

THE MUSE ISLAND SERIES

CURSE *of the* NIGHT



A DARK MOON ARISES,
AND NIGHTMARES AWAKEN.

KRIS FARYN &
JULES LYNN

CURSE OF THE NIGHT

BOOK 4 | THE MUSE ISLAND SERIES

KRIS FARYN
JULES LYNN



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Muse Island Publishing

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Finn's Call

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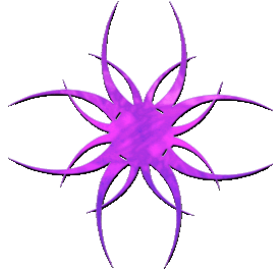
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CHAPTER ONE

ARI FAWKES



Cold mountain air whipped at his ears, and a fire burned in his soul. Deep, throaty voices wrapped around the snow-capped peaks, echoed through the valleys, climbed up to his ancient home in soft waves of chime and song. Monks chanting from the sacred temple on the sacred peak.

A place he was not allowed.

The time would soon come when he and his children made the barriers, the rules, the cage.

Ari left the balcony and walked through the open, sliding glass door of his home built into the mountain, a home his ancestors had lived in since the mountains were young and the world sparse. Mountains that should be teeming with his family, but instead echoed with the desperation of humans stretching for divinity and the phantom roars of his murdered race.

But soon, soon.

He paced through the living room and headed deeper into his home, his feet sinking into rich carpets dyed with young blood, and trailed his fingers along tapestries covering the stone walls, tapestries that depicted his family's brilliant heritage. His workshop was in his mother's old room, a tribute she would have appreciated.

In the place of honor, centered under a beam of light, was the book.

His phone rang, and he sent the call to the massive screen that took up one wall of his workshop. His associate appeared.

"Speak," Ari commanded and turned his attention to the book.

"Tezcatlipoca has risen."

"And your brothers?" Ari traced the empty page, the stretched hide smooth and supple.

“Dead by Piper Prince’s hands. As planned.”

“Anything else? I have work to do.” The interruption was unwelcome, and his associate was aware of the consequences of disturbing him needlessly.

“Tezcatlipoca is powerful, more so than we expected.”

“We?”

“I, my Leader.”

“Tez will serve his purpose. The dark magickas will be freed, and my army primed. All is according to plan.”

“And if he cannot be defeated?”

Ari flicked his gaze to the screen, taking in the ghostly form of the last remaining son of Poseidon. They had that in common—being the last.

“Do not doubt Piper Prince.” Ari let the flame in his soul brighten and burn in his gaze. “Do not doubt *me*.”

His associate bowed, and Ari ended the call.

He turned his attention to the book and removed the mark of power from the preparation table. Harvested from a human male not yet of age, the skin was pliable. Obedient.

He sealed the mark on the book, transferring the power that resided deep in its cells to the book’s entirety.

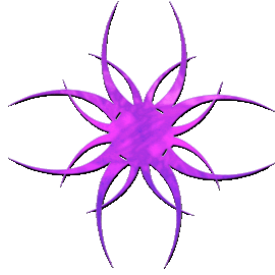
The book groaned, glowed.

Four more.

And then, with the help of Piper Prince, his children would once again walk the earth.

CHAPTER TWO

PIPER



I led Rainey to the roc guarding Roc Bottom. She stood back, her headscarf flicking in the breeze and the color in her face a healthy pink, and kept her gaze trained on the too-big-to-be-real mythical bird waiting for its nummies.

The remains of Finn's and Bernard's raw meat tributes dripped off the silver offering plate at the base of the roc's nest. I reached into my paper bag, locking in the bird's hypnotic gaze, and tossed a raw prime rib high into the air. The roc caught my tribute, swallowed, then lowered its head and once again bowed to me.

That bow wasn't normal the first time I came here with Finn, and it wasn't normal now.

The roc turned to my little sister. My very human, *has no powers and should not be here* little sister.

Rainey, being Rainey, ignored everything Finn and Bernard had told her on the ride over from Book Spirits. She held out her offering, as if coaxing a stray puppy to come out of hiding.

"Rainey, you have to throw the meat."

In my periphery, the green glow of Finn's Protector magic and the blue glow of Bernard's genie magic lit the dark opening of the tunnel that led to Roc Bottom, a place where the mythical beings of Muse Island could be themselves without worrying about wearing their human masks.

Rainey stretched out her arm, the blood from her tribute running over her hand, and cooed.

She *cooed*.

Once again, I regretted going along with this insane plan. Unmagicked people, like Rainey, were not permitted entrance by the roc guardian. Rainey being my sister did not guarantee her safe passage, even if Finn and Bernard were ninety percent sure it'd work.

I was not comfortable with ninety percent. Not when it came to my sister.

The roc snorted.

I tensed, and my own magic flared in my hands, a purple glow ready to save Rainey.

The roc cooed back.

It gently took the tribute from my sister's hand, swallowed, and then rubbed its head against her like a cat showing a moment of gratitude.

Rainey threw her arms around the roc's beak and hugged it.

Hugged it.

I looked toward the tunnel. Finn and Bernard stood with mouths opened wide, toned shoulders slumped.

"You're just a big, beautiful baby," Rainey said, stroking the roc. "Aren't you?"

"Rainey, time to let Mr. Roc go." I kept my voice steady and calm.

She looked up and started to protest.

"You need to come with me while he stays here and guards all the magical creatures you want to meet. Who are inside. Away from Mr. Roc." I gestured toward the tunnel, toward *safety*.

She stuck her lip out in a pout then kissed the roc on the beak. "I'll be back to visit you later, beautiful."

The roc trilled then slumped his head on the edge of his nest, watching Rainey leave.

"Unbelievable," I muttered, taking Rainey's hand and pulling her into the tunnel.

Finn and Bernard shook their heads and took up positions on either side of us, Bernard sticking by Rainey like her personal bodyguard.

She'd need it here.

While most creatures on Muse Island were friendly, some were not. All were welcome at Roc Bottom.

As we walked, I fidgeted with the straps of the bikini Rainey had forced me to wear. All three of them had barged into my other-dimension office at

Book Spirits and demanded I step away from my research on Tezcatlipoca, the Aztec god of chaos whose ritual to come into power I'd failed to stop.

The word *obsessed* had been flung about.

I ughed. "You know I don't wear bikinis. And my beach pants would have been just fine."

"Pipes, loosen up." Rainey's tone held an eye roll.

"Trust me, you should wear a bikini." Finn looked me up and down, the back of his hand brushing my arm.

That'd been happening a lot in the past few days. The "accidental" touching.

Not that I was complaining.

He shot me one of his single-dimpled smiles. "If those straps are bothering you, plenty of mythicals go topless."

Bernard chuckled.

I glared at Finn. Now I should complain. I *should*. But I just dropped my fidgety arm and kept walking, still too aware of how close we were.

The tunnel opened up into a large cenote, an underground lake open to the sky, where a small, dark moon had hung for the past three days, courtesy of the god Tez. And no amount of my *obsessive* research had turned up anything on what it meant.

The iridescent blue-green water was filled with merpeople, water nymphs, and land-based creatures floating around on inner tubes.

Rainey stopped walking and yanked on my arm.

Bernard was there in less than a second. "Are you okay, Miss Prince?"

"Rainey," she corrected him for the hundredth time. "I'm fine. Just...look."

She pointed at a woman whose legs twisted into a mermaid tail as she performed a perfect jump off the high dive.

Rainey bounced up and down on her toes and clapped her hands together. "Mermaids are real!" she squealed.

Bernard grinned like she was the cutest thing he'd ever seen.

Huh.

I leaned over to Finn. "That mermaid may be technically topless, but her scales cover her you-know-whats."

He stifled a laugh. Yep, the forensic psychologist who discussed murder scenes without blinking couldn't bring herself to say "nipples" in front of the boy she liked.

In the center of the pool, a man waved his arms wildly, the rubber-ducky-shaped inner tube around his middle bobbing up and down chaotically in the water.

“Hello, Piper Prince! Hello!” Narfi shouted across the water then showed off his rubber ducky, like a kid trying to get his mother’s attention.

“Hi, Narfi,” I called back. “Looking good.”

His answering grin was enough to warm me up inside.

Narfi, the son of Loki, had given up his god powers to become a phoenix. The Sons of Poseidon had killed him and kept his body on ice to prevent him from being reborn. But I’d killed all but one Son of Poseidon, we’d rescued Narfi’s body, and he’d come back to us two days ago, with no memory of his time spent as a ghost.

Bernard and Finn set up a few loungers by the water, where the sun poured in from the cenote’s opening. Rainey moaned as she collapsed onto one of the loungers, a total sun baby. The chemo treatments had made her sensitive to the sun, but the experimental treatments she’d started didn’t have the same side effects.

I stretched out between her and Finn, my sheer cover-up doing nothing to actually cover me up—including the sun-shaped birthmark on my leg that marked me as a Protector—and pulled out a book on ancient religions from my beach bag.

“Piper.” Without looking at me, Finn reached out and pushed my hand back down, his matching birthmark visible without a shirt covering his upper arm. “Take a break from the books. Giving your brain a respite is good for you. Even scientists say so.”

“But Tez—”

“Will still be hanging out in his dark moon, no matter how many books you read. Until he makes his next move, we can’t make ours.”

He kept his hand wrapped around mine, his thumb massaging my palm, sending tingles up my arm, even though his own muscles had tensed. As they did anytime Tez was brought up. Because Tez had Bett, Finn’s best friend. Who’d betrayed us all and helped Tez rise to power.

I forced myself to relax onto my lounge. Bernard’s tattoos glowed blue, and cocktails of various sorts appeared by each of us.

“Ooh, what is this?” Rainey stroked her icy blue concoction.

“I do not know,” Bernard said. “It’s a twist on an old recipe. My gift told me you like ice cream, so I added it.”

She took a sip and *aahed*. “I dub it The Blue Genie. After you.”

I smiled, sipped my tequila on the rocks—apparently, I needed something strong—and watched Narfi float aimlessly around the water. He slumped forward, hugged the neck of his rubber ducky float, and moments later, fell asleep.

Finn grinned at Narfi’s childlike pose, at the innocence that radiated around him like a sleeping baby. His ability to recover from the trauma he’d endured was supernatural.

I shared Finn’s grin—

A shriek broke through the cenote.

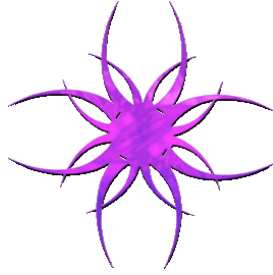
Creatures screamed.

The four of us jumped to our feet.

In the middle of the pool, water started to freeze from all directions, imprisoning a still-sleeping Narfi in a moat of ice.

CHAPTER THREE

PIPER



The ice spread, trapping not only Narfi but every mythical creature swimming in the underground pool. Screams echoed against the cavern walls, bouncing around the cenote with a deafening, growing panic.

A water nymph beat at the ice that surrounded her hips. Finn ran to her aid. “Help me, Bern.”

Bernard joined him, and they pounded the frozen water around her, causing fissures but no opening.

“It’s n-n-no use,” she sputtered. “The ice goes all the way down past my feet.”

“Piper, do something.” Rainey nudged me, as if I was some superhero.

My mouth went dry. “If I blast the ice with my power, I could hurt someone.”

Narfi was still slumped over his rubber ducky in the middle of the frozen pool.

“Narfi! Narfi!” I yelled.

Unbelievably, Narfi had slept through the freezing cold and screams but finally roused at the sound of his name.

“Piper?” He rubbed his eyelids, opened his eyes, and jerked back. “What happened?”

Most of his body was on the massive inner tube, but his feet dangled into the ice. He began to cry, scream, slap at his trapped feet.

The wild motions reminded me of when he’d been drugged by the Sons and had scratched his scalp into scabs. “Narfi, stop it. Stop!”

He locked his gaze with mine and held on tight, as if I was the tether to his safety ring.

“You’re okay, Narfi. We’re coming for you. You’re going to be fine.” I edged my impractical flip-flopped foot onto the ice.

It moved under my feet, broke apart with a loud crack, and I jumped back onto the shore.

Narfi’s panicked gaze met mine.

All around the cenote, the ice began to crack, split apart. The screams started anew, a fresh terror injected into the high notes.

Narfi’s feet popped free.

The ice melted and disappeared. As if it’d never been there.

Bernard and Finn pulled the nymph from the pool and rested her on the rocky shore. Rainey ran forward and wrapped the shivering woman in a towel.

Bernard dropped to his knees and placed his hands on the ground. His tattoos glowed blue, and the water in the cenote began to steam. The rocks under our feet heated to a comfortable warmth, and the half-frozen creatures sank to the ground with a relieved sigh as they climbed out of the pool.

Narfi paddled to the edge. I helped him scramble out, and he fell into my arms, shivering. I rubbed his back and held him tight, his skin cold as ice. “It’s okay, Narfi. You’re okay.”

“I-I-I was dreaming...and I woke up...and it was there...here...”

My trauma training kicked in. I pulled him away gently but held onto his arms. “We’re going to take deep breaths. Follow my lead. In for three.” I sucked in a long breath. “Out for three.”

He mimicked me, taking breaths, once, twice, three times.

When he was calm enough, I led him to my lounge where he sat down. Finn, Bernard, and Rainey circled us. All around, mythicals were packing up for the day. I could hardly blame them.

I took Narfi’s hand in mine. “Now tell us what happened.”

“I was having a horrible nightmare.” He lowered his head and peeked up at me. “About the Sons freezing me. Ice everywhere. When I woke up, I was in it. How did that happen?”

Finn ran his hand through his hair. “Tez. We’ve been waiting for his first move, and here it is—attacking the most protected haven on the island.”

Rainey and Bernard both glanced up at the dark moon above, as if it was verification of Tez’s attack. Or an omen for the next one.

A heavy silence fell on the group.

I shook my head. "I've been reading everything I can find about Tez, and freezing water isn't in his wheelhouse. He's associated with change, disorder, sorcery, beauty, war, the night sky, and some other stuff. But water? That's his brother's domain."

I waited for a reaction, but the group seemed to be reflecting on what I'd said. Rainey slurped at her Blue Genie cocktail, fidgeting the way she did when nervous.

"And what good would it do to freeze the pool for a few minutes?" I continued. "That's hardly the kind of rise to power that gets all the magickas on your side."

Finn crossed his arms over his bare chest. "Good point. I've been asking around—guests, visitors, locals—about Tez, and he's not a bullseye shooter. Likes to charm people to his side."

His jaw clenched, and I knew he was thinking about Bett. Wondering how Tez had charmed her to betray him.

"Not like the Sons of Poseidon then," Bernard added.

"Not all murderers are the same," I muttered, Ari Fawkes on my mind. He wanted not only the necklace passed along to me, known as the *asteri psychi*, but me. He wanted me.

I needed to figure out why.

Narfi took a shuddering breath, still recovering from a nightmare-come-true.

Finn nodded at us. "Let's go. I'll drive your car home, Narfi."

Narfi nodded, and we followed Finn out of Roc Bottom. Bernard hopped into Finn's Jeep, and Rainey climbed into the passenger's seat next to him.

"Ride with me, Piper?" Finn's dimple was irresistible.

Narfi ran ahead. "My car. I get shotgun!"

I looked after Finn's Jeep, already backing out of the parking spot. I didn't like leaving my sister, but Bernard would keep her safe.

"Guess I get the back seat all to myself." I smirked at Finn's disappointed look, but Narfi had been through more than we had. If riding upfront helped him recover, he could have it.

We headed to Narfi's bright red El Camino, Narfi humming and bopping his head to the "El Camino" song, and followed Bernard and Rainey out of the parking lot.

Finn caught my attention in the rearview mirror. “Think Rainey’s handling everything okay?”

I snorted. “I think she’s handling it better than I am.”

Finn nodded then yelped, his full attention back on the road.

Ahead of us, Bernard had sent Finn’s Jeep into a spin on the asphalt. We skidded to a stop behind Bernard and Rainey, my heart lost somewhere in my stomach.

Narfi screeched and pointed out the window. “Wh-wh-what is that?”

I was still trying to catch my breath when I looked up and saw *that*. *That* was a giant umbrella the size of a sequoia tree with arms and legs stomping down the lane.

The umbrella raised its foot above the Jeep. I fumbled with my seatbelt latch, my fingers slip-sliding over the catch, my heart ping-ponging between my throat and my toes.

Not Rainey, not Bernard, this can’t be happening.

The umbrella disappeared. There one second. Gone the next.

We sat still. Silence coated the insides of the El Camino, heavy and oppressive.

A knock came on the window. We jerked and screamed.

Bernard stood at Finn’s door, Rainey beside him, rubbing her arms. Finn rolled down the window.

Bernard leaned in. “Everyone okay?” His gaze met each of ours as we all nodded. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say that was a *tsukumogami*, a possessed household object in Japanese mythology. But those aren’t living myths. And they aren’t that big.”

Finn went rigid, his hands gripping the white leather steering wheel. “This morning at the resort a kid asked his mom about stuff in their house coming to life and chasing them.”

“How’s that connected?” I propped my elbows on my knees, leaning forward from the back seat.

“Bad dreams,” Narfi whispered. “Like ice.”

“Nightmares?” Rainey said from behind Bernard. “Are you saying nightmares are coming to life?”

I swallowed. “What do you guys know about nightmares and mythology?”

“Baku,” Bernard said, dread a deep hum in his throat.

“What’s Baku?” Rainey asked.

“Not what,” Finn said. “Who. Baku is the island’s dream eater. Good call, Bern. Something may have happened.”

“Change of destination?” Bernard asked. “Baku’s place?”

“Yes,” I answered, not waiting for Finn.

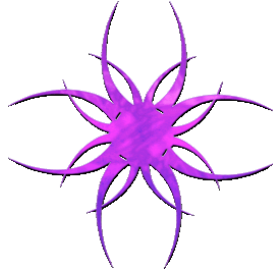
He narrowed his gaze at me for a moment then nodded.

Rainey snorted a laugh. “Are things always this crazy on Muse Island?”

I sighed and answered, “Pretty much,” at the same time Finn answered, “Only since your sister arrived.” I couldn’t be sure, but I sensed a hint of resignation in his tone.

CHAPTER FOUR

PIPER



We stepped out of our vehicles in front of manicured grounds outside a cave. Two stone lanterns flanked either side, and a lush Japanese garden with shrubs, flowers, and a pond stood between us and the opening.

It looked like the massive den of an animal with really good taste.

Rainey turned to Bernard. “This is Baku’s place?”

He nodded. “Baku rarely assumes human form. It’s not necessary for his role as dream eater.”

“He’s a loner,” Finn added. “No one here quite like Baku. He’s a chimera—a hodgepodge of animal parts thrown together.”

Rainey’s eyes danced. “A chimera?”

Given her excitement over everything on Muse Island, one might think we’d led a boring life back in Vernon, Texas. Other than her saving lives in the emergency room and me counseling killers, one would be right.

I tugged on my cover-up, trying to get it to live up to its name.

Rainey rolled her eyes. “Stop fussing with your clothes. We’re about to meet a chimera.”

“I’m not fussing. And I wouldn’t have this problem if you’d let me wear actual clothes.” Showing up to a stranger’s house in a bikini and what was basically a sheer robe was not my idea of professionalism.

She *pfifted*, while Finn stifled another laugh. I had a feeling he was on Rainey’s side. Outnumbered again.

I looked for reinforcement and realized Narfi wasn’t with us. He was cowering in the passenger seat.

“Narfi?” I approached the El Camino, and he cracked his window and peered out. “Narfi, aren’t you coming with us?”

“I’d rather wait here.” His gaze shifted between me and Baku’s home beyond. “I’ll be fine.”

“But you should stay with—”

“Leave him.” Finn wrapped his hand around my upper arm and pulled me away. “We could use a lookout.”

“You think he’s recovered enough?” I asked Finn.

“Narfi’s alive, finally sober, and a demigod,” he answered. “He can handle himself for a few minutes. We won’t be gone long.”

I sighed away my tension and nodded.

The four of us walked across the bridge spanning the large pond. Rocks ornamented the banks, lily pads floated on the surface, and a small waterfall off to the side trickled peacefully. The island’s music called to me in reedy tones, the same notes once again rearranged into a familiar medley of Muse energy.

