doves, scallop shells, dolphins, pomegranates, and apples. She was married to Hephaestus, but her lovers include Ares and Adonis. Her divine children include Eros and Phobos. She’s had dozens of demigod children.” Hope recited everything she could remember reading about the goddess.

After a solid ten minutes of Hope talking, Obelia held up her hand.

“You’re very good at memorization.” Another frown.

It was so disheartening. The compliment completely deflated Hope. She’d been feeling really good, too. And then Obelia just grumped it all away.

“Let’s see how much you remember tomorrow, and why don’t you read

about Ares, too? We'll pick up at three o'clock. Sharp. Don't waste my time with tardiness." Obelia clomped her way to the door.

Hope didn't smile this time at the sound of the shoes. She had an almost uncontrollable urge to stick her tongue out at the pixie-like demigod. Almost.

And she still didn't know how the library was organized.

FOURTEEN



“HOW ARE YOUR CLASSES GOING?” Xan asked over breakfast a couple of days later. “Are you learning much?”

They sat at the large kitchen table. The smell of cinnamon hung in the air.

Hope ran her finger along the grain of the dark tabletop. “Yeah, I guess.” The botany classes were fun, even if she sucked at making things grow. She loved the fighting and strategy classes. The anatomy and physiology courses were probably her favorite. Thenia taught those, as well as mathematics and sciences. Hope was supposed to be taking a cooking class, but Obelia refused to allow her to do that until Hope “showed more promise” in her history class.

“But?”

She leaned over the table and muttered, “Is Obelia always antagonistic?”

Xan laughed. “Is she giving you a hard time, luv?”

“She’s mean.” Hope could mostly avoid Endymion, and she did her best to. But she had to meet with Obelia almost every day for classes, and it sucked.

Xan’s shoulders fell. “Don’t be too hard on her. She’s had a rough adjustment.”

“How long has she been here?”

“Three or four years.” He peered up at the ceiling for a moment, then back to her. “Maybe longer.”

“What happened?”

He bent forward and motioned for her to do the same. When they were inches apart he whispered, “I’m not telling you.”

He sat back with a smirk.

She sat up straight in the wooden chair, frustrated by his teasing. “Why not?”

“It’s not my story to share. Ask her if you want to know.”

As if that would ever happen. Obelia had nothing but hate for her, as was manifested in every nasty interaction.

“Is it because Athan found her?” He’d hinted at this before.

Xan shook his head. “Not my story. But he did everything arse backward.”

Hope studied him. There was more to this story, too. “Why do you hate him?”

“I don’t hate him.” He took a deep breath. “Actually.” His shoulders dropped.

She waited for him to continue, anxious to hear about Athan, and a little curious about Xan, too.

He stood up abruptly, nearly knocking his chair over, but with his quick reflexes, he grabbed it before it hit the floor. “You better hurry up. You have class.”

She stared up at him, hoping he would change his mind, sit down, and spill, but then his words sunk in. She glanced up at the clock on the wall behind him and then jumped up from the table.

“Holy Hades!” She dropped her bowl in the sink. “I’ll get that later!” she yelled as she ran out the door.

“LET’S GO OVER HOW the library is organized.”

Hope dropped the green folder containing information on Hermes’s sons and stared up at Obelia in shock.

“Really?” Hope had asked Obelia twice and been refused. Twice. As the days ticked by and Hope wasted time studying about demigods, incidentally *not* in alphabetical order, she’d occasionally poked around in the shelves closest to her desk. She’d found information on psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Interesting but not particularly helpful.

“You’ll need to be able to do research for your next few assignments, so we can’t put it off any longer.”

She’d been putting it off? Of course, she had.

“The library is organized by era first. Depending on when the book was written or published. Publication date takes precedence if there’s a discrepancy. If the book was never published, then it will be found in the era in which it was written.”

Hope nodded as she recited the information to herself.

“Once you get in the right era, books are organized by subject, then finally by author.”

“Like a regular library,” Hope said.

“Right.”

“But how do you know what is what if there are no labels on the shelves?” Hope’s leg bounced with excitement, and her heart thrummed with anticipation. This was it. She was going to finally be able to start her search.

“There’s a map. There, on the wall.” Obelia pointed to countless frames lining the walls. Quite literally, there were hundreds. Maybe thousands.

Was she kidding? Reading the maps would take years. She was never going to find anything.

“That’s the only way?” Her heart thudded dully with despair, and tears burned her eyes. It would be impossible. She’d never find *anything*.

Obelia pursed her lips. “Or you can use the computer.”

Like flipping a switch, anger clenched Hope’s stomach.

“And where, pray tell, is the computer?” Gods, did demigods take lessons on being obtuse?

Obelia pointed to the desk. She pushed a button under the right corner. The wood grain became translucent, and the bright light of a computer screen glowed to life.

Hope rolled her eyes. Right there, the entire time.

Obelia gave a brief lesson on searching for books by topic, title, author, and era. It took less than ten minutes. She then collected the rainbow of folders and stood. “Why don’t you spend the rest of class time getting comfortable with this? We’ll pick up studying tomorrow.”

Wait. “Really?”

Obelia raised her eyebrows. “Did you want to do something different?”

“No. This is great.” *Just go away*. “Thanks.”

Obelia left, and Hope tapped on the screen, trying various combinations of keywords, authors, and eras. Thankfully, she had a notebook to record the titles and locations. She tested it out and spent the better part of the next two hours familiarizing herself with the computer, then the library. When the lunch hour was coming to a close, Hope entered several more searches. It was the best she could do to bury her history. With minutes before her next class, she sprinted to her still sterile room and shoved the books between the crisp, white linens of her bed.

Hope sat up all night reading page after page, searching for some clue about Apollo, curses, and monsters. Hope continued to spend her days in classes, but her nights were now filled with research. After the first day, she

stopped taking the books to her room and spent the bulk of her night in the library, catching only a few hours of sleep each night.

As the new moon approached, she felt the urgency to find the information. Time was running out, and no matter what else Priska had said, Hope knew she couldn't change at the conservatory.

HOPE SAT AT WHAT SHE considered her desk in the library, a tentative truce easing the tension between her and Obelia. The smell of paper, leather, and old books hung heavily in the air. Hope was studying about Hermes, and thoughts of Athan burned through her concentration. She stared at the paper listing the god's children, but her focus was on the only one she knew.

With a big swallow of apprehension, she looked up at Obelia. The demigod daughter of domesticity was scowling at the computer screen.

"Can I ask you something?" Hope blurted.

"Can?" Obelia glanced up at Hope and sneered. "Can is the ability. So, *can* you?"

Hope blushed, wishing she could take the words back. "Um, yeah. Never mind."

"That's not a question." Obelia let out a slow breath, and her face cleared. "Do you have a question?"

"Well, I wanted to know, um . . ." Hope hesitated, shifting in her seat. How should she ask? Was there a better way to do it? More than anything, she didn't want to say it the wrong way and not get an answer. "I wanted to know about how you came to the conservatory. I heard Athan found you, too."

Obelia froze. There was one, two, three heartbeats of silence.

"Yeah, Athan found me, but he didn't bring me *here*." Obelia pointed to the ground as she spoke and then gritted her teeth.

Either she would continue or not, but Hope wasn't going to stop her for anything.

Obelia's petite body sagged. "I was in Nairobi, British East Africa. That's where my father was from. He died when I was very young, and I lived with two of his sisters in the city. My aunts were charmed with the foreigner who came to call. He was well-off, well educated, and seemed to be well respected in the short time he'd been in the community." Obelia wrung her hands. "I used to love to hear him say my name, especially when the room was silent. He would whisper, but he knew I could hear. It would make me laugh."

Hope stared at Obelia, slack-jawed. She couldn't be saying . . . There was no way . . . A growing weight pushed on Hope's chest. "You dated Athan?"

Obelia's laugh was filled with bitterness and scorn. "Sure. At least *I* thought so." Her eyes filled with tears. "It's his way of getting you to leave with him, to trust him."

The sting of betrayal burst white hot in Hope's chest.

"It's his way?" Hope took a ragged breath; the pressure was unbearable.

"Well, it certainly seems to have become his way." Her brow creased, and she pointed at Hope. "You didn't know." She stood up. "You thought he was serious about you?" Pain flashed through her eyes, and her features hardened. "I'm so sorry." She didn't sound sorry.

All Hope could think was she would not cry in front of Obelia. With another deep breath, Hope closed her eyes and swallowed her hurt. She imagined the crumpled bricks around her heart being replaced with steel walls. Hard. Cold. Impenetrable. She shouldn't have asked. When she opened her eyes, Obelia was still there with a small, contemptuous smile playing on her lips.

Hope refused let the other girl see how much she'd been hurt. "No worries. I completely understand the mix-up." She straightened and met

Obelia's dark gaze. "I hope you'll excuse me." Hope stood and gathered her things. "Thanks for the information. You're a wealth of knowledge."

Obelia smirked, but her dull eyes were haunted with pain.

Hope forced herself to walk until she was out of the library, but once the door closed behind her, she ran to her room. Slamming the door shut, she flung herself on the bed, burying her head into the bright cotton bedding. When the first sob came, the dam broke, and Hope cried her pain into her pillow. Shame, anger, and hurt controlled her body until she couldn't move, and exhaustion took over.

The morning light made the night seem very far away, and Hope began to doubt the veracity of Obelia's story. After all, she was clearly a bitter person. Hope needed clarification. She needed verification. She needed someone she could count on for the truth.

Xan came to mind, as did Dahlia. Both were forthright, even brutally honest. She needed that. But both had made it clear they were not impartial regarding Athan.

With a growl of frustration, Hope crossed the black and white room to get in the shower.

FIFTEEN



HOPE WENT TO BREAKFAST, distracted and distraught. She'd scrubbed the evidence of her pain from her face, but her back was throbbing. She would have to leave today or early tomorrow morning at the latest to make the change, but she wanted to talk to someone first.

"Hey." Xan bumped shoulders with Hope while she stood at the open fridge. "You're looking a mite glum today."

"Yeah?" She glanced at him, his good mood a grating irritation. "I'd hope I'm entitled to a bad day now and again."

"Right." He stepped back, surveying her.

She didn't really want to fight with Xan. It wasn't his fault she was irritable. It wasn't his fault she'd been played. He'd even tried to tell her as much. She just hated that he was right. She stared at the contents of the pantry. Oatmeal, cold cereal, pasta, rice, and canned fruits and vegetables lined the shelves. What was with all the processed food? There had to be something else. She turned to open the next door, but it stuck. "Hey, this one —"

"That's not a pantry, luv." Xan crossed the hardwood floors.

Hope glanced down. A small keypad sat below the handle.

Xan grabbed her shoulders and rotated her back to the still open doors.
“This is the pantry. That’s what we’ve got.”

Why would you have a closet in the kitchen? Hope swore and reached for a loaf of bread.

“All right then. I’ll be having a seat over there. If you want some company, you know where I am.” He bumped her with his hip before going back to his seat.

Hope made a quick sandwich and then left the kitchen without speaking to anyone else. She wandered outside on the damp grass. The huge mansion was actually quite small for all it contained. Hope contemplated the paradox of the immortal realm in the mortal world while she ate. Honestly, it made no sense. None of it. The conservatory sat in the middle of the city, but the demigods rarely left, instead choosing to stay safe in isolation because of Skia. Skia hunted demigods. Most demigods hunted monsters. And others sought out new or young demigods to bring them to the conservatory. Which seemed like another sad version of hiding. Her thoughts pounded into a solid headache at her temples. With a sigh, she decided to go to class. This morning it was “crafts and life skills” with Thenia, which usually meant building something.

Thenia, daughter or Athena, was one of *those people*. The ones so comfortable in their own skin you wanted to hate them, but you couldn’t because they were incredibly *nice*. Thenia was tall, probably close to six feet, and solidly built. She had long auburn hair and warm russet skin. From the notes she’d studied with Obelia, Hope knew Thenia’s father had been from one of the islands and living in Oregon when he met Athena. The demigod had been placed in a boarding school in Europe when she was younger and educated herself voraciously. She loved school, reading, the arts, strategic games, and hands-on projects. Most of the other demigods deferred to her.

She was one of the senior demigods in the house—Xan being the other.

During one of their first lessons, Thenia shared how luck found her in boarding school when she was still a child. Demeter's daughter, a girl named Lily, became her best friend, and Demeter had been quick to take Thenia under her wing, too. Hope hadn't gotten to the Ds in history yet, so that was all she knew about Lily.

Hope made her way to the craft room attached to the greenhouse. The large oblong room was filled with industrial tables holding sewing machines, art easels, a pottery wheel, a spinning wheel, and boxes and bins of supplies. Several tables were covered with half-finished projects. Hope walked in and dropped into a seat at the first table. The room smelled of paint thinner, clay, and wet wool.

"Hope?" Thenia stood up from behind a far table.

Hope pulled herself from the chair and glanced to the back of the room. Two large plastic bins sat open on the table by the daughter of Athena. Yards of fabric were strewn across the surface, and a few had fallen to the floor, a veritable sea of color and patterns. A third bin, filled with envelopes, sat at Thenia's feet, the lid propped up next to the chair.

"Come on back," Thenia called.

Hope walked to the back of the room. As she approached, she noticed papers filled with lines on the next table over.

"Hey." Hope glanced at the papers and fabric.

"Hey yourself." Thenia was all sunshine and butterflies, but when her eyes met Hope's, her voice dropped, "You all right?"

"Yeah, just great." Hope frowned. "What are we doing today?"

"Oh, you'll love it!" Thenia's face lit up, and she held up a pattern. "I thought we could sew a skirt." She cocked her head. "Do you know how to sew?"

This had become routine, especially with Thenia, who assumed Hope far more capable than she was. *At least she's nice about the disappointment.*

"No. I've never even picked up a needle and thread before."

"Hmm." Thenia pushed the fabric back, clearing a space. "Maybe we'd better begin with something more basic. Let's do"—she surveyed the spread—"buttons. We can sew buttons. We'll move on to a sewing project in a little bit. Always start easy, you know, to build confidence."

Thenia did that a lot. She'd address Hope and then make a comment to herself about her teaching. Usually, Hope found it endearing. But today, it rubbed her irritation raw.

"Why do you do that?"

"Do what?" Thenia asked as she pulled out needles, thread, and scraps of fabric from a bin near the wall.

"The little aside?" Hope glowered as Thenia dropped buttons on the table. "You told me what we're going to do, and then it's almost like you're coaching yourself."

Thenia laughed and sat next to Hope. "No, Hope, I'm not coaching me. I'm trying to coach you. It seems like you just got here, but soon enough you'll find your skill, what you're best at, and then you'll have to master it. While you master it, you'll also teach it. I'm trying to give you some teaching pointers."

That was laughable. "I won't ever be teaching here." Ever.

"Maybe. Maybe not. Your talents may lead you in another direction, but it's nice if you choose to contribute. When and where you can, of course. The choice is always yours." Thenia motioned for Hope to come closer. "Now, let's sew some buttons. Pick one out and grab a scrap of fabric."

Thenia demonstrated how to thread a needle, tie it off, and sew a button securely onto fabric. It took Thenia all of two minutes. At the most. She then

got up and started cutting fabric at the next table over.

It took Hope the better part of a quarter of an hour to get her needle threaded and knotted. Forty minutes later, Hope set her sewing project down with an, “Ugh!” There on the table in front of her was a mess of fabric and thread. Somewhere in that mess was a purple plastic button.

Thenia came over to where Hope sat chuckled as she examined Hope’s work. “Well, this is a mess. I don’t think we’ll be moving on to anything else today.”

Hope snorted her disgust. Nothing was going right.

Thenia tilted her head, and the skin around her eyes creased. “What’s with you today? Your button’s a mess, but everyone’s first sewing project is. Who cares?”

The chastisement stung because, really, who cared about a button?
“Sorry.”

“What’s the problem?” Thenia asked as she sat down next to Hope. “This isn’t really about the button, is it?”

Hope shook her head.

“What’s the matter?”

Hope’s defenses crumbled. Tears slid down her cheeks, and she fought to compose herself.

Thenia patted Hope’s knee and offered a sad smile. “Oh, no. What is it?” She leaned closer and gave Hope an awkward hug. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Hope pulled away and dropped her head into her hands. “I don’t know.” But this was her best chance at getting a straight answer. She plunged ahead. “Obelia told me that Athan . . . that he’s manipulative, and—”

“This is about Athan?”

Hope bit the inside of her mouth and nodded.

Thenia dipped her head and took a long breath. “I’m sorry.” She met Hope’s gaze and held it. “I don’t know his whole story, but I’ll tell you what I can, okay?”

Fear made her want to curl in on herself, but Hope thought of her steel wall and sat up straight. “I want to know the truth.”

“Of course you do. Let me see.” Thenia scooted back in her chair and studied the vaulted ceiling. “You already know Athan’s dad is Hermes. The two of them are very close. I know he had several years with both of his parents before his mom died. He came to stay with us at the conservatory when he was probably ten or eleven.” She glanced at Hope and then focused on picking the knotted thread of her button. “Even then he was very charismatic. And when his grief abated, he exuded enthusiasm. He was practically a human magnet: charming, made everything fun, and enjoyed the company of everyone. He and Xan were very close, but he had lots of friends.

“He and Xan left the conservatory for a while, a couple of years, I think. I don’t know what happened. I’ve heard rumors, but neither Athan nor Xan have ever talked to me about it. They changed. Both of them. Although Xan has been better the last year or two. But Athan?” Thenia exhaled a slow breath. “Even though he was still able to put up the front, he became restless. Closed off. The last five years, he’s been all about his work. We heard rumors that he employed tactics to get demigods here to the conservatory, tactics that were manipulative, but we’d lost enough demigods to Skia that the end justified the means. Now when we see Athan, it’s usually only for a day or two. He spends most of his time searching. Sometimes, I’m not sure what he’s searching for. I’m not sure he knows, either.” Thenia propped her chin on her fist. “I hope one day he can find happiness again.”

Hope listened with a growing sense of dread.

“It’s all an act?” Her mortification spread over her skin in bright scarlet.

“I don’t know. I don’t know exactly what he says or does. Several years ago, he brought in a couple female demigods that became distressed when he left, one in Europe and Obelia in Africa. Both had quite an emotional adjustment. But not everyone he brought in had a problem. And none in the last couple of years.” Thenia paused as if contemplating her next words. “He may not have meant for there to be such an attachment. That is something better answered by Athan.” Her weak smile and soft tone were pure sympathy.

Hope absorbed the words and meaning of what was said, and a sharp tearing sensation ripped through her chest. She stifled a scream. She wanted to punch something, kick someone. Athan came to mind. And Xan. And yet, part of her was insistent that it was different with her, that he had to have meant it.

She stood up. “I’m sorry, Thenia. I need to leave now.”

Thenia stood, too. “I understand.”

Hope walked from the room, stopping in the foyer to grab her keys on the way out of the house. It was time to go anyway, she reasoned, as she walked to the detached garage. She’d need to be on the road at some point today. Now was good. She started the car and pulled out onto the drive.

She needed to clear her head. She needed to fly. She needed to get out of the city.

And so she did.

SIXTEEN



HOPE SPENT THE BETTER part of the first day as a Sphinx uprooting trees on a mountainside in the Cascades. She kicked, pulled, and punched, splitting the wood and the skin of her hands over and over and over again.

Late that night, guilt about the destruction ate at her, and she flew a large percentage of the pines to a lumber mill near Arlington. She rationalized that she was helping the loggers, that it wasn't anyone's personal property she'd destroyed. But the hollow twinge of shame continued to nag at her conscience. It wasn't until the first rays of sun streaked the sky that she collapsed amid the remaining ruin. Exhausted by the exertion, she slept.

The late afternoon sun beat warmth through the feathers and fur on Hope's back. She let consciousness seep into her, stretched in the bright light, and then lay back down. The tantrum had left her strangely purged of her pain and anger. The hurt remained, but it was the dull ache of a healing wound, still there, but no longer pulsing with her heartbeat. She would be okay.

The sun dropped, now low in the sky as evening overtook day. Hope took a cathartic breath. It was time to be done. Time to focus on what she could control. Move on from the hurt, find a way to break the curse, and then really live her life. Athan was gone, and she would let her feelings for him go.

As Hope drove south on I-5, back toward the conservatory, she cringed. Had Xan told her there were rules about leaving? Would she be able to get back in? She'd checked her phone on the drive out of Seattle. The only messages, and there were fifty-six, were from Priska, and Hope deleted them all.

Half the cars were missing when she pulled behind the conservatory and into the massive garage. Another one of those impossibilities. Ten cars in what appeared to be a two-car garage. Well, usually ten cars. Perhaps it was a shopping day, which might make it easier to sneak back in. And gods, she was starving.

Having not eaten for the past two days, the kitchen would be first. Food took precedence over cleanliness, regardless of how bad she must have smelled.

She stepped through the glass back door, and someone screamed.

"Hope? By the gods!" Dahlia grabbed her and shoved her into one of the tall bar chairs. "Where in the name of *Hades have you been?*" As Dahlia's voice got louder, she jabbed a finger at Hope's face.

Hope frowned and took a step back. "I needed to get away." Even with the distance, she leaned away from her friend, and the anger that radiated from her. "Why are you so—?"

"*Worried?*" Dahlia cut her off and took a deep breath. She muttered to herself while she paced the length of the kitchen and then came back to stand in front of Hope. "Seriously? Xan has half the house scouring the city, looking for you." Dahlia shook her head. "I need to call him." She pulled her cell phone from her pocket and dialed as she continued yelling. "You can't leave like that! I mean, what were you . . ." She stopped yelling and addressed the phone. "She's here, Xan. No, I don't know. Just walked in the door. No. Right." She tapped the screen then glared at Hope. "Where was I?"

Hope blew out a noisy breath. "I'm sorry, Dahlia. I didn't mean to worry anyone; I needed some space."

"Well, next time tell someone."

Hope jumped in before Dahlia could say anything else. "I did. I told Thenia I was leaving."

"You told Thenia you had to go. She thought you meant leave the room, not leave the conservatory. Zeus and Hera. You really need to—"

"All right!" Hope yelled. She was tired, hungry, and emotionally beat. "I get it. I'm sorry. Can't you let it go?"

Dahlia crossed her arms and growled, "You are in serious trouble, Hope." She sniffed the air and grimaced. "You smell"—she sniffed again—"like an animal. Where were you?"

Hope shifted from foot to foot. "I went hiking?"

Dahlia flicked her hand back and forth in front of her nose.

"Well, take a shower. You stink." She walked out of the kitchen, muttering about animals.

Hope slathered peanut butter and jelly onto bread, eating the first sandwich while making a second. Then a third and fourth. She drank a pint of milk and was munching on an apple when Xan strode through the door.

He stopped when he saw her. His cold eyes locked on hers. She stopped chewing and forced a swallow.

Something gripped her stomach, and fear ran down her spine. "Xan?"

"Don't. Just . . . don't." He took a deep breath, his eyes skimming over her as if making sure she was really there. After another ragged breath he said, "Finish eating and then come to the study. We need to talk." His gaze bounced around the kitchen and then back to her. "Please. Please, come to the study when you're done."

"Okay." She felt very small. "I'm sor—"

“No.” He cut her off. “You don’t even know what you’re saying. Come talk to me when you’re done.”

He didn’t sound angry. Tired. But not angry. The niggling fear abated. She’d finish her apple first.

HOPE LOVED THE STUDY. Overstuffed, worn leather chairs sat in front of a real wood-burning fireplace. Perfect for reading. A picture of a cat curled up in the midst of a loaded bookshelf hung over the mantle. The lighting came from two torch lamps and a side lamp on the end table between the two chairs. There was a desk of dark mahogany in front of the windows, and rows of bookshelves extended floor to ceiling. There was even a ladder that slid along the wall of books. Despite there not being a door, the sounds of the house always seemed muffled and distant from within the study. Maybe the magic of the conservatory was like at Myrine’s house.

Hope stepped into the small, and apparently uninhabited, room. “Xan?”

“Hope?” His voice came from behind the chairs facing the fireplace. He stood and pressed his palm to his heart. “Zeus and Poseidon.” He crossed the room in two strides and wrapped her in a hug. “Where have you been?”

She was all kinds of nervous to be this close to him, but mostly because he’d notice how she smelled. She took a step back.

“I’m sorry I took off without telling anyone. I didn’t know it would cause a bunch of problems. I didn’t mean to make anyone worry. Anyway, it won’t happen again.”

Xan nodded but said nothing. His fists hung clenched at his side, and his lips were pinched.

The silence dragged on, and Hope’s guilt pushed her with it an urgency to fill the void and placate the irritated demigod. “I shouldn’t have freaked out. I went up to the mountains, did some hiking, and I probably should take a

shower. I'm really, really sorry."

"I know you didn't mean anything." He took a deep breath, and the corded muscles of his neck relaxed. "Come over to the fire, and let me tell you a story." He tugged on her hand.

Hope followed him to the overstuffed chairs, and they each took one. Hope watched Xan while Xan watched the fire.

"You know, it doesn't seem that long ago." He met her gaze and blinked repeatedly before turning away. "But it was before you were even born." He stared into the dancing flames. "We had a young demigod brought to the conservatory. She was . . . amazing. Beautiful doesn't even describe her. She was striking and incredibly talented, too. She sang, danced, and was a great actress. She was Aphrodite's daughter, and she oozed sexuality. Men and demigods were falling all over her." He fell quiet again.

Hope wasn't sure what this had to do with her. She glanced back at the doorway, wishing for a shower. His next words drew her focus back.

"One day," he continued, "she took off. Just like you, she left without a word to anyone. She had big aspirations. Big plans. She talked about them all the time, but I didn't really take her seriously. It was dangerous, and I didn't . . . She moved to Hollywood and climbed to the top. She became famous. Really famous." He stared at Hope, his hard gaze piercing. "Always dangerous for a demigod, it makes you such an easy target for Skia." He sat back in the chair. "I tried to protect her. I couldn't help it. We fought a lot about it. And then I couldn't take it. I decided not to be involved." He dropped his head into his hands. "I stopped checking on her. Several months went by, but then she called and apologized. It was impossible to stay angry with her. Impossible to stay away from her." He looked up at Hope again. "She was amazing."

Hope frowned.

“You said that.” An ugly feeling pierced her heart. It wasn’t fair to compare Hope to this girl.

“Yeah, I know.” He dropped his head again, and took two ragged breaths.

She knew it was bad. Of course it was bad. But she still wanted to know.

“What happened?”

“Skia got her. I couldn’t be there all the time. I mean, I tried to be there, but she traveled a lot. She’d want me around and then refuse to see me for weeks. One day, she demanded I come be with her. I couldn’t go. We’d just found a new demigod. I can’t even remember who it was now.” He pinched his lips and ran his hand through his hair. “I wasn’t with her, and they got her.”

He seemed like the kind of guy that would blame himself. Terrible. And an actress? “Would I know her?”

“Aye. There are songs, stories, and books about her. She’s still considered one of the best actresses, ever. She was born Norma Jeane Mortenson, but you would know her as Marilyn Monroe.”

Hope thought her eyes would bug out. “Marilyn Monroe was Aphrodite’s daughter?” How had she missed *that* in her reading? “*The Marilyn Monroe?* As in ‘Story of my life. I always get the fuzzy end of the lollipop?’”

“Aye. You like *Some Like it Hot?*” He chuckled. “That was a good one.”

Hope struggled to make sense of what he was saying. It seemed preposterous. And what about . . . “I thought Skia took the bodies or burned them or—”

He shifted in the seat, the leather creaking in protest. “I was supposed to meet her that night. When I arrived, they’d killed her. So, I killed them.” He flattened his lips into a grim line. “Just not in time.”

The thought of Xan fighting Skia made her stomach lurch, but she could see him filled with anger and obliterating anything that stood in his way. And

the Skias' bodies would have disappeared after he killed them, but Marilyn Monroe's didn't. "You made it look like suicide? Why would you do that?"

"It was probably rash, but at the time I didn't want Hades to know he'd won. We'd lost several demigods, and Skia had become the equivalent of the boogeyman, even to mortal adults. There were rumors they were killing humans. I was trying to hide what had happened. I had no idea it would create that kind of sensation."

"Why wasn't any of that in the notes Obelia gave me?"

Xan shrugged.

"You thought—"

"What I thought was that *you* had left." He shifted his body, and the conversation, back to Hope with an even stare. "Maybe it was what Obelia had told you; maybe it had been something else. All I knew was you were gone. You need to stay until you're trained. At least that long, Hope. Until you can defend yourself. I don't want . . ." His voice dropped to barely above a whisper, "I think you're pretty amazing, too."

Hope's breath stuck in her throat. *What? No, no, no!* She did not have time for this. She couldn't even open the door to those feelings.

