



BAD
THINGS

PLAY
HERE

Chani Lynn Feener

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ALSO BY CHANI LYNN FEENER

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Unleashed
Unbound
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For Kayleigh. I probably would have given up on this without you!
Thanks for being the best beta reader a writer could ask for!

Also thank you to everyone who reads this second edition!

Chapter 1:

Piper tossed her keys on the counter and groaned, reaching back to massage the tense muscles in her neck. That was it. No more double shifts for her, no matter how good the money was. She was working herself into the ground, and for what?

She paused in the middle of her living room, glancing around her microscopic apartment.

You could always go home, a traitorous thought filtered through her head before she could stop it, and she growled in response.

That was not an option, not after five years of successfully separating herself from the crazy that was her family. Hell, she'd have changed her last name to avoid any of the lingering drama it caused, if not for the fact she liked the layer of protection it provided. Being an Anesidora had a few perks, one of them that most supernatural creatures left her the fuck alone.

Which was all she wanted. To be left alone.

Not for the first time since she'd fled from her family and their responsibilities, she thought of her friend Rover. He'd been the only real person she could talk to while growing up, the one person who'd understood. When she'd finally confessed to him that she wanted nothing to do with the family responsibility, he'd held her hand and allowed her to soak his shirt through with tears.

She'd been fourteen.

He'd been three hundred and seven.

Talk about forbidden love.

Piper chuckled at her own joke and moved to the kitchen, rummaging through the fridge for anything, literally anything, to abate the twist of hunger in her stomach. Working two shifts a day and she still could barely afford to put food on the damn table. A girl could really go for a cheeseburger every once in a while.

She was in the process of reaching for the mostly empty bottle of orange juice—liquid diet was a thing, right?—when a noise from down the hall distracted her.

Straightening, she cocked her head and waited, sure that she'd merely caught a sound from one of the neighboring apartments. When the soft rustling came again, and distinctly from within her own apartment, a tingle of worry shot down her spine.

Piper didn't bother with the knives as she passed the counter, moving toward the entrance to the hall. She didn't need a weapon, especially because she was sure it was nothing. Had she left the bedroom window open? She'd done it before, a couple of times, in fact. Moving cautiously, she kept her ears trained. It could very well be one of her curtains blowing in the night air.

Or it could be a burglar rifling through her things.

It took less than a minute for her to make it to the end of the hall to find out. Twisting around, she peered into the room and froze.

A man was kneeling at the end of her bed, the antique hutch that used to belong to her grandmother, tossed open. His hands were inside, shuffling things around, clearly searching for something.

A burst of adrenaline coursed through her and she straightened from her cover behind the doorframe. Taking a single step into the room, she cleared her throat.

The man froze but didn't turn.

"You picked the wrong house, buddy," she drawled, voice confident. Mostly because it was true. "Now, because I'm way too exhausted to deal with this right now, I'm going to be seriously generous and give you a choice. Either leave, right now, or I call the cops. If you go for option B, just know that by the time they get here, you're going to be an unconscious mess on the floor. Cool?"

He didn't say anything, didn't so much as twitch, which only made her ire grow. Fact of the matter was, she didn't even have anything worth stealing—unless he was jonesing for some orange juice.

For a second, she debated whether or not she should even involve the cops. She could handle this on her own. There would be the issue of removing his body, however, and somehow she doubted her neighbors would appreciate her dragging an unconscious man three times her size through the halls.

It would also make them question a few things, like how the tiny five-foot-five brunette had even managed to subdue a man that size.

So, cops it would be. But not before she got her licks in.

Sickly, she could already feel the anticipation rising up to greet the adrenaline. It'd been a long time since she'd had a good fight. She'd kept up with her training, attended a krav maga class twice a week. But it wasn't the same. Not when humans only had regular human strength, while she had...not so regular. It was times like that she almost caved and gave Rover a call.

She missed their sparing sessions. Missed not having to hold back punches and really let loose. It was the only good thing about being born into the Anesidora line. The perks of being something other than human, despite how mortal she still was.

Which was also fine with her, because she didn't want to live forever.

Be burdened, forever.

Suddenly, the man stirred, and she watched as he slowly rose to his feet. Once he was standing, he paused all over again, and she was about to roll her eyes and step forward to get the show on the road when he finally angled his head.

He glanced at her over one of his broad shoulders, and the air was immediately sucked straight out of her lungs.

Because his eyes were glowing. Like, literally, glow stick glowing.

"Shit," she barely got the word out before he pounced.

She shot back so quickly, she hit the wall, her skull rebounding painfully off the solid surface. Letting out an annoyed growl, she lifted her knee, blocking the swinging arm headed her way.

The man ran into her, and she twisted, grabbing fistfuls of the back of his t-shirt. Applying as much pressure as possible, she slammed him forward, right into the spot on the wall she'd just been occupying. His chin hit with a resounding thwack that satisfied her to no end.

She should probably feel a little bad, all things considered, but didn't have time to waste attention. Defend herself, then worry about the damage she inflicted on the innocent body later.

And the body was innocent, because she could feel it now, the heavy, sticky feeling coming off of the man in waves. The familiar stink of a malicious spirit, one who'd spent quite a lot of time below in Tartarus.

A soul was possessing the man in front of her, manipulating his body. But why? And why come after her?

“Not sure if you know this,” she said, even as the guy spun and came at her a second time, “but you’re making a mistake.” She didn’t have the pithos—which had to be what he was after—hadn’t even been in the same state as it in five years.

He ignored her, swinging a meaty fist to her left. When she went to dodge, he brought his other around, his knuckles connecting with her jaw before she could shift away.

It hurt, and there was even a momentary ringing in her ears. Which was surprising, because a hit from a human shouldn’t be that effective against her. Another sliver of worry slipped through her defenses, snaking down her spine to wrap around her stomach and squeeze.

Whoever this spirit was, they were bad. Really bad. She needed to end this and get out before it was too late. She hadn’t used her abilities on someone in forever, but she felt herself instinctually call on a thread of wrath inside of her.

He dove forward, and she slammed her palm against the center of his chest. It stopped him for a split second, long enough for her other fist to shoot out. She punched him in the throat, wincing when his eyes bulged.

Yeah, that was definitely going to hurt whoever woke up tomorrow. It wouldn’t be the spirit, because she was going to make sure that asshole was gone.

He dropped to his knees, wheezing, and not wanting to give him the time to recuperate, she put all her strength into her next hit. His body dropped the rest of the way, unconscious.

“Told you,” she hissed through her teeth, inhaling sharply. Piper rushed back out to the living room, grabbing up her purse. It took her another few seconds to locate her phone within, but once she had it she didn’t allow herself to hesitate.

Hitting the contact she wanted, she brought the cell phone to her ear. The other line only rang three times before it was answered.

“Rover,” she rushed out, “I need help.”

There was an exhale on the other end, the only sign that he was there, that he’d heard, and then less than a second later a familiar tingle shot down her spine.

It was as if someone had trailed an ice cube directly across her skin, her body reacting to the supernatural being the way it’d been programmed

to before birth. She could run away from her family, but she couldn't run from what they'd given her. Couldn't run from her instincts.

It'd been a long while since she'd felt the presence of a Reaper, let alone the one she'd grown up with. Different supernatural's had distinct feels to them, a quality that helped separate them without her having to get too close. Because she wasn't meant to defend, or even deal with, spirits, Piper hadn't been able to sense that the man currently knocked out in her bedroom wasn't fully human.

Hence, why she was supposed to have a Reaper guard.

Whom she'd slipped five years ago.

Yeah, he was probably beyond pissed.

As if to prove her wildly spinning thoughts, Rover moved past her without so much as a glance. He headed straight down the hall, not needing to be told where to look for the malicious soul.

She was tempted to follow, but couldn't get her legs to obey, feet rooted to the spot. It gave her ample time to watch him walk away, to note the sway of his broad shoulders, the bunched muscles in his back. How his ass looked in those jeans.

Piper cursed and pulled her mind away from that direction. When she'd been younger, foolish, she'd had such a massive crush on him it had been borderline obsessive and unhealthy. He'd never given any sign that he reciprocated, and knowing that her parents would be livid, she'd kept her feelings to herself. Mostly.

But now that she was older, seeing him again...She let out a slow breath, forcing her wayward emotions to settle. How the hell could she be attracted to someone right now, mere minutes after almost being murdered by a spirit in her own home? Definitely unhealthy.

It'd been a while though. The last time she'd slept with someone had been the night of graduation from her phlebotomy classes. That was almost a year ago.

The last time she'd seen Rover, she'd been an eighteen year old rebellious teen, angry at the world and the gods and her lot in life. So she'd done something about it. She'd survived, and most of the past five years had been spent learning how to; she didn't have a lot of spare minutes to spend on finding a boyfriend.

Not that she wanted one of those anyway. Too much trouble. Too much time. Too much energy. She'd run to be free, not to tie herself down

to something, or someone, else. So the few occasions she'd had a spare moment, when the itch had gotten too great to scratch herself, she'd relied on the cliché bar hookup to get her through.

She was always gone before dawn, and never left her phone number. It was perfect, and it worked for her, but seeing Rover, even just the back of his head, was forcing all those old desires to the forefront of her mind. And she didn't like it.

They'd been childhood fantasies based on puppy love, nothing more, and she'd gotten over them. She'd put that behind her.

As soon as she'd reminded herself of that, she found her legs worked again. Quickly, she followed after the Reaper, who'd already disappeared into her bedroom all the way at the end of the hall. There wasn't a single sound coming from the wide open door, and when she reached it, she found him crouched over the still unconscious body.

"You knocked him out?" his voice, so familiar and low, slid over her, causing her to shiver before she could help it. Fortunately, he wasn't looking, busy checking the man for permanent damage.

"It was either that or let him strangle me to death," she countered, instantly hating the way her own voice took on an edge. Like he'd been accusing her of something when they both knew he hadn't been.

Instead of getting angry, he chuckled, rich and deep, shaking his head so that the five metal hoops in his left ear winked in the lighting. "Some things never change."

He'd mumbled the words, but she'd caught them. Straightening, she crossed her arms over her chest, trying to appear in control, intimidating. Remain collected and calm under pressure, that's what he'd taught her. Never let the enemy see you shake.

So he's the enemy now? Her upper lip twisted, not liking that thought. But, if they were, it'd be her own damn fault.

"I'll take the soul and bring whoever this is to the hospital. No doubt he'll need to be monitored for concussions." Rover stood, slinging the man up over his shoulder with no effort at all.

Her heart clenched in her chest, a small inkling of panic rising before she could get a handle on it. She didn't want him to leave. She hadn't even gotten to see his face.

"Don't go anywhere," he told her, and didn't get to see her tense shoulders deflate in relief either. "This'll only take a minute."

It was the longest damn minute of her life.

When Rover came back, the breath she'd unknowingly been holding slipped past her lips. He reappeared facing her this time, running his gaze almost impassively up her body to check for injury before finally meeting her gaze.

He looked exactly the same as the last time she'd seen him. Logically, she'd known he would because Reaper's didn't age, but seeing it in person was another thing entirely.

Like most of his kind, he was tall and fit. On the outside, he appeared to be no older than she was, but if someone stared into his golden eyes the truth was apparent. He'd seen things, done things, that no twenty-five year old could even fully comprehend. The trail of hoop earrings down the curve of his ear—the colors alternating between black, white, and red—weren't his only piercings. Two obsidian balls, one above his eyebrow the other below, were a new addition she hadn't seen before. Then there were the familiar spider bites at the curve of his bottom right lip, those black as well.

His hair was fire truck red, thick and curly at the top, shaved on the sides and back. There was a single dyed stripe leading from behind the curve of one ear all the way to the other, the color a vibrant sunshiny yellow.

He dressed like a punk rocker, in black and leather, a few chains looped through the front of his jeans. Now that she was older, it didn't feel like he was a rebel kid in her high school, however. He looked like a biker. A hot, badass, biker.

Who was currently glaring daggers her way like she'd just backed her pink Prius into his Harley.

She gulped before she could help it, and his eyes followed the movement, a slight frown finally cracking through his hard exterior.

"So..." She cleared her throat. "Thanks for that." Waved a finger down at the spot between them on the floor where the man had been. "I came home and he was here. I didn't know who else to call."

There was no one. Even though she was an Anesidora, she'd only ever met the one supernatural being personally, and that was him. No one else she could have contacted would have been able to get here fast enough to be of service. No one else could flash. Not even she could, which had bothered her to no end as a kid because, seriously? Not fair.

Reaper's needed the ability to enter and exit the Underworld. Seeing as how ferrying souls wasn't part of the Anesidora job description, she supposed it made sense the gods had left flashing out of their makeup.

"Was he the only one?" Rover asked after another moment of tense silence. His voice cut across the expanse, curt and to the point. He did not want to be here, and he wasn't doing anything to mask that fact.

Which hurt, even though it shouldn't. Even though she didn't have a right for it to, because hadn't she been the one to leave him behind?

Swallowing down all those bruised feelings, Piper shifted, trying to get herself together. As badly as she hadn't wanted him to go before, now she was almost desperate for him to. This had been a bad idea. Calling him. Bringing him here. There was a reason she'd had to leave him alone with her family, why she couldn't have kept in touch with him.

Guilt opened its yawning jaws in the pit of her stomach and she dug her nails into her palms in a poor attempt to keep it at bay. The small pain helped, a little, but not nearly enough.

"Yes," she answered, licking her suddenly dried lips. "He's the only one I've seen since—" She stopped herself, opting to repeat instead, "Yes. He was the only one."

"Good." He nodded once and took a quick glance around the sparse room. Clearly not satisfied by the small single mattress on the rickety frame, or the tiny dresser she'd picked up at a tag sale with peeling white paint, he turned back to her. "Grab what you need and let's go."

She bristled, for a moment that panic rising up to buzz in her ears. "What?"

"You heard me." He was stern, cold. "Though I can't imagine you'd actually want any of this junk."

The panic turned to anger so quickly she saw actual red. This *junk* had taken her years to collect, every piece of it carefully selected. Cared for. With all of this *junk* she'd built a home for herself, away from her parents, away from their madness, and most importantly, on her own.

"This was a mistake," she hissed, mostly to herself, though she didn't bother to lower her voice. He'd hear it anyway, with his damn Reaper super hearing.

"What?" He lifted a single deep red brow. "Calling me? Too late, *meisje*. It's done. Now get your stuff and let's go before one of that spirit's friends decide to show up."

The old endearment caused her to flinch, and when he saw it, he actually looked like he felt bad. The frozen expression he'd locked onto his face cracked slightly, his golden eyes and tight mouth softening.

"What friends?" she asked, because she didn't want his pity. She'd made her choice, and if she'd thought seeing angry pissed off him had been hard, it was nothing to the way her heart had twisted when she'd seen the familiar comfort in his eyes.

She needed to renew the distance between them. Fast.

For a moment, it was clear he didn't want to tell her. Then he heaved a sigh and ran a hand through the top of his hair, his fingers sticking in the heavy curls for a split second like they always did.

"Something happened, Piper," he divulged slowly, as if afraid to spook her. "Something happened to Paul."

The panic turned cataclysmic.

Chapter 2:

Reece did not want to be here, no matter how good the damn scotch was. And it was pretty good. Watching the amber liquid swirl around in his glass, he was forced to admit that it was one thing Hadrian had decent taste in.

But that was about all.

Lifting his head imperceptibly, he risked a long glance around the room he was currently seated in. It was sprawling and all but empty, just a massive dark chamber filled with a single throne, the chair he was currently occupying, and cavernous space. Everything was black marble and towering walls with no ceiling in sight. What a waste.

He was mentally filling the room in—a roulette table here, a long bar there—when the clipped sounds of the pacing god before him finally forced him from his daydreaming.

“Relax already,” he said, going back to swirling his drink as he watched the other god continue obsessively moving back and forth in a straight line. “If I’m not concerned, Hadrian, neither should you be.”

A lie, because Reece was very, very concerned. But his friend didn’t need to know that, not with everything he already had to deal with.

A week ago there’d been a breach, something practically unheard of nowadays. Somehow, someone had opened a gate to the Underworld, allowing a slew of malicious souls to slip out and enter the Above. As the god of the dead, Hadrian, also known as Hades, was responsible.

While he and his people had managed to collect almost all of the displaced souls, he’d yet to find the cause of the breach. The fact it was driving him mad was apparent, and not only by the way he’d been wearing a hole into the floor by his unceasing pacing.

Reece had already been there a half-hour, and not once had the other man stopped. Merely walked ten feet to the left, spun on his heels, walked the same distance to the right, spun on his heels, and repeated the whole process over again.

And over again.

And over again.

Reece rolled his eyes and downed the rest of his drink quickly, if only for an excuse to get up from his seat. Moving toward the other god, he was careful not to encroach on his space. Hadrian wouldn't want his comfort, especially not in his own kingdom.

"I know you better than that," Hadrian finally responded, though he didn't lift his cobalt eyes from the floor. His hands were on his hips, shoulders pulled back, the air around him aggressive.

Honestly, Reece had been a bit surprised when he'd arrived to find him wearing regular clothing, and not the ancient set of battle armor he was wont to wear.

On the outside, the god of the Underworld could be anywhere between eighteen years old and twenty-five, though he leaned more toward the first. His hair was an inky midnight, body strong and braced in anger.

Reece ran an appreciative glance down him, shrugging a single shoulder when the attention finally got the other god to pause. Which had been his intention.

Hadrian's eyes narrowed briefly, his head angling. "Do not make moves on me now. I am in no mood."

Reece grunted, rolling the glass between his palms as if he hadn't a care in the world. "Wouldn't dream of it."

"Dionysus," his name was said with a warning, though there was a lighter edge at the end. Proof that Hadrian knew what he was really doing. Distracting him.

Not that he wouldn't take Hadrian to bed—as the god of lust, Reece didn't have a gender preference—but doing so would probably put a kink in what was a very lengthy friendship. Also, one of the few he actually had. Besides, unlike him, Hadrian did swing a certain way.

Reece didn't have the right equipment.

He shrugged a second time at the warning, adding a cocky grin for good measure. The pacing hadn't restarted, so that was something in any case.

"Reece, Hades," he reminded, not for the first time. "Remember? My name is Reece now."

Hadrian waved a hand at him dismissively. "Maybe if you didn't change it so often, I wouldn't always forget."

That was a fair point, he did have a tendency to alter it every other century or so.

Still... “I’ve been going by that for a hundred years.”

“So you’ll be changing it again soon,” Hadrian chuckled, “is what you’re telling me.”

Reece’s grin widened. “Perhaps. If I find something that I like.”

All at once the tension in his shoulders returned and he let out a low growl. “This is a serious problem.”

Sighing over how shortly his distraction had taken hold, Reece crossed his arms and asked, “You haven’t found anything yet then?”

He shook his head in the affirmative. “There’s no explanation for how a gate was left open. No reason anyone should have been able to make it through one of the rivers and into the mortal world.”

“Have you managed to close it at least?”

“That’s the other infuriating part,” Hadrian admitted. “It didn’t just open the once. It keeps opening and closing at random intervals. There’s no discernible pattern. No way for me to guess when it will happen, or even how long it will stay open. Souls keep slipping through, and all I can do is send more Ferryman out to collect them.”

Reece grunted and then lifted a shoulder when his friend stared at him for it. “Sorry, it’s just, Ferryman doesn’t mean the same thing in the Above that it once did.”

Hadrian rubbed a hand down his face, clearly too exhausted to bother over the details. “Fine. We’ll refer to them as Reaper’s in your presence. Happy?”

“Oh,” he drawled, “ecstatic.”

And what reason did he have not to be? So what if there was currently a jar out there that could destroy the entire world? Big deal.

Stop making jokes and get to it. The thought sobered him instantly.

“The pithos must be found,” he said, finally bringing up the reason he was down there in the first place. He’d put it off long enough.

“Of course,” Hadrian agreed. “But it was taken by a single soul. Imagine what the others who get loose might do? What they might want? I can’t risk putting all of my people on this, Reece. It’s why I need you to handle it.”

His eyes narrowed at the commanding air in the other gods voice. “I don’t answer to you.”

He might have been added to the Greek pantheon last, but Reece’s first birth made him older than the god of the dead. Eons older.

“You know that’s not how I meant it,” Hadrian growled back, frustrated. “We don’t have time for postulating right now either. I have my mess to clean up, you have yours, and you know it.”

“Sure,” he agreed tightly, “but my mess was caused by yours.”

Hadrian restarted pacing.

Reece felt like a dick.

“Even if you didn’t have a connection to the pithos,” Hadrian went on, “your maenads are the only other beings who can sense a soul the same way my Reaper’s can. We’d need you either way.”

“Correction,” he said, “you need my forces. Using me for my ladies, Hadrian.” He clucked his tongue. “That’s cold.”

“I know what you’re doing,” the other god shot him a dark look, “but even your humor isn’t enough to sweep this under the rug. I’ve got as many of my own on this as I can afford. Can I count on you or not?”

There’d only been one occasion in their entire friendship where Hadrian couldn’t, and that was a long time ago. He’d started a war with his brother over a woman, and Reece had not so discreetly excused himself from the pointless bloodbath. A lot of their people had fallen during that waste of a century. If it hadn’t been for the fact he was the god of lust, and therefore understood intimately where Hadrian and Thayer had both come from, he’d probably still be pissed about all of that.

As it were...Bygones and what not.

“Relax,” he repeated, “we both know I can’t sit on the sidelines for this one.” Because he was personally invested whenever it came to the pithos.

“Why do you think it hasn’t been opened yet?” Hadrian asked then, his usual curiosity slipping through the frustration.

“No clue,” he replied honestly. It didn’t make sense to him, that the soul who’d stolen the jar would wait to open it. Why waste time? Why risk giving him and Hadrian the chance to swoop in and steal it back? “It doesn’t add up. He has everything he needs.”

“And you’re certain?”

“He possessed an Anesidora heir,” Reece reminded. “Of course I’m certain.”

Hadrian opened his mouth, then snapped it shut before he could get a word out. He frowned, the only sign that he was receiving a message from one of his Reaper’s. Then his brows winged up and he blinked once.

“What?” Reece demanded, growing impatient with every passing second. Had they found the jar? Stopped the breeches? Discovered the last damn unicorn? “What is it?”

“One of my Reaper’s has discovered where the last Anesidora has been hiding,” Hadrian revealed, causing Reece to frown along with him.

“An Anesidora had gone missing?” That was news to him.

Hadrian shot him a strange look. “You don’t keep track?”

“Why would I?”

“Because they’re the only people on the planet who can open Pandora’s Box and you have an invested interest in such things, perhaps?”

“I keep my distance,” he stated. “The farther I am from that thing the better, no matter how badly I want it to stay closed.” Which meant being near the Anesidora’s, the very family tasked with guarding the pithos, was the last thing he wanted. Ever.

“Well then you aren’t going to like what I ask you next.”

Reece stilled, waiting, making sure the warning in his eyes was apparent.

“The Reaper who found her has been tasked with finding the pithos,” Hadrian explained. “I’ll need someone to help him watch the girl.”

“Nope.” It was one word, and from anyone else, it might have even sounded like a joke. From him, it did not.

“She could help get the jar back,” he urged. “Her brother was the one possessed.”

“I’m not a babysitter.”

“No, but women do find your presence very agreeable.” Hadrian canted his head. “I’m sure she’s upset right now, what with discovering her brother has stolen the very thing they’d been tasked with protecting. Possibly distraught even.”

Damn. It was the right thing to say. Probably the only thing he could have said to get Reece to agree.

“She’s an Anesidora,” he reminded in one last-ditch attempt to get out of it. Though he wasn’t sure which of them he was trying to persuade with that statement.

“One who’s been missing for five years,” Hadrian told him. “Who knows what state she’s currently in. How much of her training she’s held onto. Besides, we both know what it’s like to lose someone. How... complicated it is.”

Double damn.

“Fine,” he growled, hating himself a little for giving in. “But tell your Reaper we do things my way.”

“Of course,” Hadrian agreed quickly. Too quickly. “The pithos is your responsibility, not mine.”

Reece flipped him the bird and disappeared before Hadrian could ask him for any more favors.

* * *

“What the hell do you mean someone *took* him?!” The ground beneath Piper’s feet practically shook with her fury. If she’d been anything other than human at that point, she would have certainly loosened the entire building from its foundation.

“He was possessed,” Rover repeated, seemingly unaffected by her outburst.

“By who?” Whoever they were, she was going to kill them. End of story.

“Orpheus.”

She pulled back, blinked. “I’m sorry. What now?”

“Did you develop a hearing problem over the past five years?” he asked, and it wasn’t nicely. “Orpheus rose from the Underworld and possessed your brother.”

“Why?”

“I assume so that he could take the pithos from him.” The unspoken *duh* thudded around them like an active grenade.

He didn’t want to be friendly? Fine. She could deal, but did he have to be such an ass right now about this? She hadn’t spoken to Paul in years, not since she’d caved and called him two Christmases ago. He’d begged her to come home and she’d hung up on him. He hadn’t tried calling her back, either because he’d been pissed or he’d been respecting her space. Knowing her brother, it was probably a little of both.

“He has the pithos.” The world tilted on its axis and her lungs felt like they were going to implode. “That means—”

“That I don’t have time to be here with you?” Rover cut her off. “Yeah. It does.”

She couldn't cover the sting those words caused in time, knowing he saw it when his eyes softened yet again. "Where is he? Where did Orpheus take it? And why did he take it?"

Piper had grown up on mythology. Though, because her family had been created with the sole purpose of guarding something Greek, her focus had mainly been on that. Even if it hadn't been, there were few people who didn't know the story of Orpheus the famous lyre player.

He was so good, in fact, that after his wife Eurydice was bitten by a snake and died, he'd convinced the god of the Underworld to return her to the living. Only, there was a catch, like there usually was when it came to the gods. Orpheus had to lead Eurydice back to the Aboveworld himself, without once looking back at her. Without once seeing if it was even really her with him at all.

He'd failed at the last moment, dooming them both to an eternal separation. Forcing her to stay dead after having the chance of being alive again dangled in front of her.

Absolutely none of that story had a thing to do with the pithos, however.

There was no reason she could see for him wanting it. And judging by the look on the Reaper's face, he wasn't having much luck figuring it out either.

"We can't find him," Rover said. "Somehow he's masking his whereabouts from us. Probably magic of some kind. Who knows what else he's acquired since he's been topside. We only realized he was one of the souls who'd slipped out a few days ago. He's been out for at least a week and a half. Maybe longer."

That was certainly enough time for someone to gather items necessary to avoid being caught by a supernatural. Orpheus was old, ancient. He'd know about things that others had long forgotten.

"And the rest?" she forced herself to ask, even as she pretended not to care. "Was the pithos the only thing taken?"

Rover's mouth thinned. "As the acting Anesidora, Paul is the only one who could accurately answer that."

"My parents haven't checked?" That seemed strange. Though they'd passed their responsibilities onto Paul the moment he'd turned eighteen, it still seemed odd. Only the members of her family that were of age were

allowed to know what was hidden in the vault. Not even Rover, who'd been watching over the Anesidora line for centuries, knew.

"They aren't here," he replied coolly. "They're halfway across the world right now on vacation. They're trying to get back early, but it's not like there's much they can do here."

"We need to know if anything else was taken," she insisted, only to have him snort derisively.

"There is no *we*, Piper. You left, remember?"

Another slap to the face, another turning of her cheek. Because he was right, and she therefore couldn't be angry. Couldn't defend herself against the truth. But she could assert herself, at least where the pithos was involved.

"My last name is still the same," she said. "Which means whether either of us like it or not, I am involved in this."

"Piper—"

"I will find my brother, with or without you." She seriously hoped that he wouldn't make her do that, though. For one, she didn't have the networking he did, for two...she didn't really have much of anything, actually.

Rover canted his head and narrowed his eyes. The moment stretched in silence, finally shattered by a grunt. He lifted his hand and curled his fingers at her. "Time's up. Let's go."

She'd slung her purse over her shoulder when she'd taken out her phone to call him, so she had it on her. Anything else in the apartment would have to wait. As much as his earlier comment had annoyed her, he was right about there being nothing there she needed. Nothing worth taking with her, anyway.

"When will I be back?" she asked, not bothering to ask where they were going because she knew he wouldn't tell her. "I have a shift in the morning."

"You'll miss it," he said bluntly.

"I can't do that."

"There's a lot you can't do, huh?"

The jab hit home and she reached out and slapped her palm against his before she could wince again. Reminding herself that he was in the right here. She wasn't above admitting her mistakes, not that she believed for a

second leaving had been one. But disappearing on him specifically? Yeah, that she regretted.

She wasn't going to tell him that though, not when he was staring at her like she was a hated stranger. Not when his fingers curled tightly around her own, or when the black tendrils of smoke began wafting out of his pores to wrap around her shoulders. It tingled everywhere they touched, and she shivered, hating the amused sound he made in the back of his throat.

Before she could say as much, she felt that smoke tighten around her body, the air going thick and still all at once. It'd been a long time since she'd flashed anywhere, and with a jolt she recalled how it always made her feel afterward.

Too late, the world blanked out as they left her apartment, the one she'd struggled and worked so hard for, behind.

Chapter 3:

Piper gasped and clamped her jaw shut as hard as she could to keep from puking all over the red and gold carpet. Once the room stopped spinning and she felt like she was on solid ground again, she risked glancing up at her new surroundings.

Wherever Rover had brought them, it clearly wasn't located in New York. The sound of whirs and whizzing machines greeted her, along with chatter from every direction. The place was packed with people, some crowded around tables, others standing in groups or lines for the bathroom. Flashing lights and the smell of alcohol and a mixture of cheap and expensive perfumes filled the air, almost making her gag all over again.

By the time she looked over to the Reaper, it was to find he'd already started away without her. Struggling to catch up, she pushed through the crowds, desperately trying to keep his bright red hair in her line of sight. She almost lost him twice, locating him at the last second.

She caught up with him on the stairs, barely resisting the urge to jerk him around and curse him for leaving her—irony the only thing that stopped her.

And the asshole knew it to, because he didn't so much as acknowledge her presence, let alone apologize. Instead he carried swiftly on his way, leading them down three separate corridors before stopping in front of a set of closed, heavily guarded, double doors.

There were two large men at either side, both eyeing Rover up and down. Even they barely spared her a glance, and she found that annoyed her. Just because she was tiny in comparison to the Reaper didn't mean she wasn't a threat. She could be threatening.

There was a spirit freshly deposited back to the Underworld who could attest to that.

"Private party," one of the burly men said in a deep voice. They were both dressed in suits, hands clasped before them. There wasn't a weapon in sight, but that didn't mean they weren't armed.

Piper discretely sniffed the air, trying to get a feel for them and what they might be. All she came up with was the lingering scent of cigarette

smoke on the one who'd spoken. Nothing on the other one. They were probably human, but they didn't have to be. Like the malicious spirit who'd attacked her, they could be something else that she couldn't detect.

"Would you like me to—" she began, only to be curtly cut off.

"No." Rover stepped closer to the guards. "I'm here about a Deadly."

The darker haired of the two clicked his tongue. "Lots of deadlys in there."

"I'm only after the one," Rover said in an almost bored tone. "One of the Seven Deadlies. I'm expected."

The two shared a look, and concluded not to let them in. They set themselves against the door, stretching their spines so they appeared taller. Tougher.

Piper almost rolled her eyes. Instead, she took a deliberate step back, already anticipating what was going to happen next.

"Sorry about this, boys." Almost before he was done speaking, Rover shot forward in a blur of color and motion too quick for Piper to follow. His hands slammed at the center of their throats at the same time. Then he twisted so he was facing away from the door and shoved them forward.

They toppled and hit the ground hard, clouds of dust bursting upwards from the thin carpet to swirl like dirty glitter around their bodies.

Piper scrunched up her nose and glanced at Rover. She didn't see how that was easier than letting her handle it, but whatever.

Without a word, he spun back on his heels and twisted the doorknobs. He didn't bother knocking or announcing himself, simply pushed them inwards and entered the room. It wasn't very big, and was painted a warm cream hue with navy carpeting. There was a single table in the center, currently occupied by four people.

Piper's gaze skated over three of them uninterested, but the last one caught her attention. She felt an instant rush of heat, and would have been embarrassed if she thought there was any way for the others to notice. Fortunately, she was able to keep her face impassive, even as she allowed her eyes to trail over him.

Gorgeous didn't even begin to cover it. He was seated on the other side of the table, so she couldn't see much aside from his broad shoulders

and the top half of the deep green suit he wore. The shirt beneath the jacket, as well as the tie, were both black.

It was his face that did it though, the arch of his thick brows over assessing eyes—assessing her, though she couldn't bring herself to care at the moment. He was a good distance away still, yet she could make out their color, a mixture of blues and greens and golds. The longer she stared, the more they appeared to glow.

The subtle shifting at her side, Rover moving half a step closer to her after all that effort of avoiding her, was what snapped her out of it. She blinked, realizing that she'd gone from taking him in to full on staring.

One of the women at his right, a redhead dressed in dark green, leaned over, pressing her mouth against the curve of his ear. She whispered something, and whatever she said had his eyes dimming, the glow disappearing.

The supernatural glow, which indicated he wasn't human.

"Reaper," his voice was like warm whiskey, washing over her even though he'd addressed Rover.

"Dionysus."

Piper's mouth dropped open, but she was the only one in the room surprised to be in the presence of a god. She'd grown up knowing they existed, yet had never actually met one before. There'd been no reason for her to. Members of her family rarely, if ever, had contact with anyone other than Rover.

She'd only been schooled in the basics when it came to him. He was the last god added to the Greek pantheon, and was the god of a long list of things, including wine, winemaking, ritual madness, and ecstasy.

Knowing who he was, the three redheaded women who surrounded him made sense. Many of the gods had their own forces, their own army. Rover was a Reaper, and therefore one of Hadrian's. Dionysus's soldiers were called maenads.

Curiosity getting the best of her, Piper turned her attentions to them, seeking out signs they weren't what they appeared to be: beautiful human women. They had various shades of red hair, different colored eyes, different statures. Aside from the fact they were all dressed impeccably, there was nothing linking them together.

"It's Reece, actually," Dionysus—Reece—corrected. "Though I'm sure your boss put you up to that little slip. He thinks he's cute."

“Well...” the same redhead who’d whispered in his ear drawled, and then grinned wickedly when he narrowed his multi-colored eyes at her.

“Piper,” Rover ignored their exchange, “this is the god of lust. God of not-being-able-to-contain-your-damn-self, this is Piper, the youngest Anesidora.”

“Aka,” Piper added, mostly to keep the now fuming redheads from attacking the Reaper, “Girl of disappearing-for-five-years-without-a-word.” She risked a glance at Rover, only to find she had not amused him with her teasing. Inside, she deflated some. Outside, she remained enigmatic.

“That’s some introduction,” Reece said, leaning back in his chair. He scanned the two of them as if he hadn’t done so the moment they’d stepped through the door. “Mine will, unfortunately, be less colorful. This is Nora, Etta, and Jane.” He motioned toward the women.

“See something you like?” Etta, the one sitting closest to where they stood, asked Piper suggestively.

She’d been staring at the girl, more aptly at the swirl of butterfly tattoos that cascaded down her entire right arm. Instead of being embarrassed by this, she merely stated, “I like your ink.”

“Thank you.” She eased her blue eyes down Piper’s body. “Come closer. I’d love to give you a better look.”

“Oh enough,” Rover hissed. “That isn’t why we came here.”

“No,” Reece agreed, “it’s not. We’re here because someone couldn’t do their damn job. Isn’t that right, Reaper? Weren’t you the one tasked with keeping the Anesidora’s safe?”

Piper straightened, any lingering curiosity doused by the accusation directed at her friend. Or, at least the guy who used to be her friend. She shifted closer, barely a few centimeters, but the god noticed, those weird multi-colored eyes honing in on her like a bloodhound sniffing out prey.

“Have you located the pithos?” Rover asked tightly.

“I have not,” Reece said. “Wherever Orpheus has it, he’s doing a great job keeping it hidden. I won’t be able to sense it until I’m closer, and until we narrow down the location, that’s not going to happen.”

“Does anyone know why Orpheus took the jar?” Piper braced herself when all eyes turned her way.

“We’ve discussed this,” Rover growled quietly, as if trying to convey she should shut up.

“Actually,” she corrected, “we didn’t.”

“We presume he took it to open it,” one of the maenads, Jane finally answered. Her hair was long and curly, and she was seated casually on the side of her seat. Like they weren’t discussing the possible end of the world as they knew it.

“Sure,” Piper agreed, “but then why hasn’t he?”

“That,” Etta purred, “my pretty friend, is the question of the millennium.”

“Enough flirting,” Reece ordered, the command rough and leaving no room for argument.

All three of the maenads seemed surprised, staring at him a little too long before finally composing themselves.

“She needs to be guarded,” Rover angled his chin to indicate Piper, “at all times. Orpheus already got his hands on one of them, the last thing we need is him taking another. Don’t expect too much though, there’s very little use she has.”

“Ouch.” She couldn’t stop the word from slipping past her lips. She twisted so that she was fully facing the Reaper, unable to contain the mixture of hurt and anger any longer, no matter whose company they were in. “I understand that you’re pissed at me, but—”

“You understand nothing,” he asserted. “You assume that I’m lashing out at you due to petty emotion and hurt feelings. I’m not. You don’t know me. You haven’t for a long time.”

“Maybe not,” she was forced to admit, “but there are other things I still do know. Things I couldn’t run from, no matter how much distance I put between myself and that damn jar. You think I can’t feel it? Twisting inside of you?” Before he could realize what she was doing, she slammed her palm to the center of his chest. “All that wrath and that pride?”

Finally, he was looking at her, really looking at her. Seeing her, his golden eyes scanning her features as his mask slipped to reveal the truth. His head dipped lower, but he didn’t move his body closer to hers, didn’t press against the hand still on his chest.

“I forgot how strong you are,” he whispered, and he wasn’t talking about physical strength.

When they’d been children and training, Paul had never been able to sense the seven sins. Piper, on the other hand, could feel them from across the room. She could detect which, if any, was currently residing within a person. Because being affected by a sin wasn’t the same as experiencing

regular emotion. It was deeper, fuller. A person had to feel an intense amount of something for it to reach sin levels.

Rover wasn't just mad at her for leaving. He was furious.

And he wasn't just hurt by the fact she'd abandoned him. He was devastated.

That was why she could feel wrath and pride, the first directed at her, the second at himself. He hated that she'd managed to get under his skin, and the moment he fully realized what she was doing, that hatred only grew.

He yanked away from her so fast she almost stumbled forward. Rubbing at the spot she'd been touching, like she'd somehow stained his black t-shirt, he bared his teeth.

Piper felt herself crumble inside.

"I'm sorry," she said, not caring about the desperation in her voice. The way the words trembled out of her. "I'm so sorry. Rover—" she reached for him and he pulled back as if she'd burn him.

"The only reason," he stated between clenched teeth, "I came when you called was because I had to. I'm duty-bound, that's it, Piper. If not for your last name, the one you despise so much, I wouldn't be standing here right now. Remember that."

She flinched and dropped her hand. Tears threatened, and she sucked in a breath in a poor attempt to keep them at bay.

You can't blame him, she reminded herself. Whatever he felt toward her now, however he chose to express that, she deserved it for what she'd done. Especially on that last day before she'd left.

"Can we go back to flirting now?" Etta asked under her breath.

Piper whipped her head in their direction, humiliation burning through her all at once. She knew she couldn't get a hold of it before her cheeks stained red and she grimaced. All four of them were watching, but it was the look on the god's face that drew her.

The others wore expressions of pity and sheepishness, but not him. No, his eyes were back to glowing, just a soft hint of it around the rims, enough that she noticed. He'd gone stiff as well, and even though he was still lounging back in his chair, the move no longer appeared casual. When their gazes locked, the glow intensified and his jaw clenched.

He was in the process of pushing himself slowly to his feet when something over her shoulder caught his attention. He froze halfway out of

the chair and frowned.

Piper felt the incoming whoosh of air at her back before the attacker made contact. She shifted to the left in an attempt to avoid being hit, but was only marginally successful. Claws dug into the fleshy part of her right arm, tearing free a second later, taking with it skin and blood.

Hissing, Piper twisted away, turning so she could see who'd delivered the blow.

Another redhead, one who hadn't been there only moments prior, was standing a few feet away, lips pulled back in an atavistic snarl. The claws maenads' were said to possess, the ones Piper had not so subtly sought out on the others earlier, were extended and dripping blood onto the carpet.

Her blood.

Instinctually, she pressed against the wound on her arm, backing further away from the crazed maenad before her. She wanted to turn and see if the others were now after her as well, but couldn't risk glancing away from the obvious threat.

Before she could decide who to trust, Rover was there, leaping between the two of them. He barreled into the maenad, his shoulder hitting her solar plexus. The move flung her back so that she hit the wall, hard enough that plaster rained from the ceiling.

Then Reece was there, yanking the Reaper away, cornering his subject with both hands outstretched. His voice was soft, low, soothing, and through the rushing adrenaline and shock coursing through her ears, Piper couldn't make out a single word. He didn't ease up on his advance even when the girl hissed and spat at him like a wild animal, her glassy eyes tracking his every move.

Rover came to Piper's side, gripped her good arm to pull her further away. Then he angled his body in front of hers protectively, so that she was between him and the wall at her back.

Despite what was going on, Piper felt a swell of satisfaction by the move. One of his hands was still on her uninjured arm, holding her as if needing the confirmation she was there and safe.

It was almost enough to drown out the intense pain below her right shoulder, where blood was now staining the white of her shirt.

Almost.

The other three maenads were up and circling toward Reece. Where there'd been nothing but well-manicured digits before, were now inch-long curved claws. Their canine teeth had elongated, partially extending over their bottom lips, and there was a feral, predatory gleam in their eyes.

Piper didn't know much about maenads, only that they were all women and all redheads. They were made, not born, and were fiercely loyal to their creator, Dionysus. Any semblance that they'd once been mere human women prior to the change was now gone. When the one who'd attacked Piper jerked defensively toward Reece, the three of them hissed and growled in warning.

They were wild and vicious and, Piper had to admit even as her head began to spin and the world began to blur, beautiful.

Reece was still mumbling at the rabid one, still trying to get close while the others at his back spread out to help keep her contained. If they recalled Piper and Rover were in the room, they didn't show it.

Everything started to mush together, colors bleeding into one another so that Piper had to blink rapidly to make out where everyone was.

"Rover," she didn't recognize the sound of her own voice, or the feel of her tongue, now thick and swollen in her mouth. She might have managed to say his name one more time, but she couldn't be sure.

In the next instant, she felt her head tip back, felt herself falling.

And then felt nothing at all.

Chapter 4:

Reece heard the Reaper's cry and risked twisting his head enough to glance over his shoulder. He swore when he saw the Anesidora drop, her legs going out from under her. For some reason, seeing it sent a shot of fear through his chest, unfamiliar and unwelcome.

Like almost every other thing he'd felt since she'd walked through the doors fifteen minutes ago.

He wasn't used to people affecting him—he was a god, he did the affecting—but there'd been no denying the massive attraction he'd felt the second he'd laid eyes on her. Or the twinge of jealousy when she'd turned and stared at the Reaper. With longing. Who she was interested in shouldn't matter to him, *didn't* matter, he'd corrected.

But then Etta had started making moves on her, and that jealousy had grown. If he hadn't put an end to it, he feared the emotion might have gotten to the point it could no longer be quelled. His maenad had stopped, following his orders, but couldn't help the tiny glances from beneath her lashes she'd kept sending Piper's way.

Appreciative glances. Sexual glances.

Reece had been about to scold her, maybe even dismiss her, but before he could the Reaper had started insulting the Anesidora.

And Piper had taken it.

Considering the fight they'd just had, the words he'd just lashed at her with, Reece didn't like the fact the Reaper was the one currently cradling Piper's unconscious body. Not one iota. He felt this unwarranted urge to go over there and snatch her out of his grasp.

That's insane, his mind stated. *Full on madhouse.*

Seeing as how he was also the god of ritual madness, he knew a thing or two about insanity. In many ways, knew it intimately, both figuratively and literally.

Recognizing he was acting strangely and there was nothing he could do about that right now, Reece turned his attention back to the matter at hand.

She used his momentary distraction against him, dropping to the ground and darting to the right before he could react. Springing back to her feet, she dove, opting to attack Nora, who was standing closest to where the Reaper was still holding Piper. Her objective was apparent: get through them and take another shot at the Anesidora.

But why?

He certainly hadn't given the order, and the way she was acting, like she was under the influence of his *bakkheia* was—

“Oh, hell no,” Reece hissed as it clicked into place. His hand shot forward and he gripped the back of the maenad's skull, digging his fingers into her hair. Then he pulled back, hard, yanking her off balance in the process.

He threw her to the ground, barking out an order for his other three to help pin her to the threadbare carpet. It took all of them to keep her contained, but they managed to secure her flailing claws and legs.

Reece dropped to his knees, placing a hand at each side of her head, forcing her to look up at him. Once he had her attention, he began to hum in the back of his throat, a deep, thrumming noise that rose in volume. It took longer than it should have, but a moment later the effects of his song were visible, the maenad lulled into a sense of calm.

He strengthened the trance, no longer humming but singing softly, delivering each sound deliberately. She went pliable in his hands, weak and lax, eyelids slowly drooping. Even after they'd fully closed, he kept up the song, wanting to be sure before he pulled away. Not wanting to risk she'd been buried too deeply by someone else's manipulations.

When he was certain he'd given enough, that she and the rest of the people in the room were safe, he pulled back. Easing to his feet, he watched the steady rise and fall of her chest, confident she would stay asleep for the next three hours at least. More than enough time for them to undo the hypnosis placed on her.

The other three were already pulling her away, lifting her gently between them. They knew without him having to tell them that something had happened to their sister. That the attack hadn't been her fault. The maenads were tuned to each other that way.

The Reaper, however, was not.

“What the hell?!” He glared from his spot on the floor, the much smaller Anesidora woman curled in his lap.

Her head was tucked beneath his chin, tendrils of her long brunette hair wrapped around his arm. In his haste to catch her, the Reaper must not have noticed. Though he was clutching her close now, his body wrapped around her as if to defend her not just from the crazed—and now subdued—maenad, but from the rest of them as well.

From Reece.

A growl traveled up his throat before he could stop it. He did not like the idea of the Reaper trying to keep the Anesidora from him.

“What’s the meaning of this, Dionysus?” Rover demanded, either not noticing the fire in Reece’s eyes or simply too stupid to tread lightly. His purposeful usage of that old name was proof it was more than likely the latter.

He was arrogant, and Reece was tempted to knock him down a peg. Would have, even, if the small woman hadn’t chosen that very moment to stir in his arms.

“Piper.” Just like that, all of Rover’s attention dropped down to her. He cupped her cheek, tilting her head back so that he could see her face. His thumb trailed beneath her closed left eye. “Piper.”

She groaned, delicate features scrunching up as she did so. She was coming out of it slowly, but she was also in pain.

“Give her to me,” Reece ordered, barely recognizing he was already crossing the room and reaching for her.

Rover shot to his feet and away faster than a normal human would be able to follow. “Like hell.”

“Do you want her to live?” he growled. “Then give her to me.”

“It’s because I want her to live that I’m not going to do that.” The Reaper motioned pointedly toward the maenads. “One of yours just attacked her. Hurt her. Back off. I don’t care who you are.”

Reece struggled with the fury that rose within him, that misplaced jealousy returning and bringing along with it a friend. Possessiveness. His reaction to the Anesidora was primal, and no matter how much he disliked it, he couldn’t outright deny it.

Too bad he couldn’t very well kill the Reaper and take her either, despite how badly his instincts were screaming at him to do that very thing.

Full on madhouse.

Was it because she was an Anesidora? Maybe that was it. Her blood, her purpose, the fact that she was made to guard the pithos, the very thing

he was so tightly tied to...perhaps that was the real reason for his reaction. It was possible he was attracted to her this fiercely simply because of her connection to Pandora's Box.

That's highly unlikely. He chose to ignore that thought.

"My maenad was manipulated," Reece said, forcing his voice to calm, to come off less threatening. "Orpheus must have gotten his hands on a damn lyre."

For a tense moment the Reaper didn't react, then he glanced back over to the women who were still crowded around their unconscious sister. He seemed to come to grips with the truth, realizing that logically, there was no reason for Reece to have Piper attacked. His grip around her didn't loosen, but he became less hostile.

"She's been poisoned," Reece explained when another pained sound came from Piper. "She needs to be cared for before it's too late."

"Fine." Rover took a step toward him, stilling when he shook his head.

"I need to take her alone. The cure is somewhere you're not allowed to be."

"Make an exception."

"I'm going to go with no on that one."

"I'm not letting you take her anywhere without me." The look in his eyes was deadly.

Reece let some of his ire slip through, done with playing nice. He'd explained the situation, which should be more than enough for the Reaper to cooperate. "You're forgetting your place. I do not need your permission to do anything."

"Are you threatening me?" Rover asked. "Hadrian—"

"Isn't here. But I am. And I am a god, your obedience falls to me whenever he's not around."

The Reaper did not like that term, not one bit, but he stilled, debating. They both knew that if he wanted, Reece could just take her, but there would be a struggle, however slight, and that could cause more harm to Piper in the end.

He waited patiently for Rover to give into that conclusion, banking down the grin the second he saw that he'd won.

"If anything happens to her," Rover said, holding her out and allowing Reece to replace his arms with his own, "you will regret it."

Reece didn't bother ordaining that with a response. He'd gotten what he wanted, and now he had to get her to a healing room. He adjusted Piper in his hold, getting a whiff of her in the process, a sweet smell, like lemon and vanilla. It took all his willpower not to noticeably sniff her in the presence of the Reaper.

Without another word, he tightened his grip and flashed the two of them out of the casino. They didn't leave the city, merely traveled to the other side of Las Vegas, where one of his houses was located.

He brought them directly in the room they needed, glad to find that it was empty when they arrived.

The room held two large bathtubs made of smooth stone. Each was set in the wall at either side. A separate shower unit was on the opposite wall. There was a cabinet in the center, and after he'd settled her into one of the tubs, he went for it. Opening the middle drawer, he pulled out a small vial filled with purple liquid and returned to Piper, crouching down to feel her forehead.

She was starting to burn up, which meant he had to hurry. His hands reached for the hem of her shirt and he hesitated. For a moment, he actually debated over whether or not to remove her clothing.

Modesty had never been an issue with him, and wouldn't she prefer living to keeping hers if she had any?

Cursing himself for being ridiculous, he quickly stripped her of the shirt and went to work on removing her sneakers, socks, and pants. He left her underwear and her bra in place.

Reece flicked the faucet on, a gush of icy water spilling forth. Some splashed onto his suit jacket, and he removed that as well, flinging it to the floor over the pile he'd made of her clothing. As soon as his sleeves were rolled up, he reached into the tub and wrapped an arm around her narrow waist, hoisting her higher so that her head could rest against the wall. With his other hand, he uncapped the small vial and brought it to her lips.

She was sweating, her skin hot to the touch and growing redder by the second. Her jaw was clenched so tightly, he had to pry her lips open in order to stick the end of the vial in. Then he emptied its contents and quickly let her mouth close once more so she'd be forced to swallow.