But the sound was faint, hushed, whispered.

Like the Muse Thalia’s song after the death of Tez’s martyr at her sanctuary.

“What Muse lives in this area?” I whispered to Finn.

“Urania, Muse of—”

“Astronomy.” I’d finally learned all of the Nine Muses’ names and which creative energy they represented.

“Why?” He lowered his voice as well, following my lead.

“Something’s not right.”

I picked up my pace, but Bernard stopped us several feet before the cave’s opening. “Baku can be, shall we say, temperamental about company,” he warned. “I suggest I go first and give him a heads-up.”

Finn nodded. “Good idea. But I’ll go, Bern. You stay here with the women while I’ll see what’s up. I swear, if Baku took a vacation without clearing it first...”

“Stay with the women?” Rainey murmured to me and folded her arms across her chest. “What century is this?”

“My thoughts exactly.” I followed Finn for a few steps before he turned around.

“What are you doing?”

“Going with you.” I’d thought that was obvious.

“No, you’re staying back there.” He pointed at Bernard and Rainey.

I glared at him. This was the point when I usually protested and we verbally tussled for a while. But if charm worked so well for others, maybe I could use it myself.

I took another step, closing the distance between us to barely-there. Finn's gaze darted toward my bikini top, then back up.

"C'mon, Finn," I murmured in the most-seductive voice I could muster. "If something bad is in there and Tez is involved, don't you want us working as a team? Stronger together than apart?"

"*Tartarus*, woman." Slowly, slowly, the edges of his mouth rose into a grin. "I could stand here and argue with you—which I know you love to do—but if nightmares *are* coming to life, we don't have time." He jerked his head toward the mouth of the den and resumed walking.

"Together it is." I triumphantly fell into step beside him. Maybe this bikini had its uses after all.

"Be careful!" Rainey called after me.

Moments later, she giggled at something Bernard had said. So much for her worrying too much.

Finn crouched and shouted into the dim light of the cave-like structure. "Baku, it's Finn Kalani, from the resort. I've got some friends here too. Piper Prince? I bet you've heard of her by now." He turned to me and muttered, "The faerie won't shut up about you."

I grinned at the thought of Wiley, Earlene, and the other faerie being personal fans.

We waited for an answer.

"Baku?" Finn yelled again.

The only sound was the island music I could now barely hear, the trickle of the waterfall, and birds chirping nearby.

"Maybe he's out?" I asked.

"No." Finn shook his head. "Baku roams at night, but he doesn't technically have to be anywhere near nightmares to swallow them."

I cocked my head toward the entry. "Shall we go in?"

"Let's."

He took one step, but I blocked him with my arm and smiled. "Ladies first."

Before he could object, I stepped into Baku's place, not at all sure what kind of home a chimera kept. I pulled on my power, starting from my sun-

shaped birthmark and spreading through my body, and a small purple light rose from my hand. Just in case, I wanted to be ready.

Behind me came a green glow, Finn bringing his Protector power to the surface.

We entered a tunnel that led toward the light shining from a room tucked away in the back. I turned the final corner and stepped into the main home. My stomach jumped to my throat.

Lying on a massive futon bed in the middle of the large room was a sedan-sized creature with a furry body, an elephant's trunk, a rhinoceros nose and horns, and a tail I couldn't name at the moment. But covering its body was blood. Deep red blood.

Finn ran into my back, gasped, and slid his arms around me.

I leaned back against him, wincing at the sight of the dead creature. "Is that Baku?"

"Yes," he breathed. "That *was* Baku." Finn turned toward the entrance. "Bern, get in here."

Footsteps pounded behind us, and Bernard and Rainey ran inside.

Rainey shrieked and slapped her hand to her mouth.

"No, no, no," she cried between her fingers.

Bernard reached for her, but she shrugged him off, surged forward, and dropped to her knees in front of Baku.

Finn and Bernard glanced at me. I shook my head, indicating they should let me handle this, and joined Rainey at the dead creature's side. She was already stroking its fur and murmuring, "Oh, Baku. You poor thing."

I slipped my arm around her shoulder and pulled her into me. "Baku wasn't an animal, Rainey. He was a mythical."

She turned to me, tears moistening her cheeks, and sniffed. "It doesn't matter. He's animal-like, and you know how I feel about animals."

"They deserve protection and respect." I repeated the line I'd heard from Rainey a billion times, starting from when she was in Mary Janes and pigtail braids.

"Every creature deserves respect." Bernard's voice boomed from where he now stood over us, casting a comforting shadow.

Finn had drawn closer too. "I'm all for grieving Baku, but let's put this in perspective. If Baku is dead, no one is eating dreams. *No one.*"

Bernard pursed his lips and crossed his arms.

“So we call a new dream eater?” I suggested, looking back and forth between Finn and Bernard for clues.

Finn ran his hand through that thick hair of his. “It’s not that simple. Dream eaters don’t die, not naturally. Baku wouldn’t have been easy to kill.”

Sure enough, the blood was accompanied by claw marks and stabs that left little untouched fur for Rainey to rub. And yet she’d found the few places where she could pet the poor creature.

“Not your typical murder then.”

“Baku’s murder isn’t the only problem,” Finn answered. “For the foreseeable future, nightmares will roam free on Muse Island.”

“Roam free? What does that mean? Like if you dream about something dangerous...?”

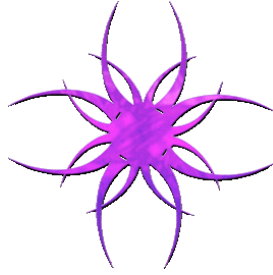
Rainey snorted. “More dangerous than a giant umbrella stomping on your car?”

“Someone must have woken up in time.” Finn gave a shuddering sigh, as if remembering that near-death moment. “Because yeah, real nightmares do real things in real life.”

My stomach sank like a rock. “Meaning more creatures and people could turn up dead.”

CHAPTER FIVE

FINN



Rainey stepped away from Baku, and Bernard handed her a handkerchief. She sniffled into it while Piper leaned closer to examine the body. Like she really was “Piper Prince, Supernatural Detective,” the way it read on the business cards Seshat had made her.

“Let me see your phone, Pipes.” Rainey reached out to Piper. “We need to call the police.”

“Um, I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Piper glanced up at her sister, then over to me. Since when did she ask for my input before making decisions?

But hey, I could roll with it.

I nodded at Piper then turned to Rainey. “Sheriff Mykos was in the pocket of the Sons of Poseidon, more or less. Now that the Sons are gone, I’m not sure whose side he’s on.”

Not that they were totally gone. Piper had let Aphrodisios, the youngest of the Sons, live. She believed he could be useful to us...and I believed in her.

Even if I wasn’t certain what the prophecies about her meant for our future.

Bern slid his hand into Rainey’s to draw her away, but she shoved him back. Feisty ran through that family like cream through a Twinkie.

“Excuse me,” she announced, “but this anim—chimera deserves to have his death properly investigated. We have to bring in the authorities.”

“We’ll call them, Rainey,” Piper said. “But not until we’ve had a chance to look around ourselves.”

Rainey scanned each of us, probably looking for confirmation.

“Trust me.” Piper’s tone turned insistent. “It makes no difference whether we call now or a few minutes or even an hour from now. Unless there’s an eyewitness or a watch gets broken at the exact moment of death, coroners can only come up with a window for time of death. And we won’t disturb the crime scene—”

“Any more than necessary,” I added with a smirk.

I was impressed by Piper’s mild rebellious streak. And a little turned on. I cleared my throat. “Let’s scan the place. No leaving fingerprints, in case Mykos decides to actually investigate a murder for once, but look around for anything unusual.”

Rainey cocked her head. “Wait, I just petted Baku—is that a problem? And how would I know what’s unusual in a chimera’s home?”

Piper stood and took her sister’s hand. “Actually, it would be great if you could take a closer look at the body. They can’t really get fingerprints off animal skin or fur, you aren’t going to leave hair behind”—she gestured to Rainey’s headscarf—“and you’re the only one here with medical training. Your expertise could help us figure out what happened.”

Rainey nodded, squatted, and began to pet Baku again—a gesture Baku would no doubt hate if he were still alive.

“Piper and I will look around here,” I told Bern. “You take the outside.”

He nodded and strode back out, and Piper and I began a tour of the room.

I’d never seen the inside of Baku’s place before. Hadn’t even tried to picture it. But I wasn’t too surprised that it held very little furniture, just the futon, a low lying table with food crumbs, scraps, and bones on top, and a large TV screen.

“Wonder what his favorite shows were,” I muttered to Piper. “Animal Planet?”

“A stereotypical assessment.” She lifted her chin. “Maybe Baku watched Masterpiece Theatre or baking shows or surfing championships.”

I grinned back. “I doubt a creature like that was interested in riding boards.”

“Not everyone is.”

I leaned closer, to where her hair brushed my cheek. “I could teach you to surf. You already own the right attire.”

“If you think I’m keeping this bikini...”

“Oh, you can lose the bikini anytime you want.” I winked.

My libido had really bad timing.

“Could we focus on the dead dream eater?” she said through clenched teeth. But her face was a pretty pink.

“Nothing here to see really,” I said. Lamps lined the walls, making light flicker throughout the space. “Unless you think there’s something up there.” I gestured to the shelves of rock around the perimeter that Baku had likely climbed and reclined on.

Piper marched toward the back and scrambled onto the first, waist-high shelf. I joined her, and we looked around and then moved to the next. And the next. Until we reached the fourth and final one.

From this vantage point, we could see the room in its entirety. It looked just like a cave, except for being too symmetrical. Baku had obviously designed something that looked natural and felt like home.

Below us, Rainey was still examining the body. She looked up at us. “Hey, I need Bernard’s muscle.”

I pulled out my phone and texted him.

Bernard stepped inside moments later. “Find something?”

Rainey pointed at Baku. “Help me flip him.”

Piper planted her hands on her hips—those perfectly curved hips—and glared down at her sister. “What happened to not disturbing the crime scene?”

“We’ll put it back,” Rainey answered, with almost a *duh* in her tone.

It was more than amusing to watch Piper’s sister successfully challenge her. Maybe she could teach me some tricks.

Bernard heaved Baku over, and confusion struck me like a blow to the head. “What’s that?”

“That”—Rainey pointed to hunks of matted fur on Baku’s underside—“looks like *plica neuropathica*. It’s a hair disease also known as Polish plait. It happens to humans when hair gets irreversibly tangled.”

“But not animals?” Piper asked.

Rainey shrugged. “Not sure. I’m a nurse, not a vet. But as thick as animal hair is, I don’t think it gets matted quite like this.”

Bernard wrinkled his brow. “The cherry tree was tangled too.”

“Cherry tree?” Piper began her descent.

I caught up, jumped ahead to the shelf below, and helped her get down the massive steps injury-free. We’d done enough first aid on each other to last a while.

“Cherry trees in the back,” Bernard explained as we drew close. “Branches twisted around each other, in a way that doesn’t look accidental.”

“Show us.” Piper stepped forward to head outside.

“Hang on,” Rainey called out. “We should turn him back over.”

Bernard flipped Baku to his original position on the massive futon, and we walked through the tunnel toward the sunshine. Piper led the way, with me trailing her, Rainey behind me, and Bernard bringing up the rear.

“Where’s this cherry tree?” I asked over my shoulder to Bern.

“It’s on the backside. Turn right when you—”

Swwwsh.

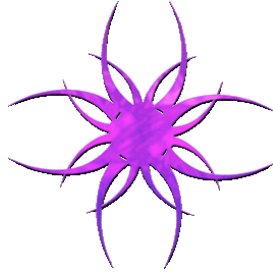
Piper gasped. I halted. Rainey screamed. Bernard’s blue glow beamed from behind.

My pulse throbbed in my neck. “Stay. Still,” I instructed Piper.

But she was already frozen stiff, her breath coming in pants as she stood just outside Baku’s den with a sword blade pressed against her throat.

CHAPTER SIX

PIPER



You don't realize how cold a blade can be until its chill rests on your neck. This was the perfect moment to call on my power, except that the slightest movement could make whoever was holding this weapon jerk in the wrong direction.

Could I summon my magic without startling our enemy?

And who was the enemy? Tez? Aphrodisios? Bett?

Please not Bett. I didn't want another run-in with Finn's best friend that would crush his already aching heart.

"Who's there?" Finn called behind me.

Silence.

A rustle.

"Finn?" The voice was female, high, light.

"Namika?" Finn's voice was surprised, but not scared.

So not Bett. Or any other known foes.

The sword lowered, and I released my held breath.

A petite Asian woman stood off to the side, wearing a sporty bikini and holding a samurai sword. Rainey and Bernard emerged from the cave behind us.

"Hey, brother," the young, gorgeous woman—who looked at home in her athletic bikini—said to Finn. "What you doing in my territory?" Her voice held the slightest accent, letting me know her first language wasn't English, but she'd mastered it well.

Finn sighed heavily. "Baku's dead."

"Ah, I thought something must have happened."

“Baku?” Narfi’s voice came from behind. He joined our little circle. “He’s dead?”

“Good to see you back, Narfi.” The young woman picked up a sheath from the ground and slid the samurai sword inside.

“I saw her, Finn,” Narfi said. “But I knew she was okay, so I didn’t say anything.”

I nudged Finn with my elbow. “Want to introduce us?”

“Sorry.” Finn looked properly contrite and wrapped his arm around my waist. “Piper Prince, this is Namika Sato, Protector of Urania. Namika Sato,” Finn continued, “this is—”

“Piper Prince?” Namika gave a respectful bow. “I am honored to meet you. You rid our island of Poseidon’s bastards.”

Bastards? She really had learned English well.

I bowed back. “Good to meet you too.”

Rainey pushed past me and propped her hands on her hips, her headscarf blowing behind her in the breeze like a superwoman cape. “Rainey Prince. And you nearly killed my sister.”

Namika rasped air from her mouth. “Sorry about that. Black ball in the sky got me jumpy.” She pointed at the gleaming darkness in the sky, the constant reminder that Tez had risen.

“Think Tez could be behind this?” I wanted Namika’s take on the situation.

If I’d learned anything from my years as a psychologist, it was that everyone had a unique perspective, and one of those perspectives could well be the key to unlocking a case.

Namika pursed her lips to the side and considered Tez’s dark moon before turning back to face our group. “Seems like someone who does that level of drama”—she thumbed at the unnatural moon-like object over her shoulder—“would make a bigger show of killing someone. Bigger than leaving it for dead in a cave no one visits and hoping someone finds it.”

I nodded. “Along the lines of what I was thinking. But the nightmares...”

“Drama all on their own. *Kēosu*.”

The word sounded a lot like *chaos*.

“Then who killed Baku and why? Who gains the most from nightmares coming to life?” My fingers itched for a notepad and pen.

Bernard's genie magic glowed, and he handed over my notebook from my office at Book Spirits and my favorite pen.

Rainey's eyes widened. "Well, that's handy." She rubbed her hand up Bernard's bicep, as if providing office supplies was as big a turn-on to her as a guy who worked out.

He shot a bemused grin at her.

I shook my head and perched on a nearby rock, Finn at my side.

"Wanna take bets?" Finn whispered, low in my ear.

"Bets on what?" I wrote at the top of the notepad "Who gains from Baku's death?"

"Those two becoming an item." He tipped his chin up at Bernard and Rainey.

My pen made a large scratch to the edge of the paper as I looked at them again, barely an inch between them. An item? Rainey would have said something. We told each other everything. We'd always told each other everything. But...

Since I'd rescued her from the Sons, she'd been keeping her distance. I thought she needed some recovery and adjustment time, but maybe—maybe Rainey just needed time away from me.

I shook away those thoughts and wrote down the beginnings of a list of suspects. Rainey was a notorious flirt. This meant nothing. *Focus on the case.*

Tez and Aphrodisios went immediately to the top of the list. They were the most obvious suspects, but that also made me want to cross them off. Namika was right. This wasn't Tez's style, and it wasn't Aphrodisios's either.

"Besides Tez and the Sons, who else would have it out for a dream eater?" I posed the question to the group, and the splintered focus recentered.

"Sons," Narfi intoned. "It's always the Sons."

Namika stepped up and squeezed Narfi's arm. "Dude, they're dead. All but that one, and your Piper Prince has him scared."

Narfi nodded through a shaky sigh.

Bernard cocked his head. "Plenty of creatures would desire such turmoil on the island, but a dream demon would most directly benefit."

"Dream demon?" Rainey paled a little.

Finn shifted at my side. “Dream demons feast on dreams. Mostly nightmares. Incubi, alps, mares. In humans, an attack from a dream demon presents as sleep paralysis.”

“Coven of Nyx,” Namika added. “Witches who worship the goddess Nyx. A god like Tezcatlipoca coming to power would be a sign for them to celebrate darkness of night and dreams.”

I jotted down all their ideas. “All of these are on Muse Island? That’s a lot of suspects.”

Finn shrugged. “A lot of dark magickas will take advantage of Tez’s rise.”

A pang of guilt shot deep in my gut. Tez’s rise that I didn’t stop. Chaos happening because of my failures. Because I’d chosen to save Rainey above everyone else.

I took a deep breath and shoved that guilt down until it pressed like a pointed stone in my stomach, heavy and sharp. “I need to hit the books at my office, and we need to narrow down this list. Anyone want to join me?”

Narfi shook his head. “Too much death, too many nightmares.”

Finn looked from Narfi to me, then back to Narfi. “Why don’t I take you home, bud? We’ll grab some food from Baba’s, get you all settled, and let you rest up.”

Narfi nodded and headed for his car.

“Text me what you guys want from Baba’s,” Finn said, “and I’ll meet you at Book Spirits with lunch.” He followed Narfi to the car, and the two of them took off.

Rainey yawned and raised her hand. “I’ll go with, as long as I can nap while there.”

Bernard cupped her elbow, as if steadying her. “You have done too much today. I should have taken you back to the safehouse earlier.”

She gave him a wan smile. “I wouldn’t have let you. Just ask Piper how headstrong I can be.”

I sighed. “True, but Bern’s right, Rainey. You’ve overdone it today. The treatments may be working, but you need to conserve your energy.”

“I’ll be fine after a nap.”

There was little point in arguing. Wherever our parents were, they were likely super-stubborn people who’d passed on that gene to both of us.

Bernard, Rainey, and I headed for the Jeep, leaving Namika to call Sheriff Mykos about Baku. She promised to give us a head start and keep

our involvement on the down-low. As we backed out, she raised her fist in salute and then disappeared into Baku's cave.

Skirting the edge of Faerie Hollow on a narrow road that ran between the faerie's woods and the beach, we kept silent, watching out for escaped nightmares. None of us wanted to be crushed by an umbrella foot...or worse.

Twenty minutes later, we pulled to a halt in front of Book Spirits, the island's bookstore located on Main Street and run by Seshat, goddess of the celestial library. To keep me protected from the Sons discovering my magical signature, she'd created an other-dimension office for me at the back of her shop, an office that had come to feel like a second home. More so than my office at the state hospital in Vernon ever did.

Which reminded me...

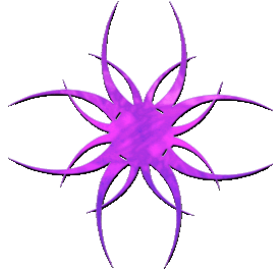
Before joining Bernard and Rainey inside, I pulled out my notepad and added one more suspect to the list.

Ari Fawkes.

So far, he'd been behind most of the happenings on Muse Island since I'd arrived. It wouldn't surprise me in the least to discover he had his blood-slicked fingers in Baku's murder.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PIPER



The antique bell welcomed us with a *ding-a-ling* as Bernard, Rainey, and I walked into Book Spirits. Inside, kerosene lamps lit the corners, and the musty smell of old books floated around us. Shelves overstuffed with leather-bound books made it hard to see anything in the shop, and through the maze of literary clutter, Seshat sat behind a secretary's desk, scratching on parchment with an ink-dipped quill.

She stood, her tall frame draped in a black-and-tan animal print. She'd once told me she wore the skin of her enemies. I didn't doubt her.

"My guardians whisper unwelcome messages. There is a disturbance among dreams on the island."

I'd met Seshat's guardians a couple of times—ghosts that stayed with her, upholding another of her titles, "friend of the dead in the afterlife."