"What? Did I say too much too soon? I'm not trying to pressure you, and I'm not asking for any kind of relationship besides friendship. I'm sure Athan messed up your head, and that kind of thing takes time to get over. I don't have any ulterior motives, either. I like you. I like your strength, your perseverance, and I understand your mistrust. I don't want you to mistrust me, though. I'll be honest with you, about everything. Always. I . . ." His eyes plead with her, saying far more than his words. "When you think you're ready, think about me, 'kay?"

Hope took a deep breath. "I can't, Xan." If he was going to be honest, it was the least she could give back. "I can't go there right now."

“Yeah, I understand.” His eyes were bright, and he rolled his shoulders. “But someday you might.”

Hope sat, contemplating what he had said and what he’d done. He’d organized a search party for her as soon as he knew she left. He’d gone out hunting for her the last two days and into the night, because he was worried about her. He was a fabulous teacher, and so patient. Her heart warmed. He was the closest thing to a best friend she had since leaving Goldendale. But her heart didn’t melt. And that was the crux of it. She wasn’t ready to open her heart again. Not like that.

“I can’t promise—”

He held up his hand. “Seriously, I’m not asking for anything. Knowing what you said before, and what Obelia told you, I’d expect now to be a terrible time to be hitting on you.” His dimple flashed for the first time that night. “And don’t run off like that again, all right? If you want to leave, let me know. We can figure something out if you need to get out.”

“Okay. I promise.”

“That’s it, really. I wanted you to know why we don’t run off.” Xan leaned back in the chair and watched the fire flicker and flame.

The tension dissipated, and the silence was no longer uncomfortable. Hope leaned back in her chair and let her gaze fall to the flames. Several minutes passed, and exhaustion seeped into her body. Warmth and comfort seeped from Xan’s hand to hers.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

The question poked at something she wanted to bury away and never acknowledge. “About what?”

“About what happened with Obelia? About what happened with Athan?” He crouched low until he was eye level with her.

Her shoulders dropped. Of course, he wouldn’t let her.

“Not really.” But she kept going. “I thought he was sincere, and it turns out he’s a liar.” She glanced back into the flames.

“Yeah. That sucks hard. He’s pretty messed up, though. Not that that’s an excuse for what he does.” He made a sound low in his throat. “Anyway, I’m sorry. I wish it had been different. Especially for you.”

She sagged into her seat. Somehow Xan’s pity made her heart ache. But the pain of Athan, his betrayal and lies, while still tender, it wasn’t fresh, not so raw, more like a two-day-old bruise. “Yeah, me too. But I’ll be all right.”

“I know you will be.” Xan stood up. “Oh, by the way, I’m going to have to go out of town tomorrow. I need to go to the coast.”

Hope frowned. “Why?”

He sat on the arm of her chair. “There’s a group of Mer-people off the coast of California causing problems. They’re luring boaters into shallow water.”

For real? “There are mermaids?”

Xan laughed. “Aye. You didn’t know?”

“I thought the monsters had almost all been destroyed.” *By demigods like you, actually.* But the thought of Xan killing anyone was nearly impossible to believe. Not that he wasn’t capable, but more that he had such restraint. Like what had happened with Braireus.

“No. And the Mer don’t consider themselves monsters. They’re Poseidon’s *people*.” He made air quotes. “There’s a sanctuary in the Mariana Trench. Their numbers aren’t very big, so they’re pretty secretive. But every once in a while a group of adolescents will do something stupid.” He waved his hand as if dismissing youthful antics, then rested his elbows on his knees, and his eyes became somber. “If it were just a boat or two being sunk, I wouldn’t intervene. But two human children drowned yesterday, and some teen boy the day before. That’s not right.”

“That’s awful.” And it was, but her thoughts went to the library. With Xan gone, she would have almost free rein for her research. “How long will you be gone?”

“A couple of days.” He narrowed his eyes. “You know, on second thought, you probably should come with me.”

“What?” He couldn’t be serious. She needed to stay here. “You and me on a trip? But—”

He smirked. “Right. We’ll take Dahlia, too.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but he held up his hand.

“I don’t want to leave you here with Endy and Obelia. Especially not when Ty and his brothers could be here any day.”

Great. Just what she needed, more demigods. But she did appreciate not being left with Obelia and Endy.

Silence stretched between them. Hope half-heartedly tried to think about a way to get out of leaving but gave up when she thought of Obelia yelling at her.

“You all right?”

Hope frowned. Was he kidding? “Sure.”

Xan squeezed her hand. “You look right mad. Have I done something to upset you?”

It wasn’t his fault. None of it. “No. I’m just . . . done.”

“Want to belt it out?” He leaned forward, and his fist barely touched her chin. “We could go spar if you’re not too tired.”

It was barely eight o’clock. The desire to hit something spread from her heart to her limbs. “That’d be awesome.”

“Go get your gear, and I’ll meet you in the gym.” He brushed her cheek with a quick kiss, and then he was out the door.

Somehow the kiss felt less like a kiss and more like a hug. It was nice.

Weird, but nice.

The exercise was cathartic. Hope channeled her frustration, hurt, and anger into her blocks and counter skills.

Xan called time.

Both were breathing heavily and beaming.

“You’re all right.” He pulled off his gloves and dropped them in his mesh sparring bag. He sank to the floor to pull off the rest of his gear.

Hope sat next to him and took a long drink from her water bottle.

“You’ve gotten much better. Not so hesitant in your movements.”

She laughed, a weak, tired wheeze. She put her mouth guard in its plastic container. “Sparring with you is nothing like sparring with mortals.”

“Aye. I should hope not. Humans are slow and weak.”

It would probably seem that way to her, too, now. “There should be a sign on every martial arts academy: ‘No demigods allowed.’”

“You were well trained, but not challenged enough, I think. And honestly, you’re better than almost anyone here, except maybe Dahlia.”

She blushed with the praise and shoved her pads into her bag. “You seem determined to make up for lost time in challenging me.” The pads would dry, but she’d definitely need to clean them before she sparred again. She lifted the hem of her damp shirt and wiped her face.

She caught Xan looking at her stomach, and she pulled the shirt down.

Xan’s gaze travelled up over her sweaty shirt and stuttered over her lips before making eye contact.

“I’m starving,” he said, his voice husky and deep. A faint pink tinged his skin.

Her stomach jumped.

“Do you want to get something to eat?” His brogue became more pronounced, and his gaze was intense, burning into her.

Hope shook her head as much to clear it as to answer him. “No, I ate a lot when I got back. Besides, I need a shower in a serious way.”

He laughed. “Aye. You almost smell like wet fur. Did you sleep in a bear’s den last night?”

Fresh anxiety coursed through her. She stood up and slung her gear bag over her shoulder. “Maybe.” She needed to get out of there, but the feeling of connection with this strange demigod had her reaching out without consciously thinking it through. She brushed her hand against his arm. “Thanks for the workout. I feel much better.” She let out a slow exhale. “What time do we leave tomorrow?”

Xan stood up. “Zero six. Unless you want to fly. Then we could go a bit later.”

She’d never been in an airplane, and she didn’t want to. The only kind of flying she was going to do was the kind she could control.

They walked out the door together, and their shoulders brushed.

“No, six o’clock is fine. Are you driving?”

“We’ll take my car, but I’ll make Dahlia take first shift. That way we can both catch a little extra sleep. Later, Hope.” Xan walked toward the kitchen.

“Good night.” Hope called after him. She went to her room and threw a couple of outfits into her canvas duffle bag. She wasn’t sure what she would need, and Xan hadn’t told her to bring anything in particular. She buried the immortal daggers under the clothes and shoved her *Book of the Fates* on top. Then, grabbing a change of clothes, she headed to the bathroom.

SEVENTEEN



THEY DROVE THIRTEEN HOURS straight, and Hope slept for twelve of them. Xan woke her up at noon for lunch but let her return to the back seat while he took the next driving shift.

It was early evening when consciousness pulled her through the fog of sleep. The movement reminded her that she was in a car, and the voices told her with whom. The lemon of Dahila's lotion mixed in the small space with the earthy scent of Xan's cologne. Their words tickled Hope's ears, and she kept her eyes closed.

"You're being too protective. How is she ever going to learn to defend herself if you don't let anyone near her?"

Xan snorted. "She's had to defend herself plenty before she ever got here, Dahl. And she has contact with almost everyone. Besides, she can handle herself fine. You should've seen her last night." A moment of silence. "I think she could give you a run for your money."

"I know she can fight," Dahlia said.

"Then what's the problem?" He huffed.

"That's not the only way she'll be attacked."

Someone shifted in their seat.

“True. But it’ll end any attack,” Xan snapped.

There was a long exhale.

“You’re not going to be able to keep them all away from her. Endy’s scared of you. Ty and his brothers won’t care a bit.”

“Aye,” he whispered.

Hope yawned and stretched, drawing attention to the fact that she was waking up. She met Xan’s eyes in the rearview mirror.

“Good morning, princess. Have a nice rest?”

Her smile wobbled, and then she fixed it firmly in place. “Yes, quite. Thank you.”

Dahlia twisted in her seat.

“How much did you hear?” Her brows drew up in expectation.

Hope blushed. Caught. “Just that Endy’s scared of Xan, but Ty won’t be.” She thought about it. That was the second time she’d heard Ty’s name.

“Who’s Ty?”

“He’s an arse. All of them are,” Xan said. “Do your best to stay out of their way. I’ll have a talk with them when they get there. You don’t have to worry about it, Hope.”

She wanted to agree with him, but Dahlia’s words held more conviction. These were boys Hope would need to worry about. “Who’s his father?”

“Apollo,” Dahlia said. “And if you think Endy’s an idiot . . .” She frowned. “He’s got nothing on these guys.”

Apollo’s sons. What if they were the same ones from Goldendale? They almost certainly were. This was bad. Bad. Bad. Bad.

“Hey, it’s okay.”

Hope realized she was still shaking her head and stopped. “Oh, no. It’s fine.” She would need to step it up, get the information, and get out. “When do they get here?”

Xan and Dahlia shared a look, and then Xan met her eyes in the mirror again.

“Any day,” Dahlia said, and then she faced front.

Xan frowned. “Who knows? They could come soon, but it could be weeks afore they get here.”

She’d really have to dedicate more time to her search. It had been frustrating. She’d found lots of books about curses from the gods, but everything about her curse was wrong. In the histories she’d read about monsters, the Sphinx was said to be sent by Hera to Thebes, and her parentage was believed to be of primordial monsters, like she’d learned in Mr. Barton’s class all those years ago. How could there be so much misinformation? And did that mean all the information about monsters was wrong? How was she supposed to find anything accurate? Her thoughts drifted to the book in her bag.

“Hey, can I ask you a question?” She continued without even pausing for breath, “Can a *Book of the Fates* be wrong? And where are they? In the library, I mean.”

Xan frowned, and Dahlia turned again to face Hope.

“The *Books of the Fates*?” Dahlia asked.

Why were they staring like that?

“Yeah. The ones by the Moirai.” Surely they’d heard of them.

“The *Books of the Fates* are in the Underworld, Hope. The Moirai are bound there, and so are their writings.”

“And even if they were here, no one can read them.” Dahlia quirked her head. “I mean the writing is allegedly invisible unless the person reading them is pure or something.”

Hope’s lips made an O. She swallowed. “Why are they in the Underworld? I mean if no one can read them, it shouldn’t matter, right?”

Dahlia studied Hope, and Xan quirked an eyebrow. “It’s always been that way.”

Hope scowled. *Great.* She’d thought if she could get Apollo’s book, there would be information there.

“How do you even know about The *Books of the Fates*? Has Obelia already talked to you about them? That’s pretty advanced.” Xan’s pointed questions seemed more than idle curiosity.

Uh-oh. “No. My mom used to talk about them. The whole of a person’s life recorded just like a story.”

Dahlia cocked her head “Your mom told you?”

She’d stumbled and didn’t know how to recover. Hope bit the side of her mouth and nodded.

“Right. Well, that’s what we’re taught. Why the interest?” Dahlia asked.

Hope’s foot bounced with an urge to run, but there was nowhere to go. She glanced out the window as the pine trees passed by. “Ah, a project Obelia has me working on. I thought if I could read someone’s *Book*, I could get the whole story, instead of reading different accounts by different people. I mean, they don’t always add up.” It sounded good. Maybe.

Xan laughed. “That would be the best way to go about it. The Fates *can’t* lie, hence their stories, nay, history, would be accurate.” He winked at her. “That would save heaps of time on research, and Obelia would be out of a job.”

Bummer. On both counts.

“We’re here.” Xan pulled off onto a long road that led to a hotel on the top of a bluff overlooking the ocean.

It was gorgeous. Hope rolled the window down, and balmy air filled the vehicle. The humidity was cut by the cool breeze lapping off the ocean waves. The air held a salty tang, and the crash of waves reverberated up the

bluff.

“Here?” Dahlia hissed and glared at Xan.

They drove the rest of the way up the hill in silence. Sprawling in front of them was a gigantic white structure, glowing from the lights strategically placed on the grounds surrounding it.

Xan handed the keys to his BMW to the valet, and they crossed the circular drive to the lobby doors. The glass slid open, and they stepped into a marble foyer, where an enormous glass sculpture hung suspended from the ceiling, dripping in golds and creams. Hope stood rooted, trying to take in the extreme opulence. She’d never seen anything like it before. She glanced down and had to race to catch up to Xan and Dahlia.

“Two rooms, please.” Xan slid his credit card across the counter.

Dahlia fixed Xan with a glare.

“I hate you for this.” She scanned the lobby then said, “I’ll catch you later.” She stalked off.

What was that? Hope had never seen her friend this upset. She’d never seen *anyone* that upset. What had Xan done to deserve that kind of wrath? She studied him as if to figure out the puzzle.

“Sir,” the receptionist said, “would you like them adjoining?”

Xan caught Hope watching him and smirked.

“Sir?”

His gaze was still locked with Hope’s, but he answered, “Aye.”

“Would you like the rooms to be next to each other?” The receptionist’s eyes shifted from Xan to Hope.

Hope wanted to laugh at him. The receptionist thought he’d said “I.”

His face tightened, and he turned back to the receptionist. “Aye. Yes. I would like the rooms to be adjoining, right next to each other. Thank you.” Xan enunciated each syllable as if speaking to an idiot.

Hope narrowed her eyes. “Don’t be a jerk, Xan.”

The woman blushed and typed on the keyboard under the counter.

“Here you are, sir. Seven hundred eighteen and seven hundred twenty.”

He took the proffered keys, signed the papers she put in front of him, then extended his hand. “Here’s your key. I’ll meet you for dinner, or would you rather rest?”

Hope noticed several shadows, some long and dark, all foreboding. She inched forward and took the key. “What about Skia?”

Xan looked around, scrutinizing the corners and patches of dark. “Right. I’ll come up with you if you want to sleep. Otherwise, let’s go have dinner now.”

“Where’s Dahlia?”

Xan frowned. “Getting pissed. Probably best to avoid her tonight. She hates this place.”

They crossed the lobby and entered the restaurant. “You’ve been here before?”

“Aye.”

He said nothing more about it as they had dinner, or even when they went to their rooms later. He insisted on keeping the adjoining door open until Dahlia got back, but Hope fell asleep before that happened.

“GET UP,” DAHLIA SAID.

Something cold slid down the front of her shirt, and Hope sat up with a squeal.

“Bloody Hades, Dahl. Don’t be taking your anger out on her.” Xan touched Hope’s arm.

Dahlia glared at them both.

“It’s her fault I’m here, so shut your face.” She still wore the same

rumpled clothes as yesterday, and pain seemed woven into her features. Pain and anger. She started toward the restroom.

Hope climbed out of bed and shook the ice cube from her shirt. She grabbed her bag and covered her chest.

“I should go, uh, clean up.” She trailed after Dahlia.

“Go use Xan’s.” Dahlia poked her head out then closed the door in Hope’s face.

Hope spun around, incredulity hot in her chest. It was one thing to be upset, but—

“It’s my fault.” Xan grabbed Hope’s bag and crossed into his room.

Hope padded after him.

“I should’ve taken us to a different hotel, but this is the closest one.” He spoke to himself as much as to her.

“What’s wrong with her?” she asked.

“She has a lot of memories here.” He handed her the bag. “Go get dressed. We’ll leave as soon as you’re ready.”

“Where are we going?”

Xan quirked a brow at her. “To the ocean.”

Hope rolled her eyes and closed the bathroom door behind her.

Twenty minutes later, the three of them were hiking down to the water.

“What exactly are we doing here?” Hope studied the uninhabited beach. The waves pounded on the dark, jagged rocks and lapped at the sandy breaks, leaving bits of kelp and seaweed stranded on the shore. The ocean appeared as deserted as the beach.

Dahlia said nothing as she kicked rocks off the path.

“We’ll ask the Mers to leave the humans alone, first. If they don’t . . .” Xan stared out at the water.

Hope didn’t like the way that sounded. “If they don’t?”

“Then we’ll deal with it,” Dahlia snapped.

“Is it dangerous?” Hope couldn’t help the nerves scratching at her. Dahlia’s deadpan glare made it worse.

“Not usually.” Xan pushed Dahlia down the path. “Go on ahead. You’re not helping here at all.”

Hope wanted to ask Xan about Dahlia. Why was she angry? Her short temper reminded Hope of how she felt about Athan . . . Oh. Oh no.

They eventually made it down to the beach. The smell of salt water and tangy kelp competed with the sour smell of dead fish. As the three of them wandered toward the rocks, the smell of fish grew stronger.

“Ugh. I hate the Mer,” Dahlia grumbled. “I hate fish.” She clutched her stomach. “I hate you, Xan.” She ran back up the path toward the hotel.

Xan motioned Hope forward.

“Where’s she going?”

“To throw up,” he said with a shrug. But she saw the pain buried in his eyes as he stared after his cousin, while he chewed on his lip. And then he turned back to the trail, and with two steps passed Hope to lead the way.

“Will she be all right?”

“Eventually,” he said.

He offered no other assurance, and Hope was left struggling to believe him.

They climbed over the rocks, Xan offering his hand when there was a sharp drop or a steep climb. Eventually, they arrived at a pile of fish bones on a sliver of beach.

“Come on.” He leaned over and untied his shoes.

Hope followed suit. “Why are we getting barefoot?”

He rolled up his pants to his knees.

“Are we getting in?” The idea of standing in the crashing surf, fish guts

washing over her skin, maybe even live fish swimming around her . . . She backed up.

“Don’t be daft. We’ve only got to stand in the surf to call them. Once they get here, we can get out.”

“Do I have to?”

He shuffled in the sand toward the water. “I guess not.”

She swallowed her fear.

“Sorry. I can help.” She peeled off her socks and rolled up her cuffs.

Xan stepped over the fish, grabbing two corpses by the tails.

Hope followed him into the surf, cringing as the waves crashed over her feet.

“David!” Xan yelled then threw the dead fish bones into the water.

“David!”

Obviously this wasn’t the first time he’d done this if he knew the Merman’s name.

The surf pounded at their feet, and the pull of the undertow grew stronger.

Xan grabbed a silver dagger from his waist and dipped it in the water.

“David!”

She recognized the irritation laced through his voice. David was going to have to deal with an angry demigod if he didn’t hurry up.

Hope saw the crown of dark hair break through the surface, followed by smooth caramel-colored skin and soft Asian eyes. The man coming toward them was bare-chested, his muscles tight and toned. He looked familiar. Really familiar.

Hope stumbled back and heard Xan splash next to her. Her jaw dropped when the god walked out of the surf and onto the beach.

Standing before her, buck naked. Oh, gods. She blushed and dropped her gaze.

“Son of Ares.” Poseidon’s voice was soft but carried over the surf. “What do you want with my young captain?”

Xan bowed low, and when he stood, he kept his eyes averted. “I was seeking an audience because there are Mer leading humans to their death, Lord.”

Poseidon frowned. “What are human lives to you? How is this your concern?”

Xan shifted his feet in the sand. “My concern is for your people, Lord. The humans have spotted the Mer. If they continue to see them, they will hunt them.”

“You know how men think?”

She was hearing verbal ping-pong, and one of the players was a god. A god that could make his own rules.

“I know how fear and anger think, Lord Poseidon. Man will hunt what he fears. It behooves us all if your people remain in their realm,” Xan responded.

Hope risked a glance and saw Poseidon’s pursed lips as he studied Xan. “I will think on this, young demigod, and discuss it with my generals.” Then Poseidon pointed at Hope. “What are you doing with this demigod?”

Her heart pounded, and fear coated her throat. Words wouldn’t come.

“She is at the conservatory with us, Lord. She is my charge. I am her trainer.”

Poseidon studied her, his gaze piercing.

“Ah, the rumor is true.” His face lit up.

The water on her feet warmed, and the waves calmed.

“I wish you the best of luck, daughter of Leto.” He inclined his head.

Her fear dissolved. She wasn’t sure if he’d kept her secret on purpose or just been misleading, but she felt a surge of gratitude all the same. “Thank

you.”

He shifted his gaze back to Xan. “I will take care of the Mer. They will not bother the humans again.”

The god turned, and Hope blushed again before he dove under the surface of the water and disappeared.

“*Shite.*” Xan’s voice broke the spell. In two strides, he closed the distance and pulled Hope in for a hug. “He could have killed us.”

Hope pulled away from him. “Stop it.”

“Sorry.” His eyes were wide, and he wrung his hands. “Leto? Wow! No wonder you’ve kept it a secret. I mean, wow.”

She couldn’t figure it out. Why had the god kept her secret?

EIGHTEEN



HOPE WALKED INTO THE kitchen and stopped. Silence greeted her. Xan sat at the table, engrossed with his phone. He gave Hope a nod of acknowledgement when she came in but returned his focus to the screen in his hands.

While she flipped pancakes, she wondered where the other demigods were. Dahlia, Obelia, Endy, and even Thenia had yet to make an appearance. Even the somewhat spacey Kaia, Demeter's daughter, was nowhere to be seen.

"Xan?" Hope set a stack of pancakes on the table between the two of them, then handed him the extra plate. "Where is everyone?" She buttered a pancake and poured syrup over the top.

Xan grabbed four pancakes from the stack. "Dahlia is taking a break. Obelia and Endy are probably avoiding me still, and Thenia and Kaia haven't come home yet."

"Come home?"

"From when they were combing the streets for you."

That seemed like forever ago, but Hope realized it had only been three days since she'd come back from her time as the Sphinx.

“I sent them another text. I think they’re out having fun.” He waggled his eyebrows as he doused his pancakes with maple syrup. “Girl time.”

A sharp pain of loneliness seared her heart as her thoughts went to Haley. Hope pushed the pain away. She’d left her friend a message on her way back to the conservatory after suffering through her time as the Sphinx but never heard back. Hopefully they were safe somewhere. “When someone disappears . . .”

He finished his bite before answering.

“Everyone goes out. Or at least everyone is supposed to. Endy is still too young to be of any help in a search, but . . .” His eyes hardened, and his lip curled. “Let’s leave it at that.” He took another bite before going to the fridge.

“And Dahlia?”

He pointed at the milk container in his hand. “Do you want some?”

“Yes, please.”

He poured them each a glass. “I’m glad you brought this up. We never really talked about it, and we should. You’re lucky Dahlia was here when you got here.” He set the milk in front of their respective places and took his seat. “In the future, I think it would be better if you had one of us with you. Or at least let one of us know where you are.”

“You think I need to worry about Endy or Obelia?” She had a hard time believing either of them would attack her. Obelia was wimpy and Endy too much of a pretty boy.

Xan cut another piece of pancake, and another, and another. “Ah, no. But I don’t trust them.”

She didn’t either.

“Where’s Dahlia now?” She sipped at the milk.

He speared several large pieces of pancake. “Dahlia has a hard time when

someone disappears, and then we had to go to Half Moon Bay. She'll probably be gone for a week, out coping. Anyway, I just got word that Dionysus's son is supposed to be coming any day. Things will really change while he's here." He stuck the loaded fork into his mouth.

Did he really just shove that bite in his mouth? It took a second for his words to register. "Change how? And what's Dionysus's son's name? I don't remember reading about a current son in the notes Obelia gave me."

He loaded up his fork again. "Ha! I'm surprised you haven't picked up on that yet. Obelia's teaching—"

"Is the best ever?" Obelia stepped into the kitchen, arms crossed and voice sharp. Endy trailed after her, and both wore matching expressions of smug superiority.

Xan faced the other demigods. "That wasn't quite the message I was going to give, but, whatever." His smile was tight and without warmth. Hope remembered it from when they'd first met.

Obelia glared at him, her hands on her hips. "Oh? What were you going to say?"

Xan set the fork down and took a deep breath.

Endy stood next to Obelia, scowling at Hope and Xan. Hope measured the two demigods, one bright as day, the other dark as night. If it came to an actual fight, she and Xan would win. But she remembered Xan's warning to get along.

Xan stiffened and glared at the other demigod. "Hello, Sun-boy. Did you enjoy your time off?"

Endy clenched his teeth and took a step forward. "Time off?"

"From responsibility, honor, integrity." Xan stood and cleared his place, setting the mostly full plate and glass in the sink.

Endy took another step toward him. "Are you trying to insult me?"

“I don’t think I’m trying at all.” A muscle in Xan’s neck jumped.

Endy gritted his teeth and clenched his fists.

Both of them appeared to understand some boundary not to be crossed.

Hope itched to hit them. If Endy struck first, would it be okay to retaliate?

Xan closed the remaining distance. “Do you have something you want to say?”

“You know, Xan, you can be a real shab.”

Xan tilted his head to the side as if measuring the insult. “Shab?” He turned toward Hope. “Is that even a word?”

She bit her lip and managed to shrug one shoulder. The tension filled her stomach, leaving no more room for pancakes. Should she go stand by him?

Xan leveled his gaze at Endy. “Am I supposed to be insulted by a nonsense word? Go on.” Xan waved dismissively at the other demigod. “Go work on your vocabulary, you git.” The glare disappeared, and he addressed Hope, “Thanks for the pancakes, luv.” He said it like the confrontation had never happened, but the tightness around his eyes told otherwise.

Hope waited for Obelia and Endy to leave the kitchen before addressing Xan. “You hardly ate any. And what’s with them?”

“Endy’s always been a D-bag. I don’t know why it’s getting worse, but I’ll have Thenia talk to him and Obelia when she gets back.”

Hope had a theory, but she wasn’t going to share. She took her half-full plate to the sink, turned on the water, and scraped their food down the garbage disposal. What a waste. “Shouldn’t we do some grocery shopping? I don’t think I’ve contributed anything since I got here.”

Xan blew out an extended breath and rolled his neck. The tension level seemed to drop as he shook his head. “No need. I put money in the community pool for you last week. You can cover me next week, when money’s due again. You have money from your mom, right?”

“Of course.” She wasn’t sure how much money a god would give their child, but the trust fund from her grandmother would be more than sufficient. As she washed, Xan chatted about some new military weapons he was getting.

“They’re all U.S., which some argue isn’t as great as the Israeli, but in my opinion they can hold their own. These aren’t new per se, but I don’t have them, so I’m excited.” For as irritated as he was ten minutes ago, he was now bouncing with excitement.

“What are you getting?” His enthusiasm was almost contagious. It was clear he wanted to tell her.

“An AT-4, which is an anti-tank weapon, an M20 grenade launcher, and a couple machine guns.”

She listened to him without understanding. Finally, she interrupted, “Why is it that you need these weapons?”

A slow grin spread from his lips to his eyes. “I don’t need them. I like to know what’s out there, give her a try. I should be familiar with all weapons, all types of combat. It’s part of who I am.”

Hope wanted to laugh at him and his fascination with big guns. “You don’t seem like the bloodthirsty type that I envisioned a son of Ares to be.”

“No?” He frowned. “Hey. I think that’s the first time you acknowledged my immortal parent.”

“It took me a while to actually believe it. You really don’t fit what I would have thought.” At all.

“You mean totally crazy about killing, accumulating power, a complete arse?”

“Something like that,” Hope quipped. She thought back to the list Obelia had given her: Genghis Kahn, Attila the Hun, and Basil the Bulgar Slayer. That last one sounded like something from a kitchen, not a fierce warrior. But

these demigod children of Ares had been responsible for killing hundreds of thousands of people. Xan just didn't seem to be in that same vein.

"I get that all the time. Believe me. I got it from my father *a lot*. But he eventually got tired of saying it, and he left."

"What do you mean he left?" Most gods didn't raise their children. Had his childhood been like Athan's?

"I mean, he completely stopped coming to check in on me. I was seven when he told my mom I'd never amount to anything. Then he left us." There was a soft silence, and then he continued, "Me mum . . . I'm sure she's why I'm normal."

Hope shook her head. "Who told you you're normal?"