Reece couldn't remember the last time he'd had to do this. There hadn't been an accidental maenad poisoning in a long while, at least not one that he'd had to personally deal with. Who his maenads spent their time

with, and who they accidentally scratched with their poison-tipped claws, was their business. So long as it didn't result in any of the other gods coming at him, he didn't care what they did with their free time.

Once he was certain Piper had swallowed the cure, he felt her forehead again. It was still as hot as a moment prior, but wasn't worse, which was a good sign. The icy water was filled halfway now, enough to reach her ribs, and he shut it off.

Then he got to work on her arm.

Three of the maenad's claws had dug in deep. Settling his palm tightly over it, he inhaled. It'd been a while since he'd bothered healing anyone as well, but the familiar heating in his veins started with little to no prompting. It took less than a minute, and when he pulled back there were only three small cuts in her arm. The poison prevented him from healing her all the way, but at least now it was more of a cat scratch than a knifing.

He went back to the cabinet, opening the lower drawer to remove a few medical supplies. When he came back, she was still unconscious but less red. By the time he'd wrapped a bandage around the remainder of her wound her temperature was back to normal.

Reece was in the process of rising to grab some towels when she suddenly started jerking. With a curse, he snatched another vial of the cure from the cabinet and grabbed her. He swore again when her head connected sharply with his chin, and her flailing increased. She was still unconscious, but she wasn't fighting like it.

Without thinking, he tugged her forward so that he could drop into the tub at her back, securing her tightly against him by wrapping his arms and legs around her. She was strong for a mortal, and it took a couple of tries to open the vial without spilling any with her putting up such a struggle.

It took even more effort to get her to swallow the cure this time, and he had to keep his hand over her mouth for a good two minutes before he could safely remove it without her spitting it out. The effects were instantaneous, and her fighting decreased until she was simply jerking slightly in his hold.

He whispered to her, pressing his cheek against the top of her head to get close, letting his power enter his voice so that it soothed much the same way his humming had done for his maenad. When she started to settle, he rocked gently, loosening but not removing his hold.

Even unconscious she responded to him, arching slightly, turning her face to nuzzle against him. Her reaction caught him off guard, and within seconds he was hard. He stopped moving but kept whispering to her, not wanting to stop giving comfort just because he was now very uncomfortable himself.

She was pressing against him, settled between his stretched legs. Earlier, he'd tried really hard not to notice the thin white lace that made up her bra and panties, but now that most of the urgency of the situation had gone, it was impossible for him not to.

The water had turned the material sheer, her nipples very visible and extended toward him from the cold. He saw naked breasts all the time, so there was no reason for these particular ones to affect him so much. But they did.

He'd been hard before, but it was nothing compared to now. Squeezing his eyes shut, he rested his head back against the cool tile of the wall, willing the icy water to rid him of the hard-on.

Preferably before the woman in his arms woke up and realized what was pressed so solidly against her back.

Chapter 5:

Piper was fucking freezing. She came to this realization instantly, the shock of it snapping her awake. Sucking in air, she tried to move only to find that she couldn't. It took another moment for her to figure out why. Someone was holding her.

She blinked past the lingering confusion, oddly not panicking. She remembered being attacked by the maenad, being with Rover. Had she passed out? She must of. Testing the strength of the arms around her again, she twisted, hoping he'd get the hint and let her go. She'd assumed it was Rover holding her, but she'd just noticed the green dress pants sticking to her bare legs were distinctly *not* the black jeans she'd last seen him in.

What the...

"Easy, Anesidora," a smooth voice said close to her ear, immediately causing her to still. She knew that voice.

"Reece?" She wasn't sure what she was hoping for, that it would be him, or that it wouldn't. One of his people had attacked her, after all. But she was pretty sure he'd tried to stop her. Whatever had happened, her mind was still a little fuzzy, and she was finding it difficult to put two and two together.

"Yes," he answered. And that was it. She waited expectantly, but he didn't add anything else.

"Seriously?" she prompted, and then heaved a sigh of frustration when there was still nothing. Guess she was going to have to push. "Question—a few, actually—we'll start with the two most important though. What are we doing in a bathtub? And where the hell are my clothes?"

He chuckled, the sound dark and deep and before she could help it, her hands tightened on his arms. "I had to get your temperature down before the poison set in. This was the best way."

"And my clothes?"

"Same reason. Without them you cooled faster."

"Pretty cool right now so...let me go."

"I'm content where I am, thank you."

Was he...Did the god of lust just hit on her? Piper shook those thoughts from her head, determined not to completely have a meltdown. Or a breakdown, depending on which way the rest of this conversation went.

"I just woke up freezing and practically naked in the arms of a stranger," she pointed out, making her comment as light as possible given the circumstances. "The word 'content' is not even in my vocabulary right now. So if you don't mind—"

He had her up and out of the tub before she could finish that sentence. A thick towel wrapped around her shoulders, his hands moving the material over her. He hadn't removed his clothing, so he was soaked through and practically standing in a puddle now on the floor.

She watched the ridges of muscle on his chest as he worked to dry her, allowed her gaze to roam over him while he was distracted. His shirt clung to him in all the right places, and she bit her lower lip to keep from reaching out to touch him. It'd been such a long time since she'd been attracted to anyone, and she welcomed the sensation now, if only for a distraction.

Then she remembered Rover, and the things he'd said to her right before the maenad had interrupted. All of the heat she'd been feeling staring at Reece vanished in a puff of pain filled smoke.

She opened her mouth to ask about him, but snapped it shut again. What if the reason she was here with the god instead was because Rover had really meant it? He didn't want anything to do with her, so he'd handed her off. Like an old toy. Or discarded trash. Tears pricked her eyes at the thought and she dug her nails into her palms to try and stop them.

"Hey," suddenly Reece was standing again, holding her chin carefully, "it's okay. You're okay."

"That's not..." She let out a shaky breath. There was no way she was going to tell him she'd been about to cry over a boy. She was not twelve years old, and he was a fricken god. He so did not need to hear about her melodrama. "I'm fine."

"Generally," he said carefully, "when people cry it means something else."

"People cry when they're happy," she stated.

He angled her head, waiting for her to lift her gaze and meet his. "Are you happy, Piper?"

It was the first time he'd said her name, and it sent a rush of tingles down her spine. Somehow, she knew what he meant. He wasn't asking about right this second, he was asking about her life. The one she'd made for herself.

The one she'd made by running from her responsibilities.

"You probably find me repulsive," she blurted before she could think better of it.

Whatever he'd expected her to say, that had not been it. "Why would you think that?"

"Because of what I've done." She glanced away, hating herself a little for it. For being such a coward she couldn't even look the damn god in the eye when she said it out loud. "You heard it back there. Don't act like you don't know."

"That you ran away?" He clucked his tongue. "You didn't want that life so you chose a different one. What's repulsive about that?"

She eyed him suspiciously, certain this was a trap somehow. "You can't honestly think that. You do realize that I'm an Anesidora, right? The only reason my family even has children is to continue the line so that we can protect the pithos."

And what a bang-up job they were doing.

"I'm ancient, Piper," he told her, amusement clear in his multi-colored eyes. "I was there when Anesidora was created as another name for Pandora. I was there when Pandora opened the box, in fact. Trust me, I know who your family is, and where you come from." His gaze wandered across her face, searching. "You aren't the only one in your line who wished for something else."

"I'm not?" She didn't want to allow that little kernel of hope that sprung up to grow. "Why are you telling me this?"

The gods couldn't be trusted, that was the first thing they'd been taught as children. Hell, all of the myths told around the world taught that very same lesson. Yet here she was, standing half-naked with not just any god, but Dionysus.

Of course he thought her actions were acceptable. Wasn't he the guy who believed in partying and letting loose? Giving in to carnal needs and instincts? She'd heard the stories about how in ancient times his maenads had gone around tearing people limb from limb.

For fun.

He must have seen the change come over her, because when she pulled back he let her go. Let her put distance between them as she moved toward the closed door. He didn't follow, merely rested his hands on his hips and waited.

When she stopped moving, he spoke.

"You should rest. The poison did a number on your body. You'll need sleep to fully recover." He motioned toward the door at her back. "There's a bedroom right outside. There should also be some clothes in the dresser. Go ahead. I'll clean up in here."

"Where's Rover?"

His eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. "He had to stay at the casino. Outsiders aren't allowed here."

She lifted a brow and glanced down at herself pointedly.

"Go get changed, Piper," he said.

She thought about arguing, but self-preservation won out. She didn't know him, or how far she could push his buttons before he snapped. Best not to piss off the god, especially when it seemed like he was the only one helping her out.

She opened the door and then paused.

He'd already begun draining the tub and sopping up the spill on the floor, but he glanced up like he felt her gaze on his back and waited.

"Thank you," she told him. "For," she waved a finger at the bathtub, "this."

"Maybe next time we bath together, it'll be more enjoyable," he offered, the corner of his mouth turning up suggestively.

Piper shot out of the room so fast it was a wonder her hair didn't magically dry. His dark chuckle followed after her, even slipping through the door she slammed at her back.

She found clothes where he'd said they'd be, but wasn't pleased with the selection. It'd been a long time since she'd worn anything black—even her workout gear was colorful—mostly out of rebellion.

More like spite.

She started to get dressed without any more inward complaints. Growing up, monotone colors meant blending in, so her wardrobe had mostly consisted of blacks, grays, and the occasional browns. Every once in a while she'd manage to slip a white item in there for fun, but that was about as far as it went.

No matter that her family had successfully remained unbothered for centuries, or that they were basically allowed to run normal lives. Gods forbid if they try to wear a green shirt or some neon socks.

If it was such a normal life, you wouldn't have run.

She hated when her thoughts got like this, out of hand and all traitor-like. Her parents worked regular jobs, paid their mortgage, their phone bills, et cetera. But they also trained daily, knew more about mythology than most professors, and had the ability to siphon sins from the surrounding populous and use said sin as a weapon.

And they wanted her to be just like them. Their jobs were boring, their lives were boring. Yet they kept on honing their skills, as if they'd actually get the chance to use them. Piper had thought it was such a total and complete waste of a life, and of time.

But she didn't think that now. The pithos had been taken, and maybe if her parents had been there—if she had been there—they could have done something to stop it.

To stop Paul.

She wrapped her arms tightly around herself and moved to the window. Outside, flashing lights whirled in the distance. The sky was darkening so that it was a mixture of cerulean and black, and she couldn't make out any of the stars.

Her phone was probably still in her jeans pocket in the bathroom, so she glanced around for a clock. There was one on the nightstand next to the large king-sized bed, the numbers saying that it was close to six o'clock.

In the morning.

Of course she'd been out that long. Why not? Everything else in her life was going so well.

The room had wood flooring and a high ceiling. The walls were beige, as was the plush chair set in the corner by the window, and the thick comforter on the bed. She walked toward it and lifted a corner, smiling when she saw the sheets beneath were a deep violet.

"I like purple."

Reece's sudden voice at her back had her yelping and jumping guilty away from the bed. When she turned, it was to find an amused expression on his face.

Damn that face. For the second time she found she couldn't look away, too caught up in how perfect he was. The straight arch to his nose

drew attention to his lush coral tinted lips, then to the curve of his jaw. He'd been clean shaven before, but now there was a hint of five o'clock shadow. He lifted his hand to rub at his chin and a single orangey-yellow gem gleamed at the center of his middle finger, right above the first knuckle.

"You have a dermal piercing?" she asked, not really sure why, or why she found that sexy.

Everything about him was sexy, in fact, which was a problem on so many levels. He was a god, for one. Getting involved with him would be dangerous, and that was if he was even interested himself. Despite his flirting, she doubted that he was. He had a slew of redheads at his beck and call, after all.

Her? She was a brunette. Not lithe by any means. Over the years she'd made sure to keep up with her training, so her body was well muscled. While his maenads were strong, they were also supernatural. They didn't need to look fit to be able to tear a person's face off.

Then there was Rover...

"And you have terrible observation skills," he said, the corner of his mouth turning up as he entered the room. "You should really work on that, Anesidora."

"I have a first name, you know." She balked when he began removing his soggy shirt, spinning on her heels pointedly. "Do you have to do that here? In front of me?"

"You didn't seem to mind that I saw you practically naked," he countered. "What did you do with all those wet under-things anyway?"

She'd wrapped them in the towel so they wouldn't leave a puddle on the floor. She merely pointed to it where it sat beneath the window. "Why?"

"No reason," he purred, and the sound seemed to glide all the way up her spine.

One of the dresser drawers contained at least half a dozen bra and panty sets. She'd been tempted, but had opted against wearing any of them. It made the clothes she was wearing now, the tight leather pants and the black long-sleeved shirt, a bit uncomfortable, but it was the lesser of two evils in her mind.

"Whose underwear is that?" She turned, angling her head toward the dresser. And tried to convince herself that wasn't disappoint she felt when she found him already redressed in dry clothing. "Is this her room?"

"This is my room," he told her.

She lifted a brow. “And you have a ton of women’s underwear because...?”

“Occasions like this one, of course.” He winked at her.

She rolled her eyes. “Brilliant.”

“You don’t approve.”

“Does it matter?”

“I suppose not.”

“If outsiders aren’t allowed here,” she said, “then why could I come and not Rover?”

Reece moved toward the bed, tugging down one of the corners and smoothing the fabric over. Unlike her, he’d changed into a pair of loose gray sweatpants that hung low on his hips. The black t-shirt kept her from seeing anything, but she recalled the way his wet dress shirt had clung to him. Knew where the curve of his hipbones would be.

“He’s a Reaper. I don’t allow them into my home. This is where many of my maenad’s choose to live. A Reaper could interfere with their work,” Reece explained. Then, as if having similar thoughts to the ones she’d just had he ran his gaze over her outfit. “You should probably change again.”

“Why?”

“That isn’t going to be comfortable to sleep in.”

“I’m not sleeping here. With you. Or at all. Paul is still out there.”

“I’m very aware.”

“Then you know we don’t have time for sleep!”

“On the contrary,” he came around the bed and reached for her, “it’s more of a reason why we need it. We have to be at one hundred percent in order to catch Orpheus. Being half exhausted will be detrimental, not beneficial. Besides, you were poisoned only a few hours ago. You need to continue healing. Sometimes there are some nasty...side effects to maenad venom.”

That caught her attention. As did the fingers now lightly wrapped around her wrist. She was trying to ignore the latter, so latched onto the first.

“What kind of side effects?”

“Hopefully nothing you’ll have to worry about. If you sleep, the rest of the poison should burn through your systems and you definitely won’t have to.” He tugged lightly on her wrist, indicating she should go back to

the dresser. When she didn't budge he sighed. "All right. I'll choose for you then."

Dropping her arm, he turned and yanked open a drawer, already reaching for a few things without having to search. He came back with a matching pair of sweatpants and another t-shirt, this one in white.

She glanced at the offered clothing and then up at him. "You're kidding. Right?"

He merely stared.

"You have a ton of women's underwear, but you don't have any female pajamas?"

"You should be more surprised by the fact I even have the underwear," he offered. "Generally when women visit my bedroom clothes come off, not on."

"That's—" She stopped herself just shy from saying disgusting.

God. He's a god, she chastised herself.

"You said you'd answer my questions," she told him, taking the clothing and placing it on the bed so she could start to remove the ones she was wearing. When he didn't turn around or step away, she debated whether or not to say something. He had a point though, about having already seen her earlier.

A sick, twisted part of her also felt the need to put him off guard. To regain some of the ground she'd lost. She was an Anesidora, and yet she'd been attacked twice in the same night, and had needed rescuing both times. What must he think of her? The poor, tiny human who ran from her responsibilities? Who made herself weak.

But she wasn't weak. Strength of will was still a strength, and maybe the most important one of all.

Which was why she made herself tug the shirt over her head without flinching over the fact she wasn't wearing anything underneath. She dropped it to the ground and reached for the t-shirt on the bed, not bothering to cover up or angle her body away from him as she did so.

His sharp intake of breath was an indicator she'd gotten to him, and she allowed some of her long hair to slip over her face to hide the satisfied smile that graced her lips.

Not wanting to see him naked earlier hadn't been about modesty, it'd been about survival. She didn't care if he saw her body, she kept herself in good shape, and she was fortunate enough not to be one of those girls

with low self-esteem. She was nothing compared to a maenad, of course, but she wasn't unattractive.

Even if she had been, that's not what this little power play was about. She needed him to know that she wouldn't be pushed around, that she wouldn't tremble before him simply because he was a god. That wasn't to say she wouldn't walk carefully, treat him respectfully—when it was due. She didn't want to make an enemy of him, but if she hadn't allowed her family to control her, the people she cared most about in this world, she'd be damned if she let one lust god get under her skin.

One gorgeous, sexy as hell, lust god.

With the shirt on, she moved to the button on her pants, slowly slipping them down her legs as if it was hard to remove the tight material. If he knew what she was really doing, stretching the moment out, he made no signs of it. Just stood there and gawked.

Once they were a puddle on the floor, she kicked them aside. His staring finally starting to get to her, she didn't bother putting on a show with the sweatpants, slipping into them as quickly as possible. While she adjusted the band around her waist, she turned to fully face him, arching a brow almost tauntingly.

"Questions, Reece?" she said, hoping he hadn't caught the breathy way she'd spoken.

Because looking at him had been a mistake. He was still fully clothed, and yet the expression he wore was so open, so naked, that it sent the blood in her body rushing. Before she knew what was happening, the muscles between her thighs clenched and she felt the first telltale signs of warmth.

Fuck no. She was not going to lose all the ground she'd just covered with that striptease by getting turned on by him.

"Yes," his eyes were glowing, swirls of gold and neon blue and green, "so many questions."

"My questions," she corrected. "You promised you'd answer them. Remember?"

If she hadn't been watching so closely, she might have missed it. As it were, she saw the very second realization struck him. His shoulders pulled back and his eyes hardened, the mixture of suspicion and fury evident. Though they continued to glow a few moments, his lips thinned in annoyance.

“What are you trying to gain here, Piper?” he asked, voice thick and low, practically a growl into the massive room. He didn’t approach her, but it was obvious that he wanted to. That he was holding himself back.

But was it to strangle her? Or something else?

She pushed her thighs together, trying to make it seem like she was simply adjusting her stance. She should have known he would hone in on the movement. That he’d see through her.

Just like that, all the tension left him, and he was back to being that playful, flirty version of himself. “I get it now.”

“Get what?” She really wanted to know, because she feared whatever he thought he’d just discovered was something she wasn’t going to like.

Instead of answering, he ambled around the bed, dropping down so that he could rest against the backboard. He sprawled out, practically displaying himself, and canted his head at her.

“Go ahead and ask your questions, Piper. I’m listening.” He stretched an arm over his head, resting it there. The move caused his t-shirt to tug up, exposing a swath of tanned skin. The bastard knew it too, because when her eyes dropped to it he chuckled.

Snap out of it, she ordered herself, straightening and crossing her arms.

So he was hot? Big deal. There were plenty of hot guys out there, and of course she’d be affected by him. God of lust. That was all this was. She was falling for his sway just like everyone else who came into contact with him. As long as she kept a level head and remembered that, she’d be fine. She wouldn’t do anything stupid.

Think of Rover.

The guy who wants nothing to do with you?

Right. There was that. Then there was also the fact that he’d never, not once, shown an interest in her sexually. There’d been moments in the past where she’d thought he was being romantic, but those could have easily been misconstrued times of friendship. There’d never been any sign that he was attracted to her. That he thought of her as anything other than, at best, a good friend, and at worst, a sister of sorts.

Thinking that last part did the trick, dousing any remaining heat she’d felt toward the god.

He noticed that too, suggestive grin turning to a frown as he dropped his arm and sat up. "What is it, Piper?"

She couldn't talk to him about Rover, that would make her seem so pathetic, but she could discuss what was going on with her brother. What had just happened to her. After five years of not being a part of this world, there was a lot she needed to be reacquainted with. A lot she didn't understand.

"Your maenad attacked me."

"True," he agreed. "She was under the influence of Orpheus." When she made a face indicating he should continue, he did. "Orpheus was a musician when he was alive, a famous one. He could weave magic into the notes he played, persuasive magic that hypnotized those around him. That's how he convinced Hadrian to let Eurydice go, in fact."

"He hypnotized a god?"

"Yes," he nodded, "but he was only able to do so much. That's why Hadrian was still sound of mind enough to add the stipulations. All Orpheus had to do was not look back, and Hadrian knew the musician's fear and mistrust would never allow him to follow through on that."

"So Hadrian really played him." Sounded about right. She'd always been told the gods were manipulative.

"No more so than Orpheus had tried to first. There's a balance to everything, Anesidora. Orpheus attempted to break that balance, and he paid for it dearly. Even after his death, even after Hadrian granted him a place in Elysium, he wasn't allowed to see Eurydice ever again. Those were the rules of the game, to which he agreed upon."

"He wanted his wife back," she stated. "It wasn't a game to him. It was his life."

Reece angled his head. "You find him noble."

"He just hijacked my brother's body and stole one of the most dangerous weapons on the planet," she corrected. "I find him sad."

"You shouldn't pity him. Not after everything he's done, and everything he's going to do."

"Unless we stop him."

"Yes," he smiled softly, "unless we do that."

"You don't think we can?" If he wasn't sure...that wasn't good.

"I think until we figure out why he hasn't already opened the pithos, there's no way to be certain about anything. Why steal it if he didn't intend

to release the remaining sins trapped inside? He has everything he needs, an active Anesidora, the jar...I'm curious what he's using it for right now. A paperweight? It's useless unless he flips the lid."

And if that was all he intended, to merely hold onto it, he'd gone through a lot of trouble, and pissed off a lot of people, to do it.

Reece was right, that would be stupid, and until they knew what he was currently doing, what he was waiting for, they'd remain in the dark. The only thing they could do was find him. Find him, and take back the pithos and her brother.

"This thing Orpheus can do," she said, "can he do it to anyone?"

"He'll be able to affect you, yes."

"And Rover?"

"So much concern for a guy who insulted you with an audience." He patted the empty spot on the bed next to him. "Come on. In."

"Not gonna happen." For multiple reasons.

"Don't trust yourself with me?" He waggled his brows, and she snorted. "Then there's nothing stopping you. I'll be a perfect gentleman, I swear."

"And the reason I can't just get my own room is...?"

He sobered some. "I'm not sure it'll be safe. This place is protected but he got to one of my maenads before. They've all been warned and are on the lookout, but I'd still feel better monitoring you myself. Then there's also the issue of possible side effects—"

"Which you still won't tell me about."

"—which I still won't tell you about," he continued as if she hadn't spoken. "It's better this way. Just get in the bed, Anesidora. What's there to be afraid of, really?"

"You mean besides the god?" she mumbled, but flung back the covers and began rearranging the pillows. "So you know, the only reason I'm doing this is because I'm exhausted."

Getting chased and poisoned would do that to a person.

She formed a barrier in the space between them with the pillows, then settled down with her back facing him.

"What happened to all that bravado with the striptease?" he asked a moment later, waiting until she'd gotten comfortable.

She stilled, but refused to turn and look at him. "This isn't about bravado. This is about trust."

He was quiet a minute and then, “I’ve never touched a person who didn’t want to be touched, Piper. Being the god of lust doesn’t mean I abuse people, sexually or otherwise. Lust doesn’t even have to be sexual. People yearn for all sorts of things. Money, yachts...freedom.”

“Pretty sure if it’s money they’re yearning for they can buy the yachts their damn selves,” she snapped, tightening her fists around the soft material of the sheets. That last one had been an underhanded jab at her, and she refused to play into his hand. “Tell me how to avoid Orpheus’ control.”

“I’ll think of something,” he told her.

And then he was silent.

Chapter 6:

Piper couldn't help it. She was staring.

Not that it seemed to bother him. The asshole.

Reece stood on the other side of the room right before the open window. Sunlight spilled in, highlighting the golden tone to his skin, sending shots of it through his otherwise dark hair. He'd been there since she'd woken five minutes ago, casually stripping out of the clothes he'd slept in to replace them with a suit.

This one was the color of the sky after a storm, the material shiny so that when he slid the pants on it was almost like he was stepping into deep water. He took his time doing the buttons, leaving himself shirtless and angled toward her just enough that she could see every plain and curve of muscle he had.

Piper inwardly begged herself to look away, but if him dropping his sweatpants hadn't done it—she'd barely so much as blinked to find he'd been wearing nothing underneath—having him half dressed now certainly wasn't going to.

Why not? Turnabout is fair play.

That was true; he'd seen her in her see-through underwear. Besides, it wasn't like he didn't know what he was doing. Might as well enjoy the show.

There was something about him that gave off the sense of danger, and yet unending control. It was an odd combination. It made her want to take him apart, get inside his head, figure out what was going on behind those multi-colored eyes. Which was an altogether insane thought.

It didn't matter who Dionysus was as a person, or how sexy he was. The only thing she wanted from him—she *needed* from him—was help finding her brother. Once they did that, they'd go their separate ways and she could go back to pretending like none of this world even existed.

Still, it was hard to concentrate on her resolve when he was standing there exuding sexual appeal. Baiting her in just the right way. She'd tipped her hand last night and now he was taking a page from her playbook. The real question was why? What did he hope to gain here?

Perhaps, given that he was the god of lust, this sort of thing was just natural instinct to him. Preening, showing himself off. Trying to get a rise out of the people around him.

For some reason, she didn't like that idea, and a thread of displeasure pierced through the thick layer of attraction she was feeling.

Reece's muscles flexed as he did up the last button on his pants and leaned over to pick up the midnight black dress shirt he'd carefully placed over the arm of a chair. Slowly, he removed it from the hanger, making sure not to cover himself from view as he did so.

Which was fine by her, because she wasn't done unashamedly ogling his bare chest. His shoulders were wide, and a well-sculpted chest led to a tapered waist and jutting hipbones.

Something else was standing at attention now as well.

Tearing her gaze away from the bulge in his pants, she found that he'd stopped with the pretenses of getting dressed and was watching her back. Had he seen her reaction? Somehow, that actually would be embarrassing, so she forced herself to straighten and ignore the fact she was sitting in the center of the massive bed with messy hair.

"Don't stop on my account, Princess." The words were spoken lightly, but the glow of his eyes was anything but. "I haven't been looked at like that for a very long time."

The nickname threw her off, but she recovered quickly, snorting at that last part of his comment. Yeah right he hadn't been. Even with his clothes on the other night she'd been able to tell how hot he'd be with them off, how perfectly formed. There was no way she was the only one who'd mentally undressed him.

"You should pay better attention," she told him, voice so husky it was like it came from a stranger. "Your maenads stare at you all the time."

"You've only met four of them," he reminded, "and their stares are different."

"How?" She hated that her interest was piqued.

The corner of his mouth turned up knowingly and he tugged the shirt the rest of the way off the hanger, moving to slip one arm through. "Be good, and maybe I'll tell you. Eventually."

"I'm not a dog." But she should have known he would view her as much. Hello? God. Human. Wasn't that their typical M.O? Tossing the

covers off of her she stood with a flourish, making her way toward the bathroom without a second glance in his direction.

Space, that's what she needed. Of course she'd been caught up in his spell, it was early and that was the first thing she'd seen: gorgeous naked hot guy. No one in their right mind would have looked away. That's all it'd been. Primal instinct.

Sure, because you use words like primal all the time. Totally normal.

She clenched her teeth and ignored that annoying voice in her head.

"I didn't mean it like that," Reece said, stopping her just as she was about to push open the bathroom door.

"Oh?" She spun around and glared. Which was a mistake because while he'd put the shirt on he hadn't bothered buttoning it. Somehow, the black silky material against his skin did more in terms of showing him off than less. "How did you mean it then?"

His dark brows drew together, lips pursing as he unabashedly ran that hard gaze down her body. "I'm trying to decipher you."

"I'm not a Rubix cube."

"I believe you solve those, not decipher them. There isn't really a code involved or anything like that so...But no, you're not. I am still going to figure you out though."

"Well," she gripped the door handle and shoved it open, stepping deliberately through, "good luck with that."

When she heard him chuckle from the other side of the now closed door, she was forced to wonder why she was always slamming them in his damn face. He was getting to her, and she shouldn't be letting him. Hell, they'd only known one another for a single night. And she'd been unconscious for most of it.

Piper got into the shower and closed her eyes, allowing the hot water to ease some of the kinks in her muscles. She needed to get herself together. There was no way she'd be of any use finding Paul if she didn't keep a clear head.

She washed her hair and grabbed the single bar of soap off the shelf, halfway through rubbing it across her chest before the scent hit her. Bad idea.

It smelled like him, and she hadn't even been aware she'd known what he smelled like. Must have been a subconscious realization from last

night when she'd been tucked against him in the bathtub. Her gaze absently wandered over toward it, hands slowing over her breasts.

The smell of teakwood mixed with something sweet and almost floral surrounded her, steam starting to fog over the glass of the shower door. Idly, the hand not clutching the bar of soap trailed lower, fingers slicking across her abdomen to the top of her mound. She cupped herself, almost moaned, and then—

Realized what she was doing.

“Shit. Shit. Shit.” Tossing the bar of soap away from her as if it'd turned into a snake, Piper quickly rinsed off and all but jumped out of the shower.

What the hell was wrong with her? She'd been about to touch herself just because of the smell of him?!

And the fact that you saw him naked fifteen minutes ago. Her mind conjured up a picture of him standing there, and of course it was the moment he'd dropped his sweats and exposed everything he was packing.

Shaking the image of his semi-hard cock out of her head, Piper twisted the material of the towel tightly around herself. In her haste to get away from him, she'd forgotten to grab clean clothes. It was either stay in here hiding, put on the ones she'd slept in, or suck it up and go out there.

The first was not an option—she wasn't a coward. The second would give too much away—he'd figure out she was now too unnerved to be naked around him. Which left option C.

Bracing herself, Piper inhaled and then opened the door, stepping into the bedroom with all the false confidence she could muster. Which ended up not being necessary, because the room was empty.

Alone, she glanced around, as if expecting him to leap out of the dresser or something equally ridiculous. Grunting at herself and her stupidity, she quickly made it over to where she'd left the first outfit she'd put on last night. She gave in and took one of the bras, an overly lacy monstrosity with crisscrossing straps.

Like before, the pants slid on and clung like a second skin. They were high-waist, stopping just over her belly button. The shirt was really half of one, leaving a good inch of skin exposed. Could be worse, she supposed.

A part of her, the sick part that actually enjoyed messing with him, liked the idea of bared flesh. She wasn't arrogant enough to expect it to

highly affect him, but she hadn't been the only one staring. Last night, Reece hadn't been able to take his eyes off of her when she'd gotten naked.

A sharp knock on the door pulled her from her thoughts, and she turned just in time to see him enter without waiting for a response. Any ire she might have felt about that vanished the second she saw what he was carrying.

"Thank god." She rushed to him, snatching one of the paper coffee cups out of his hands. It was scalding, but she didn't care, gulping down a few swallows before sighing contentedly.

He was blinking at her in surprise, but when she was done and met his gaze, that frustratingly sexy half grin returned. "You can just call me Reece. God is a bit much."

"Haha." She took another sip for good measure, needing all the fortification she could get to survive what she could already tell was going to be a long day.

He'd finished dressing while she'd been in the shower, the black shirt buttoned all the way up to the top. He'd left three of them undone, so the collar was open and loose beneath the dark blue suit jacket.

"Going somewhere important?" she asked, lifting the cup to her lips to hopefully cover her reaction. Because *damn*.

He lifted a single brow and glanced down at himself. "I always dress like this."

"Is there a reason for that?"

"I like to?"

"That sounded like a question."

"Because I'm not sure the one you asked me is really the one you meant to."

Okay...she'd play. Why not? He had brought her coffee, after all.

"Do all the other gods dress like you?" She motioned at the suit. "Is it a high and mighty thing? Set yourself above the rest of us visually?" She was pretty positive the jacket alone had cost him more than three months' worth of her rent.

"You've never met any of the others?" He seemed surprised by this.

"My family tends to avoid anything supernatural or mythological," she informed. "Sort of helps keep the pithos safe if we're not involved with this world."

“Except for the Reaper,” he angled his head, “you’re involved with him.”

She flinched, clearing her throat in a poor attempt to make it seem like she was unaffected. The truth was, she didn’t know what was between Rover and her anymore, but they’d certainly never been an item. No matter how badly she’d wished otherwise. He’d been her first crush, her first kiss even. Though, she’d stolen it by forcing him under some mistletoe on Christmas eve. But it counted.

Then she’d gone and ruined any chance of them ever being anything. Maybe even friends. Which was the worst part, because he’d been all she’d had up until she’d left. The only person she’d felt connected to, who she thought understood her.

He hadn’t understood your need to go.

No, but she couldn’t blame him for that, not after all the years he’d spent with her family, teaching them the things they’d need to know. Ingraining in them that protecting the pithos was the most important thing they could do. That their lives were dedicated to it, and that it was an honor.

Piper had never felt honored. She’d felt trapped. Smothered by a fate she hadn’t chosen and didn’t want. She’d hoped her friend, her only friend, would see that and help her choose something different.

He hadn’t.

So she’d gone without him. Without so much as saying goodbye.

“He’s watched over my family for centuries,” she told Reece, lifting a delicate shoulder, making it seem like no big deal when inside the barrier around her heart was cracking. “It’s his job.”

Those hurtful words Rover had sneered at her last night came rushing back, and a tiny bit more of her defenses cracked. He’d been so cruel.

You deserve it.

And wasn’t that just the icing on the cake? He’d been mean and it was warranted. She’d done this to them. It was her fault. Paul’s possession might even be, considering things could have gone differently if she’d been there. If she’d just done what she was supposed to do. What she’d been born to do.

You would have been miserable.

True, but Paul might still be safe, and wasn’t that more important than her happiness?

“Well,” Reece said, “the Grim Reaper’s been worried about you since last night. Apparently he’s driving my maenad’s up the wall with his constant demands over your well-being. So,” he curled his fingers at her, “let’s go put him at ease, shall we?”

Gawking at him naked was one thing, touching him? She hesitated, and he waited patiently, watching her with an unreadable expression.

She didn’t know why she was suddenly so nervous. Hadn’t she spent a good portion of the night pressed up against him in a bathtub? In her underwear? They were both fully clothed now, and it was only his hand. Barely any skin to skin contact at all. She was overreacting, letting the sleep deprivation and the adrenaline crash from yesterday’s events get to her. That’s all.

Before she could rethink it, she pressed her hand against his. She’d been right, however. It was a mistake.

The heat from his body immediately ricocheted down his arm, seemingly right through her, and she shuddered. Taking that as a sign, Reece tightened his fingers around hers and reeled her in, twisting her arm gently around her so that he could press their hands against her narrow back. The move brought her flush against him, and with her other hand occupied with the coffee, she couldn’t brace herself or push away.

She sucked in a breath, the smell of his teakwood soap mingling with a musk distinctly his own, infiltrating her senses. Her nipples immediately hardened, and it didn’t help that when he shifted they rubbed against his solid chest.

“This makes it easier,” he murmured down at her, and she found her eyes following the movement of his lips.

“To do what?” she sounded far away, even to her own ears.

Reece smirked, clearly knowing what was going on with her. “Travel, of course.”

Her mind blanked out for a heartbeat, and then it hit her. She opened her mouth to spit out a curse, but he beat her to it, flashing them from the bedroom before she could get so much as a syllable out.

Teleporting with him wasn’t like with Rover. There wasn’t a tight sensation in her chest or around her body, and there’d been no black smoke. One second they’d been standing in the bedroom, and in the next they were simply...not.

They weren't in the casino either, and she frowned around at their new surroundings. It looked like a club, or a bar, only being that it was the middle of the morning, it was pretty much empty. The walls and floors were painted yellow and black, and booths with leather upholstery lined the entire far wall. A couple tables were set about, the chairs currently resting on top of them.

Reece shifted them so that they were facing the opposite direction, and the long bar that took up the entire wall. It was glass and metal, with a string of bright florescent blue lights beneath the surface. It lit the space up, drawing attention to the maenad bartender on the other side currently wiping down the counter.

It also highlighted the Reaper seated on a stool, and Jane, one of the redheads from last night, who was currently running her finger intimately down his arm. She was smiling at him, whispering something close to him while they held each other's gazes.

The wave of cold hit her so quickly, Piper's grip tightened on Reece before she could even think to stop it. Not that her brain was doing much thinking at the moment. Watching them, seeing the way Rover leaned in closer, tipped his chin up, grinned...He'd never once looked at her that way.

Like he wanted to eat her up. He was the big bad wolf and Jane was Little Red Riding Hood.

She'd told herself that she was over it, that she understood that her crush had been one-sided and that it'd been a good thing. It'd been years since the last time she'd seen him, since she'd imagined him when she touched herself at night, or wished it was him she was with instead of whichever hookup she'd gotten into.

But, watching him now, it was like all those old childish feelings sprouted back up, crashing over her all at once. All that longing and desperate hoping, swallowing her and bringing along with it a harsh dose of reality.

Because he really hadn't *ever* thought of her as anything other than a friend, a responsibility. Proof of that was right in front of her.

As if to further drive that point home, Rover lifted a hand between them and eased his knuckle across Jane's stomach.

Piper went numb.

Reece still had their hands pressed against her back, and he turned her now, though she hardly noticed. He moved them until her body was

pressed against his a second time, then he reached out and took her chin between his fingers, forcing her stare away from the Reaper and onto him.

She blinked, needing a few seconds to wade through the ache in her chest and really *see* him. The very second she did, he pounced.

His mouth took hers, swallowing her startled sound. Then his hand shifted to cup the base of her skull, holding her to him so she couldn't pull away.

Something she had no intention of doing. Instead, she moved closer. The feel of his lips against hers like fire shooting through her veins. She was ignited, that cold and that sorrow consumed by heat in an instant. His tongue lined the seam of her mouth, silently asking entrance and she opened for him without hesitation.

He stroked the roof of her mouth, nipped her bottom lip and did it all over again. When she pushed up onto her toes for a better angle, he groaned and tugged lightly on her hair.

Emboldened by the sound, Piper flicked her tongue across his, then sucked it into her mouth and held with light pressure before releasing him. She followed the retreat of his tongue greedily, wanting more of that fire.

She couldn't remember the last time she felt like this—if she ever even had. That familiar pit in her stomach was gone, that flicker of guilt that followed her around, clinging to her back, was overwhelmed by all the sensations he was bringing forth. There was no regret, no second thoughts, no questioning herself.

It felt...wonderful.

It felt right.

Which would have been a serious problem if she'd been able to think straight. As it were, she was as gone as he seemed to be, slave to this thing burning between them.

At least until a voice from her past shattered the illusion.

“What the fuck do you think you're doing?”

Chapter 7:

Reece was going to kill him.

Through the rage and the lust, he tried to recall whether or not this particular Reaper happened to be important to Hadrian. Probably not. Probably didn't matter. He was going to murder him anyway for interrupting what had to be the most intense first kiss he'd ever had.

And he'd had a lot of first kisses over the millennia.

He tried to pinpoint what about this was so earth-shattering, but couldn't for the life of him do so. He shouldn't have even done it, he hadn't planned on kissing her—even if that was all he could think about since she'd appeared yesterday.

Well, that wasn't *all* he could think about. His mind had gone elsewhere, especially when he'd felt her lust spilling from the bathroom this morning like a tidal wave. It'd almost swept him up, and he'd been halfway to the door before logic and reality had slammed into him.

The fact that she'd been in there horny as hell had nothing to do with him. She'd more than likely been thinking of the Reaper. He'd noted the way she looked at Rover.

That's what had stopped him. That was why he'd left as quickly as possible to save them both from the embarrassment of him invading her personal space in the shower, taking her up against the wall...He'd gone to get coffee, and had downed an entire cup of it before gathering up the nerve to go back.

He'd thanked the all-mighty stars when she'd been fully clothed upon his return, ignoring the inkling of disappointment that accompanied the relief. Temptation was a thing he did not need, and neither was an Anesidora.

Yet the second she'd spotted the Reaper, the moment he'd felt the warmth leach out of her, all the reasons he shouldn't went right out the window. The only thing that had mattered was bringing back that Piper from before, the one that had brazenly stripped in front of him. The one that had then openly stared as he returned the favor.

That was the Piper he wanted, not the cold empty husk the Reaper had somehow turned her into with a few careless gestures. He needed to be taught a lesson. He needed to know what it felt like, and more importantly, Piper needed to know.

So Reece had kissed her to comfort her, and no reason but.

It had backfired.

Like, getting hit with one of Zeus's lightning bolts square in the chest, kind of backfire.

Because he realized fairly quickly that he'd lost control of the situation, that Piper had taken the reigns, was the one directing them, that he'd made a serious miscalculation. She was taking charge, and he was letting her. Which was wrong on so many levels, but mostly because he couldn't be beholden to anybody. Least of all a tiny Anesidora girl.

Woman, his mind immediately corrected. *She's a woman*.

And damn she was. He could smell her musk right now, was positive that if he reached down and felt her she'd be wet for him. Another reason the Reaper was going to die.

Wait, no.

He warred with himself, struggling to get a hold of his lust—another issue he'd literally never had before. The interruption was a good thing. It kept him from taking things too far. Which he would have.

You still want to.

"Get away from her," Rover growled, and it broke whatever spell Reece had been under.

"She's a big girl," he said, because he had to start talking, had to start shaking off whatever that had been. "I'm sure she can decide for herself where she wants to be. Besides," he let out a long breath, "kissing like that takes practice, and Piper here?" He risked a glance down at her—another mistake—and quickly back to the Reaper before the tightening of his groin could happen again. "Gold star, baby."

"You're taking advantage of her." Rover looked about ready to commit murder. Or at least give it his all. There wasn't a person in this room who could successfully take Reece on, and the Reaper damn well knew it.

"You're going to want to be very careful with those kinds of accusations." Fury threatened to turn his vision red. "Do you feel me using my powers? Was I singing prior to our hot and heavy make-out session?"

Don't think so. And you know why? Because I don't need to use my abilities to get laid, shithead. But you're definitely going to need to use yours to get out of here unscathed."

"Looks like my timing is spot on," a new voice said, filled with humor. A man Reece had never seen before stood in the doorway leading to the back of the club, hands tucked deceptively calm in the front pockets of his faded blue jeans. His hair was buzzed, but clearly dark brown, and his eyes were the color of melted chocolate. Familiar.

It clicked into a place less than a second later. They were Piper's eyes.

This had to be her brother, which meant really...

"Orpheus," Reece released Piper as casually as possible, spinning on his heels to face the newcomer. The move put him protectively in front of her, and he hoped the malicious spirit didn't notice. "It's been a while. I hear you've been busy."

The Anesidora body he'd possessed was tall, strong. Now that he'd made the connection, it was easy enough to spot the similarities between him and Piper. They had the same nose as well, same partial smile when they were trying to come off nonchalant. Too bad her brother wasn't the one at the helm at the moment.

"Not too busy for a friend." Orpheus motioned to the instrument resting at his feet. "I thought perhaps we could play together again. We always did make the perfect music."

The lyre looked new, and Reece vaguely wondered where he'd found it. Silently, he willed his maenads to their location. All he needed to do was buy them some time to surround the place.

"The club's a little empty for that. Mornings aren't really busy here at Luxuria." Reece shifted his stance, spread his feet wider apart. To counteract the repositioning, he mirrored the spirit, slipping his hands into his front pockets. "Why don't we have a drink instead? Catch up. I'm sure you have lots to tell."

Orpheus laughed, but the sound wasn't right. Beneath the normal, deep vibration, was a layering of another voice, this one higher in pitch. That could only mean that his grip on Paul's body was tenuous. Piper's brother was fighting back.

Piper, who was surprisingly quiet. He wanted to risk a glance at her, see for himself that she was all right, but he refrained. She hadn't pushed

him out of the way to get a better look at her brother, hadn't stepped back when he'd placed himself between them. Instead, she was silent and watchful.

He felt a warm feeling hit him when he realized why. She was trusting him to handle this. Trusting that he wouldn't do anything against her and her brothers' best interests.

Is that true?

The pithos was what was most important here, she had to know that. Had to understand that it was his top priority, not Paul. If Pandora's Box was ever opened again...He couldn't even mentally go there. Fact was, he liked Piper, he did, but preventing the end of current civilization? Yeah, that had to come first.

No matter what it meant for her brother.

"What about? The Elysian Fields? I'm sure you've been, friend. Aside from that...there's not much I feel the need to share." Orpheus held his hands up and then reached for the lyre.

Everyone in the room tensed, but no one made a move to stop him. He simply held it once he had it, fingers far enough from the strings to provide some semblance of comfort. Moving to the end of the bar nearest him, he slid onto one of the stools and set the instrument next to his elbow.

Too far for anyone to successfully take it away. Too close for the silent threat not to be apparent.

Reece moseyed over to the bar himself, leaning against it lazily. He motioned with two fingers to Mauri, the maenad on the other side, and a second later she set a filled shot glass down in front of each of them.

"That can't be true," he pressed, lifting the glass to his lips to down the cerulean liquid. "You were always one of the best storytellers."

"Coming from a god," Orpheus canted his head, took his own shot, "that's a pretty substantial compliment. I'll admit it's not above me to gloat; I did use to have many wild tales to tell. Again, though, I'll mention the Elysian Fields. A couple centuries locked away in that boredom and you'd change your tune too, Dionysus."

Reece didn't correct him on the name change. Let the bastard call him whatever he liked. He wouldn't be around much longer to do so anyway. Instead, he let out a dark chuckle, pretending to understand, to relate, when in reality all he wanted to do was roll his eyes.

Oh, poor him. Paradise wasn't good enough? Had to be hard.

Yeah, and Reece was the damn Easter Bunny.

“You don’t believe me,” Orpheus said, which was a surprise because Reece had been doing an excellent job covering his emotions. “It’s not the place itself, it’s the lack of one person in it. The deal I made with Hadrian was infinite. An infinity parted from my love in exchange for a single attempt at freeing her from the world of the dead. And therein lies the loophole, for how can it be paradise when the one thing I want can’t be there with me?”

Even Reece had thought it a bit cruel for Hadrian’s tastes when he’d heard what had happened. Setting the poor guy up to fail like that was harsh; throwing in eternity for good measure? Downright evil. The concept of romantic love was all but lost on Reece, but logically, he could understand it.

Then his maenads had contacted Eurydice and he’d realized he’d been wrong about everything. Hadrian hadn’t done it to be cruel to the lyre player. He’d done it to be kind to Orpheus’s wife.

“I can see how being parted from the one you care about could be upsetting,” Reece drawled, making sure to sound only partially interested.

It worked, and Orpheus laughed before signaling Mauri to refill his glass.

Reece let the arrogant move go, sending an almost imperceptible nod toward his maenad so that she would do as told. The more comfortable the malicious spirit got, the simpler this would all be in the end. He could feel the rest of his girls closing in. They were close, maybe another ten minutes at most.

The issue was not having all of them flash in at once, in case Orpheus had picked up a few different skills since becoming one of the dead. If he sensed the ambush, he’d react, and while usually that wouldn’t worry Reece, there was Piper to consider.

You don’t want to risk her getting hurt.

Well of course not. But it had nothing to do with the fact he wanted to fuck her, and everything to do with what her last name was.

Bullshit.

“Please,” Orpheus grunted, “you wouldn’t know the first thing about love if it came up and punched you in the dick. You’re fortunate in that sense. That kind of attachment to another is nothing but agony and inconvenience.”

“Pretty sure I’ve never heard it put quite like that before.” Sure, being who he was, he’d never felt that particular emotion before, but he was certain the description just given was inaccurate. Making a note to call up Eros—the god of love—when he got a free moment, Reece stretched his mouth into a sharp, wolf-like grin. “Why not just let it go? If it’s so debilitating?”

“Are you offering up something different?” Orpheus openly leered at Mauri, eyes gleaming like cold marbles.

“You’d have to ask her nicely,” Reece said, resisting the urge to blast the other man into oblivion, body be damned. “But I’m sure something of the like can be arranged. My numbers have increased since the last time we spoke.”

“Hmm, I bet.” He nodded. “So many willing to throw their lives away, their humanity, for lust. You got a good hand.” He met his gaze head-on. “Some of your kind weren’t so lucky.”

Ice hit him square in the chest, and he allowed a little of it to show through in the form of warning. “Caution, old friend. You’re allowed to sit there and drink my liquor out of courtesy to our mutual past. I can just as easily forget those thirty years we spent traveling Greece.”

“Could you?” Orpheus didn’t sound convinced. “I know I couldn’t. I still dream of it, the screams, the moans...The blood. Everything. Beautiful and visceral and as real as a thing can be. Tell me, what happened to those revelries, Dionysus? Word is you’ve mellowed since then.”

“It has been a long time,” he reminded. “Times change. Town wide orgies don’t go unnoticed like they once did.”

“Perhaps.” He spun the empty shot glass once. “But don’t you miss it?”

Making people give in to their base natures? Feeding off of their frenzy and their lust and their other carnal emotions? Sure, Reece wasn’t above denying that. He missed the control, the attention of a captured audience. The feeling of, if only for a night or three or two dozen, being free from the past and everything else that weighed him down.

He had dreams of his own that plagued him when he slept, but none of them were of good times. They were nightmares, through and through.

“I miss some things more than others.” He let his gaze roam pointedly down Orpheus from head to toe, focusing on the parts of him that were similar to Piper. Even though it was wrong, he felt the telltale signs of

lust race through him, knew that his body tensed appropriately. It helped to give off the impression he was remembering other things now.

“Ah,” Orpheus smiled, “too bad this form belongs to another.”

“That would stop you?” That would be...unexpected. In a good way, but still. Not only did Reece have literally no desire to hookup with the musician again, there was also no way he’d do so while the man wore Piper’s brother like a suit.

“Merely pointing out that it wouldn’t be my body you’re enjoying.” He shook his head, clucking his tongue. “We can both agree mine was much better. This one...hardly passable. Barely attractive at all with these bland features.”

“You always were a bit full of yourself.” Understatement of the century.

In life, Orpheus had been all golden skin and hair. His eyes were bright green, almost like freshly cut grass, and he’d kept himself in shape. Even if he’d looked like a toad, though, he could get just about anyone to fall for him simply by strumming a few notes on his lyre. Hell, he’d even tried it on Reece a time or two when the god was otherwise uninterested.

“You can’t say you don’t feel the same. Not when you surround yourself with colorful redheads,” Orpheus said. “Brown is such a boring color in comparison.”

He could feel Piper at his back, still standing in the exact same spot she’d been in when the malicious spirit had walked in toting her brother’s body around. For some reason, the fact that she was listening to all of this made him vastly uncomfortable, and he felt the need to correct Orpheus before he gave her the wrong impression.

“There are just as many varying tones of brunette as there are blond or red, actually.” Reece shrugged a single shoulder.

“Right. I forgot that you’d sleep with anything.”

He stiffened and glared. “There’s that lack of caution again.”

“You want your story so badly? I’ll tell you one. The first decade was the worst. I spent every moment—every single one of them, because souls don’t have to sleep—trying to find a way to go against Hadrian. Of course, my people-pleasing skills revolve solely around my lyre, which was another thing paradise happened to not have. Go figure. Once I realized that wasn’t going to happen, I spent the next hundred years searching.

“I knew Eurydice was there, where else would she be? She’d been too good in life not to have ended up in the Elysian Fields. But there was a spell of some sort keeping us apart. Every time I got close to the location I’d been told she would be, something would happen and I’d wake up on the other side of the Fields again. Miles from where I needed to be. Traveling back was a waste of time. She’d be long gone once I got there a second time.”