"Hello to you too, Seshat," Rainey muttered, not a fan of the goddess she saw as having put me in danger. It didn't matter that Seshat had been drugged and not acting herself at the time, courtesy of the Sons.

I edged in front of Rainey, putting a barrier between my sister guard dog and a goddess who could send her into another dimension with a mere swish of her hand.

"We've just come from Baku's home," I answered. "He's dead. Do you know who might hold a grudge against Baku? Or benefit from a dream eater's death?"

"Many. Too many." She shook her head and gestured to my office. "I've pulled some books about creatures with connections to dreams and nightmares. When you run through those, let me know. I've more in the back."

“Thank you.” Between Bernard providing the cocktails I needed and Seshat providing the books I needed, I was spoiled beyond anything I’d experienced before.

Now if only I could get a guardian angel to show me how to handle my feelings about Finn, I’d be all settled.

Well, that dilemma *and* who I was and what destiny I had and how to control my power and how to stop both Tezcatlipoca and Ari Fawkes and how to find my parents so I could save my sister. Also, how to get over the mountain of guilt in my gut.

My personal to-do list grew a foot every day.

Seshat took a long breath and let it out slowly, as if settling her own nerves. “While you work, I will contact the Council of Gods and let them know of the dream eater’s passing.”

“Doesn’t look like you relish that task.”

She hummed a low growl. “The Council is not my favorite, but they can be useful. It will likely take days, however, to produce a dream eater from thin air.”

I nodded and led Rainey and Bernard into my office, passing the thick wooden door carved with images of mythical creatures and words in an ancient language I still hadn’t deciphered. Crossing into the dimension where my office existed sent a familiar tingle down my spine, something akin to anticipation.

True to her word, Seshat had left stacks of books by my desk, a large mahogany beauty littered with research notes on my desperate search for our parents. The experimental treatments for Rainey’s cancer were not guaranteed, but a cure could be made from our parents’ blood.

If we could find them.

Bernard settled Rainey on a chaise lounge chair he’d wished up for her after her arrival. Soft music began playing near Rainey’s nap zone, and a large, fluffy blanket draped over her. She smiled gratefully up at Bernard, and he gently moved the tail of her headscarf away from her neck.

I yanked a book from the top of the nearest stack and flipped it open. Scanning the contents, I could already tell this one was a dud, but I’d still give it a thorough review to be sure.

“Do you need help with research?” Bernard joined me at my desk, speaking in hushed tones to let Rainey sleep.

I shook my head. “Thanks, but I have a system and I’m more efficient on my own.”

He dipped his chin. “In that case, I’m going to take a walk, look around, talk to the locals. Maybe the nightmares are not as widespread as we fear.”

A long shot given our luck, but I wasn’t going to Debbie Downer him.

I started with the suspect that had a name—the witch coven. I pulled out the magical directory gifted to me by Seshat, placed my hand on the blank pages inside, and focused my magic. Then I whispered, “Coven of Nyx.”

Words wrote themselves across the page under my tingling hand, and “Nyx’s Sleep Spa” appeared with an address and a phone number. Presumably, the witches ran it, but what was a sleep spa? And who was this Nyx goddess anyway?

I searched the books, located a Greek mythology textbook, and found the chapter on Nyx. Nyx, the daughter of Khaos, was defined as a primordial goddess who emerged at the dawn of creation and was made of the very substance of night. She also gave birth to what Finn called “dark magickas,” including the three Fates and Hekate, goddess of witchcraft and the moon.

I read some more but found nothing about tangled hair or branches—the only visible clues left at the scene. Still, this Coven of Nyx sounded like prime suspect material.

Rainey tossed and turned on the chaise, burrowing herself deeper into the cocoon of her blanket.

My next resource was titled *Nightmare Lore*. Alps, incubi, and mares were listed in the index, along with other variations of dream demons.

I started alphabetically with alps, noting distinguishing features and behaviors—like a magic hat called a *tarnkappe* being the source of its powers. Close in species to elves, an alp was sometimes called a nature-god or nature-demon, often in the evil service of witches.

Could the coven have employed an alp to create *alpträume*, or elf dreams? But why?

Something further down the page caught my eye.

Elfknots.

“Alps enjoy tangling hair into elfknots and may crush small farm animals to death during a sleep attack,” I whispered aloud, the back of my neck prickling.

Rainey’s fingers and toes jerked.

An echoing cry whimpered from my office closet.

I stood and looked from Rainey to my closet and back to Rainey.

Her eyelids twitched.

The closet door flung open, and out of the darkness, a little girl huddled under a blanket slid out, a flashlight shivering under the cover.

My breath caught, my heart dropped.

Rainey was having a nightmare.

Behind the crying girl, one of our foster home closets appeared. Or rather a transparent replica of that closet, with Rainey's crayon drawings taped up haphazardly on the inside, hidden where our foster mother wouldn't see them and rip them down.

My eyes stung. We didn't love that house, but it was hardly the worst one we'd stayed in. So what had happened in my sister's past to cause this nightmare?

The blanket slipped from her head, and she peered out through a crack in the accordion closet doors, trembling harder, tears shiny on her cheeks.

I crept forward, not wanting to disturb Nightmare Rainey.

I could wake the real Rainey up, but if something from her past gave her nightmares, I needed to know. She'd want me to know, and then we'd confront it, head on. The way we always confronted challenges together.

I hovered over the little girl and peeked through at one of our many shared rooms. A quilt with the stuffing falling out lined one of the twin beds, and one of Rainey's loved-to-threads bears slumped over on the rug.

And there, in the middle of the room, was me.

Childhood me.

But with purple lightning pouring from my palms, hair raised, eyes black. And a cruel smile curling at my lips.

Chills ran over my body.

"Rainey, come out and play," Nightmare Me called.

Rainey shrieked, shrank back to the corner of the closet, and threw the blanket back over her head.

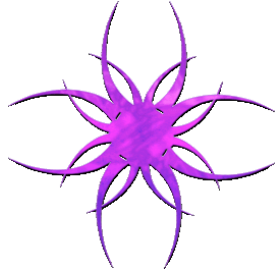
In the nightmare room, power crackled and then exploded.

But inside the closet, under Rainey's blanket—that's where the terror lived.

"Please go away, please stop," she muttered, praying through soft, hiccuping sobs. "Please go away."

CHAPTER EIGHT

PIPER



I jerked from Rainey’s nightmare and rushed to her side. The same words her child-self whispered in the nightmare fell from her lips. “Please go away, please stop.”

“Rainey, wake up. Time to wake up.” I stroked her arm, coaxing her from her dreams.

Was that how Rainey saw me? Now that I had supernatural power—power I’d used to destroy the Sons of Poseidon—was my own little sister afraid of me?

My heart pounded like a wrecking ball against my ribs, but I had to stay calm. If deep down Rainey harbored worry that I’d hurt her, I had to be extra-gentle, reminding her I never would.

Never.

Her eyes popped open then widened further, as if she was shocked to see me there in my office. Or to see the grown-up version of the power-hungry girl in her nightmare.

“Pipes?” she murmured.

“Yes.” I ran my hand over her head, on top of the scarf. So many times in our childhood, we’d snuggled up in the same bed—even when the foster family gave us separate ones—and I’d combed my fingers through her deep red hair.

I missed that. I missed us.

“You were having a bad dream.”

She took a shuddering breath, sat up, and rubbed at her eyes. “Where’s Bernard?”

“Left to see how things are around town, with hope of discovering they aren’t as bad as they seem.”

Rainey yawned, all everything-is-fine. “From what you’ve told me, things on this island always end up *worse* than they seem.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “Except for the men. They’re hotter than you let on.”

Rainey was fully awake now and had that men-are-awesome twinkle in her eye.

“Reel in your libido, will you?” I said. “We have plenty of issues that take precedence over hot men.”

“Tell that to Mr. Green Eyes,” she muttered as she stood.

Tingles ran down my neck and arms. I’d managed to not think about Finn while researching murder suspects, but of course Rainey had to bring him up again. If only Bernard could grant my wish to put my attraction to Finn on hold—at least until the bigger questions of my life got resolved.

Rainey straightened, cleared her throat, and looked me eye to eye. “Okay, give it to me straight. I’m assuming you woke me because my dream did that nightmare-come-to-life thing. How bad was it?”

I chewed on my lip. “You don’t remember?”

She slumped and eye-rolled me, *a la* eighth grade. “You know I never remember my dreams. The second I wake up, *poof*, they’re gone. I just get tidbits.”

Somehow, I’d thought this one would be different.

“What tidbits do you recall?” I asked slowly, tentatively.

She scrunched up her face, squinting her eyes, and then let it go. “A blanket maybe? A flashing light?”

“That’s it?” I confirmed.

“Piper.” She stomped one foot. “This isn’t a game show called What Did Rainey Dream. Just tell me already.”

I stilled. *Tell her*. It was a simple request, a reasonable one.

She sucked air through her teeth. “That bad, huh?”

I’d never lied to Rainey. Withheld things from time to time, my big sister prerogative for keeping her safe, but an outright lie? Never.

My mouth went dry. “It’s just embarrassing. Remember Sean, the guy who wrote you love letters way back when?”

“Oh no, I didn’t,” she protested.

I shrugged a shoulder, even as my stomach twisted. “Kissing in the closet, under a blanket. Foster mom flashed the light on you two, and...”

Her face pinkened. “Thank the heavenly stars Bernard wasn’t here.”

“Are you crushin’ on a genie?” I teased.

At least I thought it was a tease, until her cheeks went from pink to fuchsia.

“He’s sweet.” She pointed at my desk. “What did you find while I was all Sleeping Beauty and the Beast?”

That twist in my stomach tightened, but my shoulders relaxed. I had lied, but Rainey had bought it.

“We need to start with the Coven of Nyx.” I moved to the desk and picked up my notepad. “They own a sleep spa near Faerie Hollow, but I worry that—”

“A sleep spa is the last place we want to be,” came Finn’s voice, “when nightmares are roaming the island.” He leaned against the doorframe, a bag of takeout from Baba Yaga’s dangling from his long fingers.

Mr. Green Eyes in the flesh.

My heart squeezed tight.

Bernard appeared and clapped him on the shoulder. “Get Narfi home?”

“Safe and sound. Caught a ride back with Phaeton, best taxi driver on the island. Now who wants some grub while Piper tells us what she’s discovered?” He rattled the takeout bag, and the scent of French fries and fried chicken wafted through my office.

I shook my head while Rainey scrounged for paper plates and napkins. “First, I want to hear about the island.” I braced myself. “What did you guys see?”

Finn and Bernard looked at each other, a silent conversation passing between lifelong friends.

“And don’t you dare try to ‘protect us from the truth.’” I folded my arms across my chest and leaned back in my chair, waiting.

Their shoulders slumped in unison.

“Narfi’s place looked clear,” Finn began. “But it’s mostly abandoned out where he lives. On the drive back, I definitely saw Godzilla dancing with a giant flamingo.”

I tried to picture that, but my imagination came up short.

“Things weren’t any better around town,” Bernard added. “A life-sized Ms. Pac-Man was gobbling up parked cars, and I think I saw the clown from *It* hiding in a sewer drain.”

We all shuddered.

“Anyone seriously hurt?” I asked.

“Godzilla was in the distance,” Finn said, “so I didn’t see anyone being squashed, but it had caused a couple of fender benders from onlookers.”

“Most of the people I saw were running away screaming,” Bernard added, “but it didn’t look like Ms. Pac-Man or It had gotten anyone. Yet.”

“How are humans dealing with what’s happening?” Rainey asked.

Finn sighed. “Mykos already coordinated an official response with a faux medical expert suggesting a chemical gas spill is creating mass hallucinations across the island.”

“And they’re buying that?”

“For now.”

“Trust me,” I said, “humans will go to great lengths to convince themselves that they’re not seeing what they can’t explain.” Not only had I seen it with patients, I’d spent years believing my own sightings of mythicals were childhood hallucinations.

“This is just going to get worse tonight, isn’t it?” Rainey looked to each of us. “Right now, it’s daytime nappers having nightmares. But tonight...”

“It’ll be the whole island,” I finished. “Most people will be asleep, and plenty will have nightmares.”

“As part of not protecting you from the truth...” Bernard shifted uncomfortably. “I tried using my genie magic—granting locals’ wishes to make the monsters go away—but it had no effect.”

Finn hissed between his teeth. “That’s not good.”

“Not good at all,” I echoed and pulled out my books. Careful not to drop any greasy food on the pages, I took a few bites and found my place in the *Nightmare Lore* book. “So we’re either dealing with the Coven of Nyx, which I’m moving to the top of our suspect list, or one of several dream demons, like incubi—”

“Heard of them.” Rainey nodded.

“Alps—”

“Like the Swiss mountains?”

“No. They’re elf-like creatures and were known to tangle hair into ‘elfknots.’”

Rainey sank into a guest chair, propped her bare feet up on my desk, and sank her teeth into a piece of chicken. “Well, that’s promising,” she murmured with her mouth full.

“Hold on.” My finger stuck at a section below alps. “Mares are the female version of an alp. And they are also known for tangled hair and, get this, tangled tree limbs.”

I looked up at Finn and Bernard standing there with their muscly arms crossed over their chests and twin stares resting on my words. Rainey was right—they were hotties.

“Did you see any more tangled trees like what we saw at Baku’s?” I asked.

Finn gave a single nod. “The trees were twisted near Godzilla’s dance floor.”

Bernard nodded as well. “Same.”

“Then we may be looking for a—”

“Mara.” Seshat stood in the door and brandished one regal hand toward the woman standing beside her. “Mara is a dream demon here to see you.”

Finn and Bernard straightened. Rainey’s jaw dropped. Apparently, Mara was not donning any human mask for this visit. Meaning we all saw the full picture.

Mara was something of a cross between a woman and a horse. Not quite a centaur, which I would presume was a light magicka. Her face and body were mostly female, beautiful and haunting with long, almost white hair that reached to her knees. But below her knees, she had horse hooves. She turned to the side as she bowed in introduction, and a long tail to match her mane of hair cascaded to the floor.

She seemed like a well-baited trap. Gorgeous, innocent, sensual. Dangerous.

Mara crossed the protective barrier and stepped into my office.

Rainey let out a little gasp.

Finn and Bernard’s magic flared.

I shifted into professional mode, years of training and experience interviewing killers dropping me into my old groove. “Did you cause this?” I asked gently. “If you did, we can help you.”

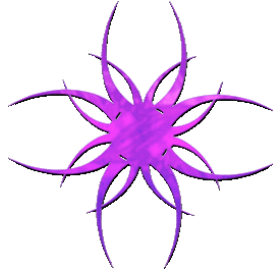
Professional, yes, but not stupid. Behind the desk, I called my power into my palm, ready to shoot if necessary. Rainey’s nightmare flashed fresh in my mind, and my power flickered.

“No, Piper Prince.” Mara’s voice was feminine yet husky. She crossed the room quickly, ignoring everyone but me, her hooves clicking like a pair of designer high heels. She stood before my desk with arms spread wide

and eyes glistening as if they held tears. “I’ve come because I need your help. The islanders are after me, saying I brought this trouble upon us. I need you to prove my innocence.”

CHAPTER NINE

PIPER



Was there a billboard somewhere on Muse Island advertising my services?

Didn't matter. The horse-slash-woman-slash-dream-demon needed help, help I could give her with my detective skills or supernatural powers. Night was growing closer and closer, and she might give us some insights into the nightmares that could overtake, and destroy, the island in less than ten hours.

"Sit, please." I gestured to the open guest chair.

As Mara sat, Bernard moved to stand beside Rainey, as if protecting her from our new guest.

I sat in my executive chair, grabbed the notepad, and lifted my pen. "You were saying that you're innocent?"

"Baku was a friend," Mara replied calmly. "Even on an island that is refuge to mythicals, those of us who can manipulate thoughts and dreams are often subject to unwarranted suspicion. Baku and I understood each other in a way no one else could."

"So you hung out regularly with Baku?" Finn said from behind me. When had he moved there? "When's the last time you saw him?"

I gave Finn my shut-up look, and he winced. But I didn't need him taking over my forensic interview.

"As I was saying," I started then sighed. "Actually, when *was* the last time you saw Baku?"

When I looked up, Rainey's hand was over her mouth, as if hiding a smirk.

“We did not, as Mr. Kalani said, ‘hang out,’” Mara answered, “but I knew Baku. I last saw him at Roc Bottom about a month ago, around daybreak. Few are there at sunrise—a far preferable time for a creator of nightmares and eater of dreams to visit.”

Rainey leaned toward Mara, making Bernard tense. “Aren’t you two opponents or something?” she asked, as if chatting it up with a bedridden patient instead of a dream demon. “Seems like a weird friendship when Baku pretty much cancels out what you do.”

Mara glared at her for a long moment then gave a hard flick of her tail. “Baku did not ‘cancel out’ what I do. Nightmares still come—surely *you* know that—but with Baku, they do not—did not—spring to life.”

Cold ran through my veins at the way she spoke to Rainey, as if she knew every nightmare Rainey had dreamed.

Or at least the last one she’d dreamed.

“I have no need to dispense with Baku.” Mara returned her attention to me. “But I understand that Sheriff Mykos, his officers, and plenty of islanders believe me guilty of the crime. People are scared. And when people are scared, they go witch hunting. I do not want to be the victim of a mob.”

She waited while we all exchanged glances. Reading my friends’ expressions, they weren’t yet sold.

Mara leaned forward, blocking my view of the others. “If you are to be the Protector others have said you are, not simply of a Muse but of we mythicals ourselves, then you must protect me. Hide me. Keep me from the mob and its torches. And find the real culprit.”

I needed to know more. Much, much more. But Mara displayed no signs of lying or deception. And if you were going to frame someone for Baku’s death, she was the one to frame. All you’d have to do was tangle some hair and trees, a task well within the powers of a number of mythicals.

I believed her.

“Seshat,” I called.

She had remained just outside the doorway, listening in. “How may I be of assistance?”

“Could Mara stay here for a bit while we look into things? There may be more in these books, but we have enough to go on for the time being. And we have to figure this out in the next few hours or—”

“Or the nightmares will cause more destruction and even death,” Seshat said. “Of course. Mara?” She gestured for Mara to follow, and Mara trailed after the goddess.

Finn raked his hand through his hair. “I need to give a heads-up to the Nine. They can keep an eye out on their areas of the island, stop what they can, keep us apprised.”

“We need to check out the sleep spa.” I tapped my pen on the notepad, working through next steps in my head. “And we might want to send Mykos in a different direction somehow.”

Rainey raised her hand, as if we were in class. “Ooh, I can call with an anonymous tip sending him to the other side of the island. I do frantic really well when I want to.”

Finn scrunched up his face, and I chuckled. I could tell him later about the time our foster brother, Philippe, had sneaked a whole bottle of whiskey from a locked liquor cabinet while Rainey put on a distracting sob-show for our foster mother.

“Bernard?” I said, drawing his attention away from Rainey.

“Yes?”

“Could you spread the word to keep lights on and naps to a minimum? We have to keep this in check as long as we can.”

He bowed his head ever so slightly. “Your wish is my command.”

Rainey smiled up at him. “How come you never say that to me?”

Bernard stilled, his mouth fell open, and he looked around the room as if unsure how to handle Rainey flirting with him. Good heavens, was my little sister putting her own kind of spell on Bernard?

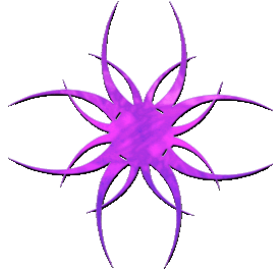
“I can’t believe I’m saying this,” Finn murmured, “but if you’ll drive my Jeep, Piper, I’ll call the Protectors on the way and we can both check out the sleep spa.”

We dispersed to accomplish our given tasks, with the promise to meet back at the safehouse as soon as possible. Rainey needed to take her follow-up medication, and Bernard made a promise to get her there in one piece.

Meanwhile, I told Finn I’d try to keep his Jeep in one piece. But no promises.

CHAPTER TEN

PIPER



Nyx's Sleep Spa was situated between Faerie Hollow and Roc Bottom, on the border of the Muse Urania's domain. Namika's Muse. I pulled Finn's Jeep into a parking spot and waited while he finished his last phone call.