Xan laughed. "Okay. But she's probably the reason I'm not out slaughtering everything that moves." Xan put the pan away and flicked the towel at Hope. "I do love fighting, and there is something to having his blood in me. The weapons, the hand-to-hand combat, the strategic planning, it all comes pretty easily."

He flicked the towel again, but this time she caught it.

"What a gift," she joked, "brother of Genghis Khan."

"Better than Hitler." Xan pulled on the towel and drew her close. His demeanor shifted, and the smile faded. With a pensive expression, he studied her. "We all have power, Hope. As demigods, more than most. As individuals, we get to choose what to do with our power. It is that choice that makes us who we are."

His words made her uncomfortable. As if he could see something good and strong within her. Something she knew wasn't there. And if he really knew her, what she was, he wouldn't be so nice.

"That's a bit thick." As soon as the words were out, Hope wished she could take them back.

“It is what it is.” He dropped the towel on the counter. “I can’t wait to try the new weapons. You should come with me. It’ll be fun.”

Hope tilted her head to the side. “You have the most interesting definition of *fun*.” She made air quotes as she spoke. “Fun, in a sick masochistic way.”

“Oh, come on. They aren’t immortal weapons, so they’ll hardly hurt. Unless you shoot yourself. But if you’re that bad, you deserve what you get.”

THE NEXT SEVERAL DAYS were quiet. Xan told her Kaia and Thenia had decided to do a girls trip to a conservatory in the South. Obelia and Endy were still making themselves scarce. And Dahlia had told Hope she was working on a project and then disappeared.

Hope and Xan spent hours exercising and studying different martial arts and shooting weapons. The arms he’d received were military grade, and that was the freakiest thing Hope could think of. How had he gotten military weapons? He’d refused to say.

Of everything they did, her favorite was Han Mu Do, a Korean martial art that focused on stand-up grappling. Hope found she could use Xan’s weight in her favor, and she loved tossing him to the ground.

But there was still a lot of free time. Hope put her head down and pushed forward, taking every opportunity to search about her curse.

NINETEEN



THE HOUSE WAS QUIET as Hope tiptoed down the hall. It was late, well past midnight, and she'd just finished the last of the books she'd taken to her room that afternoon. As always, there was nothing there to tell her how to break the curse but plenty to tell her what she already knew. Apollo was a selfish jerk.

She cracked the door and listened, and when only silence greeted her, she tiptoed down the stairs. She'd skipped dinner, and a midnight snack sounded perfect.

Hope flipped on the kitchen light and froze. There on the wall was the phone. She'd forgotten all about it. She picked up the receiver and heard a dial tone. Without any regard for the time, she punched in her best friend's number, hoping it still worked.

"Hello?" Haley's voice was thick with sleep.

"It's Hope." Emotion clogged her throat, and she coughed to clear it.

"Hope! Oh, gods! Are you okay? You got away? We got away. Where are you?"

Hope wanted to tell her everything. About the curse. About Athan being a liar. About Xan, Dahlia, even Endy. But she couldn't. What if they monitored the line? What if she put Haley and her family at risk? She'd never be able to

live with herself.

“I’m in Seattle. I miss you.”

They chatted for a few minutes, but Hope worried that someone would catch her. Every minute was a risk. She didn’t know the rules, but she couldn’t afford to break them either. They said their goodbyes and promised to stay in touch. A promise Hope was determined to keep.

She just needed to break the curse.

The next morning, she skipped practice and told Xan she wanted to do some reading. Sitting in front of the fire in the study, she flipped through brittle pages about humans cursed during the early years after the Titans were overthrown. Deciphering the spidery scrawl used every ounce of her concentration, and she moved her finger across the page inch by crawling inch.

“Hey, there you are.” Xan plopped into the chair next to her. “I should’ve known you’d be in here.”

Hope closed the book. “Hey, yourself.”

“What are you reading? Anything good?” He reached out and grabbed the book, hefting its weight but not even cracking the cover. He handed it back to her, a furrow creasing his brow. “That’s some heavy reading. What kind of report does Obelia have you working on?”

Hope mumbled incoherently as she shoved the book to the bottom of the stack. “What have you been up to?”

“Weapons training. And Dahlia decided to join the realm of the living again, so I had to kick her butt.” He nudged her with his foot. “You doing all right?”

She sighed. Truth was she wasn’t doing all right. She missed Priska. And Haley. Her old life with her mom. And when all this was over, then what? Or worse, what if she couldn’t break the curse? “I’m trying to figure out what

I'm doing."

Xan blew out his cheeks. "What do you mean?"

Hope almost told him everything.

"I . . ." She couldn't do it. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I mean, what's next? Once I'm done here, then what?" It was the best truth she could share with him. And yet, even that felt like a lie.

"What do you want?" he asked.

His words caught her off guard. "Want for what?"

"You know. What do you want with your life? It's really not much different than anyone else, mortal or immortal. At some point everyone asks themselves, *What do I want to do with my life?* And you know, you can go do whatever you want. Some demigods are hedonistic, others altruistic. You get to decide."

And that was the crux of it.

"I can do whatever I want?" She already knew the answer. She couldn't. She wasn't going to be able to decide.

"Sure," Xan said. "It's not like anyone's going to tell you what to do. Take some time; figure it out. There are lots of things that you can do here or out in the world." He waved his hands around.

"Like Athan is a, what did he call it, *Psachno*, right? And he chose that?" Where did that come from? She hadn't thought of Athan for days. And here he was sneaking back into her thoughts.

Xan studied her, his brow furrowed. "Aye. Athan takes his job very seriously. *Psachno* are seekers. They find demigods and occasionally immortal creatures, like monsters." He softly tapped at her knee as he said it. "He's very good at it. Mostly because he doesn't do much of anything else. Except occasionally work for his dad, Hermes."

"Like what?"

“He helps escort the dead, delivers messages to the gods—that sort of stuff.”

Hope remembered Athan telling her about his father’s business. What he’d said made more sense now.

“And what about you? What do you do?”

Xan’s face cleared, and he laughed. “It doesn’t seem like much right now, huh?”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“It’s okay. We all have different roles. I’ve been *Psachno*. I’ve been *Daskalos*, a teacher. Earlier in my life I was an *Archarios*, a learner or novice, what you are now.” Xan pointed to her then dropped his hand to his side.

“*Archarios*.” She tried out the word. The gutturalness felt foreign, but something about the word resonated with her desire to belong.

He laughed again, an indulgent chuckle that made her blush.

“At one point, I was called *kopritis*,” he said.

She tried to remember if she’d ever heard this one, but nothing came to mind. “My Greek isn’t that good. What does *kopritis* mean?”

“Ah, let’s say it means lazy.” He reached out and nudged her leg.

“Is that what it means?”

“Yes, but it’s not a very nice way of saying it.” He relaxed into the chair and extended his legs toward the fire.

Hope looked down his long legs to his bare feet, and the fire licked at her heart.

“Were you? Lazy, I mean?” She had a hard time imagining Xan lounging around doing nothing, and yet he seemed very relaxed here at the moment.

“At the time? I reckon I was. At least by our standards. I wasn’t contributing anything to the greater good. I wasn’t even improving myself.” He sat up straight and tilted his head to the side. “I think everyone goes

through a phase like that in their life.”

Hope pursed her lips.

He tapped her leg, but this time his fingers lingered. “Don’t disapprove. You might be there one day.”

That was ridiculous. She wouldn’t even dignify that with a response.

“The point is you can take all the time you need. It doesn’t have to happen tomorrow.” Xan scooted to the edge of his chair and then stood up. “In fact, if you don’t like something, you can even change your mind.”

Hope stared at this philosophical Xan. His patience and understanding continued to surprise her.

Xan moved closer and extended his hand to help her up. “You really are making great progress. I know I don’t tell you enough, but you’re coming along nicely. It can be a bit overwhelming here, and I want you to know you’re doing right well.”

“Thanks. You’re right. It’s been a lot to take in.” Her voice shook from the overwhelming exhaustion. She accepted his hand, and he pulled her up. For as comfortable as the chairs were, they did suck you in.

She went to pull her hand away, but he didn’t release it.

“I can see that. It’s been a long time since I was there, but I can remember.” He squeezed her hand. “And whatever I can do to help . . .”

He was such a great friend. “Thanks.”

“And you asked what my role is. What I do.” He took another step closer, and they were toe to toe.

He studied her and his voice dropped, wrapping comfort and peace around her as he spoke, “I’m *Kathigitis*. I’m your mentor.” He brushed her hair away from her face. “I have the task of keeping you safe, making sure you get good instruction, and it is my responsibility that you learn and progress.” His lips tilted upward, and he held her chin. “It’s a tough job, but someone has to do

it.”

Her gaze dropped to his lips, and her breath caught in her throat. Her thoughts muddled into a tangled mess. Part of her wanted to step toward him, to close the distance. To feel his lips on hers. But part of her wanted to run far, far away. Her heart pounded, but she couldn’t tell if it was in anticipation or fear.

She glanced up to his eyes and took a step back. “I’m sorry. I can’t.” Not yet. She blushed as she studied the fire; the flames danced and crackled. What was happening? The last time she’d felt this way . . . Her thoughts went to Athan and then recoiled.

Xan’s hand at the small of her back brought her to the present.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t even know what to say.” Their eyes met, his cool blues so different from her gold ones. She noticed the hints of creases, the lines of worry, etched into his forehead, and part of her wanted to brush them away.

She heard footsteps at the same time someone cleared their throat.

Hope went to step back, suddenly aware of the proximity between her body and Xan’s, but Xan’s hand, still at her waist, held her close. Too close.

“Am I interrupting?” Athan’s voice was light, and he stood in the doorway. His lean body looked thinner than she remembered, and his green shirt made his eyes bright, like they were lit from within. But he wasn’t smiling. No, his jaw was clenched, his gaze hard.

“Athan.” Xan turned to the other demigod, and his arm slid around Hope’s waist. “Welcome back.” The words were cold and hard.

Hope wanted to die. She wanted to run. She wanted to hit Xan. She wanted to hit Athan. The indecision overwhelmed her, and she stood stock-still. *Stupid, stupid, stupid. Say something. Anything.* But she couldn’t think of a single thing.

“Thanks, Xan.” Athan hadn’t taken his eyes from her. Then he smiled.
“What’s the matter, Hope? Cat got your tongue?”

The tension was a palpable force radiating between them.

“I, um . . .” She glanced at Xan and then again at Athan. What was he doing here? Why now? The strain was too much. “I’m sorry. I need to go.” She withdrew from Xan, and, without meeting Athan’s eyes, she fled the study.

What was that? She berated herself as she scurried to her room. For months she’d hoped he’d find her. Almost prayed for it. But now that he was here? The cat really did grab her tongue, and she acted ridiculous. Not that it should matter. She was furious with him. He was a liar. *Why was he here?*

She climbed the stairs, internally groaning with the weight of the questions inside her. Hope wasn’t sure if she wanted to cry or hit something.

“Uggghhh!” She threw her hands up and slumped into the wall.

“Goodness, girl. What’s that about?” Thenia’s voice came from behind.

Hope spun around, her face flushed. “Thenia! Sorry.” She exhaled. “I just . . .” What could she say? “Welcome back.”

“Thanks.” Thenia leaned forward and asked, “Any chance this is about Athan?”

Hope stepped away from the wall, closer to the smiling demigod. “You know he’s here?”

“Yeah. He came in about ten minutes after we got back. We were still unloading the car when he pulled up. He said he was looking for you. Did he find you?”

Hope snorted. “You could say that.”

“Oh good. Did you talk to him?”

“Uh, no.” Hope thought she might be sick. Just thinking about the two men in the study made her cringe. “Not really. I was in the study talking with

Xan when he came in.” How could she even explain her irrational behavior?

“Xan?” Thenia said, and her smile faltered. “Uh, were you talking or kissing?”

“What?” Hope blushed at the thought of how close they’d come. Had Athan seen that? “No. No kissing.” If it was possible, she blushed harder.

“Right, then. Well, still, that couldn’t have gone well.” Thenia pursed her lips.

“They really don’t like each other?” As soon as Hope said it, she knew. The tension that had filled the room was like a tidal wave. Weird. Because Xan was so nice to everyone. Well, except Endy, but he was a jerk.

“No. Not so much.” Thenia paused as if weighing her words. “Those two have a lot of history. You should be careful.” Her raised eyebrows were like an exclamation point that came too late.

Hope’s gaze flicked to the ceiling. “Great.” She met Thenia’s eyes. “You know, I think I’ll just go to my room. I’m done for tonight.” Hope couldn’t deal with one more thing. She took two steps and then turned back. “Thanks, Thenia. I’m glad you’re home.”

Thenia smoothed her expression, but her eyes remained focused and serious. “Sure,” she said. And then after a moment of hesitation, she added in a lowered voice, “Good luck.”

The weight with which she delivered her well wishes spoke volumes about the trouble Hope was in, and she grimaced. “Good night.”

But there was nothing good about it. Nothing.

As if Thenia could read thoughts, she responded, “‘Night, Hope.”

Hope went into the sparse guest room and closed the door behind her. She let out a long, slow exhale and leaned against the door.

“How long have you been at the conservatory?”

Hope yelped. Turning around, she noticed Athan sitting on the edge of the

bed.

“Sorry.” He was quickly at her side. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Then what the Hades are you doing in my room with the light off?” Hope flicked the light on and glared at him.

“Right.” He took a step back. “Sorry. I wanted to talk to you, and you left abruptly.”

Hope clenched her teeth. “Oh. Well then, it’s all okay. Come on in.” Sarcasm dripped with the words. “What do you need to say?”

Athan frowned. “What’s with the hostility? Did I do something to you?”

She sputtered in her attempt to say anything, but words formed and disappeared before she could get them out. Finally, she said, “I trusted you.” She knew she was being irrational, but all the pent-up emotion erupted, blasting into the air between them. “I don’t even know what to believe anymore.”

Athan reached his hand out to touch her face, but something in her expression made him hesitate before contact. He dropped his hand to his side. “I never lied to you, Hope.”

“Really?” She wanted it to be true, had been wanting to hear those words for so long. But how could she trust him? “Did you lie to Obelia?”

“Obelia?” He stepped back as if she’d delivered a physical blow. His faced fell, and pain etched into his features. “Yes,” he answered. “I lied to Obelia, but that was a long time ago, Hope. I admit I’ve screwed up a lot, but not with you.”

“Stop.” She couldn’t hear it. His words tore at her heart, and she choked back the tears. “It’s too late. Don’t even try to justify yourself now.” She took a deep breath. “I thought you said you hated lies and deceit more than anything. That’s what *you* told *me*.” She lowered her head, unable to even look at him. The pain she thought she’d battled and defeated roared back to

life, bringing a physical ache so strong it threatened to smother her. In a voice barely above a whisper she said, “You’re the biggest liar I’ve ever met. Please,” she pleaded, “please, get out.”

The silence extended and punctured fresh wounds, exacerbating the emotional bleeding of her heart.

She caught herself mid-sob and cleared her throat.

“Get out, Athan.” She choked on the next one and coughed over and over.

He reached out in protest, but his hand fell to his side as she pulled away.

“Okay, Hope.” His voice was filled with hurt. “If that’s what you want.” He stepped past her and opened the door. Without another word, he slipped through and closed it behind him.

Hope walked to her bed and threw herself on it. Her chest ached, racking sobs breaking through wave after wave. She cried for her loss, for the pain over the last year, for the unfairness of it all. She cried until she was exhausted, ’til there were no more tears left.

But even as evening disappeared into dusk, and dusk to night, she still didn’t have any answers.

TWENTY



THE MORNING LIGHT WAS MUTED, the overcast Seattle sky preventing any warmth or light of the sun from touching the area. A lot like her life.

Her emotions were still raw, but she was hungry. A quick glance at the clock told her it was late enough that the kitchen should be empty by now. Hope showered and dressed. Her stomach gave a loud growl, and she decided hunger took precedence over her pride. She slipped a pair of boots on and opened the door. The hall was quiet. Taking a deep breath, Hope made her way to the kitchen.

As soon as she walked in, she saw him. Xan sat at the kitchen table with a glass half-filled with water tilted to the side in his hand.

“I was wondering how long it would take you to come down this morning.” He worried the glass with his fingers, and his smile fell flat.

She stood in the doorway, her emotions warring. Uncertainty ate the words from her mind, and she said nothing. After a moment of uncomfortable silence, she crossed the kitchen to the fridge.

The tension in the air pulsed and contracted, taking on a life of its own.

“I’m sorry,” Xan said, and the tension popped. “I did it all arseways last night. I shouldn’t have put my arm around you, like that. I’m sorry.”

She met his gaze.

“It’s just . . .” Hope struggled, unsure even of what her feelings toward him were.

“No, you don’t owe me an explanation. You told me you weren’t ready. I wanted to apologize.” He stood up, took his glass to the sink, dumped the water, and then started for the door.

“Xan, wait.”

He came back to her, a spark of hope in his eyes.

“Are we”—Hope stumbled over the words—“still friends?”

Xan laughed, his dimple flashed, and his shoulders relaxed as if he’d dropped an invisible weight. “Hope, I like you. Clearly, I like you, so yes, we’re still friends. I’ll be your friend as long as you want me to be.”

She sighed with relief. She wasn’t sure she would’ve stayed if he’d said no. “I think I need . . .” She stopped and took a moment to reflect. Where she was used to insecurity filling her, a sense of confidence thumped in her chest. “You know, I don’t know what I need. But could we work out? I’d really like a good workout.” She needed to work through the rest of the frustration nagging at her. Somehow, she knew, punching would give her that release.

Xan’s relief lit his face. “Aye. Let’s go work up a sweat.”

Ten minutes later, the two walked off to the gym, the previous strain dissipated.

It was early evening before they called it quits. Both were wet with sweat, and Hope’s muscles were screaming from overuse. Her meager breakfast was long gone, and she was dying for a hearty meal.

“Hey, when do I get to go shopping? I’d do a lot right now for a good steak, or pot roast.” Her mouth watered with the thought. And it would feel great to get out of the conservatory.

“Not for a while. I can take you out next week though, if you’d like.”

The thought of going out with Xan filled her with warmth. “Yeah. I’d like that.”

He bumped her, shoulder to shoulder. “I think Dahlia went shopping yesterday, so there should be some fresh meat. Do you want to grill steaks?”

She was getting used to Xan’s constant touches, and she bumped him back. Steak sounded like the best thing in the entire world. “Mmm. Yes. I would sell my soul for a good steak.”

Xan chuckled. “Don’t sell your soul. Hades is brutal.”

As luck would have it, Dahlia had been in the kitchen with Obelia most of the afternoon, and they’d put together a feast. There were New York strips grilled to order, baked potatoes, grilled asparagus, creamed spinach, Caesar salad, and fresh baked bread. For dessert, the two had made a double chocolate cake with thick fudgy frosting, Tahitian vanilla crème brûlée, and caramelized poached pears with fresh goat cheese and candied pecans.

Hope gasped at the sight and smells of all the food. She grabbed a large dinner plate and filled it. Twice. But even with a full belly, she eyed the sweets. She grabbed a salad plate and served up a small helping of each dessert. The cake was dense and rich and not much to her liking, but the crème brûlée and pear were divine. She was silent while she ate, her focus on her plate of food. She was down to her last bite of the pear, the flavors melding in her mouth, when Xan interrupted.

“How can you stand to eat that?” Xan wrinkled his nose with disgust.

She couldn’t help it. She laughed so hard she almost spit pear pieces at him. She clamped her hand over her mouth and swallowed. But the laughter bubbled up out of her.

His laughter fed hers, and the two of them laughed hysterically. Tears streamed down Hope’s face. Dahlia gave them both a quizzical look, which only made them laugh harder.

Obelia rolled her eyes and muttered something to Dahlia.

Athan walked into the room, and with one glance, Hope's laughter dried up, and her stomach dropped. His gaze held her, and shame clawed through her for how she'd treated him last night. All he'd asked for was a chance to explain. And she'd refused him. Had it been premature? Doubt wiggled in her stomach.

"Hope?" Xan's voice pulled her back to the table.

She pulled her gaze from Athan and focused on Xan.

Xan followed her gaze to see what had drawn her attention. "Oh." His voice dropped. "You okay?"

"Yeah." She wanted it to be true more than she actually believed it. She watched as Athan crossed the kitchen and spoke with Obelia. The young woman's face lit with joy as she chatted happily with the son of Hermes.

"Are you done?" Hope was done watching, but she couldn't pull her eyes away. She needed to get out of there.

Xan laughed. "Yeah. I was done a long time ago. I've been waiting on you, piggy."

Was he being serious? She forced herself to look at Xan.

He smirked and shook his head. "I can't believe you can eat that much."

Hope collected her dishes and stood.

"Did you really call me a pig?" As she stacked the plates, she reconsidered her protest.

Xan laughed again. "Yep. Totally. I can only say it because there is not an ounce of fat on you, so you'd better not have a complex and get all twitted out on me." He grabbed one of her extra plates, and the two of them crossed over to the sink.

Hope forced herself to keep her gaze away from Athan and instead studied the plates she carried.

“And now you’re trying to act like I’m unreasonable? Do you want to pick a fight?” She pushed him, but her arms felt like jelly, and there was no force behind her shove. She giggled when he pretended to stumble forward. Whoops. Her gaze caught on Athan’s. His eyes were flinty, and he was practically baring his teeth.

“Ha! That’s funny,” Xan said, and he pushed her back. “I actually just finished handing you your arse.”

Her fatigued legs almost gave out, and she wobbled back upright.

“Did you almost fall?” Xan taunted. “Yeah, I beat you.”

Athan was at her side, holding her elbow.

“Don’t be an idiot, Xan,” he said, but his eyes never left hers. “You all right?” he whispered. He brushed his thumb over her arm in a tender caress.

Hope swallowed the lump at the back of her throat and nodded.

“She’s fine, Athan.” Xan grabbed her other elbow and pulled her away. “Leave her alone.”

Hope blushed. “No, it’s—”

“Irony company you’re choosing to keep, Hope.” Athan’s gaze hardened, and he took a step back. “Be careful. Xan’s not always reliable. Right?”

Xan’s ice blue eyes glittered, and he tightened his jaw. “Right.”

What the Kracken? The hostility between the two was stronger today, if that was even possible. She tugged Xan’s sleeve.

“Come on. Let’s go.” But she couldn’t help glancing back at Athan as they walked out the door.

Hurt was etched into his frown.

THE NEXT MORNING, HOPE trudged down the hall to the library after breakfast. Over eggs and bacon, Xan announced that they were going back to their regular study schedule, and now her morning would be spent with Obelia.

“No, really, Xan,” Hope protested. “You said yourself that she leaves out stuff. Isn’t there some way I can independently study this course?”

Xan laughed. “All your lessons are independent study. It’s not like you’ve even had a test yet.”

Hope said nothing.

“Are you sure you’re not just trying to avoid Obelia?” he continued, “I know she isn’t always the most pleasant person to be around—”

Grossest understatement ever. “Is she ever pleasant?”

Xan raised his eyebrows. “Why don’t you go to class now? You can be grumpy with me later. I’m sure we’ll find a way to work that off this afternoon.”

Hope left and was fuming to herself as she walked through the library door. She stopped as soon as she entered.

“Why does that matter?” Obelia asked. She stood inches away from Athan, her back to Hope.

“Please, Obelia?” Athan’s green eyes met Hope’s then. “Here she is now. I won’t keep you.” He reached out and touched Obelia on the arm.

Obelia glared at Hope, but her features morphed into something much sweeter when she turned back to Athan.

“I’ll see you at lunch?” She batted her lashes as she toyed with the edge of his shirt.

He smiled down at the petite demigod. It was the same tilt of his lips he’d given to everyone in Goldendale. Warm with no meaning.

“Of course, Obelia,” he answered, then he pulled away and started toward the door. As he passed Hope, he whispered something. He was out the door before Hope deciphered it.

“Study hard.”

Hope gritted her teeth. “What are we learning about today?” She crossed

the dark wood floor to the study tables, dragging her feet with dread.

Obelia shuffled through the folders. She pulled one and then another out of the stack and then extended them to Hope. “We were going to study Artemis, but let’s have you read up on some of the monsters.” She handed the folders to Hope. “I heard you had a run-in with one when you first got here,” Obelia said as she placed the folders in Hope’s hands.

The inquiry made her jaw drop. The girl had never asked anything about her before. Ever. “Yes, here in the library, actually. Briareus.”

“And you went with him for a book?” The sideways look spoke volumes. “Surely, you saw he was a monster?”

“Well, yeah, but I had assumed that if he was here in the conservatory, he was safe.” She bit back any further explanation. It wouldn’t do her any good. Obelia hated her.

Obelia’s hand went to her throat, and she took a deep breath. “Athan was right. You do need some education on monsters.” She pulled the bottom folder from Hope’s hands and placed it on top. “Start with the monsters. I’ll come back for you in a couple of hours.” Obelia crossed the room to leave.

That conversation was, by far, the most civil Hope had ever had with Hestia’s daughter. She took the folders and headed over to a table to read. Hope always thought she knew a lot about Greek mythology, but the information in this folder was different. It was astounding.

The Minotaur, a crazed half man and half bull, sent as a curse to Minos, the king of Crete. For sustenance, he consumed human flesh.

The Sirens, bird-women creatures created by Demeter (Demeter! She’d always thought she’d be one of the nice gods). Sirens were women cursed for their immorality, as if the gods didn’t sleep around. These cursed creatures sang a beautiful song, calling for the lost Persephone, but the song lured men to their death.

Argus, a hundred-eyed monster, cursed by Hera for infidelity. He was set to watch over Io to prevent Zeus's roving. When Argus was killed by the demigod Hercules, Hera put his eyes in the tail of the peacock. As if Hera had never been unfaithful. And then Hope realized she might be the only one who actually knew that. *Ugh. Gods and their secrets!*

The stories were depressing. The humans who'd offended the gods were then cursed to become monsters, half-breeds. In some cases, it was the human's offspring, as if an innocent child offended the gods by its very existence. And the monsters were offensive to both man and god. More often than not, their end was horribly tragic.

Her mood plummeted to despair as she read.

A few of the stories she was familiar with, but her mother had only given broad strokes of the story. Even in school, nothing had been this comprehensive. It was the details, the very details that made her sick. Not one monster, not a single one, had met with a happy ending. Why would Athan want to shove that in her face?

There was no hope. She laughed as she thought it. Her mom had always told her she had been aptly named, but she wasn't sure what there was to hope for.

"Did you find something funny?" Obelia stood over Hope, arms crossed over her chest.

"Not particularly. It was one of those laugh-so-you-don't-cry kinda things. It's really horrible and depressing." Hope indicated the folder she was reading from.

Obelia leaned on the desk, tapping the papers with her manicured nails. "They're monsters." She spoke slowly as if Hope were dim. "If they weren't created that way, they were changed because they were monsters inside. They either lack intelligence or character. They don't deserve your pity."

Hope was floored, and her temper flared. “Really? None of them were ever good? Do they not have any redeeming qualities?”

“Like Briareus?” Obelia’s sarcasm was punctuated by her raised eyebrows. “He was created to help, but the Titans refused to have anything to do with him. Zeus took pity on his kind and tried to let him be helpful, but Briareus is a monster. He betrayed those who would have saved him from Tartarus. Hopefully he’ll be thrown in the pit for a millennium. And he deserves it. You of all people should be glad for it.”

But Hope wasn’t. “Do you think, maybe, if they were treated with more respect—?”

“How can you respect a monster? They’re awful.” Obelia stood up, ending the conversation. “Why don’t we take a break for lunch? Take the folder. I’ll see you on Thursday.” With that, Obelia left again.

Hope flipped through the folder. Athan had given it to Obelia to give to Hope. Was he trying to tell her something? Was he trying to say she didn’t stand a chance?

Story after story, printed on white paper, stacked in the red folder, all stories that would discourage her from having any hope. A bright blue flashed from between the pages. Hope flipped back through, this time more slowly, until . . .

She pulled out the bright paper. *Monsters—histories, myths, legends, and fates. Look for volumes by the Moirai. There will only be a few. The rest are in the Underworld. Third row from the left, all the way in the back. Be brave.*
-A

What the—?

He was helping her. Why? She folded the paper and shoved it in her back pocket.

A glance told her what she already knew. No one else was in the library.

Time to do what she had come here to do.

Third row. All the way in the back. It took fifteen minutes to walk to the back of the library. The dust was thick on the heavy tomes filling the shelf. Most of the lettering was in Greek, and Hope searched for the familiar markings indicating curses. She pulled out book after book, until several small piles lay at her feet. Then she sat on the floor in the midst of her search.

She pulled the closest volume off the top of a pile and blew the dust from the spine. Gold lettering in Greek was embossed on the cover. She opened the book; etchings swam in front of her, and she blinked. With a snap, the writing solidified. Cassandra, Daphne, Castalia . . . Hope read story after story of these women who had rejected Apollo and were cursed for it. None had escaped.