If Reece hadn’t known the truth—that this was more obsession than actual love—it might have sounded romantic. As it were, knowing that the man seated next to him was a resident psycho stalker with a penchant for hypnotizing and controlling people, Reece was only more pissed off.

“The next couple hundred are a blur. I was angry. In a rage. After that, Hadrian had me relocated because I was bothering the other residents. Can you believe that? He sent me to the Asphodel Meadows. But I wasn’t content there either. As a spirit, you start to develop this sixth sense, this ability to feel others around you. Reapers are easy for me now, due to how much time they spend around souls like me. There are others, though, different types of beings that I can now feel in a way I couldn’t before.”

Reece caught onto where this was going. He didn’t like it. Silently, he sent a little alarm up, signaling his troops to hurry it the hell up. They were just outside, tightening around the perimeter.

“Maenads,” Orpheus clarified, as if he needed to, “for instance. I can feel them out there right now. I’d hoped we could pick up where we’d left off,” slowly, he eased to his feet, tsking in disappointment, “that I’d find an alley in you. But I suppose that was wishful thinking.”

“The second you chose to steal the pithos,” Reece said, “you made an enemy out of me.”

“The plan was never to use it against you, friend. Not if you’d stood with me.”

“In order to use it against anyone, you have to open it first.” And therein lay the real question, the real reason for this dance. It was clear that the malicious spirit didn’t have the jar on his person. Which meant he’d stashed it somewhere. “It’s still closed. I can sense things too.”

“Yes,” Orpheus sighed, “unfortunately it is. I made a slight miscalculation in my rush to escape the Underworld.”

“You always were impatient.”

“I’m afraid it’s my turn to caution you. I have what you want, and you have what I want. So, before you make the mistake of letting your maenads attack me, hear me out. Let’s make a deal.”

“I’m listening.” To the gall of the musician, that was. Trying to make a deal with a god? Coming into his establishment and demanding as much, as if he was owed it? Hadn’t he learned anything from his stint with Hadrian? Reece didn’t owe him a damn thing, didn’t owe anyone anything, in fact. Having the soul think otherwise raised his blood pressure. If it weren’t for Piper being in the room, he’d be tempted to start up a *bakkheia* right now merely to watch his maenads tear the arrogant ass apart.

But he needed the location of the pithos before anything could be done about shredding Orpheus’s soul.

“There’s only one sin I need released from Pandora’s Box,” Orpheus began. “Once she’s freed, I’ll close the lid and give it you. You can do what you like with it then, I don’t care.”

“You’re not off to a very good start,” Reece told him nonchalantly. What he was asking was for him to look the other way, allow him to keep the one tool on the entire planet that could be his undoing. Why would he ever agree to something like that?

“I’ll warn you before I open it,” he continued. “So you can be far away when it happens. There will be no risk of you getting trapped. I swear it on the river Styx.”

A promise that couldn’t be broken, and not one to be made lightly. Still...

“And in return? What could I possibly have that you need badly enough you came scurrying out of hiding? Is it help against the Reapers?” He held a hand up, indicating Rover who was—amazingly—as silent as Piper. “Because as you can see, I’ve made other alliances already. Why should I betray a god for the likes of you?”

“Because,” he stated, “in a twist of fate, I now pose a larger threat to you than Hadrian Hale.”

With the pithos? That was true.

“I’ll sweeten the deal. I’ll help you get revenge on his brother while I’m at it. There are plenty of sins in that jar who want out. Who hate the god of death every bit as much as you do.”

Reece clenched his jaw. “I’ve long since gotten past my hatred for Thayer.”

“After what he kept you from doing? I highly doubt that.”

“What you do or do not believe is no concern of mine. In fact, this whole conversation has gotten boring. Speak quickly, old friend. I’m losing my patience. What is it you hope to gain from me?”

“Something I’m sure you won’t mind parting with.” Almost immediately after the words were out, he proved them lies by shifting his attention. For the first time since entering the building, Orpheus set his eyes on Piper.

Reece saw red so quickly, it was a wonder he managed to remain in his seat. The protectiveness was expected—he’d been defending women his entire existence—but the outrage? The pure, undiluted sense of ownership? As if he had a claim to her and the other man was threatening to step onto his territory...That was new.

And messed up, on so many levels. None of which he had time to deal with or sort through right now, because the comment had finally snapped Piper out of her reserve. She took a step forward and the last thread of control Reece possessed vanished.

He was in front of her in less time than it took to blink, the careful mask he’d had in place gone. He should be playing this smart, keeping himself collected. Being the sweet talker Orpheus had accused him of being. But he couldn’t. All that anger swarmed inside until the fury was practically impossible to contain.

So he stopped trying.

Chapter 8:

Reece's wrath was a live thing blasting from him. It was like a bomb had gone off, practically pushing Piper back with the force of it.

Which was ridiculous, because what did he have to be upset about? The damn malicious spirit had just asked for her, while wearing her brother like a damn meat suit. She was the one who should be severely pissed—and she was—not him.

Rover was at her back, steadying her before she could stumble much, but she didn't thank him. She regained her balance, pulled away, and he let her. He even retreated a step himself, as if he was the one who needed the space.

They'd talk about his blatant distaste for her later, right now, they needed to figure out a way to get Orpheus out of her brother's body. The pithos can come after that. Without Paul, it wasn't like it'd be a threat anyway.

"I see I've made an error in judgment," Orpheus said. He'd manipulated Paul's face to showcase how shocked by this he was, brown eyes wide, mouth partially gaped open.

"An egregious one," Reece confirmed, but his voice was hardly recognizable. It had dropped several octaves and had a low rumble accompanying it. She couldn't see his face, but from how nervous Orpheus suddenly looked, his expression had to be as scary as his tone suddenly was.

Piper had been in shock when Paul walked through the door. Even more so when reality had hit her, and she'd recalled it wasn't her brother she was seeing, not really. She couldn't even feel him in there, but then, that wasn't overly surprising because she wasn't a Reaper or another denizen of the Underworld. She didn't have the ability to sense souls. Only sins.

She could even funnel them if she wanted to. Draw them inside and turn them to fuel, or twist them and use them against others. The latter used to get her in trouble a ton in school.

Surreptitiously, she glanced at the Reaper. He'd moved away, but not far, and though his attention was on the malicious spirit, she knew him

well enough to know he was just as aware of her as he was the others in the room.

Even after what she'd done, she could count on him in that one regard anyway. He'd keep her safe because, like he'd said the other night, it was his job. He was sworn to it.

Piper focused back on the matter at hand, using her senses to get a feel for Orpheus. Unfortunately, while the god was oozing wrath, the escaped soul wasn't quite there yet. His emotions were all muted to her, which meant he wasn't currently experiencing a sin.

Unless she wanted to physically beat up her brother, she'd be next to useless in this situation.

Great.

"Last I recall," Orpheus said then, "you hated the Anesidora family. Avoided them like the plague, even. Did that change? I didn't think it possible, given how strongly you felt about them and their task."

Her ears perked up. For some reason, the idea of him hating her got under her skin. It didn't matter that taking a prejudice against her last name would mean he had the issue, not her. Or that she'd sort of undergone the same thing, running because of it and rejecting the lifestyle that came along with being an Anesidora.

She didn't want him to dislike her, and she tried to convince herself it was because having a god on her side—on Paul's side—was the best chance they had. In reality, though, the kiss played a great deal into it, and she really didn't like that.

She'd kissed guys before. So what if this had been her first toe-curling experience?

"What do you want me for?" she asked, and felt more than saw all three men tense at her sudden break in silence. She'd angled herself partially around Reece so that she still had eyes on her brother's body. Settling into that false calm was easy, came naturally to her after years of practice with Rover.

When she'd been learning how to control her abilities to manipulate and siphon sin, she'd had to do this a lot. Mask her features, contain her own feelings so as not to give herself away or mix them up with the ones she felt coming from someone else. Those first few months, whenever someone nearby felt gluttony, she'd pig out on all the food in the house.

When they felt greed, she'd pilfer her mother's jewelry—or steal from the mall, depending on where she was.

The one time she'd been out in public and hit by lust had been an absolute disaster. Rover had found her practically tearing the clothes off a guy from her biology class that she barely knew.

They hadn't even made it inside an actual building. Her hands had been down his pants behind the movie theater, where anyone could have driven around and seen.

That'd been smack dab in the middle of her crush on Rover, and she'd been absolutely mortified that he'd found her with another guy. Let alone in a compromising position with one. Even later, when he'd started to tell her he understood that it was the effects of someone else's sin, and not her own doing, she'd begged him to stop and never speak of it again.

He hadn't, but she'd walked on eggshells around him for months.

"Things," Orpheus told her cryptically, smirking for good measure.

She was moving an aggressive step forward before realizing she was doing so. Reece's arm across the width of her chest snapped her out of it. He didn't drop it once she'd stilled, and she sent him a withering look.

Which he promptly ignored. It wasn't like he was looking back anyway, his attention was still locked on the malicious spirit.

"You're going to have to be more specific," he stated, aiming the comment at Orpheus, who merely narrowed his eyes.

"Why? It's clear you have no intention of handing her over. It's a pity, truly."

"You really don't want to fuck with me right now," he growled back.

"Forget already that you were the one making the moves on me? It was less than fifteen minutes ago, Dionysus, really. Perhaps you should get your memory checked. It might help with this entire situation in fact. Make you recall who it is you're currently protecting."

"If you knew what you were talking about, you'd know I owe her family."

"A debt that has more than been repaid." He scrunched his nose in distaste. "If you hadn't thought so yourself, you wouldn't have left them in the dust. Can you even tell me the last time you were in the same state as an Anesidora? I don't believe you can. It was that long ago."

Okay, they were seriously getting off track here. Piper wanted to know what they were talking about—almost enough to let it continue—but

having Paul's body there, knowing he was somewhere trapped inside it, kept her from being that selfish. She didn't bother attempting to step around Reece, his arm was a solid bar keeping her at bay, but he couldn't stop her from retreating.

So she did, only enough that she gave him the sense she was going to behave. The second she saw him shift a little away, dropping his arm in the process, she made her move. He was altogether faster than she was, what with that weird blurring thing he could do, but she must have seriously caught him off guard because she made it halfway to Orpheus before Reece pulled her back.

He had an iron hold around her waist, tightening his arms as much as he could without hurting her so that his hands practically locked onto his elbows. It was yet another indicator of how much larger he was, and if the god thing hadn't been enough to sober her, that might have.

She stilled instantly, feeling his solid body pressing against her back, her head a good few inches below his chin. If she tipped back, she'd be able to see the unshaved scruff beneath his jawline. She kept her stance clear, tough, ready, but allowed the rest of her to go slack. Fighting both of them wasn't even a remote possibility, and that wasn't taking Rover into account, whom she was sure had leapt to stop her as well.

She was tempted to look back and see, but Reece's large form would prevent her from doing so and it wasn't worth adding more struggle to the mix.

After a tense silence, she felt him shift around her, grip not loosening even as he bent to lower himself. She felt the distinct press of his lips at her ear, the rush of warm breath as he exhaled, causing her body to react before she could help it. The shiver racked through her, and being that they were so close, he had to feel it too.

"Good girl," he murmured, pulling back even as her face went red.

She wasn't sure if it was embarrassment that caused it, or something else.

Something else, her traitorous mind cooed, and she practically growled aloud.

"You want to channel me, Princess?" he said, this time a bit louder so that the others could definitely hear. "Suck up all my wrath and direct it at Orpheus? We could take him together. Doesn't that sound fun?"

“You might be willing to harm this body,” Orpheus hissed, clearly seeing that he wasn’t going to get his way here, “but she isn’t. Your threats are empty.”

“Are they?” Reece cocked his head. “Haven’t you done your homework? The two of them haven’t spoken in years. Sounds like I’m not the only one who wants to avoid her family, and yet here you are, forcing her back with her brother. Choice is a pretty powerful thing, having it taken away a compelling motivator. I know you can’t feel it, but there’s more than enough sin in this room for her to go from sexy woman to badass Anesidora.”

“Actually,” Piper caught on, letting a half smirk tilt her lips dangerously, “wrath doesn’t have to be our weapon of choice. You are the god of lust. Wouldn’t it be funny to see him fall for that lyre he’s so obsessed with? Watch him try to figure out how to screw it? My brother would surely get over any lingering embarrassment from us seeing his body try and have sex with an inanimate object. You, Orpheus, would be too distracted to even see us coming then.”

“Damn,” Reece let out a low breath and she felt the distinct press of his cock hardening against her back. “Make that sexy woman *and* badass Anesidora.”

“Seriously?” it slipped out before she could stop herself. How the hell could he be turned on in the middle of all this? Not to mention how quickly he’d gotten there. She felt the first waves of lust rolling off of him, practically seeping into her everywhere his body touched hers. Which was a lot of damn places considering how he was holding her.

“I’m sorry,” he didn’t sound like it, “did you want the wrath after all? I took you at your word. I’d like to take you some other ways as well.”

“Seriously?” she repeated, this time with more force. When she attempted to pull away, he clung.

“I have to admit,” Orpheus said, drawing their attention back his way, “I agree with the Anesidora on this one. This is hardly the time or the place, Dionysus. Even if you so frequently believe every time and every place is right for coitus.”

Piper blinked. “Did he just—”

“Make fucking you sound like the least sexy thing on the planet?” Reece interrupted unhappily. “Yeah. Coitus doesn’t exactly scream hot and heavy petting session.”

That wrath from him returned, and instead of questioning it a second time, Piper embraced it. Mostly, she was relieved that his lust had been banked down. Because one more minute of that and...Damn. She couldn't let her mind wander.

"When you say 'fucking' it sounds like the least sexy thing on the planet," Rover corrected, coming closer. The rage coming off him was apparent as well, though he was keeping himself contained. It didn't go unnoticed that he refused to look Piper's way.

"You're getting the word romantic and sexy confused," Reece said.

"Guys," Piper snapped. "Not important."

"Course not, Princess," Reece brought his mouth back down to the curve of her ear, "because you like the way I talk dirty to you, isn't that right?"

"What the hell?!" Rover turned on the god so quickly, Piper practically got whiplash from it.

Then everything erupted into chaos.

Maenads swarmed the place, flashing in so that a sea of redheads crowded them almost before Rover was done with his sentence. Their eyes were glowing blood red, nails extending into claws. Some of them leapt up onto the bar, hunching over as they bared their teeth at Orpheus.

"Here." Reece shoved her at Rover, already moving to join the fray.

Ignoring the spark of hurt, the feeling of being used and discarded, Piper growled and pushed at Rover before his arms could fully link around her.

"No! Don't you dare!" Because it was obvious what was about to happen. His maenads did not look like they were in the correct mental state to take prisoners. She reached out and grabbed onto Reece's elbow, felt the jolt of wrath as she used her abilities to suck them through her palm.

Her vision went white, then black, then red all in a matter of heartbeats. Fury rose up and swallowed everything else, including logic. The first maenad who went for Paul, she tore away like badly wrapped gift paper. She hardly noticed as she flung the woman, knocking down a few others in the process.

Taking sin had never given her advanced strength like this before, but then again, she'd never siphoned a god either.

Her hand was wrapped around Paul's throat a second later, slamming him down onto the countertop so that his spine was bent

backward at a dangerous angle. Careful, she had to be careful not to hurt her brother's body, even if the person currently operating it deserved to feel that type of pain.

"Get the fuck out of my brother," she snarled, clenching her fingers tighter, satisfied knowing they'd bruise and had to hurt like hell. Paul would understand a few bumps to his person, she was sure of it. Though, that could just be the wrath swirling inside her chest.

A flash of something shiny caught her attention just in time for her to spring out of the way of the oncoming weapon.

Orpheus wielded the blade expertly, regaining his footing as he forced her back with another swipe in her direction. It was long and serrated on both sides, the color of blue sea glass. An unusual weapon to say the least.

Reece started circling around his other side, looking for an opening. It was obvious by the tight expression on his face, however, that he was holding himself back. Probably due to her reaction when she'd thought they were going to hurt Paul. While Orpheus was distracted, he pounced.

Grabbing onto Paul's arm, Reece forced Orpheus around. His grip prevented the soul from knifing him, but he tried. He twisted and shoved, so that he had Orpheus pinned against the edge of the counter.

"Rover," Reece growled, command booming around them, sending the three or so dozen maenads into another frenzy.

They surged forward, only just stopping from reaching out to run their talons over Paul's body.

Reaper's had the power to remove soul's from bodies. Aside from a handful of gods, they were the only beings capable of doing so without damaging either the host soul, or the invading one.

"I'm trying," Rover hissed through clenched teeth. Sweat began to bead across his forehead, and his muscles were straining. A few veins even bulged visibly from his neck. "He's too strong. I can't...Shit."

Piper lost hold on the tenacious thread of wrath—a drawback to not having used her powers at their full capacity over the past five years—and felt herself begin to crumple where she stood.

Reece swore, roughly pushed Orpheus at three of his maenads and flashed to her side. Catching her around the waist, he tugged, securing her limp form to his sturdy one, front to front. He emitted a low growl when her head lolled, a fresh wave of wrath trickling from his pores.

Not that she could do anything with it. She'd burned herself out. Some big bad Anesidora she'd turned out to be. The thought caused her to wince, and he took that as a sign that she was also in pain, eyes widening for a second before dropping down to take her in.

A sharp cry had his head snapping up, and Piper watched as his expression contorted yet again, a flurry of emotions between rage and horror crossing over his face.

She somehow managed to turn her head, and felt bile rise up the back of her throat when she saw what he was looking at.

The maenad from behind the bar was standing next to Orpheus, nails dug deep into the flesh of his right shoulder. Her teeth were elongated and deadly, but she was so still it was like she was a statue. The hilt of the blade buried in her gut and the blood that spilled from the wound was the only indication that she wasn't.

Orpheus twisted away, the gouging nails ripping free so that blood welled and ran rivers down his arm—Paul's arm.

Piper tried to regain her balance, but all she managed to do was lift her hands to Reece's biceps. She could barely even hold onto him. Panic for Paul filled her, and she felt tears burn at the corners of her eyes. Stubbornly, she bit the inside of her cheek, forcing them away.

She would not turn into a blubbering idiot. Not in the midst of all this. And certainly not in front of Reece.

"I'm going to get what I want," Orpheus hissed, his guttural voice overlaying Paul's beneath, causing a sob to escape past Piper's defenses. His gaze snapped to hers. "And then you're all going to pay."

Maenads and Rover went for him, but it was too late. With one last glare, Orpheus disappeared. Vanished. One second he was standing there and the next...

"How—" Her throat was suddenly the Sahara and she needed to stop and swallow. "How the hell did he do that?" Her brother didn't have the ability to flash.

Rover was in the middle of cursing up a storm. He even spun around and kicked viciously at one of the bar stools, sending the thing clattering to the ground in a loud burst of sound.

The maenad who'd been stabbed was on the floor now as well, with five others around her, cooing to her.

Reece quickly settled Piper onto another stool, this one still upright, and then rushed over to them. They made space at his approach, and he dropped to his knees at the injured maenads side.

“Mauri,” he said gently, checking the wound. The knife was no longer there—Orpheus must have taken it with him—and thick amounts of burgundy blood gushed from her to the floor. He pressed his palm tightly against it, began humming under his breath. Less than a minute later he swore. “The blade...”

“I know,” the maenad, Mauri, nodded, face ashen. “I saw it.”

“I’m so sorry,” Reece hunched over her, “there’s nothing I can do.”

“I know,” she repeated, right before her body started convulsing.

Rover walked up to Piper, stepping in her line of sight so that she could no longer see them on the ground. When she attempted to look around him, he took her elbows, holding her steady.

“What are you doing?” she asked, still trying. “What’s going on?”

“She’s dying,” he informed tightly. “The blade was poisoned. Ash from the Underworld, hemlock from topside, blood of the innocent...and a couple other ingredients. It’s old school. There aren’t many people still around who know how to concoct that particular formula. He took care of that.” He glanced over his shoulder at Reece, mouth set in a thin line.

As in, Reece had killed everyone who knew about it and erased all knowledge from the world kind of took care of? She was tempted to ask, but also tempted to let it go. In the end, the latter won out. There’d been enough crazy for one afternoon, and she so wasn’t feeling adding more to the mix.

“Come on.” Rover took her hand and helped her off the stool, giving her a moment for the dizziness to pass. “We should go.”

“Go where?” She made one last attempt to see Reece, this time catching a glance of him still leaning over the maenad before Rover shifted in her way yet again. Why did he keep doing that?

“Away.” He sighed. “There’s a safe house nearby. I’ll take you there. They need time alone, Piper. She’ll be dead in the next five minutes.”

They didn’t have a right to be there when she died, was what he was saying. She couldn’t argue with him there. If it hadn’t been for her family losing control of the pithos, none of this would have happened in the first place. Maenads were immortal, but they could be killed a couple different ways—apparently poisoned blade was one of them.

It would be disrespectful of her to hang around. So, she gave a curt nod and closed her eyes the second those black inky tendrils started uncurling from around the Reaper.

Chapter 9:

He'd done a semi-decent job of covering his annoyance while they'd been in the club, but now that they were alone, Rover didn't bother.

He brought them to a tiny apartment that overlooked a busy downtown street. Neon lights flashed outside, and cars passed constantly, creating a sort of humming sound that helped settle her nerves some.

At least until she turned around to face him and saw just how angry he really was. Her stance turned defensive, alert, and when he noticed, his eyes narrowed and he crossed his arms over his chest.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" he demanded, and it took all of her willpower not to cower before him.

He never used to get mad at her before, it was always Paul who got the brunt end of that. They'd always been able to talk, even when she made a mistake during training, or didn't understand something simple he was telling her. They'd gotten along not just because they were good friends, but because they connected on a deeper level.

To Piper that was the case, anyway. That's how she'd always viewed it. No one understood her like Rover did. No one even bothered to try. She and Paul got along, but they weren't best friends or anything. Close, but only because of the lineage they shared and the fact they were always too busy training to make decent friends at school.

They'd had each other, and she'd also had Rover.

Then she'd screwed it all up and thrown it all away. And she couldn't even feel sorry about it. Guilty, sure. She felt so much of that it was practically suffocating her. But the truth was she wouldn't change her mind. If she could go back in time, she'd make the exact same choice. Her life—her regular, maenad, god, malicious spirit free life—might be difficult and taxing, but it was hers. She'd built it, she'd decided on it.

"I'm not sure what you're referring to," she confessed, because she didn't. There were a couple of things he no doubt wanted to yell at her for.

"How about we start with the fact you almost got yourself killed back there! I mean, gods damn it, Piper! It's been five years since you've

used your full power! You can't just run headlong into danger expecting your body to be where it was back then!"

Okay, she'd done that, couldn't fault him for pointing it out.

"He wasn't going to kill me," she said, which was the wrong thing, because it only pissed him off more. "Well, he wasn't."

"You don't know that."

"Sure I do. He wanted to take me for some reason. We just need to figure out why."

"*We* don't have to do anything. *You* are going to stay here for the remainder of this mission. It's where I should have put you from the very beginning. I knew you weren't prepared for something like this. It's been too long."

Piper bristled. "First of all, quit talking about this like we're part of some secret government agency. Those types of rules don't apply to us. Which brings me to second of all, you're not my commanding officer, or anything of the sort. You can't tell me what I can and can't do. Especially not if you're trying to keep me from my brother by doing so."

"I'm trying to keep you alive!" he yelled. He turned away from her to begin pacing the small space of the living room. It gave her a good view of the tattoo on the left side of his neck, a dark black jagged butterfly with a capital T for a head and crossed scythes making up the top tips of the wings. The mark of the Reaper.

Which was a brutal reminder of what this really was. He wasn't worried and angry for her benefit; this was all because of his job. He'd successfully kept her family safe and hidden for centuries, and now they'd been revealed, the pithos had been stolen, and he was furious because it'd all been on his watch.

He was doing this not out of some protective need to keep her safe, but out of duty.

"You didn't come," she whispered, only partially aware she was doing so out loud as her mind spun over everything. The past five hours, and the past five years, all blurring and mixing in her head.

"What?" Rover spared her a glance and then kept up the pacing.

"Looking for me," she said, more firmly this time. Too late to go back now. "I left, and you never came looking for me." It wouldn't have been too hard for him those first couple of months. She'd been a mess,

constantly using her powers without meaning to out of habit. Leaving her full name at the checkout counters of motels.

Hell, even just the fact that she'd stayed at the cheapest motels in each city should have been a flashing sign large enough to compete with the Vegas ones currently blaring out the window.

The colors splashed across his body, highlighting the metal in his face and the shine to his hair. He wasn't as tall as Reece, but just as commanding even though there was no alpha air around him like there was with the god. Rover was in control—or, at least he felt that way—of this situation.

Reece was in control of damn well everything.

Aside from the single dermal on his finger, she also hadn't seen any other piercings on him. There hadn't been any ink either, though that didn't necessarily mean he didn't have any. Even Reapers could make their tattoos appear and disappear at will, concealing the markings from the rest of the world, or more aptly, humans.

There was no real reason Reece should have bothered, but she had the feeling he'd done so during that striptease. Maybe he'd wanted her to get a good look at all of him, all that naked, tanned skin, without so much as a tattoo to distract her.

Piper shook her head, not sure why she was thinking about the god right now when she and Rover were finally alone. There was so much for them to talk about, and he still hadn't responded to her comments. She was beginning to think he wouldn't bother when he finally ran a hand through his hair and heaved a frustrated sigh.

"My job is to stay with the Anesidora Heir," he told her. "Protect whoever that is and the pithos above all else. I couldn't just leave simply because you did, no matter how worried I was. You ran from your responsibilities, Piper, but I was not going to do the same. I never will."

The words were truth. She didn't so much as flinch.

"You were worried?" She didn't like the shred of hope that brought. Wanted it to die so that she could legitimately let all of this go.

Because he was right, he was never going to give up his duty, and definitely not for her. All of those sleepless nights she'd dreamed of him bursting into her motel room, confessing his undying love...those had been the fantasies of a child. She was an adult now. It was time to grow up.

Which was so much easier said than done. Seeing him still did things to her, brought back all those old feelings, made her want to fall back into the same patterns. Ones where she followed him around, doing as he said, wishing she could touch those piercings at his bottom lip without giving herself away. Without being rejected.

“Of course I was worried,” he said, finally pausing to give her a look like he thought she was crazy for not knowing that. “How could I not be? You were a little girl out in a big world you’d never experienced before. Your knowledge of it, and the people who occupy it, was limited. I had nightmares for days that I’d turn on the news and watch some report that you’d been found dead in a ditch somewhere.”

That hope shriveled and died in her chest, and as soon as it did, she grunted at herself. She was so stupid even letting that tiny kernel to kindle.

“I was eighteen,” she reminded. “Legally an adult.”

“In this world,” he waved an arm out the window to indicate all the mortals, “maybe. But in mine? I have centuries on you, *meisje*. You’ll never catch up. To me you’ll always be that kid with the chubby cheeks I watched grow up. The one that I protected. I was terrified when you ran away.”

“Not enough to actually try and find me though,” she said bitterly, hating herself a little for it.

“Don’t put that on me.” He pointed at her darkly. “You’re the one who left. You even tricked me to do so. Planned the whole thing out behind my back. Hadrian was furious when he found out how easy it had been.”

“Sorry I embarrassed you in front of your boss.” Piper felt the tears return and willed them to stay put. She would *not* cry.

“Damn it, Piper! It wasn’t about that! We were friends!” Both hands caught in his curly hair now. “And then you make out with the god of lust? Are you insane? Have you completely lost your mind these past few years?”

“Jealous?” Despite everything he’d just got done telling her, she couldn’t keep the single word from shooting past her lips. As soon as it did, he froze, paling even as she felt herself heat up. Mortification stained her cheeks red, and if it hadn’t been for the fact he was standing in the way of the door she would have done what he apparently believed she did best anyway.

Run.

“I didn’t...” she tried to recover, but it was too late.

“Piper, I—”

“No,” she held up a hand, keeping her eyes locked safely on the hardwood flooring, “don’t. Please. It’s fine. Just...don’t.”

“He’s using you,” he said anyway, making his tone light even though the tension in the air gave away how awkward he was truly feeling.

“He didn’t use his powers on me,” she disagreed.

Reece could have, he probably wouldn’t even need to sing, could probably just will her to sexually want him and she would. She wasn’t a complete moron, and she was mature enough to admit when she was attracted to someone, even if that someone was a god.

She’d never felt that type of power, the kind that took control of your thoughts and your body, made you do things you otherwise wouldn’t. Made you want to do them. She’d heard stories, been told about gods like Dionysus who had abilities like that. Much like Orpheus, a good deal of his sway rested in his music.

Rumor was Reece had taught the sirens their song. Taught them how to lure sailors to their deaths. How to sing just the right notes to lull them to their doom and like it. He could sing to make someone lust after him, or someone else, sing to make them angry or go into a frenzy. Sing to make them admit their deepest, darkest desires. Or sing to soothe, which was something newly discovered to her.

That’s what he’d been doing when Rover had whisked her away from the club. He’d been hovering over the maenad, humming to her, calming her in her final moments. All of this power, and that’s how he’d chosen to use it.

“Well there really wasn’t a need when you were practically throwing yourself at him already,” Rover snapped, his comment tearing her from her thoughts.

“That’s not what happened.” He’d kissed her. She’d just...gone along with it.

“I was there, remember? I saw everything. The way you clutched him to you. You’ve never been that passionate about anyone, Piper. This is dangerous. Don’t make another mistake simply because you’re angry with me.”

Piper froze, the room spinning and then stilling around her, almost as if they were the only two people left in existence.

And she wanted to murder him.

“Is that what you think?” she breathed, pressing a palm against her stomach as it tightened. “Is that what you’ve thought this whole time? That I left because...” She couldn’t even say it. Even now. Even with it burning between the two of them like a hot coal.

Rover sighed again, this time more delicately. His shoulders slumped forward as if all the fight had drained out of him at once. “I’m sorry that I couldn’t return your feelings, Piper. I am. I’m sorry that that hurt you. But running away because of it...Who did that help? How did that make a difference?”

“Holy shit.” She stumbled back, almost fell but caught herself on the edge of a lounge chair someone had placed beneath the large window. She dropped to the edge of it, feeling like the ground was falling away.

“Piper—”

“I can’t believe that’s what you think,” she cut him off, unable to look at him again, though this time for different reasons. “That’s what you really think of me? That I’d abandon everything because I was in love with you and you didn’t reciprocate?”

It’d been hard, sure, and for a moment there, in typical teenage fashion, she’d wanted to die from embarrassment. But that wasn’t what had sent her packing. She’d told him what it was, had opened up to him about not wanting that life. He’d held her...

“I thought you knew,” she continued. “That you’d understood. I wasn’t the Anesidora Heir. I was never going to have to guard the pithos. I was only there as a backup, no matter how much better at it all I was than Paul. My life was going to be me constantly on the sidelines, giving up the things I wanted for a jar that the world still mistakenly refers to as a box.”

“You’re being dramatic,” Rover said, though with little heat. “You could still have had the life you wanted. Your parents both have successful careers. So does Paul.”

Actually, she couldn’t, because she was a phlebotomist. Anything in the medical field was strictly forbidden for fear it would draw too much attention, or they’d be around too many people to control themselves around all that sin.

“I didn’t leave because of you,” was all she managed, despite all of the arguments, the proof, swirling in her brain. That was all she could force out. She was tired, and frankly, heartbroken, and defending herself against

the image of her he'd built up over the years was just too damn much right now.

"Well, that's good to know," a new voice said.

She startled and turned toward the tiny attached kitchen to the left. Reece stood there in the entryway, arms crossed over his chest. His eyes were glowing, but there was an edge of danger clouding him, invisible but very obvious.

His dark hair was swept out of his face, giving her a good look at the twisting of his lips. He was scowling and, if possible, even angrier than the Reaper had been upon their arrival. Blood stained the front of his shirt, smeared down the side of his neck.

The maenads.

"I was beginning to think you'd left on my account," Reece continued once he had her attention, "but clearly that assumption is redundant, and I'm loath to admit my line of thinking is ever in league with the Reaper's."

For a moment Piper was confused, but then she untangled the two conversations and realized he was referring to leaving the club earlier, and not her running five years ago. She would have found the fact they were both arrogant enough to think she'd gone because of them funny, if she wasn't still too broken to bother.

"How did—" Rover began, only to be swiftly stopped.

"—I find you? The better question is what the hell were you thinking taking her away like that? You should have told me." He didn't so much as glance the Reaper's way as he spoke, keeping his multi-colored eyes locked on Piper. The gaze was so intense, she actually felt the need to shift in her seat.

"I don't answer to you, Dionysus," Rover stated, back to his cold and aloof self.

"I've got a car downstairs," Reece told her smoothly, still just as furious even though his tone wasn't harsh. "Get in it."

Piper cocked her head. "I don't take orders from you, either."

"So stay here with the Reaper," he surprised her by saying. "Looks like it was going really well."

"I don't know you," she reminded. Still, a part of her really liked the idea of getting away from Rover before she said anything else she might regret. Or he said anything else to cut her.

“You don’t know him either, Princess,” he said, matter-of-factly. “Not anymore.”

“She isn’t going anywhere with you,” Rover growled taking a step closer to her. “She’s safer here, with me. And this is where she needs to be until we figure out what Orpheus wants her for.”

“You shouldn’t have tried making that call without me,” Reece maintained, still not looking at him. “Shouldn’t have taken her without so much as a word, right after someone came to kidnap her. I just watched my friend die, and then had to deal with the panic that somehow Orpheus had slipped through my notice and gotten to her after all.”

Piper blinked at him. He’d been worried? Then she sobered some, because apparently she never learned her lesson. Of course he had been, for the same reasons Rover had. They needed to keep her out of Orpheus’s clutches until they got the pithos and her brother back. Even if they didn’t know what he wanted from her, it was clear it couldn’t be anything good.

Reece was simply covering his ass.

It shouldn’t bother her, but it did. She couldn’t pinpoint why, and that only annoyed her more.

“I’m sorry about Mauri,” Rover said, “but Piper stays with me. I am the Anesidora protector. Stay in your lane, Dionysus. This only concerns you so long as the pithos is involved. I’m the one who can be trusted to keep her safe. To keep her best interests in mind.”

Reece snorted, and then tipped his chin at her. “What’ll it be, Princess?”

She glanced between him and Rover, confused by the fact she was even hesitating. So far, only one of them had done anything to hurt her. And it wasn’t the god.

“It all comes down to one thing. Only one.” He licked his lips. “Which stranger do you feel the most comfortable with?”

“I don’t feel comfortable with either of you,” she admitted. But then she stood, holding his gaze. “Let’s go.”

“What?” Rover yelled. “No, no way in hell!”

“Great thing we’re topside then, huh?” Finally, Reece grinned at her, shedding some of the fury like a well-worn coat. He held out a hand, palm up, the grin only widening when she immediately stepped forward to take it.

Only to be blocked by the Reaper, who shoved her back roughly enough that she tripped over the chair and fell into it. He had the good sense to seem as shocked by what he'd done as she was.

Reece growled, full on, jungle cat growled. The sound rumbling up the back of his throat, loud enough that the floorboards practically vibrated under her feet. He'd flashed away and repositioned himself between her and Rover so quickly, it took a moment for her brain to catch up. Then he was extending the same hand behind him to her, waiting until she'd pressed her palm against his before speaking again.

"If you touch her like that a second time," he asserted, "I will kill you."

Rover opened and closed his mouth, then managed, "Hadrian isn't going to like this."

"Hades can kiss my ass." Reece's fingers tightened around hers, and then they were downstairs in the lobby. They appeared and he was already walking, tugging her after him toward the double glass doors that led to the street.

On the curb, right in front of the building, was a sleek silver 2010 Jaguar C-X75. Piper only got a moment to gape at it before he flung the passenger door open and shuffled her inside.

The upholstery of the two-seater was buttery black leather, and she ran her hands across the smooth material, relishing the smell which ranged between new car and that teakwood sweetness that was Reece.

"You drove here?" she asked the second he'd slipped in and started the engine. It purred to life beneath them, but he was back to being sullen and didn't seem to appreciate it nearly as much as she thought he ought to.

She wasn't even a car person.

"I had it delivered," he corrected, easing onto the street. After a few turns, he brought them onto a longer stretch of road and picked up speed.

"Why?" It would have been a lot easier for him to flash them to their destination. Wherever that was. Now that the initial shock of the situation had worn off, Piper was second guessing her decision to leave with him. Rover was angry and had said some hurtful things. But didn't he have a right to some of them?

Not if he honestly believed you were shallow enough to run because of him.

Right, there was that. And she was still pretty angry about it, truth be told. Mostly because it discolored all the things she'd thought they'd shared. All the memories that had kept her going these past years.

"I needed time to think," he explained, checking his side mirrors as he merged onto another lane. "To get away. Something tells me you get the feeling."

She did. Yes.

Piper leaned against the door so she could watch him, noting the shadows that played over his face every time they passed beneath a larger building or sign. He was tense, rigid, ready to pounce despite there being no one in the car but them.

"You can relax," she told him. "There's no immediate threat. I promise not to bite."

It looked like he might ignore her, but then the corner of his mouth tipped up. It was slight, but she caught it because she'd been staring.

She smiled back, feeling strangely like she'd accomplished something by eliciting the reaction. Outside, the sky was a deep blue as they dipped into late afternoon. Had it really been morning when they'd entered the club? It felt like a lifetime ago, yet also like it'd been only moments. A strange, uncomfortable feeling, like she couldn't fully grasp what had taken place.

There were so many questions. And seeing Paul had...No, she couldn't go there. Not as beat and exhausted as she was. After, once she'd had a hot shower, gotten food into her, and slept a good six hours at least, that's when she'd let her mind wander. That's when she'd think of her brother and all those crazy feelings that had accosted her the moment she'd seen him.

The silence stretched between them, turning comfortable with each passing minute. It was a while until he spoke again, all the heat gone from his voice when he did.

"Tell me," he said simply.

"Tell you what?" she frowned over at him, but his attention was on the road.

"What you were trying to tell the Reaper back there," Reece said. "You want someone to understand? Okay. Make me understand, Piper."

Bare her soul to a complete stranger? Even one—especially one—as gorgeous as him? Who'd been alive longer than she could even fathom?

“You’ll find it ridiculous,” she told him. “I’m sure I’ll only bore you. Or you’ll agree with Rover, find me childish.”

“I won’t,” he disagreed, then rethought it and rephrased. “Or, if I do, I won’t disparage you for it. Even if you did leave for immature reasons, those reasons are still yours. I can find them distasteful, wish you hadn’t made them. But I can’t put you down for it. You’re living your life, Piper. And life comes with mistakes. That’s just the way it is. The way it’s always been.”

He didn’t ask her again, simply continued to drive, letting the quiet retake them.

She didn’t know if she believed him. “Why did you change your name to Reece?”

He sent her a sideways glance, the corner of his mouth turning up. “Easing into it? All right. Slow isn’t normally my thing, but for you...” He winked, and the muscles in her vagina actually fluttered.

Stupid.

“The first time I changed it, it was for the Romans. That was after my second birth, and Bacchus was a chance to start fresh. I was a little... intense then.”

“Second birth?” Piper lifted a brow. “There’s a lot about you I don’t know. As either Dionysus or Bacchus.”

“It’s not surprising,” he said. “They’d keep you from delving too deeply into my past.”

She frowned, and would have asked him to elaborate but he started back up again before she could.

“After Bacchus and between Reece there were several others. Reece is the newest addition. Perhaps I’ll change it again soon, but for now I like it. It means ardor and heart of passion, and I’m not called the ‘god who comes’ for nothing.” Another wink.

“Who says that?” she asked, mostly to keep conversation going in the hopes he wouldn’t notice she was clenching her thighs together. This was literally the least convenient time for her to be turned on. There was also no reason for her to be.

Just look at him.

That was the problem, she was. So long as she ignored the blood splatters, it was hard not to want to jump his bones. She was tempted to ask if that had been done on purpose, if his outer package had been created

specifically to attract the masses due to who he was. That would tip her hand way more than she was ready, however. She'd already done that with Rover, and that had been a disaster.

"Lots of people used to," he answered. "I was known as an outsider, a protector of those not accepted by conventional society. 'The Liberator'. I freed people from their self-conscious fears. I still do."

"And you were also apparently born twice," she drawled, hoping to lighten the mood. Really, she was stalling, because it sounded like his story was winding down, which meant it would be her turn. "How exactly does one go about doing that?"

"Generally," he said, "they have to die the once, and then come back. I wouldn't recommend it. Besides, death is...a strong word for what happened to me."

"What—"

"Uh uh," he lifted a hand from the steering wheel to wag a finger at her chidingly, "I answered your question. You're up. Be brave, Princess."

"It's not about bravery," she said.

"Ah, yes," he recalled their conversation from last night, "it's about trust. Right?"

"Right." Though, she wasn't so sure it was about that either, at least, not when it came to this. What could it hurt, really? Telling him would get it off her chest, and then at least there'd be one person on the planet who knew her side of the story. Who didn't just think she chickened out and ran away.

Didn't you though?

"Growing up," she began, allowing the words to flow through her before she could change her mind, "I was always better at this stuff than my brother. He was older by three years, but he could barely sense sin. I on the other hand could feel it blocks away from our house. I started showing symptoms at ten, turning on my parents whenever I was hit with wrath. Refusing to leave the house when it was sloth. I didn't realize I was siphoning. I didn't even know what that was."

Her parents had, and it'd taken them a good year and a half of her struggling, feeling like she was going crazy, before they'd finally explained it all. Tradition dictated that no one be let in on the big family secret of abilities until they were at least twelve. They hadn't wanted to break that,

even if their daughter had developed earlier than anyone else in the family ever had.

“Paul was always competitive after that, always trying to up show me to prove a point. He was the heir, after all. He was the one who’d have to dedicate his life to actually guarding the pithos and the rest. That might also be why I don’t know as much about you as I should,” she spared him a glance and had to look away. Seeing him while she was saying this was too hard. Too confusing and unbelievable. “He was the scholar. I got tired of being one-upped and focused on the things I knew I could beat him in.”

“Like mastering your abilities,” he said, and she groaned in embarrassment.

“Obviously I’m out of practice.”

“I thought you did rather nicely back there.” He flashed that half smile and nodded for her to continue.

“It wasn’t just my abilities. Paul wasn’t great at any of the physical stuff. Even younger and half his size I could always take him on the mat. It infuriated him, getting his ass kicked by his baby sister.”

“It doesn’t sound like you two were all that close.”

“We weren’t,” she admitted on a sigh. “Not really. That’s why it wasn’t too hard to leave. My parents were always too distracted with grooming Paul to take over so they could finally have a normal life, and he was always too busy preparing. Trying to be better. The only person who paid any attention to me was—”

“The Reaper.” He did not like that, but she didn’t press him for an explanation.

“Rover got me, or,” she shrugged, turning to stare out the window so he wouldn’t see the sheen of tears which returned, “I thought he had. Guess I was wrong. He thought I left because he hurt my delicate feelings.”

“How so?”

And this was the truly embarrassing part. She could make something up, sugar coat it, but now that she’d started down this road, she found she didn’t want to take any shortcuts. It’d been forever since she’d had someone she could talk to about the truth, about her life before she’d moved to New York City.

Telling people she came from a long line of people tasked with protecting Pandora’s Box, and that there were Reapers and demons out there wasn’t exactly an option.

“He found out I had a crush on him,” she admitted, feeling her cheeks heat, shoving the need to curl in on herself and hide away. She would not be ashamed of feelings she’d had as a kid. She just wouldn’t. “It was an accident. He caught me with another boy, and the way I reacted...it gave it away.”

“You were into him but hooked up with someone else?” Reece quirked a brow.

“Lust hit me,” she said. “The sin. It happened quickly and I was unprepared. I’d been up all night studying for an exam, was running on two hours of sleep. Unfortunately, the arrogant prideful jock I had class with wasn’t feeling the correct sin that day.”

She didn’t know how much he knew about her family, about how they could turn that siphoning into energy that acted a lot like a triple shot of espresso. The crash down was always three times as bad, of course, so she’d only done it on occasion. Even now, when she was working multiple shifts at the hospital, it was a last resort only.

He didn’t press for more information, however, so she figured that meant he was following just fine. That reminded her of the conversation he’d had with Orpheus, how cryptic it had been. How she wanted answers about that too.

“It was another six months before I turned eighteen and left. Between then and him catching me with my pants practically down around my ankles, I told him how I felt about being an Anesidora. How debilitating it made me feel, how suffocating. He’d comforted me, explained that it was normal. Told me that I’d grow out of it.”

Reece was frowning now and she paused, wondering what he was thinking. When he noticed her silence, he glanced at her then away, expression only tightening more. “He’s an asshole.”

“I thought he was right.” She wouldn’t correct him, not when she was feeling the same thing at that moment. “He’d been doing this for a while, and I trusted he knew what he was saying. But the week before my birthday the feeling hadn’t gone. Instead, it grew, until it’d overshadowed everything else. Paul had already taken over from my parents by then, but he was still living in the house with them. He had no plans of moving—the pithos was safer where it was—and he’d been taking classes at the local college and working at the supermarket for cash.”

She could still remember watching him come home, changing out of his work clothes, heading straight for the couch afterward to watch television. She'd hated the idea that that could be her. That it would be if she didn't do something to change her fate.

"I had to get out," she whispered, not sure who she was saying that part to. "So I did."

Chapter 10:

She would have withered away. Reece knew it. After only knowing her a couple of days it was so obvious it was a wonder it'd somehow passed her family's notice. And the Reaper...It was a good thing they'd left him behind because if he was here there was no telling what Reece would do.

He hated the thought of Piper drowning like that, feeling so alone and helpless. He knew firsthand what it was like to have a responsibility, a purpose. To want to reject all of that. It was how he'd ended up dead that first time, trapped and tricked for being selfish and foolish enough to think he could have more.

There wasn't more for a god like Reece; there was only this. Only the next party, the next name, the next fuck. Century after century after century. His maenads were the only comfort, the closest thing he had to a family and friends since his mother and his mentor had passed hundreds of years prior.

In many ways, he'd spent his life searching. It sounded like she'd been doing something similar. Or at least, that she'd spent it trying to get away. Disentangle herself from the past.

"I had money saved up from birthdays, Christmas, stuff like that," she said, and he struggled to keep his eyes on the road and not on her. "Enough to get me by, I figured. Enough for a fresh start. The real issue was getting past Rover. He was always around, even has his own room at the house. I spent days trying to come up with a better plan, but in the end there was only one thing I had that I could use against him. Immortal Reapers aren't exactly easy to disarm."

No, they were not. Reece recalled that vividly from his one unsanctioned trip into the Underworld. Thayer had gotten angry and called his soldiers to attack. The bastard.

"So I...tricked him. His kind doesn't have any protection against sin, and his defenses were already down. It was just the two of us; there wasn't any reason for him to worry. We were watching a movie in the basement—I'd picked it specifically, for this one scene in particular—and when it came on, I focused all of my attention on the male lead."

“Sex scene,” Reece guessed.

“Bingo.”

“Mild attraction isn’t a sin.” Not that he believed lust to be a sin necessarily. But, then again, he was biased.

“It’s enough for an Anesidora to work with,” she told him. “I made the feeling grow, fester, and then I touched his arm and pushed it all inside him.”

Reece blinked. “That’s...”

“Wrong, I know.” She groaned and dropped her head into her hands, blocking her face from him. “I wasn’t going to take advantage of him, not like that anyway. It wasn’t like I was drugging him up to have my wicked way with him. After what had happened months before, I knew he didn’t feel like that toward me.”

“You predicted he would get uncomfortable enough to leave you alone.” Clever. Very clever.

“Pretty much. And it worked. He turned bright red and excused himself, flashing away before I could say anything. He wouldn’t be gone long, but I didn’t need much time. Everything was already packed and I had the keys to my brother’s car in my pocket. I used it to get to the bus station, climbed onto the first bus I saw, and went. It sounds like a lot, doesn’t it? Damn it. I do sound childish when I play it all back like that. But I knew the pithos would be safe, Paul was there.”

The heir was the only one that mattered in these instances. The only reason she would be trained alongside him was to ensure there was a successor if he’d died. Her parents couldn’t retake on the responsibilities, they’d be too old. Anesidora’s weren’t immortal, despite their supernatural gifts. They lived the same lifespan as any other human. Could die in all the same ways.

They were fragile, and easily destroyed. Which was one of the reasons a human had been chosen to guard the pithos in the first place. Another was that it was their family member, Pandora, who’d been foolish enough to open it in the first place.

“Your task started as a curse,” he said, wanting to tell her even though he knew he shouldn’t. “Because your ancestors witnessed Pandora open the box, let loose the Seven Deadlies, the Anesidora line would know better than to do so again. Pandora was destroyed with the first opening, so her sister was forced to take responsibility.”

He could still hear Pandora's screams, could still taste the blood in the air. Sometimes, he'd go decades without thinking about it, and then bam, in the middle of the night like a freight train the nightmare of that event would hit him. He'd wake in a cold sweat, screaming his throat raw. Loudly enough that it usually brought a dozen or so maenads to his bedside.

No one knew but them, how haunted by that second birth he was. How panicked he would grow if left alone in the dark for too long. Small spaces were their own form of torture. Those phobias would develop in a person after being left in a box for four hundred years.

"He'd had a long term girlfriend, Morgan." Piper dropped her hands away from her face finally, staring blankly out the window. "There was already talk of getting married. Starting a family."

More of a chance they wouldn't need her, that she was expendable. That she could go without there being any real consequences. Still, he hadn't missed the hitch at the end of her voice on that last part, and wondered over it.

"Were you afraid they would and you wouldn't be invited?" he pried. "That they'd get married, have a kid, and you'd never be able to meet your niece or nephew?"

It sounded harsh. Like she'd be shunned. But then, the Anesidora's had been operating the same way for thousands of years. Did Reece really expect them to make an exception just because it was the twenty-first century? Could they even make an exception, or was he merely siding with Piper here because...

What?

She was hot, sure, but there were billions of sexy women out there. He'd slept with plenty of them, and even though their features had started to blend and blur over the past hundred or so years, that didn't change the fact.

Piper was one girl. Maybe these odd protective feelings were a sign that he had an itch that needed scratching. It didn't have to be anything more.

"Nothing like that," she answered. Her face contorted and she shook her head. "Never mind. That's not pertinent to why I left."

He was tempted to ask what wasn't—had something happened these past five years? Something bad, from the way she was frowning—but respected her wish to drop it. Hadn't he just been thinking about his various secrets? He had no right to push for hers.

“Did you know,” she started up again after a moment, “that Anesidora’s aren’t allowed to become doctors? It’s too risky, being around all those people at once. What if they’re feeling sin and the Anesidora can’t control themselves? We can’t be lawyers, or musicians, or professional athletes, or circus performers either.”

Reece smirked. “Explain that last one to me.”

“Probably the same as the others,” she waved his skepticism off, “the crowds. Too many people.”

“I was under the impression that you chose to siphon,” he said. “That once you’re of age, you gain total control of your abilities.”

“You do.”