Outside, a three-tiered fountain trickled peacefully, each tier held up by a statue of a nude woman, hands raised above her head, hips slanted to the side. We hopped out of the Jeep and made our way to the entrance, passing the fountain.

Instead of the trickling sound I expected to hear, the water shushed us, like a mother shushing her baby to sleep. Koi fish trailed lazy fins under the water and bubbled the surface.

A path created from glow rocks shone dimly, making it seem as if we were walking on starlight. A stained-glass front door depicted who I assumed was the goddess Nyx, her body draped in a dark robe, almost blending into the starry background. I stepped onto a welcome mat that read *Soporaltum*.

Finn yanked me back, hissing, "That's a spell."

"A spell?" A wave of exhaustion rolled over me. I yawned and swayed on my feet.

"It's Latin for something like 'deep sleep.' Makes sense for a sleep spa, but we need you awake. Can you push past it?"

I shook my head, drowsy. "I'm good. But if there's a coffee bar nearby, I'd kiss the barista."

Finn tilted his head. "What if I made you coffee?"

Ignoring my heart's leap, I smirked at him, sidestepped the doormat, and we walked in the front door.

The room was lit with covered lamps and lilac candles. Scents of lavender filled the air, and an enchanted violin played itself in the corner.

A woman sat behind the front desk and smiled at us. "Welcome to Nyx's Sleep Spa, where we guarantee restful sleep. My name is Gwen, of the Coven of Nyx. How may we enchant you?" Her hair cascaded over her shoulders, a dark purple with shimmery strands, and her eyes glittered with warmth. "We do offer sleep therapy for couples, though we must ask that you refrain from coupling. While orgasm can elicit restful sleep, we prefer to lead you along a solo journey to slumber."

Finn choked.

I pounded him on the back, yawned again, and addressed our hostess. "Thank you, but we're not here for sleep therapy."

Her welcome smile disappeared. "I see." She came around the desk, a deep purple robe swishing her small frame and brushing her—fuzzy socks?

I rubbed at my eyes, making sure I wasn't already dreaming, thanks to the charmed doormat.

Nope, I wasn't dreaming. A witch of the Coven of Nyx was wearing fuzzy socks. Fuzzy socks with sleepy stars and blinking moons.

"What can I help you with today?" She placed her hands on her hips and planted her feet wide, blocking the entrance to the spa.

Finn intervened. "Haven't met you before, but you might've heard of me. Finnian Kalani. And this is Piper Prince. She's got questions for you."

My thoughts were having a hard time connecting. Everything felt dull and tired and as fuzzy as the witch's feet.

"Piper?" Finn nudged me, and I rapid-fire blinked.

"Your clients...are they having strange nightmares?" My first question sounded only slightly slurred.

She lifted one pierced eyebrow, and the piercing disappeared under her straight-line bangs. "Strange how?"

"I mean, nightmares coming to life?" I swayed into Finn, who wrapped a supportive arm around my waist.

She looked from him to me, then back to him. "We do not condone the use of drugs in our facility as they interfere with the brain's natural sleep cycles."

“I’m not on any—” I yawned, leaned into Finn, and gestured at the front door.

“She stepped on your doormat,” Finn answered. “That thing should come with a warning.”

Gwen shrugged. “Most who come here spend their nights fruitlessly chasing sleep. The spell is slight, enough to ease them into a better path. However, if you’re already well primed toward sleep...”

I nodded in response. Hours and hours of book time made for heavy eyelids.

“I see. Then let’s make this brief. We had one slight disturbance and handled it with no need for your concern.”

“Actually...” My head dropped onto Finn’s shoulder. “Since Nyx...is the sleep goddess...we wondered...”

“We wondered,” Finn took over, his voice strong, his grip on me stronger, “if this might be the source of nightmares coming to life across the island. Something out of whack with the sleep systems?”

Even half-asleep, I could see her bristling. “Most definitely not. The Coven of Nyx praises the goddess for all her sides, but we do not pay tribute to terror. Nyx is a provider of rest, a healer, and here at the sleep spa, that’s what beings find. Rest and healing.”

She sounded like an infomercial.

Finn glanced at me and lifted me right up into his arms. I pushed against his chest, resisting him playing hero to my damsel-in-distress, but it was pointless. He lowered me into a waiting room chair, and I settled in like it was a hammock. At least from this vantage point, I could rest my body and keep my eyes open and my brain mostly to the *on* switch.

“I got this,” Finn whispered with a wink then turned back to face Gwen. “Here’s the scoop. Nyx rules the domain of sleep, and your coven knows her realm better than anyone. If something did go awry, we figured you’d know. How about you tell us about that one nightmare you so easily handled?”

She sniffed, as if we were a terrible bother. “It was a simple flying-then-falling dream. We woke our client, and it dissipated.”

Finn crossed his arms. “But how do you know Nyx isn’t the cause?”

“How do you know Miss Prince is not the cause?”

Me? I lifted my head to protest.

“Piper?” Finn’s voice deepened and tightened. “What would Piper have to do with nightmares?”

Gwen shrugged a shoulder. “If not for her felling the Sons, perhaps this problem would not have come to the island.”

My head dropped back against the wall, and my spine sank into the chair’s back. Maybe I had caused this. Unwittingly, but still...

Finn snorted. “I’d think you’d be glad to have the Sons gone. Fewer people drugged into oblivion means more people coming here for sleep.”

Gwen didn’t answer, just lifted her chin in defiance.

I wanted to pop her a purple *zing* of my magic. Instead, all I seemed headed for was a nap, and I didn’t care where it happened, with whom, or in what position.

“Piper Prince,” Gwen said, “before you leave, why don’t you visit the Second Wind Corridor? Just there.” She pointed to the side of the room, where a tall, cylindrical room sat behind a pair of French doors.

Finn let out a deep gruff. “You couldn’t have told us that first?”

Gwen shrugged. “Supernatural detectives are not welcome here. Now go, and do not darken our door again.” She turned with a swish and disappeared into the spa.

I shrugged at Finn and made my way over to the room Gwen had indicated, fairly certain this wouldn’t cause me harm since it was a permanent fixture for the spa’s guests. I shut the doors behind me, and they sealed with a *whomp*, then a breeze blew up from the floor.

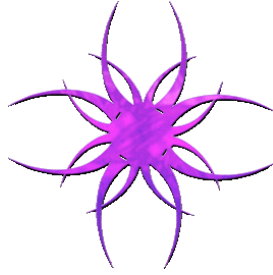
My cover-up blew around my hips, very Marilyn Monroe, while Finn stood outside the doors watching with a giant grin on his face.

The tiredness faded with the crisp breeze. I took a deep breath then walked back into the lobby, feeling not quite refreshed but awake.

I’d taken two steps toward the exit when a crash and a scream came from behind the door where Gwen had gone. Finn and I exchanged quick glances and went running into the private spa.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

PIPER



Gwen stood in the sleep spa's hallway, looking bewildered as she stared into a room halfway down. The hallway was dark, lit with more candles and that same violin music piped in. But from the doorway, an eerie light poured out.

Finn and I skidded to a stop in front of the open door. The air in my lungs turned cold, hard, solid.

Tezcatlipoca in his greenish mask stood on a stone tableau in the middle of the therapy room. Beyond Tez was an enclosed sleep chamber, much like a tanning bed, and the silhouette of a woman inside.

"Why aren't you waking her?" I asked Gwen. Was this a welcome visit from Tez? Was Nyx and her coven on his side?

Gwen cleared her throat. "The client is a goddess herself. We will not interfere unless absolutely necessary."

My lungs squeezed. A goddess, in the chamber, dreaming about Tez?

It couldn't be.

Before I could process that thought, Bett—self-described Egyptian goddess of pleasure and Finn's best friend—entered the dream scene wearing her priestess robe.

Finn gasped beside me. "Bett?"

I grabbed his hand and gripped it tight, stopping him from lurching forward into the nightmare. *Real nightmares do real things in real life.* Finn's words pounded through my head.

"She's dreaming." I nodded at the bed, where the real Bett must be sleeping inside.

Dream Bett turned and looked in the same direction where she'd seen us at Thalia's amphitheater. I expected the actions to play out as they had that night, but a stream of purple light shot across the room and slammed into her.

Purple light. *My* light.

"*Tartarus*," Finn murmured and brushed past me into the room. He skirted around the very-real-looking Tez and Bett, approached the sleep chamber, and stopped. Stilled.

"Finn." I joined him and squeezed his arm. "Now, before it gets worse."

He nodded and pushed a button on the outside of the sleep chamber. The lid dissipated. Bastet, Egyptian goddess of home, cats, and fertility, lay supine on the cushioned interior, wearing a thin camisole and shorts and looking as impossibly gorgeous in sleep as she did awake.

Her full-lashed lids flickered a few times as she opened her eyes. "Finn? What are you doing here?"

Obvious discomfort tightened his whole expression. We hadn't seen her since her betrayal, but Bett and Finn had a long history, a friendship that had spanned many years before I had come to Muse Island.

"You were having a nightmare," he mumbled.

I spun around in time to see Nightmare Tez and Dream Bett disappear.

"How would you know? And that doesn't answer my question." She sat up, slipped her long legs over the side, and stood. Then she peered down at me with a sneer. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised *she* is here, given that she's always where you are these days."

She stepped past me, and Gwen scurried over to hand Bett a robe.

"Better question," I answered. "Why was Tez here? Though I shouldn't be surprised, given that you're probably wherever he is these days."

"Miss Prince. Mr. Kalani." Gwen grabbed our attention with her vice-principal tone. "I already asked you to leave. Do I need to enforce that request?"

"It's okay." Bett waved her off. "I'll handle them, Gwen. You take care of the other clients."

Gwen scanned us each in turn then abruptly nodded and left, shutting the door behind her. Silence fell so heavily, it seemed like we were standing in a crypt rather than a sleep spa.

Finn glared at Bett. "Know anything about nightmares coming to life across the island?"

She raised her perfectly curved brows. “Nightmares are coming to life? Interesting.”

“Try dangerous,” I answered.

“What’s dangerous is you being within pouncing distance.” She spoke as if commenting on a china pattern rather than making a death threat.

“You even think of hurting Piper again,” Finn growled, “you’ll have to deal with me.”

Bett yawned. “Piper shouldn’t get in people’s way. And look, your shoulder is just fine. No harm, no foul.”

“No harm?” I planted my fists on my hips and summoned a spark of power into my palms, hidden but ready. “You attacked me so the god of chaos could rise.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “But despite what you think, I am not a murderer.”

“So you and Tez aren’t behind this nightmare thing?”

“Tezcatlipoca does not share all of his plans with me, but you should already know that my goddess powers do not extend to the dimension of dreams.”

I narrowed my gaze at her. She hadn’t really answered the question, merely said *she* wasn’t personally involved.

“Bett.” Finn sighed. “Baku is dead.”

Something flashed across her face, but it was too fast for me to decide whether it was surprise or recognition. “Well, I didn’t kill him.”

“Not saying you did,” Finn answered. “But without a dream eater on the island, people could be offed by these nightmares. If you know something, you have to tell us.”

“I don’t have to do anything, Finn. You chose your side—the side of *balance*—and I chose mine.” She said the word *balance* as if it were poison.

But then, the Sons of Poseidon had said I’d disturbed the balance when I’d arrived.

Once again, everything came back to me. What if Gwen was right? What if *I* was the real problem here?

I wriggled my shoulders, as if I could shake off the ten-ton block of self-doubt that rested there.

Meanwhile, Finn was fuming. “You chose the wrong side.”

Bett shrugged, tied her robe, and strode toward the exit. She spoke back over her shoulder. “Nightmares coming to life are not the only chaos to

come. I don't wish anyone harm, but sometimes change, a rebalancing, requires upheaval."

And with that, she sauntered out the door.

"What did that mean?" I turned to Finn. "Do you think Tez is behind this after all?"

Finn ran his hand through his hair and shook his head. "I don't know. But I doubt we'll get any more answers here."

"Agreed." I led the way out of the spa, barely glancing at Gwen as we left.

As soon as we emerged into the sunshine, Finn seemed to drop a veneer he'd held onto inside.

"Here's what I don't get." He charged ahead of me, taking long strides back toward the Jeep. "Why does Bett need to go to a sleep spa anyway? She's the goddess of cats, for heaven's sake, and since when do cats have a hard time falling asleep?"

I hurried to catch up. "Maybe she's being kept awake at night by her decision to break away from you." Bett's nightmare replayed in my mind.

He jabbed a finger in the air. "Or maybe she's staying up more hours plotting her next backstabbing move."

As he reached for the driver's door handle, I settled my hand over his and waited until he moved his gaze to mine. "I can't imagine what you're feeling," I started. "Well, I *can* imagine, because it's been my job as a psychologist to imagine what people are feeling and how they—"

"Piper." His mouth curled on one side, the false alarm of a smile as it quickly fell away. "What's your point?"

I sighed. "My point is you've lost an important friendship, and you need to grieve. You're angry right now, but that's only one of the stages of grief, and you'll probably go through them many times over. If I can help in any way, I'm here."

Though unsure it was the right move, I wrapped my arms around his waist and pressed against him, trying to emulate Rainey's bear hug.

His muscles softened in my embrace, and he pulled me closer, settling his chin on top of my head. "Thank you," he whispered.

We stayed there for what felt like a few minutes but might have only been seconds.

Finally, he stepped back, pushed my hair behind my shoulder, and smiled. "You should wear your hair down more often."

“It gets in my way.”

“Sometimes the best things in life are things we once thought were in our way.”

I felt my brow pucker. Was he talking about me?

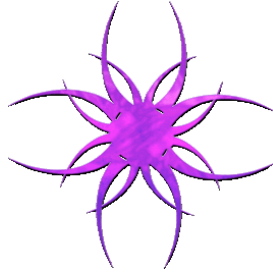
Before I could ask, he cocked his head toward the passenger side. “Get in. We need to regroup back at the safehouse, share notes, and make our own plans.”

Plans. Yes, we needed those.

Speaking of which, why was something on this island always getting in the way of my most important plan? Find my parents. Save Rainey’s life.

CHAPTER TWELVE

PIPER



The safehouse I'd been living in since the Sons declared war on me was Bernard's ancestral family home. A two-story beach house unevenly settled on the pink sands of Muse Island, it had become more of a home than I'd ever had.

I looked around the living room, the sliding glass wall all the way open to capture the sea breeze, and took in Bernard and Rainey sitting together on the couch, Finn making tea in the kitchen, Narfi dozing on the porch...

This was also more of a family than I'd ever had.

In two short weeks, thanks to trials by fire and combat, we'd all grown close.

And even I noticed the absence of Bett.

I sat on the loveseat and smoothed out the wrinkles of the old sheet covering the worn fabric, appreciating what the old and worn fabric meant. Bernard refused to use his genie magic to fix up this house. He'd wanted a place free of his magic and obligations, a place where he could put his hands to work. But he hadn't had the time required to keep it up by himself, so it had fallen into disrepair.

Once things settled down, Rainey and I planned to put our hard-earned skills to work, helping him rehab this place into a shabby chic beach house worthy of its view.

Guess that meant we were staying for a while. At least until I understood this power that lived in my bones and Ari Fawkes's mission and we found our parents and Rainey's cure.

It was time to cut ties with my old life. Officially. I picked up the notebook I kept on the coffee table for my to-do lists and added "Quit Job"

to the bottom. It was surprisingly easy to write.

Finn walked in from the kitchen, balancing a tray with a steaming teapot and teacups and a plate of Pixie Power Bites, little cookies Bernard had baked, full of protein-fueled energy.

I stepped outside and gently shook Narfi awake before he could have another nightmare.

Narfi smiled a goofy grin. “I like seeing you when I wake up, Piper.”

“I like seeing you too.” I helped him to sit up then guided him inside by holding his elbow.

He’d returned to us from death because of his phoenix power, but he was still a little shaky from his ordeal. Now and then, he shivered, as if the chill of the ice that had kept his dead body in stasis lingered.

Finn sat on the loveseat, next to where I’d been sitting.

My heart skipped. What was I—fourteen? Nervously excited about a cute boy wanting to sit beside me?

Someone knocked on the front door before I could join Finn. I swung open the door to reveal three Protectors.

Livvie Carlisle, Protector of Thalia, the Muse of Comedy, wearing a colorful tunic.

Akachi, Protector of Melpomene, the Muse of Tragedy, wearing a dark, tribal robe.

And Namika, Protector of Urania, the Muse of Astronomy—who’d changed out of her athletic swimwear and now wore a pair of board shorts and a crop top. Tendrils of the familiar sunburst mark of a Protector peeked out from underneath the shirt’s hem.

“Finn called a Buster Keaton,” Livvie said in her Cockney speak, “so here we are.”

I’d heard Finn on the phone inviting them, but my stomach still jolted at seeing them again. Since none of them knew what I was—Protector or something else—and since Akachi’s Muse, Melpomene, wanted me to come before her to be judged, they kept some distance.

“Sure, come in.” I opened the door wider. “We were just about to start.”

We all settled in the living room, perched in various places. Livvie sat on the arm of the loveseat near Finn, making him press his thigh against mine. He stretched an arm over the back of the couch, his shirt sleeve tickling the back of my neck.

“We’ve all seen the effects of Baku’s death.” Finn’s deep voice rumbled against me as he addressed our growing team.

Around the room, everyone nodded.

Narfi shivered from his seat in the macramé hanging chair. “They make me not want to fall asleep.”

Finn gave a slight nod. “And that’s what we need to discuss. Right now, our only defense is waking the dreamer. But tonight, when most of the island is sleeping...”

Akachi bowed his head. “We will not know which nightmare belongs to which person in order to wake them. The tragic events already experienced today have made Melpomene weep.”

“And we don’t know the killer’s motive,” I piped in. “Without that, we’ll have a hard time stopping things from getting worse.”

The why mattered. Once a killer’s motivations became clear, everything else tended to fall into place. Crimes were solved. People were saved.

“Even if we knew the killer’s motives,” Bernard said, “Baku is still dead, nightmares will continue to manifest, and we need a way to protect the island from these dreams.”

Rainey halfway raised her hand. “Is there like a caffeine god or something who can keep the island awake? Or enough of the island awake to take turns sleeping?”

Namika shook her head. “No caffeine god, but taking turns is a good idea. Fewer dreamers, fewer incidents, more people safe.”

“Agreed,” I said. “Bernard said business owners are spreading the word to keep their lights on through the night. But we can also break into teams and take shifts sleeping and patrolling.”

“Is Mykos doing anything?” Namika asked.

Akachi *hmp*hed. “That useless ‘officer of the law’ is standing in front of cameras, acting as if he’s on top of things and turning it all into a re-election campaign.”

I winced. “He was elected to that post?”

Finn shrugged a shoulder. “No one else wanted the job.”

“Once again, it’s all up to us,” I muttered.

“The other Protectors are keeping an eye out in their areas too.” Finn squeezed my hand, as if reminding me we had more allies than our small circle.

Livvie took a long sip of tea and peered over her cup at me. “We’ve got a few hours left before nightfall, love. What have you learned about the murder? I presume you’ve been detecting.”

“Not much.” I blew out a weary sigh. “The Coven of Nyx acts suspicious, but what benefit is a dead dream eater to them? If anything, the nightmares will hurt their business. Of course, there’s Tez...” And Ari Fawkes, though I didn’t verbally add his name. Even if it was him, so far he’d gotten others to do his dirty work.

I thought of his mother’s book tucked away in my room, a secret I still hadn’t confessed. So far, my research into Ilde Fawkes’s *Numerology and the Stars* hadn’t revealed anything new about Ari, but I wasn’t giving up.

“That black ball is crazy.” Namika looked out the window at Tez’s dark moon and puckered her face like she’d tasted something sour. “What’s it mean?”

“Crazy, indeed.” Livvie nodded her head, making her bauble earrings dance. “But I’ve asked around, and no one seems to know a thing about what it’s doing there.”

“Then Tez is still on our suspect list?” I was making a statement more than asking a question, but everyone nodded.

“I still don’t trust the coven,” Finn added.

“Agreed, but Gwen seemed really surprised by that nightmare, and I can’t fathom how nightmares coming to life helps their cause. Night, sure, but nightmares?” I leaned back, Finn’s arm now right up against my neck. “Anyway, I doubt they’d open the door for us again, even if we showed up with flowers, chocolates, and liquor.”