She pulled another book down, and another, and another from the seemingly endless stack.

She found exactly nothing about the curse of the Sphinx. But each of these tomes were from the Moirai, so she knew they were accurate. But after hours of research, the only conclusion she had was that curses were fulfilled, not broken.

She refused to give up, but it was all she could take for today. One by one, she shoved the books back on the shelf and then stood. She took the blue paper and slid it between the books separating the ones she still needed to read. There were only five tomes left. Of course they were the biggest. And probably the most depressing.

Hope had skipped her afternoon workout to do research in the library. She trudged to her room, knowing she needed to get herself together. Artemis had told her to come to the conservatory for a reason. There was something here she needed to learn. And she refused to believe it was that her existence was hopeless.

She showered and dressed in jeans and a sweater. Ready for dinner, she crossed her room while mentally counting down the days until she'd change into the Sphinx. Ten. She had ten days before she would morph into the Sphinx. She steeled her heart. She'd have to leave for good this time. Whether she had an answer or not. She couldn't leave and come back without an explanation again. This was it. Nine more days.

She opened the door and heard yelling from downstairs. She took two steps before Athan was up the stairs, pushing Hope back into her room.

"Hey—"

"Shh!" He hissed and clapped his hand over her mouth, closing the door behind them. "You need to get out of here."

Her gaze narrowed, and she shook her head. She glanced down at his hand and gave it a tug. It didn't even budge.

He leaned into her, his lips grazing her ear as he whispered, "I'll take my hand off your mouth, but be quiet, okay?"

Her heart did a funny flip. How could he still affect her?

He pulled his hand away.

"What are you talking about?" she snapped. "Get out of my—"

His hand halted her speech. "They're here." He swallowed, and the vein in his neck jumped with his erratic pulse. His fear became a thick cloud surrounding them. "They're here, and they're hunting you."

Apollo's sons. Her mind raced. Should she leave? She thought about the five volumes left in the library.

"I'm not leaving," she murmured. Her resolve pushed the fear away. "I'm too close. I need to go through those volumes, and this is my only chance."

Athan inched closer, his eyes begging.

"I can do it. If they find out what you are . . ." He didn't need to finish the thought. They both knew.

“I’ll make sure they don’t.” She forced herself to say it with confidence she didn’t feel.

His shoulders sagged. “Why won’t you let me help?”

How much could she tell him? Did she trust him? He hadn’t told her secret yet. “I only know that I need information in the library. That’s all I have to go on.”

“Okay.” He sounded defeated, but when his eyes met hers, green flame blazed within. “Be careful of Xan. He’s not the good guy you think he is.”

“Why would you say that?” Hope frowned. “Are you jealous?” Boys were stupid.

A familiar smirk blossomed over his face. “Should I be?”

She hated that he could read her.

“Maybe.” She dropped the word like a hot pan.

“Not hardly,” he said, but his haunted eyes contradicted the words. “Well, let’s go down, and I’ll introduce you to more of your enemies.”

Hope took a deep breath and nodded. She opened the door and saw Xan coming up the stairs.

“Holy Hades,” she swore and stepped back into Athan. She shoved him back in the room and closed the door.

“What are you—?”

“Hope?” Xan said her name as he knocked on the door.

Athan rolled his eyes and offered her another smirk.

She did not need this right now.

“Just a sec, Xan.” She briefly contemplated her sparse room, but there was nowhere for Athan to hide. She grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him into the bathroom. “Stay here until we get down the stairs. Then you can come out.”

He leaned in, closing the distance between them.

“Are you trying to hide me from your boyfriend?” he whispered in her ear, his lips tickling her skin.

Her heart jumped at his nearness. That was not fair.

“Don’t be a jerk.” She couldn’t put her finger on why this was important, only that she didn’t want Xan to know Athan was in her room. She looked up into his green eyes, and her heart thudded with anticipation and wanting.

“Please?” she breathed.

His smile turned to a grimace. “Fine.” He gritted his teeth. “Fine.”

But it wasn’t fine, and worse, she didn’t know how to fix it. She didn’t know how to fix anything. There was another knock from Xan, and without another word, Hope left Athan in the bathroom.

She pulled open the bedroom door. “What’s up?”

Xan’s eyes lit up, and he tried to step into her room.

But Hope wasn’t about to let that happen.

“I’m starving. Let’s go down for dinner.” She pushed him out into the hall and closed the door behind her.

“Before you go down there, there’s something I need to tell you.” He pulled her to a stop and levelled her with his somber expression.

Hope gave him her full attention, trying to pretend she didn’t already know. Trying to pretend she wasn’t scared. Trying to pretend Athan wasn’t hiding in her room. But even with her preoccupation, the furrow on Xan’s brow and the strained tendons of his neck told of the tension he was struggling to contain.

“Are you okay?” He reached up as if to touch her face, but she flinched, and he dropped his arm with a frown.

“I’m fine.” Her heart raced, and she licked her lips. Her gaze darted down the hall. “What’s up?”

“Ty and his brothers are here.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Don’t go

anywhere with any of them. No matter what, all right?”

“Okay.” She had no intention of going anywhere with them. Ever.

“All right.” He let out a long exhale. “Where were you this afternoon? You missed our workout.”

“Uh, I was reading. In the library.”

“Really? I couldn’t find you anywhere.”

What was with the twenty questions today?

“Yeah. All the way in the back. Sorry. Should I have let you know?” Was she supposed to tell him everything? He wasn’t the boss of her. The thought crossed her mind, and then guilt followed. She pointed down the stairs, and they headed toward the kitchen.

Xan thumped his fist against the wall with every step. “No worries. It was probably better. Ty and Prax came in talking about killing a monster and going after some demigod. Better you didn’t have to listen to them.”

She recognized them as soon as she walked into the kitchen. These were the three blond boys she’d seen in Goldendale before she moved, and then again when she’d gone to visit Haley. One of them was supposed to be in her grade at school. But none of these men were seventeen.

“Hey, hey, hey!” The tallest one shoved another away from him and sauntered up to her. “Who are you?” His gaze traveled from her head to her ankles and back up again. To his credit, he didn’t focus on her chest.

“Hope.” She extended her hand.

His grip was firm, and he squeezed more than was courteous. Hope clenched her jaw and squeezed back.

“Whoa! You’re not a pussy, eh? Good. Good. Prax, Ty, come meet your cousin. Or should I say aunt?”

Hope shrugged as if the question meant nothing to her. As if they meant nothing to her. But her stomach was rock hard, and images of her aunt’s

terror flashed in her mind.

Two additional tall, blond young men came over and sized her up.

“She’s awful thin. You sure she can fight?” This one had a blond patch of hair below his lower lip and two piercings on his right eyebrow. He was built like a tank. He leaned forward and pushed her with two fingers.

Anger rooted her to the floor, and she braced herself. “I can fight just fine.”

He lifted his chin to the taller brother then extended his hand. “I’m Ty. That’s Tre, and that’s Prax. You’re Leto’s daughter, huh?”

“I am.” It didn’t matter if she was scared, only that they didn’t know it. She stood tall.

“Never knew she had a daughter.” He said it like if he didn’t know, then maybe it wasn’t true.

“I didn’t know she had to tell you.” She knew this kind of person, and Hope refused to be bullied.

The one named Prax laughed. “This one has fire, she does.”

He smirked, and his eyes lit with humor. Maybe he wouldn’t be so bad.

“Stay out of our way, and you’ll be fine, Aunt.” Ty said aunt like ant.

“Hey,” Xan said and stepped forward as if to challenge the hulking boy-man.

Ty was a jerk.

“Right,” Hope said, cutting Xan off. “Then you best stay out of my way too, Nephew.” She hoped the best defense would be a strong offense, but she couldn’t help the shiver of fear running down her spine. Were these the demigods that tortured Priska? It seemed very possible.

Athan walked through the door, and an awkward silence descended. He gave Xan a brief nod, but his attention skimmed right past Hope.

Hope brushed past the boys and over to the counter. It was only then that

she realized she was the only girl in the room. “Hey, where’s Dahlia?”

While she wouldn’t say she was close to Dahlia like she’d been with Haley, the daughter of Eris was the closest thing she had to a girlfriend.

He frowned. “She and Thenia took Obelia and Kaia shopping.”

All the women gone? These guys were big trouble if even Dahlia didn’t stick around.

“Well, let’s have some dinner,” Ty said with a sneer. “Little Aunt, what are we having? What are you making for us?”

Hope studied each of the men in the room. Ty, Tre, and Endy all issued challenges with their eyes. Prax looked aloof. Both Xan and Athan appeared tense.

“She’s not your servant, Ty.” Xan pushed past him and put his arm around Hope’s shoulders. “So don’t be an arse.”

“Oh. It’s like that, then?” Ty smirked. “Well, I’m going out to get something to eat. Prax, Tre, you coming?” He glanced to his brothers.

Endy stood, hope shining in his eyes.

“Oh, very well. You can come too, little brother.” Ty sounded like he was throwing scraps to an annoying dog.

The four blond boys left the kitchen. The very walls seemed to sigh with relief.

Hope would need to be very, very careful.

TWENTY ONE



THERE WAS A TAP ON HER DOOR.

“Are you ready to go?” Xan asked.

“Yeah, just need to put my boots on,” Hope hollered back as she zipped up the knee-high black leather biker boots. They were steel-toed, which wouldn’t make a difference with Skia, but it made her feel tougher all the same.

“If you have immortal weapons from your mom, you should bring them.”

That was the other reason she wore the boots. Each had a sheath, made specifically for her mismatched pair of blades. The immortal weapons were hers now, but her grandmother had taken them from other demigods. They were from her mom, but not the way Xan meant it. She’d kept the blades hidden in her room since being at the conservatory, but after Endy’s not-so-veiled threat, she’d started wearing the blades in her boots.

Hope pulled open the door. “Ready.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

They walked down to the kitchen together.

Xan and Thenia made the assignments. They would break into groups of four. One group would go to the market and the other to the warehouse store

to stock up. The three sons of Apollo had left on a tip about the monster they were hunting. Hope wasn't sure if Athan had thrown them the false information or if they'd gotten lucky, but she was glad to have them gone. Too bad they wouldn't take Endy with them.

"Each of you has a buddy, and you stick to your buddy like glue." Xan looked pointedly at each of them. "Consider it a lesson in teamwork."

"Endy and Athan. Thenia and Dahlia. Hope and Obelia—"

Obelia? Hope's hand went up.

"No way," Obelia protested.

Xan flinched, and his lips flattened. "Don't argue with me, Obelia. You can do something different when you make the assignments."

"Which happens never," she muttered.

Hope dropped her hand. Why would Xan put her with Obelia?

"All right, people. Let's go."

Hope hurried to catch up to him. "What the—?"

"I know what you're going to say." His jaw was set, but his eyes pled for understanding. "It's not what you think."

Hope crossed her arms and tapped her foot.

Xan squared his shoulders. "You're a good fighter. Probably better than Dahlia now. But don't tell her I said that." He scanned the kitchen, but the other demigods had gone out to the garage. "I always pair my good fighters with the ones that suck. It gives everyone an even chance."

Of course Obelia sucked, but . . . "What about Thenia?"

"Yeah." He ran a hand through his hair. "She's great at strategy, but she sucks. And she always goes with Dahl. Sorry, luv."

"Fine." Not really, but there was nothing she could do about it.

They walked into the garage, and Hope stopped. Obelia and Endy sat in the back of a black sedan. Together. Which could only mean . . .

“Get in, Hope. We’re waiting on you,” Athan said. He slid into the driver’s seat and closed the door.

Anxiety churned her stomach, but she crossed to the car to get in.

WANDERING PIKE PLACE MARKET in awkward silence was awful. During the drive, Obelia kept trying to get Athan to talk to her, but he returned only monosyllabic responses, and by the time they parked she was seething silently. For whatever reason, Endy was as withdrawn as Hope, so for almost two hours the only conversations were between Athan and the vendors.

“Here you are, young man,” the Asian man held out a white grocery bag filled with apples.

Athan exchanged cash for the bag and extended it to Hope. “Can you carry one more bag?”

She rolled her eyes. She held a bag of oranges and another filled with herbs in one hand and bags of potatoes and carrots in the other.

“Sure.” She reached out and grabbed the apples.

“How much longer are we going to be?” Endy asked, shifting from foot to foot, his hands conspicuously empty.

Athan gritted his teeth. “Only a couple more things on the list, then we can go.”

It wouldn’t take much momentum to swing the bags and hit Apollo’s son. Hope contemplated smacking him, and a deep sense of satisfaction came with the thought. Was there a way to make it look like an accident?

“This is boring,” Endy huffed. “Whatever. I’m going to go get donuts.” He stalked off.

Hope’s mouth gaped. What in the name of Olympus was he thinking? The moment of shock was all it took for him to be swallowed by the crowd.

“How many Skia have you seen?” Athan asked Obelia.

“I don’t know. Maybe one?” Obelia’s wide eyes scanned the crowd.

Hope wanted to tell her it was too late to start now.

Athan turned to Hope. “How many?”

“At least five, but all alone and in shadows.” And none that she recognized. If Skia worked together, the demigods wouldn’t stand a chance.

He ground his teeth and pointed at the street. “Go out in the sun. I’ll go get Endy.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to stay together?” Hope asked, but by the time the words were out, she was talking to Obelia. Athan had dodged into the crowd and disappeared.

Obelia held up her hands, revealing several bags in each. At some point, she’d gotten saddled with Endy’s share. Between the two of them, they had all the bags. Of course.

Hope shook her head. “Come on.”

She stepped into the waves of people who would carry her to a break in the tents.

“You don’t have to be rude,” Obelia said following close.

Hope frowned. “I wasn’t being rude.”

“Not to me. To Athan. It wasn’t his fault, you know.”

What? Hope turned around, but the demigod was fixated on the ground and refused to meet Hope’s eyes. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Hope stopped as she recognized the surroundings. They were by the artesian stalls where she and her mom had bought scarves. Was that only a year ago? It seemed like so much longer—

“Sure you do,” Obelia said, her voice drawing Hope’s attention back to her. “It’s not like he can say no—*Skata!*” Obelia’s eyes dilated, and she dropped her bags. Tomatoes and onions spilled onto the ground, rolling underfoot of the pedestrians.

“What’s the . . .” Hope knelt to try to rescue the produce, and she saw them.

Two Skia stepped from the shadows behind a table laden with jewelry, their black eyes and tell-tale leer startlingly frightful.

“Go. Go!” Hope yelled. If they could get out on the street, maybe . . .

But Hestia’s daughter stood rooted.

Time meant nothing.

Hope pushed Obelia with her shoulder, but the smaller demigod only stumbled to the ground. Dropping her bags, Hope grabbed Obelia’s arm and yanked her upright. “We need to go, now!”

Hope shoved through the throng, closing the distance to the gap that would lead them outside. She glanced behind her. They weren’t going to make it. The Skia were right behind them.

“Go.” Hope ushered Obelia toward the opening with one hand and, with the other, pulled her knives from her boots.

“Skia!” Hope shouted in an attempt to draw the creatures’ attention to her.

“She’s got a knife!” a vendor yelled.

Several took up the alarm. “Skia!”

Screaming began in earnest, and the pedestrians pushed to get away. Mayhem ensued, and Hope stood, blocking the exit to the street. The two shadow-demons leered at her as they drew closer. What was left of the crowd dissolved into the periphery until her world consisted of her and the Skia.

“Don’t think we’re after you, monster,” one rasped. “We want the demigod.”

“Over my dead body,” Hope replied, holding out her immortal blades.

“Little monster, you don’t know what you mean. She would kill you if she knew what you are.”

It didn’t matter that he’d spoken the truth. Hope skirted to the side,

effectively putting one Skia in front of the other, and then she lunged. The Skia in front jumped out of her way, and she caught the one behind it unprepared. Her blades sliced across his abdomen, and she followed the knifing with a kick, effectively pushing him back.

“Stop now.” A cold blade rested at her throat.

He had baited her, and she’d fallen for it!

“Why do you fight for the demigods?” The stench of decay on his breath carried over her shoulder, making her eyes water.

“I need answers.” She clenched her blades, weighing her options.

“And you think they have them.” He breathed on her neck. “You smell so alive, and not altogether monster . . .”

He was smelling her? *Gross!*

She gritted her teeth and pushed closer to the Skia. His hand relaxed, his blade dipping. She dropped one of her knives and grabbed his wrist, pushing his hand down away from her neck, away from her chest. She doubled over, and with the other hand she shoved her blade back to deliver a death strike.

The blade never struck.

The Skia were gone.

She bent, retrieved her blades, and then slid them into her boots.

“Oh my gods!” A woman rushed to her side. “Are you okay? Did you fight them? You must have—”

“I’m fine.” Hope pushed away, but a crowd materialized around her, and she bumped into someone else.

“You all right there, demigod? You must have put up quite a fight.”

She ignored the chattering voices and made her way outside.

Obelia stood in the sun, her eyes wide. “You’re alive.”

Hope nodded and glanced at the shadows, but something in her gut told her they wouldn’t be coming after her again. If the Skia were sent to kill her,

the one could have done it when his blade was at her throat. What was going on?

“Well, nice.” Obelia scowled.

“What?”

Obelia pointed behind Hope at the growing crowd. “It looks like—”

“Excuse me, could I get your autograph?” A young man pushed between the two immortals and addressed Hope. “I can’t believe that you’re a—”

“Are you really a demigod?” a woman shouted above the din.

“Hey, demigod! Who’s your momma?”

“Demigod, come here!”

The voices clamored.

Hope grabbed Obelia’s arm and pushed toward the donut stall. “It looks like what?”

Obelia glared daggers.

“You’ve got a fan club,” she finished as Athan and Endy crossed the cobblestone street.

“What in the name of Hades . . .” Athan regarded the two girls then at the growing mob following them. His nostrils flared, and he glared at the crowd. “Get in the car.” He ducked his head.

“But the food—”

“No time to worry about that. You’ve exposed us.”

Dozens of people crowded the street, phones out, likely snapping pictures. With a swallow, she tucked her chin to her chest, her hair falling like a curtain on either side of her face. She ran to catch up to the others.

THEY PULLED INTO THE GARAGE, and Athan put his hand on Hope’s knee.

“Stay a moment?” he implored, his voice melodic.

Hope remained in her seat, even though every muscle in her body begged

to run.

Endy exited as if the vehicle would explode any moment, and he slammed the door shut so hard the entire car shook.

“Athan?” Obelia fidgeted in the back. “When you’re done, will you come find me, please? I really—”

He shifted and faced the demigod. “Of course ’Belia,” he said. “You can wait in my room if you want.”

Hope’s heart stopped.

“Thanks.” Obelia left.

In his room?

“What in the name of *Every. Single. God*. Do you think you were doing? You could’ve gotten killed!” He glared at her.

Was he *kidding*?

“What was I supposed to do? Nothing?” She swallowed back something green and ugly.

He flinched. “Hades, no. Why would you say that? It’s just . . . I can’t believe you didn’t run. Why didn’t you run?”

“And leave your precious ’Belia?” She pursed her lips. “If I didn’t do anything, they would have gotten her.” And then what conversation would they be having?

Athan ran his hand through his hair. His woodsy scent filled the small car. “Don’t you get it?”

“No, Athan, I don’t get it.” She pushed back the tears, putting the heels of her hands over her eyes. “Don’t act like you care. I can’t take it. I don’t know what game you’re playing at, but—”

Athan covered her mouth with his hand, his rough skin chaffing her lips.

The contact was electric, and Hope’s hands fell to her side.

“Don’t put words or motivations on me,” he said as he withdrew from her.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. I get that you don’t want my help, and that’s fine. But don’t judge me.”

Before she could formulate a coherent thought, Athan was outside the car and closing the door.

Hope dropped her head into her hands, her emotions a tangled mess. His scent lingered in the car, and she sat back, breathing it in. Gods, she was such a mess.

She heard a door slam, then someone yelling. With a deep breath, she opened the door.

“—but everyone is okay,” Athan was saying when she got into the kitchen.

Hope closed the kitchen door, and both Athan and Xan stopped, their focus aimed at her. The two young men stood inches from each other; their anger roiled through the room.

“Hope, thank gods.” Xan crossed the kitchen and pulled her into a hug. He sighed into her hair. “I can’t leave you alone for one afternoon without trouble finding you.” He brushed his hand down her back.

Hope peeked over Xan’s shoulder where Athan glared at them.

“I’m fine.” She pulled away.

“What happened?” Xan led her to the table and sat, pointing at the chair next to him.

Hope remained standing. Athan stared at her, and she shifted from foot to foot. Part of her wanted to hug him, to have him hug her. But whatever this was going on between them wouldn’t even let her get near.

“Did you kill them?” Athan asked. “Did your immortal blades pierce their hearts?”

Xan’s gaze went from Athan to Hope. “You have immortal blades?” His face relaxed. “A great fighter and blades. I won’t worry so much.”

“No. I didn’t get their hearts.” She hated to admit it. Somehow it felt like failure.

Athan frowned.

“But you sent them back to Hades, anyway,” Xan continued. “That’s awesome that you have your mom’s blades. I didn’t even know Leto had blades.” He smiled like she’d won the lottery.

“Yeah, good thing,” Athan said, his tone flat.

But it didn’t feel like a good thing. Hope scowled at him. If he were any closer, she’d hit him. “Why are you being such a jerk?”

Xan crossed the floor in a blur. “You know, Athan, if anything, you should be singing her praises right now. If Hope hadn’t saved Obelia, you’d be sitting at a tribunal for your disregard of the rules. Don’t be an arse. Thank her.”

The color seemed to drain from Athan’s face.

“You’re right.” He faced Hope. “Thank you.”

And then he left.

A tribunal? What the Hades was that? Hope looked at the empty doorway, then at Xan, and then back to the doorway. Why was everything such a mess?

“Hey, come talk to me,” Xan said, touching her shoulder.

Fear clenched her heart, and she brushed off his hand. “Not now. I need a minute.”

She fled to her room.

TWENTY TWO



HOPE DID HER BEST to avoid everyone. She got up early with the intent to spend the day in the back of the library. She spent hour after hour reading the pages of the dusty tomes. For whatever reason, she was able to read the writings of the Moirai, or at least these. What had Dahlia said, something about only the pure? That had to be a mistake.

Hope finished another book about Apollo's curses, this one about the men and women who had refused him and had somehow gotten turned into plants. She hadn't realized there were so many. And who would want to be a tree? She almost laughed at herself. Who would want to be a Sphinx?

By halfway through the day, she was lonely. Lonely and bored. Somehow, she was no longer used to solitude, and she took the next book and went to find a comfortable chair.

A few hours later, Xan came into the study and stood in front of her. "Here you are."

Hope was curled up in front of a crackling fire. She marked the page and then set the book facedown.

"Hey, Xan." Hope had spent the last several days making herself scarce. The amount of tension between the demigods gave her anxiety, and she

seemed to be stepping in the middle of something every time she moved. But seeing Xan alone in the study seemed like old times, and she smiled up at him. “How was your day?”

He frowned. “Fine. I wanted to let you know we’re going out of town.”

She sat up. “Who’s going out of town?”

He perched on the arm of the chair. “Me and Thenia and those bloody sons of Apollo.” His face screwed up as if he’d tasted something bad. “Might as well get them out of your hair for a bit.”

“Why? Where?”

He laughed, but it sounded forced. “It almost sounds like you’ll miss me.”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course I’ll miss you. Why would you even say that?”

He snorted and looked away from her. “We’ve got to go to Florida. It’ll be another short trip. You’ll hardly notice I’m gone with all your reading.”

“Can’t I come?” She didn’t want to stay with Athan. His personality was giving her emotional whiplash.

“If you hadn’t exposed yourself as a demigod last week, I’d take you. Seriously, your picture is *everywhere*.” He rubbed his forehead. “Anyway, there’ve been reports of Scylla being off the coast. Thenia and I are going to assess the situation and try to contain her. Then we’ll move her back to the Ionian Sea.”

She thought about the Mer people and their run-in with Poseidon. “Is it dangerous?”

He blew out a loud breath. “Poseidon doesn’t get as worked up about the monsters. One way or another, we’ll make her get back.”

“That sounds an awful lot like a . . .” *Threat*. He’d said it so casually. Like it didn’t even matter.

Hope remembered reading about the beautiful nymph, Scylla, who had

become a victim to Circe's jealousy. Glaucus, a mortal fisherman had discovered an herb that could bring dead fish back to life. Curious, he'd decided to try it himself. The herb had made him immortal, but his lower half had changed such that he became the first merman. Glaucus fell in love with Scylla, but she'd been repulsed by his fish features. Because he was a monster.

But Glaucus had been determined and he'd asked Circe, the goddess of magic and witchcraft, to give him a potion to make Scylla fall in love with him. Unfortunately for all of them, Circe had fallen in love with Glaucus. When Circe had tried to woo Glaucus, he denied her. In her anger, Circe poisoned the water where Scylla bathed. The beautiful woman was transformed into a six-headed monster with tentacles from the waist down. Scylla fed on the flesh of sailors that got too close to her, and she historically inhabited one side of the Strait of Messina. Charybdis—another cursed monster—inhabited the other side.

"Don't sound shocked. She's caused a triangle of destruction, and boats and planes are disappearing like crazy."

It wasn't Scylla's fault. If you were cursed to be a monster, didn't something in your nature change? Hope thought about her grandmother strangling men outside of Thebes. That had nothing to do with her being a monster and everything to do with going crazy with grief.

"Sometimes you have to weigh out the options of doing something you don't like with doing nothing. Sometimes all the options suck." He shrugged. "That's the way it goes. We'll go see what we need to do and take it from there."

"How long will you be gone?"

"You are going to miss me." His whole face lit up.

Hope rolled her eyes. "Why does it have to be you? Why can't Dahlia

go?”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but she’s a bit of a hothead.” He chuckled. “Besides, she doesn’t work as well with Thenia. No one can assess situations like Thenia, and despite what Ty or Athan might say, my intent isn’t to destroy Scylla if I don’t have to.”

Whoa. Destroy her? Something about his words made her uneasy. But she knew him. He didn’t hate all monsters. He wasn’t a vicious killer. “I wish—”

“You’ll miss our lessons, right?” His dimple flashed.

He was teasing. And it shouldn’t matter that much, but her eyes welled with tears. Nothing was going right. She couldn’t find the information about the curse. She missed her relationship with Athan. She could feel her relationship with Xan shifting, and she didn’t know how to freeze it where it was. She dropped her head, knowing if she met his eyes, she’d be sobbing. And when had she become such a crybaby? She sniffed.

And then Xan wrapped her in a hug.

“Hey, really, don’t be upset,” he spoke into her hair. “I promise we’ll only be gone a few days. I’ll call you every day and make sure Dahlia is giving you a good workout. It’ll almost be like I’m still here.”

His nearness sent her heart rate into overdrive.

“I’ll be fine. I don’t know why I’m throwing such a fit.” She laughed apologetically and tried to pull away.

Xan kissed the top of her head and released her.

A flush crept across her cheeks, and she couldn’t bring herself to meet his gaze.

“It’ll be good to have the three amigos gone, too.” And maybe she could sort out her feelings for Xan. Feelings she didn’t even want to admit were there.

He grimaced. “I really hate those guys.” He gritted his teeth and stared at

the wall for a moment before returning his gaze to her. “Well, I’m glad you’ll miss me at least.”

Hope moved to punch him in the arm, but he deftly blocked the strike, grabbed her wrist, and pulled her toward him. “Don’t throw a punch at the demigod of war unless you want to fight. You want to fight, little girl?”

She laughed. “No, sir. Not tonight. I’ll save it for when you get back. Maybe Dahlia can show me some moves so I can beat you.”

“Don’t count on it. Who do you think trained her?” Xan pointed to his chest.

“Bummer.”

“Yeah. But it’ll be good for you to practice with someone else. Dahlia has a different style of movement. You can learn from her.”

Xan sat down in one of the overstuffed chairs. Hope pulled the other next to his and then sat.

“I have to say, Hope, you have the makings of a great fighter. If you didn’t let your compassion get in the way, you’d be lethal.” He frowned at the fire for a moment before continuing, “Probably good you have such a conscience, though. You won’t have to learn some things the hard way.”

“Oh? Like what?”

“Have you ever killed someone?”

She shook her head as she inched forward. “Are you speaking from experience?” The idea was ridiculous. Sure, Xan rarely spoke of his past. Only hints here and there. But he was so *nice*. And yet . . . Athan clearly didn’t like him. And she remembered how biting Xan was when she’d first met him. She’d thought he was a jerk. And she still had no idea why Xan and Athan’s supposed friendship blew up.