“Then why—”

“It isn’t worth the risk. My family is paranoid. Being brought up on the single belief that guarding the pithos is the only thing that matters will do that to a family. If it came between me and the jar, my mom would shoot me in the face to keep it safe. No questions about that.”

And then Reece got it, the real reason she’d left. The reason maybe she didn’t even know. It wasn’t about getting out from underneath her family’s thumb, or because she didn’t want to waste her life protecting an inanimate object when there was already someone on the job.

“You wanted connection,” he made the mistake of saying aloud. Fortunately, his driveway came into view then, and he turned right onto it. A bit desperate to get out of the car, put some space between them, he hit the gas.

If Piper noticed, she didn’t show it.

“What do you mean?” she asked, chocolate brown eyes wide. Innocent.

More of a reason to kick this sexual tension to the curb.

You came up with a pretty good plan for that earlier...

He cleared his throat, shifted in his seat. “You weren’t getting an emotional connection from your family. Your parents were too focused on taking care of Paul. Paul was too focused on being worthy of that and not losing his place to you. The only other person you had, the Reaper, was duty-bound to rear you up in the traditional Anesidora image. None of them were capable of giving you what you wanted.”

Maybe what she still wanted.

Danger! Danger!

He shut those thoughts down the same time he pulled into the garage and twisted the keys. The echo of the dying engine filtered around them for a few seconds before fading off, leaving them in silence.

Unlike the other ones they'd slipped into during the drive, this one was not comfortable. The air was thick and he felt it pushing down on him. She'd turned all the way in her seat, the seatbelt folded around her awkwardly. She was watching him like they'd never met before. Like the strangers he'd pointed out they were back in the Reaper's safe house.

"You wanted to feel alive," it came tumbling out of his mouth, sounding sure and confident even though on the inside, he was already cursing himself and his stupidity. He couldn't stop himself, tried, but it just kept coming. The bulge in his pants made it perfectly clear he was no longer thinking with the head on his shoulders.

Yet another rarity for him. He couldn't recall the last time he'd gotten dragged by the balls by lust. Usually he was the one in control, of it, and everyone around it. Especially of himself. Despite what he was god of, he had dry spells. He'd go years without sex, even close to a hundred of them once.

There were so many reasons he shouldn't suggest what he was about to, not least of the fact she was an Anesidora. But, looking at her, breathing in the smell of her...It was impossible to turn away. He wanted her.

So why not take her?

Yeah, why not? Do it once, get it out of his system, go back to finding Orpheus and her dickhead brother.

"You still want that, Princess?" he asked, voice dropping low, seductive. He eased himself half an inch closer, only enough to make his intentions known. To raise anticipation. From the slight widening of her eyes, he knew it'd worked. "I can show you."

"To..." her dark brow furrowed, "connect?"

He chuckled, loving the double entendre even though he was pretty sure she hadn't meant to make it. "Physically, yes."

He was sure to be clear about that. It would be sex. Nothing more.

"I'm not a virgin," she drawled, some of that fire returning to her face, chasing away the confusion. With it, the sarcastic version of her, the one he wanted to play with so badly, came out.

"I didn't think you were."

She lifted a brow, though it was clear she was fighting back a smile and she wasn't actually insulted.

"Not how I meant it, and you're aware of that." He licked his lips—mostly because he'd noticed her noticing when he'd done it before—and gave her his best grin. The one that usually had women and men stripping faster than he could blink. "Well, what do you say? I could use one night of connecting. Of forgetting all the bullshit we've just been through."

He thought of Mauri, of her bleeding in his arms, and quickly dashed the memory aside. He couldn't go there. When he got a moment to himself, he'd mourn, but until then...sex. Yes, that's definitely what he needed. Enough lust between them to overload and sleep like the dead the rest of the night.

In the morning, he'd feel one hundred percent and refreshed.

"Forgetting, huh?" She nibbled on her lower lip, considering.

For a moment, she made him wait for it, fearing she was going to turn him down. Then she smiled back, and all he could think about was how hard his dick was.

"That sounds like just what the doctor ordered. And I should know. I work with them on the daily." With that one sentence she made it clear what she was thinking. Screw her family.

He could get on board with that. Especially because she was a part of it, and he intended to screw her well and good for the rest of the night.

Reece didn't bother with the front door. Instead, he reached out and touched her wrist, keeping the touch light, and gave her a half smile. Flashing them to the parlor, he banked down his need long enough to let her have a look around.

The place was huge, much larger than the one they'd spent last night in. It had to be, considering a larger number of his maenads called this place their home. Though it was empty now, usually the sound of female laughter could be heard trickling from multiple rooms along with at least two televisions. He loved coming here, it was one of his favorite places to be.

Unfortunately, one couldn't live off of female company alone, and he had jobs to do, an empire to run. It'd been about six months since he'd last visited, and a little wave of nostalgia washed over him.

"I sent the maenads away," he told Piper, turning to watch her move through the vast foyer. He wondered what it looked like through her eyes. Too big? Too flashy?

The flooring was veined marble, slick and shiny, so that the crystal chandelier that hung from the center of the high ceiling reflected back on the surface. The walls were tall, glaringly white, and lined with framed movie posters dating back the past thirty years. They'd been artfully arranged by one of the maenads, Julie, so that every other frame hung either an inch higher or lower than the one before it.

Across from the front door, all the way in the back, was a large window seat that overlooked a lush garden overflowing with an assortment of colored flowers. On either side of where they stood were two openings leading to two separate living areas. On the left wall a long staircase with a black guardrail led straight up to the second floor. It wrapped around the center of the foyer, all the way to the right, so that anyone up there could look down and see who'd entered.

Reece moved closer to Piper, settling his hand against her lower back. She stiffened, but didn't pull away, and he smirked behind her.

A part of her wanted to fight this, fight him and deny the attraction. He understood that. He'd been doing the same thing. But he better than anyone knew that a little carnal pleasure could do a world of good in terms of relieving stress, and after the day they'd had? They could both use it.

Gently, he used his palm to urge her toward the stairs, directing her up them with a subtle pressure against the curve of her spine. She went without protest, the only sound that of their boots tapping against the solid steps.

Anticipation thrummed through him, making his blood sing. How long had it been since he'd last done this? Since he'd allowed himself to partake in the physical aspect of what he stood for?

A while.

Try eight months, asshole.

Yeah, that was right. The last time had been a bland stint in Chicago with a nimble little blond—she had been blond, right?—that had left him wholly dissatisfied and surly. She'd been attentive, had made all the right noises, came on his cock like a good girl. But the entire exchange had been...empty.

He'd left the city less than an hour later deciding it was time for another dry spell. That usually did it, pulled him out of his funk, got him back to enjoying it. Everything, even meaningless sex, got old eventually.

That's when he'd hit the reset button, take a little time to cultivate other things, then get back to it when he felt the spark again.

Except it wasn't a spark igniting in him now; it was a whole damn inferno.

Reece felt the heat from her small body flicker out to him, burning where he touched her at the base of her back, even through the clothing she still wore. That would definitely have to go. Soon.

He shook his head at himself as they reached the top floor and he turned them so that they crossed the balcony that overlooked the foyer. He had to keep himself together, not lose it. If he was only going to allow himself the one night with her, he sure as hell wasn't going to waste it rushing things.

His bedroom was down the hall on the other side of the mansion, and he briefly debated ducking into one of the numerous others instead. Somehow, he didn't think either the woman he was currently with, or the maenad who the room belonged to, would appreciate that, however. Plus, there was something about taking someone in his own bed that called to him.

Picturing Piper sprawled out on his bed, twisted in his black and gold bed sheets, chocolate hair spread out over the pillows...His dick swelled and he almost let out a moan. They were both still fully dressed and already he felt like he was going to explode.

Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea after all. He could just as easily leave and find someone less risky to sleep with. Someone who didn't carry the burden of her last name, who wouldn't be disgusted with herself once she found out just what and who he truly was.

Only, even the thought of fucking someone else cooled some of that heat. No, he wouldn't let doubts stand in his way. Caution was only so useful; he knew what he was doing.

It was just one night.

Of course.

He tried not to note the sarcastic undertone. Now his mind was turning against him. Great.

His door was already open, and he barely resisted hurrying her inside. Once they were in, he turned to close the exit, some inward part of him preening with the notion that she'd be trapped with him. No more excuses. No more escapes. For either of them.

Reece was in the process of turning back when she pounced.

Chapter 11:

He'd been rubbing circles with his thumb against her back the entire walk up here. It drove her crazy.

As soon as they got to the room and she'd spotted the bed, all of her patience went right out the damn window. She caught him off guard, using that against him as she placed her hands on his shoulders and shoved.

His back hit the now closed door, the resounding thwack sending anticipation coursing through her already lava-filled veins. He'd lost the suit jacket—probably at the club—and though the material of his shirt was dark, the blood there was obvious.

Piper didn't hesitate or bother working through the buttons. The shirt was ruined anyway, why not take it to the next level? Grabbing each end tightly, she tore, ripping buttons free in the process. They flung around the room, and she dropped the once expensive silk, already too distracted to notice the mess, gaze racing over his chest.

The other night she'd tried so hard not to notice the thin trail of dark hairs that led into his pants, but now...She couldn't look away, suddenly feeling the need to drop to her knees and lick her way down it.

Maybe that was too much. She frowned, confidence wavering. Rover's words resonated in her head, making it worse. He'd said she wasn't passionate. Was she letting the god play her?

As if sensing her sudden doubts, Reece pushed away from the door, latching onto her. He spun them so fast the breath caught in her throat. She came up against the wall, his weight instantly pressing her from the front. He held her wrists pinned above her head, and hadn't left her enough room to so much as wiggle between him and the door at her back.

"I've got no problems letting you take lead, Princess," he told her, lowering his head close enough she could see his multi-colored eyes start to glow and harden. "Later. For now, I'm in charge."

One of his knees pressed between her thighs, forcing them apart, and any protest she'd been about to give died on her tongue. Then he was kissing her, and all reason she had for not doing this vanished in a puff of smoke.

He rocked his knee against her and when she gasped, quickly took advantage and slid his tongue into her mouth. He kept pace with the movement of his leg between hers, mirroring the give and take as his tongue flicked in and out. It started teasing, but turned rough and demanding.

Tiny electrical bursts rushed over her and she struggled to free her wrists before recalling what he'd said.

With a deep chuckle, Reece pulled back, grinning when the separation caused her to whine.

She couldn't even be embarrassed about it, not with the way he was staring at her. Those eyes of his were brilliantly glowing now, swirling between emerald and sapphire and gold. His mouth was already puffy from the kiss, tipped up at the corner as he waited while she blatantly inspected him.

"You're beautiful," she said, and meant it. Some men didn't like being called that, preferred more masculine terms like handsome or rugged. While he could pull those two things off as well, it was easier to picture him on the cover of GQ magazine than felling trees in the woods with the rest of the lumberjacks.

"It's gotten me in trouble on numerous occasions, I assure you." He smiled, not the least bit offended. "You've probably got the same problem."

She pulled back slightly. "Definitely not."

"Come on," he persisted, shifting closer, the move causing his knee to once again apply pressure. He left it there, still as a statue so that for a moment her mind blanked and all she could think about was rubbing against him. "You're gorgeous. You've got to know that."

Truth be told, she never really thought about her looks before. There was only one person she'd ever cared of impressing that way, and he hadn't been interested. All the other random hookups she'd partaken in over the past few years weren't important. Obviously those men had all been attracted to her, at least enough to sleep with her. That'd been the extent of her interest as well, so she couldn't blame them.

Seeing the wariness on her face, Reece frowned. "Piper, you're the hottest thing I've seen in a long time, and I just visited the Underworld. Don't let the blindness of one moron Reaper affect the way you perceive yourself. He doesn't matter. Nothing matters." His voice turned breathy and he lowered his head once more. "Nothing but this."

His mouth captured hers and just like that, the conversation fled her mind. He was good at that, getting her to forget things, to lose herself. It should have worried her that she didn't care, should have been the added push she needed to stop this before it was too late.

Piper pressed into him, as much as she could still pinned beneath his weight, moaning against him in the process. She felt him shiver around her, and couldn't hold back the triumphant smile.

Reece lifted his head, arching a single dark brow. "Find something amusing, Princess?"

"I want to touch you." She strained her wrists again, but his hold didn't budge.

"Not sure I can trust you yet." He brought his free hand to the side of her face, tracing her jaw before settling his palm against her throat. He didn't apply pressure, merely rested his large hand there against her, collaring her neck. The meaning was clear.

"You want me to give in?" she asked, licking her lips. His eyes followed the tip of her tongue and she almost let loose another one of those smiles. Almost.

"I want you to surrender," he corrected, tearing his gaze from her lips. It was obvious he was as turned on as she was, but he was holding himself back. His look turned serious as he asked, "Can you do that, Princess?"

"Why do you call me that?"

"Is that a no?"

He didn't want to talk. That was fine, there were other things she'd rather be doing right now anyway.

"It's a yes," she took a breath, hoping it would help settle her nerves, "actually."

His eyes gleamed. "You won't be disappointed by that decision."

Leaving this room dissatisfied had never even crossed her mind.

Reece planted a soft kiss to the corner of her mouth, then repeated it on the other side. His hand around her neck was still loose, while he kept the fingers on her wrists firm. He hadn't rubbed his knee against her since they'd started this conversation, and she knew when he let out a low growl that he felt it when the muscles of her pussy clenched eagerly.

"Patience, Princess," he breathed, trailing those feather light kisses across her jaw. When he reached the spot directly below her right ear, the

press of his lips was harder. Then he sucked and her back bowed.

“We do this my way,” he said directly after, but it was hard to process the words with the ringing in her ears. He blew against the wet spot he’d just made, eliciting tiny shivers from her. “That’s a trigger for you,” he smirked against her skin, “I’ll remember that for later.”

“Reece.” Aside from his knee, he hadn’t even touched her yet and she was already close to losing it.

“Maybe I’ll make you call me ‘sir’...” At the narrowing of her eyes, he chuckled. “Not into dominant titles. Noted. Problems with authority, Piper? I hope that doesn’t mean you’re opposed to taking orders?”

Usually? Yes. Now? What the hell. She’d already agreed to do what he said, hadn’t she? Might as well go all in.

She shook her head, a spot in her chest loosening when she saw how excited that prospect made him. And it wasn’t just his expression that gave it away. His cock was practically stone pressing against her abdomen. She was a little nervous about that. It’d been a while, and from the feel of him, he was larger than she was used to.

“Good.” He pulled back so fast, she was hit by a blast of cold. If he noticed the way she almost slid down the door, he didn’t show it, stepping away until his legs hit the edge of the bed. Then he lowered himself down and rested his forearms on his knees. “Take off your clothes.”

Piper blinked, still trying to catch up with the present moment after the sudden loss of his heat.

“Princess,” he ordered, voice low and commanding, “strip.”

She didn’t know why her fingers shook when she moved to do as he said—she’d stripped in front of him before, after all.

But that had been different. She’d been trying to prove a point, to show she wouldn’t be bullied or afraid. This wasn’t about establishing herself, wasn’t the tease it’d been before.

No, this time he was going to touch her once she was done, the promise of that was crystal clear in his honed gaze. He watched her fingers move as if he didn’t have any other choice but to.

She unzipped her boots and tossed them aside first, then removed her socks and reached for the button on her pants. The zipper going down was like a gunshot in the already tense room, and she was grateful she had to bend over to slide the pants down so he couldn’t see her face. She was shaking, needy. If she’d ever felt like this before, she couldn’t recall.

With the pants in a puddle on the floor next to her feet, she gripped the hem of her shirt, tugging it swiftly over her head. She paused when she was left in nothing but the borrowed bra and panty set, waiting to see if he wanted her to continue or not.

Apparently, that was the right thing to do, because he exhaled nice and slow, giving himself away. He'd been talking about patience, but it was obvious she wasn't the only one close to losing control.

"Come here," he left no room for argument, not that she even considered doing so.

Her legs were moving her forward without hesitation, stopping her just within the space between his spread knees.

He lifted his hands to her hips and she closed her eyes, swaying slightly toward him. The need to get nearer only intensified as he brought his left hand around, massaging his palm against her back, and then lower. He kneaded her ass through the thin lacy material of the panties, then used the momentum to shove her against him.

She connected with a sharp intake, instinctually lifting to grip his shoulders to steady herself. His face was directly between her breasts now, all he'd have to do was lean an inch or two forward and...A sound made its way up the back of her throat before she could help it, a very needy, very desperate one.

He didn't chuckle like he had when she'd whimpered before, merely brought his other hand around so that he was cupping her ass with both palms. "Take off the bra."

Doing so meant removing the support she had on his shoulders, and she tipped closer when she did. The latch in the back unhooked quickly, and she tugged the straps down and discarded it. When she reached for him again, he took her wrists with lightning speed, twisting them so that in the next instant she was blinking up at the high ceiling.

He hovered over her on the bed, adjusting her wrists so that her arms were at either side of her head on the pillows. His next words were guttural, rough. "Keep them there. I mean it, Princess. You move, and I stop."

She opened her mouth to ask what exactly it was he'd stop, but closed it again at his warning look. Okay. She'd play. Piper allowed her upper body to go lax beneath him in silent agreement.

The corner of his mouth twitched, but then his attention was elsewhere. For a long moment all he did was stare at her breasts, causing her heart to pick up speed. Then, just when she thought she was going to burst, he lowered his head, taking one of her nipples in his mouth.

The warm heat had her sucking in a breath, and when he grazed the sensitive nub with his teeth she gasped.

He started delivering little licks around her areola, making a full circle before coming back to her nipple to repeat the sucking and the bite. He'd done this three times already before shifting to give the same treatment to her other breast. As he did, his right hand slowly slipped down.

When he got to her stomach she started squirming, chided by a sharper nip of teeth. Her nipple stung from it, but he quickly chased any lingering pain away with his tongue. His fingers reached the top of her panties, sliding beneath the silk, right over her clit.

The pad of his middle finger pressed the bundle of nerves lightly and her body convulsed. He did the same thing he'd done with her breasts, swirling his finger around, building her up, then finally going back to applying pressure where she needed it.

"Hands," he growled, lifting his head momentarily from her left nipple to send her a warning glare.

She hadn't even been aware she'd been sliding her arms down. As soon as she settled them back into place, he returned to her breast, the hand in her panties palming her. He traced her slit, coming close to her opening only to retreat before actually entering her.

"You're so wet," he groaned, pulling back so that he could stare down at where his hand was buried. When she didn't respond fast enough for his liking, he ground his palm against her clit.

She jerked and he emitted a satisfied rumble.

"Reece," she moaned, "please."

"What's the matter, Princess?" he asked. "Not liking the way I'm running the show?"

"You're playing dirty." She forced herself to meet his gaze, but there was nothing she could do about the reedy sound of her voice.

"Without question." The very tip of his finger finally slid inside of her, just barely entering. "And I'm only getting started." He paused, thinking something over, and then said, "Beg."

Piper had never done that before. In the past, even during rough sex, there'd always been mutual control. Either that, or she was the one taking lead, mostly so she could get what she wanted and be done with it. She'd been too determined to achieve her free life, to gain a career and a safe place to live, to dedicate much of her time to sex or relationships. One and done. That'd been her way. And if any of those guys had told her to beg...It wouldn't have ended well for them.

But not with Reece. She waited for the outrage but it never came. Instead, her legs spread wider, almost of their own accord, and another whimper traveled up the back of her throat. If it got him to finally touch her where she really wanted, begging was the least she could do.

"Please." Her eyes threatened to shut but she forced them to remain open and locked on his.

"Please what?" he persisted, harsher this time.

"Inside me, Reece," she rushed, not giving herself time to back down. "I need you inside me."

"Done." He was on her before he'd even finished speaking, tearing at the thin lace panties in much the same way she'd done his shirt. He tossed the ruined scrap to the floor and dropped down, forcing her thighs further apart with his hands. Just as she realized what he was about to do, his face was between her legs.

He didn't mess around this time, tongue immediately stroking deep into her. She arched, and his hands fastened around her thighs to keep her in place. He licked up to her clit, sucked lightly on her swollen labia, then dipped back down to lap at her inner walls.

Piper felt the pressure begin to coil within her, twisting her hands around so that she could clutch at the sheets. She desperately wanted to touch him, to run her hands through that dark silky hair. But not at the expense of him stopping. If he did, she might just die.

Her eyes sprung open when he twirled his tongue inside of her, and she dropped her gaze down. She sucked in a breath when it was to find he was already staring back. No one had ever looked at her like that before, especially not from his current position. Like he wanted to consume her. No, like he *was* consuming her. There was a sick thrill in knowing that, in giving in to it.

Reece moved his lips back to her clit, flicking his tongue against it. At the same time, he shoved two fingers inside of her, curling them so that

he raked against that sensitive spot. He pumped them a few times, drawing her closer to the edge, and then applied one more hard suck to her tiny nub.

Piper screamed as the orgasm hit her, throwing her head back against the bed as her body lifted. Blood rushed to her head in a whoosh, so she was too dazed to notice him moving off the bed.

He tugged off his pants as he moved to the nightstand, quickly yanking the drawer open. After grabbing something from inside, he made his way back to her.

She blinked, trying to focus as he settled himself between her still spread legs. After an orgasm like that, she should have been satisfied, but one glance at his jutting cock and the ache returned tenfold.

Reece tore open the foil packet he'd gotten, expertly rolling the condom onto his member, before positioning himself at her entrance. He paused for half a second to look up at her, waited, as if to see if she'd somehow changed her mind. When she didn't say or do anything, he let out a growl.

He thrust into her so hard her body slid up the smooth sheets. Then he was on top of her, his weight keeping her in place as he rolled his hips. He gave her a moment to adjust to the sheer size of him, for her body to stretch and accommodate, then he pulled back and slammed home with the same force as before.

Piper moaned, finally giving in to the need to touch him. She wrapped her arms around him and clung as his thrusts continued, digging her nails in when he jacked up the tempo. Each press of his hips brought him deeper and deeper, and it wasn't long before she was fighting off another orgasm.

For the first time in forever, she felt like she was in the right place at the right time. Despite all the other bullshit currently taking place around her, she was meant to be here, with him. She didn't want to give that feeling up, not yet.

She'd worry about the why later, the wrongness and the impossibility. For now, all she cared about was extending this moment, of holding onto the sensation of belonging.

As if he knew somehow that she was holding back, Reece captured her chin, forcing her to look at him as he drove his cock into her. He adjusted himself to another angle, one that had him tapping her clit with each thrust, making it impossible for her to cling to that thread any longer.

She cried out with his eyes still locked on hers, the climax hitting her harder than the last, making light burst around her. She felt herself come apart beneath him, felt him haphazardly stitch her back together with every pump of his hips as he kept going.

And when he threw his head back, finding his own release, her muscles clenched onto him, trying to keep him close. Already dreading the empty feeling that would come when he eventually left her.

Chapter 12:

What have you done?

Piper stared at herself in the mirror, lightly running her fingers over the various marks Reece had spent the night making on her skin. He'd taken her twice more, the second time gentle, the last rougher than the first.

And she'd liked it.

She blew out a slow breath, watching her pupils dilate at the mere memory. No, she'd more than liked it. He hadn't left any bruises that wouldn't disappear by the end of the day, hadn't done any permanent damage despite how deliciously he'd hurt her.

Reece knew all about that delicate balance between pleasure and pain, had used it against her in the form of more nips and bites. In the past, she would have been appalled if a guy had tried any of that on her, but with him...

What have you done?

She'd been thinking it nonstop on repeat since she'd slipped from the bed and hidden away in the bathroom. That was probably twenty minutes ago now, and she'd yet to bring herself to do anything other than stand there. In the mirror, a woman she hardly recognized peered back from beneath mussed dark hair. Her lips were puffy and bright red from the constant making out, causing her skin to appear even paler than usual.

There were slight bags under her eyes from lack of sleep—their last session had ended only three hours ago, so she'd gotten half that much—and yet there was an odd glow to her. She looked, if not well-rested, healthy. Which was strange, all things considered. And she felt...Rather okay.

Piper had been expecting to freak out, to regret what she'd done. With a start, she realized that's what she was in here doing; waiting for it. For that familiar rush of guilt and contrition. Those emotions she'd been wearing like a heavy cloak the past five years.

But, while she did still feel bad about leaving her family in the lurch—though they'd been well off in her mind—as far as regretting last night with Reece went...She didn't.

Logically, she knew that was worrisome on its own, and definitely cause for alarm. Why force herself to feel shitty if she didn't though? Sure, eventually this would find a way to bite her in the ass, and when it did, she'd deal with it. Now? Why not enjoy it while it lasted.

She pursed her lips, recalling what he'd told her last night before they'd started. Actually, it was already over, wasn't it. He'd said he wanted a night, one, and they'd had it. Just because she was left craving more, didn't mean he would feel the same. Hell, he was used to this, being the god of lust and all. Was used to leaving the one-night stands after the allotted time had ended.

And you aren't?

True, that was typically how she operated as well, but something about this time was different. If she closed her eyes, she could still see the way he'd looked at her as he came. The heat and possessiveness that had sparked there, all that power directed at her.

"Second thoughts, Princess?" at the sound of Reece's voice, her eyes popped open and she spun around to face him. He was standing in the now open doorway, arms down at his sides. Naked and on display.

Her eyes widened when they rested on his erect cock. He was hard and swollen, a drop of pre-cum already visible on the tip.

She swallowed, and was pretty sure the sound could be heard in the next county. He'd certainly caught it, because his member bobbed slightly and his hands clenched into fists so tight his knuckles went white.

Even if she had been before, seeing him like this now would have changed her mind.

"No," she finally answered huskily, unable to tear her gaze from his cock, even when he started taking slow, lazy steps closer.

"Glad to hear it," he drawled, and it was only made sexier by the thread of need that slipped through. He grew silent, and after a moment she looked up, met his gaze. The corner of his mouth curled in a wicked smirk and the muscles between her thighs clenched almost painfully.

"In the shower," he ordered, angling his chin toward the massive glass encasement to the left. "Now."

Piper didn't argue, or snap at his tone, knowing the ends would more than justify the means.

She wasn't mistaken.

* * *

“These are all of the maenads?” Piper shifted through sheets of printer paper that were sprawled out across the kitchen table.

After screwing her against the shower wall, they’d gone back to bed for a couple of hours. Three rounds later, and they’d finally dragged themselves out and into clothes. Sort of. She was currently dressed only in one of his button-up shirts, this one a pale silver. She’d had to roll the sleeves up to her elbows, but the hem reached mid-thigh, so as long as she didn’t bend over for anything she was covered.

Which of course made her think of how he’d bent her over the edge of the bed, and fucked her from behind earlier...

“All of the ones presently accounted for,” Reece said, snapping her out of her thoughts. He came around the kitchen counter and handed her a mug before wrapping an arm around her waist. He pulled her back against his bare chest, resting his chin on top of her head.

She was grateful for the position, because it meant he couldn’t see the red currently staining her cheeks. Enjoying sex with him was one thing, drifting off into fantasies about it less than thirty minutes after actually doing it? Pathetic.

Piper sniffed at the contents of the mug and almost groaned aloud. The coffee was scalding, but she didn’t care, gulping half the contents. The burned tongue was worth the way her muscles relaxed as the caffeine and sugar hit her. Coffee had always been her bliss, gave her a false feeling of contentment she often desperately needed.

“Now if only I could get you to relax like that,” Reece chuckled by her ear, warm breath fanning against her sensitive skin.

“Well, you gave me the coffee,” she said, trying to keep her tone light, playful, “so I guess you get kudos points, in any case.”

“I’ll take what I can get.” He pressed a kiss to the curve of her jaw, keeping his lips there a little longer than necessary. “For now.”

Heat rushed through her and she cleared her throat, needing a distraction something fierce. She pointed to the pages that had been left for him. The maenad who’d done the delivery must have popped in and out so as not to disturb them sometime earlier this morning.

“Some are missing?” His comment had implied so, and that meant another important issue that they had to deal with. I.E., something else that

should take precedence over her libido.

“Six of them,” all of the teasing left him and his voice hardened along with the arm he was still holding her with, “to be exact. They’re being searched for, but if Orpheus has gotten a hold of them, there’s no telling where they’ll be.”

“Or what they’re up to.” She nodded, understanding. “You’re worried.”

He hesitated a moment, and then, “They’re my family, Piper. I’m responsible for them.”

“You love them.” And why shouldn’t he? They were all freakishly gorgeous, and wholly dedicated to him.

“Jealous?” He grinned behind her. “Careful, Princess, keep that up and I might feel the need to demonstrate just how much my body wants you.”

Don’t go there, her mind warned. Stay focused.

“We already wasted half the day,” she told him.

“If you think it was a waste, I didn’t do it right.” He flipped her around so that she was perched on the edge of the table with him between her legs. “Let me try again.”

“Reece.” She pressed a palm flat to the center of his chest, trying desperately to ignore all the bare tan flesh. He was standing close enough to lick, and she momentarily considered it before recalling what they were actually doing here.

Why they’d been brought together in the first place.

“We have to concentrate,” she said. “Orpheus and Paul are still out there, and they still have the pithos. We can’t allow ourselves to be distracted.”

His mouth twitched. “So you think I’m a distraction, do you?”

Not seeing a reason to lie, she spoke truthfully. “A big one.”

“Only big?” He pouted, and she struggled to hold back a laugh at the absurdity of it.

“A massive one,” she corrected, then allowed her gaze to trail down toward the growing bulge in his pants. “A *seriously* massive one.”

“Ego stroke accepted.” He pulled back and snatched the mug out of her hands, drinking before she could stop him. His gaze roamed the paperwork spread out at her back, dismissing her in a way that had her eyes narrowing.

“Well?” he prompted when she remained seated. “Come on. We’ve got work to do, remember?” He made a tsk sound and shook his head at her. “Lazy, Princess.”

“Watch it.” She dropped from the table and turned back to the pages.

“Oh,” he drawled, “I am. Trust me, I am.”

When she glanced over her shoulder, she caught him blatantly checking out her ass. It was clear when he grinned and winked at her, that he’d wanted to be caught.

“Are you always this playful post-coitus?” she asked, purposefully using the word Orpheus had to keep the question from coming off too serious or intrusive. She didn’t want him to get the wrong idea or anything.

And, what idea might that be?

She wasn’t sure.

“I wouldn’t know,” he said, stalling by drinking the rest of her coffee. Once the cup was empty and he had no other choice but to elaborate, he sighed. “I don’t usually hang around post-coitus.”

He looked so uncomfortable, shifting on his feet, twirling the cup around his fingers. For some reason, she took pity on him.

“Me either,” she admitted, smiling sheepishly when he seemed surprised to hear it.

“Aren’t we a pair,” he murmured, gaze turning sharp, assessing.

She didn’t like it, so she quickly filled the silence. “I don’t get attached because I’m a runaway Anesidora. Regular men don’t have a hope of understanding me, and I don’t have the time to explain. Especially not if they ask about my family. What’s your excuse?”

“Hi,” he held out his hand to her, “my name is Reece Luben, and I’m the god of lust. Pleased to make your acquaintance. Can I stick my dick in you?”

Piper’s eyes went wide and she ignored his offering, refusing to shake. “Please tell me you never actually used that as a pickup line.”

“Once,” he dropped his arm and shrugged. “Almost sixty years ago.”

“Did it work?”

He wagged his dark brows. “Oh yeah.”

“That’s...” Unbelievable. Insane. “Kind of sad.”

“Ain’t that the truth?” He didn’t appear to be the least bit offended.

“It also doesn’t answer my question. Not really.”

“Sure it does.” He set the empty mug on the table, the move allowing him to sidle closer to her. “I’m a god, Princess. Promising someone forever is a pretty big deal for someone like me.”

She blinked at him.

“What?” He frowned, lifting his arm so that he could place his hands down on the table at either side of her hips, effectively caging her in.

“You’re a romantic.”

“That’s surprising?”

“Sort of.” Being that he was all about lust, she just couldn’t picture him doing the whole hearts and flowers dance. Bringing home roses and setting up fancy dinners for anniversaries. “It’s a bit hard to swallow.”

His wide smirk made her realize her poor choice of wording and she rolled her eyes.

“All right, Romeo, enough of that. Back to the important stuff.” She pointedly picked at the pages again, not really seeing any of them with him so close.

“I haven’t gone by that name in a long time,” he said, and her mouth dropped open.

“Next you’re going to tell me you were also Casa Nova.” She was joking, but his smile was anything but.

“Guilty.”

“No—”

“I got around.” He shrugged, and this time he was the one to clear his throat and reach for the list of names in front of them.

Was he...embarrassed? Why? She knew his history going into this. His past didn’t bother her. And even if it did, she wouldn’t have a right to it. They were just having fun, blowing off steam while they tried to discover the whereabouts of a sociopathic malicious soul. That was all.

You believe that?

“The missing six all hang out in the same area,” Reece said then, brow furrowing in concentration. “If they were taken, there’s a chance Orpheus is hiding out near where it happened.”

“Let’s check it out.”

“It’s a long shot,” he warned.

“It’s also the first real lead we have,” she said. “We can’t afford not to take it.”

He nodded and glanced down at the two of them, seemingly just realizing what they were wearing. “We should probably finish getting dressed.”

“That’s more than likely a good idea.” Though, even in the face of a possible clue, she much preferred the thought of removing what they already had on.

This was bad. Very, bad.

Chapter 13:

Reece was tempted to leave Piper behind, which wouldn't be cool under the best of circumstances, as he well knew. Just because she'd let him boss her around in the bedroom didn't mean she'd appreciate him dictating her life outside of it. And he didn't want to.

He just wanted her safe.

Because of this, he opted to flash them outside of the local bar his maenads frequently visited in Toronto, not wanting to risk getting caught off guard inside. For all they knew, Orpheus was there.

"I don't like this," he admitted, staring up at the back of the brick building. They'd appeared in the alley, and while it was still early afternoon, it was obvious from the sounds coming from within the place was open.

"Why?" Piper cocked her head and followed his gaze. "Can you sense the pithos inside?"

"No." He couldn't feel it anywhere, in fact. Which meant they weren't even remotely near it. That didn't mean Orpheus wasn't inside. "We still don't know why he wants you."

"Isn't it obvious?" she said, but when he looked at her he saw she was doing that thing she did whenever she was nervous. "My sparkling personality, of course."

"Sarcasm will only get you so far, Princess." The wind was whipping around a long strand of her hair, and he reached out and tucked it behind her ear without thinking. As soon as her eyes widened, he backed away, silently cursing himself.

What the hell? He thought about what she'd asked him earlier and felt his gut tighten. They'd had sex. That was it. What was up with all the touchy feely crap? And it wasn't her, either. She'd barely touched him at all. A fact that was driving him crazy.

In bed, she'd begged him to let her feel him up, had stroked and smoothed and ran her hands over every last inch of him the second he'd released her wrists. Just this morning, less than two hours ago, she hadn't been able to stop, moving her tongue across his pecs, over his jaw. She'd

pressed her cheek against his when she'd climaxed, holding onto him for dear life.

Afterward...nothing.

They'd gone downstairs and it'd been like a switch in her head. Even when he hadn't been able to keep his hands off of her—fingers in her hair, on her abdomen, her hips—her hands had stayed wrapped around that coffee mug like it was the most coveted thing on the planet.

And now he was jealous of a damn ceramic cup.

You were jealous because even after you'd taken it away, she still hadn't reached for you.

Yeah, there was also that. He'd purposefully removed the cup to force her hands empty. To see what she would do. A whole lot of nothing. Sure, when he'd blocked her in against the table, he'd felt her heat, the shimmer of attraction spark through her. But he didn't just want her to find him attractive. He wanted her crazy, frenzied. Drunk on him and overflowing with lust.

Which would be a catastrophe of epic proportions. Really, he should be glad that she wasn't gaga for him. Rejoicing the fact she hadn't turned into some clingy nightmare, begging for his undivided attention. That had happened plenty in the past, more times than he could count even, and each and every time he'd hated it.

Hate is a strong word.

Okay, he hadn't *hated* it per se, but he certainly hadn't reciprocated.

And you would have now?

No, of course not. That was why he was being ridiculous, and should focus on being grateful instead. It had to be his ego, that was all. He hadn't spelled her with his magic dick and that bothered him on a purely egotistical male level.

What he was feeling wasn't craving, it was simply misplaced emotion. She'd bruised him with her lack of obsession and he, not used to such things, had merely misinterpreted his reaction. He didn't want her any more than she wanted him.

She hadn't denied him, had she? Even though their agreed upon one night had ended, this morning when he'd caught her in the bathroom, she hadn't pushed him away. The very opposite. She'd not only welcomed him, she'd taken him back to bed.

Again.

And again.

And again.

So what if playtime was now over? They'd had their fun.

You want more.

Didn't matter. As soon as they found Orpheus and the pithos, they'd go their separate ways. He'd never see her again, and she'd move on with her life.

Reece went to the backdoor, yanking the heavy metal open with more force than necessary. He pretended not to notice, slipping inside before her so that he could scout out the narrow hallway.

It smelled like stale beer and day-old cigarette smoke, the scent crowding around them, instantly brandishing itself onto their clothes. He picked at his ruby red suit jacket, a little put out by the thought it would be regulated to being worn at dive bars like this one from now on. Even dry cleaning wouldn't be able to erase this stink completely.

Two doors leading to bathrooms flanked either side of the hall which opened up at the end. The closer they got, the better he could make out the wide bar space. Booths with chipped black vinyl and walls covered in various stickers and photographs greeted them. Some were occupied, enough to cause his protective instincts to kick into overdrive, but it couldn't be considered packed by any means.

Not overly surprising, seeing as how it was early afternoon on a Wednesday.

Reece reached back, a thrill of relief and excitement shooting through him when he felt Piper take his hand. It shouldn't make him feel so good, so accepted, but it did. He kept his stance casual as they stepped into the main part of the bar, like they weren't on the hunt and hadn't snuck in through the back.

Linking his fingers with hers, he gently tugged her over to the long counter that stretched across one wall, smiling at the petite blond who stood behind it.

At their approach, she set the glass she'd been cleaning aside and leaned toward them. Doing so gave a great view down the front of her shirt, the thin material stretched low to expose large breasts. Any other time and he would have accepted the obvious offering, no questions asked. As it were, his dick didn't so much as stir at the sight of creamy skin.

It only made him think about Piper. How her breasts were the perfect size to fit in his palms, filling them, but not overdoing it.

It was an actual chore keeping the seductive, friendly smile in place, but he somehow managed. Propping an arm on the bar, he pretended to take an interested look around, scanning the small crowd for familiar faces. Nothing so far.

“What can I get you, sugar?” the blond asked, all of her attention trained on him. Like Piper wasn’t even there.

The fact that she was flirting was a good thing—hell, he’d always used that to his advantage—but something about her dismissal pricked at him. Reece found himself lifting his and Piper’s linked fingers to his mouth, where he openly brushed his lips against her knuckles. Making a statement. A claim.

To Piper’s credit, she only seemed surprised by the act for a second before she got a hold of herself. Slipping into the role he’d just given her, she eased closer until she was tucked against his side. Her free hand rested against his abs, brushing across him until she was lightly holding his hipbone.

Reece’s breath caught and she fluttered her long inky lashes, making that tightening in his chest expand. Had he just been complaining because she wasn’t touching him? Damn. What a fool, because now that she was it’d become abundantly clear how damn dangerous that was.

How the hell was he supposed to focus on gathering clues about Orpheus with an erection the size of Texas in his pants?

“Whiskey on the rocks for my friend here,” Piper told the bartender, all while keeping her eyes on Reece.

Taking control, when he was too caught up and distracted to do so.
Fuck.

“And for you?” the flirty note the blond had had before was gone. Now she just sounded bored, and slightly put out.

“I’m fine,” Piper said. “I like to keep a clear head.”

Reece vaguely wondered if that was a light jab at him, but dismissed it. There was no way she could know what was going on inside him right now. Not when he was clueless about it himself. This was just part of the game they were playing with the bartender. That was all.

And he was losing by letting her do all the work.

Piper made a big show of tearing her gaze off of him, letting out a quiet gasp when she looked at the bartender.

The sound caught the other woman's attention, and she paused what she was doing to glance back questioningly.

"I'm sorry," Piper sounded slightly flustered, "I love your hair. Do you do something to it to get it that shiny?"

"Oh," the blond reached up to run her fingers through it, "no. It's natural."

"Lucky. I wish mine came out like that. You should see me in the morning. I'm a beast. Just ask this one." She patted Reece's chest, but otherwise didn't acknowledge him, still focused on the bartender. "Actually, now that I think about it, some of my friends told me about you. I just didn't believe them, but now that I've seen you for myself, I know it's true. You're as pretty as they say."

Reece felt his mouth twitch and hurried to mask the humor. His little Anesidora was trying to play on the other girl's pride, stroking her ego. And from the looks of things, it was working. The blond hadn't stopped touching her hair since the start of the conversation.

"Friends?" she asked absently.

"Yeah," Piper broadened her smile, "they come here often. They're basically regulars. You'd know them if you saw them, I'm sure. Tall, red hair, insanely gorgeous." She rolled her eyes. "Envy, thy name is me, am I right?"

"Yes!" The blond snapped her fingers. "I know exactly who you're talking about! The Vixens." She gave her a curious once over. "Are you part of their club? No offense, you just don't seem like the type, if you know what I mean." To make sure she did, the blond tugged on a strand of her own hair pointedly.

The maenads who congregated here were part of a motorcycle club. Really, it was a cover so that people would leave them alone without questioning why they all lived together and why they kept odd hours. They also happened to like riding, so it worked out. Being what they were, however, they were all redheads.

Piper didn't know any of this, because he stupidly hadn't thought to tell her, but she recovered quickly, laughing like she understood exactly what the other girl meant.

“I’m too brunette for them,” she said, proving that she actually did. “But we are close friends. Any chance they’ve been in today? We were supposed to meet up but...” She waved at the room. There wasn’t a single redhead in the place.

“Nope, sorry.” The blond finished pouring the whiskey and slid it in front of Reece, though she didn’t bother looking at him this time. He’d faded to the background, it seemed.

“Damn.” Piper blew out a breath. “They’re probably pissed at me still. I was supposed to be here last night but this one and I got a little distracted. You know what I mean.” She indicated Reece with a tip of her head. “Hell have no fury like a woman scorned and all that jazz. I’d hoped they’d forgiven me.”

“Yesterday?” the blond frowned, sticking her tongue between her teeth. “Don’t remember seeing them. Last time they were here was Monday night.”

“You sure?”

“Positive. My uncle owns the place so I’m here all the time. The Vixens are funny ladies, sometimes we hang out and play pool when I’m not on shift. If they’d come in, one of them would have texted asking where I was at.”

“Looks like they blew me off too then.” Piper tapped the surface of the bar.

“Sorry.”

“No worries,” she waved her concern off. “You’ve been a big help.”

“Tell you what,” the blond pulled a napkin and a pen out and handed them over to her, “leave me your number, and if they stop by I’ll let you know. Okay?”

“You’re the best.” Piper scrawled her digits across the napkin. “I didn’t catch your name?”

“It’s Daisy.”

“Nice to meet you, Daisy. I’m Alexa, and this is my boyfriend Dick.”

It was a good thing Reece had been too caught up in watching her work to touch the drink, because he certainly would have choked on it hearing her say that.

Piper finished up her conversation, paid, then grabbed his glass for him and turned. They were still holding hands, and she used that to pull him

over to a corner booth, dropping down on the side that would allow them to face the entire bar. Instead of giving him the option of taking the opposite seat, she tugged him in after her.

“Here you go, *sugar*,” a teasing glint entered her chocolate eyes as she set the drink back down in front of him.

“I’ll admit,” he took the glass and sipped, “props for that.”

She shrugged a small shoulder. “Pulling strings is easy when you know which ones people have.”

“And you figured her for vanity, how?”

“The second she thought someone like you could be interested in someone like me, she got arrogant. Thinking you’re pretty enough to pull attention away from *you* is a serious boost.”

They’d go back to that comment about “someone like her” in a moment. For now...

“It worked. We know they haven’t been here for days.”

“Which means either Orpheus got to them on Monday, or—”

“He took them somewhere else.” Reece stared down into the amber liquid pensively.

“Is there any chance they went into hiding?” Piper asked, resting a hand on his arm. Comfortingly.

It caught him off guard, and for a moment he couldn’t get his voice to work. Then he quickly shook his head. “No. They would have contacted me by now.”

“All right.” She shifted closer so that her knee brushed against his leg. She didn’t pull away, but it also didn’t look like she’d made the contact on purpose. “What about their place? We should check that out next. If they weren’t hypnotized here, that’s another option.”

“Agreed.” He swallowed the rest of the whiskey in one go, relishing the burn. Then he clicked it down and angled his body toward her. “Dick, huh?”

“What? Another name to add to your list of aliases,” she said it innocently enough, but he didn’t miss the slight reddening of her cheeks.

Interesting.

“But Dick, Princess? You couldn’t come up with something a little better than that?”

She shoved at his arm, indicating she wanted him to stand up. When he refused, she let out a frustrated sigh. “I got distracted.”

“By?” He tilted his ear closer to her.

“Uh, hello?” She glanced pointedly to the spot under the table where his erection was currently concealed.

Reece laughed and finally got up, letting her stand before slipping his arms around her narrow waist to tug her flush against him. He took a second to enjoy the feel of all those soft, lush curves pressed to his body, then grinned.

“Ah, Princess,” he drawled. “I didn’t think you noticed.”

Chapter 14:

The maenads house in Toronto wasn't really a house at all. They'd renovated an abandoned office building to fit their needs, using the entire lower floor as a garage/lounge space. It was dark by the time Piper and Reece got there, and everything within was pitch black.

"Looks like no one's home," she said, even as they continued to approach the front door. It was glass and had a logo with the word, Vixens, across it in swirly red lettering.

There was a large metal lock, and when Reece reached for it, it shook. His mouth thinned and he patted down his front pocket, swearing under his breath when he found it empty.

"I have keys," he explained. "I just didn't think to bring them."

Maybe she wasn't the only one distracted by the things they'd done to each other earlier? She was tempted to ask, but now wasn't the time. It was clear he was worried about his people, and truthfully, she was too. The last thing she wanted was to be poisoned with maenad venom again.

Reece's grip on the handle tightened and with one strong yank he snapped the metal lock. Bells attached to the inside of the door jingled as he swung it open, but they both ignored them and entered.

Outside the front door, only a tiny sitting area could be seen, but as soon as someone walked inside and turned to the right, the open floor plan became visible. A line of motorcycles were carefully parked in front of large white garage doors. They were in pristine condition, all sleek and shiny, not so much as a scratch on any of the paint jobs. Obviously they were well taken care of.

So the fact that they were all here and there was no sign of their owners...Wasn't looking good.

Across from the bikes the room had been set up with a living space, complete with leather couches surrounding a coffee table and a large flat-screen TV. A set of stairs to the right led up to the second floor, and a line of cabinets and countertops filled up the rest of the space. There was a refrigerator, a coffee maker, and a toaster.

“There’s still coffee in the pot,” Piper noted, jutting her chin toward it so that he’d see for himself.

“Hayley is a neat freak,” he said. “No way she’d leave that there.”

The only sound came from the humming of the refrigerator, nothing else. Easing her way closer to the stairs, Piper tried to focus her hearing, but if someone was up there they were either asleep or...Well. Dead.

Reece was moving past the bikes toward a door on the far wall. He opened it up to a small bathroom, glancing inside to find it empty. He shut it again and rested his hands on his hips, taking in the room. A magazine had been left open on the couch, and there was a half eaten roll of crackers on the coffee table.

“Let’s check upstairs,” Piper suggested, not liking the concerned expression he was wearing.

He kept blinking as if that would somehow change what he was seeing, but at her words he refocused on her and nodded.

She’d only gone up three steps when the first wave of dread hit her. Before she could react, a small hand dug into her arm, yanking her from the stairs with enough force to send her crashing into the wall. Her skull rebounded off the cement, and she saw stars. Reece called her name but he sounded far away and underwater.

Reaching back, she tentatively touched her skull, pulling away when she felt wetness there. Using the wall for balance, she eased onto her feet, pausing while the world spun for a moment. It felt like it took her ten minutes just to do that, but it must have been more like ten seconds, because her attacker was still there.

And they weren’t waiting for her to recuperate.

A female body slammed into her from the front, though Piper had the good sense to protect her head this go around. She curled into herself, vision still partially impaired. She could feel the claws digging into the backs of her shoulders, blinked, and finally made out the approach of a knee.

She blocked it, pushing the leg away with all of her strength. When the person stumbled, she moved, delivering a blow to her attacker’s gut before accompanying it with a right hook across her jaw.

The maenad’s head snapped back, strawberry blond hair flying around pale skin, and Piper cursed.

Over in the living area, Reece was busy taking on the other five women who'd ganged up on him. Though he probably could have handled them with ease, it was clear he was trying to be delicate. Even though they clawed and spit at him, he was holding himself back so as not to hurt them.

Piper dropped to her knees, avoiding a swipe from the one attacking her at the last second. She rolled over to the kitchenette, grabbing the partially filled coffee pot. Turning, she whacked the maenad on the side of the head. Glass shattered, muddy brown liquid splashing everywhere.

Not waiting for any of it to settle, she snatched the toaster, ripping the cord from the wall in the process, and brought it crashing against the other side of the maenads skull.

You're professionally trained in martial arts...and you're fighting with kitchen appliances...

Yeah, well, whatever did the trick. Besides, she wasn't foolish enough to think she could take on a supernatural being on her own with mere punches and kicks alone. Case in point, the fact that the woman was already starting to get back to her feet.

Piper ran around the counters toward the front door, but came to an abrupt stop once she'd gotten there. She couldn't leave Reece. For multiple reasons. Like, the fact he was her ride out of here. And it was safest in his presence.

And you care about him.

What? No. That wasn't true at all.

The maenad caught up with her then, fortunately pulling her from her thoughts. Piper dodged to the left, but the woman anticipated that, latching onto her arm with sharp talons and tore easily through a few layers of skin.

She hissed out a breath, lifted her leg, and kicked against the redheads' ribcage. Then, she planted her foot against her thigh and used it as a springboard. She executed a backward flip in the air, landing four feet away, already taking up another stance.

The move accidentally brought her closer to the fight going on in the center of the room. Two of the five attacking Reece broke off, shooting toward Piper in a blur of speed and color. There was nothing she could do aside from brace for impact, which she did. The first got her around the waist, taking her down to the ground.

Piper tried to struggle free, kicking where she could find an opening, digging knuckles into the maenads side, but it was like the woman felt none of it.

Something made a loud rumbling sound that shook the floor beneath her. It had the maenad on top of her, and the two circling, momentarily stilling. Piper could barely move her head, so had no idea what had made the noise, but the redheads weren't the only ones affected. Tingles of fear bolted down her spine.

A scream, followed by a crash, and then a shriek of outrage filled the room. The damn maenad pinning Piper still blocked her from seeing anything, and she was forced to lay there wondering, the panic bubbling in her chest.

Something large and glass broke, and then the maenad on top of her was ripped off. The talons she had dug into Piper's right thigh were forced free, and Piper couldn't hold back the cry of agony.

Then there was a strange slurping sound, something wet accompanied by the snapping of something solid, like bone, and then silence.