“But they don’t know me.” Rainey smirked from across the room. “How about I head over there and see what I can find out?”

My spine popped straight. “Rainey, you’re still in recovery, and I don’t want—”

“I’ll go with her,” Livvie announced and returned Rainey’s smirk. “I believe we two can keep a few witches in line.”

Livvie and Rainey together? That could be trouble. Girls’ Night Out kind of trouble.

I bit my lip, but Finn leaned close and whispered, “I’d trust Livvie with my life.”

I closed my eyes briefly, trying to clear my worry. It wasn’t easy to pause my protective impulses. Not when I’d been Rainey’s only anchor

growing up.

“What about other creatures?” I asked the group. “Any alps on the island?”

Akachi nodded. “Two of them.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Rainey held up her hands. “Three nightmare bringers and one dream eater? Does anyone else see a problem with that math?”

Finn’s thumb grazed my neck. *Accidentally?* “A single nightmare bringer doesn’t produce as much as a dream eater can swallow.”

“Still...” She shook her head, and Bernard patted her knee then pulled back, as if surprised at his touching Rainey with such familiarity.

Rainey didn’t seem to mind, just smiled his way.

“Bern.” Finn caught his attention. “Maybe you could look for another way to stop the nightmares from materializing? Not sure I want to see Godzilla a second time.”

I nodded. “Seshat and Mara might be able to help with potential solutions.”

Bernard glanced one more time at Rainey before standing and nodding at me.

Akachi stood as well. “I’ll join you, Bernard. I want to meet this Mara for myself.”

“Meanwhile Finn and I will continue to interview suspects.” I took one of Bernard’s energy cookies. I was going to need it to stay awake today. “The sooner we find the killer, the better.”

“I wanna join you and Finn.” Namika’s delicate fingers turned into fists. “Baku was one of mine, so I want to find his killer and get him justice.”

“Of course.” I nodded.

Finn stood. “I feel like we need to all put our hands in and yell ‘break.’”

Livvie and Rainey cast *as if* stares at him.

“Or Piper could do a cheer.” He cocked his head at me, as if waiting.

I rose and slapped his hard bicep. “I’m changing into some real clothes.” I started toward the stairs and my bedroom then turned back. “Wait, where are we going? We need to talk to those alps, but where do we find them?”

The four Protectors exchanged wary looks.

Finn sighed. “You’re not going to like it.”

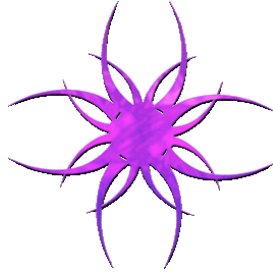
“Of course I’m not.” Did it involve riding on a motorcycle behind Finn and putting my life in his speed-demon hands? Flying through yet another dimension? Paying “tribute” to another creature the size of a house?

“The alps have permanent rooms at Poseidon Point.”

With a long sigh, I stomped up the staircase. As if this day hadn’t sucked enough, we were going into enemy territory where I’d killed three of the four remaining Sons of Poseidon and left only one, Aphrodisios, behind. And who knew where his loyalties lay.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

PIPER



Poseidon Point was a party-haven resort perched on a long stretch of land that jutted into the ocean. Or at least, it used to be a party-haven resort.

The Sons of Poseidon had provided their special brand of magicked drugs and alcohol, keeping their guests happy and stoned while they fed off their magical energies.

We'd put an end to that.

I'd put an end to that.

I looked up at Tez's dark moon, hanging in the sky like a bruise, and told myself again that killing the Sons had been a good thing.

As Finn parked the Jeep in the half-empty lot, he murmured, "Have I ever told you how much I hate this place?"

From the backseat, Namika slapped her hand on his shoulder. "Bad memories, yeah?"

I glanced over at Finn, remembering the bad memories we'd shared here—Narfi tortured, Rainey and Finn held captive, people drugged beyond recognition.

Knowing the Sons of Poseidon, Finn likely had more.

"Let's get this over with." He stepped out, and Namika did too.

I stuffed my notepad inside my bag. Before I could grab the door handle, Finn was on my side, holding the door open. I gave him a do-you-have-two-heads look.

"What?" he challenged me. "I can do manners."

"Don't strain yourself." I walked away, my hips sashaying a little more, and took the lead.

Namika fell into step beside me, leaving Finn to follow in our wake.

Once in the lobby, my steps hesitated, the memory of what I'd done here coming back to me in a swell of tension.

"You okay?" Finn's voice came from behind me.

"Of course." I walked forward confidently, but I also avoided looking in the direction of the conference center wing where it had all gone down.

The Poseidon Point front clerk was a genie, with similar tribal tattoos to Bernard's, but slack posture and hair falling over his eyes. He peeked up through his curtain of bangs. "How may I be of service to you today?"

I sidled up to the counter and gave him a generous smile. "We understand you have alps living here, and we'd like to speak to them. Could you page them to come down?"

"I-I...don't know," he stuttered, darting his gaze around the lobby. "I gotta, um, check...if that's okay with..."

Finn joined me at the counter. "Give me the room number of your alps. Now." I started at his gruffness—as if this clerk was his personal servant.

The genie grabbed a pen and a pad, jotted something down, and passed the top paper over. I read over Finn's shoulder: Room 323.

"Well done," Finn said to the genie then waved Namika and me toward the elevator.

Once inside, I turned to Finn. "Why would you speak to him that way? He's a person, you know."

Finn flinched. "I hate it as much or more than anyone, but genies are mostly slaves, and with limited time, I knew he'd respond better to a direct command." He let out a long, heartbroken sigh. "Believe me, if I could change it for all genies, I would."

My anger deflated. I reached out and stroked his arm. "I know."

The elevator doors opened, and Namika stepped out. "At least you saved Bernard. Now where is room three-two-three?"

Finn tilted his head left. As we walked down the hallway, I noted how different Poseidon Point's interior was from Finn's hotel, the Muse Island Beach Club and Resort. This place had the feel of a cheap house flip—all trendy design where if you looked too closely, you could see the glue. Guess the Sons didn't care about quality, especially with a guest base made up of drugged partiers.

Room 323 was in a corner at the back, a larger room than others judging by the wall space it took up. We rapped on the door, stood back, and waited.

No answer.

We tried again.

"They could be out," Namika offered with a shrug.

"Probably are." Finn pointed at the deadbolt plate. "Can you zap that lock, Piper?"

I swallowed, a little unnerved by the request to hit a target so small. But when not reading everything I could about Tez, or Ari's mother's book, I'd been practicing my powers. I wiggled my fingers, brought my magic from my birthmark to my palm, stilled my breath...and shot.

A purple spark hit the metal plate, popped, and faded. Left behind was a singed lock and a wisp of smoke.

Finn smiled, and a little thrill of pride, mixed with a bit of relief, raced through me as he opened the door. We swept inside and found ourselves in a full suite of rooms with child-sized furniture spread throughout.

"How big are these alps?" I asked.

"Not sure." Finn began touring the living room. "Haven't met them before, but by the looks of it, I'd say three feet tops."

Namika pulled a hunting knife out from somewhere and entered the next room. She called back, "Nobody here. But check this out."

We entered the bedroom, which held bunk beds, and looked where she was pointing with her knife. On the wall was an up-close photo of two thin-bodied, gray-skinned, tall-eared creatures who might have been smiling, though the sharp teeth made it hard to tell.

I winced. "I guess those are the alps."

"Good buddies, apparently." Finn gave me that charming smile of his, the one I was becoming all too fond of.

"Or brothers," Namika added.

"Well, they aren't here in any case," Finn answered. "Any idea what kind of clues to look for, Ms. Criminal Background?"

"I thought you were the Batman of Muse Island." That's what he'd said when we'd first met.

"Maybe I'm just Robin, and you're Batman. Batgirl. Whatever."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Namika roll her eyes. About the way Rainey would have done if she were here.

"Anything and everything can be meaningful at a crime scene," I answered. "But look for anything recent. Tracking last movements can help identify a killer's motives."

“Got it.” Finn turned around and headed back the way we’d come.

I strode to the closet. The doors were the accordion type, but the handles had been lowered. It reminded me of Rainey’s nightmare. I closed my eyes against the flurry of guilt and yanked the doors open.

Hangers dangled askew and tangled together in impossible thrift-store webs of metal. Piles of clothes were dumped on the ground. And something like a claw mark was scratched into the carpet.

“Hey, look at this.” I moved aside a pile of clothes with my foot and bent closer.

Finn and Namika appeared and knelt beside me.

Three scratches had ripped the carpet, but in a circle that didn’t quite connect. In the middle of the circle was an impression, like something heavy had stood there or been dropped.

“What do you make of it?” Finn asked.

“Not sure.” I pulled out my phone and snapped a few pictures, then did the same with the rest of the closet.

“I’d say from those hangers they left in a hurry,” Namika observed.

I hummed and looked around the room a bit closer. If the alps had left in a hurry, there had to have been a reason.

And maybe a piece of evidence telling us where they had gone.

The little desk under the window had been wiped clean, not a stray paper or envelope. The beds likewise had been made, sheets tucked in nice and neat.

I crept closer to the bunk beds. “Alps are nightmare demons. I wonder how they sleep at night. If they do.” I bent down and looked under the mattresses then pillows, but nothing.

“What are you thinking, Piper?” Finn stood back, letting me lead the search.

“Not sure, but when I was in college, I had the bottom bunk in our dorm room. I used to keep pictures and knick-knacks stuffed in the mattress springs above...”

I crawled onto the bottom bunk and lay down.

Woven through the support rods of the top bunk were long strands of thin, white string. It was almost a spiderweb or a cocoon.

I reached up to touch it, but Namika grabbed my hand. “Dreamcatcher. Not good to touch that kind of magic.”

Finn bent down and took a look. “Why would an alp need a dreamcatcher?”

“To save it from its own homemade nightmares?” I climbed out of the bed and brushed myself off.

We checked the rest of the rooms, Namika taking the left, while I took the right. Finn explored the main areas.

“Nothing else but some ski and golf equipment,” I called out.

“Pool table and electronic game here,” Namika yelled from her side of the apartment. “Nothing out of place.”

“I’ve got something.” The edge to Finn’s voice hurried my steps.

When we emerged into the living room, he was standing in the kitchen staring at the countertop.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He raised his eyebrows. “Looks like they haven’t been here for a while.”

Namika entered the kitchen, looked where Finn was gazing, and darted back out, hand over mouth, retching into her palm. I took her place and saw the reason—maggots crawling all over food left on plates.

“Gross.” I wrapped my arms around my torso, as if protecting myself from the nasty insect larvae.

Finn nodded. “I’d say the alps haven’t been here for forty-eight hours. Takes at least that long for maggots to appear on exposed meat.”

“Why do you know that?”

Finn shrugged, looking sheepish. He slid out his phone and pushed a few buttons, and moments later, I overheard the genie clerk say, “Front desk.”

“I need you to answer this question.” Finn’s tone was calmer this time, still forceful but kinder. “When’s the last time you saw the alps?”

The genie mumbled something.

“Thanks,” Finn answered and hung up. “Three days ago.”

Namika returned, her eyes bright but her face pale. “You’d think a tough Protector wouldn’t let a few *ujimushis* make her sick.”

I assumed she was talking about the white wiggling bugs crawling all over the food. “It’s a totally normal reaction. Do you need a few more minutes? Or a ginger ale? Even this place might have one in a vending machine.”

She grinned. “If I’m gonna drink anything here, it’s gonna be Poseidon’s Poison.”

“Poseidon’s Poison?”

Finn escorted me out of the kitchen. “Overproof rum, absinthe, and some other potentially lethal stuff, all in one drink. Safe enough if you imbibe in small doses.”

Namika shook her finger at us. “But will make you forget *ujimushis* exist.”

Before I could respond, a face appeared and peeked through the balcony window. I jumped, and Finn and Namika turned toward the sliding door.

“What?” Finn asked. “What did you see?”

He was gone. But I knew that face. Aphrodisios.

I shook my head. “Nothing. Just jumpy, I guess.”

Aphrodisios wasn’t a secret. But if I told Finn, he’d insist on searching him out together, and Aphrodisios might not talk with him there. Plus, I wasn’t sure how the other Protectors felt about our tentative alliance.

“So it looks as if the alps left here in a hurry, three days ago,” I summarized. “Possible signs of a struggle in their bedroom closet.”

“Guess our next step is finding out where the alps went,” Finn said. “Or if they had any guests in the past week.”

“Maybe you could ask some hotel staff?” I pointed my question to both Namika and Finn. “I’ll catch up. I want to step outside for a minute. I’m feeling a little nauseous myself. Probably just need some fresh air.”

“You sure we should split up?”

I tilted my head. “I’ve already gotten rid of most of the Sons, and I’m in a suite with nothing more than a few maggots. If something else threatens me, I’ll aim and fire. I’m good. Trust me.”

The irony was not lost on me—that I was asking Finn to trust me while not telling him I’d seen Aphrodisios. But I’d fill him in later.

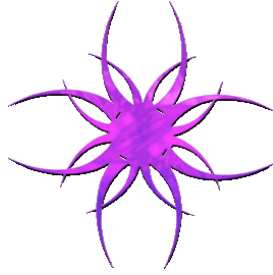
If there was something to tell.

Finn relented with a nod, and he and Namika headed out to find stray staff who might have more information on the alps than their empty rooms held.

I stepped out onto the balcony and found Aphrodisios waiting outside.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

PIPER



Aphrodisios leaned over the iron railing, staring out at the rush of waves and ocean foam curling over the beach's pink sands. He was in human form, but his stormy self lingered beneath the surface of his mask.

I joined him at the railing, but on the other end of the balcony, needing space. Just in case. "You could call or text to schedule an appointment, you know. Appearing like this when you want to talk doesn't inspire confidence."

"The alps is a good theory," he said, ignoring my not-so-subtle suggestion. "They feed off nightmares, so it makes sense they'd take the opportunity of Baku's death to create more. But you're looking at this from the wrong angle."

I fisted my hands at my sides, letting the warmth of my power heat my hands. My leg's birthmark burned as well. "What do you know?"

"Not much more than you. But I'd already searched Nolte and Franz's suite, and they only took what they needed to survive. This chaos on the island?" He looked over Poseidon Point, back toward the mainland. "It is not their doing."

"Whose is it?"

"When my brothers and I ruled this island, we excelled at using a creature's strengths while manipulating their weaknesses. Everything we did had a purpose that furthered our end goal."

"You're making yourself sound like an excellent suspect."

He laughed through closed lips. "I have been a little busy keeping things afloat since you wiped out my entire family. Not enough time in the day to

keep Poseidon Point running, handle dealers now angry with their lack of supply, *and* terrorize the island with nightmares.”

The reminder that I’d killed his entire family felt like a blade slipping between my ribs.

But their deaths were different. Not murder. Justice.

“Why are you here?” My tone turned growly as the churn of guilt burned my stomach. “It’s not to help me solve the mystery of these nightmares or Baku’s death. Like you said, you don’t do anything without it benefiting you.”

He took a deep breath through his nose, as if inhaling the sea air, then let it out slowly. “Whether Muse Island residents liked us or not, the Sons of Poseidon provided a check on dark magickas who would bring full chaos.”

“You think the Sons weren’t chaotic?”

He paused as if contemplating his next words carefully. “I have a fondness for American history and culture. You’ve likely never heard of Johnny Torrio, but his Chicago syndicate kept crime rates down. When he was murdered, instead of crime decreasing, Al Capone took his place and the true violence began.”

“You still haven’t told me what you want.” I laced steel into my tone.

“I want you to keep me off your suspect list and on your side. Believe it or not, I can be an ally. I have contacts you do not have, and my reach extends to places yours will not.”

“Are you offering information about the nightmares?”

He straightened and finally faced me. “Alps are notorious sycophants. Why do you think my brothers kept them around? They can be bound in service by whoever controls their web of nightmares.”

“You mean the dreamcatcher around the alps’ bunk beds? Someone controls that?”

He nodded. “We used to. But now, someone else holds their leash.”

“Who?” If he knew, this case could be cracked like a pecan in two seconds.

“I do not know. It is not me, but someone is tapping into these creatures’ strengths and manipulating their weaknesses, all toward some end goal.” He stretched his arms out and cracked his fingers.

I studied him for a long time, though I wasn’t sure why. The Sons had never followed the textbook signs of lying or truth-telling.

“I can be an ally, Piper Prince,” he said again and met my gaze. A sickly green flame flickered behind his irises, and dark green mist roiled under his skin. “Though I feel the loss of my family, I also feel the freedom from my brothers that I’d missed for many a century. I am indebted to you.”

I blinked, not sure if I believed him. “What does that have to do with helping the alps?”

He gazed at the horizon once again. “I know what it is to be enslaved.”

My stomach jolted. *Enslaved?* That wasn’t a term I’d ever thought to apply to the Sons of Poseidon.

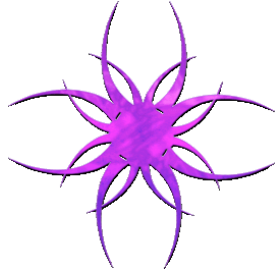
“Piper!” Finn’s voice came through the curtain.

I spun around and called out, “Coming.”

When I turned back, Aphrodisios was gone, only a handful of olive-green fog left behind.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

PIPER



I followed Finn and Namika through the lobby. The minimalist decor—white marble and leather couches with pops of green in the wall paintings—was cold without the music and party atmosphere the Sons used to provide.

If the alps were victims, this case had just gotten more complicated. Now we were looking at not only murder but kidnapping.

We reached the parking lot. I glanced up at Tez's dark moon and could almost sympathize with Bett for choosing his side. Things needed to change on Muse Island, and change was always disruptive. Uncomfortable. Chaotic.

The moon flashed.

My pulse jumped. "Did you guys see that?"

"See what?" Namika looked around, and she and Finn moved into a defensive position, their backs to mine so the three of us made a triangle of protection.

In my periphery, Finn's green and Namika's light blue magic glowed in unison.

"Tez's moon." I pointed up to the black ball hanging low in the sky. "I think it grew."

"Did it?" Namika said. "Distance makes it hard to tell."

"Something happened to the moon. I'm sure of it," I insisted.

The moon began to rotate.

"Well, that's new." A sharpness crept into Finn's tone. A sharpness I recognized. Fear.

“We gotta get to Urania’s Observatory,” Namika said, an edge of urgency clipping her voice.

I faced Namika. “You have an observatory? Meaning we can see a close-up of Tez’s moon?”

She nodded. “I’ve been keeping my eye on it but couldn’t see much. Now, with it moving—”

“Maybe we can see an opening. Weaknesses. Get some clue of what it is, *why* it is.” I’d interrupted her with my rapid-fire words. “Sorry.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Namika walked toward the Jeep. “Finn, while you drive, I’ll call Livvie and Akachi to join us. Think we should bring in the Volkovs? They’re only a few minutes from the observatory.”

“Protectors of the Muses Clio and Calliope,” Finn said for my benefit.

I flipped through my mental flashcards. “Muses of History and Epic Poetry. They share the same last name?”

“Married.”

“Really? Huh.” With only nine Protectors, I hadn’t imagined two of them would marry.

Finn nodded. “Clio and Calliope have always been close, so it makes sense their Protectors would be close as well.” He held my door open, once again.

I let him.

“And no,” he said to Namika, “the Volkovs are on duty. They’re taking the first shift and spreading the word to residents about the sleep schedule.”

“Right.” She leaned forward between our two seats. “How fast can this baby go?”

Finn grinned.



What should have taken forty-minute minutes from Poseidon Point to Urania’s territory took about a half hour with Finn doing eighty the whole way. We passed Faerie Hollow and Roc Bottom, Namika pointing out Mara’s neighborhood along the way.

“Baku’s place is on the opposite side of the cape.” Namika pointed across the island. “The two were comrades of a sort but kept to their sides of Urania’s territory.”

I nodded, grateful for the orientation.

A few minutes later, Urania's Observatory peered over the trees. The structure was a giant, white silo with a rounded top, and as we drew closer, Urania's song strengthened.

Each Muse had their own notes that together created a symphony of music.

A symphony no one besides me could hear.