Xan stared into the fire, and his voice was quiet when he spoke, “Having Ares for a father, life was a bit tumultuous, especially in the beginning. He is

a very *aggressive* individual. He has definite opinions and thought things in our “home” should be to his liking—him being a god and all. Not many people will tell a god no, and even fewer will stand up to Ares. It’s probably what attracted him to my mom.”

He was quiet, and Hope knew there was lots he wasn’t sharing.

“When things got bad, she threatened to go to Aphrodite, Themis, Dike, or any other god or goddess that could or would intervene. That’s when he left. When me mum died, I grieved in a horrible way. I think there was a time that I was like a monster. I’m sure it was terrible to behold. Then I became destructive in another way, more self-destructive. But even then, my choices affected more than just me. Eventually, I hit bottom and had to make a decision.

“I made peace with my father and with who I am. Now, I mostly like myself. Although, not everyone else does.” He studied her face. “But, that’s part of being true to yourself. Even when someone else doesn’t approve, you have to be true”—he reached out and briefly put two fingers on her chest —“here.”

Hope nodded.

Xan stood up. “I’ve got to go pack, but I’ll see you in the morning. Thenia and I don’t leave until noon. If you want, we can have breakfast.”

“Yeah. I’d like that.”

He bent over and tapped her chin with his fist. “Don’t let life get you down, luv. Chin up.”

She ducked her head and blushed from his touch, then again with his words. And she thought Athan was a sweet talker. “All right. Go pack already.”

Xan waved from the doorway and then left.

Hope leaned back in her chair. There was a lot Xan wasn’t telling her, a

lot that made him what he was, but it was almost like he didn't want to be defined by the past. Maybe that was what drew her to him. Because more than anything, she didn't want to be defined by a curse.

Despite being hurt by what Athan had done—what she now knew was manipulation and lies—she wanted him to apologize. She wanted him to tell her he'd been sincere and that he really liked her. But even if that were true, then what? It wasn't like they would live happily ever after.

And why was he here? He was all nice and chummy with her one minute, then hostile and withdrawn the next. If he was going to stay at the conservatory, would he also be giving her lessons? Should she ask? Would it even matter? She hated to ask for help, and she was going to leave in a week. Questions circled her brain.

She unwound herself from the chair, grabbed her book, and headed upstairs. She'd ask Thenia. After all, the demigod daughter of Athena had offered to talk, right?

Hope knocked softly on the dark door.

"Come in." Thenia's voice came through the thick wood muffled and distant.

Hope poked her head in and swallowed her pride. "Hey. Would you mind talking while you pack?"

Thenia waved her in. "Not at all."

Hope walked into the room, taking it in as she did so. The room was spacious, but inviting and warm. A large, thick carpet covered most of the dark wood floor, and a large bed with rich brown leather upholstery was pushed up against the wall. The bedding was a soft cream that begged to be touched, and there was an upholstered daybed with matching cream pillows. The lighting was muted, and the coals of a recent fire still glowed in the fireplace.

Hope sat down on the daybed. “Do you need any help?”

Thenia laughed. “No, not really. I’m never sure what to bring on these trips. I won’t know what I need until we get there, so I take some basics, and then I almost never use anything I take anyway.” She shoved a couple of books and some clothes into a bag. “We’ll make do. We always do.”

“You’ve done this before?”

Thenia gave her a half smile. “Once or twice a year. Life creates chaos and havoc. When it’s immortal, it’s our job to take care of it.”

“Is it always a monster?” Hope had a sinking feeling.

“No, in fact, usually not. Rogue Skia cause a lot of problems, and sometimes it’s a demigod that’s being destructive. Occasionally, like now, it’s a monster that escapes its binding and makes a mess.” Thenia walked into the bathroom.

“Oh.” But since she’d been there, it had only been the Mer people and now Scylla. Except . . . “Is that what you were doing in California?”

Thenia poked her head out. “Two Skia that were killing humans. We sent them back to Hades.”

“You don’t always hunt Skia?”

Thenia cleared her throat. “Skia are supposed to be about balance, but I’m guessing that isn’t what you wanted to talk about.” She ducked back into the bathroom and came out minutes later with a bunch of toiletries in a bag. She stopped inside the doorway and gave Hope a pointed look. “You wanted to talk about Skia?”

Hope took a deep breath. “No, I wanted to ask about Athan.” She paused, unsure of how to start.

“What about him?” Thenia put the toiletries into her suitcase then eyed the room as if assessing what else to take.

“Um, does he usually come for a visit? Is he going to stay long? Will he

be teaching me? Why is he here?" Hope asked all her questions in a rush, making sure she didn't chicken out of any of them.

Thenia walked over to her nightstand and grabbed a book and highlighter. She paused at the writing desk and pulled some gold coins from a drawer. She put the coins in a leather satchel and deposited all of this into her bag. She then turned to Hope.

"Athan hasn't come to the conservatory for a visit in as long as I've been here. I have no idea how long he's planning to stay or if he is going to teach, but thus far he hasn't said anything to me about it. Usually curriculum goes through me, but as a demigod, and a senior one at that, he really doesn't have to ask permission. He can do whatever he wants. As for why he's here, I can only guess. But I don't want to give you false expectations." She came over and sat on the daybed next to Hope. "Why don't you ask him yourself?"

Hope fell back on the bed then propped herself up on her elbows. "I don't know what to say."

"You did pretty well just now." Thenia patted Hope on the knee. "You're going to get the most direct answer from him."

Hope chewed on her lip as her heart raced with trepidation. "Can I trust him?"

"I don't know. I've always trusted him, and he's never given me a reason not to. Although, I admit my interactions with him have been limited. Do you know if he lied to you, Hope?"

Hope's stomach was tied up in knots. Literally. Big sailor knots, and the thought of talking with Athan created more knots. "I don't know if he was lying. He never said he was, but it's not like he's going to say 'I'm lying to you' either." Hope's thoughts went to what she'd learned in the Olympian Library. "And he lied to Obelia."

Thenia frowned. "I know she was deceived, and I've heard her side of the

story, but I've never heard his, so I can't really say where his head was then."

"And you said there were other demigods? Other girls . . .?" Hope left it hanging.

Thenia collapsed next to Hope. "Yes. There were others with similar stories to Obelia's. I thought about this more after our conversation last week. There haven't been any of these stories in the last few years, Hope. The only demigod Athan's brought to this conservatory in the last two years was Panos, Hephaestus's son. And I heard he brought a girl named Chelli to a small conservatory in Eastern Washington last year." The demigod's eyes went to the ceiling momentarily and then back to Hope's. "It was about eight or nine months ago, if my math is right. Oh, and there was a girl, a daughter of Demeter's around the same time as Panos. Narella was her name. I never spoke to Chelli, but I saw Narella in L.A. She's a pretty happy person."

"But you don't *know*." Hope was trying to process this information. Part of her wanted to believe there was a possibility.

"Hope." Thenia threw her hands up. "You need to talk with Athan. Get it out. Then you can decide."

Hope deflated. Thenia was right. "Sorry."

"Don't be. I'm happy to listen, to help you find answers and wisdom. But in this case, the best advice I can give you is to address the issue head-on."

"I'm—"

"Scared?"

"No." As soon as Hope said it, she knew it was a lie. "Well, maybe, yes. I mean what if . . ." She played with the satin edge of the pillows.

"You'll never know until you talk to him. You have the next few days when your studies will be a little more lax. Take the opportunity to seek him out and ask him. Then you can deal with whatever it is. But right now, you're fretting about the unknown. And it seems he is, too."

Hope took a deep breath. "I think I'd rather go fight Scylla."

Thenia laughed. "Sometimes facing pain is scarier than fighting a monster, but I have faith in you."

"Thanks, Thenia." Hope stood up. "I hope your trip goes smoothly. Do you really think you'll have to kill Scylla?"

Thenia frowned as if the idea was ridiculous. "Is that what Xan said?"

"He said you would try to move her back to the Ionian Sea, but if you couldn't, you'd do what you had to do."

Thenia chuckled. "He's so dramatic." She stood. "No. We'll not have to kill her. Scylla gets bored every few years and goes swimming. Most mortals are agnostic, and they chalk it up to shark attacks or a boating accident. If you pay attention to the news, you'll see evidence of when something immortal is wreaking havoc. Things won't add up. But mortals only believe in the gods if they want something. The rest of the time, it's as if the world exploded into existence." She surveyed her room. "And Poseidon's a softie. More than the other gods, it seems. He thinks all the creatures in his realm should be free, so his bindings aren't very strong." She shrugged. "It keeps us busy, but it is a waste of human life. Sometimes I wonder if Poseidon is humoring Hades. Not that it matters. There are plenty of creatures under Zeus's bindings that get free too. Anyway, to answer your question, we'll move Scylla back. Both Xan and I have done it multiple times."

Hope stopped halfway to the door. "Is it safe?"

"No, it's not safe." Thenia went to her dresser. She pulled out a pair of pajama bottoms and a tank top. "But we know enough to not be complacent, so it will be fine."

"Well, be careful." Hope leaned on the door.

"I always am. Thanks, though." Thenia pulled her sweater off and then put on the tank top. "You be careful too."

Hope nodded. “I will. Good night.”

“Night, Hope. See you in a few days.”

Hope closed the door behind her and went to her room. She’d make it a point to talk with Athan tomorrow . . . Or maybe the next day.

TWENTY THREE



“WHO IS IT TONIGHT?” Hope asked. “Are you still going out with”—she searched her memory—“Jack?”

Dahlia laughed. “You’re thinking of Max, and no, we broke up.” She stood at the mirror in her expansive bathroom, curling her hair. The marble countertops were covered with makeup, hair products, and brushes. The walk-in shower had panels of jets facing each other, and the soaking tub was surrounded by plastered pillars.

The smell of coconut-lime wafted into the bedroom where Hope lay on Dahlia’s king-sized bed. “Well?” she asked, rolling onto her back. Her head dropped over the edge, and everything was upside down.

“His name is Harrison. Second year law at UW. Six foot two and Scandinavian . . . I think.” Dahlia brushed mascara over her lashes.

“Do you like him?”

Dahlia snorted.

“You don’t?”

Silence.

Hope flipped over and sat up. “You don’t like him, but you’re going out with him?”

Dahlia continued to apply mascara to her thick lashes. When she finished, she stared at the tube, twisting it over and over in her hand. “He’s hot. And fun. We’re going to that skydiving place in Renton.” But she remained focused on the purple tube.

“But you don’t like him?” Hope insisted.

“Of course I like him. He’s nice, too.” Dahlia frowned, and her gaze rested on Hope for only a moment before darting back to her hands “Why the inquisition?”

“You know it’s not going anywhere. You’re dating him, and he might be in love with you, but you’re going to break his heart—” The thought of her playing some poor guy was upsetting.

Frowning, Dahlia set the mascara down and looked at Hope. “Are we still talking about me, ’cause you’re getting really worked up over poor Nelson?”

“I thought you said his name was Harrison?”

Dahlia chuckled and waved her hand, but her skin tinged pink. “So I did.” She came over and sat on the edge of the bed next to Hope. “What’s the matter? Are you still pining over Athan?”

“No.” Hope bit her lip. “Well, maybe a little, but that has nothing to do with you . . .” She waved her arms.

“Dating a lot?” Dahlia raised her eyebrows. “Sleeping around?”

“I wasn’t going to say that.”

“You probably thought it, though.” Dahlia exhaled. “I’m not going to talk about my current relationships with you because, quite frankly, they are none of your business. But I don’t sleep around.”

That was fair. It wasn’t any of Hope’s business, but still. “Why would you go out with someone you don’t like?”

“I do like Harrison. And Nelson, too. But it’s just for fun, you know?”

Dahlia tipped her head back, and she gazed into the air above her. She sighed,

and the hard exterior dropped. “You better hand me my phone.” She pointed at the bedside table.

Hope rolled over, grabbed it, and then handed it to her friend. “Why do you need your phone?”

Dahlia scrunched up her face. “Because I’m going to cancel on poor Harrison. You and I are going on a double date instead.”

Wait, what? “I don’t want to go on a date.”

“Too bad. I think you’ll like Ben and Jerry.”

Hope immediately got the reference and laughed. “Why? What did I say?”

“Nothing. But after we get done talking, all I’m going to want to do is watch stupid rom-coms and eat ice cream.”

A few minutes later, they were both in pajamas. Hope tugged at the ribbed tank and lacy shorts Dahlia had given her.

“Come on.” Dahlia led the way down to the kitchen and flipped on the light.

Hope prayed no one else would see her.

“I met Roan about . . .” Dahlia frowned and closed her eyes. “About fifty years ago, I think. We were both at a concert. It was loud and hot and wild.” She opened her eyes and then the freezer. “I spilled my drink down his shirt.”

Hope shook her head. “How embarrassing.”

Dahlia laughed. “I did it on purpose.” She grabbed two pints of ice cream and then handed one to Hope. “Chubby Hubby okay?”

Hope shrugged. She didn’t much care for ice cream, but she wasn’t about to tell Dahlia that.

“Would you rather have Chunky Monkey or Boom Chocolate?”

“This is fine.” Hope pulled the lid off and took a small bite, avoiding the bits of chocolate covered somethings and dark and caramel colored swirls. Cold sweetness was all she could taste.

“It’s my favorite.” Dahlia led the way back to her bedroom. “Anyway, I wanted to meet him, and it was all I could think of.” She stopped as if remembering something. “Actually, it was Xan’s idea. He said the lads had been known to do it a time or two, and it usually worked.” She tilted her head to the side. “It goes to show you how desperate I was that I would listen to my cousin.”

Hope sat down on the bed, sinking into the softness. She took another tentative bite, and salty peanut butter cut through the sweetness. “You dumped your drink on him so you could meet him?”

“Correct. All down the front of him. Then I offered to clean it up, but he laughed and pulled his shirt off.”

Hope blushed.

“Don’t be a prude. It’s not like we had sex right there. He only took off his shirt. Anyway, then he did this gesture”—Dahlia raised her hand, palm up—“as if to tell me it was okay, and then he turned away.”

“Really?” Hope had a hard time believing anyone could turn away from Dahlia, and lifted her eyebrows. “Are you embellishing the story?”

Dahlia snickered. “No, seriously. He was there with his mates and had just ended a relationship, and he was definitely not looking for another.”

“What did you do?”

“The concert was almost over, and I was getting desperate.”

Hope raised her eyebrows as she ate more ice cream. The combination of salty and sweet was growing on her.

“I took his shirt, and when he tried to grab it back, I kissed him.”

“You kissed him?” Hope had no idea if that was a bad thing or not. She couldn’t imagine kissing someone she’d just met, but hookups happened all the time now, right? Had they been uncommon fifty years ago? Or had that all been part of the sexual revolution?

“Roan broke it off, took his shirt, and frowned at me. ‘You shouldn’t kiss someone if you don’t mean it,’ he said. ‘It’s a rule.’” Dahlia’s eyes filled with tears. “We got married two months later.” Tears dripped down her cheeks, and she wiped them away with the back of her hand.

“You married him?” It wasn’t that Hope couldn’t believe someone wanting to marry her friend, but the idea of Dahlia settling down was a little hard to fathom.

Dahlia’s emotion hung heavy between them. “We had our honeymoon at Half Moon Bay.”

Oh gods. No wonder she’d been mad at Hope and Xan when they’d gone to California. “At that hotel?”

Dahlia nodded. The tears continued to fall, and she grabbed the duvet and wiped her red-rimmed eyes, sniffing again and again. “I always meant it with Roan. Everything.” She glanced up at Hope. “But it didn’t matter.”

Even before Dahlia started her story, Hope had known it didn’t have a happy ending.

“What happened?” As soon as she asked, she knew it was rude. The pain that crossed Dahlia’s face was shocking. “Sorry. You don’t have to tell me.” But Hope was curious.

Dahlia hiccupped then leaned over and grabbed several tissues from a box on the nightstand. “I know what you’re thinking. Everyone thinks it. Why would anyone want to stay with me, right?”

“No!” How could Dahlia even think that?

“It’s okay. But he didn’t leave.”

Hope wasn’t sure what to say. She definitely didn’t want to make it worse. Whatever tore them apart had to be bad.

Dahlia sopped at the tears and wiped her nose. “We were married for five years.” She held up her hand, her fingers splayed. “Five years.”

Hope held her breath.

“And then he disappeared.” Dahlia waved her arms across her chest. “Gone.” She searched through the tissues, picked a less wet one, and then scrubbed her face. “Anyway, you shouldn’t lead my cousin on.”

Hope’s jaw dropped. *Where did that come from?*

“If you’re not interested, don’t make him think you are.”

Her denial stuck in her throat, like a pretzel had lodged somewhere it shouldn’t. She coughed then cleared her throat. “What are you talking about?”

Dahlia flopped back on her bed and covered her eyes with her arm. “You’re either really naïve, Hope, or really manipulative.” She sat back up and glared. “I don’t think you’re smart enough to play him, though.”

And somehow that was an insult. Should she be manipulative? Would what Dahlia was accusing her of make more sense?

“Xan likes you. You have to know. It’s all over his face. In everything he does. Ugh. It makes me sick,” Dahlia said.

Hope poked her spoon into the soupy mess that surrounded the still-formed ice cream and swirled it around. The chocolate darkened the white ice cream, blending it into a latte brown. She couldn’t think of a single thing to say. Xan liked her, and she liked him. But like *that*? Honestly, she couldn’t make heads or tails of her feelings for him.

“I’m sorry, Hope. I’m being a Gorgon. I think it would be best if you left me alone tonight. I’m not going to be very good company.”

Certainly not. Hope scooted to the edge of the bed and stood up. Why did pain make people inflict pain on others? The discomfort nagging at her heart was a physical ache, and she hurt for Dahlia, Athan, and even a little for herself.

Dahlia’s dark eyes were bright with tears. She offered a smile, but it

seemed like it made her sick.

“Do you want me to take your ice cream?” Hope pointed at the other container, the lid still on.

Dahlia held out the carton. “Thanks.”

Hope grabbed it and stared at her friend. She wished she knew what to say to make it better. Maybe she should give Dahlia a hug, but the idea made Hope nervous. A sense of helplessness filled her, and she walked to the door. “I’m sorry, Dahlia.”

The beautiful young demigod rolled onto her side, facing the wall, her back to the door and Hope.

There was nothing else to say, so Hope left.

THE HOUSE WAS QUIET, and after a lonely dinner of leftovers, Hope found her way to the study with one of the last books of the Moirai. As she read, her mind continued to drift to Athan, and she wondered if she was going to miss her opportunity to talk to him before Xan came back. Then she thought about what Dahlia had said. Xan was in love with her, but would he even like her if he knew what she was? Would she ever be free to be herself? And if she was, would anyone really care for her?

She heard laughter outside, and the front door banged open.

“Na pari I eychi! Skata! Skata!”

Then the door slammed shut and someone shuffled into the foyer. The speech was slightly slurred as he continued, *“Geia sou?”*

Something thudded to the floor in the entryway.

“Geia sou?” a man with a deep voice shouted.

Hope pulled herself out of the chair and stuck her head into the entryway.

There stood a young man only slightly taller than she was. A large duffle bag lay on the floor of the foyer, and the man’s head was moving side to side.

His curly black hair stuck up wildly, and his skin was tawny beige. She was struck with his prominent features, a wide nose that was slightly crooked, and generous lips. He grinned, revealing a chip on his front tooth.

“Ah, hello.” His accent was thick and guttural. “I am Dion, Dionysus’s son.” He stepped forward and extended his hand.

Hope took his hand and shook it once before letting it go. Alcohol exuded from him and hung thickly in the air.

“I’m Hope.”

“Hope, yes. It’s nice to meet you. Aren’t you *oraios*?” His blurry eyes inspected her. “Yes, quite beautiful, no?”

Hope blushed and ducked her head.

“*Malista*, aye. Umm, is there room for me?”

“Room for you?” Hope glanced around as if looking for answers. “What?”

“*Domatio*? A place for me to sleep?” He pointed to his bag.

“Oh, a room.” Right. She was an idiot. “I’m not really sure where . . . Let me go find Dahlia.”

“Ah, Dahlia is here? *Fantastikos*!” He grinned again.

His enthusiasm was contagious. And she giggled. Footsteps in the hall drew their attention, and then Athan came out from the kitchen.

“Athan!” Dion yelled his name with gusto. “It is *aprosmeno kalo* you are here, no? *Thavmasios* to see you, *adelfos*.” He embraced Athan and kissed both his cheeks.

Hope stood fixated with the exuberant welcome.

“It is nice to see you, too, Dion.” Athan laughed as he pulled away, and Hope could see the humor in his eyes. He winked at Hope. “I see you’ve met Hope.”

“Yes, the lovely Hope.” He leaned toward Athan, and whispered, “I do not know this, but I believe she thinks me *trelos*.”

Athan laughed again. "You are crazy, Dion. It's why everyone likes you."
"Likes me?" Dion shook his head. "No. *Oloi agape mou!*"

Athan smirked. "I'll take Dion to his room. He's completely intoxicated."

He lifted Dion's bag and tried to lead the young man toward the stairs, but the Greek demigod protested, "No. I feel quite, how you say, dandy. *Malista*, aye. I feel dandy. We stay up and talk, no? Much to catch up on. And there is a beautiful girl *a flertaro*."

"Come, my friend. There is tomorrow. You're going to be sick all too soon."

Their voices faded.

Hope's thoughts had been derailed, and she stood smiling in the entryway. Athan had winked at her. Maybe he didn't hate her after all.

The next morning, the sun was out. Hope's mood brightened with the weather. The thought made her wonder at Endy's cloudy disposition, and then she laughed out loud at the appropriateness of his being in Seattle. She wondered briefly which came first and then forgot all about him as she got ready to go downstairs for breakfast. Eager with anticipation, Hope tripped over herself as she sped through her morning routine.

As she entered the kitchen, she noticed Athan was the only one there. Her enthusiasm waned slightly from her nervousness as she contemplated how to address him.

"Good morning, Athan." Even to herself it sounded formal, and she cringed.

"Oh?" He raised his eyebrows. "Are you talking to me now?"

"I . . . I was talking to you last night."

He crossed his arms. "No, I spoke to you. If I remember correctly, you said nothing. You've said nothing to me for days. Nothing since we got back from Pike Place. Nothing, until now."

“I’m sorry?” Hope was struck with disbelief. He’d noticed how long it had been since they spoke? He’d been counting the days? “I guess I was hoping . . .” She took a deep breath. “I-was-hoping-we-could-have-a-talk-and-kinda-sort-things-out.” It all came out as one word, and she took another breath. “Please.”

His gaze burned her, and she lowered her head.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” She couldn’t believe it. He’d actually said yes, and he didn’t seem mad. She wanted to jump up and down and scream. She wanted to giggle. She wanted to cry with relief. He didn’t hate her?

He nodded. “Let’s have lunch tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Disappointment punched her. What about right now?

“I have plans with Dion today.” He scrubbed his hand over his face. “Sorry.”

“Oh.” Hope’s enthusiasm deflated a little and then perked up. He’d still said yes. “What are you doing?”

Athan’s eyes twinkled with mischief. “Dion came across Endy last night, and there was some wagering. Endy lost, and we have a beautiful day.” He pointed out the window. “Dion and I are going golfing.”

The sun was because of Endy? Wait.

“Golfing? You golf?” She’d never met anyone who golfed.

He laughed. “Yes, I golf. Actually, I play most sports.”

Of course he did. And he was probably good at all of them, too. Demigod son of Hermes. Stupid god of athletics.

“Golf is Dion’s favorite.”

“Did you lose a bet to him too?” She held her hand out. “None of my business. Sorry.”

“Nice. Sometimes you surprise me too.” He rinsed his plate. “Now, I have

to get everything ready for the demigod of wine, who will probably sleep another hour or two.” He started for the doorway out into the foyer but turned back at the last second. “Yes, I lost a bet, and if I could give you some advice, don’t gamble with Dion.” He winked and offered a parting wave. “Have a good day, Hope.”

Happiness pulsed through the air, and she skipped across the kitchen floor.

TWENTY FOUR



DAHLIA FOUGHT AS INTENSELY as Xan, but her style was much more aggressive. She didn't wait for Hope to attack and then counter. Rather, as soon as the fight started, Dahlia went all out punching and kicking. However, like Xan, she also broke their sparring to give pointers and tips.

"Their eyes aren't going to hit or kick you, Hope, so there is no reason to focus there."

They stood on the blue sparring pads in their gear. Dahlia had a wicked round kick and had clocked Hope in the head three times in a row.

"But you can assess their emotions in their eyes," Hope countered.

Dahlia frowned. "Yes, but that will only tell you their intention to fight. And you should be able to read that before the first punch is thrown. And if your attacker is Skia, you won't read anything in their eyes." She pointed at her chest and abdomen. "Look at my body." She shifted to kick, and her torso moved too. "Read their body." She drew back a punch, and again her torso shifted slightly. "Then count the timing. Remember, the best attack—"

"Begins with a good block."

"Good," Dahlia complimented her. "Now, let's see what you can do."

Unlike Xan, Dahlia didn't hold back at all. The fighting was intense, and

she'd often interrupt the sparring by shoving Hope out of striking distance.

"Don't expend so much energy countering your opponent's move. If you can use their momentum to your advantage, then do it." Dahlia showed Hope some grappling techniques that used an opponent's force against them.

"There will always be someone bigger, faster, and stronger than you. That means you have to fight smarter. Use your advantages and see what you can do to minimize theirs. If everything else is equal, technique will win. Shades of Hades, even if all else isn't equal, the best technique should win. You need to make sure you have it."

Dahlia shook out her dark hair, and it fell in cascading curls down her back. "I think that's it for today. I have a date, so I can't stay and play."

Hope thought back to their conversation a few nights ago. "A date with who?"

Dahlia pursed her lips before answering, "Doesn't matter to you. Now, go take a shower, or whatever it is you do. I've got to go." She threw her gear into a mesh bag and then hung it on a peg by the door. "Good night, Hope."

"Good night. Have fun, Dahl."

"I will." The beautiful girl walked out the door.

Hope scanned the room. Despite Dahlia having called time, Hope wasn't done. Her gaze settled on an athletic bag that had been bolted to the floor. Two others hung from the ceiling. She went over to the stereo, cranked the music up as loud as it would go, and then started kicking and punching the bags. She matched the staccato beat of the drums, thumping the bag over and over and over again. When she couldn't move her arms anymore, she went upstairs to take a shower and go to bed.

HOPE'S AGGRESSIVE EXERCISE left her exhausted, and when her mind finally allowed her to relax, she slept late the next morning. Anxiety slowed her, and

she dawdled through her morning routine. When it came time to pick out something to wear, she pulled out a cream sweater her mother had bought her for her birthday and completed the outfit with dark boots and skinny jeans. Yep. That would be fine. She smiled at her reflection and headed downstairs.

She walked into the kitchen and heard a low whistle.

Dion sat at the table, a plate of eggs in front of him, untouched. In his hand, he held a stemmed glass filled with what appeared to be a mixture of juice and wine.

“*Poly oraios!* Hope, you are beautiful.” He tilted the glass at her.

She blushed and pointed at the glass in his hand. “Isn’t it a little early?”

“Ah. You are beautiful, but *skliros*, no?”

Hope grimaced. “*Skliros?*”

“Hard, cruel, tough.” Athan answered from behind her.

His words were like a physical blow. Is that what he thought of her?

“She’s not really one to spare your feelings,” Athan continued talking, directing his comments to Dion. “But . . .” Athan hesitated as he met her eyes. “You’ll always know where you stand.”

She wasn’t even sure where Athan stood with her, or she with him. While the two men spoke, Hope surveyed Athan. His bronzed hair and skin were lighter than she remembered, probably from spending so much time indoors. His jeans hung low on his narrow waist, and although he was lean, he was far more muscular than the son of Dionysus.

“*Alitheia kai ithikotita.* Truth and honor.” Dion glanced at Hope, then continued his conversation with Athan, “Do you ever get tired of your ideals?”

Athan laughed. “I’m not training her. Xan is.”

“Xan?” Dion laughed. “You’re, how you say, teasing, no?”

Athan shook his head. “No. Really. Xan is her mentor.”

“*Alitheia? Ouai.* I wouldn’t have . . .” His glazed eyes wandered over his plate and then to Athan. “Everyone grows, no?”

“Oh, *absolutely.*” Athan smirked, driving in the thick sarcasm coating his words.

Hope narrowed her eyes. “Why would you say that? Why is truth and honor such a stretch for Xan?”

Athan pinched his lower lip before answering. “I would hate to burst your bubble about someone you think you know.”

Hope glared at him. What was it with demigods not answering questions? Maybe there were advanced lessons she hadn’t gotten to. The idea was infuriating. “Why don’t you try me? I like to make my own assessments. I appreciate honesty. And, sometimes, like Dion said, people change. I’d like to think people can change.”