For a moment, all Piper could do was stay on the floor, gasping for breath as she fought past the pain. She couldn't tell if she was starting to feel the effects of the maenad poison, but the room was spinning and her head felt three sizes too large. So that couldn't be good. Cautiously, she eased herself into a sitting position, using one of her torn arms to do so, which had her gritting her teeth.

When she risked a glance down at it, she was a bit relieved to find it wasn't as bad as it felt. Only four large gashes lead from her elbow to her wrist, and not overly deep. Blood was welling, but not flowing. Nothing major had been severed. The wound in her thigh was more intense, and there was a tiny pool of red forming around her leg, but even that didn't seem immediately life-threatening. She'd have to check her shoulders, but she wouldn't be able to properly see without a mirror.

That weird slushy sound came again and her head whipped in its direction. All the color drained from her face when she spotted Reece, standing in the middle of the demolished living room.

Amidst the carnage.

The TV was busted, pieces of it scattered on the ground, mixed in with shards of wood and glass from the splintered coffee table. Half of the

leather on one of the couches was torn off, bits of cream colored stuffing still drifting on the air to land in a pile. Some of it was stained red, sticking to the body of one of the maenads, whose head was turned toward Piper.

The dead woman's eyes were glassy, her mouth partially open in a perpetual scream. One of her sisters was nearby, rolled the opposite direction so Piper couldn't make out any of her features. The odd angle of her back was testament enough to the broken spine however.

Everywhere she looked there was blood, smears of it across the floor, splashes of it on the walls. Some had even sprayed onto the ceiling, looking like paint splatters haphazardly tossed. Nothing had escaped the damage on this side of the room, not the paintings or the potted fern that was now tipped over in a pile of clumpy dirt. Most certainly not the now dead maenads.

It was the one less than five feet away from Piper that really sent her over the edge though. She'd only caught glimpses of the woman when she'd come at her, but she recognized the maenad who'd pinned her and done the damage to her thigh.

Her hair was matted in blood, causing tendrils to stick sloppily to the floor. She'd landed on her front, with her head turned away, but that did nothing to hide the massive, gaping hole at the center of her back. The leather jacket she was wearing had been ripped through, and bits of pink and red disappearing in a cavern of flesh were visible.

Piper felt the contents of her stomach rise, and she clapped a hand to her mouth to try and keep it at bay. Acid burned in her gut, up her throat, causing tears to sting the corners of her eyes. She trailed her gaze up toward Reece, who was standing over the maenad like a stone statue and couldn't help the tiny wounded sound that escaped past her lips.

He was staring down at the dead woman at his feet, expression blank and unreadable. His eyes were dull, unfocused despite how he kept them unblinkingly on the hole in the maenad's back. His right hand was still in front of him, red running rivers down his arm, droplets plopping off his elbow.

There was a mass of burgundy tissue in his palm, wrapped in his fingers. An organ.

He'd ripped the heart out of the woman's chest.

A gust of air behind her clued Piper in someone else had arrived, but she couldn't tear her gaze away from Reece. Her brain was too shocked to

care if it was a threat at her back.

Instead, a familiar body dropped down, his knees cradling her, arms coming around to tip her back so he could get a better look. There was fear written all over Rover's face, dark circles under his eyes, but Piper hardly noticed.

"Take her," Reece said then, his voice cracking like a whip. He didn't look at them. When Rover hesitated, he snarled. "Get her out of here!"

Piper didn't protest, allowing the Reaper to tighten his hold and flash them away.

Leaving a part of her behind.

* * *

She should have found it strange when he took her back to Reece's place, but she'd hit her limit for the day, and could only muster slight curiosity.

"Piper?" They were in the kitchen, and Rover led her to one of the stools in front of the granite island. Settling her on it, he remained hunched over, hands on the only part of her that wasn't marked or covered in blood: her hips. "Are you all right?"

What a stupid question. She would have said so aloud, but couldn't seem to get her tongue to work. So she just sat there, staring at a spot on the tile floor, not seeing anything. All she could focus on was the way Reece had looked standing there. What he'd done...He'd murdered his own people. Women he'd called his family.

Why?

You know why.

No. She didn't. She couldn't. Because if he'd done it for her, she didn't think she could live with herself. Not to mention how he would react later, once he came out of that red haze of wrath. Would he blame her for his actions?

Absently, her eyes trailed over to the table where the list of maenads was still spread out where they'd left them. The day had started so amazing. She should have known it wouldn't last. A part of her had been foolishly hoping for more time in his bedroom, had gotten the sense it was possible by the way he'd held her.

Not just the bedroom.

“I need to clean your wounds,” Rover was still talking, and she only just tuned him back in. “Can you stay seated on your own while I go get the medical supplies?”

She blinked at him, frowning as she watched the emotions play across his face. A face she’d been so certain she was in love with growing up. Even after she’d gone, at night all she had to do was close her eyes and she could picture his features perfectly, right down to the freckle above his right cheekbone.

It was impossible for that attraction, all those years’ worth of it, to have disappeared over the course of a few nights, and yet...

Looking at him now, she felt nothing. None of those familiar stirrings in her gut, no butterflies or clenching between her legs. No heat. Logically, she could acknowledge that he was hot, but she didn’t *feel* it. She wasn’t attracted to him anymore. Part of her recognized that was a good thing, it meant she could finally start moving on. The other half of her saw it for what it was.

Trouble. Because there was only one thing different about her life now, one new factor. The god of lust.

It’d only been three days though, there was no way she could develop legitimate feelings in that short of time. Especially not ones strong enough to erase the torch she’d been burning for the Reaper since she’d been sixteen. No, she refused to even humor that concept. It had to be something else. Literally *anything* else.

Maybe his cruel words from before had finally hit home. He’d pushed her away one too many times and her psyche had finally caught onto the truth. The two of them would never be together.

Usually, that thought pained her, caused her to ache and long for a different reality. That didn’t happen this time. She didn’t feel anything, least of all disappointment.

“Get your fucking hands off of her,” the sound of Reece’s deep voice had Piper’s body instantly reacting.

All of those feelings she’d been waiting to come with Rover hit her like a brick at the sight of the god standing across the room. Air rushed out of her lungs, and her muscles tightened. She even shifted on the stool, prepared to go to him before realizing that’s what she intended. But Rover’s fingers prevented her from doing so.

“Excuse me?” The Reaper seemed just as baffled by the sudden demand and appearance of the god as she did. He turned his head so that he could see him over his shoulder, but didn’t move away or follow the order.

“Step away from my Anesidora,” Reece growled, looking as though he was filled with barely coiled rage. His eyes were glowing, chin tipped down, making him seem more feral than ever before. He was stiff, ready to pounce, and losing more control with every passing second.

If Piper noticed, she was sure Rover must as well, yet like an idiot he kept pushing.

“Your—” An affronted sound traveled up the back of his throat. “We don’t have time for this. Look at you. You’re covered in blood.”

“And unless you want to add yours to the mix,” Reece said, “you’ll let her go. Now.”

For a second, it didn’t seem like Rover knew what to do, then his eyes hardened and he opted to stand his ground. “I’m not your bitch, Dionysus. And I’m not going to leave you alone with her, especially not with you half out of your mind like this.”

As if to prove his point, Rover twisted, snaking his arm around her waist.

Reece’s eyes turned red. Bright, glowing, stoplight red. They were like beacons shooting out of his skull, and the temperature in the room skyrocketed. He took a single step forward and the ground shook, the plates and cups in the cabinets starting to clatter.

“The room is shaking.” It was a stupid thing to say—because, yeah, obviously—but it was all Piper could manage. Even that came out toneless and bland.

Yet it seemed to immediately catch the attention of both males. Their gazes latching onto her at once, so that she felt trapped between them and the desires playing behind their eyes. Different wants, but overbearing all the same.

“Princess,” Reece lifted a hand and curled his fingers at her, the struggle it took him to do that was apparent in the way his body vibrated, “come to me.”

Rover wanted to protect her, whether out of duty or because they’d once been friends. But that’s all he wanted. Sure, there was probably a little bit of pride in his resistance as well, the need to stand firm before the god

and not cower. That had nothing to do with Piper, though, and everything to do with his own feelings.

That wasn't the case with Reece. He was dangerous, deadly, and was doing nothing to try and mask that fact. Rover was right, he was still covered in the blood of his maenads, though most of it had dried by now, turning dark and rusty colored. His hair was in disarray and his breathing was labored. He was a wild thing, a predator, and he wanted her.

Not out of some sense of responsibility, either. His want was primeval. Pure, unencumbered. Real.

She'd been so afraid moments ago that he was going to hate her. It was lust she saw in his eyes, and not just of the carnal variety. She didn't question how she knew that. Didn't want to.

Piper slid off the stool, catching Rover off guard by the looks of it, because he didn't pull her back fast enough. She swatted his hand away when he grasped the back of her shirt, not bothering to take her eyes off of the god beckoning her. Unable to, really.

There was something about that glow, the broad stretch of his shoulders, and the way he was silently calling out to her that sent sparks flying and skittering over her skin. He lured her closer, waiting while she slowly made her way one step at a time across the tile.

Rover swore at her back, grabbed her again, this time around one of her damaged wrists. Her cry of pain snapped her out of it, and he quickly adjusted his hold so that he could inspect the cut he'd accidentally squeezed.

Not that he had much time. Reece was there, forcefully detaching the Reaper from her. He sent him crashing into the kitchen table, angling himself defensively in front of Piper afterward.

The table snapped under Rover's weight, and he dropped down with it, sheets of paper fluttering around him. He was shocked for a moment, sitting there in the wreckage, and then the fury swept over him. In a blur he was back on his feet, self-preservation the only thing keeping him from attacking.

He was a Reaper. Reece was a god. There was no competition.

"She's coming with me," he stated, baring his teeth in the process. "Piper, let's go."

At first no one moved, then Reece shifted to the side, just enough that she could get a look at her old friend. The offer was clear, even though

he didn't voice it. If she wanted to leave, Reece wouldn't stop her.

Which pretty much settled what she'd already known. She wasn't going anywhere.

Carefully, she rested a hand against his forearm, meeting Rover's wide eyes. "You should probably take off."

"Piper—"

"I'm fine."

"No." He shook his head vehemently. "No way. Look at him! He's got more blood on him than you've seen your entire life!"

Piper flinched. "You don't know me well enough to make a claim like that."

"Listen to her, Reaper," Reece urged. "Before it's too late."

"He's threatening me," Rover waved at him, "and you're just going to let him?"

"You're a big boy," Piper said. Truthfully, she did feel a little bad that she wasn't defending him, that she didn't feel the need to. But he'd been the one insisting there was nothing between them anymore. He couldn't have it both ways.

Rover straightened, anger practically spilling off of him in waves. He turned his attention to Reece and said threateningly, "Hadrian will hear about this."

Reece didn't give him a reaction.

"I'm coming back for you," the Reaper promised her next, and then he vanished, leaving her alone in the kitchen with the furious god and the broken kitchen table.

Chapter 15:

“Reece.” Piper turned to him.

“No,” he bit out harshly. “No talking.”

Before she could argue, she was in his arms, flush against his chest with her hands trapped between them. His mouth captured hers, tongue invading, spearing against her own. It was a brutal kiss, demanding and punishing, stripping her down until all of her senses were exposed.

The space around her tilted, and when he pulled back long enough for her to open her eyes, it was to find they were no longer downstairs.

He’d brought them to the bathroom, resting her small back against the counter of the sink while his hands roamed over her. They trailed from the backs of her shoulders, careful not to press against the wounds there, then lightly down. Once he’d reached her fingers, he dropped to his knees, palming the backs of her legs where her muscles ached from hitting the ground. He brought them down toward her feet, taking extra care with the spot on her thigh.

Everywhere he went her skin began to knit itself back together, healing with his touch. Her body tingled, warmed and flushed beneath his strokes, until there wasn’t even a hint of lingering pain, only desire.

Finally, he got back to his feet, shifting closer to crowd her back against the sink. Then he took her head, palming the cut there gently. As he healed it, he kept her eyes trapped with his own, that multi-colored glow still going on.

She wanted to ask him about what had taken place at the Vixens home, but knew her questions wouldn’t be well received right now. Almost like he sensed the turn of her thoughts, he pressed nearer, rubbing his erection against her abdomen, forcing her to feel how hard he was for her.

The second her skull was healed, he pulled away, quickly moving to turn on the shower. He adjusted the water temperature, and then spun back. Unlike the last few times they’d had sex, he didn’t bother asking her to remove her clothes, merely tore them from her body himself.

Once she was naked, he made short work of his own, dropping the ruined bundle absently to the floor. Taking her up in his arms, he brought

them into the shower, directly under the spray.

Piper jumped a little at the slight burn of hot water, but he didn't give her much time for distraction, his mouth on hers before her feet even hit the floor. He ravished her, pushing her against the slick wall, tugging on her hair to get her head to tip back and give him a better angle.

It was nothing like what they'd done in there this morning, he didn't take his time, or give her room to breathe. She was too gone to care. Overwhelmed by the solid feel of him, all hard muscle and steely strength. Water cascaded down his back, dampening his hair, washing away the blood that clung to both of their skin.

Reece reached down and flicked her clit, once, twice. Then he thrust a thick finger inside of her, letting out a satisfied purr when he found her already soaked for him.

Without another word, he produced a condom seemingly out of thin air, sheathing himself with it faster than she could process. He gripped her beneath her thighs, pulling her wide and lifting her up. She barely had enough time to steady herself with hands on his shoulders before he drove himself deep into her.

They moaned at the same time, the sound spearing him on, making him lose the last thread of control. He pounded into her, keeping her pinned between him and the wall as the water cascaded around them.

She tightened her legs around his waist, needing him just as desperately. Her thighs stung where his fingers dug, and she could already picture the bruises he'd no doubt leave behind. Instead of upsetting her, she felt another rush of heat between them. The idea that someone could want her this badly, enough to lose their minds over her, was thrilling.

She'd been alone for so long.

Reece buried his face against the curve of her neck, panting against her skin. When she tipped to the side, giving him better access, his mouth latched onto that spot below her ear and he sucked in time with his thrusts.

She felt herself nearing the edge, that almost painful ache of pleasure building up inside. A gasp escaped her when he angled his hips, stroking deep and hard so that the tip of him hit that bundle of nerves inside. Her vision started to waver, and her nails raked down his shoulders, around to his back to pull him closer.

He forced a hand between them, reached down and pressed a single finger against her clit. That was all it took to send her over.

She exploded around him, muscles clenching as he continued to move, chasing his own orgasm. She was still seeing stars when he did a second later, feeling him come hot and hard, buried so deep she didn't know where she stopped and he began.

A moment passed where she couldn't move, couldn't feel her body. He kept her up against the wall with the weight of his own, but his face was still against the crook of her neck, breaths whooshing out of him like he'd run a marathon.

Absently, Piper began running her hands over his skin, helping to scrub off the remaining blood there. As she worked, she felt him come back to himself, the tell-tale sign when he started to stiffen around her. Still, she didn't let it deter her, moving down to his wrists, then lightly urging him back so that she could rub the spot beneath his throat.

He watched her as she trailed lower, over places his shirt would have prevented blood from getting, but didn't stop her. She didn't look back, not wanting to disrupt whatever this was between them.

When she'd successfully touched all of him—twice—she patted at the center of his chest, silently ordering he let her down.

With only a slight hesitation he did as asked, gently easing her to her feet. He kept staring as she ducked under the spray, making short work of any red stains still marring her own body. She turned off the shower, stepped out and grabbed a towel.

He was still standing where she'd left him, and she motioned him out. Once he was in front of her, she brought the towel against his skin, using it to dry all of the areas she'd just felt with her bare hands. She ran it over his chest, down his sides, up both arms. She even got down and dried his legs, careful to avoid his already hardening cock. Then she lifted onto her toes and wrapped the towel around him to dry his back, the move causing her breasts to rub against him.

Ignoring the flood of desire between her thighs, Piper finished the job, then dried herself with less than half the effort she'd just used on him.

Next, she took his hand, leading him from the bathroom into the room they'd shared last night. Outside, the sky was dark, casting the room in murky shadows. She brought him to one side of the bed, waiting for him to slide in.

He did so, already reaching for her as he moved to make room, wrapping her tightly in his arms. The embrace was different as well,

desperate in another sense of the word. Almost like he was afraid she'd disappear on him. Like it mattered that she didn't.

She shifted a leg between them, felt his cock press against her. He was fully erect and hot to the touch. She shivered before she could help it, anticipation racing through her veins. It was like her body had already forgotten what they'd done less than ten minutes ago.

"Piper," the needy way he whispered her name in the dark had her stilling. She waited as he seemed to debate with whether or not to continue, then he took a stuttering breath. "Make me forget."

It was a plea, one that shot straight to her heart. Tears threatened but she forced them back, knowing they'd be useless in a time like this. Instead, she pulled away from him, gently shushing when he went to force her back. Taking his hands, she kissed his knuckles one at a time, reassuring him she wasn't going anywhere.

She knew where his face was due to the low glowing of his eyes, saw when he closed them. Setting his arms aside, she shifted over him, balancing on her knees as she lowered to press her lips against the curve of his square jaw. Upon contact, he shuddered beneath her, all that solid male reacting to her. It was exhilarating, so she did it again.

Piper trailed soft kisses down his neck, across the space between his throat and shoulder. She was tempted to lap at him, nip him playfully like he'd done to her the night before, but held herself back. This wasn't about lust, she was smart enough to recognize that.

It was about comfort, and after what he'd done for her tonight, she owed him that. So she shoved her own desires aside, concentrating on making him writhe under her smaller form as she continued with the light press of lips against skin. When she came to that trail of dark hairs she applied more pressure, lingering a little longer each time.

Then she reached her destination, settled herself more comfortably between his spread legs. His cock jutted toward her and he shifted his hips slightly, just enough for the silent beg to be apparent.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd given a blowjob, it'd certainly been a while, and not with anyone even remotely as large as Reece was. So she started slow, kissing the tip of him the same way she had the rest of his body, causing him to let out a slow, needy moan that had her pussy responding.

Despite her reaction, this was for him, and she lowered, rolling her tongue around him. She traced his head, licked over the drop of pre-cum leaking from him. Wrapping one hand around his base, her other moved to cup his balls, weighing them in her palm as she took more of him into her mouth.

Reece swore, and when she glanced up she found him pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes as if in agony.

She eased over halfway down his length and sucked, watching him while she did.

His hips sprung off the bed, forcing her to take more of him so that she had to work her throat muscles to prevent choking.

She pulled back, all the way to the end, almost letting him slip free from her mouth.

That was the final straw for him. Reece's hands were buried in her hair a split second later, urging her down even as he pumped his cock into her mouth. He stretched her lips, slicking himself with her saliva as he pulled back and repeated the move.

Piper didn't mind, relishing the salty taste of him coating her tongue, the power she felt knowing this was what she did to him. She picked up speed, sucking him deep while she continued to fondle his balls. She bobbed up and down on him, listening to his grunts as she pushed him closer and closer to implosion.

She felt it a moment before it happened, his whole body tightening right before the climax hit him. Warm ropes of come gushed onto her tongue and she swallowed him down, kept moving over him until she was sure he was spent.

His body collapsed onto the bed, their mutual pants and the distinct smell of sex filling the air.

Piper crawled back up his body, smiling when his arm banded around her and he pulled her close. Half of her sprawled over him, her head resting on his shoulder. Beneath the hand over his heart, she felt the telling thrum.

She'd done that. She'd set his heart racing and had gotten him off. She arched into him and he gave a satisfied rumble to make the feeling sweeping through her grow.

He began tracing patterns against her hip, lazily trailing the tips of his fingers over her smooth skin. His eyes were closed again, and he

seemed content to just lay there. Silence settled around them, comfortably encasing.

He'd taken her hard in the shower, it'd been about trying to fuck the feelings away. But this...what she'd done to him here, that had been about acceptance. About taking something awful and coming to grips with it. Being soothed, so the pain you acknowledged didn't hurt so much.

"Melisandre has been with me since 1704," Reece's voice trickled through the darkness, confirming her thoughts. "She lusted new lands. She wanted the freedom to travel the world. She wanted it so badly, I remember feeling her lust from across the ocean. Juniper was 1956. Her greatest lust was revenge against her abusive father. I felt her so strongly I ended up staying to watch. She was one of my favorites."

Piper didn't have to ask to know he was talking about the maenad whose heart he'd removed.

"Kara was born during the Black Plague. She lost her entire family in the same week. She was the only survivor. She lusted life. The opportunity to travel and see what was out there. To escape." He swallowed, proof that this was hard for him. "She had an affinity for white chocolate and afternoons in the French Quarter."

"That's in New Orleans?" she asked.

"Yes. Have you ever been?"

"No." She hadn't visited many places. Her only goal had been to escape her fate. Everything after that had been about survival.

"I'll take you," he said, and it sounded so definitive, she didn't bother pressing. He grew somber once more. "I didn't have a choice. I tried to break the hypnosis but it wasn't working. They weren't coming out of it." His voice shook. "I killed six of them tonight."

She squeezed her eyes shut, preparing for the resentment he'd no doubt be feeling toward her. "I'm so sorry."

Resentment was nothing new to her. Paul had felt it whenever she'd bested him in anything. Rover had felt it whenever she complained about having to train, because he'd viewed it as her shirking her duties. Her parents had pretty much felt it twenty-four-seven. If she did too well, they had to coddle her brother. If she didn't do well enough, they lectured her about how she wouldn't be useful enough to help protect the pithos.

At least this time, that resentment would be earned. Perhaps if she hadn't run, if she'd just sucked it up and stayed, Reece wouldn't have been

forced to take those lives today. If Piper had merely been there to aid Paul, Orpheus may never have gotten the jar. All of this could possibly have been avoided.

“Hey.” He took her chin between his fingers, tilted her head back so she was looking at him. “I don’t blame you, Princess. It wasn’t your fault.”

“But they’re dead because of me.”

“You never asked me to do that,” his gaze sharpened, “it was my choice to protect you over them. The only one who needs to pay for their deaths is Orpheus. And he will. He’ll feel my pain, Piper. When I take away the one thing he lusts for most, he’ll feel it.”

The breath caught in her throat and for the first time since meeting him she felt a lick of fear. There was so much anger in him, volatile and raw. If he turned that on her, she’d be helpless against it.

You’re helpless now.

Wrong. She was in control. To prove it, she forced herself to breathe, to resetttle against him as if she hadn’t just seen the murder in his glowing eyes.

“What does he lust for?” They needed to know, not just so he could make the musician pay. Maybe that would help them figure out his next move. They were running out of time, she could feel it. The longer her brother was out there with the pithos, the more chance of Orpheus opening it.

And unleashing hell on earth.

“I’m not sure,” he heaved, “yet. But I’ll find out.”

“Do you think he still wants me?” She frowned. “If so, he wasn’t going to receive me intact.” Not with the way those maenads had torn into her. Recalling, she touched the place on her thigh where only a few hours ago she’d been wounded.

“They didn’t use any venom,” Reece told her. “That gives the impression they were tasked with taking you alive. We just need to know why. What could he possibly want you for?”

“Maybe he wants this.” She trailed her fingers down the line of hair on his lower abdomen, lifting a brow when he grabbed her hand.

“That’s not even remotely entertaining,” he said, clearly angered by the thought.

It really wasn’t, but all of these unanswered questions made her nervous, made her feel helpless. She did not like that feeling, especially not

so soon after experiencing the type of power and control she just had giving him that orgasm.

Wait a second...

Piper pushed herself up, only getting into a partial sitting position before his arm kept her from going any further. "Eurydice."

"What?"

"Eurydice," she repeated. "He wants her back, he has to."

"We checked already," Reece said, "she's still in the Underworld."

"Exactly." She was certain she was on the right track. "She's there and he's here. Again. The last time that happened he broke into the Underworld and made a deal with the god of the dead. What's to say he isn't going to try something just as desperate this time around?"

Reece's brow furrowed, but he sat up as well, that arm still banded around her waist to keep her close, almost like he didn't realize he was doing it. He thought it over a moment, clearly trying to work out all of the possibilities.

"Hadrian would never allow that," he decided a second later. "He wouldn't let himself be tricked again."

"So Orpheus finds another way," she shrugged, unwilling to give up her theory, "one that doesn't involve convincing Hadrian. Think about it. Love like that doesn't just fade. He wants her, I know it."

"There's only one problem with that," he told her, "it wasn't love."

Now she was the one confused. "What?"

"Orpheus can hypnotize people with his music, remember? Well, when he met Eurydice, he became infatuated. It quickly turned into obsession, so that when she refused him, he was unwilling to accept her choice. He used his abilities against her, getting her to act the way he wanted. His control was so strong not even I realized it was fake. I thought what they had was real. But it wasn't."

"So Eurydice..."

"Never loved him," he confirmed. "She's terrified of him, in fact."

"That's disgusting." Horrified, she brushed a damp strand of hair off her face. "How the hell did Hadrian let him go to the Elysian Fields knowing that?"

"He didn't," Reece said. "Like I said, it was convincing. For everyone. We only discovered the truth a couple hundred years ago. Eurydice begged Hadrian not to let on that we knew, insisted that he leave

Orpheus where he'd initially placed him. Hadrian didn't like it, but...He was hoping to wear her down. From what I was told, he's been building a special cell in Tartarus with Orpheus's name on it. It was just a matter of time."

"But then he escaped."

"Yes." He clenched his jaw.

"That doesn't change the fact," Piper insisted. "There has to be a way Orpheus can get her out of the Underworld, a way that somehow involves the pithos and my family. It's the only thing that makes any type of sense, Reece."

"I have to agree," he sighed. "There were other sins still trapped in the jar, one of them may have an ability that could be helpful with that."

When Pandora opened it, only seven sins slipped through before it was closed again. No one knew the exact number of prisoners still trapped inside. Despite the fact the embodiments of the seven, the Seven Deadlies, were supposedly not evil incarnate, letting out others from the pithos was too risky.

"What about the maenads?" she asked, desperate for a solution. "Could they do it?"

He shook his head. "They can talk to the dead, but can't physically enter the Underworld without an invitation. Even then, they certainly can't leave with a soul."

"But Reapers could." Piper nibbled on her bottom lip. "Can he hypnotize them?"

Reece grimaced. "Of course. I'd like to think Hadrian prepared for something like that, though."

"And if he didn't?"

He dropped back down onto the bed with an annoyed groan, dragging her on top of him in the process. Once she was safely back in his hold, resting against his chest, he blew out another frustrated breath.

"Tomorrow I'll go talk to him," he said. When she opened her mouth to argue, he clucked his tongue. "Tomorrow, Princess. Rome wasn't built in a day."

Despite her eagerness, she chuckled against him. "That's hilarious coming from Bacchus. Tell me, because now I'm seriously curious, how many days exactly did it take to build it?"

He pinched her side lightly, tickling her more than anything, then swooped down and covered her mouth with his, swallowing the rest of her laughter.

Chapter 16:

Reece swept a gaze around the living room, carefully checking each of the eight maenads situated there.

He'd done a thorough inspection before allowing them to enter the house, not really having a choice in the matter. Putting Piper in further jeopardy didn't sit right with him, but yesterday's events needed to be discussed in person. He'd only invited a few of his generals, because they needed to hear about the Vixens from him.

Piper had sat in the corner of the room, giving them all a respectable amount of space as he described the attack, and what resulted from it. They'd known already that Orpheus was using his lyre to manipulate them, but now they had a clear picture of the effects. He was sending them into a frenzy, like the *bakkheia*, only without the limits Reece provided when he sent them there himself.

They weren't acting on their own desires, for instance, that much was apparent, especially since they'd openly attacked Reece. They hadn't held back, either. If he hadn't done something, they would have kept trying to tear him apart piece by piece.

The discussion over what to do took almost five hours total, and by the end of it, he was exhausted. It'd been a long time since he'd lost someone—even longer since that someone's death had been executed by his own hand. Losing that many maenads all at once was devastating. But he didn't have the luxury of wallowing. No, that pain he could feel later. Right now, he had to stay focused to ensure the rest of his people didn't suffer the same fate.

"So, that's the plan?" Piper asked once he'd dismissed the meeting and he made a beeline for her. She'd remained silent the entire time, watching them all closely.

The maenads flashed away around them, heading to the designated safe house he'd established. From there, they'd contact the rest and give them the news about the Vixens, the advanced threat level, and implement a few new safety rules.

“We just pray the buddy system works in our favor and nothing bad happens to anyone else?” She scrunched up her face in displeasure. “I didn’t realize we’d fallen into a children’s book with Happily Ever After’s and wishful thinking built on wishes that really come true.”

“You’re being a tad cynical,” he finally reached her, propping one hand against the wall over her head, the other on the back of the couch by her shoulder, blocking her in, “don’t you think, Princess?”

“Actually,” she corrected, “I think you’re being a bit delusional.”

“You think I’m too cocky?” He arched a brow. “We’ve been taking care of ourselves for—”

“Yes,” she waved him off, her frustration evident, “I get that. But you’ve never had to fight your own before, Reece. You can’t tell me this isn’t different. What’s going to happen if more of them get hypnotized?”

She knew what was going to happen, because he’d just got done warning his generals about it. If he couldn’t break the hypnosis, there was only one other option...Even the thought of killing another of his own made his stomach twist and snake into tight knots. But he wouldn’t have any other choice, and neither would the rest of the maenads.

“They know what they have to do,” he said. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“That’s risky.”

“Everything about this is risky, Piper.” He pulled back, ran an agitated hand through his hair. “There aren’t any other options. I spoke to Hadrian this morning and, even though he’d already spoken to Eurydice, he agrees Orpheus trying to get to her is looking more and more like his only goal. And as you pointed out last night, Reapers have direct access to souls and the gates leading out of the Underworld.”

If Orpheus got a hold of a Ferryman, he could easily hypnotize them into doing his bidding. And once he had Eurydice? Who knew what the next part of his plan was. Probably opening the pithos.

“He’s had to call his Reapers off the hunt,” he continued. “Which leaves the maenads. If they don’t search, no one will. The fact that he’s been out over a week and only seven of them have been affected by him so far means it isn’t easy for him to get in their heads. It’s the tolerance they built up over the years with me. Now that they’re all aware of the stakes, hopefully they’ll be even more determined to fight against it should they find him.”

They were all under strict orders not to approach Orpheus anyway. If there was an opportunity to safely grab the pithos, they were to do so, but otherwise they needed to immediately call Reece.

Back at the club, he'd been focused on trying not to hurt her brother's body. Now, he wasn't so sure if being careful was worth the risk. It was something he'd need to speak with Piper about, but not yet. She needed more time and so did he, to figure out the best way to bring it up. The best way to tell her that her brother might be too far gone for them to save.

"Hadrian's given us permission to contact Eurydice," he said, and some of her unease over their situation returned. He watched it spark behind her dark eyes and felt the breath catch in his throat. Damn, but she was beautiful.

Focus, asshole.

Right.

"When do we go?" She got to her feet and when he didn't make room for her to pass, paused. "What?"

"Unfortunately, Hadrian's taken steps of his own to ensure the safety of his people as well. He's not allowing anyone other than a god or Reaper to enter or exit the Underworld. There's a way we can talk to her without having to travel below. So that's what we're going to have to do."

Piper seemed surprised, gaze roaming across his face, searching for something. He couldn't understand why she seemed nervous all of a sudden, but found he didn't like the idea of her being so in front of him.

He wanted her trust, because somehow over the course of the short time they'd had together, she'd earned his.

Fuck, that's why they were revisiting this Eurydice option, after all. Both he and Hadrian had decided in the beginning that there was no way for Orpheus to come for her—the Elysian Fields were next to impossible to enter without an explicit invitation, and as a soul, if he even reentered the Underworld Hadrian would feel it and return him to where he belonged. That was before the musician had gotten his hands on an instrument and proven them wrong on another front.

They'd assumed his ability would have diminished along with his physical form. It really didn't make sense that he was able to spin manipulations with song while in another person's body. And yet, clearly he was more than capable.

They shouldn't be too shocked, his gift was unique and therefore there was no basis of comparison when it came to how it reacted after life. Hadrian hadn't wanted to test it out while Orpheus had been in the Underworld, so he'd ensured the soul never got his hands on a lyre while there.

Perhaps that'd been a mistake. At least if he'd run an experiment they'd have known what Orpheus could still do without having to find out through bloodshed.

"You aren't just going to go talk to her without me?" Piper said, and he frowned at her.

"Why would I do that?"

"Because you can get in and I can't? Because it's the Underworld and it's dangerous? Because—"

"I'm going to stop you right there." He stepped up and took her arms. "I wouldn't do this without you, especially seeing as how talking to her was your idea. We're in this together, Piper. If I haven't already made that clear, I'm sorry. This affects both of us, and I wouldn't cut you out. And, sure, the Underworld does happen to be pretty dangerous." He smiled. "But so are you."

She was silent a moment, seemingly taking in his words, and then murmured almost to herself, "Badass Anesidora."

"The badest of asses," he agreed, turning her partially so that he could sneak a playful peek at her rear-end. When she slapped him, he laughed, pleased to see whatever strange mood she'd been in seconds ago was gone now.

She rolled her eyes and then leaned up onto her tiptoes. It was his turn to be surprised when she planted a chaste, almost friendly kiss to his lips before dropping back down to the balls of her feet.

"What was that for?" he asked, a bit breathlessly. Reece had been kissed a lot of different ways, but all of them had been dirty, lust-filled exchanges. The last time a person had placed their lips on him in a non-carnal way she'd been his mother.

And it wasn't that Piper didn't want him, he could feel her attraction even now, shimmering beneath the surface, but that's not why she'd done it. She hadn't been trying to get him into her bed with the move. It'd been sweet, unencumbered by ulterior motives. Even though she hadn't meant it

to start anything, all he could suddenly think about was tossing her over his shoulder and whisking them back upstairs.

Or, better yet, pushing her back down to the couch to have his wicked way with her right here...

"No one's ever treated me like an equal before," she told him, and her comment immediately morphed the flames in his gut to something else. Something that burned slower, longer.

Comfortably.

It was an altogether odd sensation, and he wasn't sure how he felt about feeling it.

"Paul was always more important than I was growing up," she added, wringing her hands. "He needed the most attention because he was going to be in charge one day. Rover was my friend, but he was also Paul and my trainer, and my brother needed more help than I did."

Hearing her talk about the Reaper caused jealousy to rear up inside of him. He had to clench his fists tightly at his sides to keep from breaking something, struggling to maintain an outward cool so she didn't notice how possessive he'd become.

He hated the thought of the Reaper touching her. Absolutely loathed the idea that once, he'd been her only source of comfort. Of friendship. That she'd pined over him, even considered herself in love. There was no way the dick deserved any of that from her. He wasn't even remotely good enough.

And you are?

"You're strong, Piper," he told her, wanting out of his spiraling thoughts. "You survived two separate maenad attacks. That never happens. My girls are ruthless."

"I only got away because you were there," she stated, but the corner of her mouth turned up to show she wasn't bitter about it. She seemed grateful, which was a major stroke to his ego. It was nice to see that her pride wasn't damaged due to the fact she'd needed help. *His* help.

Which was another reason it burned him to think that a part of her was still letting the Reaper's actions dictate her emotions.

"The Reaper is a moron," he said, continuing quickly when she opened her mouth to stop him. "He is. He's an asshole, and I hate him. However, he also saw you grow up. Helped raise you...Piper, I know it

hurts, but you can't really blame him for not reciprocating your feelings like that. It's his loss, don't get me wrong, it totally sucks to be him, but..."

"The fact that he was probably in the house the night I was conceived is a major buzz kill?" She let out a humorless chuckle and hid her face behind her clasped hands. "I know. Logically, I've always known that. I never hated him for it. It was just, he was all I had, and I couldn't make my feelings go away."

Reece reached up and gently circled his fingers around her wrists. Easing her hands away, he waited for her to open her eyes and look at him. He licked his lips, stalling, trying to decide if he really wanted to ask the question that'd been racing through his mind like a cancer since he'd walked in on them in the kitchen.

"And now?" He tried to keep his tone conversational, but was pretty sure he failed. "Do you still want him?"

Piper took a moment to think it over, and it was the longest five seconds of his immortal life.

"No," she said, and he blew out the breath he'd been holding. "I'm not attracted to him anymore. He can't give me what I want. What I need."

Alarm bells started ringing in his head—because, what could he give her, really? Nothing long term—but he didn't want to jump to conclusions. She wasn't necessarily insinuating anything more than what they already had going on between them. The sex was phenomenal, and they made each other laugh.

Reece was almost certain the Reaper had exactly zero funny bones in his useless body.

A jingle filled the air, and for a split second he thought it was just those damn alarms in his mind, but then she pulled away and took out the cell phone in her back pocket.

Piper frowned down at the screen.

"Who is it?" he asked, clearing his throat. Gathering his wits.

"Unknown number." She debated and then hit the accept button, bringing the device to her ear. "Hello?"

Worry gripped him when her chocolate eyes went wide, when her mouth dropped open and she stilled like a deer in headlights. He wanted to snatch the device away and find out who was on the other line himself, but refrained.

He was abso-fucking-lutely losing it.

Piper listened and then nodded her head. Realizing the person on the other end couldn't see, she managed to croak out an, "Okay", and then she was hanging up. She stared down at the phone as if the thing was going to come alive and leap for her face.

"Hey," he covered it, blocking it from view with a large hand, "what's going on?"

"That was..." She took a shaky breath, squared her shoulders. "That was my mom. She wants me to come home. Says there's something I have to know, something she and my dad need to tell me."

"What could it be?" He didn't like it. Her parents had no right to summon her after years of silence. From what Piper had told him, they hadn't even bothered trying to find her. Just let their eighteen year old daughter go off by herself into a world she hardly knew. One they were very aware was filled with demons and other shady sorts.

Like yourself, for example?

Shut up.

"I have no idea." She shook her head. "But I have to go, don't I? If there's even a chance this could help us find Paul and the pithos, we need to know, right?"

It was her referral of them as a 'we' that cooled the lingering anger within him. "When did they suggest you be there?"

"Tomorrow morning," she sounded unsure, despite her instance they go.

"Well," he slipped his hands around her waist, easing her closer as he spoke, "we can't contact Eurydice for another two days, and there's no rush for us to travel to your parent's place because I can flash, so..."

The second she caught onto where he was going with this, her eyes heated. She circled her arms around his neck, pulling herself snugly against him in the process so that he could feel the tight peaks of her nipples against his chest.

"Want to spend the rest of our day in bed?" she prompted, smirking up at him with that lush mouth. Reminding him what it'd looked like wrapped around his dick.

"No," before she could get disappointed, he gripped her a little harder and began backing her up. When her thighs hit the couch, he allowed them to tumble, careful not to crush her beneath his weight. "Let's start here."

* * *

“Ready for this?” Reece watched a range of emotions play across Piper’s face. Most of them negative. He hated that she felt this way about her childhood home, that the thought of seeing her parents again made her worried and nervous.

His relationship with his parents—his second set, anyway—was amazing. Hell, his love for his mother had gotten him in serious shit in the past even. Because of his maenads and their ability to communicate with the deceased, he was still able to talk to her, and he cherished their monthly conversations.

You’ll have to cut this month’s short.

That was true, but they needed to talk to Eurydice, and that could only be done during the full moon. His mom would understand. Besides, they had an eternity for monthly chats. What was one shorted or missed month in the grand scheme of things?

Still, he was seriously hoping he wouldn’t miss it altogether. That there would still be enough time after speaking with Orpheus’s ex-wife for the maenads to contact Semele. And if they didn’t...well, it would suck but she’d understand his reasoning. Keeping the pithos locked up was important.

“Sure,” Piper answered, shifting on her feet, “why not.”

“You don’t sound sure,” he pointed out, then linked their fingers together. “I’ll be here the whole time.”

She squeezed his hand and smiled over at him. “Thank you.”

Taking one last breath, she started for the front porch of the two-story she’d grown up in. From the outside, it looked painfully normal. White house, blue shutters, emerald green lawn...There was even a white picket fence, which Reece had almost gagged upon seeing. Nothing about the typical place screamed Piper Anesidora to him. It was no wonder she’d left as soon as she’d been able.

Then again, that was the point. Everything about their family, including their house and the non-flashy minivan and Chevy Corolla parked in the driveway, had to appear normal. Their goal was to blend in, so that no one ever guessed there was something going on with them. Like that they had powers and guarded Pandora’s Box—as well as a few other dangerous items.

Reece wouldn't mind getting a peek into that closet.

At the door, Piper hesitated, clearly unsure whether or not to knock or just go right in. She settled on the first, her fist making a light tapping sound against the navy blue wood. Then she took a deliberate step back, eyes glued ahead.

Before Reece could think of something comforting to say, the door swung open and an older gentleman with the same dark hair as Piper stood before them. He was wearing a pair of frameless glasses, and a gray sweater and jeans. When he saw Piper, the crinkles at the corner of his eyes became apparent, though the smile he gave was close-lipped.

"Hi, Dad," she said, waving her free hand at him awkwardly.

Without a word, her father turned to Reece, expression darkening. "I assume you're Dionysus."

One guess who he'd been talking to.

"Reece," Piper spoke up for him. "He goes by Reece this century, Dad."

He felt a swell of pride hit him, knew that both of the Anesidora's picked up on it when they each sent sideways glances his way. Either her father was too polite to point it out, or too embarrassed by the fact he wasn't feeling it for his daughter himself.

"Well, come inside." Her dad stepped back, making room. When Reece passed him his eyes narrowed in warning, but the god only chuckled.

He'd promised Piper he'd play nice before flashing them here, so he reigned himself in as much as he was able. Fact was, he already disliked these people, which amazingly had more to do with how much he cared about their daughter and less about their last name. Having her father try to intimidate him? It wasn't helping. It was more laughable than anything, really.

They didn't have the pithos. Which meant they couldn't use anything against him.

Inside the foyer was spotless. A potted plant sat in the corner by a coat rack, and a small table with a glass bowl in the center for keys was against the opposite wall, directly in front of the wooden staircase. The living room was to their left, and that's where her father directed them, though they didn't linger.

He moved on through the open archway at the other end, bringing them into a dining room with a medium-sized table that seated six. There

was no one there, and he moved past that as well, to yet another attached room, this one the kitchen.

Which was where her mother and the Reaper were waiting for them.

Piper didn't look anything like her mother. The older woman had light blond hair which she'd pulled back into a tight ponytail, and stern gray eyes. Her mouth was pressed in a thin line, and she was dressed in a loose white blouse and light purple pants. She looked like she should be out gardening, not meeting with an ancient god to discuss the possible end of the world.

Her arms were crossed over her chest, and she made no moves toward Piper when they entered. Though she took her in, hopefully checking to see if her daughter was all right, there was no motherly love in the look.

"Those are cute," Reece lifted his chin toward the crossed scythe's visible over the Reaper's shoulders.

Rover was standing in front of the refrigerator, blocking the only other exit which led into a hallway. He also had his arms folded, but was dressed in black leather and openly scowling. The blade parts of the short-handled scythe's poked over his shoulders, so that they almost looked like small metal wings. In the old days, most Reaper's would carry them, just like that, a match to the tattoo that adorned their necks.

"I can't believe you brought him here, Piper," Rover stated, though he didn't tear his gaze off of Reece.

"Can't you?" If they thought he'd let her come alone, they were insane.

"You said you had something to tell me?" Even though he knew it was hard for her, Piper kept her hand in his and lifted her chin pointedly.

He could feel that she was shaking a little, but it wasn't visible. Part of him wanted to attack her parents for putting her through this, for making her this worried and anxious. Sure, he understood they probably felt betrayed, like she'd deserted them, and in some sense she had, but still. She was their kid. He'd done way crazier things to his parents and they'd loved him all the same.

And they hadn't even been blood-related.

"That's all you have to say for yourself?" her mother asked, and he wondered if she'd sounded like that on the phone yesterday.

“I’m not sure there’s anything else I can say,” Piper said tentatively. “I tried to call a couple times over the years, but you kept hanging up on me.”

Rover frowned at them. “She what?”

“You made your position in this family clear,” her mother waved the Reaper off. “I told you that first time that unless you were planning on coming home, we couldn’t have contact with you. Doing so would have put us all at risk. Who knows how careful you were being out there, on your own.”

“So you were worried she’d expose you?” Reece narrowed his eyes. “That’s why you wouldn’t have contact with her? Wow. That is some seriously fucked up parenting.”

“Don’t speak to us like that,” her father snapped. “You don’t know —”

“I know more than you do,” he cut him off. “I’ve lived more lifetimes than even the start of your line. I walked the earth before the dawn of man, hell, before the dinosaurs. When the first two organisms sprung into existence, there was me. I came with creation, I spanned universes. I’ve seen and experienced more good and more evil than your tiny little mortal brain could even comprehend. So when I tell you you’re a crap parent? Believe me.”

“Reece.” Piper rested her other hand on his wrist, holding him more tightly. She wasn’t angered by his harsh words, however, which for some strange reason helped him relax.

He needed to remember that she could defend herself, and that maybe despite all the obvious reasons not to, she was hoping to form a new connection with these people. They were her family, whether or not they treated her the way one should.

“They aren’t the only ones to blame here,” she told him softly, and he saw the guilt in her eyes.

He wanted to cup her cheek, comfort her with his touch, but holding hands was already giving away too much. He didn’t want to broadcast what they were to one another.

And just what are you?

He ignored that.

“Preston, Nicole,” Rover took control of the conversation, “you brought her here for a reason. Tell her, before this goes any further. You two

aren't exactly in the position to judge at the moment."

Her father *would* have a pretentious name like Preston.

"Fine," Nicole cleared her throat, "the sooner it's out there, the faster we can move on to the bunker and solve this issue with the pithos."

"There's something you don't know, Piper," her father said, holding her gaze. "Something about your brother. We never told either of you because it didn't make a lick of difference to us, but now, given the circumstances, we've agreed it's pertinent information."

"Especially seeing as how it could help explain why Orpheus is after you," Rover added.

Reece felt Piper stiffen at his side. When she rested wary eyes on the Reaper, he had to remind himself of their conversation. She wasn't interested in him anymore. There was no reason for him to be jealous.

Yeah, easier said than done.

"Paul isn't an Anesidora, Piper," Nicole stated, and this time Reece felt the shockwaves just as sharply as the woman at his side did.

"What?" her voice shook so badly, it was hard to make the single word out.

Her father sighed, dropped his gaze to the tiled floor. And then completely shattered their world.

"He's adopted."

Reece watched as Piper's eyes began to glow a pale red.

Chapter 17:

Piper felt like the ground was dropping out from under her. She sucked in a slow breath, exhaled, then did it again. It did nothing to stop the roaring in her ears as the blood rushed through her, creating war drums sounding within her, complete with feeling like her entire body was shaking with the vibrations.

“No,” she said, the word barely a whisper, and then firmer, “No.”

“It’s the truth, Piper,” Rover told her, and when she looked at him he had the audacity to stare back. As if he hadn’t just annihilated everything she’d thought was real all twenty-three years of her life.

“You knew.” It wasn’t a question, he’d said as much already. Part of her, the part that’d crushed on him for so long, rejected that notion, tried to explain it away. Make excuses for him. But the other part, the one clinging to the god at her side for dear life, took it for what it was.

He’d lied to her.

He was just as bad as her parents.

“We made him promise not to tell,” her father was saying, but it was a struggle to hear him through the pounding of her heart. “We thought it would be best if you and your brother didn’t know. Anesidora’s don’t typically adopt, it goes against our purpose.”

Right, because only someone of Pandora’s bloodline could open the jar.

“Paul just sort of came to us,” her mother explained. “We were friends with his parents. They died in a car accident, it was very sudden. They hadn’t told us, but they had a will and in it they’d given us custody. It wasn’t an easy decision to make, but we couldn’t turn our backs on a baby. Giving him our name was the safest way to keep him and keep our secret mission safe.”

“You didn’t trust him either?” Reece interrupted. “That’s what you’re saying? You lied to a boy his entire life, made him believe you were his birth parents, in the off chance that he’d decide to spill your secret about the pithos?”

Piper looked at them, monitored their expressions. Almost threw up when she saw that he was right. The same reason they'd let her leave and had ceased contact was the one they'd used to excuse the lie of Paul's parentage.

"Who the hell are you people?" it was out before she could stop it, and once it was, she found she didn't much care.

"We did what we thought was best," her mother scolded, stubbornness written across her face. She wasn't even going to apologize for it, that much was apparent. She honestly believed, even now, that they'd done the right thing.

"Piper." Rover took a step toward her and she moved back quickly.

"If you touch me," she growled, "I will take one of those fancy scythes and use it to cut out your black heart."

"How dare you," her father roared, and she was on him so fast the room spun all over again.

"How dare I?" Her voice rose with every word, and she hardly noticed that she was getting closer to him, that Reece no longer held her hand. Or held her back. "How *dare I*?! All my life you've treated me like second best, turning your head when I was better at Paul on the mat. Coddling him and berating me when my abilities grew and his never developed. Telling me over and over again that despite being better than him, I wasn't good enough!"

"Piper—" her mother began, only to suck in a breath when she set her glare on her.

"I'm not finished! You think I'm not smart enough to read between the lines here? To figure out what this really means? No wonder you never cared for me the way you did Paul, I was merely your insurance policy! I was you performing your duty, continuing the Anesidora line despite having put a false heir on the throne!"

Which was when it hit her. Paul wasn't an Anesidora. He wasn't the Anesidora Heir.

"Oh my gods." She would have fallen, except Reece was there, steadying her, holding her up while everything came crashing down. The anger fled her as swiftly as it had come, making her feel drained and shaky. And scared.

Because if Paul wasn't it, that only left one other person who could take the mantel. Who would *have* to take it, after this little debacle.

“There,” her mother hissed, and there wasn’t a shred of kindness in her tone, “you see it finally. We let you go because staying meant you’d be trapped in the thing you wanted least of all. We did you a service cutting ties. Not forcing you back.”

“If you finish that tirade with ‘she should be grateful’,” Reece said, and though Piper couldn’t see his face from where she stood, she didn’t doubt it was terrifying at the moment, “blood relative of Piper’s or not, I will destroy you. You think I can’t sense the greed on you? The sloth? I know both of those sins intimately. You were too determined to cover your tracks and conceal your lie to bother giving your daughter the time of day.

“Piper leaving meant you no longer had to struggle so hard to maintain it. You’d already groomed Paul, and even he believed he was the heir. You let her leave because it made it easier for you, and no reason but. Tell me, what was the plan for the next generation? Were you going to hunt her down eventually once she had children of her own and force her back then?”

Holy shit, she hadn’t even thought of that. What would they have done? They needed a legitimate Anesidora to continue the line. Even after this reveal, she knew her parents would never have risked allowing their family to step away from duty forever. Paul was good for now, but his children? They would have lacked the same abilities and skills that their father had.

“We knew by then the truth would have come out,” her father said. “Piper’s children would no doubt show signs of our abilities. That would have given it away. Once that happened, our hope was that she would return to the family willingly and allow us to train them properly.”

“And Paul?” she growled. “Did you stop to think about what that would do to him? Finding out that he wasn’t meant to have this life? That he could have done something different?”

“You’re the only one who ever had a problem with our responsibility,” her mother told her. “Paul didn’t resent being an Anesidora. He embraced it.”

“And got possessed by a psychopath in the process!” She felt the wrath flicker to life again inside her chest. “You’re lucky Orpheus didn’t just kill him and take another body once he realized.”