I closed my eyes and focused on Urania's notes. They were tinny and light, but also deep and full of echoes. Not notes you could find on a piano, but something else, something ethereal. I imagined if stars could sing, they'd sound like this.

Finn pulled to a stop out front. The observatory sat at the edge of a cliff. Far below, the ocean beat at the rocky sides and splashed up in waves of white foam.

We climbed out of the Jeep and followed Namika inside.

As soon as I could get a moment alone with Finn, I needed to relay Aphrodisios's message. I wasn't sure I believed the Son yet, but so far, he'd given us good intel. At the very least, we needed to explore the kidnapping angle.

Namika and Finn's inquiries of hotel staff had yielded a big, fat zero. All of them with nothing to tell or too nervous to tell it.

Inside the observatory, the ground floor was set up like a loft living space. Stained concrete floors, but covered in plush rugs and big, comfortable furniture. Namika's kitchen had a grand view of the ocean and was full of chef-grade appliances. Her bed was tucked away in an alcove with glass walls and a glass ceiling. A clear view of the stars.

"Wow, Namika. This place is gorgeous."

She smiled, pride showing through the softness of her gaze. "Thanks. In my ten years here, I've made it my own. I can't think of being anywhere else. Here, I'm close to the stars, the waves, and Urania's song."

"Then this is Urania's sanctuary?"

Namika nodded.

I turned to Finn. "Where is Terpsichore's sanctuary? I don't think I've been there."

He smiled brightly. "Sure you have. It's the dance floor in the tiki hut."

I opened my mouth. Closed it. "Huh."

“When we get back, I’ll properly introduce you. Take you for a spin.” He grabbed my waist, pulled me close, and swayed his hips.

My blood fired.

Namika cleared her throat. “You’re cute, but don’t make me gag again. We got a spinning death star to check out.” She pointed up a set of spiraling, suspended stairs.

Finn let me go with a smirk, and I tried to hide my own, but failed miserably. Which only made him smirk more.

“Tez’s death star, Finnian,” I said sternly.

“Aye-aye, captain,” he shot back.

Namika had already made it to the top of the stairs and was fiddling with a giant telescope by the time we joined her.

She pushed a few buttons, and with a groan, the observatory ceiling slowly parted in two. “Got a message from Livvie. The coven seems fine, and she and Rainey will meet you at the resort later. So all good on their end.”

She showed us the text on her phone. A text with a picture attached. A picture of Livvie and Rainey at a bar with Gwen and some other women, all raising glasses in the air.

“They were supposed to be doing reconnaissance,” I said. “But Livvie took my little sister out drinking with a bunch of witches?”

Finn zoomed in on Rainey with a swipe of his fingers. “To be fair, I think she’s drinking water.”

“Yeah, well, the magical witches who put a sleep spell on me are certainly not.” I pointed to Gwen’s shot glass.

“Don’t worry, Piper. Livvie will keep her safe.” He gave my shoulder a squeeze. “And if she thinks the coven is cool, they probably are. Livvie’s got good instincts.”

I scowled at him. This was my sister he was talking about.

He held up his hands defensively with a grin. “Maybe not as good as your instincts, but good.”

Fair enough. I dropped my scowl.

He turned back to Namika. “How about Bernard and Akachi?”

She checked her messages again. Above us, the ceiling opened completely, the mechanism groaned as it stopped, and the platform vibrated under our feet. I grabbed for the railing and adjusted my balance.

“No word yet,” she said, completely unaffected by her mechanical home. “Now, Mr. Death Star, let’s look at you.”

Namika stepped up to the viewing scope, made a few more tweaks, and pressed her face to the scope. “Interesting. When I first saw it, I thought it was a perigee-syzygy, or supermoon. But then I realized it didn’t orbit. It’s more like a Zeppelin hovering over the island. Still, the word *moon* seems right, you know? Moon or Death Star, one or the other. Wait—something’s happening.”

Finn and I crept closer, peering up at the moon-not-moon from the observatory’s open ceiling.

The moon flashed again.

I pointed to the sky. “You saw that this time, right?”

A beam of darkness shot from the moon and hit the observatory with a *crack*.

Namika screamed. I fell back against the railing. Finn dropped to his knees. The building trembled, then everything went still. Silent.

I got to my feet.

Finn did too. “Everyone okay?”

Namika turned around.

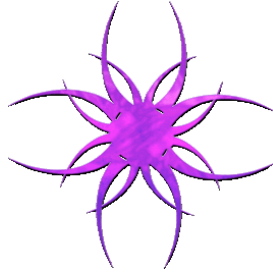
Her eyes.

They’d gone completely dark.

“I can’t see,” she said. “What’s going on? Where are you?”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FINN



Tez's moon hung over the observatory, still rotating but no longer shooting out darkness. I looked from Piper to Namika. My gut wrenched. This...there was no Protector's training that covered this.

"Namika, we're here." I took her hand then supported her elbow. "Something shot out of the moon and struck the observatory. Whatever it was must have affected your sight."

"Rainey," Piper murmured. "We need Rainey." She yanked out her phone and texted her sister.

"Finn? Piper? Namika?" Bernard's voice came from downstairs. "We were on our way back when we saw something happen with Tezcatlipoca's moon."

"Rerouted our destination to here," Akachi's deep voice added.

I guided Namika to the rail where they could see us.

Akachi grabbed his chest. "My dear, what has happened to you?"

"Stupid Death Star. Blasted something out and blinded me," she said in her typical *wassup* tone. She was handling blindness like it was nothing more than a bad wipeout. Or maybe she was in shock. "Urania's quieter too."

Piper closed her eyes. "Urania's notes are fading from the song." She looked to me, worried.

The last time a Muse had gone quiet, it was because she'd been poisoned by a death at her sanctuary. Thalia was still weak from that attack, her notes still faint.

Had Tez also poisoned Urania?

Bernard's tattoos glowed. Brighter and more intense than his normal wish-reading power. He flexed his muscles, seemed to grow in size, and groaned.

"Bern?" I called, my tone shard-like in its edge.

Piper ran down the stairs to him. "What is it? Are you okay?" She looked up to the sky, probably making sure Tez wasn't attacking Bern. Her eyes took a violet hue, the same color as her power.

A light flashed and—

"Shot, shot, shot—hey! What happened?" Rainey stood in the middle of the living room, hands propped on her hips in a very Piper-like pose.

Bernard grabbed her hands, checked her over. "Are you okay? Ten fingers, ten toes?" He felt her forehead. "No fever?"

She batted at him. "I'm fine, but did you just wish me here?"

"I apologize for startling you, but it was your sister's request. Her wish was so strong, so immediate..."

My breath caught, and I gazed down at Piper. She rushed forward and embraced her sister.

Namika pressed closer into me and whispered, "Bernard wished up a person?"

I couldn't answer.

A freed genie could grant or reject small wishes or unnecessary comforts. But transporting people? Any wish that massive would require an official wish.

But Bernard hadn't granted Piper three official wishes.

And the way Bernard was acting—taking a step away from Piper, his face blanching—it seemed he didn't understand either. As if her wish had defied the rules of genie magic.

"Thank you, Bernard." Piper beamed at him. "I had no idea you could even do this."

"I c-cannot," Bernard stammered. "At least I didn't know a genie could..." He trailed off again, as if his thoughts had disintegrated halfway through.

Akachi stared at Piper, distrust filling his features once again. His Muse had demanded Piper stand in judgment before her, but Piper had wiggled out of that, and Akachi had agreed to postpone the ceremony.

I had a feeling he'd no longer be willing to postpone.

I had plenty of questions myself.

“Pipes.” Rainey snapped her fingers in front of Piper’s face. “Why am I here? Instead of partying with the coolest witches I’ve ever met in my life?”

“Coolest witch—” Piper shook her head. “Never mind. Namika’s been hurt. By Tez. You need to check her out.”

“C’mon, Namika.” I slid my hand under her upper arm. “I’ll help you down the stairs.”

“Kalani, I’ve lived here on my own for years. I can get down these stairs blindfolded on a moonless night.” She wrenched free of my grip, confidently walked to the stairs, then descended to the ground floor without so much as a stumble or a flinch.

I shook my head as I followed her down. What was it with all these headstrong women in my life?

I turned to Akachi. “Could you let Livvie know where Rainey turned up? I’m sure she’s Cockney-slanging like a pub regular by now.”

He nodded and pulled out his phone.

Rainey reached for Namika, and they sat on the couch. She checked Namika’s eyes, her glands, her pulse.

“I’m no ophthalmologist, but I’d say whatever this is, it’s temporary.”

“You sure?” Namika, for the first time, let fear creep through her calm facade.

“Pretty sure.” Rainey nodded. “Your pupils are still responsive to light, but this dark goop—it’s like a mask has been glued to your face. I wonder if Gwennie could help remove it.”

“Gwennie?” Piper almost shouted. “You’re on a nickname basis with the witch who nearly threw me out of their spa?”

“Maybe you’re not as likable as I am.” Rainey grinned.

It took extra effort to keep the grin off my own face.

“Anyway,” Rainey continued, “they seem just as bothered by the nightmares as we are. And they might be able to do something for Namika. We should at least try.”

Piper sighed and turned to Akachi. “Any news from Seshat or Mara?”

Akachi studied her for a long moment, as if still trying to size her up. Finally, he shut his eyes and opened them again, seeming to blink away his reluctance. “Neither Seshat nor Mara know of any way to prevent the nightmares from coming, but Seshat continues to search her store of resources. She also contacted the Council of Gods, who gave no indication of when a new dream eater might arrive.”

“So we’re on our own,” Piper muttered.

Bernard stood on the perimeter, staring at her and still looking confused. When we were alone, I’d ask Bern a few questions, but now wasn’t the time.

My phone buzzed. I pulled it out and saw I’d missed seven messages. All from the resort. My shoulders fell. “Need to check voicemail. Looks like an emergency.”

The first two messages were calm check-ins from resort staff, the third and fourth mentioned strange happenings, and the last three were panicked reports about nightmares gone wild.

A lump swelled in my throat, and I hung up with a sigh. “Seems some guest’s nightmare involved a monster rising out of the ocean and attacking people.”

Piper jerked her head toward me. “Is anyone hurt?”

I nodded. “Mild injuries. Staff evacuated the beach, and the dreamer woke up. But it’s likely to get worse. I need to swing by, check on people, give instructions.”

“Take me with you,” Rainey said. “We need to set up a triage area. Treat this like a natural disaster. Our hospital had procedures for times like this, so I know the drill. I could head it up.”

“That’d be great,” I said with genuine gratitude. “I’ll introduce you to my head of security. We have standard procedures but could use your medical expertise.”

Plus, that’d give me some time alone with Piper.

Piper had been so tied to her research about Tez and getting Rainey settled on the island, fussing over her younger sister like a mother bear, that the right opportunity to explain what I knew about her, or at least the prophecies about her, hadn’t yet come. The visit to Roc Bottom had been partly aimed at giving me that opportunity to broach the subject.

But now, given what she’d somehow done to Bernard, I couldn’t put it off anymore. I had to show her the Protector’s book. Today. As soon as possible.

With more nightmares and mayhem coming our way, we didn’t need Piper as a loose cannon, unwittingly exercising more power she didn’t understand and couldn’t fully control.

“Coming, Piper?”

“Hmm?” She jerked herself out of some private thought, probably some deep mind dive about the nightmares or Tez or the alps. Or maybe her sister’s newfound friendship with a coven of witches. But not about her forcing Bernard to transport Rainey—she didn’t know what she’d done.

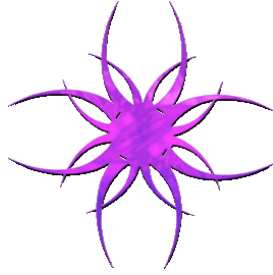
“Are you coming to the resort with Rainey and me?” I repeated.

“Oh, yeah. Of course.” She marched toward the exit without a backward glance.

Rainey shrugged, and we both followed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

FINN



We dropped Namika at the sleep spa with Livvie and the witches, who'd suddenly turned nice and promised to take care of her. For the time being at least, the Coven of Nyx was off the suspect list and Piper seemed content to focus on the alps angle.

She stared out the window, a serious look crinkling her forehead on our ride to the resort.

When we pulled into the circle drive, things were much too quiet. I could still hear Terpsichore's rhythmic notes, but the usual din of guests was missing. And the valet stand out front was unattended.

I parked the Jeep at the entrance, and we headed into the lobby. Warner, my head of security, met us at the front desk, looking more frayed than a frat boy after a bender.

"You okay?" I asked.

He nodded. "Just got chased by a pack of wolves on the fourth floor."

Rainey squeaked.

He darted a glance at her then continued. "We woke the dreamer in time and piped party music into their room to keep sleep at bay. Still, we have more beds in this hotel than anywhere else on the island. I'm not sure how long we can keep this under control."

The weight of our task slammed me. Not everyone could pull an all-nighter, so more trouble was bound to come. No matter what we did.

"Recliners on the beach?" I asked.

"Already folded and stored away," he answered.

I nodded and then waved my hand at Rainey. "Rainey, this is—"

“Actually, Warner and I already met.” She grinned brightly. “When Bernard and I were browsing the gift shop and I squealed a little too loudly at the *perfect* bikini I’d found for Piper.” The way she said *perfect*, that part of the message was meant for her big sister.

I tended to agree. That bikini was perfect. Too bad Piper had never taken off her cover-up so we could all appreciate its perfection.

Maybe someday. If we ever got a real break.

“Rainey’s a nurse,” I continued, “and has lots of experience dealing with emergency situations. She’s going to set up triage here and help you with plans.”

Warner lifted his brows at me then turned to Rainey. “I’ll take all the help I can get.”

He escorted her into the security office, and my shoulders felt just a touch lighter at the thought of those two plotting to keep my hotel and its guests all in one piece.

When I turned back to Piper, she was staring toward the beach beyond the glass windows at the far end of the lobby. But she didn’t seem focused on anything in particular.

“What are you thinking?” I asked.

“Back at Poseidon Point...” She took a deep breath. “Aphrodisios was on the balcony.”

My heart slammed my ribs. “What? Why didn’t you say something?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t know how the other Protectors felt about our stalemate alliance. About keeping him around.”

“I should have stayed with you.”

She bit her lip. “He just wanted to talk. Told me he wasn’t responsible for the nightmares and said the alps probably were, but they’re working for someone else.”

I scoffed. “I trust a Son of Poseidon about as far as I can throw a cyclops.”

“I’m not saying he’s trustworthy, but even murderers will give accurate information when they believe it’s in their best interests.”

“So who did he say is controlling the alps? Tez?”

“He didn’t say who.” She sighed heavily. “And besides, how is Tez’s moon attack on Namika related to any of this?” She flung her arm out, as if indicating the whole entire island.

My gut twisted. I ached looking at her, at the stress creasing her brow, the weight pressing down her shoulders, the weariness in her eyes.

Time wasn't on our side. Time was never on our side. But I knew enough about dealing with dark magickas to understand that sometimes you had to settle your own turbulence first to successfully overcome theirs.

I hailed a waiter from the open restaurant in the lobby. "When you get a chance, could you take a scotch and soda to security? And some kind of chocolate dessert."

Piper stared at me.

"The scotch is for Warner, and you said Rainey's favorite is chocolate, right?"

She nodded.

"Good. I'm giving them something to keep them going, and you and I are going to do something that keeps us going. We're sinking our toes in that sand." I gestured at the beach that lined our resort.

She shook her head. "We don't have time. The sun's going to be setting soon."

"Five minutes." I wrapped my arm around her waist and nudged her forward a step or two. "I bet somewhere in your psychology training they mentioned caring for yourself enough to be there for others."

"Yes, but..." She peered back toward the lobby and bit her lip again.

"The longer you delay, the more time this takes."

A small smile cracked her serious expression. "You're persistent. I'll give you that."

"I'm nowhere near your level of stubborn, but I try." I smiled back, trying to muster every iota of charm I had. Every twinkle, dimple, and mischief I'd been accused of.

She kicked off her shoes, stuffed them in her bag, and pulled me forward toward the beach. As usual, once the decision was made, she liked to be in charge.

I matched her stride, adjusted our hand-hold, and walked beside her to the water's edge.

We stopped right as the foam tickled over our toes. I drew up behind her, encircled my arms around her waist, and settled her back against my chest. She sucked in a breath and held it, as if surprised by my closeness.

Or buoyed by it?

I breathed in the faint scent of flowers and coconut from her hair, probably from her shampoo. It smelled heavenly. *She* smelled heavenly.

Lowering my mouth to her ear, I whispered, “Enjoy the present smiling hour and put it out of Fortunes pow’r.”

“Where did you get that from?”

“Believe it or not, I only had a couple of semesters left on a classics degree when I got Terpsichore’s call. And that is Roman poet, Horace, from one of his odes. Reminds me to not miss out on the good moments.”

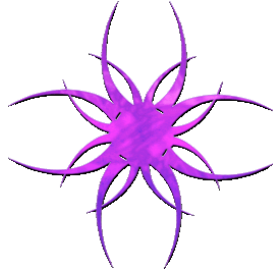
“Like this one.” Her voice was soft, breathy.

I moved my hands to her arms, gently rotated her, and nearly lost my lungs at the sight of Piper Prince, eyes wide, lips parted, filled with anticipation.

Zeus be praised.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

PIPER



The ocean breeze wrapped around us like a warm hug, and my feet sank into the pink sand. The sun hung low on the horizon, teasing the sky into a blush.

Finn stroked my cheek, his fingers a breath of a touch against my skin, and he leaned down. His hand dropped to my waist and pulled me closer.

My pulse trilled, and the Finn-inspired butterflies in my stomach pirouetted and leaped into a private ballet. I lifted my face to his, sinking in those too-green-to-be-real eyes, except they were real. *He* was real.

A man who wasn't intimidated by me, but supported me. Believed in me.

That green gaze became even greener, and Terpsichore's notes brightened and danced. Surrounded by ethereal music only we could hear, Finn lowered his mouth to mine.

It was a caress, but there was nothing hesitant about his lips. Not at all. Instead, it was a tease, a slow capture of my mouth in his, a breeze of a kiss that foretold a storm.

My lips parted, my hands went around his strong neck, and my hips pushed into his. I hadn't thought we could take a break, but this—surely, the madness of the world could stop long enough for me to have this one moment.

I breathed him in, savored him, memorized his scent. Salty air and freshly-washed sheets and orange spice.

He deepened the kiss, a small groan vibrating his throat, and it was like coming home after being gone on a long trip. Familiar and foreign, comforting and thrilling.

Then, our storm hit. The kind of storm where the skies open and rain falls in big, fat drops. I lost my breath, kissing him. I lost all sense of time, wrapped in his arms. But I found a new part of me. A part that could open, that could be receptive to being loved.

I pulled him closer, not close enough, his tongue sliding against mine, tasting of something deep and aromatic and addictive.

Everything slowed, the storm turning to a gentle rain before fading. Finn nuzzled my nose, rested his forehead against mine.

“That will definitely keep me going for a while.” His voice was husky and soft, his hands still laced around my waist.

“I’m pretty sure time has stopped anyway.” My breathless words came out soft, but something new was building inside me. Something strong.

“Pipes!” Rainey called out from the tiki hut. “Stop necking your hottie and c’mere.”

Finn let out a laugh and took my hand in his. “At least she’s subtle.”

“’Bout as subtle as a turd in the punchbowl.” Philippe’s favorite phrase popped into my head.

Finn laughed again then kissed my fingertips.

“And time restarts,” I muttered.

Rainey grinned at us. One of those Piper-got-some grins. “Nice kiss, Finn. I could feel the heat from over here.” She raised a hand to high-five him.

I lifted my brow at him, but he shrugged, returned her Cheshire cat grin, and met her high-five in a loud clap.

Great. Rainey loved him almost as much as she loved Labradors.

The butterflies in my stomach swooned a little. I didn’t stand a chance.

“Okay, okay. Finn and I kissed.” As I walked forward, I straightened my blouse, but I couldn’t straighten my smile. Not completely. “But we have a crisis at hand. Sun is about to set, and we have a resort full of scared guests. What’s the plan?”

“First part,” Rainey said to Finn, “is thanking you for that to-die-for dessert. If your chef was here, I’d give him the kind of kiss you just got.”

Finn’s palm settled on my back, but he smiled at Rainey. “Our chef studied under Edesia, Roman goddess of feasting.”