Athan’s eyebrows shot up. “Really? Would you give Xan the benefit of the doubt?”

Her immediate thought was yes, but she considered. “I’d like to think so.”

“Hmmm. Do you believe in double standards?”

Dion rubbed his temples and stood.

“You two have some history. I think I will go now.” He took his glass and left the room, his plate of food still uneaten on the table.

Hope looked at Athan, and he held her gaze. Why was he staring at her? “What?”

He licked his lips as he regarded her. “What time do you want to go to lunch?”

Her heart jumped, and something warm, like honey, spread through her chest.

“I haven’t had breakfast yet.” Her voice came out all breathy, and the warmth spread to her cheeks.

“No? You slept in?”

Hope rolled her eyes and swallowed a giggle threatening to escape. She’d stayed up half the night worrying he’d cancel. Even now she teetered on the edge of hope and doubt, but excitement fizzed through her like a carbonated drink.

“Well, how about brunch, then? Are you hungry?”

Hope bit her lip. *Would he remember?*

Athan laughed. “Yeah, yeah. I should’ve known. Okay, let’s go get something to eat.”

He did!

“Where are we going?” She rolled up onto the balls of her feet, ready to sprint to the car.

“Downtown. There’s this bakery in the Market that makes an incredible egg scramble, better than you’ve ever had. And they get their sausage from a local butcher. You’ll love it.”

They stepped out the door to be greeted by three tall, blond men.

“Hope and Athan,” Ty said with a smirk.

Hope frowned. What were they doing here? “I thought you went with Xan and Thenia?”

Ty laughed, a short barking sound. He looked her up and down, his lips curling into a sneer. “I bet you wished we had.”

Athan clenched his teeth, and the muscles of his neck tightened. “Back off, Ty. I’m not interested in dealing with your drama right now.”

“Whoa-ho-ho. What do we have here? You two know each other well? Is Hope the demigod you found in Goldendale? The one that disappeared for a while?”

Athan grabbed Hope’s arm and stepped to go around the side, but Ty and Tre moved to block them.

“Are you? Weren’t the two of you *friends*?” He made air quotes around the word friends.

“Why would it matter?” she asked.

Ty chuckled. “World’s greatest *psachno*, and he loses his prize. Not so great after all, eh, Athan?”

“Come on, Hope.” Athan tugged her hand, but again the bigger men blocked their path.

“No. I want to ask her something. I know you already told us you didn’t see anything, but maybe she did.”

“She didn’t.”

Hope glared at Athan. She hated when others answered for her. She directed her gaze to Tre and Ty. Prax stood behind them, a scowl on his face.

“What do you want?” she snapped. “I’m hungry, so make it fast.”

“Gods, I’d love to break you, Hope. You’re so mouthy.” Ty leaned forward into her personal space. “I bet you like it rough, too.”

Athan stepped in front of Hope. “If you have a question, ask her. Otherwise, get out of her face.”

“What do you care, Athan?” Tre stood toe to toe with the other demigod. “She’s not with you anymore. She’s with Xan.”

Hope gritted her teeth. She was not property. “What’s your question?”

Tre stepped away from Athan and said, “Have you seen the Sphinx?”

She glanced up at Athan, her heart nearly pounding out of her chest.

Ty grabbed her jaw. With an iron grip, he forced her to face him.

“Have you?” he growled.

Hope tried to shake her head, but Ty didn’t release her. Clenching her chin tighter, he brought her face close to his, and she stumbled forward.

“Have you seen the Sphinx?” His sky blue eyes, eyes that matched all of his brothers’, were colder than ice.

She shoved him away with every bit of her strength, and he fell to the ground. “I shook my head.”

He jumped up and stepped toward her, his hands balled into fists. “You looked at Athan first.”

“Because he’s my friend.” Her blood pressure climbed with her pulse.

Ty glared at her and took another step. “You haven’t seen her?”

“Not since last Halloween. But then I see at least five of them every year.” If he came any closer, she’d go for the blades in her boot. There was no way she was going to let him touch her again.

“Come on, Ty.” Praxis called. “She said no. Leave her alone.”

Ty turned back to Hope. “I don’t believe you.”

That was it. She’d had enough. “I don’t care two cents what you believe. I told you no. And no means no.”

She grabbed Athan’s sleeve and pulled him to the garage.

“Why didn’t you say something?” she hissed.

Athan opened the car door for her then met her gaze. “Because they can tell when you’re lying.”

Just great.

THE DRIVE WAS SHORT, and Athan made small talk. There was no further reference to the earlier conversation. It wasn’t until they sat down with their food in the little café that he broached the subject of the two of them.

“What happened? Did you hear me and my dad talking? Is that why you left Goldendale?” Athan sipped his orange juice. “I thought you’d at least come back to get your stuff.”

She’d been afraid of this moment. Afraid he would crush her heart. That he wouldn’t care. So why did she feel like they were sitting at her kitchen table in Goldendale? “I sent movers to pack up and bring it all over to Seattle.

I did go back to apologize to you. I wanted to patch things up, but you were gone. Myrine was completely coherent for a few minutes then went all crazy again. I saw Haley, and those beefed up lunatic sons of Apollo showed up. In your truck, I might add.”

He grimaced. “I sold them that monstrosity. I hated that thing, and I was trying to get them off your tail.”

“I don’t think they recognized me, though. Not that time.” She thought about her brief fight, while she smashed pieces of her muffin with her fork.

“I can’t believe you saw them again. Gods, Hope. Do you have a death wish?” He ran his hands through his hair, eyes wide.

She studied him while considering his words. He seemed sincere, like he really did care. “They seem pretty bad.”

“They are the worst kind of immortals, taking pleasure in other’s pain.” He pushed his empty plate back. “Twisted and sick, and they will kill you. We need to figure a way to get you out of the conservatory.”

“I’m leaving.” Now that they were talking, she wanted to tell him everything.

His hand stilled on the plate. “What?”

She nodded. “Next week.” She took a sip of orange juice. “It’s not like I can change in there. And the sons of Apollo are only going to get worse. I can’t hide from them, if I’m right there.”

He ran a hand over his face. “They’re brutal, too. You know, they’re the ones who tortured your aunt.”

Her heart froze. “Priska?” Guilt hung in her chest, followed by a burning hatred. “They’re the ones?” If they came near her again, she would kill them.

“Where are you going to go?” He reached across the table, his hand stretching toward her. Then he grabbed her fork and took a bite of her breakfast. “Would you move back in with Priska?”

She missed her aunt, but she couldn't go back. She'd need more help breaking the curse, and Priska wouldn't, or maybe couldn't, take the risks necessary. "Maybe I could move in with Myrine."

"Yeah, well, that's not really an option," he said after swallowing another bite. "Myrine sold her house. I don't even know where she is now. Would you need to stay with anyone?"

"Isn't there protection in numbers? Especially if someone like Ty comes after me."

"Nice thought, but have you seen those guys? I think your best bet is to go back into hiding."

Hope took a deep breath. "I want to break the curse. That's why I'm here. I've been trying to study and find clues in the Olympian library."

"Is that why you were asking about monsters and curses? Did you find anything?"

"Not much." She frowned, unsure if she should tell him about Briareus. "Why did Myrine move?"

Athan took the change of topic with grace. "That's how Myrine is. She does her own thing. It's always nice when our paths cross, but she's her own individual. She doesn't really cater to anyone. If she likes you, she'll help you, and she's always truthful, but . . ."

"But?"

"But her perspective is sometimes different." He stared at her, searching her face for something. "She told you to come here."

"No. Actually, I went with Priska and made an offering to Artemis. Artemis told me to come here."

He flinched as if she'd struck him. "Artemis? Really?"

Hope nodded.

"*Skata*. Did she tell you why?"

“She told me to come here and do a bunch of research. Myrine told me to beware lies and trickery, and something about another realm.” Her shoulders dropped, and she pushed her eggs away. “But so far, all the time in the library has been a dead end.”

He frowned. “You’ve really found nothing?”

Even if it was wrong, she couldn’t lie to him. And she didn’t want to. She shook her head. “I’m not even sure why I came.”

“That’s the thing about oracles and gods. You never know what you’re going to find. It isn’t always about the literal thing you’re doing. Sometimes they put you on the path of where you need to be.”

And he would know that how? Right. His dad. “Okay, but still I don’t know anything, and I’ve got to be out of there before I change again.”

Athan grimaced. “I want you out of that house, now. It isn’t safe with Apollo’s sons in it.”

Hope thought about her options. She really didn’t have any. She needed to finish that last book of the Moirai. It was all she could think to do.

Athan stared at her. Examining her, as if her face would answer questions that her words would not.

“What happened? Did you fall in love with him?”

She blushed. He wasn’t really going there was he? “What do you mean?”

“I thought you’d be happy to see me, but. . . What’s going on with you and Xan?”

This was not the conversation she wanted to be having. Hope considered her words carefully. “Nothing is happening with Xan.”

He exhaled a slow breath, but he was clearly waiting for more.

Time to tell him the whole truth. “I thought what had happened in Goldendale was . . . mutual, that you cared about me.” Her mouth was dry, and her heart pounded. She went to sip again at her orange juice, but only a

few drops trickled their way into her mouth. She forced a swallow.

Athan raised his brows but said nothing.

“When I got here, I heard you had a history of doing whatever necessary to get an immortal to the conservatory, even using . . . deception.” It was the nicest way she could think of to say it.

His eyes widened, and his face blanched. After taking a deep breath, he schooled his features and said, “Even if that were true, you said yourself that you’d give someone the benefit of the doubt. Or does that only apply to Xan?”

Irritation flashed through her. “I did say that I would try to give *anyone* the benefit of the doubt.”

Leaning forward, he set his fork down. “Did you mean it?”

“Yes, I meant it, but—”

“Not for me?” he snapped as he sat back and crossed his arms over his chest. He clenched his teeth as if trying to bite back further protests.

“I didn’t say that.” Why was he doing this? Why was he so mad? She shifted in her plastic seat but couldn’t get comfortable.

“Then what?” He flung his arms, gesturing as he spoke, “You would forgive Xan’s past.”

She didn’t even want to talk about Xan. “I didn’t say that either. I don’t even know his past. I only know how *I*’ve been treated.”

“And you think he’s more sincere?” He thumped on the white tabletop with his index finger.

“It isn’t about a comparison.” She glared at him. How dare he? They were beginning to draw attention, and Hope took a deep breath before continuing, “I always thought you were sincere. You never gave me any reason to think otherwise. It was only when I got here and heard things—”

His green eyes hardened. The longer she spoke, the more corded his neck

became, his pulse thrumming under his tanned skin. “From whom?”

“Xan, and then Obelia. Even Thenia told me there had been stories.”

Athan’s gaze bored into her, and he scrunched his face. “You believed the stories?”

“Not at first. But, it made me doubt, and you weren’t here to contradict any of it.” Had she been too quick in her judgment? Had she misread him? Had he kept his distance because he thought that’s what she wanted?

“I came, Hope. As soon as I knew you were here, I came,” he said, his voice choked with emotion. “Do you know where I was before I came here?”

Her heart tripped and skipped. “Myrine said you were looking for me.”

“Yeah.” He leaned toward her. “I spent weeks searching small towns along the Columbia River and in Portland. Then I got a tip and came over here to Seattle. Since you left, I’ve spent every minute scouring the city for you.”

“I didn’t know.” She dropped her gaze to the white Formica tabletop. That sweet something burst in her chest, spreading its warm honey again.

“Did you know . . .”

For the first time since she’d left him, joy pulled her lips into a smile.

“Did I know what?” She glanced up, excited. So excited to hear what he would say.

Terror lined his features. “*Skata!*”

Her entire body was doused with fear. “Athan?”

Athan stood up. “Our meal has come to an end. We need to leave.”

He pulled his wallet from his pocket and threw several bills down, his gaze remaining fixed on the front window of the café.

Hope studied the scene but saw only the regular street traffic of Pike Place Market. She begged to be wrong. “What is it?” Please not now.

Another minute of silence. He still didn’t answer but surveyed the café, his

hand resting on his belt.

“Athan?” Her heart pounded. “*Athan?*” Something was really wrong. The last time he’d freaked out—

“Skia.”

Hope’s food turned to lead in her stomach. “Are you sure?”

He refused to meet her eyes when he spoke, “Maybe they didn’t see us yet.”

There was no confidence behind the words, and Hope knew he was trying to spare her. The wall around her heart melted just a fraction before fear kicked back in.

“We need to leave now. We’re sitting ducks in here.”

She glanced around at the other patrons and the bright lighting. “They won’t attack us in here, will they? I mean, there are people and no shadows for them to come in through.”

Athan frowned. “You have more studying to do. If they’re already here, in this realm, they don’t need shadows. They don’t need darkness. They just prefer it. Skia will attack anywhere. We may appear mad, the police might get called, and innocent bystanders might even be killed, but Skia don’t care.”

His heavy words sunk in, and her shoulders sagged.

“Do you have a weapon?” Athan asked.

“Of course.” The two knives were tucked in her boots. She knew better than to leave a conservatory without them.

“Okay, we’re going to walk out the front door as though we have seen nothing. I’m hoping that they’ll be counting on us going out the back. I can’t see them anymore.”

“Maybe they moved on.”

“We’d have to have incredible luck for that to be the case. But I doubt it.

If they saw us, we need to move.”

They crossed the crowded café. Athan surveyed the busy sidewalks through the wall of windows and then opened the door. “Let’s go.”

He grabbed her hand, and they stepped out the door.

Hope scanned the bustling shoppers for signs of the creatures from the Underworld. She couldn’t see them, but the chill of death rolled through the air around them. They were close.

“How many?”

Athan said nothing.

TWENTY FIVE



THE SECONDS FELT LIKE HOURS.

If there was only one Skia, he wouldn't attack. Not the case with two of them. Two, and she and Athan would each need to take out one. It would be scary, and dangerous, but they could each handle one. If it were more . . . Hope tried to think of a scenario where that would be okay. She was good, but she'd never be able to best two on her own.

"I saw two."

Hope's pulse quickened. Her hands started to sweat. She pulled one of the daggers out from the sheath in her boot. "Even match, right?"

They were almost to the car.

"Right?" Even to herself, she sounded unsure.

The Skia leaped out from behind a parked car, and the force knocked the breath out of Hope's lungs as she fell to the ground. She kicked up, and her heel connected with the pale face of a male Skia. As he fell back, Hope popped up. She scrutinized the monster from Hades, the human body infused with dark powers from the Underworld. His obsidian eyes revealed nothing, and he wore the telltale leer. His square jaw was all hard angles, much like his body, and his movements were lithe like a panther.

He came at her again, and in a flash, knives whistled past her face. Skia daggers were forged of black metal, and the hilts of Hades's immortal weapons appeared to be writhing bodies with screaming skulls at the end.

The Skia swung as he moved in, a long arc coming down toward Hope's face. She threw a block with her left arm and delivered a sidekick to his abdomen. The force sent him flying backward, and she took a fraction of a second to glance at Athan. He was fighting as well, his focus consumed on the Skia swinging a blade at him.

Hope eyed the creature on the ground. He hadn't gotten up yet, and she knew this was her chance. With a flick of her wrist, she sent the golden dagger through the monster's eye and into the Skia's skull with a wet *thunk*.

She went to help Athan.

This other Skia moved like a bull. His large, heavy frame spoke of power, and as Hope worried about what would happen if one of his swings connected, he punched Athan in the stomach. Athan stumbled backward against the hood of a car.

Hope stepped between the two of them.

The heavyset Skia opened his mouth in a soundless laugh.

Even as he moved toward her, she knew she was no match for his strength. She stepped back in an arc as he moved forward with his first kick until she stood behind him. She reached for her other weapon, but it stuck in its sheath in her boot. This was her chance, and she needed to strike. Hope kicked the creature in the back, pushing him forward and off balance. But she'd missed the tender spot where the kidneys sat. If the dead still had kidneys.

She spared a moment to glance over at Athan. He'd sat up but was still on the hood of the car. He needed more time.

The Skia charged, his face contorted with anger. He crossed his arms, then swung at her with his left fist in a backhand.

Hope dodged the projected strike, but her block wasn't strong enough for the follow-through right hook. The connection sent her back several feet and to the ground. Dazed, she struggled to her feet. With a shake of her head, she tried to clear her vision of the two Skia standing side by side.

The first Skia's body began to dematerialize, wisps of black smoke rolling off the body.

She concentrated on the large Skia and realized she hadn't been seeing double. Two Skia advanced, their movements slow and deliberate. Like sharks circling before an attack. She was outnumbered. They knew it, and she knew it.

She debated running but discarded the idea. There was no way she wanted to leave Athan, nor did she want the Skia on her back. The newcomer was short, no more than five and a half feet, his once olive-tone skin now sickly, and he had jet-black hair on his head and face. The larger Skia loomed even bigger next to his companion.

Hope unsheathed her jeweled dagger. She had no great options. No good ones either. But maybe they didn't know that. With a deep breath, she ran toward her attackers, screaming through her fear. Hope faked right toward the smaller creature and then spun. With the force of her movement, she buried her knife into the large Skia's chest. He clutched at the blade and vomited a beam of light.

Hope shifted to face the swarthy Skia. Lightning fast, he kicked at her hip, shoulder, and then head in rapid succession. Hope blocked the first two and stepped closer, taking away his legs. She swung a hook and then an uppercut. Both were deftly blocked. She stepped back to kick, but the Skia slid into her space, turned his body sideways, scrunched down, and drove his heel into her chin.

Hope fell backward, seeing nothing but stars.

She could feel him drawing closer, but she was blind to strike. She staggered to her feet, her arms flailing in front of her as she tried to find him. If she knew where he was—

“You are cursed.”

Judging by the distance of his heavily accented voice, Hope knew he was close. Her brow drew down. “How would you know that?” she shouted, scanning her still blurry surroundings.

A gray silhouette began to take shape in the shadows between the cars. The dark Skia stepped through them until he stood before her, just out of reach. “Hades holds only truth. There are many questions that are answered when you go to the Underworld.”

Was that a threat?

As if in answer, he raised his knife to strike.

There was a blur of movement, and then the Skia was on the ground with Athan sitting on top of him. Athan struck at the Skia’s face, his fists connecting once, twice. And then the Skia brought his legs up around Athan’s throat, pushing the demigod back to the ground. The Skia rocked forward and pulled out his blades.

Athan screamed.

Hope screamed. She charged the dark creature, driving her shoulder into him, shoving him away from Athan. Both Hope and the Skia crashed to the ground. He scrambled for the dark blades, but Hope pulled his legs to drag him away. The Skia beat on her forearm, an icy sledgehammer pounding again and again until she let go.

She’d lost. With a roar of frustration, she lunged, but the creature stood and danced away.

And then he sheathed his blade.

“I will come back for you, Sphinx. One day, we will finish what was

started.” The man became mist and disappeared.

With deep, gulping breaths, Hope ran to Athan and knelt by his side.

“Are you all right?” he asked. He glanced over her body as if to see for himself.

Hope nodded.

“Their blades. . .” Should she tell him?

He waved away her words. “You’ve become a great fighter.”

In that moment, the compliment meant nothing. He was still injured.

“Are you okay?” Her hands fluttered over him. She wanted to help. Would he let her?

“A scratch, I think.” He pointed to his leg. “We need to get back. I should have someone look at it.” He grimaced, and sweat beaded his brow.

She stood. “I’m ready when you are.”

Athan stood with a slight sway but waved her away when she stepped up to help. “Go get your weapons.” He pointed to where the Skia had fallen but continued toward the car. “I’d hate to tempt fate by hanging out on the streets of Seattle. One Skia attack per decade is my quota. I’m ready for a little R and R.”

They reached the car, and relief cascaded through Hope as the doors locked and they pulled out onto the street.

Maybe Athan was going to be okay. Maybe a scratch wasn’t so bad.

The drive was silent. Athan’s breathing became more labored as the seconds ticked by. Despite the short distance, when they pulled into the conservatory, Athan was gasping in shallow breaths, and his skin had lost its color.

When she stopped the car, Athan spoke, his voice tight with pain, “I’ll need your help to get up the walkway, but I’m going to try to make it to my room without alarming anyone. Once we’re there, I’ll need you to get Dahlia

or Endy, okay?”

“Okay.” Her heart pounded. “Are you going to be all right?”

He laughed, but the sound was off. “I’ll be fine.” He gasped and clenched his jaw. “Eventually.”

Athan leaned on Hope, becoming heavier as he limped up to the door. When he pulled away, Hope noticed his pant leg was saturated with blood.

Hope tossed the keys onto the table. Screw not alarming anyone.

“Dahlia?” she yelled. “Endy?”

Obelia poked her head around the corner from the kitchen.

“Where have you two been?” She glared daggers at Hope. “I can’t believe you left. You both know the rules! What in the name of Hades—”

“It was my . . . suggestion . . . Obelia.” Athan gasped as if he’d run a marathon.

Obelia’s mouth snapped shut. “Why?” Her voice dropped and was almost pleading. “Why would you—?”

“I needed to explain something.” He swayed but caught himself on the table. He inhaled, the ragged breath rattling in his chest.

Dropping her head, Obelia closed her eyes with a wince. When she looked up, her eyes were filled with tears. “What could you have to say to her?”

“Obelia, not here.” Athan’s voice trembled, and his knees buckled.

Time seemed to slow.

“Athan?” Hope stepped toward him.

He reached out to her, but before he could make contact, his eyes rolled back, and Athan slid to a heap on the floor.

Obelia screamed.

“Dahlia!” Hope’s voice carried throughout the house. “Endy!”

Footsteps came running.

“What is it?” Dahlia rounded the corner, and with only a glance, she ran

into the kitchen. Grabbing a pair of shears, she cut away the pant leg of Athan's jeans while she yelled for Endymion.

Surprisingly, he came out of the kitchen. With his brothers.

"What is all the yelling for?" He eyed Athan on the floor and then the three women. "What do you want me to do?" Endy turned to leave, and Ty, Tre, and Prax all laughed.

"If you leave, Endy, it had better be out of this house. That goes for each one of you sons of Apollo. You all know the rules of the conservatory. As long as you are here, you will use your power and knowledge for the greater good."

"Who's to say what the greater good is though?" Ty crossed his arms and leveled a glare at Dahlia. "It appears that the son of Hermes tangled with something he shouldn't have. That's not my problem."

Dahlia looked up from where she was tying a tourniquet on Athan's leg. "I'm the senior demigod in the house right now, so I have that say, 'taur head. Either get your medical supplies and help, or get out of this house."

Grumbling under his breath, Endy left the area with Ty, Tre, and Prax right behind him.

"We'll meet you in his room," Dahlia yelled after him. She pulled Athan up by the arms and draped him over her shoulder. "Hope?"

Hope was right behind her. "Yeah?"

"Gods. What happened?"

Hope outlined the fight in brief details as they moved Athan to his room. Obelia interrupted once to curse at Hope, but Dahlia cut her off.

"Save your energy, Obelia. We're going to need you to be productive. You can yell at Hope all you want, on your own time. But not right now. I need to hear this."

Obelia and Dahlia listened to the rest of the story.

Endy walked in just after Hope finished. The other sons were noticeably absent.

“What happened?” Endy looked bored as he assessed the wound.

“Skia.” Obelia hissed, glaring at Hope.

“*Skata!*” Endy regarded Hope with wide eyes. “For real?”

Hope nodded. Why would he think she was kidding?

Endy flushed. “I don’t know if I can do anything to help. What did they get him with?”

Hadn’t he trained for this? How could they not have an emergency kit? “A knife.”

Endy gasped, and his head jerked back. “Athan’s knife or theirs?”

Didn’t he know he needed to *do* something? Hope was having an out of body experience. The person answering the questions was like a robot, even while her mind reeled. “Theirs. I think.”

“Did you see it?”

Feeling came back in a rush, and nausea roiled over her. Her hands shook, and she clasped them together to get them to stop. “When he got cut? No. Yes. I mean, I was there, but I was fighting. There were three of them.”

Sour bile burned at the back of her throat. If she opened her mouth again, Hope was pretty sure she’d throw up. Without saying anything else, she left. It was only a dozen steps, but she was shaking by the time she got to her room; it took her several attempts to get the door open. Her palms were damp with sweat, and she wiped away the perspiration running down her temple. She made it to the bathroom just in time. She retched over and over. The vomit burned, and tears dripped down her face. She wiped the snot and tears with toilet paper, closed the lid, and then put her head on it.

A knock sounded on the door.

TWENTY SIX



SHE COULDN'T GET UP. Not yet. She was too sick to care who it was.

The knock came again.

"Come in," she rasped, and then she snapped her mouth shut before she could throw up again.

"Hope?" Dahlia's voice filtered back through the room. Seconds later, she opened the door to the bathroom. "Ah, here you are." She looked at the toilet and then back to Hope's face. "Bollocks. You all right?"

Hope shook her head.

"No, I wouldn't think so." Dahlia squatted down until she was sitting on the floor too. She reached out as if to touch Hope and then withdrew her hand.

"Is he going to be okay?" Hope whispered.

Dahlia let out a long breath and frowned. "I wish I could tell you he's going to be okay, but it's too early to tell. Endy sucks. He isn't even as good as Thenia when she's drunk. And those other boys are worse."

Hope's tears ran unchecked, dripping onto her sweater and making little wet marks. She was congested, and her entire face was oozing. She grabbed tissue, scrubbed at her eyes, and wiped her nose. "I'm sorry."

“It’s not your fault.” Dahlia leaned over and flushed the toilet. “That stinks.”

Both were silent as the water washed down the drain and then trickled to fill the bowl again.

“Athan never should’ve taken you out of the conservatory,” Dahlia said when it was quiet again. “I don’t know what he was thinking. Not that it matters now.”

“Why not? I mean, Xan’s allowed to—”

Dahlia raised her brows. “Xan knows how to fight.” She pursed her lips. “Athan is brave and impetuous, and wicked smart. But he’s a mediocre fighter.”

Somehow that made Hope feel worse. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t.” Dahlia held up her hand. “Don’t feel bad.” Pride gleamed in her eyes. “I can’t believe you fought three Skia at once and lived. And killed two? That’s pretty amazing, you know.”

Dahlia was clearly trying to cheer Hope up, but the pit in her stomach gaped, raw and painful. “If Athan hadn’t stepped in—”

“You’ve got to stop that, or you’ll go crazy. If Athan hadn’t stepped in, it would be you in that bed instead of him, Hope. And that wouldn’t be better. Trust me.”

Hope couldn’t argue without revealing anything.

Dahlia put her hand on Hope’s leg. “As a senior demigod, and the one that took you out of the conservatory in the first place, he should have done everything to protect you. That was his responsibility.” Dahlia stood up. “Now, are you done in here?”

Maybe? “Yeah.”

Hope dropped the toilet paper into the garbage and gingerly pulled herself up.

“Good. I hate puke.” Dahlia stepped out of the restroom.

Hope washed her hands while Dahlia continued talking.

“One of the reasons I could never get along with Dion is he’s always trying to get everyone piss drunk. And even if it tastes good going down”—she pointed at the toilet—“it’s nasty coming up. I reserve it for only very special occasions.”

Like having to go to Half Moon Bay. But Hope didn’t say it. Instead, she focused on herself. “I hate how it affects my reflexes.”

Hope dried her hands and came out of the bathroom.

“I know, right? Not sure why the boys like it so much. Now, do you need anything?”

“Nope. I’m going to brush my teeth and clean up. Then can I go sit with Athan?”

Dahlia nodded. “You might have to fight Obelia for the right, but I won’t stop you.”

“Thanks, Dahlia.”

“Sure, ’course. And for what it’s worth, I’m glad you’re safe.”

Emotion welled in Hope’s throat. It was nice to have friends.

“I’ll check on you later, Hope.”

“Okay.”

The door clicked shut, and Hope went to lock it. She went back to the bathroom and set her knives on the counter. She rinsed her mouth and then brushed her teeth and her tongue. Twice. Sticky with sweat and blood, Hope turned on the shower and peeled off her clothes. She let the hot water beat down on her skin, relieving the tension in her back.

She dressed in gray sweats and a black T-shirt and then padded her way to Athan’s room. Hope knocked once, and when there was no answer, she slowly opened the door.

Athan's room was dark, lit only by a small floor lamp in the shape of a candlestick. The walls were a pale-olive-green and the bedding and upholstery a darker shade of the same color with accents of rich blue. Trophies from track and field lined a high shelf, and several shelves of books lined one entire wall. In one corner were a smattering of musical instruments and a desk by the window.

The desk was covered with papers, and there were several frames containing black-and-white pictures. As Hope drew closer, she saw a beautiful woman with fair hair, pale skin, and bright eyes. There was another one with Athan, the woman, and an older man who looked a lot like Athan. They were dressed in what appeared to be period costumes from the 1800s, and they were laughing. There were a few others of Athan and the man in regular clothes and one picture of a young lady with dark hair and dark eyes.