Which explained why he hadn’t opened the pithos. He wasn’t able to. He’d possessed who he’d thought to be the Anesidora Heir, the protector

of the jar. But he'd gotten the wrong sibling.

"That's why he wants me." She spun around and saw that Reece had already come to that conclusion himself at the start of all of this. "If he gets me, he can open the pithos and release the remaining sins."

Not all sin was bad, she knew that, had grown up being told it. But when they came out of the jar, in the form of spirits who'd been trapped there in nothing but darkness for centuries and centuries...well, they came out a little unhinged. When Pandora opened it, she released seven—the Seven Deadlies—who'd come out screaming and twisted and out of their minds.

They hadn't been able to control their powers, or themselves, had attacked anything living nearby, tearing people apart in their frenzy. Apparently, they'd even attacked one another. The whole ordeal had been brutal and bloody, and entire cities had been wiped out before the gods had been able to contain them.

It was impossible to put the Seven Deadlies back without reopening the jar—which would let out the remaining sins—and some had been urged into new bodies instead, flesh which could contain them. Help them redevelop control.

Piper didn't know much more after that. She had no idea what happened to them, or even if they were all still alive. She'd never asked, and no one had ever bothered telling her. She wasn't even sure her parents knew.

The only thing she did know for certain was that if that jar was opened a second time, half the world would be destroyed before the released sins could be contained. And that was *if* they could be.

"There aren't as many gods around as there once were," Reece said, as if having read her thoughts. "We might not be able to stop the sins if they get out."

"Which brings us to the other reason we called you here," her father remarked. "We can't let Orpheus open Pandora's Box."

"We're still checking the rest of the bunker," her mother added, referring to the holding beneath the house that only they and Paul had access to. Not even Rover would have seen inside before, and there were no written documents listing the items within. It was that big of a secret. "So far, it doesn't seem as if anything else was taken. But we've only managed to make our way halfway through it."

That was a bit surprising. How big was this place? The pithos was the only thing she was allowed to know about. All of the others were apparently too dangerous and too powerful for anyone other than the heir, or the previous guardians, to know.

“Yes,” her father nodded, “we can’t be sure of anything until we’re finished.”

“That’s why you’re staying here.”

She blinked at her mother, waiting for the punch line, and when it didn’t come, grunted.

“What?” She so wasn’t going to do that. Period.

“We can keep an eye on you here,” her father elaborated. “There’s the panic room in the basement, it’s magically protected against all supernatural forces. It’ll ensure Orpheus has no way of getting you.”

“That space is like a ten by ten cell,” she reminded. She’d been in it a time or two during drills. They’d wanted her and Paul to be prepared to hide in the off chance they were ever attacked by someone after the jar.

Orpheus’s possession must have been pretty quick for Paul not to have made it there himself.

“You’ll be fine,” her mother waved her concerns off.

“It’s for your own protection,” Rover told her, making himself sound more gentle than either of her parents bothered.

“And the protection of the world,” her father agreed.

“Piper,” Reece sounded strained, “do you want to go into this panic room?”

“No.” She didn’t have to think about it. Paul was still her brother, and the pithos was still a danger. She couldn’t sit in a cell twiddling her thumbs, hoping that everything outside worked out okay.

“That settles that then,” he said, leaving no room in his tone for argument.

So of course her parents ignored it.

“This isn’t up to you,” her mother began.

“If it was, all three of you would be rotting in a cell of your own,” he snapped. “It’s Piper’s choice, unfortunate as that is, what’s done or isn’t done to you. Knowing her, she’s going to opt not to punish you because she’s a much better human being.”

“You sound disappointed about that,” she murmured, watching him.

He was barely holding himself together, coiled and ready to snap. There was no doubt, looking at him, that every single word he was saying was true.

He wanted to punish her parents.

For her.

It was messed up and wrong, yet...She couldn't help the small smile, or the way she swayed toward him, subconsciously wanting to be closer.

She sensed more than saw her mother step forward, and Piper's hand shot out as if of its own accord. Her fingers spread and energy speared straight through her, invisible threads of it bursting from her palm, directly into her mom.

Nicole was shoved all the way back against the counter, pinned there, and while she struggled, her husband moved.

Piper untangled her hold on Reece and mirrored the attack, having both of her parents immobilized faster than either of them could blink. She angled her head toward Rover, silently challenging him to try something. She almost wanted him to, just so she could prove to him what she was currently showing her parents.

"That day I ran away," she said, voice cold and unwavering, "the day I turned eighteen, I became the rightful Anesidora Heir. I'm stronger than all of you." She shoved with her power a little harder, not enough to hurt, only enough to get her point across. "What you're feeling is pride, by the way. Mine, in case you were wondering."

To them, it'd feel like getting blasted with a harsh and icy wind. To her, it was like slipping back into herself after years of being absent.

"You don't have to tap into outside sources?" Rover's mouth hung open at the revelation.

She did, but she could store it up. Use it for later. He didn't have to know that little detail, however. He no longer had a right to know anything about her ever again.

"I am stronger than all of you," she repeated, and with every passing word she felt herself lighten. All this time she'd felt guilty for leaving them. Sad that they wouldn't even talk to her on the phone during Christmas or Thanksgiving—just that one time with Paul. She'd been slowly eating herself away on the inside, missing them.

No more.

“You’ll get back to sorting through the items in the bunker,” she ordered. “If you find something is missing, you will inform me immediately. You have my phone number, so no excuses. Aside from that, you will stay out of my way, and once I find Paul you will be ones to explain to him your deception. Explain to him that you’re both self-centered assholes who deluded yourselves into thinking you were doing the right thing.”

They’d said they’d taken him in because they couldn’t turn away a child. Piper knew better. They’d accepted custody because not doing so would have caused suspicion. Hell, they might have even made it in the papers.

Horrible People Refuse to take Dead Friends Child.

That headline, or one like it, would certainly have brought them to the limelight. There were enough beings on the planet who would recognize the Anesidora name for that to be an issue.

That’s why they’d done it. The rest was just window trappings.

“We’re going to go now,” she finished, wanting to get out of that house and finally, *finally*, put the past where it belonged. Behind her.

No more running.

“Piper,” Rover held up a hand, “please. Dionysus can’t get near the pithos, I can. Let me help you.”

She shook her head and stepped back, bringing her arms down in the process. Her parents were both out of breath, practically sliding to the floor without her there to hold them up. She grabbed onto Reece and gave them all one last look.

“Can we get out of here?” she asked him, leaning into him when he bent down and pressed his lips to the top of her head.

The small show of affection was worth it to see her mom and dad’s eyes practically bug out of their skulls.

Chapter 18:

“How does this work exactly?” Piper took in the strange setup, watching as three maenad’s moved about the room putting finishing touches here and there.

It’d been over forty-eight hours since she’d spoken to her parents, and she still wasn’t able to shake the weight of what they’d divulged. She’d managed to talk to Reece about it a few times, but nothing lengthy. Whenever she started, her throat closed up and she’d feel close to falling apart.

Which she refused to do, because they didn’t deserve her tears. What she needed to concentrate on was figuring out Orpheus’s plan so she could stop him before it was too late. Of course, now that they knew the reason for him wanting her, everything was that much more complex.

Reece had just flashed the two of them back to that first house she’d stayed at after being poisoned by the maenad. It was supposedly a secure location, and a group of his people were already working on preparing the ceremony that would allow them to speak to Eurydice.

The room they were in was all concrete and stone, with towering walls that led up to a high ceiling with a skylight at its center. The glass had been pulled back already, exposing the inky night sky. A circle had been painted on the ground in red, the copper note in the air a dead giveaway it was blood. There was a small fire pit filled with various branches and other plants that she couldn’t identify piled in it.

“As soon as the moon paces overhead,” Reece began, pointing up toward the large open window above them, “Jane, Cerise, and Lana will start to chant. It’s an ancient song; you won’t recognize the words. They’ll pace counterclockwise around the circle, making sure to stay on the line, and each of them will offer a blood sacrifice to the fire—which will be lit at the very end.”

“A what now?” She pulled back and turned on him.

“Relax,” he held up both hands, “this is the twenty-first century. We’ll be using pig’s blood bought from the butcher. No actual killing will take place tonight.”

“He’s always hated killing animals,” Jane, one of the maenads from the first time Piper and Reece met, winked at her as she arranged more kindling in the pit. “It’s why we used people for a while.”

Piper blinked.

Reece mock winced. “Only bad people. People who deserved it.”

“Right.” She hoped that was the case, but didn’t want to press for details. She’d had enough revelations for one lifetime. “What happens after you light the fire?”

“That’s where I step in.” He pretended to adjust the hem of his suit. The jacket was copper, shiny in the dim lighting, casting off reflections on his neck and jaw. The shirt he wore underneath it, and his pants, were both white.

It would have looked flashy on anyone else, and yet Piper couldn’t help but steal admiring glances whenever he wasn’t looking.

“Princess, do you mind stepping back a few feet,” he asked, eyeing the sky. He motioned to a spot a small distance from the ring of the circle, smiling at her when she moved there. “Thank you. Eurydice knows we’re going to contact her tonight, but sometimes spirits get jerked into this world too quickly and it throws them off.”

“Like with the sins that were released by Pandora.” She was tempted to move back another step or two, but if he said she was safe where she was, then she trusted him.

An odd expression crossed over his face quickly, gone before she could place it. His smile dulled a little and he nodded his head, feigning distraction with the process before him and the maenads now getting into position.

Piper should have been more concerned by the fact she knew that’s what he was doing, that she somehow knew him well enough already to read him so easily. But peering too long into that, trying to pick it apart, could only lead down a rabbit hole she didn’t want to be in. With all the other issues already swirling around them, they couldn’t afford for her to allow her feelings to get in the way.

You have feelings?

Shit. That’s not what she’d meant. Of course she had feelings for him, he’d been supportive, had saved her life a couple times, and had given her a safe place to stay. He was helping her find Paul, and had been honest about his stance on the matter and the pithos since the beginning.

Add all that to the fact the sex was amazing, and how could she not develop feelings for him? That didn't mean they were strong or long-lasting though. No, this was merely a distraction to help get them both through this with their sanity intact. That's all. As soon as they stopped Orpheus they'd have to go their separate ways. He was a god, and she was—

She put an end to that thought immediately, still not ready to go there. She understood that by telling her she was their only blood relative they were also blatantly stating another truth, but Piper wasn't in the right place to deal with that just yet.

It seemed like once they stopped Orpheus, she'd have to give up a lot more than just the god of lust.

A white glow filtered down from above, catching her attention. The full moon had settled directly over them, bright and glowing. Almost instantly, the three maenads spread around the circle began to move, their pace even while their voices trickled lightly on the air. The chant started out as more of a hum than anything, slowly rising in volume and clarity as they walked. Soon, they were speaking in Latin, only one or two of their words recognizable to Piper.

Each of the women held a small clay bowl in her hands, and after a long minute, Jane leaned forward, dousing the kindling in the pit with crimson red. The other two did the same once they were standing in the same spot that Jane had been, emptying the pig's blood onto the collection of plants and branches without breaking the chant.

Suddenly, they came to an abrupt stop, holding out the bowls before them. Their voices lowered back down, so that it was a whispered murmur on the wind. Reece took a single step into the circle, and the maenads all tipped their heads back, eyes closed.

Reece lifted his hand, staring into the pit, and then snapped his fingers. Flames leaped and curled, burning the kindling as if it'd been doused with lighter fluid. Puffs of dark green smoke flickered, twisting and spiraling up toward the opening in the ceiling.

A sweet burning smell entered the air, heady and strong enough that Piper could almost taste it on her tongue.

She watched in awe as Reece held out his arms and began to say words of his own, his deeper voice standing out amongst the whispers of the maenads. He blinked, and it was like he'd linked himself with the

others, for they all mirrored the move at the same time. When their eyes reopened, they were glowing.

The maenads eyes were white, their pupils and irises seemingly gone. It was eerie and, frankly, gave Piper the creeps. From where she stood, she could just make out the side of Reece's face, and saw that his were flashing through a range of different colors. First it was blue, then green, then gold, and red. White, black, orange, and back to blue again. It was fascinating, and they ran through the spectrum another three times before the smoke in the fire billowed out, catching Piper's notice.

The grayish-green smoke reformed, taking on a shape similar to octopus tentacles. They stretched outwards, coming up against the circle drawn in blood, then skated up on an invisible wall. Once they'd reached high enough to hover over all of their heads, they shrank back. The process was excruciatingly slow, and if not for the body forming in the pit, Piper might have grown impatient.

A woman stood amidst the flames now, her image transparent, darkening and solidifying in some places, lightening and becoming foggy in others. Her features were still visible, beautiful and sharp, with almond-shaped eyes and long, curly black hair. She was wearing a light pink dress that covered her legs and left her arms bare, and the corner of her mouth tipped up when she spotted Reece.

"Hello, Dionysus," she sounded soft and delicate, lyrical. It was no wonder Orpheus had grown obsessed. "It has been a long time since you've properly visited me."

"You know how Thayer can be. Always keeping me away," he replied, tone friendly. "As much as I'd love to catch up, I'm sure you heard this wasn't a social call. We have a problem, Eurydice. A big one."

"I have already told Hadrian all that I know," she said. "If Orpheus has a plan for the pithos, I am not aware of what it is. He never spoke of such things when I was forced into his company."

"My Anesidora has a few guesses," he motioned toward Piper, and the woman turned to stare at her.

"She is very attractive."

"She's also a badass." Reece smirked, the expression wolfish and showing teeth.

"Ah," Eurydice smiled knowing, "but then she must be to be with you."

Piper frowned at that comment, because she and the god weren't together, and waited for Reece to correct her. Instead, he chuckled and continued on topic.

"She thinks there might be a particular sin within the pithos whom Orpheus needs." He paused, licked his lips, and added as delicately as possible, "We believe he hopes to get help in retrieving you."

Her expression contorted to one of pure loathing, but aside from that, she gave no other signs how disgusted or affected by that idea she was. Her body didn't shake, and her hands remained carefully clasped in front of her. It was impressive, how poised she was in light of what she'd just been told.

"I knew that was a possibility," she said, "and Hadrian was nice enough to keep me informed when they realized he was missing. I assure you, however, that should he try to seek me out, he will have to pull me kicking and screaming from this place. I will help you however I can, but I fear there isn't much I can do."

"Actually," Reece disagreed, "that's not true. You happen to be in a place where ancient dead people accumulate. My Anesidora and I need to know what other sins might be in that jar. Can you ask around? If you're able to find out, we might be able to get ahead of this."

At least if they knew who, or what, it was exactly Orpheus was hoping to release, they could start planning accordingly.

Eurydice frowned. "Of course, I can certainly try. But, do you not know the answer yourself, Dionysus? If it's a matter of memory, surely it would be simpler to find someone to help with recollection. I'm not sure who to ask down here. It could take a while before I find the right person. If ever."

Piper glanced between the two of them. The strange insinuation made dread course through her, though she couldn't pinpoint why. It did, however, make her think back to what Rover had said the other day, about how Reece couldn't get near the pithos. At the time, she'd been too distracted by the rest of the news she'd gotten to really think about that, but now...

Reece shook his head. "There were too many, and it was too dark. We need someone who was outside when sins were being trapped. Someone old enough to have either heard stories, or witnessed a few of them take place firsthand. I know it's a hard task; I'll ask Hadrian to assist you."

“He is busy with other things at the moment,” Eurydice said, clearly knowing all about the breach and how he was trying to figure out what had caused it. “All right. I will do what I can, old friend.”

“Thank you. If you find anything, tell one of the Reapers. They’ll contact Hadrian, who will in turn get a hold of me. I really appreciate this, Eurydice. I know you’d like nothing more than to separate yourself from all things Orpheus.”

“If what you assume is correct,” she told him, “stopping him will benefit me as well. I’ll do my best to get the information you need. I swear it on the river Styx.”

“Thank you,” he repeated, bowing his head in the process.

“Of course.” Eurydice glanced at Piper. “It was good to meet you, Anesidora. Please take care of him. There is more to Lust than he appears.”

Before anyone could say anything else, her image vanished and the fire fizzled out and died. It cast them in nothing but moonlight and shadows, and for a long moment everyone stood there quietly.

Then Jane sighed and brought her head back down, showing that her eyes had gone back to their normal blue. “I’m sorry there wasn’t time to call Semele.”

“It’s fine.” Reece dropped his arms and rotated his shoulders as if he’d developed a kink during the ceremony.

“Would you like for me to go below and explain to her?” she offered.

“Hadrian has implemented a lockdown.” Reece stepped out of the circle. “Don’t worry about it, Jane. She’ll understand. Once this is cleaned, I’d appreciate it if you stayed in for the rest of the night. Regain your strength. There are plenty of others still out searching for Orpheus.”

“That’s probably for the best,” Lana agreed. She seemed young compared to the others, and Piper was tempted to ask her age.

“Good.” Then Reece was stepping in front of Piper blocking her view of the others. There was an exhaustion to him that hadn’t been there prior to the start of the ceremony, so when he reached for her she took his hand without hesitation.

Not giving her the chance to say goodbye to the maenads, or thank them for their help, he flashed them out of the house and into a small dingy office.

Piper pulled back only enough to take a look around, keeping his hand firmly linked with hers. She'd never been in the small room before, noting the peeling red vinyl couch in the corner, and the shabby wooden desk across from it. There was a row of dented file cabinets, and the floor under their feet was scuffed and had numerous scratches on its surface.

There wasn't much else, aside from the old mirror that hung behind the desk and a door currently ajar. It was easy to make out that it led to a small closet. The place could really use a dusting, which was such a sharp contrast to all the other places Reece owned that she'd been to. He certainly didn't look as though he belonged here in his fancy suit.

"We're at the club," he told her, moving toward the desk and the single swivel chair there. He let go of her in the process, and she immediately felt the loss of him.

Which made her silently chastise herself.

"I hope you don't mind." He propped his elbows onto the edge of the desk. "I wasn't ready to go home."

"Sure." Part of her wanted to stay away, prove that this feeling, this need to touch him, wasn't anything. The other part, however, was already making her way over to him. She came around the side of the desk, lifting herself so that she was sitting on the corner.

"The club is safe," he said. "I had Hadrian place a boundary spell on it. Possessed individuals can no longer enter. I also have everyone screened at the front door, so if anyone is under Orpheus's influence, hopefully we'll know."

"Sounds good." He'd covered his bases. "Honestly, it's nice to get out every once in a while. I get it." She shrugged.

"Do you?" He smirked at her. "Go clubbing a lot, Princess?"

"Not even once," she admitted, laughing at his shocked expression. "I was alone and trying to build a life, remember? Partying wouldn't exactly have helped me achieve that goal."

"It would if you'd gone to the right party."

She rolled her eyes and settled more comfortably on the desk. There were things she needed to ask him, things she had to know before she let this go any further.

You're already in too deep.

Maybe, but she couldn't even begin to play with that idea without having all the facts. After what happened with her parents the other day,

there was one thing she was absolutely certain of, and that was that she didn't want to be blindsided by someone she cared about again.

"Who's Semele?" she asked. There'd been a few names mentioned back there that she hadn't recognized, she started with that one because it sounded female. She didn't want to be jealous, and yet...

Picking up on where her thoughts were going, Reece smiled reassuringly. "Semele is my mother."

Oh. Well then.

"I usually contact her once a month during the full moon. Catch up. She died a very long time ago, and this is a way I can hold onto her. We're very close, and I was hoping to be able to fit her in after we spoke with Eurydice, but the maenads couldn't hold the connection. They've been out searching for Orpheus and haven't maintained their strength."

Even though Piper couldn't relate to that, it was sweet that he had such a good relationship with his mom. Even sweeter still that he was so genuinely disappointed about having to miss a talk with her.

"What a pair we make," she said, and when he lifted a questioning brow, laughed. "I'm upset about having to converse with my mother, and you're upset about not getting the chance to."

"Are you ready to talk about it?" He hadn't pushed her those few times it'd been brought up, which she really appreciated.

"Not yet," she decided, then followed it with, "Who's Thayer?"

Reece pulled back, resting in his chair. "You'd know him as Thanatos, the god of death. He's Hadrian's brother."

"And you dislike him because...?"

He ran a hand through his hair, agitated by the memories. "When my mother died, I was early in my second life. Young. I wasn't ready to let her go. So I broke into the Underworld and tried to steal her back. I wanted her to live. Like I had gotten to live. But she was a mortal, a human, and their lives have expiration dates. Thayer caught me, and we fought. Death has been around almost as long as Lust has. If I had still been in my first life, I would easily have bested him. As it were, he won and stopped me from saving the only woman I've ever legitimately loved."

Piper tried to mask the stab of pain that last part brought her, and not just for his benefit. She couldn't allow herself to go there either, especially because it wasn't like she loved him. There was no way.

Right?

“So you blame him for stopping you?” She needed to keep the conversation going.

“Is this the part where you tell me he was just doing his job?” it came out terse, but there was no anger in his eyes. “I know that. Logically, I know. But love isn’t logical, Piper. And she was my mother.”

“Still is, from the sounds of it.” He got to speak to her, didn’t he? That was a hell of a lot more than most got.

He blew out a breath. “Can we talk about something else? Please?”

“Because you asked so nicely.” She grinned at him and rested one of her hands over his knee. Before he could get the wrong idea, she said, “Tell me about your lives. You keep mentioning that you had two. But I don’t have any of the details. Explain it to me.”

She’d tried to get him to before. They knew each other better now, were closer. Hopefully he would feel safe and confident enough to tell her about it. It seemed like everyone else around here already knew, and she was the only one left in the dark. Unfair, considering she was also the only one currently sleeping with him. At least, she better be.

“I’m not ready,” he finally admitted after a long pause.

“Tell me why.” There was a difference between lying and keeping a secret, she knew that better than most. But there was a fine line, one easily crossed.

“I don’t want you to look at me differently,” he said, and before she could react, rushed on. “It’s nothing that could harm you, or anyone else. Honestly, it doesn’t change anything about me, or about this.” He covered her hand where it was still resting on his knee.

“Then why keep it to yourself?” How could anything to do with his being reborn alter the way she saw him?

“You really going to make me say it?” When she didn’t disagree, he cursed and leaned back. “Fine. I’m afraid. I’m not ready for this,” he waved a finger between them, “whatever this is, to be over.”

“All right.” She slipped from the desk and moved closer. Placing her hands on his shoulders, she straddled him, settling down so there was nowhere for him to go. “Don’t tell me about how you died then, or about how you were reborn. Just tell me about who you were. Were you different?”

He hesitated, then must have realized if he didn’t at least give her something she’d walk away. Carefully, he wrapped his arms around her

waist, tugging her even closer so that their breaths mingled.

“I was originally a blond,” he conceded. “With a different face, and a different body. My eyes, they were the same, that was mostly it. When I came into existence, there were only a handful of others. Together, we watched life form and grow, creating the planet and its occupants.

“Then something happened,” he glanced away, “to me. To some of the others. A being got greedy, he wanted to control us. To use us. He couldn’t do it, however, and only managed to trap me and the rest of them away. By the time I came back into the world it was different. There were more gods, many more, and they’d formed pantheons and hierarchies. I found a new body, had to grow all over again. Once I’d reached maturity, Zeus offered me a seat at the Greek’s table. I accepted.”

That was more than she’d been expecting, and some of the pieces started moving around in her head, clicking into place.

“There,” he tipped his head back, resting it against the chair, “satisfied?”

Piper pretended to think it over. “Nope.”

When she kissed him, everything else ceased to matter.

Chapter 19:

Reece growled when the door to his office opened up with no warning, shooting a glare at the man standing there.

“Sorry, boss,” the demon mumbled, quickly averting his gaze. Azra had been with him for fifty years, and had helped run the club when Reece was away. He was allowed to use the office in his absence, so it shouldn’t be surprising that he’d entered without knocking.

“I should have told you I was here.” Reece took a deep breath and shifted beneath Piper. A mistake, seeing as how it caused his erection to press against the heat between her legs. He almost moaned, catching it at the last second. It wasn’t that he was uncomfortable with an audience, but Piper had stiffened the second the door had opened.

“I’ll leave you alone.” Azra moved to go, but Reece stopped him.

Unfortunately, other things should be taken care of now that he was here. Things that could possibly help them with Orpheus. As badly as he wanted to put them off and bury himself balls deep into Piper instead, he knew he shouldn’t.

“We’ve got some business to take care of on the floor,” he told Azra, then he turned to Piper and noticed that she was staring at something over his shoulder intently. He glanced over to see that she was watching her own reflection. Or, more aptly, her eyes.

They’d both gone from zero to a hundred in a split second. All it’d taken was her lips pressed against his and he’d been instantly hard for her. She must have felt the same, because her eyes were glowing a soft gold, a telltale sign that she was consumed by lust. It didn’t usually happen when they fucked, so he imagined it had more to do with all the pent-up emotion she was carrying over that conversation with her parents.

Stress could affect her abilities, activate random parts of them, make them extra sensitive. Last night, or the night before, they hadn’t lit up either, which probably meant she’d reached her maximum build-up. She needed to expel some of that tension and anxiety.

Still, the way she was staring herself down, the slight frown marring her brows...

“Did you not know they did that?” he asked, and when her gaze snapped to his it was apparent he’d hit the mark. “They don’t always. They only glow sometimes. When you attacked Orpheus downstairs, for example. And standing in your parent’s kitchen. They were red then.”

“Because of wrath,” she guessed.

“Yes.”

She blinked, glanced over his shoulder into the mirror one last time, and then slowly eased off of him. Another moment later and her eyes were back to normal, but she was nibbling her bottom lip pensively, the wheels in her head actively turning.

She’d already admitted to using her abilities once and a while during shifts at the hospital she’d worked at. Was that why she was concerned? That she’d revealed herself without knowing it?

“Hey.” He cupped her cheek and turned her face up so that she was looking at him. “It’s all right. It’s perfectly normal, and humans wouldn’t have noticed, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Piper took another moment, and then all at once seemed to shake herself out of it. Turning to face him, she smiled, then nodded her head toward the door where his manager still stood. “Let’s get out of the nice man’s way, shall we.”

“Azra,” he introduced himself and stepped forward with a hand outstretched. He blanched when Reece let out a low, warning growl at Piper’s back.

“Really?” She sent him a look and laughed, then pointedly took the demon’s palm in her own and shook. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Piper. If he,” she angled her chin to indicate Reece, “gives you any alpha-male-bullshit on my regards, please let me know. I’ll take of it.” She winked at him.

And Reece momentarily saw red. Or was it green? He shouldn’t be jealous—or envious—of her showing kindness to another man. Even if it was playful, and overtly friendly. He was tempted to blurt out that Azra was a demon, but if she recoiled he’d feel too guilty.

She was eyeing the other guy now, and before he could react on those alpha-male instincts he’d just made fun of, she asked, “What kind of demon are you?”

Reece’s mouth dropped open slightly, but he closed it quickly before anyone noticed. He’d assumed that she’d never met any demons before,

especially considering the Anesidora's were tasked with avoiding supernatural beings in order to maintain their cover. He should have realized, living in New York City, that she would have had a run-in or two.

Azra looked slightly uncomfortable by the question, rubbing his palms on the thighs of his black jeans. "I'm a Soul Snatcher."

"He's careful," Reece jumped to his defense before Piper could come to the wrong conclusion. "He helps keep the peace around here. Only takes a little from those who get too rowdy or dangerous."

There were two main types of demon that lived topside: Soul Abductors, and Soul Snatchers. The first fed off of human emotion, the second fed directly off of the human soul. If done properly, the demon could do either of these things without causing permanent damage. A few centuries ago, Hadrian had set accords to help keep them in line. For the most part, they followed, but there were always some who defied the rules.

Demons weren't inherently bad. But they weren't good either.

"Interesting," she said, and meant it. Then she stepped to the side and motioned him past her and out of the doorway. "It was nice to meet you, Azra. You can come in now, we'll be going."

Reece followed her out into the hall, closing the door at his back with a slight click. When he stood there, reassembling his wits, Piper lifted a brow.

"Trying not to unleash some alpha-male-bullshit," he explained, grinning like an idiot when she laughed. Damn, but he liked seeing her smile. Liked being the cause of it even more. His dick hardened in his pants and he shifted on his feet in a poor attempt to adjust himself.

Of course, doing so also brought her attention straight to his erection, and he just about died when she ran her tiny pink tongue across her lips.

"Later," she promised. "What business were you talking about?"

Right, the other reason they were here. Shit, he needed to get his head back on straight and keep to what was important.

"I have some other people on the Orpheus search," he said.

"Non-maenads, you mean."

"That is correct. Demons, mostly. A couple others. Some owe me favors, others want to garner favor...you know."

"The usual for a god." She shrugged a single shoulder.

“The catch is a lot of them will only deliver information directly to me. Figured we could check downstairs, we might get lucky. They don’t have set schedules. A few of them might have decided to spend the night clubbing.” Perhaps they’d even get lucky and one of them would have something useful to share.

“Sounds like a plan.” She turned toward the rickety set of stairs all the way on the other side of the narrow hall. He would have asked how she knew which way to go, except the flashing lights that hit the top and the blaring music were dead giveaways.

He loved how perceptive she was.

Love?

Whoa. He came to an abrupt stop in the middle of the hall. No, that was a slip. He thoroughly enjoyed a lot of different things about her. That was all. And what wasn’t to like? She was gorgeous, powerful, independent...Perfect.

For you?

Of course not. He was the god of lust. He didn’t do long-term. There was no other half of him—or however that stupid mortal phrase went—out there. He was destined to be alone, always had been. Always would be. He’d always preferred it that way.

Things change.

Shit.

“What’s up?” Piper had reached the stairs and realized he was no longer behind her. She frowned at him, made as if she was going to come back, which sprung him into action.

“Nothing,” he shook his head, “it’s nothing.”

“All right.” She didn’t believe him. “Well, when you’re ready to talk about *nothing*, I’m available.”

Available? Like hell. She was with him.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Piper stepped down onto the stairs and before he could stop himself his hand snapped out, latching around her wrist. He was careful not to pull or make her lose her footing, but he didn’t ease up, even when she looked at him.

“It should be safe,” he said, running over all those precautions he’d told her about. There was no way Orpheus or anyone under his control should be able to get in undetected. Still, that left a lot of other undesirables

to deal with. Just because Azra could control himself, didn't mean everyone could. "Stick by me, okay? There's always the chance a fight could break out or something."

"It is a demon club," she pointed out. "That's pretty much to be expected."

"I'm serious, Piper." If anything happened to her... "Promise me you'll stay close. Bad things play here."

"Oh, sweetheart." She swiveled around so that she was facing him, reaching up to run her fingers through his hair like she was petting a house cat and not the wild animal that he was. Once he'd turned into her touch, rubbing his cheek against her palm, she smirked. "I *am* the bad thing."

Realizing she'd just used his lust against him, he grinned. "Yeah, you are."

She chuckled and spun back around, heading down to the club.

Reece followed, trying not to let himself think too hard about how she'd done it without using her powers.

* * *

"So why do you have Azra running the place?" she asked a half-hour later. They'd parked themselves at the bar and were both eyeing the crowd. "As opposed to a maenad, I mean?"

Reece watched two demons across the room known for causing trouble. They didn't seem to be in moods tonight, and were sitting and laughing among a group of others. The crowd wasn't particularly dangerous, which was a good thing, because every time someone came within five feet of Piper he went on the defense.

Logically, he knew she could take care of herself, but try telling his instincts that. He needed her safe, even if that meant accidentally tearing a few limbs off innocent bystanders.

You have completely lost it.

"They take care of some of my other ventures," he said, staring down a tall dark haired demon who moved a bit too close to Piper.

He'd only been trying to wave down the bartender, but upon catching Reece's glare, quickly relocated.

If Piper noticed the exchange—which he didn't doubt she had—she didn't show it. She just kept viewing the people, taking in the flashing lights

and upbeat music. It was obvious that this wasn't her type of scene, that she wouldn't hang out here even if she'd had the option while growing up.

"Azra needed a place to stay," Reece added once they were more or less alone in their small bubble again, "and I'd just decided to open Luxuria up. It made sense. He's a good fit. I can trust him to take care of the club when I'm away. He loves Luxuria as much as I do. It's his home."

The demon even had a set of rooms upstairs. Originally, Reece had built them for himself, but it hadn't been a burden handing them over to his friend instead. He had more than enough places to crash anyway. Most of them belonging to random women.

Reece found himself wondering what Piper's apartment looked like. Did she keep it sparse in the off chance she'd have to pick up and leave? Or did she fill it with things that she loved, surrounding herself with things inherently her own in the hopes of making it that home she'd always wanted?

He would have asked, but a lithe woman stepped from the crowd then, sidling right up to his side. It caught him off guard, and it took him a moment to process what was going on and just who the female demon was.

"Mags," he greeted, trying to think up a way he could disentangle himself from her without insulting her in the process.

Already she'd snaked her arm around his waist, her other hand playing at the buttons of his shirt.

"Reece," she purred his name, drawing out the syllables in a way that might have been seductive. Before Piper. "I've been looking for you. You haven't been around lately, and I'm only in town another few days."

"Busy," he said, taking her wrist and attempting to tug it off. She held on like a damn octopus. "I'm busy now as well."

She didn't take the hint.

"I'm going to have to ask you to let go, Mags." He tightened his grip, hard enough that he knew it couldn't be comfortable. The threat was there, and he allowed some of his annoyance to flicker in his eyes. "You're making me seem rude."

"Why?" Her inky black eyes swept over Piper. "Because of her? I don't think she minds. I've been watching. The two of you haven't touched since you came down."

That's because even the thought of physical contact made Reece's dick stand at attention, and sporting an erection, even one as impressive as

his, wasn't exactly the intimidating look he was going for at the moment. Sometimes he came here to play along with the rest, others he came to remind them all of his presence. Of who he was and who was in charge. Like tonight.

With Orpheus out there, it'd do them all well to recall there was a god among them. One who'd specifically chosen another side.

"You know anything about an escaped soul?" Piper asked Mags, tone steady and light. "Carries around an ancient instrument? Currently looks a little like me?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I might have seen a guy like that, not here though. And not recently. Might have been a week ago, somewhere in Chicago, maybe?"

"Could you find out?"

"I could try." Mags danced her fingers down Reece's chest. "For a price."

It wouldn't be the first time he'd traded his body for something, but that had been a long time ago. He'd never been a fan of sexual slavery—especially after the fourth time he'd been mistaken for a mortal and almost sold into it. The issue here, however, wasn't just that he didn't want to sell sex, it was that he didn't think he even could.

Looking at her, having her hands all over him, wasn't doing anything. There wasn't so much as a sliver of attraction. Which was... impossible. Being the god of lust had its perks. Always being ready and in the mood? That was one of them.

Or, at least, it had been. Suddenly, sleeping with anyone and everyone he could didn't hold the same appeal as it once had.

"Unfortunately," Piper said, "he's going to have to decline. You're still going to help us though."

"Oh?" She didn't back off. "And why is that?"

"Because I'm an Anesidora, and now you're on my radar." Piper shifted less than half a foot closer, but the warning was clear. "I've got a house full of fun odds and ends I'd love to try out. You can either volunteer as my test subject, or you could get me this information on my brother, and I could owe you one instead."

She was bluffing. Not only did she not have access to the bunker at her parents' house, she also had no clue what was in it. For all they knew, it

was filled with stuffed animals, and not the ancient weapons or curses or whatever the hell else, that they'd been told was there.

Mags hesitated, trying to sniff out whether or not Piper was telling the truth. His girl had an epic poker face, though, and the demon didn't know her the way he did.

Your girl?

Finally, she let him go and stepped back. "You'll owe me a favor, Anesidora?"

"That's right," Piper agreed.

"How do I know you'll keep your word?"

"Would you like me to swear it on the river?" she suggested.

Mags thought it over, then surprised Reece by shaking her head in the negative. "I'll take your trust instead. Who do I contact if I find anything?"

"Azra," Piper gave the demon's name with a dark smirk. "I'll be with Reece so Azra will know how to get a hold of us."

"Hmm." She purred low in her throat, though unlike when she'd done it earlier, there was nothing sexual about it. "All right then." She angled her head in a partial bow and then disappeared into the crowd without a second glance.

"If that happens again," Piper said, moving so close to his side he could feel the heat of her body, "I can't promise not to kill her. Just a heads up. In case you're good friends or something."

"Nope," he assured, unable to keep the breathiness from his tone. "The only good friend I've got here is you."

"Smart man." She grinned and then swept an arm out across the crowd. "Okay, so who else do we need to talk to?"

"Eager to get out of here?" he asked, remembering how uninterested she'd seemed with the club scene before Mags had shown up.

"Definitely," she confirmed. Then she caught his gaze with her own, and the light golden glow in her eyes had him inhaling sharply. "But only because I want to finish what we started upstairs."

Chapter 20:

Piper had kept as much distance between Reece and her as she could when they'd entered the club. Seeing as how he'd done the same, it'd been fairly easy to accomplish. Which was good, because she'd needed time to process what she'd been forced to acknowledge upstairs in his office.

She knew who Reece was. Who he *really* was. And it wasn't just a god.

When she thought about it, it was clear to her that on some level she'd always known. Hadn't Rover hinted at it back in her apartment? Hadn't there been a million other clues over the past week that'd all pointed in the same direction? So, yeah, she'd known. She just hadn't been ready to accept it, mostly because of the way she'd been brought up.

The Anesidora family were direct descendants of the woman blamed for unleashing the original seven deadly sins on the world. The Seven Deadlies were famous—even if humans didn't know they were legitimate beings walking and talking among them.

Pandora was famous too. For the colossal mistake she'd made. A shame that her ancestors had carried with them across generations in the form of being magically linked to the object she'd failed to protect herself. The pithos was tied to the Anesidora line. No one else could do what they did for that very reason. For thousands of years they'd guarded it, protected it.

All because a girl who shared their blood long before any of them was born had screwed up.

Even though Anesidora's could use and manipulate sin to help benefit them, as a means meant to help protect the pithos, they always grew up being taught that the Seven Deadlies were best avoided. As physical embodiments, each sin supposedly took their namesake to the next level.

Piper didn't know anything about them specifically—apparently having actual information about them wasn't necessary for them to do their jobs. It also helped that the Seven Deadlies supposedly avoided her family and the pithos for fear of being sucked back into the jar. Which made sense,

because if there was a way she could be trapped in eternal darkness by someone, she'd avoid them like the plague as well.

Of course, doing that was easy when they had the ability to sense the pithos. It meant they could get out of dodge before the jar ever got too close to them. Along with the Anesidora family, the Seven Deadlies were some of the rare few capable of sensing Pandora's Box.

"I'm here about a Deadly," Rover had said to the guards at the door back in the casino. *"One of the Seven Deadlies."*

Then Piper had passed out and it'd completely slipped her mind to make the connection. She hadn't wanted to make it. It was safer that way, smoother. This situation was already strenuous and confusing enough without adding more to it.

But after seeing her eyes, realizing that they glowed when she accessed a sin...she could no longer justify turning the other cheek. It was time to face reality. She wasn't the only one whose eyes lit up like neon traffic signs.

Reece Luben wasn't just a god. He was Lust, with a capital L. He was a Seven Deadly.

She'd slept with one of the Seven Deadlies.

Piper had practically hyperventilated then and there, right in front of Reece and his demon manager. Only pride had helped her keep together; she'd wanted to sort through her feelings on her own before announcing what she'd figured out. And it was hard, because the part of her that was an Anesidora, that had been raised as one, recoiled at the idea of what he was.

There was also the matter of him keeping this secret from her. So soon after discovering her parent's lies, it was hard to handle knowing something else had been purposefully withheld.

Until she'd seen Mags wrapping herself around him. If not for the fact they'd been in a crowded room, Piper would have torn the woman off him and physically tossed her aside. It was crazy and possessive and nothing like anything else she'd ever felt in her life.

It also slammed home another fact she'd been trying desperately not to let spring to the forefront of her mind.

She was falling for the god of lust. Hard.

Reece saw her the way no one else ever had before, the way no one had even bothered to try. Not even Rover, the guy she'd grown up with. Her only friend. With Reece, things came naturally, easy. She could open up

about her past and talk about her reasons for deserting her role as an Anesidora without feeling judged. When he'd told her he didn't think less of her because she'd run from her fate, he'd meant it.

She'd been told the Deadlies were monsters, even if they weren't necessarily evil. But that's wasn't the case. She'd seen Reece mourn for his maenads, had heard about the lengths he'd gone to for his mother. Making an enemy out of the god of death was no small thing. Yet he'd gone down to the Underworld intent on bringing back the woman who'd raised him.

Since the start of all of this he'd been actively seeking out the pithos and Orpheus with her, despite having spent hundreds of years avoiding the jar. He was doing it, in part, because his maenads were being threatened, sure, but there was more to it than that. He could have turned away. He certainly could have turned her away. But he hadn't. He'd put the world first, and in some ways, ways she hadn't even known she'd needed, he'd put her first as well.

What about any of that was monstrous?

In a split second Piper had realized that it didn't matter what he was, or what he'd kept from her. She knew *who* he was.

She kept all of this to herself as they made their rounds in the club, filing the names and faces that he introduced her to away for later. By the end of it, they'd spoken to a dozen different demons and had walked away with no new useful information.

Now, as they appeared in the center of Reece's living room, Piper pulled away and allowed herself to really look at him. She'd been careful not to since the incident with Mags, afraid he'd see something in her expression and know what it was she was thinking. He seemed good at that.

Reece was tired and frustrated, that much was clear. He hung his head, eyes closed, and slowly inhaled. His hands were on his hips and he was just standing there, giving himself a moment to settle. After being around all that noise and all those people at the club he needed it.

She knew him pretty well too.

The dermal piercing on his middle finger winked in the dim overhead lighting, the only sign on his otherwise extremely put-together self that there was an edgier side to him. Even in the suit he came off as dangerous, there was no question. His presence demanded attention whenever he entered a room; she'd been on the receiving end of that, knew the electric shocks a single glance from him could illicit.

His dark brown hair was swept back, emphasizing the angle of his chin and his strong jawline. Her gaze swept down his nose, to his lips, her mind bringing memories back of what that mouth was capable of.

She inadvertently shivered, and somehow he must have sensed it for his eyes snapped open and on her before she'd regained control.

The multiple colors in his eyes swirled, the glow already starting up as his gaze heated. There was something very primal about the way he looked at her, like he felt she belonged to him. Like she was his.

Piper cocked her head, playing with the idea as she stared back unblinkingly. What would it be like to belong to a man like him? To have him belong to her in turn? The thought surprisingly thrilled her to the core, and she almost laughed. She'd spent her whole life avoiding being owned by something, only to end up directly in the path of Lust.

"It's sort of ironic, don't you think?" she said, finally breaking the silence. "How the two of us, complete strangers, both spent our lives running from the same thing?"

She saw the moment he realized where she was going with this, his eyes widening slightly before he forced his expression into an enigmatic one. For some reason, she didn't like that, him cutting himself off from her, and the next thing she knew she was standing in front of him, sifting her fingers through the silky hair at the nape of his neck.

"We've both been so afraid of the pithos," she added, voice low so that the words danced dangerously between them. Her hand trailed around to his trace the right side of his jaw, then she lightly pressed her thumb against his full bottom lip. "So afraid of losing ourselves."

"Piper." He didn't move, keeping his hands at his sides as she continued exploring him. He started swaying slightly on his feet when she began stroking down his sides, smoothing over the curve of his hip bone, feeling him up through the material of his suit.

She might be falling for him, but that didn't mean she was ready for it. Rationally, she knew this could never work between the two of them. The fact that he was literally lust incarnate sort of drove that fact home. It didn't mean she couldn't have this though, have right now. While it lasted, why not enjoy it?

When this was all over and they'd stopped Orpheus—and they *would* stop him—she'd take these memories with her. They'd go their separate ways, probably never see each other again. But on those

particularly awful nights, she'd dust off recollections of this, of what it felt like to touch him and be touched by him. He was giving her something to hold onto. Something good for a change. A past that wasn't only filled with loneliness.

"I don't care what you are, Lust," she said, and it was probably the truest thing she ever had. "It doesn't change anything."

Reece searched her face, lingered on her eyes as if trying to pick her apart. "Are you sure?" he finally whispered, voice reedy and thin. "You're an Anesidora." He paused, licked his lips, then admitted, "And I'm one of the Seven Deadly Sins."

"You're right," she agreed, and his breath caught. "Which means I'm supposed to let you out."

He frowned, until her hands on his belt clued him into what she was planning. She worked quickly, and the second his cock sprung free he tipped back his head and groaned.

Piper went to drop to her knees but he caught her under the arms.

"No," he said, turning them, "the couch."

"Oh?" She smiled. "Enjoyed it the other day, huh? Been fantasizing about that specifically or...?"

"Yes," he admitted, not the least bit embarrassed as he pushed her onto the plush leather, "more than once."

"As in," she made her tone as suggestive as possible, "we're going to do this more than once, or you've thought about it more than once?"

His hungry eyes swept over her and a low growl traveled up the back of his throat. "Princess, I'm going to make you come so many times you're going to lose count."

Reece rested a hand on either side of her head, bending so that their noses practically touched.

"Promises, promises," she said, just as he was about to lean in and kiss her.

"That a challenge?" he asked.

"You're a god *and* an ancient sin," she pointed out. "Let's just say my expectations have gone up."

"Is that so."

"Hey," she shrugged a shoulder, "if you don't think you can rise to the occasion—"

He grabbed her hand and brought it his rock-hard cock. His pants hung low on his hips, the rest of him still fully put together. When she reached for his tie, he latched on to her wrists, tsking down at her.

“I’ve got something to prove now, Princess,” he reminded. “That means this is my show. We play the game my way. Say yes.”

She wet her suddenly dry throat, feeling the heat coil in her lower belly at the gravelly way he spoke. It wasn’t difficult to agree to something like that, not when she knew what doing so would get her. “Yes.”

“Good girl.” He grinned, and adjusted his hold so that her wrists were now clasped in one hand. His other began working at his tie, loosening the knot enough to tug it free and slip it over his head with skill. Then he looped it around her wrists, binding them together, his gaze locked on hers as he did.

If he thought she was going to argue about a little bondage, he was so wrong. Already the thrill was speeding through her, lighting her up inside so that it felt like she was a furnace about ready to overheat and implode.

That excitement only intensified when he forced her arms back over her head, pressing her tied wrists against the leather pointedly.

“Keep them there,” he ordered.

“Sir, yes, sir.”

“Careful,” he warned, eyes sparking a golden hue, “don’t tease me. I know you don’t like using titles like that in the bedroom.”

“I don’t like using titles period.” She hated thinking that she was part of a hierarchy. It made her feel too much like she’d escaped one dictatorship for another. She’d given up a lot to make her own choices.

Too bad none of it matters now.

She shoved that thought away, not wanting to let it destroy this moment between them. She’d yet to deal with what finding out about Paul’s adoption really meant in terms of her future. There was good reason for that. One thing at a time.

“Yet you let me call you Princess,” Reece said, drawing her back to him with the sound of his voice.

Just like that her problems faded away, everything else dripping into the background. The only two people on the planet were right here. He was the only thing she needed to focus on. The only thing that needed her attention. Not the past. Not the future. Just him and the present.

“You seem to get off on doing so,” she told him, smirking when he quirked a brow.

“Only me, huh?”

For a split second she feared he’d read her mind somehow, but then she realized what he meant and she shook her head. “I kind of like it too. I like that someone cares enough about me to come up with a nickname. Even one I still don’t understand.”

Reece’s eyes lost some of their luster. “The Reaper has a nickname for you.” That took her by surprise, and he scowled. “You think I didn’t notice? He calls you *meisje*. It’s Danish for—”

“Darling,” she interrupted. “Yeah, I know. But in the way a father calls his daughter.”

This time he was the one frowning. “You knew that, and you still had a crush on him?”

“Pathetic, right.” She was good at blocking out the things she didn’t want to face. Isn’t that why it’d taken her so long to admit it made sense he was Lust?

“No,” all the heat and jealousy left him as fast as it’d come, “no, Piper. It doesn’t mean you’re that. It means you’re human.”

“So,” she drawled, wanting to get back to the teasing and playfulness of before, “what you’re saying is gods don’t make mistakes?”

“Not at this they don’t.” He flashed her a wolfish grin, planting a palm on each of her knees and shoving them apart. Settling down on the floor between them, he reached to undo her pants, and had them and her panties in a pile across the room in less than a minute.

He didn’t give her time to process, and her body arched into him at the first stroke of his tongue against her core. He traced her slit, and let out a satisfied rumble from the back of his throat when she reacted to him, wiggling beneath his hold. Adjusting his grip on her thighs, he held her down, keeping her in place as he explored her folds. Every once in a while he’d suck on her clit, causing her entire body to jolt, but he’d move away before she could come close.

The constant rise and fall left her panting, and Piper dug her nails into the soft leather of the couch, determined not to lose by touching him back. When he pressed a finger inside of her she tipped her head and moaned, only to whimper when he removed it again.

“Eyes on me, Princess,” he commanded, waiting until she followed. As soon as she did he slid two digits home, smirking at her as she gasped. He curled them inside of her, knowing exactly how it was she liked to be stroked, what places to give extra attention as he pumped his fingers in and out in a slow, torturous rhythm.

Piper didn’t want slow, she wanted fast. She wanted a quick burn, use up all of her energy so that she couldn’t think straight at the end of this.

But Reece was having none of that. He dropped his head back between her thighs and began licking and sucking in time with his fingers, driving her up with each tantalizing second. The entire time he kept her captive, with his eyes and his hands, ignoring the slight struggles she exhibited as she tried to force him faster, deeper.

When she came it was intense, her muscles clamping around him as he continued to work her well to the end of the orgasm.

He didn’t pull away until her body went lax, standing between her legs as he stripped out of his clothes. He was careless with them, but he was also slow with the removal, giving her time to recuperate.

By the time he was completely naked, Piper was hot and ready all over again. She slid to the edge of the couch, reaching up to run her fingers across the hard planes of his abdomen. He was solid to the touch, like granite, and her eyes trailed to his jutting erection, happy to see that she wasn’t the only one affected.

Using his teeth, he ripped open a foil packet and quickly rolled the condom on. Reece grabbed onto her bound wrists, tugging her onto her feet when she glared at him.

“What’s up, Princess?” he asked, brushing strands of hair off of her face. “Oh, I see. You need control.”

“Yes.” She needed an outlet for all of these pent-up emotions and revelations.

“All right.” Gently, he moved her to the side and then lowered himself onto the couch. He closed his legs and then patted his lap. “Climb on.”

She took a step forward, stopping when he gave a single shake of his head.

“Other way,” he ordered, circling a finger in the air for emphasis. When she complied, his hands settled around her hips, helping her to straddle his lap backward.

Piper gripped one of his knees for support, shifting her thighs so that they were spread over him. Once she was in a position where she could successfully brace herself, she glanced down at his cock.

“Need help, Princess?” he asked. He was lounging behind her, so that aside from his hands, the only parts of him that touched her were the parts she was sitting on.

“Reece.” She wanted him so badly.

“You wanted to be in charge,” he reminded, the teasing edge to his voice apparent. They both knew her being in control was an illusion; he was simply proving it by dragging this out.

“Inside me,” she clipped, about to lose it, “now.”