“Um, hello.” I waved my hands between their faces. “Crisis.”

Nightfall was upon us.

And Tez’s dark moon was still spinning.

“Sorry,” Rainey mumbled then cleared her throat. “We’re getting all staff and a few volunteers full-access key cards, so we can get in to wake guests if needed. We’ll also catalog any recurring nightmares, so if one of those pops up, we know who’s having it.” She tapped a clipboard in her hand with printed spreadsheets. “And we’re instructing everyone to take shifts sleeping—one person in each room awake at all times. Solo travelers will be partnered up for the night in two-bedroom suites, so they still have privacy but can take turns sleeping.”

Rainey propped her hands on her hips, obviously proud of her quick thinking and leadership.

I was too.

Finn gave her an appropriate attagirl grin. “Well done, Rainey. You ever want a job, say the word.”

She lifted her chin happily and held out two radios. “One for each of you. In case satellite communications are interrupted by that moon or something else, we need a backup. No telling what you two will be up to tonight. I mean, other than smooching.”

Finn snickered.

I put out my hand, palm-up. “Just give me my radio and keep the commentary to yourself.”

She handed them over. “Channel seven. You know, like Seven Minutes in Heaven.” She waggled her eyebrows.

I shook my head and handed Finn his radio, noting the blush of his cheeks.

“What’s your plan?” Rainey asked.

I hadn’t had time to make a plan, but it was definitely on my list of to-dos.

Finn clipped his radio to his waistband. “If you and Warner have everything under control, I need to show something to Piper.”

“I’ll bet.” Rainey chuckled.

I gave her a withering look then turned to Finn, wondering what he *did* mean.

“No,” he said with a not-quite-smile. “It’s Protector-related, and I don’t think it can wait.”

Before Rainey could answer or I could ask questions, Finn took my hand and pulled me away.

He called back over his shoulder, “Radio us if you need anything.”

“Will do,” Rainey yelled back as she headed back into the hotel.

“Where are we going?” I kept my hand in his, but resisted his pull. “And what can’t wait?”

He halted in the sand and spun back to face me. A mix of worry and solemnity flashed across his face followed by a relaxed smile. “Just give me a few more minutes, Piper.”

I nodded and squeezed his hand.

Finn led me to a part of the resort I’d never visited before. A white clapboard cottage stood behind a wall of palm trees and manicured flower bushes that provided privacy while still allowing a view. Surfboards were propped against the house’s covered front porch, and a speaker system seemed to be wired throughout the house.

As we walked up the pebblestone path, motion-sensor fairy light flickered to life above our heads.

Finn grinned. “Welcome to my humble abode. My mom put those up before...” The grin fell from his face. “She left the island after I became a Protector. A move to keep her safe from the Sons.”

“I’m sorry. Where is she now?”

“Las Vegas, near my brother. Or rather, he lives near the Strip, and she lives as far away from it as possible while still being Vegas-adjacent.”

“So your mom was at risk because of you being a Protector? Should I worry about Rainey even more?”

Finn pressed his lips together and shook his head. “No. Her leaving wasn’t about me being a Protector. It was about the financial debt my dad had to the Sons.” He looked down and smiled at me. “But now I don’t have to worry about that, because you rid this island of the Sons. One of these days, maybe my mom can come back for a visit. And meet you.”

My skin tingled. Was that an admission that we were not just kissing buddies, but an actual item? A couple?

“That would be nice.”

He led me up the steps into the house. I braced myself, expecting a messy bachelor pad to match his usual laid-back vibe.

Instead, I was greeted by a neat, cozy living room with soft couches, accent pillows, and hand-knit throws over their backs. Natural wood beams crisscrossed overhead and framed doorways, and the floor beneath was wood-planked with a sink-in-your-toes rug in the middle. On the opposite

side, a broad leather armchair was tucked into a window nook, and on either wall of the little alcove were bookshelves from floor to ceiling.

I beelined to the shelves, my breath stuck in my throat, and pulled the first book I saw from a shelf. I flipped open the hardcover, saw the title page, and let out a sigh. A long, satisfied sigh. I was holding a hardbound copy of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, first edition.

When I looked up, Finn was grinning ear to ear. "Are these your books?" I asked. "You said you didn't read."

"Actually, I said I was more of an action guy. Which I am. But yes, I've read most of those books." He pointed to the book in my hand. "My brother bought me that one at a rare books store on the Strip."

I glared at him through narrow eyes, wondering how I'd missed so much. I was a trained professional in observation and human behavior. But when I'd looked at Finn before, I hadn't seen a guy who quoted Horace and read classic literature.

"Stop looking at me like that." He crossed the room, slid the book from my hands, and tucked it back into place. "I'd still rather listen to audiobooks than read tiny words on a page. That way I can get in my jog and savor the island scenery while enjoying great books."

I stood on my tiptoes and brushed a kiss against his jaw. "And here I thought I was going to have to do like I used to with Rainey and read you a picture book before bedtime."

"Bedtime?" He gathered me in his arms again.

Blood rushed to my cheeks. "I meant theoretically." *For now*. I pushed him away and stepped out from the alcove. "Now why are we here, and more importantly, where is your coffee pot?"

Finn sighed and pointed. "Kitchen's that way, and I could use some caffeine too."

Passing through a wood-framed doorway, I entered a small kitchen with glass-door cupboards, older appliances, and a table in the middle made of driftwood. On the counter sat a combination bean grinder and coffee maker. *Be still my heart*. I was really falling for Finn now.

He shuffled to a cabinet, pulled out fresh beans, and got our beautiful brew started.

I sat at the table and fidgeted while he worked.

A distant scream came from outside, and we both froze, waiting for the next one or several. Silence. The dreamer must have woken up.

After a moment, we relaxed. But my heart was still on edge. The sun had barely set, and even with our best efforts, many more nightmares were likely to come. So what mattered so much for Finn to drag us away for more alone time?

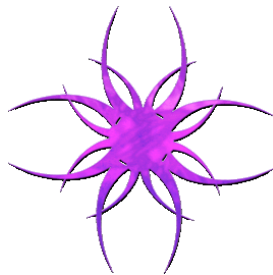
He poured two cups of fresh coffee, brought them to the table, and settled into a chair across from me.

I sipped, and delicious coffee oozed over my tongue and down my throat. “Okay, tell me the bad news first.”

He lowered his eyes to his cup. When he lifted his gaze again, his whole expression had become much more serious. Urgent. “It’s time I told you about the prophecies.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

PIPER



I didn't need to be a forensic psychologist to read the look on Finn's face as he sat across from me at his kitchen table. It was classic walking-on-eggshells, him waiting for any reaction from me to know what effect that revelation would bring.

All I could manage was "Prophecies? About me?" My breath wisped away, but something hard settled in my stomach.

Finn slid his hand across the driftwood table toward mine, but I scooted it back just an inch. "Is this about what you said at Thalia's sanctuary?" My voice was small, wary. "The night Tez rose?"

He returned his hand to his cup. "Yes. But then Rainey was here, Narfi needed rebirth, and you've been a bit obsessed with learning all you can about Tez. I haven't had a chance to tell you."

"Haven't had a chance?" I leaned across the table, now getting in his personal space. "If you knew something about who, or *what*, I am, you owed it to me to stop everything and tell me."

The afterburn of our ocean-side kiss singed, turned painful, felt a lot like betrayal. I'd known Finn was keeping secrets. He'd as much as admitted to it when Tez rose to power. But this admission still pulled a brick out of the foundation of our relationship.

Finn rubbed his hand through his hair, keeping it mussed as usual.

The *pop* of a gunshot outside startled us both. We froze again, waiting. In the quiet, my phone buzzed. I pulled it out and translated the text: "Rainey says not to worry. Gunshot didn't hurt anyone."

Her reassurance did nothing to cut the tension suffocating this room.

“I’m sorry, Piper,” Finn said. “I can only imagine how all of this has hit you.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “So are we going to sit here and listen to Muse Island go to hell while you hem and haw, or are you going to tell me about these prophecies?”

“How about I show you?” He stood and gestured toward the living room.

I took one more gulp of my coffee, now wishing it was Irish, and went into the living room.

Finn followed. “Just give me a minute to get the book.”

“The book? What book?” Surely not Ari’s mother’s book. Did he have a copy? Had he found something I hadn’t?

“The Protector’s book,” he mumbled as he crossed the room.

The way he said it was solemn, hushed, hesitant. It sparked a new flood of adrenaline through my system. My hands prickled, not from my power but from fear. Of the unknown. Of what Finn knew.

Finn scooted the armchair away from the alcove, dropped to his knees, and pried a wood plank from the floor. He reached in and pulled out a small vial and black leather book with yellowing pages. On its front was the same sun-shaped mark I had on my leg, Finn had on his upper arm, and Namika had on her rib. I hadn’t asked Livvie or Akachi, but presumably they had the same mark of the gods as well—the one that labeled them as a Protector.

“Is that the Protector’s manual or something?” I asked.

He sat beside me, making sure to plant himself close enough for us to share the book but not touch. “The other Protectors have never even seen the book. Don’t know I have it.”

“You’re hiding it from them too?”

“This book is given to one Protector at a time,” Finn explained. “Seshat periodically finds its content somehow and stocks a copy in her celestial library, but the Council of Gods makes it disappear just as quickly. By the rules, I shouldn’t be showing this to anybody. I’m the one entrusted with consulting the Protector’s book if something goes truly awry with the Nine Muses. The world we know cannot exist without the creative energy they provide.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Then why are you showing me?”

“Because I believe you’re right—you deserve to know who or what you are, and while I still don’t have the answer to that question, I think the

prophecies in here are about you.”

Some of my anger lifted. And yet... *Prophecies*. That word held such weight that I simply sat there, letting its heaviness sink into me.

“I removed it from lock-and-key in my office,” he said, “and brought it here so I could show you what it says. In private.” He opened the vial, poured some kind of oil onto his hands, and rubbed it into the leather.

The book seemed to drink in the oil, and the golden insignia glowed. Finn met the glow with a shot of his own magic. The lock clasp clicked, and the book fell open.

Finn breathed in and out then whispered to the pages, “Tell me the story of the girl to whom the banished muse speaks.”

Prickles crept up my neck.

Nothing happened.

My gaze darted to him, but his focus was absorbed by the book. He held out his hand for mine. I placed my fingers in his grip and let him pull me to the pages.

“Show the book your power, Piper.” His voice was hushed. Reverent.

I did as he had done and let a spark of my power roll off the tip of my finger and drip to the book. It hit the pages like an inkblot, spread out like a Rorschach test, then soaked in and disappeared.

The book groaned.

Pages flipped, faster, faster, turning into a blur of light and a steady hum. The book lifted off the table, its spine stretching back, opening all the way up as the pages turned, so fast it looked more like a half-moon than a book. The humming grew louder.

Finn’s arm soccer-mom’d against my chest, protecting me. From his reaction, I’d guess this had never happened before.

Everything stopped.

The book slammed to the table.

A beam of light poured out and blinded us with its brightness. A voice spoke through the white light.

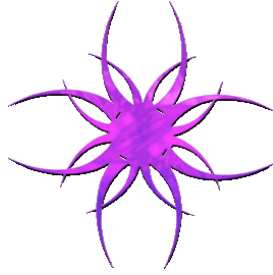
The girl walks the earth, aware and yet unaware of her inner power. The banished muse speaks to her in secret, whispering lies and truths, directing her path. But to what end?

The light faded, the voice disappeared. I grabbed Finn’s hand and held on tight.

We were no longer in Finn’s kitchen.

CHAPTER TWENTY

PIPER



We sat on a moss-covered rock in what seemed to be a forest. The world was dark except for our purple and green auras surrounding us like a protective shield. The same voice that had filled Finn's kitchen just moments before, a woman's voice, cold and sinister, whispered, "Follow me. This way, Piper Prince."

My heartbeat tripped. "Finn?" I whispered, gripping his hand more firmly.

"I'm here. I got you."

"But who's got us?"

The forest seemed to echo darkness with no path forward revealed. The woman's voice came again. "Come to me, Piper Prince. You are power. You are chaos. You are mine."

Finn's hand went slick in mine. Goosebumps ran the length of my arms, and a chill dribbled down my spine. "Do we really want to follow that voice?"

"Not sure we have a choice," Finn answered. "Probably can't leave until we find out what it wants."

I swallowed my fear. "Okay," I whispered, "let's do this."

I'd wanted answers, and maybe I was finally going to get them. Though I'd have much rather just read them in the book while sitting on Finn's cozy couch.

The woman's whispers led us through the dark forest and even darker shadows, her words no longer discernible, but distant, fading. We kept walking until we reached a grove of trees lit by the ghostly glow of a

faraway moon. Something tingled against my chest, and I looked down to see the pendant of my necklace glowing.

The forest parted. In the middle of the grove, a baby cried and a couple dangled a necklace over the child.

“Is that your necklace?” Finn asked.

I nodded. Not only did the two necklaces look exactly the same, but I could feel its power, the same power that warmed my skin and weighed down my neck.

The young woman leaned close to her child, grinned happily, and said, “You will awaken the Muse.”

“And that baby...?” Finn’s question prodded where my thoughts were already going.

But I couldn’t finish the thought. Not out loud.

That baby is me.

The couple and the baby dissolved into mist, and the woman’s voice returned.

Conceived in the hidden grove, under the full moon, the girl was created to awaken the tenth muse. But her birth angered the gods, for the tenth muse had been banished from this world to a place of eternal sleep for her crimes.

In due time, the girl’s parents confessed their error, but as retribution the gods imprisoned the reckless lovers.

To free them, the girl must sacrifice her most precious gift.

But in doing so, she will awaken the tenth muse, and Shadow and Chaos will reign.

The girl walks the earth, aware and yet unaware of her inner power. The banished muse speaks to her in secret, whispering lies and truths, directing her path. But to what end? If the girl cannot untangle lie from truth, hope will not be enough. If the girl will not untangle lie from truth, if she chooses the path she walks, there is only chaos and darkness and death.

Dread fossilized in my stomach.

The forest around us blurred, and the mist in front of us swirled. But I was more disoriented by the woman’s words. “She’s talking about me?”

Finn swallowed and nodded. “I believe so.”

“And what she’s saying...”

“Is the prophecy from the book.” Something cold, hard, immovable filled his tone.

“You believe I was created to awaken an ancient power that will bring chaos and darkness and death?” Gwen’s words came back to me. *How do you know Miss Prince is not the cause?* And this prophecy said I was the cause. Directly or indirectly. Still...me.

Finn opened his mouth, clearly prepared to protest.

I held up a hand. “No, the book’s right. This is all happening because of me. I chose Rainey, so we didn’t reach Tez in time. I brought this chaos, the nightmares, the everything. It’s all my—”

“We did the best we could.”

“People are dead because of me. And if I wasn’t whatever-I-am”—I flailed my arm out at the mist-soaked grove—“then my parents wouldn’t have left and Rainey would be cured.”

“Now you’re responsible for your sister’s cancer?” He shook his head. “No wonder you walk around like you’re carrying a ton of steel on each shoulder.”

I wanted to argue, but he was right—I’d carried every burden for Rainey I could, not caring how much it weighed, but now I knew the truth.

I couldn’t carry it.

Because *I* was the burden. Rainey’s burden.

Finn took both my hands in his. “You are not chaos. Not to me.”

Chanting filled the air. The mist cleared.

The ancient forest was no longer ancient. It’d regressed. Moonlight spilled freely through the tree’s slim profiles and sparse canopy.

Nine inhumanly tall beings, covered in robes of glowing white, formed a circle in the grove. They raised their hands, palms up, and white light poured from their fingertips, creating a luminous bubble that encased something. Someone. In the middle of their circle.

I yanked Finn behind a large rock.

“Who are they?” I whispered.

Finn’s face was paler than I’d ever seen. “I think—” He licked his lips and tried again. “I think that’s the Council of the Gods.”

Their voices rose and fell in a wave of deep tones. An unfamiliar language spilled from the circle.

“What are they doing?”

Finn shook his head a little, putting me on hold, and listened to the Council’s mutterings. “That’s ancient Greek. They’re...they’re banishing someone...”

I peered around the other end of our hiding place to get a better view of whoever, whatever, was crouching in the middle of the circle.

Long, silver hair covered her shoulders and her bare knees, and she was etched in a purple glow, like a life-sized firefly.

Yet I knew her.

The sleeping woman in the other dimension.

The woman I was supposed to wake.

She raised her head, turned her gaze to where I hid in the shadows, and smiled.

My breath held, and it felt as though a thin, invisible thread connected us—her and me.

She unfolded herself, straightened her spine, and lifted her hands above her head. “I am Arche, Muse of Origins and Beginnings. In me, wild creativity roars and all Muse energy bows to my power. Banish me, try to contain me, but never forget me. One day, my daughter will awaken me. She will walk the path of truth and bend nature to support her creative chaos.”

My bones hummed. With dread, with shame. With anticipation.

The Council’s voices deepened, and their power swept through the trees, over Finn and me, and wrapped around the Muse Arche.

The Muse who’d been speaking to me since I’d arrived on the island.

She spread out her arms and let the Council’s power bind her, restrain her, put her to sleep. The white light surrounding the clearing shrank to a small circle, enfolding Arche, and the Council and the Muse vanished.

The forest disappeared and Finn’s living room kitchen came back into focus, as if we’d never left.

But I had dirt between my toes.

“What was that?” My voice shook, and I rubbed my arms, as if I could scrub away my fear.

His gaze met mine. “I’m—I’m not sure. My best guess is the book gave us an in-person visit to the beginning of the prophecy.”

A *bleep* drew our attention to the kitchen.

It took me a moment to recognize the sound. “Rainey.” I jumped from the couch and ran to the kitchen. The radio flashed on the kitchen table. I picked it up, clicked the button, and spoke. “Hey,” I answered, trying to sound calm, in check, *unchaotic*.

Static came over the line. “Pipes, we need...come...happened...and...”

“Wait, wait, Rainey. You’re not coming through.” I walked around the kitchen, spun in a circle, lifted the radio—all in a futile effort to understand her. “I can’t hear you, Rainey.”

White noise took over, and the radio signal ceased. I clicked again, but nothing happened.

Finn stood in the doorway, hands in his pockets, waiting. “Right channel?”

“Of course.” Still on seven.

“Try your phone,” Finn suggested.

I picked up my phone and saw five missed calls. My chest squeezed. What was going—

A *boom* slammed into my ears, my chest, my knees, making me teeter.

My heart jumped, and power flared to my hand. Finn ran from the house and started toward the resort, then froze so quick and so solid, I momentarily wondered if someone had dreamed up Medusa. “What. The. Tartarus?”

Rainey was up there, at the resort. If something had happened to her...

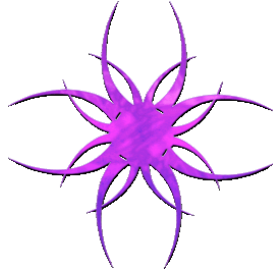
By the time I joined Finn, my power had risen to a blazing glow around me. But it couldn’t match the ball of flame rising from a mountain well beyond the resort. A rumble like the sound of a jet engine was followed by a massive, billowing cloud of smoke. “Is that a—”

“Volcano.” Finn let out a twenty-pound sigh. “It just doesn’t stop, does it?”

We took off toward the resort.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

PIPER



Entering the lobby, I had to stop and reorient. Muse Island Resort was no longer a hotel but a hospital in a war zone.

How long had we been gone?

Guests bled onto the posh couches and chairs, lay on the vast carpets moaning and clutching various parts of their body, and rocked and sobbed in corners around the room.

Finn halted beside me. “Oh no, no, no...”

I should have reassured him, but all I could do was scan for Rainey. Where was she? Was she okay?

Finally, I spotted my sister kneeling in front of a girl no older than ten. The girl held a stuffed pink bunny tight against her chest and a single finger up for Rainey’s inspection. Rainey smiled at her, wrapped a Band-Aid around the girl’s finger, and then wrapped another one around the pink bunny’s ear. The whole interaction took no more than a few seconds, but it stopped my world.

Even in the midst of utter chaos, Rainey was cool, calm, compassionate down to the bottom of her heart. Her beautiful, beautiful heart.

And I’d brought her chaos.

“Bern!” Finn’s voice jerked me into the present.