Suddenly feeling as though she were prying, Hope stopped examining the room and went over to the bed. A chair was pulled up next to the bed, and Hope sat in it.

"Athan?" She reached out and took his hand. It was warm and dry, and touching him brought back memories. "I'm so sorry," she whispered the words and put her head on the bed. His scent was everywhere. Her tears fell silently.

Hope awoke in the middle of the night, stiffness in her shoulders and neck from sleeping at a weird angle. Her first thoughts were of Athan, and she studied his body to see if he'd moved.

A sheen of sweat covered his brow, and, even in sleep, his features were contorted with the pain.

Hope went to the bathroom and ran a washcloth under cold water. When she stepped into the room, she noticed the door ajar. A cursory glance around revealed nothing significant out of place or altered. She went to the door and

scanned the hall. There was no one, and Hope tried to shake off a sense of unease.

She went back to Athan and put the washcloth on his forehead. A familiar squeak made her sit upright. That was her door! She dashed down the hall.

Her door was closed but unlatched, yielding to the pressure of her hand. Certainly she would've closed it. With raw nerves, she eased the door open but left the light off. Her eyes, similar to that of a cat, dilated quickly, allowing for perfect vision even with the minimal light. Scanning her room, nothing seemed amiss in the almost sterile environment. She stayed in the doorway until the door was wide open, touching the opposite wall. Through the break on the hinge side she could see the blank wall. No one there either.

She stepped through the door. The air carried her familiar smell and something more. Somebody had been in there. And probably more than one somebody. She crossed the room, checked the closet, and then the bathroom. Nothing. It was as stark and ugly as always, and completely unoccupied. The smell could have been Dahlia and Xan.

Hope reached across the counter for a cup, and something nagged at her consciousness. Her gaze traveled over the bathroom—the toilet, shower, counter, mirror. Something was missing.

Her clothes lay in a heap on the floor, right where she'd left them, the blood now a dark, rusty stain. She kicked them to the corner and reached down to pick them up. Her muscles screamed in protest. She jerked upright, and her head swam. Her nausea resurfaced, and a feeling of defeat crawled over her. She'd better lie down before the exhaustion, or whatever this was, made her. She dropped her clothes in the laundry basket and collapsed on the bed.

IN THE HOURS BETWEEN night and morning, Hope awoke to the distant muffled

voices of an argument. Sleep pulled and sucked at her consciousness, promising relief from the aching of her muscles. She rolled to the side and then pushed herself up on the bed. The nausea was gone, but her head was only lightly tethered and threatened to float away.

She crossed her room and opened the door. The voices scratched and clawed at each other, almost like physical blows. She debated going back to bed, but her stomach growled, letting her know that wasn't an option.

When she recognized his voice, she ran down the stairs and straight into the kitchen.

"Xan!" Her smile froze and dropped with her limbs when she took in the rest of the scene.

Endy and Obelia faced him but turned to glare at Hope, accusations sharp in their eyes. Xan held both her daggers in his hands. His consternation made her want to run back upstairs and throw up again.

"Where did you get those?" She stepped forward and held out her hand.

"They were in your room. Do you think they're yours?" Endy reached out to grab the gold dagger, but Xan held them high.

"They are." She glared at Endy and held out her hand to Xan. Her anger spilled over, and she glared at him when he didn't give them to her. "They were given to me by my mother." She pointed at Endy. "You went into my room without my permission." She stepped forward, tempted to hit him. "Besides the rules of propriety, aren't there house rules that forbid such prying?"

"Hope." Xan sounded weary.

"What?" Her jaw clenched. How dare they make her feel like she was on trial for having immortal weapons? How dare their sneaking be the reason she got in trouble? And beneath the anger was screaming, hot fear. Suddenly, the smells in her room were recognizable. Recognizable because they stood

right in front of her. Both Obelia and Endy had been in her room.

“These are yours?” It was as though Xan were willing it to not be true.

“They are.”

“Where did you get them?” He seemed to sink into himself, as if the burden was too heavy to bear. “Did you steal them?”

“Steal them?” She frowned. “No. I told you my mother gave them to me.”

“Who’s your mother?”

“Leto.”

“Leto? The Titan goddess? Impossible!” Endy sounded outraged. “There is no way—”

“Stop.” Xan grabbed the golden demigod by the shirt. “Obelia, why don’t you and Endy go find someone else to harass?” He shoved Endy away from him. “I’d like to speak with Hope alone.”

“We want to witness.” Obelia scowled and took a step toward Xan.

Xan towered over her, glaring at the petite demigod. “Get. Out. Now! You too, Endy.”

Obelia’s legs bowed, and she walked away without another word.

Endy stood, his body ramrod straight, scowling at Xan.

“Endymion!” Xan roared.

Hope covered her ears.

“I command you to leave this room!” Xan punctuated his directive with his fist to Endy’s face.

Something crunched, and Endy staggered backward and fell to the floor, blood dripping from his smashed nose. He looked up at Xan with a mixture of terror and hatred, while his hand smeared the crimson across his face.

“You . . . you broke my nose.”

Xan stood over Endy, his fists clenched and his frustration simmering at the surface.

“I can’t believe you,” Endy growled. “You know what this means.” He pointed at the weapons still in Xan’s hands. “She’s a monster. There’s nothing else that could explain—”

With a flick of his wrist, Xan threw the dagger with the blood rubies. It spun through the air, flashing silver and red. With a thud, it lodged in the floor right between Endy’s legs.

“Shut your face. I’ll decide what I do.” He waved the gold dagger. “Now, if you don’t leave in the next five seconds, Sun-boy, I will kill you with your own weapon.” He held up the golden blade.

“You wouldn’t dare,” he said. Despite his bravado, he scrambled up, then wiped his nose with a wince.

Xan smiled cruelly. “Try me.”

Endy shifted, as if to walk forward, but then shifted again and stepped back.

“You’re an idiot, Xan. If you had your way, you’d get us all killed. Well, I’m not going to sit here and do nothing. I’m getting my brothers.” With that, he walked from the room, cursing under his breath.

Oh gods, his brothers.

Xan pointed to the kitchen table. “Sit down.”

Hope dropped into a wooden chair.

Xan crossed over to the doorway and stooped low. He clasped the hilt of the dagger and pulled it from the floor, leaving a gaping scar in the hardwood.

He took a seat across the table from Hope and set the daggers between them.

“Where did you get them?”

“From my mom.” Her eyes welled with tears. “Like I said.”

“And your mom is Leto?”

“Yes.”

“The Titan goddess?”

Hope dropped her head. “No.”

Xan rubbed his hand over his face. “Is your mom a goddess?”

“No.” There it was. Now there was no way of going back.

“What in the name of Hades?” He pushed back from the table and paced the room. “Even Poseidon said . . . Oh gods, he *knew*. This is bad.” He stopped pacing and came back to the table. He pulled the chair out and flipped it backward before sitting down. He narrowed his icy blue eyes. “But you’re not mortal?”

“No.” Hope focused on the table, her finger tracing concentric circles in the wood.

He took a deep breath. “I can hardly believe I’m asking you this.” He reached out to touch her, but withdrew his hand before contact. “Hope, are you really . . .”

Hope forced herself to meet his eyes.

Sadness, worry, pain crossed his features, one after another. Xan dropped his head into his hands, and his breathing hitched.

She owed him this. “My mom died about a year and a half ago,” Hope began. “She’d started dating Paul Crawford. She said it didn’t mean anything; they were just having fun. And it was nice to have a friend. Sarra, Paul’s daughter, was my best friend.” She pushed away the emotions climbing through her heart. “She was the first friend I’d had for, well, most of my life really. Until then, we’d moved a lot, trying to stay hidden from the other immortals, Skia, demigods, even the gods.”

Hope took a deep breath. “Anyway, it was Friday. I went to school like any other day. Sarra and I rode the bus; we talked about what we were reading and what we were going to do on Saturday. I was in English when

someone from the office came in. They called my name, and I was surprised. I'd never gotten called to the office before. But I thought my mom had come to get me to go on a trip or maybe shopping, you know?" She paused, the memories catching up to her.

She tried to stop the tears from coming, pushing her emotions down. She gasped a couple of shaky breaths before continuing, "When I got there, they had me sit outside the principal's office. Then, the school counselor called me into her office. She told me there had been an accident, a fire, at our apartment building. That my mom had been caught in it and she'd passed. That's how she said it. 'She's passed, Hope,' like it was a test she'd taken. At some point, I stood up and ran out of her office. I remember running on the street. I ran all seven miles to the apartment. And when I got there, it was black. Burned. Not all of it, but enough. I sat there until Sarra got off the bus, and her father took her away, calling me a monster."

Hope couldn't hold back her tears, and they slid down her cheeks and onto her shirt. "I ended up in foster care for a few weeks until the court cleared my emancipation paperwork. I don't remember much except yelling and babies crying." She dropped her head into her hands. "I do have one vivid memory of sitting in my room at a time that I had changed. Someone was banging on the door, and I screamed for them to go away. I couldn't have them see me like that." Hope gestured to her body.

Xan said nothing, but his eyes were wide.

Hope continued, "It's only two days and one night, when Apollo's power is the strongest. Otherwise I look human." She raised her shoulders and brought her elbows close to her body, curling into herself. "After the emancipation was granted, I moved to Goldendale. Priska was trying to track down information about what had happened to my mom. I got settled, got into a routine, and went to school. But, I was . . . lonely. And then I met

Athan. At first, I didn't even like him. After a Skia attacked me, we kind of became friends. At least I thought we were friends. I didn't even know he was a demigod until another Skia attacked us both. Anyway, Athan said . . .” She shook her head. This wasn't about her and Athan. “It doesn't matter what he said.”

Her gold eyes pled for understanding. “I had no intention of ever coming to a conservatory when Athan tried to recruit me before he knew what I was. I knew demigods killed monsters. But . . .” She couldn't tell him about Artemis. “I was told I needed to get to the Olympian library. This was the only way.”

“Bloody Mer,” Xan swore.

“Now, I don't even know why I did. I haven't found a single answer.” She put her head in her hands. “I'm sorry, Xan. I didn't mean to deceive you.”

“I still don't know what you are. These daggers are really yours?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Are you the Sphinx?” He ran his fingers through his hair.

Hope didn't want to answer, but if anyone deserved the truth it was Xan. Gods, he was going to hate her. It was physically painful to have to admit it. She closed her eyes and nodded her assent.

“Bloody Hades!” He slammed his fist on the table.

Shame bound her. Hope shifted in her chair; her body screamed to flee. But she owed him this, so she gritted her teeth and stayed seated.

Xan yelled and shoved away from the table, his chair crashing to the floor. He grabbed her arm in a vice-like grip. With a yank, he pulled her up. “What the Hades were you thinking?”

TWENTY SEVEN



INSTEAD OF WAITING FOR her response, he dragged her across the kitchen toward the pantry.

No, not the pantry.

He stopped in front of the other door, the one with the key pad, and punched in a code. With a forceful yank, he pulled the door open, shoved her in, and then slammed it shut.

What the Kracken?

Hope stared at a stainless steel wall, the seams of the door almost invisible.

Thump. Thump, thump, thump.

Oh, gods. Xan was pounding on the door.

Guilt churned her stomach, but she pushed it away. Honesty wouldn't have gotten her a better result. She wouldn't have even gotten in the front door. Artemis had told her this would be the only way. What more could she have done?

Thump, thump. Thump, thump.

She surveyed the cold room. It was small, no more than three cubic meters. The walls, ceiling, and floor all appeared to be stainless steel. The

door was flush with the wall, no handle on her side. The light came through small holes in the ceiling, the artificial light harsh and bright.

Thump, thump, thump.

She sat in the corner and pulled her knees to her chest.

Thump. Thump.

It was like Athan all over again, only worse. So much worse.

Why was it so much worse?

Thump.

She dropped her head to her knees and let her tears drip to the cold, hard floor. She knew he'd feel that way. Hadn't Priska warned her? If they discovered what she was, they would kill her.

The hissing of air startled her from her stupor.

Xan stood in the doorway, sadness filling his eyes. He extended his hand, his raw knuckles dripped blood onto the hardwood floors. "All the books . . . All the stories . . . I thought the Sphinx was killed in Thebes. I thought Oedipus killed you after he solved the riddle. How old are you really?"

She scrambled up but stayed where she was. "Seventeen."

"How *long* have you been seventeen?" He crossed his arms and frowned.

She hated that he didn't trust her anymore. "Almost a year. I'll be eighteen next month."

He seemed to make a decision as he stood aside and waved for her to pass. "But you were created thousands of years ago?"

If he was going to kill her, he wouldn't let her out, right? Could she trust him? Hope stepped into the kitchen. "Not me, my grandmother, Phaidra. She was the first Sphinx. She lived thousands of years. Her daughter, my mother, was named Leto."

"Leto. By the gods. How did Poseidon know?" He let out a slow breath. "You don't know what this means." He blinked, pausing too long as he

cursed to himself. “All right.” He closed the door, crossed the kitchen, and sat down at the table.

Hope stared. Certainly he couldn’t mean to continue their previous conversation?

He indicated that she sit.

Maybe he did. She sat across from him.

“Tell me, how is it that you are not”—he gestured to her body—“the Sphinx all the time?”

“I don’t know.” She looked at the door to the steel room. The door was dented, as if someone had taken a sledgehammer to it. She averted her eyes. “This is how it’s always been for me and my mom. Only around the new moon when Apollo’s power is the greatest, otherwise we appear human.”

“The history of the Sphinx ended when you, or rather your grandmother, died after Oedipus solved her riddle. She was always a Sphinx.”

Hope snorted. “Your history is wrong, and it sucks.”

“Obviously.” He gave her a half smirk but still wore his worry like a mask. “I don’t know what to do, Hope. Endy and Obelia are demanding you be killed. And they’ll pull Tre, Ty, and Prax into this. Technically you’re a monster.” He swallowed. “Although I can hardly believe it.”

“I can leave. I never should’ve come here in the first place. Please tell me you’ll let me leave.”

He stretched his hand across the table and grabbed hers but refused to meet her eyes. “I don’t know what to do, but I don’t want you to go, and I don’t want you to die, either.”

Hope pulled her hand away. “Now what?”

He threw his hands up. “What possessed you to come to a conservatory?”

Hope told him about going to the temple, giving Artemis an offering, and then what the goddess had told her, careful to leave Priska out of it. “I only

want to find a way to break the curse.” Hope leaned forward. “I want to be free to make my own choices.”

Xan let out a prolonged exhale. “I’ll call a quorum. We’ll discuss this, and then majority rules on the decision. It’s the best I can do.”

Hope dropped her head on the table. “They’ll kill me.”

Xan ground his teeth. “No. I’ll call Thenia and Kaia and see when they’ll be back.” He sounded hopeful but not very convinced. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

She wanted to believe him. “Can you really promise that?”

His shoulders sagged. “I think so. They like you.”

“Like me?” In what world did demigods like monsters?

“Not everyone wants to wipe out the monsters. It’d be easier if Thenia was here already. She’s really good at reasoning, especially with Endy and his brothers.”

“Right now it’s you, Dahlia, Endy, Tre, Ty, Praxis, and Obelia?”

“Dahlia left last night to meet Kaia, but Dion’s here, right?”

“Um, yeah.” It sounded like terrible odds.

“Is Athan awake?”

Hope shook her head. “I haven’t checked on him this morning, but he was comatose last night.”

“*Shite*.” He hit the table with his bloody hand and then winced.

“They’re going to want to kill me, huh?” It felt as if she were talking about someone else, and yet the pit in her stomach wouldn’t completely let her forget the sphinx was her.

He ground his teeth and ran his fingers through his already disheveled hair. With another long exhale, he stood. “Let me see what I can do.”

“Xan?” She had to ask. No one had told her anything, and she needed to know. “Is Athan going to be all right?”

“Probably.” His face was sallow, and he looked exhausted. “It wasn’t a death strike, right? It just nicked the leg?”

Hope nodded.

“Yeah, he’ll be fine in a couple weeks. Skia blades only kill a demigod if we’re struck in a vital organ.” He pointed to his chest and then his head. “To a human, its very touch would be deadly.” He scratched his cheek. “I have no idea what would happen if one touched you.”

Hope had a good idea, but it didn’t matter.

“Anyway, other wounds from Skia cause a coma for a bit. Our bodies have to burn off the poison, or something like that.”

“Would any immortal weapon do that or only the blade of a Skia?”

“I’m guessing any immortal weapon, which is why I threatened Endy. Thenia would probably know, or maybe Obelia.”

There was no way she was going to ask the daughter of Hestia anything. Ever.

“I’m going to see if Dion is sober. I don’t know if I’ve ever seen him sober, but we can hope.” He pursed his lips. “You should go to your room. I can’t promise you’ll be safe there, but it’s that or . . .” He glanced at the steel room.

She flinched at the thought of being stuck in the metal box. “Can’t I leave?”

Xan shook his head. “That’s the fastest way to ensure they hunt you down. This way, the sons of Apollo will be bound by the quorum’s decision.”

“Would you kill me?” If that was her fate, she knew he would do it swiftly. Kindly, if there was such a thing.

“What?” His posture slumped and he blinked, blinked, blinked at her.

“If you guys vote, and the majority wants to kill me, would you do it?”

He stood over her, and with his still-bloody knuckles, rubbed his chin.

“You want me to kill you?”

“No! But if that was the vote—?”

“No one is going to kill you, Hope. I promise.”

“Okay.” His words were hollow, but she didn’t have the strength to argue. She leaned back in the chair. “Can I go visit Athan?”

Xan rolled his eyes. “Make it quick.”

Then, muttering something about quorums and Dion’s sobriety, he left the room.

Hope sat at the table, tracing the wood grain and then the pattern on the placemats. She wasn’t sure why Xan would let her roam free; everything she knew about demigods and monsters contradicted it. Maybe he really did care for her, regardless.

The door was ajar when she got to Athan’s room, and Hope tapped quietly before walking in. The air was heavy with incense, the lights dim. She stopped in her tracks when Obelia stood up from the chair at the side of the bed.

“What are you doing here, monster?” Obelia whispered, but the small girl’s voice seethed with venom.

Hope gritted her teeth.

“You should leave!” Obelia came at Hope with clenched fists.

“I can’t?” Hope felt beaten, and her timid words came out more like a question.

“You can’t?”

“No.” She pulled herself straight, feigning courage she did not feel. “Xan told me I had to stay until after your quorum.”

“He’s calling a *quorum*?” Obelia’s voice was no longer quiet. “What in the name of Hades? This is *ajabu! Hawezi kuita Kiwango!*”

Hope stood dumbfounded; she wasn’t even sure what language Obelia was

speaking.

“*Shetri! Huwezi kufanya hivyo na mimi! Wewe ni yanaangamiza kila kitu!*” Obelia continued screaming at her.

The door opened, and Dion strode in. He stopped, his gaze darted between the two girls, and then turned to the demigod. “*Me synchoreite*, Obelia. I, uh, do not think the *dynati foni*, shouting, is helping our *filos*, no? You come with me, *arketa koritsi*.” He grabbed Obelia by the hand.

“Don’t touch me! It’s not me that should be leaving!” Obelia stuck out an accusatory finger. “Get her out of here!”

“No, no. Let’s go. You are *ichiros*, very loud, no?”

He pulled on her hand one more time, but Obelia resisted again.

Hope stood transfixed by the scene. Even though she wanted to help, she knew of no way to intervene without making it worse. She couldn’t understand why Dion was helping her, and not Obelia.

“If you touch me again—”

Dion didn’t let Obelia finish her statement. With speed that contradicted inebriation, he crossed the room. He clamped one hand over Obelia’s mouth, and used his other arm to encircle her body and arms, then picked her up. Swaying, either from her weight or the alcohol, Dion carried Obelia from the room.

Hope stood still for a solid minute. He’d let her stay. She went over to the bed, sat down, and with a deep sigh, she put her head on the mattress’s edge.

“What a mess, Athan,” she whispered, taking his hand. Intertwining their fingers, she stroked his soft skin. Her heart pulsed with a sense of grief. Leaning over the bed, she put her lips to his forehead then sat back down again.

“I shouldn’t have come here.” She stared at him, as if he might answer. But his eyes remained closed, his chest rising and falling in a deep, slow

rhythm. “You know, if it weren’t for you, I never would have. You were very convincing, son of Hermes.” She swallowed back the hurt that bubbled up. “All that time in Goldendale, I trusted you implicitly. I never, not for a second, thought you might be lying to me.”

She got up from the chair and paced the room. The muted light and movement helped diffuse her tension. She walked slowly back to the bed, all her focus on the young man she couldn’t help but love. Trying to memorize his features, she traced his eyes, his nose, and his lips. She let her fingers trace from his shoulder to his hand and back up again. She glanced at his eyes, and seeing they were still closed, she picked up his hand and pressed it to her lips.

“Demigod of thieves, you stole my heart, and now I think I’m going to need it back.” Her eyes filled with tears. “I can’t stay here. I’m sure they’ll never let me, and with you injured, I’m afraid some will want to kill me.” She choked on a sob.

The fingers in her hand twitched and then clasped hers.

“I won’t let you go.” His voice was scratchy.

“Athan?” Her mouth formed his name but made no sound.

“If you leave, Hope, I’ll find you. I’ll travel the whole world to find you.”

Tears filled her eyes. He was awake!

He smiled, and his look was one of infinite patience. “Hope.”

For a moment, she allowed herself to almost believe it would be okay.

“We’ll find a way,” he said.

Her heart fluttered. “A way to what?”

His lips pulled up into the familiar smirk, and he whispered, “To break the curse. I won’t let Apollo have you.”

Hope checked behind her, but the hallway was empty. She crossed the room and closed the door. She wanted to cry. “You don’t hate me?”

His eyes widened, and his already ashen skin paled further. “Gods, Hope. Really? I’m okay with you in whatever form. I like you. I told you that. Your curse is only . . . a curse. It doesn’t define *you*.”

His words stole her heart. Cautiously, she leaned forward and brushed her lips against his. It wasn’t nearly enough, but she refused to hurt him anymore. She drew back to look him in the eyes. “I’m sorry I ran.”

A deep growl rumbled through Athan’s chest. His green eyes lit from within, and weaving his hands through her hair, he pulled Hope back to him.

They kissed, tentatively at first, but caution disappeared when Hope climbed onto his bed to be closer. It was like fire and lightning, and love and warmth. His hands cupped her shoulders, then traced down her back. She could drown in him. Love, and hope, and a feeling of fierceness swelled from her heart to her toes.

“Gods, I’ve missed you,” he breathed against her skin.

The door crashed opened, and Hope jumped, instinctively pulling away from Athan and scrambling to the edge of the bed.

Endy stalked across the thick carpet, his eyes narrowed as if hunting prey. “Well, well, well. The beast’s here. Are you trying to finish him off?”

Her blood boiled, and she clenched her hands into fists. “What are you talking about?”

“Are you going to strangle him?” Endy taunted. “You know, that’s what your name means.” His smirk was cruel, and his confidence was unnerving.

“Hope doesn’t mean—”

“No. *Sphinx*. For being creative, coming up with all those riddles, you’re not very smart.”

“Hey!” Athan shifted and spoke around Hope, “Get out of here.”

“Don’t worry, Athan. I’ll make sure she doesn’t hurt you anymore.” Endy towered over Hope, his hand resting on a golden blade attached to his belt.

The insult took her off guard, and Hope's jaw went slack. "I would never hurt him."

She started to rise, but before she was upright, Endy grabbed Hope's shoulders and threw her to the ground. She landed on her hands and knees but popped back up.

Instinct took over, and she slipped into a fighting stance.

Endy laughed. "I know Xan tells you you're good, but he's just trying to get in your pants." He pulled out the golden dagger and brandished it in front of her face. "Do you recognize this? I can kill you with it. Do you really want to fight me, Sphinx? It will only take one—"

Endy didn't get to finish.

Hope was pushed aside, and Athan gripped the golden boy by his shirt collar. "Don't. Touch. Her." His breaths came in short gasps. "She saved my life."

"You're sick," Endy argued. "You don't know what you're saying." He continued to wave the bright blade. "Lie down, Athan. I'll take care of this."

Athan didn't counter with words. He struck with his fist, and the crack of bone meeting bone reverberated throughout the room.

Endy fell to the floor in a heap.

"Holy Hades," Hope breathed.

Athan slid to the floor.

"A little help . . . please?" He grimaced as he pulled himself up to a sitting position.

Hope got him back to bed and pulled the covers over him.

He grabbed her hand. "Don't disappear, Hope. Please don't leave."

She caressed his cheek, his whiskers scratching her fingertips. "Go to sleep. You need to rest or you won't get better."

His head bobbed unsteadily, and she was sure he would pass out. It was all

her fault. She blinked back tears and brushed his hair away from his face.

“Shhh. Go to sleep. Everything will be okay.” She knew the words were a lie, but what could she say?

“Promise me. Don’t make me search. I will, Hope. If you leave . . .” His words slurred together, and he collapsed in exhaustion.

How could anything ever be okay?

Hope pulled Endy to the corner of the room, put a pillow from a chair under his head, and then placed a cold washcloth on his cheek where a mottled purple blossom had begun to spread. If he kept this up, his face would be hamburger by evening. At the very least, he was going to have a nasty bruise to go with his broken nose.

She glanced around the disheveled room. Everywhere she went, she seemed to make a mess.

SHE SHOULD’VE GONE TO her room. It’s where Xan had told her to go, but something told her it would also be the first place Endy would go if he wanted to find her. Endy, or anyone else. She needed someplace safe so she could think. Quiet and safe.

The library. Besides, there was one book left by the Moirai. Maybe she’d get a chance to finish it before she left.

She pulled open the heavy doors, the smell of old paper and wood polish assailing her. As she made her way through the library, the sunlight dimmed and the artificial light grew. She finally reached the back of the room and pulled the heavy volume from its shelf. Brushing the dust off the cover, she read the inscription. *Curse*. Exactly like her *Book* and the others by the Moirai. She traced the gold lettering, but her mind was still reeling from Athan’s kiss, Endy’s accusations, and Athan punching Endy out.

What was she going to do? She needed to leave. Could she stay until

Athan was better? Lost in her thoughts, she startled when the sound of heavy clanking crawled down the aisle where she sat.

Hope jumped to her feet, but the monster was already too close.

TWENTY EIGHT



BRIAREUS SHUFFLED FORWARD dragging a laden cart behind him. Most of his arms and hands hung heavy at his side, bound in chains. A thick cable connected through the bindings, tying them to the trunk of his body. Only four hands remained free enough to move, and then only shoulder height. The monster's heads had swollen, red eyes, and snot ran from several of his noses.

Hope wanted to sneak away, but he was blocking her only exit.

She knew the moment he spotted her, for his advance ground to a halt.

"You?" Two hands scrubbed at faces smeared with tears, and two hands pointed at her. "You are here?"

"You're not in Tartarus?" Hadn't that been where Xan said he'd be?

"Zeus is kinder than you demigods." He shook his chains, perhaps to frighten her, but it was clear the chains held him bound. "You really wanted to read about monsters?" he asked. Heads swiveled to focus on her.

She eyed his hulking mass and weighed her chance for freedom a marginal nil. She gulped, trying unsuccessfully to swallow her fear. "I wasn't trying to be rude. I really wanted to know."

"Why do you care?" He inched forward but stopped as soon as she

scooted back. “What does it matter to you?”

What could she say? Why would a demigod have any interest in monsters? They were hated and hunted in the past, feared and confined now. There was nothing but the truth. “I want to learn how to break the curse.”

Neither spoke as they regarded one another.

Finally, Briareus lifted all of his heads, and all of his eyes turned to her. His gaze was staggering. “You would want to break a monster’s curse?”

She bowed under the weight of it. His gaze and disbelief. Her aching need to break the curse and be free. “Yes.”

He sat, and the ground shook. “The gods don’t show mercy, except as it will benefit them. Remember that when you ask for something; always make it in their best interest to help you.” He pulled on the chains and then let them fall to the floor. “Curses cannot be broken.”

Hope’s heart broke.

“But words can be twisted, interpreted; the meanings can change. Find a way to bend the words to meet your needs, and you can help your monster.” He sighed, another chorus of echoes. “And then will you, one day, help me?”

Hope shook her head. “How can I help you?”

“Will you hear my story? The Moirai’s books are bound in Hades, even these are to go there now. I’m afraid no one will remember us. I want someone to remember.”

Such a small thing. But not really. One’s story was the essence of one’s life. “Tell me,” she said. “What is your story?”