He didn’t need to be told twice, which showed how desperate he was for her, despite his bold words. With one swift move, he penetrated her, the two of them gasping in sync. He gave her a second to adjust to his large size, and then rolled his hips, spurring her on.

Piper pressed down on his knee, lifting herself off his cock. She eased up until he was almost out and then slammed back down onto him. The guttural sound he made gave her a rush of validation, and she repeated the motion, picking up the pace a little every time he bottomed out within in.

She did this to him. Those sounds he was making, the way his fingers dug into her hips, that was all because of her.

She rode him hard, breathing labored, taking pleasure from him. Enough to wipe out everything else. The sounds of slapping flesh and creaking leather filled the room, only adding to her excitement.

Suddenly one of Reece’s arms banded around her small waist, yanking her back against him. His other latched onto the tie around her wrists, forcing her arms up a second time. He settled them around his neck, so that her body was spread across his front, breasts thrust forward. Taking control, he began hammering into her, tweaking one of her nipples to drive her higher.

He captured her mouth, tongue stroking into her mouth in time with his cock, while he slid his free hand down her stomach, through her curls to her clit. Pulling back just enough to get the word out, he demanded, “Come.”

The second his thumb pressed against that small bundle of nerves Piper came. Her pussy tightened around him, pulsing as the waves

continued to batter against her.

His continued thrusts extended her orgasm, and just when it was starting to get to be too much, he pumped into her one last time and exploded. He groaned against the curve of her ear, the arm around her waist tightening like a vice, pinning her as close as possible as he emptied himself.

Once his body had settled, he began raining kisses up and down her neck, over the curve of her arm as he reached to undo the tie. When her wrists dropped free, he took them and rubbed feeling back into each one, keeping her body cradled on his own, with her still impaled on his cock.

“Princess,” he whispered, and she mumbled something incoherent back, too caught up in the way his hands were moving across her skin. “We should probably talk about it.”

“What?” she asked. “I already told you, I don’t care if you’re a sin.”

“And you have no idea how amazing it is to hear you say that, no idea. But that’s not the only issue, baby. I’ve given you space. You need to talk about it.”

Piper stilled, some of the blissful feeling slinking away into darkness. She couldn’t even enjoy the term of endearment he’d just called her.

His hands continued tracing invisible patterns over her, as if hoping to distract her, or at least ease some of the tension this conversation was sure to bring.

“Being an Anesidora isn’t something I want to discuss,” she told him finally. “Especially with you inside me.”

“I think that’s what makes it the perfect time, actually.” He splayed his fingers across her stomach affectionately. Supportively. “You aren’t just an Anesidora anymore, Piper, you’re *the* Anesidora. Talk to me. It’s okay to be afraid, but I’m here. I’ve got you.”

Tears pricked at the corner of her eyes. “I’m not afraid. I’m pissed off.”

“All right.” He waited.

She blew out a breath. “I feel cheated,” she continued, “like my entire life has been the butt of a joke and I’m only now realizing. They raised my brother to be someone he’s not, and kept me standing in his shadow for fear we’d figure it out.”

“You said you left because you didn’t want to live by their rules. You didn’t want to feel like you were wasting your time. It was different before, when you weren’t needed to guard the pithos. Things have changed, you don’t have to stand behind anyone.” He paused. “How do you feel about that, Piper?”

“I don’t know,” she confessed.

“Do you think Paul will still want to do it after he finds out the truth?”

There was always the chance, because being the heir had always meant a hell of a lot more to him than it ever had to her. But then, that was also a major reason finding out he wasn’t might push him away.

“I can’t be sure.” She felt dread snake its way around her heart. “If he doesn’t, I won’t have a choice.”

“You can move the pithos and the bunker to New York,” he suggested. “You’ll be in charge. You’ll have that option. And with that kind of power, you can change the rules. You don’t have to give up your job.”

She let out a humorless chuckle. “I’ve already done that though, haven’t I? I’ve called out for an entire week. Who knows if they’ll take me back.”

She’d told her boss that it was a family emergency, but even compassion from her workmates would only stretch so far. If they didn’t solve this quick, she’d be unemployed on top of everything else.

“Reece,” there was a hitch in her voice that she hated, “even if Paul does stay, the fact that he doesn’t share our bloodline means...Continuing it falls on me. I’ll have to—”

“Stop,” he asserted, but she was too far into the thought to do so.

“I don’t even know if I want kids.” She hadn’t wanted to bring them into this life, that was for certain. She’d started thinking, maybe, once she’d settled into a normal one having a family could be a possibility. That had been so far off into the future, though.

“Piper.”

“I’ll be obligated to have them now.” It was kind of sick, saying it out loud like that. If she didn’t pass on their DNA, their abilities, the ones that helped them protect the pithos and all the other mythological items, would die out with her. She’d leave anyone else who took up the mantel unprepared to do the job.

“I said stop,” this time he growled it, the order sharp and filled with so much anger she actually stiffened instinctually. “Enough, Piper.”

She frowned, wanted to ask him why it was upsetting him when she was the one who’d have to go through with it. Turned out she didn’t have to, however.

“The thought of you with someone else...” he sounded pained as well as pissed off now. “That’s torture enough without adding the idea that you might have to procreate with them.”

“Do you have children, Reece?” She couldn’t recall from any of the myths she knew if he did or not.

“No,” he said tightly. “Having them with mortals is dangerous. The woman more often than not doesn’t survive childbirth. I would never do that to someone, put them at risk like that. Not ever.”

She didn’t know why that response hurt her, but it did. Something sharp bit at the center of her chest and those damn tears returned. It’s not like she didn’t know what this was between them, and what it wasn’t. Long-term had never been in the cards, even if over the past few days she’d started growing attached.

“I’ve never settled with any god or supernatural being long enough to even consider making a family with them,” he went on, completely oblivious to her thoughts. “I guess, like you, I never decided whether or not that was something I wanted.”

After a moment of tense silence between them, Reece stood, lifting her off of him and setting her on her feet.

She felt the immediate loss like a wound, making that strange unexpected pain from his words ten times worse. Then he was taking her up in his arms, and she clung to him as he headed for the stairs, trying to get as close as possible, memorize the feel of him and the smell.

Before he walked away and left her alone.

Again.

Chapter 21:

Reece caught his reflection in the toaster and swore for the hundredth time since waking less than an hour ago. His eyes were glowing. Still. Bright, and vibrant and more noticeable than a bull in a china shop.

He'd spent a good fifteen minutes in the bathroom trying to get them to stop to no avail. They didn't so much as dim, despite all his efforts. He checked his dick for what had to be almost as many times as he'd cursed, confused to find it lax. Unless he was feeling lust, or wrath, or pride, there was no reason for his eyes to be lit up like glow sticks at a rave.

Making breakfast was meant to be a distraction, one he'd hoped would bring him down. But there was a stack of pancakes, a plate of toast and bacon, and the eggs were almost done and nothing had changed.

He thought back to last night, to how he'd put an abrupt end to the conversation he'd insisted they have, carrying Piper upstairs to the bedroom to make them both forget all over again. If he closed his eyes, he could still picture what she looked like sprawled out beneath him, feel the way her thighs clenched around his waist as he buried himself deep into her wet heat.

He'd woken her four times throughout the night, taking her roughly, possessively, one time, only to pump into her gentle and slow the next. Either way, the voice in the back of his head had constantly pointed out what he was doing.

Claiming her. Marking her as his own.

His dick jerked and his eyes popped open. Damn. That had been a bad idea. Now he'd made things worse.

Talk of children and what she'd have to do to honor her family had completely blindsided him. For some reason, he hadn't expected the discussion to take that turn. He should have. He knew how serious the Anesidora family was, and even though Piper had run away, those things would have been ingrained in her at a young age.

Of course she'd think about protecting her family, and in turn, protecting everything they'd fought for for generations. Reece knew what she'd successfully hidden from everyone else.

Piper cared about duty. She wanted to protect the world, the same as any other Anesidora would. She'd just been strong enough to step away when she'd realized her remaining with her family wouldn't help her accomplish that goal. It was probably why she'd jumped into a medical field, whichever one she could easily afford at the time. He had no doubt she'd planned on continuing her education. Becoming a full-time nurse or something of the like as soon as she had the financial means to pay for schooling.

Now she was dealing with the possibility that she'd never have that. That she'd worked so hard, fought so long, only to end up exactly in the position she'd been fleeing.

He didn't want that for her. She deserved so much more. To have everything she desired, especially the life she wanted. It enraged him that she probably wasn't going to get it, infuriated him that she was already thinking about starting a family with someone else.

Because he'd meant what he'd said last night. He couldn't give her a child, not when she was mortal and might not survive.

Whoa. So you would if you could?

No. Children made things permanent, and that's not what this was between them.

It could be.

He didn't see how. She'd wither and die, like all humans, and he'd be right back where he'd started: alone. Losing his mother had destroyed him; it'd taken centuries to build himself back up. Even still, he had a feeling losing Piper would be a million times worse. That if he spent a lifetime with her, and lost her, he would never recover.

And he had responsibilities of his own. He couldn't put himself in a situation where losing his mind was even a remote possibility. At least when Semele had died, times had been different. Society had believed and feared gods like him. When he'd gone on a rampage with his maenads, tearing through towns in his grief, there hadn't been things like bazookas and nuclear weapons to be used against him.

The sound of soft footsteps pulled him from his dire musings and he turned just in time to see a rumpled Piper step into the kitchen. At the sight of her, his dick hardened fully.

She was dressed in one of his shirts, a black one, with only the four middle buttons done up. Her hair was a mess around her head, a sexy

reminder she'd just come from his bed after being satisfied all night. Again. And again. And again.

He almost moaned as she came around the island counter, bringing all that creamy skin up close and personal. Did when she lifted on her toes to press a light kiss to his cheek.

While she did so, Piper reached around him and snatched a piece of crispy bacon off the plate. Stepping away, she smiled wickedly, taking a pointed bite as she moved back around to settle on one of the stools on the other side of the island.

"Sneaky." He flicked off the stove and removed the finished eggs from the burner. "But feel free to distract me with kisses any time."

"Careful," she practically purred, and he felt it all the way to his balls, "I might take you up on that offer."

Fuck, did he hope so.

Reece gave himself a moment to calm down, fixing each of them a plate before joining her. When he took the seat at her left, he had to carefully adjust himself, the move drawing her attention to the erection in his pants.

She chuckled but didn't say anything, taking a hearty bite of scrambled eggs instead. Her eyes went wide.

"Yeah?" Pride swept through him.

"You can seriously cook," she said, forking another mouthful. "Why have we been eating so much takeout again?"

"We've been a little busy." He rested a heavy palm on her bare knee, felt her shiver beneath him.

"Oh right," she agreed.

Before she could act on the lust he saw pooling into her brown eyes, he forced himself to pull back. "Eat up, Princess."

She didn't seem to have a problem with that, diving into the pancakes next. "Your eyes are glowing."

"Believe it or not," he sighed, "they haven't stopped since last night."

"No?" Her brows winged up. "Is that normal?"

"Not even remotely."

"Do you know what caused it?"

"I've got an inkling." He stared at her pointedly, grinning when her cheeks stained pink. "Does that embarrass you, Princess? Knowing how

much you affect me? How badly I want you?”

“Not exactly what I’m feeling.” To prove it, she ran her hand up his arm.

Reece felt the lust pour from the tips of her fingers like fire licking at his skin. It had him hot and his dick so hard it ached.

“Fuck.” He wanted in her. Now.

“My thoughts exactly.” She angled herself toward him.

And his phone chose that moment to go off. Cursing, Reece tugged it out of his pocket and practically snarled into it. “What?”

“Morning to you too, sunshine,” Hadrian said.

“This better be good.” He swept his hungry gaze over Piper. “I’m about to be in the middle of something.”

Piper opened her legs and he just about died from desire.

“I’ve got something for you,” Hadrian told him. “Some information. I need you to come down.”

Damn it.

He took a single, slow, calming breath. That did shit. Then he ran an aggravated hand through his hair. If they’d gotten something on Orpheus, he had to go, no matter how smoking hot Piper currently looked, or how wet he could already see she was...

“I’ll be there in a few.” He hung up and slipped the phone back into his pocket, already regretting that he was going to have to leave her. “That was Hadrian. I’m needed in the Underworld.”

“Not as much as you’re needed here, I assure you.” Despite her words, she got up and kissed him quickly on the mouth. “Go. The faster you leave the faster you can come.”

The double entendre was not lost on him.

“Fuck.”

“You said that already, *baby*.” She waved him off and settled back in front of her breakfast.

“I’m not sure about leaving you here alone.” He hesitated, glancing about the kitchen as if threats were somehow hiding in the cabinets. As an afterthought, he took out his phone a second time and quickly sent out a text.

Instead of replying, the maenad appeared a few feet away a second later.

“Hello,” Jane said, nodding to both of them. “Oh, awesome, breakfast.”

Reece rolled his eyes as she made herself a plate without asking. Seeing her in person was all he needed to know that she hadn’t been affected by Orpheus.

“Jane is going to stay with you,” he told Piper, and when it was clear she didn’t like it, added, “just to be on the safe side.”

“Two is always better than one,” Jane said over her shoulder, winking at Piper.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” Reece assured them both.

“No problem. I’m happy to help.” Jane turned and then frowned at him. “Why are your eyes glowing?”

Right. That.

Reece snatched a pair of sunglasses off the kitchen table and put them on. “Not important. Call me if anything happens. Anything.”

“Relax,” Piper said. “We’ll be fine. Go.”

He really didn’t want to, but Jane was trustworthy and completely herself. There really wasn’t a good enough reason not to. It took all his willpower, but he managed to drag himself away, flashing to the Underworld, directly into the throne room.

Hadrian wasn’t alone.

Reece took one look at the blond propped against the wall and started violently shaking his head as he approached them.

“Nope,” he stated, “Out. Get out.”

The blond gave him a funny look.

“Right now,” Reece insisted. Things with Piper were complicated enough without the god of love lurking about.

“Wait...” Eros glanced behind him to see if there was someone else there. “Me? Really?”

“Get.”

“What the fuck...” His words trailed off and he held up both hands when it was clear Reece wasn’t budging. “Whatever, man. You’ve always been a tad on the crazy side. I’ll catch you later, Hadrian.”

Eros sent him one last odd look, took a single step to the right, and disappeared.

“Well,” Hadrian drawled from where he sat in his throne, “that was rude.”

“Love gods make me antsy,” Reece said, trying to wave it off like it was no big deal. He wasn’t fooling anyone.

“Last I checked,” the ruler of the Underworld corrected, “you and Eros got on pretty well.”

There was no way he was going to get into it with him, so Reece merely shrugged a shoulder and crossed his arms stubbornly. He didn’t have to explain himself.

Hadrian eyed him. “What’s with the shades?”

“They’re to cover my eyes,” he stated.

“Your eyes?”

“I seem to be having an issue with them.”

“Is that right?” He watched him another moment, clearly trying to pick him apart, then settled back in his chair. “Eurydice found something. Would you like to hear it?”

“It’s why I’m here.” Reece took a breath and rubbed at his neck, trying to loosen some of the frustration and tension. Seeing Eros had seriously thrown him for a loop. It’d brought up feelings he didn’t want to dwell on, especially not so soon after his thoughts about Piper and the possessiveness he felt. “Sorry. I have a lot going on.”

“Undoubtedly.” Hadrian swung his legs around so that he was sitting straight. “This might help with some of that. Eurydice managed to get a couple of names, a few of the other sins possibly locked in Pandora’s Box. One of them, in particular, seems promising.”

“Tell me.” Anticipation was a live thing inside of him.

“Have you ever heard of Discord?”

“Sure.” He hadn’t realized the man who’d created the pithos viewed discord as a sin. But then, he’d been a bit sporadic with his choosing. That’s how Lust had ended up inside, after all. They hadn’t been considered sins before being locked away. That name had come after.

“Rumor is she’s trapped in the jar,” Hadrian said. “My brother and I remember her. Used to know her personally.” He paused. “She can get into the Underworld, Reece, and like a Reaper, she can pull people out.”

“What?” How was that even possible?

“She helped me build this place,” he admitted. “In the beginning. In return, I gave her a home here, allowed her to stay.”

“And yet you had no idea she was in Pandora’s Box?”

“We weren’t best friends or anything,” Hadrian stated. “I assumed she went somewhere else, or met some other dastardly fate. I had no way of knowing she was in the pithos.”

Seemed cold to Reece that he wouldn’t have even bothered searching, but then, it also wasn’t surprising. Hadrian had never exactly been known as the warm and fuzzy type. And he had a lot of his own stuff, what with an entire world to keep running.

“She’s got to be the one Orpheus is looking for,” Reece said. “He gets her out, and she’s his best chance at getting Eurydice back under his compulsion.”

“I’m seeing a serious flaw to that plan,” Hadrian commented. “You remember what you and the others were like when you first came out? And that was forever ago. She’s been trapped in there twice as long. She comes out, she’s not going to be very sane, let alone helpful. To anyone.”

“So either Orpheus doesn’t realize this, or...”

“There’s another part to his plan we’re not getting.”

They knew the who, that was something at least. Knowing his reasoning for taking the pithos and involving the Anesidora’s in the first place was progress. But even if Orpheus could somehow contain Discord long enough to get her to enter the Underworld and remove a certain soul, where did he intend to put Eurydice?

As a spirit, she didn’t have a body, and hers was long turned to dust by now. Seeing as she didn’t want to be topside, she’d resist, try to get back to the Underworld. If he hoped to keep her there, he’d need to force her into a physical form before she could do that, and bind her to it.

“Orpheus is going to need a body for his bride,” Hadrian said then, as if reading Reece’s thoughts. “Can’t be a Reaper, or a maenad, they’re too strong for spirit possession to take. Really, humans are the only option available to him. But they wither and die. He’d get her for maybe another thirty years tops. The second that body passes on, she’d slip away and return here. He’s not thinking rationally, but he’s certainly not stupid. He’d come up with something more concrete before risking all this.”

“So we still need to figure out how he’s hoping to control a newly released sin and—” Reece stopped abruptly, and swore. They were morons. “He’s fucking Orpheus. How do we fucking think he’s planning on doing that?”

Hadrian cursed himself. "Right. That damn lyre. Do you think it would work on one of you? Those trapped in the pithos tend to be stronger than the typical run of the mill maenad or Reaper."

"He was able to hypnotize you," he reminded. "You let him try and take Eurydice. If he can get to you, even a little, I wouldn't put being able to sway Discord past him. Besides, he only needs to control her long enough for her to get Eurydice out. What's that? Five minutes, tops?"

"More like three," Hadrian said. "Two, if Discord can do it without physically entering the Underworld. Which is what I'm afraid of. She does that, and I won't even sense it in time to stop her."

Reece nodded. "That just leaves the body. Whoever he's planning to force her into, that's who we need to find first. We take the vessel away, his whole plan comes undone."

"What about the Anesidora girl?"

"What about her?" the warning to tread lightly was clear in his voice.

"Why does he want her?" Hadrian asked.

"He needs her to open the pithos. Rover didn't tell you? Her brother is adopted. He can't do it."

Hadrian's expression darkened. "No, he did not tell me that."

Another Reaper appeared out of thin air across the room, moving swiftly toward them. He had short sable colored hair and was dressed casually in dark clothing.

"Ferris," Reece said, recognizing the newcomer. He'd been Hadrian's right hand for as long as he could remember.

Ferris gave him a silent greeting and turned his attention to the god on the throne. "You called?"

"Check on Rover. Relieve him if he's in the middle of something important and send him my way." Hadrian rested an annoyed look on Reece. "I can't exactly be helpful if my own people are withholding pertinent information."

Ferris clucked his tongue. "I never liked that guy."

Reece waited until the Reaper had gone before putting in his two cents. "I fucking hate him."

Hadrian grinned. "Rover is...a tad narrow minded. But that's only because he takes his job seriously."

"Yeah, too seriously to keep you informed."

Before Hadrian could respond to that, Ferris was back, looking a little disheveled. He glanced between the two of them and then blurted, "I can't find him."

Reece's alarm bells went on red alert.

"He isn't with the Anesidora's," Ferris continued, "and they claim they haven't seen him since early this morning. They've tried his cell, but he isn't replying."

Hadrian said something back, but Reece had stopped listening. There was a sick feeling in his gut and something very akin to fear was filling him up. There was only one logical reason for Rover to have gone missing and that was Orpheus.

"Piper," her name hissed frantically past his lips and then he was gone, flashing back to his kitchen where he'd left her without so much as a goodbye to the others.

His heart stopped when he got there.

The food he'd made was scattered across the counters and on the floor. Shards of shattered plates and cups sparkled under the sunlight that spilled in through the large windows at his back.

Jane was lying among it, eyes glassy. Unseeing. There was a hole in her chest and her heart had been carelessly discarded a few feet away from her dead body.

Reece would have given into the rage that threatened to spiral him into a frenzy, if not for the other cold hard fact.

Piper wasn't there.

He was back in the Underworld before he could process that's what he was doing, and was met with dire stares from his friends.

"The Anisedora's know what's been taken from the bunker," Hadrian told him carefully.

And just when he thought things couldn't possibly get any worse, they did.

Chapter 22:

Piper struggled against his hold, but he had a death grip on her arm and all she ended up doing was hurting herself more. They were in some dank warehouse, and through the spots where the foggy windows were broken she could make out water. She shuffled over crumpled and stained paper, kicked at busted wood bits originally from pallets, and almost tripped more than once as she was dragged across the expanse.

Everything had happened so fast, so even knowing she was by the ocean was useless. She could be halfway across the world from Reece's place by now. Thinking of him caused a pang in her chest, made her remember seeing the look of shock on Jane's face when...

She shut those thoughts down. They'd only distract her, and right now she needed to stay on her toes. With any luck, she'd find an opportunity to slip away and then she could steal a phone or something. It was a shitty plan, but there wasn't much else for her to work with. Getting abducted by her one friend hadn't exactly been expected.

Rover had appeared in Reece's kitchen only a few minutes after the god had left. It'd been immediately apparent there was something wrong with him, and both she and Jane had backed away. Before the Maenad could flash them, however, the Reaper struck, somehow catching the woman off guard.

It couldn't even really be considered a fight, seeing as how Jane never got the chance to react. Rover had torn the heart straight out of her chest, and before her body had even fully hit the ground, had turned on Piper.

The blood was still warm on his arm, leaving droplets on the cold concrete as he led them further into the warehouse. His eyes were bright red, and he kept twitching, snarling at anything that shifted in the breeze as they passed. He'd always been so level-headed, so cool and collected. It was scary seeing him like this, so out of control. Wild.

It didn't take a genius to guess Orpheus had gotten to him, and she wondered if that meant her parents had met the same fate. Were they roaming their suburban neighborhood tearing through houses nibbling on

household pets right now? Or, maybe because they were human, they weren't.

Rover wanted to attack things, but he was still acting differently from the way the maenads had. Perhaps Orpheus's abilities brought out different aspects in a person, depending on what they were. Maenads underwent the *bakkheia*, therefore going into a frenzy was what they were used to when they lost control.

Reapers were different, every bit as deadly, but more precise. They wouldn't generally tear a person limb from limb; they'd execute a perfect killing blow, much like Rover had done to Jane back there.

She didn't bother asking where he was taking her, and he'd yet to say a word to her either. Instead, she tried to catalog her surroundings on the off chance she really did get a chance to escape. If this is where Orpheus had been hiding out, no wonder he'd been so inconspicuous. The place was a dump.

They finally came to the back of the building, and Rover tugged her down a narrow set of rickety steps. Each one bowed beneath her weight, and she held her breath, waiting for one of them to snap and send her falling. When they reached the bottom unscathed, she was actually a bit relieved. A feeling that quickly vanished when she looked up and locked eyes with her brother.

It took her brain a split second to process that it wasn't Paul she was looking at, even though it was his body. The same uncomfortable confusion that had hit her the first time when he'd walked into the club. Only now the anger burned a thousand times brighter. If it weren't for the Reaper holding onto her, she'd probably attack.

"I said undamaged," Orpheus stated, staring at a particularly large blood splat smeared across Piper's left thigh.

She was still wearing Reece's shirt, and was at least thankful that she'd put panties on this morning as well. At the time, she hadn't wanted to come downstairs and find a maenad there and be completely embarrassed.

"Not hers," Rover said, and his voice sounded off, too gravelly and deep. His fingers were leaving bruises on her arms, and when she wiggled pointedly, he glanced at her. There was nothing familiar in his red eyes. They were completely blank.

"Huh." Orpheus stared a little longer and then shrugged nonchalantly. "All right then. Bring her forward." He motioned toward a

corner of the room where an old radiator was built into the wall.

Rover brought her over and shoved her to the ground. She didn't bother to struggle, and he ignored her glare as he attached her wrists to the metal radiator with a set of silver handcuffs.

"Really?" When he stepped back, Piper glanced over his shoulder at Orpheus and jiggled the cuffs so the metal clanged. "Cliché much?"

"I've been occupied the past few centuries," Orpheus told her, "so I really wouldn't know. Is it?"

"Pretty much."

"Interesting. In my day only slaves had a tendency to get tied up. And if we wanted heat we built a fire."

Piper rolled her eyes. "Amazing. Can we get on with it already?"

"I figured you might want to stall," Orpheus admitted. "What? Not hoping Lust comes crashing through the walls to save you at the last minute?"

"If you came from a time where every woman also happened to be a damsel in distress, you're in for an even bigger surprise."

"Not every woman." He shook his head. "My woman was a goddess among men."

He'd dressed her brother up in a salmon colored shirt and faded blue jeans with holes on the knees. His boat shoes were light blue with tiny maroon octopi peppered about, and he'd recently pierced his right ear where now a small gold ball flickered.

At least, she assumed the piercing was recent, because she couldn't recall if he'd had it or not at the club, and when she'd left five years ago her brother hadn't had a single one. Though, that also left a lot of time between then and now for him to have gotten one. She hoped he had. Hoped Orpheus hadn't taken liberties, even such a small and eventually reversible one, with Paul's body.

"Do you like the shoes?" He lifted his foot when he saw her noticing. "It fascinates me, how you people put tiny prints on everything. I have a pair with little yellow ducks as well. And my underwear—" He reached for the top of his pants and she quickly averted her gaze.

"Whoa," she shook her head, "gonna stop you right there, buddy."

"Right," he nodded like that made all the sense in the world, "I forget, you and this body are siblings."

“Cutting to the chase—” because this conversation was becoming painful “—no, I will not open Pandora’s Box for you. So, now that we’ve gotten that cleared up, how about you unlock these cuffs, get the fuck out of my brother, and mosey on your way.”

“Bravado,” he mused, “that’s cute.”

Piper leaned back against the wall and sighed. “Can I at least get some pants?”

It was clear he was only pretending to think it over, his sharp eyes lingering on her bare legs longer than socially acceptable. “I like you the way you are.”

Of course, the first person to fully accept her had to be a psychopathic malicious spirit currently infesting her brother.

Reece accepts you.

“What happens now?” She settled more comfortably on the ground, ignoring how cold the floor was beneath her. She assumed he’d try and force her to open the pithos, but she wouldn’t make it easy, and he’d have a difficult time of it with her hands bound the way they were.

Which made her think about how they’d been bound last night, with Reece’s tie...How the thick, hard length of him had slid into her, rocked against her core...and—

Shit. She was going there. What the hell was wrong with her? This was not the time to be turned on, partially because of how scantily dressed she was, and partially because her life was very obviously dangling by a thin thread. She’d let the god of lust get too deep under her skin, and now she couldn’t get him out.

Had he come back yet and realized she was missing? Found Jane dead on the floor? She felt a swell of fury and sadness for him at that thought. He’d already lost so many in all of this, and he and Jane had been close. For that alone, Orpheus had to pay.

Maybe they’d get lucky, and whatever Hadrian had told Reece in the Underworld would help him find her. Then again, when had luck ever been on Piper’s side?

“I do a little experiment,” Orpheus answered her question and motioned toward a woman Piper hadn’t noticed standing in the shadows. Another maenad. Taking the small vial she offered, he stepped closer to Piper.

It was only about as long as her pinky, and filled with an odd whitish substance that seemed to glitter a sheen of gold. The second the cap was removed, the smell of honey permeated the air, strong enough that it was almost as if she could taste it even though he was standing over five feet away.

Piper tensed, unable to keep up the appearance she didn't care about what was going to happen next. She cared. A lot. He came closer and she started tugging against the cuffs, the metal digging painfully into her flesh. She hardly noticed, too caught up by the determination written across his face.

"If you fight me," Orpheus said, "it'll only make things more difficult."

When he was close enough, she kicked out, letting out a cry when he grabbed her ankle and pulled. She slammed onto her back, her arms now pinned above her at an odd angle. Before she could attempt to deliver another blow, he straddled her waist, pressing his knees against her sides.

Piper turned frantic, twisting herself in a poor attempt to shake him. It wouldn't matter if she did, not when she was still trapped and cuffed to the radiator, but instinct had taken over.

Orpheus caught her jaw, using more strength than should have been possible in Paul's body to force her to tip her head back. Then pressed his thumb and forefinger into her cheeks, hard enough that her mouth popped open.

She tried to snap her teeth together, but he prevented that easily, slipping the bottle between her lips to empty the contents onto her tongue. The taste was sweet and strong, honey with a hint of something else, something fruity. Despite how good it tasted, she knew better than to swallow.

He dropped the now empty vial onto the ground with a clatter, then covered her mouth and pinched her nose shut. His expression never wavered, even as she shook her head, unsuccessfully trying to loosen his hold.

With her airwaves cut off, Piper had no choice. Just when her lungs began to burn and her vision clouded over, she swallowed.

The second she did, Orpheus removed his hands and quickly stepped back, giving her space. He watched curiously as she sucked in

oxygen, as if waiting for something to happen. At his back, the maenad handed him something else, which he took without turning to look at her.

Piper felt like she'd just downed a vat of espresso. Everything was buzzing, a raw energy coursing through her, making her feel like the world was vibrating around her. It was difficult to focus on anything, things were blurry and suddenly it sounded like she was underwater. Orpheus may or may not have said something, but she couldn't make it out, couldn't even focus on him long enough to process his approach.

There was something in his hand, something shiny and silver, but even that was currently unidentifiable to her. She pulled at her wrists again, but couldn't feel them, or the metal holding them together. It was like someone had flicked a switch inside her, cutting her off from everything except the odd thrumming in her veins.

Orpheus crouched over her, canting his head. After a brief pause, he reached out and pressed her shoulder, pinning her against the floor. He said something else, again, incomprehensible, then lifted the shiny object above her.

And drove it through her chest.

Piper might have screamed, she couldn't be sure. For a moment the world grew very still and there was nothing but bright searing pain.

Then there was nothing at all.

* * *

The first thing she noticed was the music. It was soft, gentle, like the waves of the ocean lolling over her in the middle of a summer night. It settled any of her lingering nerves, washed away the rush of adrenaline and panic that had started rising inside of her.

The next thing was the heat of the sun on her face, the smell of salt in the air. Gulls cried out to one another above, and the ground beneath her was swaying. The tempo of the music lifted, the notes getting heavier, more harried. As it continued to play, she blinked her eyes open, turning her head away from the blinding sunlight.

The fact that she was on a boat confused her, and she couldn't recall where she'd been prior, which made it worse. She was pretty positive it had at least been on dry land though. An image of handcuffs flashed in her mind, but when she frowned down at her wrists, they were unmarred.

What the hell?

Slowly, she pushed herself up, stopping every few seconds to wait for the dizzy spells to pass. What felt like hours, but was probably only minutes, later she finally sat up, pressing herself against the inside of the boat.

Orpheus was seated a few feet away, on top of an overturned white bucket. There was an instrument in his lap, a lyre, and his fingers were deftly strumming across it, creating the music she was hearing. He was watching her intensely, and something about it was off and predatory, but Piper couldn't get her worry to kick in.

There were others on the boat, a mixture of maenads and who she assumed to be humans. None of them so much as looked their way, and Orpheus paid them no mind. They seemed to be moving about the deck with purpose, but she had no idea what that purpose was.

She shifted and a spot of red caught her attention so she glanced down at her chest. There was an angry red mark between her breasts, and the shirt she was wearing was completely ruined. The two sides gaped open, exposing more skin than she would have usually been comfortable with, but it was the dried blood that really got to her.

He'd been hovering over her, something in his hand, and there'd been pain...

"What—" she had to stop, wet her throat. It felt and sounded like someone had scrubbed her trachea with sandpaper. "What did you do to me?"

For a moment it didn't seem like he was doing to tell her, then he smiled, and it was so far from friendly that even through the music her spine stiffened.

"I had to test it out," he said, angling his chin toward her chest. "Make sure it worked before we proceeded."

"You mean kill me?" She meant to yell it, but her words came out breezy, almost like they were discussing the weather. Which was...off-putting. Her eyes trailed to the instrument he was playing. She had to find a way to get him to stop, or at least find a way to fight through this compulsion.

"Only to ensure it didn't take," he told her. "Which it did not. You're breathing again, aren't you?"

She was, which should have been impossible.

“What was in that vial?” She was starting to get an idea, and she didn’t like it.

“Something else I grabbed from your brothers’ place.” Orpheus strummed a new note, and she sat up straighter against her will. He smiled again. “Did you know I could get you to do just about anything for me? All I have to do is move my fingers across the right strings. It’s so simple, really, how easily controlled people are.”

Yeah, she already knew all that. Hearing it again wasn’t going to help her.

“What was it?” she persisted, trying to keep them on track. “What did you take from the bunker?”

He chuckled. “Sad that you haven’t already figured it out, considering you’re the rightful caretaker of the item I stole. Of all of that stuff, in fact, and, trust me, there is a lot of stuff in there. If I hadn’t already known what I was looking for, I would have gotten completely turned around among all that junk. But I digress. Ambrosia. That’s what was in the vial, Piper. A little food of the gods.”

Her heart stuttered to a complete stop. “No.”

“Oh, yes,” he said. “Congratulations, Anesidora. You’re immortal now.”

“This isn’t happening.”

“Are you freaking out?” He frowned, adjusted his grip on the instrument and tried something new. When her muscles noticeably relaxed despite the twisting of her thoughts, he made a satisfied sound in the back of his throat. “There. Much better. We have to keep you calm for what’s to come. I can’t worry about you losing it as well as taking control of Discord, now can I?”

Wait. What?!

Everything was happening too fast. She needed it all to slow down. Why the hell had her family stored a vial of Ambrosia in the first place? Why not give it back to one of the gods if they knew they had it? In the wrong hands—like Orpheus’s for instance—it could be used in a dastardly way—like on someone like her, who didn’t want it.

There were only a few ways to make someone immortal, and Piper knew next to none of them. But she knew about Ambrosia. Also called the food of the gods, it was thought to help promote their immortality. For

them, it kept them strong, but when given to a mortal, it had the power to alter their DNA. Granting everlasting life.

Everlasting. As in, eternal.

“No.” If she could separate her real emotions from the ones Orpheus was forcing on her, she’d be screaming and crying and basically a complete mess right now. She doubted she should even be able to feel as much as she already was through his hypnosis.

Which had to be a good thing, didn’t it? If she was still even partially in her right mind, then perhaps she could break through all the way. But first she needed to know the rest of his plan. He needed to be stopped, and it was clear they were out of time.

“I don’t know who Discord is,” she said.

“Another sin trapped in the pithos,” he explained. “You’re going to let her free.”

Piper blinked. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am. Deadly so.” He grinned. “See what I did there?”

When she didn’t laugh, he flicked his fingers over a different string and she found herself chuckling against her will.

“She’s going to help me get Eurydice back,” he continued. “I’m going to use this lyre to control her into doing it. Then, as soon as she’s got my wife, back into the pithos she goes. Don’t worry. I’ll ensure no other sins are released.”

“How?”

“Same way I’m doing the rest of it.” He motioned toward the instrument. “Obviously. Has dying screwed with your brain?” He frowned. “That won’t do. I need you in perfect health.”

“Why?” she asked. “I just have to have my hands to open the jar.”

He grunted. “If that was all I needed you for, then sure. But you have a much larger purpose than that, Piper. Why else do you think I went through such extremes to acquire you and the Ambrosia?”

He had a point. Why make her immortal? There was no logical reason for that. After this, he had to know she’d come after him, and he’d just given her an eternity to do so. The guy was certifiably insane, but she didn’t believe he wanted to spend the rest of his days looking over his shoulder.

It hit her, and even though she couldn’t fully express herself with her body under his control, inside she had to admit he was right. She was a

fucking idiot for not having figured this all out sooner. The second she'd woken up she should have put two and two together.

"You're going to have Eurydice possess me."

Shit. Shit. Shit.

"I'll keep her trapped in your body," he divulged, confirming her suspicions. "At least until your soul dies. Then she'll be the new permanent inhabitant. Once this is done, and she's inside of you, I'll work on finding myself a more long-term home and repeat the process."

If someone stayed possessed too long, the original host disappeared. Her soul would wither into nothing and she would cease to exist. No afterlife. No Underworld. No anything. It was a fear she'd had for Paul, but from what she understood, the process took time, and the stronger the soul, the more of it. It'd only been a couple of weeks since Orpheus had possessed him.

"You're not staying in my brother?" She took some comfort knowing that he at least would be let go. It did anyway, until she realized it meant the musician would probably kill him as soon as he stopped being useful. Piper felt a kernel of rage at that and clung to it.

"That sentence alone should clue you in on the why," Orpheus told her. "Our spirits won't be related, but our bodies will be, and that makes me uncomfortable enough to want to seek out a new one."

She let him talk, pretending to listen while she focused on building that anger inside of her. Here was yet another person trying to take away her future, her choices. He wanted to steal her life the same way her parents had, the same way Rover had. She'd been born into a world where what she wanted didn't matter. Even now, he was speaking as though all of this was already done. To him, it was set in stone.

That seriously pissed her off.

Rover appeared then, right next to Orpheus, his eyes on something off in the distance.

Piper looked, but there was nothing there. There wasn't anything anywhere, in fact. All she could see in any direction was blue above and blue below.

"How long was I out?" she asked, voicing her fears before she could think better of it. It had to have been a while if he'd managed to bring them so far out to sea already. Even the gulls that she'd heard initially were no longer there.

“A day,” Orpheus revealed. “It only took around six hours for your chest to heal, so I imagine the rest of it was merely your body going through the change from mortal to immortal.”

“We’ll be there in under five minutes,” Rover said.

“Perfect.” He abruptly stopped playing and motioned toward Piper. “Tie her up again, but leave her hands free. I’m going to need them.” As he stood, he glanced back her way. “The effects of my music should last for another half hour or so, so don’t bother trying anything. You’re under my thrall, Piper. Get used to it.”

She attempted to break out of it anyway, struggling against the laxness of her body as Rover walked toward her. She just barely got her leg to shift, but then it was too late.

The Reaper picked up a long string of rope as he approached, then tied it around the back of her arms, looping it around the side of the ship. He tugged, making sure it was tight enough that she couldn’t budge, then stepped back to inspect his work.

The binding had her arms pulled awkwardly, her breasts jutting forward. The material of the torn and bloodied shirt slipped a little, barely keeping her upper half covered.

“You mind?” she asked tersely, not really expecting a reaction from him.

Rover hesitated, then bent and pulled the shirt, closing it as much as possible. He caught her shocked gaze and spun on his heels and headed to the bow of the ship where Orpheus now stood.

Either the hypnosis allowed for him to make his own decisions like that, or it was a sign Rover was fighting past the compulsion. She decided to go with the latter, because it meant there was hope.

If he could fight against this, so could she.

And once she had, Orpheus was going down.

Chapter 23:

“Couldn’t we have at least waited for it to be cooler out?” Piper kept her tone light, unencumbered, as she inwardly worked on taking apart the hypnosis bit by bit.

She could feel Orpheus’s power inside of her, cinching down over the rest of her body. It was a good thing—though super invasive—because it gave her a physical target to aim her anger at. And she had a lot of anger. Ever since the musician had risen from the Underworld, her life had fallen into shambles. He’d completely destroyed any normalcy she’d managed to cobble together.

Even if it was all false.

If it hadn’t been him, her parents would have done the job themselves ten years from now. If even that long. No, she’d been set up from the get-go, and she needed to deal with that.

Later.

Calling on wrath was difficult, and not just on account of the hypnosis trying to bank her emotions down. There was no source on the ship, and they were too far from the mainland for her to try and siphon it from anyone other than those also under Orpheus’s control. One would think after everything she’d been through the past week, Piper would have a reserve of it, but she’d long since burned through most of that.

Unlike what she’d led Rover to believe, she couldn’t create her own intense sin to use. Sure, she could feel a spark, initiate the rest and suck enough from surrounding energy sources, but that was all. Her own anger, attraction, hubris...that wasn’t enough. Another perk of being an Anesidora. It was meant to keep them in check, another preventative measure to ensure they’d never want to open the jar.

She did not. Yet it was starting to look like she didn’t have a choice.

There was only one other way she could get a hold of a sin strong enough to break the hypnosis, and that was to siphon straight from a pure source. All of which were currently trapped in the pithos the musician had resting at his feet.

Piper almost laughed at the irony of her situation. She was legitimately contemplating opening Pandora's Box. Her ancestors were probably rolling in their graves. She wasn't seeing any other options, though, and if she let Orpheus do what he wanted, more people would be hurt in the process.

"Rumor has it Discord was born in the dead of night. Going out in the sun supposedly weakens her," Orpheus answered. "I decided taking precautions was necessary."

"And if you're intel is bad?" She worked apart enough of the hypnosis on her to feel more of her anger flash through her. That was good. If she could loosen herself enough from the compulsion, she should be able to immediately access the sin.

This is the worst plan in the history of terrible plans.

Not really. Pandora opened the box simply because she was curious. That had been an awful plan. Piper was going to do it because she didn't have any other choice. That had to count for something, right?

"Then it wouldn't really make a difference what time of day it is," he said. "It doesn't matter. She'll be disoriented enough that I'll be able to control her with my music. Don't worry so much, Anesidora. Everything will work out as planned."

"That *is* what I'm worried about, asshole."

Her words caught his attention and he turned to her, angling his head. After a quiet moment he clucked his tongue. "I wonder if your strength comes from the ambrosia, or if it's been in you all along."

She narrowed her eyes, but was cautious enough not to respond.

"It's a compliment," he assured her. "It took the god of the dead a good minute to break through my hypnosis enough to add the stipulation of not being able to see my love to our deal."

Piper had been sitting here for at least ten, so she wasn't really seeing how he thought she was being impressive. Sure, her muscles weren't so lax, and if she had to, she was almost certain she could now get herself to stand, but that wasn't going to be overly useful. All it would take was another strum of his fingers against the lyre and she'd drop like a sack of potatoes.

Not to mention the rope still holding her in place.

"Once Discord lets Eurydice out," she said, "and you've successfully trapped her in my body, what then? You can't honestly think

you'll be able to evade the entire forces of the Underworld, do you?"

"You mean like I'm already doing?" he lifted a brow, the look so like her brother that she felt her stomach flip.

Focus, she ordered herself.

"We both know the only reason you've gotten this far is because Hadrian had to pull the Reapers back for fear you'd take them over. He didn't want to risk you using one of them to grab Eurydice."

"I assumed as much," Orpheus declared. "Why do you think I came up with this plan? Going after the Anesidora Heir was the first thing I did."

"How did you even find Paul?"

"You mean because you're supposed to be so well hidden?" He snorted. "The Underworld is filled with all types, including those more recently dead. It didn't take long to piece together your family's whereabouts from stories. The fact that you keep your last name is a blatant signifier for anyone who remembers the meaning."

That was sort of the point. It was meant to keep people like him from acting on their impulses. The Anesidora were "protected".

"The gods won't like this," Piper said, frowning slightly when he laughed.

"The gods aren't even half what they used to be. Didn't Dionysus tell you?"

He'd mentioned something about there not being as many, hadn't he? Told her about a war that had killed many of them. But it couldn't be as bad as Orpheus believed, not when there was a good number still alive.

Reece and Hadrian, for instance. She'd never met the latter, but she knew he wouldn't let this stand. And Reece...she could count on him. He'd do everything in his power to put an end to Orpheus, even if he was too late to stop the musician from enacting the first part of his plan. Even if Piper was no longer around to see the take-down.

"Besides," Orpheus went on, oblivious to her murderous thoughts, "as soon as I've gotten my wife back, I'll cover our tracks with enough supernatural beings the gods will be too occupied to bother with us. Maenads and Reapers are just the beginning. Do you know how many creatures live in the sea alone? Mythology is filled with them, so you had to have heard of at least a few."

"So, you're going to, what?" she snapped. "Set them loose on the world?"

“You didn’t honestly think I was going to stop at a mere rescue mission, did you?” His eyes heated. “No, I want revenge for what Hadrian put me through. And I’ll get it. The best thing about controlling souls is they don’t need a body for you to do it. I can have a swarm of malicious spirits headed straight for Hadrian’s door as soon as I’ve gotten Eurydice safely sequestered away.”

“And Reece?”

“I’ve always been curious what would happen if his precious maenads turned on him. Do you think he’d get a third life? Or would being torn apart finally be the end for Dionysus? We’re going to have to make sure we’re around to see that, don’t you agree?”

Piper tugged on the rope, not even caring that she’d lost her cool and played her hand. Let the bastard know she was gaining ground on breaking his hypnosis. There was no way in hell she was letting anything happen to Reece.

And he’s more important than self-preservation...because?

Because she was falling in love with him, damn it!

The revelation hit her like a bucket of ice water and she froze. She’d just accepted that she was developing strong feelings for him, but that couldn’t mean...Shit. It did though. In under two weeks she’d somehow made the epic mistake of falling for the god of lust.

“I’ll do it,” she said, aware of her racing heart and the way her skin felt like it was on fire. Hell, she could barely hear her own voice over the pounding in her head. “I’ll open the pithos. But not until I’ve gotten your word that you won’t hurt Reece.”

She’d been planning on opening it anyway—he didn’t need to know that—and this way she had a convincing reason for her change of heart. She almost flinched at her own poor word choice. If she could protect the god of lust and get herself out of this, then she had to try, and if it didn’t work... well, at least she could fade into nothingness knowing Orpheus couldn’t hurt Reece.

“How do you know I’ll keep my word?” Orpheus asked curiously, which wasn’t an outright no, so that was something.

“Because you’re going to swear it on the river. Do that, and I’ll open the jar for you, willingly. We can get this party started and speed up the process. You want to see Eurydice, right? The sooner the better.”

Orpheus thought it over and then motioned toward Rover, who was still standing nearby listening. “What do you think? Can she be trusted?”

“Piper has never wanted to be an Anesidora,” the Reaper stated, as if that were answer enough.

Oddly, it must have been, because the musician nodded his head then said to her, “I could make you do the same, swear on the river. Then we’ll both be forced to keep our word. Would you be willing to do that?”

Did she have a choice? If she said no he’d claim she’d been bluffing and he’d never agree to the deal. She had to know Reece was safe. The look on his face when he’d had to kill his maenads...she never wanted him to have to feel that again, and if they all attacked him at once...Even if he somehow survived that, he’d never be the same. He certainly wouldn’t be in any position to help defend the world against Orpheus.

“I’ll open the pithos for you so that you can let Discord out,” she agreed carefully, “in exchange for your guarantee that you won’t attack, or send anyone else to attack, Reece. I swear it on the river Styx.”

“We’re here,” Rover interrupted just as the boat began to slow.

“This is the place?” Orpheus didn’t seem impressed, and she couldn’t blame him, considering it looked exactly the same as the rest of the ocean they’d been traveling across. “Fine. Since we’ve reached our destination, I’ll acquiesce, Anesidora. I swear on the river Styx not harm the god of lust, directly or indirectly, so long as you open Pandora’s Box.”

Well, that was set then.

“Why did we need to be here, exactly?” she asked, mostly to keep attention off of her now shaking hands. She’d seriously just agreed to let loose a sin, with assurance from a psychopath that he’d put said sin back in the jar as soon as he was done with her.

Yeah, because nothing could go wrong with that.

And that was only one of the many things that could go horribly, disastrously, wrong.

The only sin Piper had ever directly drawn from before had been Reece, and there was a huge difference between taking in a little Lust and trying to control an unknown element. She’d felt lust before, after all, even if it hadn’t been directly from the source. And the wrath she’d drawn from him that time in the bar hadn’t come *from* Wrath, so that didn’t count either.

What would discord even feel like? She had an inkling—she knew the definition of the word—but aside from that, there was nothing she could be sure about. Which was terrifying and troubling and a whole ton of other messy emotions.

“The Underworld lies beneath this world,” Orpheus explained, picking up the pithos as he did, “think of them sort of how you would parallel universes. This spot here,” he pointed out to the smooth seas, “sits directly on top of the area of the Underworld where Eurydice is being kept. It will make it easier for Discord to reach in and pull her soul out.”

“Directly?” Piper said.

“Yes. If what I’ve been told is true, she shouldn’t have to physically enter in order to open a temporary gateway.”

“How will she know who Eurydice is? The right spirit to grab?”

“Souls have their own frequencies,” he told her. “Their own tunes. It’s how I know what notes to play to get individual people to do what I want. I’ll be directing Discord, which means I should be able to tell her which tune to look for.”

Which also meant he’d be distracted. All Piper would need to do is latch onto Discord’s sin, and siphon it out faster than he could lead her to Eurydice.

Piper tested the rope again, making it seem like she was simply adjusting to make it easier to take the pithos he was bringing her. Just as he was about to hand it over, he hesitated, and she quirked a dark brow.

“You swore on the river,” he said. “If you don’t follow through—”

“I’ll die,” she confirmed, “horribly.”

“And then I’ll be out my Anesidora.” He seemed to only now be putting that together.

“My brother isn’t a blood relation,” she reminded, “but my parents are still alive. We might have a complicated relationship, but that doesn’t mean I want you going after them next. I’ll open the jar, as promised.”

Truth be told, she’d played with the idea of tossing it over the ship and allowing herself to die by breaking her river oath. That would only be a temporary fix, however.

She was done running from her responsibilities, passing them off to others. This was her life, and there was no point fighting against it when she could be fighting against Orpheus.

He set the jar down in her lap, her arms just barely able to hold it up with the way they were still bound. She didn't bother asking him to untie her—he wouldn't.

"Just tell me when." She watched as he stepped back to the center of the deck. The sun beat down on them brightly, the water settled and relaxed around them. Clear skies above...It looked nothing like the nightmare that it was.

Orpheus adjusted his lyre, glanced at Rover, who nodded almost imperceptibly, and then began to play.

The music wasn't meant for Piper, so it didn't affect her the same way it had when she'd woken up to it. The song was completely different, and his gaze was so steady on the pithos it was almost as if he was trying to crack it with his mind.

Piper had seen Pandora's Box a few times growing up, mainly on birthdays, both hers and Paul's. Their parents brought them to it as a reminder of why they'd been born. What their purpose was. She'd always hated it. But her brother, he'd looked at it much the same way Orpheus in his body was currently.

With reverence.

With longing.

Her gut twisted in disgust. She should have found a way to protect Paul as well, worked him into the deal, but all she'd been able to think about was Reece, and now the opportunity had passed. She was a terrible sister. Had always been a terrible sister.

Not that Paul was going to be winning any medals for being a good brother, but that shouldn't matter. He didn't deserve this; all he'd ever done, all he'd ever wanted, was to be an Anesidora. To protect the pithos.