Briareus told her of the creation by Cronus, being cast into Tartarus, and being rescued by Zeus. “We worked hard for him, my brothers and I, and we defeated the Titans. But the gods fear anything with power beyond their control. Those of us that weren’t defeated in the war became bound. When we protested, Zeus sent the demigods after us. Those that escaped the

slaughter were again bound in Tartarus, or bound to a different form of torture.”

“Like filing library books.”

Briareus nodded.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry for me. I hope you find a way to twist your monster out of its bindings. But you best be careful.” His heads swiveled around, searching, and then tilted to listen. Satisfied with the silence in the library, he continued, “That young demigod that brought you here, the son of Ares?”

Hope flinched at the mention of Xan, and chills crawled over her skin.

“What about him?”

“He’s the one that led the slaughter. He’s the one that killed the monsters. Practically bathed in their blood. You best be careful of that one. If he finds out what you’re doing . . .” His heads shook, and his four arms wiped at several different noses. “If he finds out, he’ll kill you.”

A burst of fear exploded in her chest. The walls of the immortal library seemed to contract with the revelation. The son of Ares. Oh, gods! She’d heard of him. Learned about him in school. Was that what he was trying to allude to? A time in his life he wasn’t proud of?

She rubbed her eyes, and a burst of memory solidified. She’d seen him. The dream. Oh, gods the dream she’d had. It wasn’t a dream. It was a memory. Xan. He’d chased her when she was a child. Her and her mom. That was . . . No, no, no. How could that be Xan? The two realities refused to mesh. It couldn’t be.

She scrambled up. “I’ve got to go. Right now.” She needed to get out of there. Gods, how could she have not put it together? Was this the shame he spoke of? She shoved the book on the shelf and inched her way toward Briareus. “Please let me go?”

He scooted to the side and let her pass.

“I hope you free your friend,” he said as she passed. Several of his heads echoed the words, “Free your friend.” It was a sad, heart-wrenching sound.

With tears in her eyes, she accepted his benediction. Would that be her future? “Thanks.”

She ran to her room and slammed the door.

Hope grabbed her duffle bags from the closet and threw them on the bed. She pulled the leather-bound book of her history, another *Book of the Fates* from under the mattress. This would be the only volume of the Moirai not in the Underworld. Why were they bound there? She flipped it over and traced the outline of the gold Greek lettering, **κατάρα**, *curse*.

She opened the cover. The words blurred and then came into focus. On the first page in the same gold ink was the curse. The words Apollo had spoken at her great-grandmother’s deathbed.

*On this night and in this land
Hear the curse, how it will stand.
Your body and your beauty be
Touched and marked eternally of me
And when your family is complete
Then Death will visit on swift feet
And rob you of the joy divine
The joy that should be yours and mine
Until we wed, and love and more
This shall stand forevermore*

APOLLO

Hope choked down her anger with the god and her frustration with her impotence. Somehow there had to be a way to make her free.

A scratching sound was the only warning. Hope set the book down just as her door slammed open.

Endy, Prax, Ty, Tre, and Obelia swaggered in, all wearing matching grins. The older boys led the charge and came straight at Hope.

She scurried to the other side of the bed.

“What do you want?” But she already knew.

Ty laughed and then leaned toward her. “You.”

She dove over the bed in an attempt to get to the door, but Tre grabbed her as she crossed the floor.

“Whoa, little monster. Don’t run away. We want to talk to you.”

Right. Sure. That was exactly what they wanted. “Let me go, and we can talk.”

Pain exploded across her face, and the room swam.

“You’re never going anywhere again, beast.” Ty grabbed her hair and pulled it back, forcing her to look up at him.

“Did you really think I would let it go? That nothing would happen to you?” Endy sneered.

Hope jerked, trying to pull away from the other boys, but her strength was no match for them. She scanned the room and noticed Obelia in the corner by the door.

“It was an accident. The Skia attack was an accident. You heard Athan. I fought the Skia.” Her focus went from Obelia to Endy. As if he would corroborate anything she said.

His blue eyes glared hatred.

Another sharp crack and more pain. Starbursts danced across her vision, and the room swayed before her again.

“Don’t even go there. You are nothing. A monstrosity unleashed upon the world for too long. But we’re here to fix all that.”

Warmth trickled down her chin, and Hope tasted blood. She took a blow to her stomach like a car crashing into her. Her internal organs scrambled, and she wheezed for air. “I don’t know what you want from me.”

His boot connected with her spine, right through her belly button. Her breath whooshed out, and she dropped to the floor, doubled over.

They kicked her again and again.

Hope tried to protect her face from the blows. This could not be happening. But it was. It was exactly what Priska had said would happen if they found out what she was.

“You dare to defy the edict?” One of the sons of Apollo yelled and punctuated the question with a kick to Hope’s face.

Something cracked, either hands or a nose. Everything throbbed with pain. Hope’s teeth tangled with her lips, and blood ran down her throat, causing her to cough. She spat a red mess onto the floor.

“We’ll show you what happens to monsters.” Ty yanked Hope upright, and with a fistful of her hair he pulled her head back, exposing her neck.

Endy pulled out a golden dagger. “Do you recognize this?” He fingered the blade. “Your grandmother killed an heir to Apollo with it.” He nodded as if answering her unasked question. “I took it back.” He crouched down next to her. “I think it only fitting that the same blade is used to end your pathetic life.”

Hope closed her eyes. Death couldn’t be any more painful. White-hot agony seared her neck. Her stomach roiled with protest, emptying its contents. A bright light begged her to open her eyes, and the scent of honeysuckle filled the room. But the pain persisted, and someone screamed. A foul stench singed her nostrils. Of course, death smelled like flowers and

burned flesh. She choked and vomited again. *Shouldn't the pain at least lessen if you're dead?* Her entire body throbbed. She clenched her teeth and tried to open her eyes, but they were swollen shut.

"How dare you!" The voice was strange, melodic, and threatening all at once.

She tried again, and this time, her eyelids lifted. Not much, but it was enough.

A golden-skinned man stood in her room. He wore a skirt trimmed in gold and a bronze sash across his bare chest. He almost seemed to . . . glow?

Hope thought to shake her head, but the room started spinning, so she rested it back on the ground and watched. She should know him. Something about the golden coloring was familiar, and the scent of honeysuckle . . .

Apollo. Apollo was there. In her bedroom.

The sun god stood almost a full six inches taller than his son.

"She is not your plaything, bastard." Apollo lifted Endy up by the throat. The golden dagger clattered to the floor, and Endy's hands grasped at Apollo's.

Obelia lay in a heap on the floor by the door, the wall singed black behind her. Something foul filled the air, something dusty and chalky and burnt. The smell of roasted meat made Hope's stomach roil again.

"Did you think you could have her?" Apollo punctuated the rhetorical question with a violent shake of his son's neck. "Did you think I wouldn't notice? That I wouldn't care?"

Endymion's thrashing waned, and his skin tinged blue.

"You will never touch her again." The god's hands became luminous, growing brighter and brighter.

Endy's eyes grew wide, and his lips moved in a silent plea.

The vivid brilliance grew harsh, and Hope closed her eyes. Darkness fell,

and Hope blinked several times. The smell of charred meat grew stronger, hanging heavily in the ashy air. Hope rolled to her side and retched again, then clenched at her beaten stomach. Tears leaked from her eyes. She wanted to cough, but the pain made her whimper.

Silence filled the room, and she glanced up.

“Dear, Sphinx.” Apollo stepped toward her.

She tried to scoot away, but her arm screamed when she put weight on it. She couldn’t even get away an inch.

“You have no reason to fear me, Hope.” He crouched down, his gaze caressing her. “One day, you will know how much I care for you.” His lips parted, and his expression softened. “And you will come to care for me too.” He reached out as if to touch her.

Hope flinched, her eyes closing, her only form of protest. Apollo chuckled and closed the distance. His hand stroked her face and hair. She could smell the ash that clung to his hands and clothes. The ash that had only moments before been his sons.

He ran his hand over her head and lifted a lock of hair. “You are marked to be mine. No one else will have you.”

Words choked her. Hatred burned her throat. She wanted to spit on him. To curse him. To hit him. But shock paralyzed her. Warmth tingled across her scalp, and then trailed its way from her head to her toes. What was he doing? Was he healing her?

Another cough, and Hope scanned the room. Her eyes were no longer swollen, not even tender, and they landed on the demigod daughter of Hestia. Obelia stirred, pulling up onto her hands and knees.

“Our time is up, but I shall see you again soon.” He stepped away and clasped his hands in front of his body. A beat of silence as he measured her. “Beware of death. Despite what you think, Hades will not help you.”

Hades? What was he talking about? Why did he heal her? And he'd killed his own sons. His own sons! Oh gods, was he going to kill Obelia?

Apollo crossed over to the female demigod.

"Daughter of Hestia." He pulled her up by her arm, and her feet dangled above the thick carpet. "You are my witness." He pointed at the room; the black marks on the walls, the ash on the floor.

Obelia's eyes dilated. Her mouth opened and closed and opened again, but no sound came out.

"No one shall touch her, or they will have to deal with me. Do you understand?" He shook her, and her head bobbed. "Then tell the other demigods." He dropped her, and her small body crumpled in a heap. "Farewell, Sphinx." The god of light winked at Hope, then, in a flash, he disappeared.

Obelia's face was streaked with tears, and her hands shook as she brought them to her neck and then her lap. "Where's Endy?" Her voice trembled with shock.

Hope lifted her hand and pointed to the closest pile of ash scattered in the carpet fibers.

TWENTY NINE



THERE WAS A KNOCK ON THE DOOR.

Hope pulled her stiff body from the bed with a groan and shuffled across the room. She yanked the door open, and Xan stood in front of her, a plateful of food in one hand and a large brown bag in the other.

“May I come in?”

She shuddered as memories of him picking her up surfaced. Her fear because of his past, and what had happened with Apollo, had her screaming and thrashing in his arms. Xan had been gentle and patient, but she couldn't help the anxiety that even now caused butterflies and caterpillars to battle in her stomach. So much for eating.

“How are you holding up?” he asked as he set the food on the desk and pulled the chair closer to the bed.

Hope shuffled back and wrapped herself in a blue blanket she'd borrowed from Dahlia. “I still hurt.”

Apollo had healed her external wounds before Obelia started screaming for help. Before Xan had come in. Before Hope had collapsed into the sucking darkness. But even after waking two days later, something deep within her ached.

“Aye. I’m sure you do.”

He collapsed into the lone black chair as she climbed back into bed.

“What’s the news?” The quorum had been postponed following Endy’s, Prax’s, Tre’s, and Ty’s deaths. Thenia had thought they needed to report the incident, but no one could decide who should be told since it was the boys’ father who had killed them.

“Athena is coming. Tomorrow.”

Hope cringed.

“I’ve tried to talk Thenia out of it, but four dead demigods and a monster in the conservatory doesn’t sound good. In theory, Athena would be the most impartial. The least biased.” Xan shook his head. “It was the best I could negotiate.”

He and Dahlia had been against reporting anything, but Obelia, Thenia, and Kaia were adamant that the gods should be informed of the breach of the conservatory and the subsequent deaths.

She couldn’t stay. Not that she’d been planning on being there much longer, but she’d have to leave tonight.

“Can I ask you a question?” Ever since Braireus had told her it was Xan who’d led the charge, she’d wanted to know.

Xan stiffened, and his voice was thick when he answered, “Sure.”

“What happened? With the monsters?”

He leaned forward, put his hands on the soft blanket, and smoothed it again and again. “I was still a lad when me mom died,” he whispered. “But I thought I was all grown up. I wanted to impress my father. A boy always wants his father’s approval. Even when it’s wrong.” He took a deep breath. “Everything I ever read about monsters was how terrible they were. How selfish and cruel. I took my pain out on them.” He met Hope’s gaze, but his face was devoid of emotion. “I wouldn’t blame you if you hated me.”

She frowned, trying to reconcile the stories with the boy before her. “You came after us when I was a kid. I remember your face.”

He blushed. “Well, that’s awkward.”

They both laughed, but the tightness in her chest didn’t go away. “Would you have killed us?”

Xan leaned toward her again. “I’d like to think not, but I don’t know.” He sat back in the chair and studied her. “Now it’s my turn. Did you find anything about your curse?”

Nothing concrete and nothing she would admit to. She shrugged. “There’s no history of anyone breaking a curse.”

“But that doesn’t mean you’re not going to try.”

His shrewd gaze pierced her, and she nodded.

“Right. Well, can I get you anything else?” He stood.

It had been like this ever since Apollo killed Endy. Xan and the other demigods tiptoed around her, but worse, her heart ached because she’d lost her friends.

“No, thanks. Good night, Xan.”

“Good night.”

Hope sat in bed, the uneaten sandwiches still on the plate next to her. She went over and over what she’d read, what Braireus had said, Endy’s brutal execution. And Apollo . . . Why had he said Hades wouldn’t help her?

And then she knew. The rest of the books of the Moirai sealed in the Underworld. The Skia telling her she would need their help. They’d always been watching. Oh gods. Even the attack in Goldendale . . . The Skia had dragged her back until she crashed into a portal.

She needed to get to the Underworld. With that clarity, she crossed her room and grabbed her backpack. Despite the soreness, she moved with purpose and threw her stuff into her bag. Clothes, toiletries, her *Book of the*

Fates. In a few minutes, she was packed. Only the essentials. She could buy anything else she needed, but she suspected she wouldn't need much where she was going.

She surveyed the room one last time, and her eyes fell on the bag Xan had brought her. She opened it and saw enough food for several days, her cell phone, and a stack of hundred dollar bills. Had he known she would run, or was he trying to tell her to? She shoved the brown paper bag into the duffle.

The house was quiet, but as she walked down the hall toward the stairs, she heard voices. If she told anyone, they might want to come with her, or worse, stop her. She couldn't risk discovery.

She backtracked to her room and locked the door behind her. Her gaze flitted to the only other way out, and she crossed to the window and opened it. The night air washed over her in a chilly wave that smelled of fresh rain. Glancing out, she surveyed the surroundings. Not too bad. She dropped the bag, watching it land on the wet grass. Grateful she was only two stories up, she took a deep breath and braced herself. Trusting in her cat-like reflexes, she jumped, then landed with a quiet *thud*. She stood, brushed off the bag, and swung it over her shoulder. Maybe she could sneak through the front door and snag her keys.

She rounded the corner and stopped.

"I just want to talk to her," Priska said, her voice carrying across the drive. "I've shown you my Mark—"

"I've never seen a Mark like that one. How do I know it's even real?" Obelia snapped. "If you want access to the conservatory, you'll need to disclose your mother. Like I said, we're on lockdown."

Lockdown? Because of Hope? And why was Priska here?

"You can't keep me out!" Priska cried.

Hope heard scuffling, and she inched forward in the shadows. There was a

scream, and then the door slammed.

“Let me in!” Priska yelled.

Hope watched her aunt, again in her mid-thirties, hit the door over and over. A sense of loss punched her in the gut, and she couldn’t control the urge to comfort the mourning woman in front of her.

“Priska.” Hope called, her voice a whisper yell.

Priska froze. She turned and stared into the shadows. “Hope?” The second their eyes met, Priska ran to her and pulled her into a tight hug. “Oh, gods. I can’t believe . . .”

Hope’s mouth gaped wide. Priska’s face was ravaged with emotion, her eyes haunted with pain. This woman was an empty shell of her aunt. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh gods. I’m sorry, Hope. So, so sorry.” The plea in her eyes could have melted ice. “I should’ve come sooner, I know. I just . . . I didn’t know.” She shivered. “I’m sorry.”

Hope hurt for Priska’s pain. But the nagging coincidence of her showing up now was too much.

“It’s okay. I’m okay.” She could ask her questions later. There would be time.

Priska’s head swiveled as she gazed into the darkness. “We need to get you out of here. Oh gods. If they see you missing.” She guided Hope to her car parked in the shadows of the circular drive. “You were right. I should’ve helped. But I didn’t know. I’m sorry.”

She sounded like a broken record. No, worse. She sounded broken.

“Please stop,” Hope begged. “I’m okay. See.” She waved her arm down the front of her body. “It’s fine.”

They climbed in the car. It wasn’t until they were on I-5 headed south that Hope realized they weren’t going to Priska’s apartment.

“Where are we going?”

“Portland. San Francisco. L.A. Take your pick. We need to disappear.”

Priska’s gaze darted to Hope before locking on the road ahead. “You need to disappear. Do you know what you’ve started?”

Hope grimaced.

“Artemis came to me. Not even an hour ago. Athena was going to kill you.” Priska paused as if the words themselves were unbelievable. After a deep breath, she continued, “It seems that war is brewing on Olympus again.”

Kill her? For real? Did Xan know? Oh gods. And war? “What are they fighting about?”

Priska’s shoulders sagged. “What they always fight about. Power. Control. Pride.” She sighed. “I don’t want you to get caught in the crossfire.”

Intuition told Hope there was more to it than that. But it didn’t matter. “I know what I need to do next. Will you help me?”

Sadness and worry lined the older demigod’s face, and Hope finally noticed that it looked like Priska hadn’t slept for days.

“I’ll do anything I can to help you,” Priska said. “Anything.”

There was no more anger. At some point over the last couple of months, it had disappeared. An ache in her heart swelled. This was Priska. Her mentor. Her friend. The closest thing she had to family. Hope leaned over the consul and kissed her aunt’s cheek. “I missed you.”

“Oh, sweet girl. I’ve missed you, too.” Tears dripped down Priska’s face. “I’m glad you’re all right.”

And somehow, Hope knew no matter what happened, for that one moment all was well in her world.

And that was enough.

EPILOGUE



INTENSE, STABBING PAIN THROBBED up his leg and deep into his belly. With the sharp sensations came a wave of nausea, a vice on his stomach, and he retched. And retched. And retched. There could be nothing left, but the agony didn't stop, and neither did the vomiting. A small part of his consciousness, really just a sliver, hoped that throwing up was just a dream.

He shivered as the nausea waned. A prickle of needles crawled over him, ice cold on his skin, and then, as they penetrated the skin, the needles turned to daggers. He was being bludgeoned, stabbed over and over. He was vomiting again, and the pain consumed him.

His soul screamed for release. The torture waned, the briefest moment, and then the chill returned, this time a crushing pressure on his chest, spreading over his body. He couldn't move, couldn't breathe. As though he had been buried in ice, the cold penetrated his bones. He gasped, but the air couldn't reach his lungs. His heart lay heavy in his chest, even more weight to struggle against.

He slipped in and out of the darkness. At times his mind overrode the pain and he'd try to fight through the darkness, a sad attempt to focus, his thoughts always fleeting images of Hope. Always Hope. But the pain came back, over

and over, so severe, so intense; it was a relief to collapse into the nothingness.

The darkness waned and an icy chill brushed over his skin, making him shudder. The icy grip of the Skia's blade no longer immobilized him, and Athan's body protested as he rolled over. By the gods, he was sore.

How long had he been out? Not more than a week, certainly. He relished the clarity of his thoughts. His stomach growled, and the familiar gnaw of hunger protested any further time in bed. He threw the green sheets and blankets back and pushed to the edge of the bed.

The last occupant of the room had left the curtains drawn and the lighting dim. He glanced around for his clock, and when that wasn't visible, he looked at the nightstand for his phone. The cord dangled empty from the electrical socket.

He stood and almost collapsed to the floor, his legs shaking like jelly. A short chuckle escaped his lips as he caught himself on the edge of the bed. He sat, as if strength would come with rest, but he knew it would only come once he got to the kitchen. He stood again and braced himself against the bed and then the wall as he crossed to the door.

The hallway was dark and devoid of life. His eyes sought out Hope's door, but it was closed. He could wait. They'd seemed on the edge of a breakthrough when he'd seen the Skia; surely a few days wouldn't have changed much.

He kept one hand on the wall for stability, not trusting in his limited strength, and by the time he was at the stairwell, his breath came in short gasps. He couldn't have walked more than fifty feet, but it felt as though he'd just finished fifty miles. He brushed the trickle of sweat from his face and surveyed the sixteen daunting steps ahead of him.

It didn't take a genius to know he wasn't walking down those stairs. He eased down until he was sitting and then scooted his way down. One by one,

all sixteen steps. Finally, with a deep breath, he stood and, still holding to the wall, walked into the kitchen. As luck would have it, there was a faint glow coming from the open refrigerator door.

Athan cleared his throat as he shuffled through the doorway.

Dion straightened, and his prominent features shifted from guilt to surprise when he saw Athan. “*Filos mou!*” Dion closed the door of the fridge, and dark wine sloshed over the side of his glass. He crossed the room, leaving small puddles of the red liquid in his wake. He wrapped his free arm around Athan’s waist and then helped him to the table. “You look like you’ve had too much to drink.”

Athan grunted as he collapsed into a wooden chair at the kitchen table. “Thank you.”

“No. No. It is good to see you up!” Dion’s blurry eyes struggled to focus. “Would you want *kati*?” He held out his now half-empty wine glass.

The thought of alcohol made Athan’s stomach turn, and he shook his head.

“Something to eat, please. Perhaps, some . . .” Athan thought for a moment. “*Psomi*; maybe toast with butter?”

Dion nodded. “Still not feeling well?”

Athan rested his head on the table. “No, not really.” The hunger had waned with the effort to get downstairs. Perhaps he should just go back to bed.

“It will go away soon enough. Food will help.” Dion set a glass of water in front of Athan. “And you should have something to drink, no?”

Spoken like a man used to hangovers.

Moments later, Dion set a plate on the table. Two thick slices of a dark bread glistened with the sheen of melted butter. Athan picked up the toast and took a large bite. The sweetness of the bread was tempered with the salty richness of the butter. He’d never tasted anything so good.

Dion went back to the refrigerator, opened the door, and then came back to the table with a plate of cheeses: sliced cheddar and Havarti, a circle of brie, a soft log of what appeared to be goat cheese rolled in black sesame seeds, and a wedge of what Athan hoped was Manchego. Interspersed with the cheeses there were dark-red grapes and an assortment of berries.

“It is a good snack, no?” The demigod bit into a slice of the creamy Havarti.

Athan nodded as he put a large grape into his mouth. The fruit popped, and sweet juice tickled his taste buds. “Very good. Thank you.”

He sliced a thick piece of the Spanish cheese and put it on his bread before taking another bite.

“Of course. Just be sure you admit to helping me eat it, no?”

Athan’s brow creased, but his mouthful of food prevented him from answering.

“Obelia made it for tomorrow . . .” Dion contemplated the large clock on the wall. “Or rather today. It is today, so it’s okay.” He smiled. “Besides, if you eat it, she will not mind at all.” Dion took a slice from the wedge and bit off a small piece before sipping from his wine glass.

“If you help me back to bed, I’ll admit to whatever you want me to.” Athan rested his head on the table.

“*Ouai*, you are not well. You got up too soon, *mi filos*.”

Dion’s chair scraped back.

The grating sound caused a flash of memories, and Athan’s head came up with a jerk. “*Skata!* What day is it?”

He scanned the kitchen as if it would tell him what he wanted to know.

“Wednesday.” Dion cleared his throat. “No, ah, it’s Thursday.”

Thursday? “I’ve only been out three days?” That couldn’t be right. But the alternative was terrible. “How long have I been out? Where’s Hope?” Panic

blossomed in his chest. Had the fight in his room been a dream? Part of the nightmare of the Skia's poison?

"*Stasi!*" The young man held out a hand. "Too many questions." He set his empty glass on the table and rubbed at his temples.

An eternity of silence passed in those moments. More than anything, Athan wanted Hope to be okay. *Just let her be okay.*

"It is Thursday. You were sleeping just over a week, maybe ten days." Dion stood and went back to the refrigerator and then filled his wine glass.

Athan noticed Dion's hands were shaking, and the demigod avoided making eye contact. "What about Hope?"

"Hope is gone." Xan flicked on the light and walked into the kitchen. His gaze landed on Athan.

He flinched as if the words from the demigod son of Ares were a physical blow.

"She left. It's like she disappeared off the face of the Earth." Xan snapped his fingers. "Just like that." He crossed over to the table, flipped a chair backward, and sat. "And before you say it, I do remember how to do a search. I've looked everywhere. Even her friend Priska has completely disappeared."

Athan didn't want to think about what that could mean. How far would Hope go for answers on how to break the curse? But he knew. He already knew the answer. She would go to Hades and back if she had to.

Author's Note

I hope you enjoyed Demigods and Monsters. If you wouldn't mind taking a minute to leave a review on Amazon, I'd really appreciate it. It helps other readers know your honest feelings about a book, and helps many decide whether or not a story is worth investing in.

If you can't get enough of the Sphinx series, be sure to check out Origin of the Sphinx, a prequel novella. It's available on Amazon, but also free to my newsletter subscribers. I don't spam. I'll send you a newsletter once or twice a month to let you know of events, giveaways, or special opportunities to win prizes from me, or to keep you updated on future releases. Sign up [here](#).

Index of Mythological Figures

Aphrodite: Goddess of love, beauty, desire, and pleasure

Apollo: God of light, music, arts, knowledge, healing, plague, darkness, prophecy, poetry, purity, athleticism, manly beauty, and enlightenment

Ares: God of war, bloodshed, and violence

Artemis: Virgin goddess of the hunt, wilderness, animals, young girls, childbirth, night, and plague

Athena: Goddess of intelligence and skill, warfare, battle strategy, handicrafts, and wisdom

Boreas: God of winter and the north wind

Demeter: Goddess of grain, agriculture and the harvest, growth, and nourishment

Dionysus: God of wine, parties and festivals, madness, chaos, drunkenness, drugs, and ecstasy

Eros: God of love and desire

Hades: King of the underworld and the dead, and god of the earth's hidden wealth, both agricultural produce and precious metals

Hephaestus: God of fire, metalworking, and crafts

Hera: Queen of the heavens and goddess of marriage, women, childbirth, heirs, kings, and empires

Hermes: God of boundaries, travel, communication, trade, thievery, trickery, language, writing, diplomacy, athletics, and animal husbandry

Hestia: Goddess of the hearth, home, and chastity

Hypnos: God of sleep

Leto: Titan goddess of Motherhood

Moirai: The Fates, the incarnation of destiny, namely: Clotho (spinner), Lachesis (allotter), and Atropos (unturnable)

Persephone: Queen of the underworld, wife of Hades, and goddess of spring growth

Poseidon: God of the sea, rivers, floods, droughts, earthquakes, and the creator of horses

Thanatos: God of death

Zeus: King of the gods, the ruler of Mount Olympus, and the god of the sky, weather, thunder, lightning, law, order, and fate

The [Graeae](#): Three ancient sea spirits who personified the white foam of the sea; they shared one eye and one tooth between them. By name: Deino, Enyo, and Pemphredo

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About the Author

Raye Wagner grew up just outside of Seattle, Washington. As the second of eight children, she was surrounded by chaos, and escaped the mayhem by reading.

Raye studied the art of medicine long before she had an interest in the Gods or Mount Olympus, and still practices part-time as a nurse practitioner.

One sunny afternoon, the history of Apollo's curse and the myth of the Sphinx unfolded in Raye's mind, and she started writing.

She creates young adult fiction for teens and adults.

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Love Greek mythology? Can't get enough of the gods? You'll probably enjoy the Ignited series by Desni Dantone. I read all four books in a week (but I'm a slow reader). ;)

Turn the page for an exclusive excerpt from book one, *Ignited*!



Back at the cabin, Nathan twisted the caps off two beer bottles, and handed one to me.

“I think it’s about time we have a chat,” he said, and motioned for me to follow him onto the back porch.

He claimed a seat on the top step, and slid over to make room for me. The steps were narrow enough that our shoulders touched, but I got no comfort from that. I sipped my beer nervously, afraid to know what he had to tell me if he thought I needed a drink to hear it. This was what I had been waiting for, wasn’t it? So why was I so anxious?

Night had closed in fast. The tree line was barely visible, but Nathan stared at it like it had him captivated. I knew that wasn’t the case. He was stalling.

“Want to do that I ask and you answer thing we did last time?” I offered.

“I don’t think that will work this time.” I was about to ask why when he asked me a question of his own. “So, what all do you know so far?”

“Hmm, well, I’ve learned some people aren’t completely human,” I said conversationally in an attempt to mask the jitters. “You age slowly, are super strong, and are at war with a bunch of guys that are after me, but no one knows why. How’s that for summing it up?”

He didn’t look at me when he spoke. “Do you still want to know what I am?”

I swallowed to dislodge the lump in my throat. “Among other things.”

Nathan took a swig of beer. “They still teach Greek Mythology in school?”

I hesitated. I didn’t know what I had been expecting, but that was definitely not it. “Uh, yeah. Sophomore year.”

“Did you get a good grade?”

Was he kidding? Why did that matter? “I don’t remember.”

“Do you remember anything about it?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

He finally looked at me. “Trust me.”

You can find Desni’s completed series (on all major retailers) through her website: <http://www.desnidantone.com/>