"Now," Orpheus told her, excitement pouring through him.

The jar itself wasn't very impressive. It was made of tan clay, boring and plain, only about a foot tall and half that in width. The lid was circular, with a knob at the top. Magic was what held it closed, so even if someone were to hold the thing upside down, nothing would happen. There weren't even any markings on it, nothing to help it stand apart.

For all they knew, Pandora hadn't even meant to open the damn thing. Maybe she'd accidentally mistaken it for another jar. It was so nondescript, Piper could easily see that happening.

Her fingers wrapped around the small knob and she inhaled, preparing herself. There was a chance Orpheus had overestimated his abilities and they were all about to die.

“Quickly,” he stated, losing patience.

Piper resisted the urge to squeeze her eyes shut, and then yanked on the lid, expecting some resisting force. There wasn’t any, and if her arms hadn’t been tied, she would have accidentally whipped her hand all the way around her body. It opened as simply as a sugar dish would.

Which was...kind of anticlimactic.

Before she could get too disappointed, however, the jar began to vibrate in her hold. A sick feeling came over her, a darkness leeching through the pitch black opening. It felt like a million eyes were peering up at her, hungry, and thirsty, and desperate.

Orpheus changed the song, and suddenly a thin trail of charcoal gray smoke began twisting like a mini tornado out of the jar. Two specks followed, small balls looking like dust bunnies caught up in the smoke’s pull. They rotated around it, even following when the smoke grew and hovered on deck between where Piper sat and the musician stood.

Then the smoke began to take shape, lengthening and stretching, forming from the bottom up. First there were dirty bare feet, small, with long jagged toenails. Smears of dirt trailed up small ankles, to strong muscles and the backs of knees. The woman was facing Orpheus, and she was completely naked. Her hair was long and knotted, had probably been a beautiful black prior to her being trapped in the pithos. She was tall, but it was clear she’d been withering away, and her skin hugged her bones.

The whole process only took a minute or so, and then the woman was standing there fully. A breeze blew by and she swayed on her feet, the wind taking the two puffs of blackness that had followed her quickly out to sea.

Piper settled the lid of the jar back down, not wanting to chance any other sins getting loose. If Orpheus noticed, he didn’t show it, which only led her to believe he didn’t care one way or the other. Typical.

For the third time, the sound of his music altered, shifting to something soft and lilting, causing the woman to sway again.

Her body shifted forward onto the tips of her toes, as if she were trying to get nearer to him, but she didn’t actually take a single step. With

every passing second, the air around her seemed to grow thicker, and there was a buzzing sensation that spilled off of her frail body.

It called to Piper, and she found herself tugging against the rope around her, trying to get closer to the sin the same as the sin was trying to get to Orpheus. It was an odd sensation, a creeping one that almost lurked at the back of her mind. She could feel it trickling through her pores, leaving a sticky, disturbed feeling in its wake.

“Find my wife.” The sound of Orpheus’s voice cut across the boat, shocking through Piper.

She pulled back, sucking in a breath in the process. Shit. She could feel the discord around her, knew that her body had been drawing her in even without her conscious mind being aware of it. Seeing as how that’s what she wanted, she decided not to completely freak out just yet. Instead, she felt for it inside, trying to form it the same way she did other sins she siphoned.

Piper felt it build, letting the unsettling feeling grow, giving in to it, like she’d given into wrath back at the club. Unlike the burn that usually caused, this was itchy. An uncomfortable, jittery feeling that skated over and through her, making her feel like nothing would ever be right again.

Lack of harmony, that was the definition of discord, and that’s what she felt. All of the pieces that made her who she was were slipping by the wayside. She could feel them breaking off, separating, trying to reform into the wrong shape. Parts of her seemed to be fighting against other parts, and her thoughts tumbled around her like Alice down the rabbit hole.

Love and lust. Duty and responsibility. Fight or flight.

Reece and Paul. Rover and Orpheus. Her mom and dad.

Being the heir. Not being the heir. Everything that came with it.

She closed her eyes, attempting to settle herself, remember what she needed to do. Before this, she hadn’t really known what discord would feel like, now that she did, she realized there was only one way this was going to work. She’d hoped she could use it to break herself and Rover free. Then he could help her force Discord back into the jar before Orpheus could retake him.

That wasn’t going to work though. This feeling inside of her was too wild. It couldn’t be controlled, hell, the very definition of it was sort of the loss of control. So, no, she couldn’t do that. There was only one person she could see using this on.

Orpheus.

It meant Discord breaking free of his hypnosis as well, with no way of getting her back into the pithos. Letting a sin go wasn't exactly ideal, but allowing Orpheus to continue on as he planned? To basically start an all out war? She couldn't do that.

Of course, the likelihood that she'd make it out of here alive also dropped down to the negatives, but...

"I'm the Anesidora Heir," she mumbled to herself, straining against the rope around her arms. She felt the tug, heard it begin to fray. The whole time, she honed that thread of discord within her, staring Orpheus down in the process. She'd only get the one shot at this. If she screwed it up, and he turned that hypnosis on her, it'd be all over.

Piper thought of Reece, and how he held her while he slept, keeping her close. How he listened to her, went out of his way to comfort her. To give her what she needed.

She'd spent the past five years thinking only of herself, because she felt like she'd been owed that. Because she had nobody else who would do it. Now? Now she had him. And if she didn't make this sacrifice, awful things would not only happen to Reece, but to everyone else he cared about as well.

With renewed vigor, Piper pulled, hardly noticing when the rope began to snap and fall away. She slammed onto her knees, freed, and lifted her hand just as Orpheus began to turn his head in her direction.

He was too late though. She was already shoving all of that sin out of her, straight toward him.

She felt the very second it snapped through his chest, the boat beneath them quaking at the impact. The whole thing rocked as water began to rise and fall, the once calm sea suddenly anything but. The jar moved from between her knees, rolling quickly away, but she didn't make a grab for it. It was too late to put Discord back anyway.

The lyre was already slipping out of Orpheus's grasp. The instrument hit the deck, hard, letting out one last screech of a sound before breaking.

And then all hell broke loose.

Chapter 24:

Reece appeared in the middle of chaos. Pure, undiluted chaos.

For a brief moment, he felt like maybe he'd accidentally stepped back in time. Around him maenads hissed and tore at one another, as well as a few unlucky humans. There was already a ton of blood, though every few minutes a wave would crash over the side of the boat, spreading enough water to wash the surface. Staining it pink before the scarlet could return fresh.

It could have easily been a moment from his past, pulling him back into darker, more carnal times, but then he saw Piper and everything else blurred.

She was across the boat, eyes glowing a smoky gray. Her hair flung about her face as she swung around, fighting off two maenads who were locked in the frenzy. They slashed at her, and she bobbed and weaved, clearly trying not to do any permanent damage in return.

They kept coming and she kept deflecting, and Reece realized the only reason she wasn't putting a complete stop to them was because of him. She didn't want to take any more of his people. That realization sent a shockwave of need through him, strong enough that he rocked on his feet.

Someone called his name and suddenly the Reaper was approaching, quickly shoving his way through the masses, fending off attackers as he did. Rover's face was torn up on the right side, the cuts already healing, and one of his lip piercings was missing. The fact that his eyes were clear, and he was obviously not in the throes of hypnosis, was the only reason Reece didn't kill him outright.

There'd be time for that later though.

"I should rip your face off and feed it to my maenads," he said anyway, unable to keep back the threat. It'd been obvious from the scene left in the kitchen that Rover was responsible for Jane and for taking Piper. "You will pay for the one you murdered, Reaper. Mind that."

"She broke through Orpheus's compulsion," Rover told him. "I'm not positive how she did it, but I think she might have siphoned the sin."

“What sin?” He’d felt the moment the jar had been opened, like a fissure running straight through his center. But that was as far as it went. He couldn’t tell if anything had been let loose, only that the inhabitants of Pandora’s Box had been given a brief moment to slip through.

“Discord.”

So Orpheus had been successful. Damn it.

A part of him had foolishly hoped that he’d make it here in time. It’d taken Hadrian and him all night to figure out where Orpheus planned on being, and that was after checking several other locations first. They’d finally realized that if the musician wanted his wife out quickly, the fastest way would be from directly above.

“Where is she now?” Reece couldn’t see anything aside from the writhing and warring bodies of his own people and the few humans still left standing. Even Orpheus’s whereabouts were a mystery to him. The only comfort he gleaned was that he still had a perfect view of Piper.

They needed to speed this conversation up. The faster he got all the information, the quicker he could get to her and get them out of here unscathed.

“I’m not sure,” Rover admitted. “I was still under hypnosis when Piper did it. She channeled the sin and directed it at Orpheus. The blast knocked him off balance and his lyre is broken. I snapped out of it, but your maenads don’t seem to be doing so.”

“If they do at all,” Reece growled, “it won’t be for some time. I couldn’t break through myself the last time I encountered a group. We’ll have to hope it wears off on its own. Right now, we need to deal with Orpheus, and the released sin who can get him into the Underworld.”

“He could have flashed by now.”

“No,” Reece shook his head, “not yet.”

“How can you be—” Before Rover could finish that sentence, a crack sounded from above and a second later a body slammed down onto the boat, tipping it frantically for a few moments.

“A little bird told me you could use some assistance,” the newcomer said, flashing a wide smile that exposed pearly white teeth. His dirty blond hair was a mess, like he’d just rolled out of bed, and his pale blue eyes were filled with excitement.

“Apollo,” Rover greeted, straightening some when the god of the sun glanced his way.

“It’s Blaze, actually.”

Reece grimaced, causing the other god to laugh.

“I’m screwing with you, it’s still Eli. Blaze? Can you imagine?” He chuckled and ran his fingers over his head, making the strands stand at even worse odd angles than before.

“Hadrian sent me the adrenaline junkie?” Reece clucked his tongue, even though inside he was feeling a swell of relief.

As the god of music, light, poetry, and the sun, Eli could come in serious use against a sin like Discord.

“I’m a music man,” Eli reminded, scanning the scene. The fighting was still taking place around them, though no one had yet to approach. “Hadrian thought, and I agreed, that it might give me an advantage over Orpheus. Not to mention Discord, if he managed to—”

“He managed,” Reece cut him off.

“Well then,” he clapped his hands together and then stretched his neck muscles as if preparing for a boxing match, “let’s do this. What shall we handle first?” Something caught his attention and he let out an appreciative whistle.

Reece tracked his gaze to Piper and growled. “Back off.”

Eli blinked at him. “Wait, really?”

“Why does everyone keep saying that to me?” Reece grumbled, moving away from the other god before he lost his cool. He made his way across the deck, watching as frenzied maenads stepped out of his way to avoid him as he passed.

“That’s got to be a good sign, yeah?” Eli had followed him and was sticking close. Every once in a while he had to duck a blow, but other than that, none of them actively went for his jugular either. “They’re resetting?”

“They aren’t machines.” Reece turned to the Reaper on his other side. “You said the lyre is destroyed? Find Orpheus, he shouldn’t be an issue for you without his weapon.”

“Unless he went for one of the spares,” Rover said, causing Reece to come to an abrupt halt.

“Excuse me?”

“Below deck.”

Eli rolled his eyes and took a single step back the way they’d come. “I’ll handle this.” Then he shook his head at Rover. “Reapers, man. Fucking Reapers.”

Reece would have verbally agreed, but the other god flashed away before he could. He wanted to point out how idiotic it was that Rover hadn't told him about the spares sooner, but opted not to bother. It would be a waste of time anyway.

"We should get to Piper," Rover declared.

The only reason he hadn't immediately rushed to her side was because he'd needed to assess the situation. Besides, she was a trained Anesidora. He'd seen her fight. She could handle herself, at least for the five minutes it'd been since his arrival. Another thing he wasn't going to bother trying to explain to the Reaper. What right did he have to know Piper anyway? He'd overlooked how amazing she was her entire life.

He didn't deserve shit.

"Go help Eli." Without another word, Reece continued toward his girl, watching as she dropped to her knees to avoid the swinging arm of a maenad. Then she twisted and kicked up, her foot slamming directly at the center of the redhead's chest. The blow was hard enough she shot backward, hitting the side of the boat.

The maenad tumbled overboard, but Piper didn't get a chance to check on her because another three women took her place.

Reece was almost there, less than ten feet between them, when suddenly an eerie sensation skated down his spine. He spun toward it, already lifting his hands to defend himself. But the threat wasn't coming for him.

A woman appeared in a swirl of black and gray smoke similar to the Reaper's, forming in the space between Piper and her opponents. Her hair was charcoal, her eyes almost just as dark, and aside from the dirt and blood smeared across her tan skin, she was naked.

Fear gripped him as she reached toward Piper, and the next thing he knew he was running, bridging the gap between them. At the last second he realized he was being an idiot, and flashed, appearing at Piper's side less than a heartbeat later. He wrapped a hand around her arm and tugged her away from the approaching sin.

"Reece," the sound of his name off Piper's lips settled him only a little. Hearing it meant she was alive, and that she was herself.

"Lust," Discord said next, tilting her head at such an awkward angle it appeared as though her neck would snap.

“Do I know you?” When Hadrian had mentioned her name, he’d drawn a blank.

“I found you in the black once,” she continued, voice breathy and low. She trailed her fingers through the air in front of him. “Touched you, briefly, felt your pain. Your fear.” She dropped her arm, frowned. “Fear. That’s an emotion. Or is it an instinct? Both? Neither? One? Other?”

Reece urged Piper further away. “She’s confused.”

“Orpheus was keeping her contained,” Piper told him. “But I had to use my abilities against him specifically, otherwise it wouldn’t have worked.”

“Where’s the jar?” Reece hated the thought of putting someone back in that hell, but it was the only thing he could think of at the moment. The boat was covered in his people, and if this sin went on a rampage, they’d be the ones to suffer.

Discord’s eyes began to glow, a dim grayish light at first that grew bolder and darker. She was moving the palms of her hands all over herself, feeling her body as if it were foreign to her. Tugging at scraggly strands of hair and pinching at skin.

He didn’t recall much about coming out of the pithos himself, but that he did. The oddness of going from nothing more than a disembodied tangle of thoughts and feelings to having a shell again. If he hadn’t found Semele, a woman who’d just lost her baby in stillbirth, he could have destroyed all of Greece.

This boat would be nothing for Discord. And Piper was on it.

“The pithos,” he insisted, a bit more desperately this time, “where is it?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “If you want it, you’re going to have to sense it. That is why you joined this little party, isn’t it?”

At first, sure. But that’s not why he was staying.

“I’m not leaving you alone with her.” He tightened his grip. “I’ll flash you somewhere safe and then—”

She tore out of his grasp. “Absolutely not. This is my fight.”

They didn’t get the chance to argue over it further. Discord let out a cry from the back of her throat, the sound akin to that of a wounded and dying animal. In the next instant, her arms were spread wide and more of that smoke that surrounded her lashed out like tentacles. They speared through all of the surrounding bodies, one almost catching Reece.

Piper deflected it, stepping swiftly in front of him. She held the smoke at bay with her hands, channeling her ability to use and manipulate sin to keep it from touching either of them.

It didn't last very long. The smoke drifted off on the wind in less than a minute, but the people it left behind were twitching on their feet. Everyone on deck had already been in a heated frenzy, but suddenly the air thickened and the tension rose to obscene levels.

Reece had thought he'd stepped into chaos before, that had been nothing compared to what ensued next.

Maenads who'd been using their claws and teeth before, now began to rip and pull. They snapped through each other's bones like twigs, tearing off limbs only to then shred the rendered flesh into smaller bits. It was grotesque and chunks of bloodied meat began to litter the ground. It was worse when they started to attack themselves.

Reece watched in horror as a maenad who he'd known for three hundred years, a calm, level-headed woman named May, began gnawing through her own arm. She ripped through her bicep, chewed, spat, and repeated the process. She didn't so much as flinch at what had to be immensely painful.

Unlike before, they didn't ignore him for long. It was similar to when they'd been completely under Orpheus's control. Whatever Discord had done, it overrode their instincts to protect Reece.

Or Piper.

"I can try and siphon her power away," Piper told him, already in the process of doing so from the looks of it. She had her hands up still and aimed at Discord. "I hate to ask, but can you keep your girls off me long enough for me to subdue her?"

"You're my girl. I won't let anyone hurt you, not even my own." He tried not to think about their names as he tore through the maenads. Emptied his mind so that he was blank, the only thing left a single, defining purpose.

Protect Piper. At all costs.

* * *

She'd never tried to control an entire sin before. Sweat made her shirt and hair cling to her, and her bare feet didn't leave for much traction

on the wooden flooring. Even from ten feet away, she could feel the power pulsing off of Discord, could taste it on her tongue, an ashy flavor with a hint of bitterness.

Piper wasn't deluded, there was no way she was going to be able to keep the sin in check for long.

"We need a plan," she called over her shoulder, hoping that somehow Reece would hear her through the grunts and growls he was in the midst of.

"Apollo and I just destroyed all of the extra lyre's below," Rover appeared at her side and said. His eyes went wide when he saw what she was trying to do. "You're going to hurt yourself."

Had he just said Apollo? As in, sun god, Apollo?

"If I don't do this," she hissed, "she's going to hurt us. Not really much of a choice. So, either be helpful and come up with a better, more permanent solution, or—"

"We're searching for Orpheus, but he wasn't below deck."

"I pumped that asshole so full of discord he probably can't think straight right now." If she wasn't occupied, she could try and feel for him herself, as it were, untangling herself from what she felt coming off of Discord and what was coursing through Orpheus wasn't going to happen. "He's probably here. If he hasn't been torn apart yet."

Please, don't let that be the case. She wanted her brother back, wanted the chance to apologize and be there for him when he found out the truth. If he hadn't already...She wasn't sure how the possession thing worked. Was he able to hear and see and feel still, even though he wasn't in the driver's seat, or was he buried somewhere? Somewhere deep and dark, like where Reece and Discord had both been when trapped in the jar.

Would the Paul who came back even be the same one she knew? Or would he be damaged?

Discord shifted in front of her, and Piper was forced to drop that train of thought.

"The only reason I'm even able to do this right now is because her brain is jumbled," she explained to the Reaper. "If she started regaining some semblance of self, she might break out of my hold. Then we'll either have a crazy person on our hands, or...I don't know. Something better?"

"Highly doubtful," Rover said. "It's my understanding that it took the Seven Deadlies years to regain enough self-control to prevent their

powers from infecting others. Dionysus avoided too much catastrophe by slipping into the body of a deceased baby.”

Okay, she’d sort of known that already, but details put that way made her stomach churn. It did not sound pleasant, or sexy.

“Are you suggesting we find a dead person and slide her in?” Because they couldn’t allow her to take over a live person, inadvertently killing off that body’s soul, now could they?

Rover glanced between the two of them. “Maybe not a dead person...”

Piper frowned, flicked him a look and then had to turn her attention back on the sin as her grasp shook. She was using the smoke, the physical expression of Discord’s abilities, to cage her in. The other woman was confused enough that it was working to debilitate her; she didn’t know how to fight back against her own power. But that wouldn’t last.

“There are a ton of dead bodies right here,” she pointed out.

Please don’t let any of them be Paul’s.

“We can’t,” Rover disagreed. “We put her in a maenad and all we’ll have managed to do is get us into a slightly less awful place. *Slightly*. Besides, the only reason it worked for Reece was because it was a baby, a newborn. That body hadn’t yet discovered anything. He couldn’t use any of his facilities. It helped bank down his power until he grew enough to access it. By then enough time had passed that he’d regained knowledge of who he was. None of these will work.”

Reece was suddenly tossed down by three of his maenads, and he rolled across the ship, coming dangerously close to Discord. He was so preoccupied fending off the attack, he hardly seemed to notice her peering over his shoulder.

When she stretched out a smoke covered arm toward him, Piper let out a warning cry. Doing so broke her concentration, and she felt the sin slip through her fingers like sand from the beach. Mentally, she grappled to contain her again, but it caused searing pain to snake up her wrists, licking at her skin like fire.

She had no idea what Discord wanted with Reece, and she was too far away to physically do anything to stop her.

Discord’s hand grazed the back of Reece’s shoulder and he hissed, tumbling away. The move gave Piper a good look at his face. He’d lost the

sunglasses while trying to keep the maenads away. His eyes were still glowing, but a flicker of gray flashed, blocking out the other colors.

He hesitated, brow furrowing, and stayed perfectly still as Discord took another step toward him. Distracted, he didn't see the maenads rising at his back either, ready to pounce.

"Help him!" she ordered Rover, and as soon as he disappeared to do so, she acted, doing the only thing she could from her current distance.

Piper reached out with everything she had and yanked at Discord. The sin was pulled toward her, her dirty feet scraping across the floor. She didn't struggle, stilling her body instead, making it easier for Piper.

If she pulled the sin into herself, she might be able to control Discord for a moment. Long enough at least for Reece to regain his footing. After that...well, he and Rover would have to figure out the rest.

Her ability to suck in sin worked the same way as her nose did with smells. All she had to do was breathe them in, but there always came a point where she'd taken in too much, and she had to pause. Knowing she couldn't afford to do that now, Piper fought past the tightness in her chest that signaled she was taking it in too quickly. Within moments, it started to feel like she was suffocating, but Discord was still too far away for her to risk stopping.

Her vision blurred, black spots dancing around her, and just as she was about to give in and exhale, something hard and heavy slammed into her side. The force took her down, her head whacking against the deck, causing a ringing sound to immediately overtake her.

Disoriented, she blinked, tried to sit up only to have a set of claws rake across her abdomen. The pain was excruciating and she screamed, her hands moving protectively to the wounds. Which left her throat open to attack.

The maenads face was distorted through Piper's tears, but she saw the talons coming. They slashed across her neck faster than she could even think to defend herself. Almost immediately after delivering the blow, someone grabbed her and tossed the maenad away.

Paul stood hovering over her, murder in his familiar eyes.

Not Paul, her muddled brain reminded, but it was hard. Sounds gurgled up the back of her torn throat, and she could taste copper pooling in her mouth. She'd clamped a hand over the slices, but logically, even in the throes of panic she knew it wouldn't help.

She was going to die.

Her brother's body didn't look in too good of shape either. His clothing was torn and there was blood everywhere, making it impossible to tell whether or any or all of it belonged to him.

"You ruined everything," Orpheus hissed down at her. He reached into his back pocket and brought out the knife she'd seen him wielding back at the club, the one with the blue blade. Spittle flicked from his snarling mouth as he leaned over her. "Without Discord and my control over her, there's no way to get Eurydice back. Hadrian no doubt knows where we are and is coming for me. You may have stopped me, but you didn't win.

"Because I'm taking back that eternal life now. You know what this does?" He shook the knife. "It erases you. They used to call it a Soul Killer. You're about to be nothing, Piper Anesidora. But first." He dropped to his knees next to her, then spun the blade around and stabbed himself in the chest, barely an inch from where Paul's heart was.

Piper tried to scream but the blood prevented her from making much audible noise, certainly nothing comprehensible. She blanked and grief bloomed inside of her, strong enough to momentarily block out the physical pain.

And there was nothing she could do, no way for her to save her brother. Or his soul.

The light was already starting to leave his eyes, and his body began to tip, but Orpheus had enough control left to lift the blade once more, over her chest this time. He let out a roar and brought it down.

But he never made contact.

Reece appeared out of nowhere, grabbing onto Orpheus's wrist. The sound of cracking bones filled the air, cluing Piper into the fact that it had suddenly gone very quiet on the rest of the ship.

Then Orpheus went completely lax, a single breath stuttering out of him as he fell backward. His arms splayed out to his sides, the blue knife resting at the center of his palm.

Piper didn't have time to mourn over her brother's death. She was quickly losing consciousness—extreme loss of blood would do that—and was only vaguely aware of frantic hands moving over her. A desperate voice murmured things to her, pleading with her for...something, but she couldn't make any of it out.

She wished she'd had the chance to tell Reece what he meant to her. Wished she could see what had happened with Discord, if he was all right or if he'd been hurt by the other sin.

Her body was shutting down, the world coming to a quiet standstill. She tried to get words out, but her torn throat kept her from being able to.

I love you, she thought, praying he could somehow feel it even if she couldn't say it, despite the fact he wasn't a love god.

I love you, she thought, with everything she had left.

And then she died.

Again.

Chapter 25:

The pain was excruciating, like nothing she'd ever felt before and nothing she ever wanted to feel again. Like the skin was being peeled off her bones and every single one of her nerve endings were firing all at once. Piper opened her mouth, might have screamed, but she couldn't hear anything through the pounding in her head. Her skull felt like it was about to crack in a million places and spill her brains out.

She couldn't move, not even a finger—hell, she couldn't even feel her fingers. There was only torture, and suffering. Pain and more pain and more pain.

But then someone else touched her, a hand on her shoulder, cupping her cheek. Tipping her head back. A thumb smoothing beneath her closed right eye. The touch was hot, but not in a bad way, soothing instead of searing.

Words were being murmured in a low, lyrical voice, too far away and broken for her to piece together. All she got was the sound, which turned to a hum that slipped inside of her. She feel it like a balm, smoothing over the lava in her veins, cooling the painful burns while the hands continued to lightly stroke across her face.

And then there were lips, a warm mouth pressing to the curve of her jaw, the spot behind her ear. She tried to make another sound, still wasn't sure if she was successful, and struggled to hold onto these new feelings, the only ones she currently could feel aside from the suffering.

The mouth met hers, gently urged her to open up. She must have, because his tongue curled around her own, stroked deep and almost pleadingly. The kiss could have lasted a second or forever, she didn't know, but when he pulled back he took with him the final thread of pain.

Piper felt darkness reach for her once more, and though it wasn't cold this time she tried to fight it, to stay with the comfort and the warmth still touching her.

She slipped away with a sigh, settling into a deep and painless sleep.

* * *

Something heavy was wrapped around her. It was the first thought she had when she came too much later. There was an arm banded around her waist, holding her up against a solid body. A hot mouth moved down her throat, planting kisses. When she bowed back into the touch, it momentarily stopped, and she made a sound of protest.

Warm breath blew across the side of her face a second before the kisses started up again, a bit more frantic than before. The hand at her stomach flexed, fingers splayed on her bare skin, as if needing to touch as much of her as possible.

Piper liked that idea, and the corner of her mouth turned up.

“Come back,” a voice whispered, a familiar one that sent tingles down her spine. “Come back to me, Princess.”

She wanted to, but her eyelids felt like they’d been glued shut, and that single movement she’d made arching into him had been too much exertion. Already she felt herself slipping away again, shutting down.

“Don’t leave me alone,” he breathed against her neck, and her heart broke a little at the wounded sound.

I don’t want to, she tried to say back, yet darkness was already creeping in. A few heartbeats later and she’d returned to the silent, still, black.

* * *

Reece was a mess. He felt like he’d been hollowed out, emptied and bare. He couldn’t recall what day of the week it was, how long he’d been cooped up in this room. A few of his maenads had tried to relieve him so he could shower and eat, but he refused.

He couldn’t leave Piper. He wouldn’t ever leave her again. Piper was his, and he’d already lost too much. Far too much.

He moved about the bedroom, sometimes lying next to her, holding her close, other times pacing from window to window, burning through the frantic energy inside of him that urged for her to awaken.

She had moments of consciousness, but he got the feeling she wasn’t really there when she woke. And she always slid away from him, drifting off. Unreachable.

He felt so helpless, powerless, and went through bursts of anger where his mind screamed that there should be something he could do for

her. He was a god, damn it! He was a Seven Deadly! There should be *something*!

The first few nights had been hell, though it was still nothing compared to what he'd gone through on that boat. When he'd seen her throat sliced open...He'd known she was going to die; he hadn't known that Orpheus had already given her the ambrosia.

The absolute fury, coupled with the grief was nothing like anything he'd ever felt before. Losing his mother had been hard. When his stepfather had died, that'd been difficult as well. But those deaths were nothing compared to what the thought of never holding Piper again did to him.

Reece had torn through the remaining maenads before Eli managed to get control of him long enough for the Reaper to explain. It'd been like dying and being reborn all over again.

And he'd realized without a shadow of a doubt that he was in love with her, that he couldn't live without her. That he'd do everything in his power when she finally woke up to convince her that she couldn't live without him either.

He was sitting on the edge of the bed, staring down at her when he felt the presence at his back. He didn't bother turning, hoping the new arrival would take the hint and leave.

Of course he didn't.

"You look, and smell, like hell," Hadrian said. "And I should know."

"You don't live in hell," Reece reminded, though it was difficult. He was exhausted, burned out. The last thing he wanted to do was have a conversation. Unless that someone was Piper, he wished everyone would just fuck off.

"Semantics." Hadrian came closer, until he was standing at the other side of the bed in Reece's line of sight. "Eurydice says thank you."

"So her soul has healed?" That was good. It'd certainly happened a lot faster than Piper's recovery. He tried not to feel bitter about that, because Eurydice didn't deserve it. She was a good person, and she'd been through a lot as well.

Discord had been in the process of summoning her soul from the Underworld when Piper had attacked Orpheus, cutting off his control. The sin had lost a handle on Eurydice in her confusion, had basically dropped her back, and the sudden shift had damaged the spirit.

Hadrian could work wonders on souls. Too bad there wasn't anything he could do for Piper's body.

"She's really something, isn't she?" Hadrian asked, and Reece frowned, thinking they were still talking about Eurydice.

But then he turned and found the other god staring down at Piper.

"Taking hold of a sin like that isn't easy," he continued, cocking his head as he inspected her sleeping form. "And Rover tells me she was about to take it all the way. Allow herself to become a host." He lifted his gaze to Reece. "For you."

He'd been so distracted with fighting off his maenads, trying to disable but not kill them, that he hadn't noticed Discord approaching until it was too late. She'd touched him and he'd felt all that torment within her reaching out. Like called to like, so of course she could sense he was old, ancient like her.

She'd wanted help, that much was apparent, but didn't have the means to ask for it, so she'd done the only thing she could. Force her powers on those around her. After being trapped in the jar with no outlet for so long, it wasn't even really her fault. Power would have exploded from her whether she'd wanted it to or not.

When Piper had drawn Discord away, it'd given him just enough time to call for Eli. Between the two of them, they'd managed to contain her. Though they'd suffered some serious bruising in the process.

There was a place in one of Eros's—the god of love—palaces that had a cell meant to hold immortals. Eli had flashed Discord there quickly before she could fully comprehend what was going on and fight them with all her strength. After, he'd returned to help with the rest. Something Reece wasn't going to forget.

That's when Reece had realized what was happening to Piper, that Orpheus was standing over her with a blade. That he'd already stabbed her brother through the chest...

"When she wakes up," Hadrian said when he still hadn't spoken, "her world is going to be different. She'll need help. Her family situation has changed with her. Their legacy can no longer continue the way it once had. Still, I can leave Rover—"

"If he comes near her," Reece growled, "unless she specifically asks to see him, I'll rip his heart out. I still owe him one."

Hadrian sighed. "What a mess. Twenty-seven maenads and eight humans died on that ship. Brutally."

"Orpheus's fault." Reece wouldn't feel guilty for taking their lives. He'd had no choice. There was no breaking the hypnosis, not for all of them, and certainly not in time to make a difference. He'd mourned the deaths of his people in this room, while he'd waited for Piper to heal.

"And now he's dead," he reminded, "worse than dead. Let that be enough, Dionysus."

"Are you lecturing me? About keeping a cool head? Turning the other cheek?" Reece quirked a brow. "You get the irony in that, right?"

"I do." He nodded. "That's why I'm saying it. She might hate him now, maybe for a long time, but one day she might forgive him. I've read Rover's reports over the years. Their friendship was real."

Reece waved him off. He'd already decided not to outright murder the Reaper. He'd been under Orpheus's influence when he'd kidnapped Piper, and when he'd killed Jane. Eventually, they'd have to discuss that, but it didn't mean he wouldn't let the man leave with all of his parts intact.

At least, most of them, anyway.

"Have you heard anything from Eli?" If Hadrian wasn't leaving, Reece might as well pump him for information. Knowing Piper, as soon as she woke up she'd want answers.

"Apparently Eros has taken over. Right now Discord continues to act like a contained lab rat. Sometimes she bangs her head on the walls."

"That'll pass," Reece assured him. "Eventually, we all calm down. Return to ourselves."

"From the sounds of it, Eros can't wait for her to regain some logic. He's already frustrated. He hates seeing anyone in pain." Hadrian rolled his eyes. "Love gods."

"Is that all you came here for then?" he was eager to be alone with Piper again. He didn't want her to wake up with other people around, because his friend was right, her world had drastically changed. There was no way to tell what her initial reaction would be.

"That, and for this." Hadrian held up a hand and the pithos appeared, standing upright in his palm. He flashed a devilish grin. "Rover grabbed it. The thanks should go to him."

Yeah, that wasn't going to happen and they both knew it.

"Do me a favor and bring that thing downstairs."

Now that they were in the same room together, he could feel the sticky call of the pithos. Feel it vibrating, like the pull of a magnet. It was an unsettling feeling, and one he'd hoped to never experience again. Though it was comforting knowing it was back in their possession, where they could guarantee no one could use it against Piper again.

He expected Hadrian to argue, maybe make a joke about how he wasn't an errand boy. But Reece must be in worse shape than he thought, because the other god merely shrugged.

"Sure." Hadrian hesitated, as if there was something else he wanted to say, but he changed his mind. "If you need me, you know where I'll be."

Reece nodded, letting out a sigh when his friend flashed away.

"Come on, Princess." He brushed strands of her dark hair off her forehead. When he'd thought he'd lost her, he'd gone into a state deeper than any frenzy he'd ever been in before. Once the maenads were dead, he wouldn't have been surprised if he'd turned on his friend next.

Eli had been fortunate to break through the haze.

By the time he had, however, Piper had been left with maenad venom in her system far longer than was usually survivable. Though the ambrosia had given her immortality, and her wounds would heal, there'd been the chance the venom would still leave permanent damage. He'd feared that, that the side effects would keep her in a coma, or leave her mentally unsound. Was still afraid, though the last time she'd been conscious she'd seemed more like herself.

"I've never told someone I love them before," he murmured, the corner of his mouth turning up. "I've never loved someone before. This will be a first for me. I can't lose you when I've only just found you, Piper."

Lust had never been meant to love. He didn't think he could survive it. Not if she wasn't there to hold him steady.

* * *

Someone was moving around. She could hear their footsteps against the floor, the sounds coming from one end of the room, only to head over toward the other. The pattern repeated itself until Piper had had enough.

She blinked open her eyes, needing a moment for them to adjust to the light even though it was dim in the bedroom. Outside the windows the night was pitch black, which gave her a great reflection of Reece as he

continued his pacing, oblivious to her watching. It took another lengthy moment for her to regain control of her fingers, then her toes. She kept flexing things until she could almost feel them all. Her entire body. Alive and whole.

Getting up was a different kind of struggle, and she almost slipped as she lifted herself up with frail arms. It wasn't until she was almost in an upright position that Reece finally noticed her.

He exhaled, his relief palpable as he shot toward her. His hands settled on her shoulders and he pulled her in for a strong hug. He was shaking, clinging to her like he was afraid she'd disappear. Which meant she'd been in pretty bad shape.

Piper remembered the boat. Remembered trying to contain Discord to protect Reece. The maenad who'd delivered a killing blow. Orpheus standing over her as she bled to death. He'd had a blade, a knife with a terrible name, and he'd used it...

A strangled sound escaped the back of her throat and then she was sobbing, pressing her face into the crook of his neck. She held him back so tightly, if he'd been anything other than a god, she might have broken actual bones. But she didn't feel weak for doing it, and she didn't feel alone.

For the first time in her life, there was someone willing to hold her. It shouldn't please her, not at a time like this, but it did.

Paul was dead. More than. He was gone, completely.

She would never get the chance to tell him how much she loved him, or how much she admired his commitment to their family legacy, even if it'd been something she couldn't relate to. He wouldn't have the chance to catch her up on the past five years, tell her about his life. The one she'd missed. Sure, he'd ignored her calls, but those had all been poor attempts to reconnect, and she knew that.

They hadn't been the closest of siblings, yet they'd cared for one another all the same. And she felt that now, the empty space inside of her where he'd once been. The space she'd have to fill with memories of him, both happy and sad. Things she could have otherwise tried to forget.

"It's all right, Princess," Reece whispered, stroking the curve of her spine as he did. "Let it all out. I'm here. I'm here."

Don't leave me alone.

She remembered him saying that, though she couldn't exactly place when or where. It might have been while she'd been unconscious, but she

could still hear the sound of his voice if she thought about it hard enough. The breathy desperation.

How many times had Piper thought those very same words? All those times she'd watched her parents pour their attentions on Paul. Those times Rover overlooked her studies for the heir. In New York, it'd been a constant search, looking for someone who'd want to be around her. Who wouldn't find someone or something more important or interesting.

Five years, and Piper had managed to make a total of three friends. She hadn't heard from two of them in months, and the last was more out of convenience—they worked together at the hospital.

Or, they had. She was probably out of a job now.

"I was kidding myself, wasn't I?" she'd meant to keep the question to herself, but it slipped past her lips anyway. Her brother was gone, and even if he wasn't, the big secret was out. She was the rightful heir. Taking up the mantel was her responsibility. It always had been.

Reece didn't need her to elaborate to understand what she meant. He simply held her closer, let her cry more until his shirt was soaked through with her tears. Once the wracking sobs dissipated some, he slipped a hand beneath her chin and gently tipped her face up to his.

"You wanted a life, Piper," he said. "No one can fault you for that."

Back then, she'd walked away knowing that Paul would be there. That the pithos and the bunker and the Anesidora line would continue on just fine without her. She'd believed what she'd been inadvertently told since she'd been little, that she wasn't as important. That she didn't matter. At least, not as much.

Reece was watching her, his dimly glowing multi-colored eyes searching her face for something. She couldn't tell if he found what he was looking for or not, but after a moment he brought himself closer, dropping his forehead against hers.

"What do you want now?" he asked, and it was spoken so low she almost couldn't make it out. "What do you want, Piper?"

Growing up, something had always been a step above her. Her brother, the pithos, her duty to the entire Anesidora line. It had seemed like a heavy weight bearing down on her, crushing her. She'd felt suffocated and misunderstood. Unloved.

She didn't feel that way anymore. Reece made her feel other things. He brought out emotions that confused her, and thrilled her. Made her body

ignite with a mere glance, a simple brush of his fingers on her skin.

“You never once looked down on me,” she said, hoping he could see the awe and admiration in her eyes. “You went out of your way to keep me safe, while making sure not to diminish my abilities. You let me take care of you,” she cupped his cheek, “and you let me take care of myself. No one’s ever asked me what I want before. Not ever.”

“I’ll never take away your choices, Piper,” he told her, with so much sincerity that she felt fresh tears on her lashes. “Never. If you want to walk away, from any of this, from all of it, I’ll respect your decision.”

She’d walked away before because she’d been able to. That was no longer the case. Paul was dead, and while her parents could technically take back responsibility over the pithos, they were too old to continue on the family bloodline. She was the only real option left, and she couldn’t run from that. Wouldn’t be able to live with herself if she did.

Things were so different now. She wasn’t the same girl who craved a normal life all those years ago. The fact she was going to be alive for a hell of a lot longer than she’d ever anticipated spoke volumes to that. Normal was never going to happen for her. Especially not if this conversation went the way she hoped it would.

Piper had decided the morning after she’d found out the truth about Paul, while she’d been sitting in the kitchen, eating breakfast with a maenad. Her purpose had always been to help people, and she’d always known it. You can’t run from fate, and she didn’t have to try to anymore.

But her family legacy wasn’t what she wanted to talk about now. There was something more important than all of that.

“I love you,” she said, wanting to get it out there before fear and doubt got the chance to convince her it was too risky. She had little to no experience with love, not real love. It was terrifying, knowing that he could rebuff her. As the god of lust, it was very likely that he did not reciprocate her feelings.

Making the decision not to run meant standing her ground in all things though. Including this. She’d been so afraid when Discord had gone after him. More afraid than she’d ever been before. Because the thought of him hurt, of possibly losing him, had been unbearable.

“You asked me what I want?” She licked her lips and went for it. “I want you.”

“Forever?” He was staring at her like she wasn’t really there, like she was a mirage of an oasis and he’d been stranded in the desert for ten years. If not for the fact his arms had tightened around her waist like a vice, she would have feared his reaction.

“I seem to have that now,” she shrugged a single shoulder, trying to come off nonchalant even though it had to be obvious that the idea of eternal life was scary as all hell, “so, yeah. I was thinking for forever. Unless that’s not something you want too...?”

“I’ve lived forever, Piper,” he told her. “I’ve lived hundreds of lifetimes, with hundreds of people, in hundreds of places. I witnessed the rise of the pyramids, the forming of Stonehenge. I’ve lain with Aphrodite, and Helen of Troy.” He reeled her in as he spoke, so that she was straddling his lap with the sheets twisted between them.

“And not one of those things,” he declared, “not a single one, was ever as beautiful or as strong as you are. Do I want you, Princess? More than anything I have ever wanted in either of my lifetimes. More than anything I will surely ever want again. I want your forever, whether that’s here, or in New York, or in Missouri. I want to make choices with you, and explore this crazy sensation that grips me tight whenever you’re around. I want to wake up every morning knowing that you’re mine, and whisper I love you in your ear every night before you fall asleep. I want it all, Piper.”

His eyes were glowing so brightly now it would be impossible to look away. Not that she planned to. He was mesmerizing. And he was saying he was hers.

“I want *everything*.” Reece crushed her mouth with his own, the kiss desperate and frantic and demanding. His tongue tangled with hers, stroked the roof of her mouth. He pressed her back against the bed, tucking her beneath his body.

Surrounding her so that all she could see and think and feel was him.

His hands traveled down her side, dove between her legs. He let out a satisfied growl when he found her wet and ready.

“I love you, Piper,” he breathed against her, pulling away only enough to allow her to tug his shirt off. Then he was back, his front pressed to her own, their skin on fire between them.

There was still so much they needed to figure out, but none of it mattered as much as this did. The two of them. Together.

“Give me everything,” he pleaded.
And she did.

Epilogue:

“Two months later and he’s just now figuring it out?” Piper grumbled as she bent over one of the old metal chests that lined the walls. It was the fifth one that she was checking, and her frustration was apparent.

Reece sort of found it adorable. Not that he’d tell her that.

Piper had taken to being the Anesidora Heir like the badass he’d always known she was. After another week of recovery, she’d been ready to take on the world.

And her parents.

Unsurprisingly, Nicole and Preston did not approve of their daughter’s plan to move the bunker to Las Vegas. They were even more against the fact that Piper had decided to hide it beneath Luxuria.

The basement of the demon club had been converted and was now heavily protected. Reece had called in a few favors—including one from Hadrian to ensure no spirit could ever enter—to reinforce it. A false wall had been created, so that it looked like the lower level was a third of its actual size. If any of the clubbers above stumbled down there, they wouldn’t see anything.

The door was hidden, and only became visible at either Piper or Reece's command. When she'd told him that she wanted him to have access as well, he'd known that she'd meant it. She was his. Forever.

Basically, with all the god magic currently warding the place, it was a million times safer than the bunker back at the Anesidora house could ever be. The pithos even, was in a better place. No longer displayed separately, but mixed in with the rest of the collection. It had even been placed within fortified glass which kept anyone from sensing its power.

Reece loved that, because it meant he could be in this room without feeling sick. A plus, seeing as how Piper still had to spend a lot of time down here organizing.

It'd taken a couple of weeks to move everything, especially since they'd had to do it discretely. The new bunker was protected, but that still didn't mean they wanted to announce to the world exactly where it was located. Her parents had helped, though as soon as the job was done they'd gone back to Missouri.

"From the sounds of it," Reece said, watching as Piper cursed and moved onto the last chest, "he didn't even figure it out on his own. The problem walked right into his house."

"Convenient."

She was still in the process of sorting through all of the various items her family was responsible for protecting. And there were many, many, items. Some of the things hanging on walls, and displayed in glass shatterproof cases Reece hadn't seen in centuries. There were even objects, like the one they were currently looking for, that he'd thought lost long ago.

"Remind me again what he wants this for, if not to stab the big bad?" Piper asked, carefully shuffling through a stack of metal knives and daggers.

"The only big bad I'm aware of is you, Princess," Reece teased, winking at her suggestively when she turned to glare at him over her shoulder.

"Okay, well, that aside—Yes!" She straightened and spun on her heels to show him the foot-long blade in her hand. It was old, made of heavy metal, and not entirely attractive. But it was definitely the right one. "One thanatelly. I knew I'd read that correctly on the ledger. You know what that means." She grinned wolfishly, and he was reminded that, god or not, she could fell him with little more than her pinky finger.

And he'd let her. Happily.

"I can't believe you actually have a thanatelly." He'd bet her before they'd begun the search that it was a misprint, or at the very least, that it'd since been removed and no one had bothered to correct it in the books. "Damn. Looks like you win this round, Princess."

He wasn't really that disappointed. Getting to touch her was never a punishment. Already thinking about what she'd look like bent over the glass case in the back of the room—the one that held the pithos, ironically enough—he reached for her. When she retreated a step he frowned.

"Now that I found this," she waved the knife around, "what exactly am I supposed to do with it?"

Hadrian had requested that they search for the blade in case he'd need to put an end to the being who caused the breeches in the Underworld. Apparently, whoever that was had tickled his curiosity. It was the only reason Reece could think of for the god not to simply put him or her down immediately.

"Let's put it with the Soul Killer," he suggested, motioning to the other side. The case currently holding the blade Orpheus had used to kill her brother was out of sight, tucked around a few different shelves and corners. "If Hadrian decides he needs it, he'll have options."

Either one of those knives could kill an immortal with a mere scratch.

"All right." Instead of moving to put it away, she bent and placed the thanatelly on the ground at her feet. Then she walked toward him, that smirk returning full force. "Now that that's done..."

"What are you thinking, Princess?" Reece was already hard as rock before she even got close enough to touch him.

"I'm thinking its playtime." She brought her fingers to his belt and looped them through the top to tug playfully and pointedly. Angling her head toward the case he'd been daydreaming about taking her up against earlier, she offered a silent challenge.

"Whatever you want," Reece breathed, giving in to the lust rushing through him. He lifted her into his arms, waiting until she'd wrapped her legs around his waist before starting forward. "Forever. Anything, Piper."

He backed her up against the edge of the case and settled her lightly down on the surface. Her fingers were already working his belt loose, and he joined in, tugging her blouse free of her jeans.

“Everything,” Piper demanded as they stripped one another. When he met her gaze, her eyes were glowing a vibrant, gorgeous golden hue. “I want everything.”

“Coming right up, Princess.”

And when he kissed her, forever didn’t seem nearly long enough.

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I want to give a huge thanks to all of my beta readers! You guys were so supportive and helpful throughout this process, and I definitely couldn't have done it without you! Also, thanks to everyone who remembered I used to write Paranormal Romance forever ago, and kept asking me when I was going to go back to it! This one's for you!

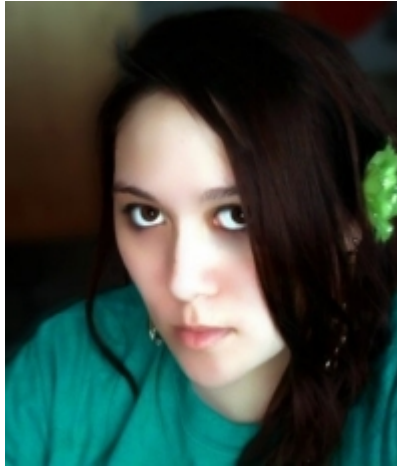
Finally, thank you to all those Hadrian Hale lovers out there! I hope Reece now holds a special place in your hearts as well, and if not, well, I hope it was still worth it to catch a glimpse of Hades!

Loads of love to my street team on Instagram! You guys are best!

I can't thank @messy_garden enough for this epic cover! It's above and beyond what I hoped for.

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Chani Lynn Feener has wanted to be a writer since the age of ten during fifth grade story time. She majored in Creative Writing at Johnson State College in Vermont. To pay her bills, she has worked many odd jobs, including, but not limited to, telemarketing, order picking in a warehouse, and filling ink cartridges. When she isn't writing, she's bingeing TV shows, drawing, or frequenting zoos/aquariums. Chani is also the author of teen paranormal series, *The Underworld Saga*, originally written under the penname Tempest C. Avery. She currently resides in Connecticut, but lives on Goodreads.com.

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For more information on upcoming and past works, please visit her website: [HOME | ChaniLynnFeener \(wixsite.com\)](#).

About Messy Garden (the cover artist).

I use this name to publish my work because my ideas are always chaotic in the early stages of creation. There're many beautiful things circling in my mind, but it always takes a long time combining them into an excellent work. This makes me feel as if I am in a messy garden. The flowers in the garden are all charming, just a little messy. These flowers all have their own unique potential and charm. After hard work, they will eventually become excellent works. I also look forward to becoming such an artist. In addition, I love to add flowers, plants and highly decorative elements into my works, which is one of the reasons why it was named Messy Garden.

You can find Messy Garden on Instagram @messy_garden

Bonus Material:

Hermes

Interview with a Sin:

Setting, Club Luxuria, Midnight.

Ferris: We're sitting down with one of the Seven Deadlies to ask him some of the burning questions you've all sent to our station!

Rover: Pretty sure I didn't agree to this. Why am I even here?

Ferris: Because literally no one else wants you around. Anyway! Let's get this over with so I can get back to my amazing girlfriend Quinn—she's recently graduated from college. Isn't that—

Rover: Whatever.

Ferris: Hey, Hermes! So, firstly, thanks for agreeing to do this interview!

Hermes: ...

Ferris: Rover, read the first question.

Rover: This is bullshit. Fine. "You're best known as the Messenger God, but now that it's out you're also a Seven Deadly, what sin are you?"

Hermes:...Guys, what is this?

Ferris: It's an interview. Play along. I'll make sure Reece gives you drinks on the house.

Hermes: What was the question again?

Rover: What sin are you?

Hermes: Sloth.

Rover: Not funny.

Hermes: Okay, okay. I'm Wrath.

Ferris: Some people might be surprised to hear it. Would you like to say anything to them?

Hermes: I'm a trickster god. Wrath kind of makes sense when you really think about it.

Rover: Knowing you, no it doesn't. Aren't you kind of too...Happy and upbeat to be wrath?

Ferris: Hey, Rover, weren't you hitting on Hypnos last night?

Hermes: Excuse me?!

Ferris: Just kidding.

Rover: What the hell man?

Ferris: Next question! What is your favorite color?

Hermes: Yellow.

Ferris: Favorite drink?

Hermes: Sex on the beach.

Ferris: With?

Hermes: Hyp—Wooooow. Asshole.

Ferris: What was that?

Hermes: I meant to say, hypothetically, with anyone.

Rover: Believable.

Hermes: Bite me, Reaper.

Ferris: What's your favorite food?

Hermes: I like plums.

Rover: Where do you—

Hermes: Gotta go, guys. Stuff to do, pithos escapees to catch, you know the drill. Later.

Ferris: Well...that was fun! We'll see you next time on Interview with a Sin!

Rover: No, no we really won't.

Ferris: Bye!

Keep your eyes out for the second book in the Seven Deadlies series featuring an MM Romance between Hypnos and Hermes! Coming soon!