Bernard looked up from a wild-eyed woman with a claw mark across her face.

I gasped, and Rainey called, “Piper!”

We four beelined to the middle of the lobby, drawn to gather in the eye of the storm.

Finn gestured around. “What happened?”

“Where have you been?” Rainey staccato-tapped her clipboard. “I called and radioed you multiple times.”

Finn gave a don’t-ask shake of his head. “It’s a long story. Trust me, it wasn’t our choice.”

Bernard crossed his arms. “Whose was it?”

“Later,” Finn mumbled. “Right now I need a status update.”

Rainey nodded. “You name it, it’s happened. No deaths at the resort yet, but some criticals. It’s like a natural disaster, a battle, and the zombie apocalypse all rolled into one.”

“What about other places around the island?”

Bernard and Rainey exchanged a glance that answered that question.

My lungs pinched. “I doubt humans are still believing the chemical spill story.”

“They don’t know what to believe,” Rainey answered. “But then, they’re just in the moment and not trying to explain much.”

Tension radiated off Finn. “Any news from the other Protectors?”

“Mostly bad news,” Bernard said. “One bright spot is that Namika’s vision seems to be returning. The Coven of Nyx is taking good care of her while Livvie and Gwen went on patrol to wake dreamers as needed.”

“What about the volcano?” I asked.

Rainey stopped to answer a treatment question from a nearby staff member then turned back to us. “We called as soon as the tremors started. Bern recognized the warnings. But it only just erupted. I can’t imagine what injuries it’s causing. I don’t suppose there’s a burn unit on this island....”

Finn simply stared at Rainey, as if trying to calculate the question.

“Never mind,” she mumbled.

Bernard gestured around the room. “Many of our injuries were caused by a nightmare involving a menagerie of animals.”

“The patrols didn’t work?” I asked.

“Apparently,” he continued, “one of the female guests had a male companion visiting last night, so he didn’t appear on our original roster and it took a while to wake him. He was not asleep so much as passed out.”

Bernard pointed at a burly man sitting nearby and drinking from an oversized coffee cup.

Recognition struck me like a slap to the head. “Dwarf?”

He raised his head. “Hey, I know you.”

Finn turned to me. “You know him?”

“We met at the Thirteen Heavens Bar and Grill,” I answered.

Dwarf lifted his chin to me. “You ever find who you were looking for? I didn’t buy that Aztec hooey until some guy came walking into the joint with glowing eyes saying he was some long-lost god.”

“Tez?” Finn asked.

“Nah, some long, unpronounceable name.” Dwarf burped. “Had that spicy woman on his arm. The one I told you about.”

Finn and I exchanged a glance that said *Bett* without either of us even mouthing the word.

“I’ve had bad dreams ever since,” Dwarf continued. “All that Aztec mumbo jumbo on the walls of the grill coming to life in my head. I feel awful about all these people. Hurt because of me.” A tear streaked down his face, and he buried his gaze back in his coffee cup.

My heart ached. I knew how he felt.

But I didn’t have time to wallow in my guilt right now. Later, not now.

“Back to the spewing volcano outside. Do we know whose dream it is?”

Bernard shook his head. “We simply cannot keep up with all the nightmares. We were hoping the death toll would stay in the single digits, but now...”

I stared at him, my lungs not working, my heart barely pumping. It was one thing to anticipate deaths and another to know the casualties were coming in. This night could take hundreds of lives.

“Nurse Prince,” a security guard called from across the room.

“I gotta go,” Rainey said. “I have patients.”

I reached over and got in a quick squeeze of her arm before she strode away.

Finn sighed as he looked around the room. “I need to stay here. These are my guests.”

“No.” Bernard’s voice was strong, insistent. “My genie powers are useless against a nightmare volcano. But here I can grant wishes here for people, things that will ease their recovery, keep up their spirits.”

Finn nodded, slowly, reluctantly, but agreeing Bernard was right.

“Meanwhile”—I pulled on Finn’s arm—“we need to get out there and stop that volcano before it kills a lot more people.”

Finn let me lead him away, past the wounded and whimpering guests, toward the exit. As we left, I caught a glimpse of the shadow box on the wall of the lobby, the same one I’d seen the first day I’d come to Muse

Island. It held a replica of the necklace that now hung around my neck, the one my parents—Tristan and Penelope, the couple in the clearing—had given me.

The prophecy said they were imprisoned by the gods. No wonder Seshat's magical directory couldn't find them.

Outside, Tez's moon still hovered overhead, a black, ominous circle against a charcoal night sky sprinkled with stars. Even the thick swells of smoke filling the air above the volcano didn't hide the ongoing threat.

"Hang on." Finn ran back inside, leaving me to stare at the volcano oozing lava and dispersing ash.

He returned with binoculars and held them up to his eyes. "We can drive there, but with all that heat, it's risky. Figured we might see something useful from here with these."

"Good idea." I grabbed the binoculars.

"Hey," he protested.

"I'll give them right back." As soon as I was finished. I needed to see for myself how bad it was.

Through the lenses, I saw sparks pulsing from the volcano's opening, rocks shooting out in various directions, ash falling in waves over the top of the mountain, and magma pouring down its sides. But amid the puffs of smoke were white blobs of...cotton balls? Marshmallows?

"Weird," I muttered.

"What?" Finn pressed against my side, as if reminding me it was well past his turn.

"Clues, if we can think of anyone who would dream about a volcano erupting white..." I lowered the binoculars. "Rabbits."

"Gimme those." He took the binoculars from my hand and stared through them for a long moment. "I'll always leave a clue," he whispered.

"I just said that. Clues. But it doesn't help if we don't—"

"Bett." He took his gaze from the binoculars and turned it on me. "It's what she used to say when we were little. She hid a lot from the other kids, but she'd always leave me a clue to where she was, a drawing of a white rabbit."

I had follow-up questions about Bett hiding from other kids, but that wasn't my most urgent question. "Bett wanted to lead you to Wonderland?"

He nodded. "Probably subconscious, but the clue's there. Bett dreamed up that volcano."

The green of Finn's eyes dimmed. This was yet another blow from her.
Not that I had much room to talk.

Just like Dwarf was responsible for so many injuries at the resort, I was responsible for this. I'd come to Muse Island, set the prophecy in motion, and now the chaos was here.

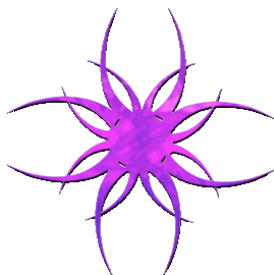
When, or *if*, we resolved this disaster, I'd do whatever it took to keep my chaos from touching the ones I loved.

Even if that meant keeping my distance.

For good.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

FINN



I held Piper's hand as we drove down the dark highway to Bett's house. Her grip in mine was smooth, natural, and a long time coming. But she was tense.

Nightmares roamed Muse Island like wild animals, and the erupting volcano rumbled through the ground. Piper seemed to blame herself, for this and everything else bad. Her profile was stark against the night sky, downturned. Sad.

Still, I didn't regret showing her the prophecy. I was determined—no more secrets.

I raised her hand to my lips and kissed her fingertips. "You know why I decided to show you the Protector's book?"

She loosened her fingers, tucked her hand under her thigh, and shook her head.

"I believe in you. In your good heart. More than any book's prophecy. Besides, after you got here, the prophecy changed. It gave you a way out."

As she looked up, her eyes shone with unshed tears. "A way out?"

"Before, the prophecy always ended with chaos and destruction. But now, it says *if*."

"If..." she repeated. "If I refuse to save my parents, to save Rainey, I can stop the world from being destroyed. Some choice." Her voice dropped low, and she seemed to curl into herself, create a shell around her no one could penetrate.

"I'm not giving up, so don't you give up either. There's always another way." After all, I'd never imagined the Sons could be defeated, but then I

hadn't anticipated Piper Prince. And she'd found the way. "We'll find it, okay?"

She didn't respond, just pointed ahead. "We should probably stop here. Looks like you were right about Bett's nightmare."

I stopped the Jeep in the middle of the road. About a hundred yards in front of us, the black asphalt of the road disappeared under gray folds of hardening lava separating us from Bett's house.

I fumbled under my seat for my dive knife and slid it into my waistband. Bett was a goddess—against her, my Protector's magic was basically useless. And while I hoped I wouldn't have to use the blade, she'd attacked me once before. I wouldn't be caught unprepared again.

We got out and approached the edge. Slits here and there revealed red lava underneath, but the crust had cooled quickly, hardening enough to walk on.

"Shall we?" I grabbed her hand to help her across, but Piper stopped short and dropped to her knees. "What is it?" I asked.

"I'm not sure..." She studied the crusted lava. "These impressions...I think they match what I found in the alps' closet." She pulled out her phone and opened the pictures she'd taken at their apartment.

I leaned over to look where she was looking, and sure enough, a trail of prints had been left in the hardened lava flow. "They look like fossilized animal prints."

"Except they're recent. Probably made just as the lava started to cool. Look." She pointed around Bett's house. "The lava flowed around Bett's house, essentially turning it into an island. Whoever was here waited until they could walk on it then left."

Heat rippled up from the lava, cooled but still warm enough to make me sweat if we lingered too long. "Bett gets her share of visitors, but they're usually human or cat-shifters like her."

"They look like hoofprints..." She straightened, and the look on her face told me that smart brain of hers was clicking its gears, making discoveries, drawing conclusions. "I need to get to Book Spirits. You wake up Bett." She was already running back to the Jeep.

"Piper, wait!"

She turned, ready to defend her decision.

"Catch." I tossed her the keys. "Stay safe."

Her lips spread into that impossibly beautiful smile, and she saluted. “You too, Finnian.”

She disappeared into the night.

I shook my head. Gods, I was in trouble with that one. I was so far gone, my heels had been permanently tossed over my head.

Shifting my attention to the here-and-now, my sappy-sweet mood turned sour. Bett’s place, previously a safe haven from the stress of work and life, loomed in the predawn sky.

Had I ever really known her? Or had I misunderstood who she was our entire lives?

I climbed her stairs, taking care to keep my footsteps silent, and felt for the hilt of the dive knife I’d hidden in my belt.

Her door was unlocked, the living room and kitchen dark. I eased my way inside and crept up the stairs to the second floor. Bett’s room, which she called her *boudoir*, was at the end of the hall.

I pushed open her door, my hand on my knife.

Bett lay in bed, fitful purrs escaping her mouth, her long, bare legs tangled in white silk sheets.

Something brushed against the house. Cat fur wafted in from Bett’s open window. The face of a cat appeared beyond the pane. Not one of her regular visitors. Nope, that was a mummified cat. It growled.

Adrenaline rushed through my veins, and I leapt to her bedside. “Bett, time to wake up.”

I shook Bett’s shoulder.

She groaned and muttered something.

Bett’s voice came from the cat’s mouth. “So dark, always so dark.”

She tossed in bed, her fingers roughing through her hair. “My fault. The darkness. The night. No stars.”

The mummy cat faded, and Bett stilled. Outside, the sky had lightened to a light purple and dark pink. “Mmmm, sun,” she purred and stretched.

“Bett, wake up.” I shook her shoulder.

The island gave one last shudder then stopped.

Bett sat up in bed, her hair a giant nest of knots, and yawned. “Finn?”

“Do not fall back asleep,” I ordered then ran down the hall and up the stairs to her rooftop porch.

The volcano was gone. The lava river had disappeared. The imprint of the lava snaked through the island like a dry riverbed. We’d have to check

the site of the eruption later, see how many homes and businesses were destroyed.

We had a long recovery ahead of us.

I gripped the sun-bleached wooden rail of the balcony. Last time I'd been up here, it'd been for the surprise birthday party Bett had thrown for me.

The rooftop door creaked open, and Bett padded out in bare feet and a white robe, two mugs of coffee steaming in her hands. She passed one over and joined me at the rail, holding her coffee with two hands, surveying the island.

"My dream came to life, didn't it?" Her voice was low, a tinge of regret coloring her words.

I looked at her profile, at the tight grip she had on the handle of her coffee mug as she took a sip.

"Giant volcano. And you showed up as a—"

"Don't say it. I remember." She shuddered. Took a deep breath. "How many?"

"Not sure. Lots of casualties last night, though."

"I didn't mean for any of this—" She waved her hand, pressed her lips together, and swallowed hard.

I at least knew her well enough to know when she was about to cry.

I pulled her into me and rested my chin on her head. "It's not too late to stop, Bett. It would take some time, but eventually—"

"What?" She yanked away from me. "You think I'm responsible or that this changes my choice? Tezcatlipoca will bring a rebirth of our kind. One long overdue. Starting with this island. Freeing slaves, empowering the powerless...how could you not want that?"

Her eyes went cat-like.

"This isn't the way." Two feet separated us, but it might as well have been a hundred-mile wide lava flow. "Dreams are our subconscious working out problems. And what you dreamed..."

She stretched one leg back behind her, planted it firm on the wooden deck, as if about to pounce. "Dreams can also just be dreams. Random images and thoughts pieced together."

"This wasn't."

She didn't argue. Her shoulders slumped, and she let out a breath. "Tezcatlipoca sees you, Bernard, Piper, and the rest of the Protectors as

threats. I'm doing what I can to keep you safe, but please stop putting yourself in his way. You can't fight him and win."

"Help us. Please." I reached out my hand to her.

She bit her lip, blinked quickly, and turned her head. "Something's coming. Something big. You won't be able to stop it."

I dropped my hand. My muscles went tight. "More nightmares? Is this all part of Tez's plan?"

"Not nightmares. Just find the light, Finn, and hold onto it tight." A tear fell from the corner of her eye, and rather than brushing it away, rather than finding comfort in my arms, she turned and walked away.

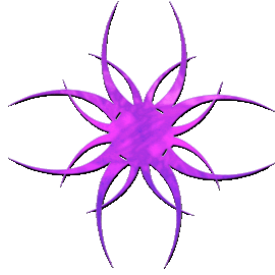
I stayed on her roof for a few more minutes, watching nightmares pop and disappear as the sun rose and people began to wake.

Piper and Bernard had been right. Bett was lost to us. To me.

I took the outside steps, made my way to the ground, and started the long walk to Book Spirits, where I could help Piper, stop Tez, and defeat Bett.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

PIPER



The bell tinkled above the entrance to Book Spirits as I walked in, the night breaking apart and sunlight peeking over the horizon. It'd taken three times as long to make my way here than usual, thanks to Bett's volcano. Which had disappeared soon after I'd left her place in Finn's Jeep.

But the destruction of her nightmare remained.

"Seshat? Akachi?" I called out.

No one answered.

My pulse pounded in my wrists, and a sick sensation that I'd made another costly mistake crawled through my gut.

Because those prints in the hardened lava flow outside Bett's house weren't alp prints. Alps didn't have hooves. Not from what I'd learned.

But mares did.

Mara does.

Quick footsteps ran through the back of the shop, and a childlike laugh broke the silence. Something fell. Someone groaned.

Placing my feet softly on the ground, I crept forward. I'd already announced myself to whoever was here, but they didn't need to know exactly where I was. Kerosene lamps flickered in the dim shop, and Seshat's ghostly guardians whispered around my cheeks, hushed words I couldn't quite decipher.

The last time they'd reached out, Seshat had been in trouble.

I held my breath, hurried. At the end of the bookshelf was a small cart loaded with books to be shelved. I ducked beside it and looked toward Seshat's desk.

Akachi should be here.

Seshat should be here.

Mara should be here.

I darted to the wall at the back of the shop and pressed against it. So far, I hadn't seen anyone. I hoped that meant they hadn't seen me.

The door to Seshat's storage area stood ajar, lights off. I made my way to it and flipped on the few electric lights Seshat allowed. Fluorescent bulbs flickered to life. Spotlighting Akachi and Seshat.

Lying on their backs, lips turning blue, arms spread wide, with two childlike figures wearing red, cone-shaped hats that flopped over one ear sitting on their chests.

Alps.

They looked up at me, screeched at the light, and turned invisible. The pitter-pat of their small steps ran past, and the doorbell tinkled, announcing their exit from the shop.

It all happened so quickly, I couldn't run after them, ask questions, or even speak.

Seshat and Akachi gasped for air, sat up, and blinked against the harsh lights.

I knelt between them. "Are you okay?"

Color returned to their lips, Seshat recovering faster than Akachi. They nodded, coughed.

"Where's Mara?" I gripped Seshat's hand.

She waved toward a room at the back of the storage area. "Hiding in my personal lounge."

"This doesn't make sense," I muttered.

The hoofprints at Bett's were Mara's—I was sure of it. But why were the alps here, attacking Seshat and Akachi?

"Mara?" I called out and picked my way past stacks of books to Seshat's lounge.

Animal skins filled the room, piles of them fashioned into comfy sitting areas among furniture made from old books. Seshat not only collected the skins of her enemies, she apparently lounged on them and read books. *Shudder*. Low-lit lamps stood around the floor, and painted hieroglyphs marked the walls.

It looked like a bookworm's tomb.

And it was empty.

"Mara's not here," I called back.

Seshat joined me at the door. “An innocent heart is rare,” she whispered. I looked into her constellation-filled eyes. “Do you know what’s going on?”

She shook her head. “Only what story has taught me. All stories are based in truth, but anything can be twisted to appear as something other. It is our duty to separate the truth from the lie.”

The words of the Protector’s book rang through my head. *She must untangle lie from truth.*

I couldn’t do that without knowing who Mara really was. I’d been totally wrong, and it was time to return to what I knew about finding truth. My newfound power wasn’t my only play or my only strength—I needed to build a psychological profile. “I need to visit Mara’s house. It’s time we knew more about our equine refugee.” *And what she’s been hiding.*

Akachi entered the room, once again looking serious and sturdy, like a warrior chief equally good with diplomacy or war. “That was highly unpleasant.”

Seshat ran her long fingers down her breastbone where an alp had squatted. “Certainly not my favorite experience. Thankfully, our nightmares are tame compared to some.”

“Like Bett,” I murmured.

They exchanged a quick glance.

“What happened?” Akachi asked.

“Volcano.” I didn’t even attempt to stop my glare.

Seshat gave a quick nod. “That explains the noise. And Finn’s absence, I presume?”

“He went to wake her up while I came here.” My stomach tightened at the thought of him confronting Bett.

Though wasn’t I ultimately more dangerous to Finn?

“Deaths?” Akachi’s serious expression became even more solemn.

I nodded. “Many.”

“I must return to the morgue. Melpomene and others will need me.”

Seshat bowed her head slightly. “Meanwhile, I will leave Book Spirits to my guardians and search for the alps. They cannot have gone far.”

Akachi let out a low snarl. “You shall be ready this time and have the upper hand against those nightmare bringers. The alps must be held responsible for their actions.”

He seemed eager for a bit of revenge. I hoped he didn't feel the same way when he finally demanded my appearance before his Muse. I'd successfully put off that meeting, but I couldn't put it off forever.

"Be careful," I warned them. "It's a madhouse out there."

"You as well," Seshat said. "I still see an important future for you, but nothing can be predicted with utter certainty."

"Do you happen to know Mara's address?"

Seshat summoned some kind of directory to her side, a quill and notepad to her hand, and then jotted down an address and handed it to me.

I waved goodbye, headed back to Finn's Jeep, and peeled toward the main road. Not for the first time, I was proud of myself for studying Muse Island maps so I could get around on my own with nothing more than an address.

On the way, I swerved to dodge a slew of rats running across the road, slammed my brakes to avoid hitting a fallen tree, and pushed the accelerator to the floor to outrun a UFO that disappeared just as its laser beam had nearly reached Finn's bumper. By the time I arrived at Mara's place, my nerves were frazzled.

The sun had finally risen above the horizon, casting light behind Tez's dark moon so it looked on fire. Maybe the nightmares would slow down now.

Silence fell over me as soon as I turned off the engine, and my frazzled nerves went numb.

Mara's home looked like a scaled-down version of a medieval castle set back in the woods. A dark shadow seemed to hang over it. There were no animal noises or rustling sounds among the trees.

But the trees...

The closer they grew to Mara's castle, the more twisted they became. Against the castle, limbs and branches appeared to be braided and knotted, matted with leaves and vines. A breeze picked up, and the silence of the tied-tight branches was approaching-storm ominous.

It hit me that my total plan was hoping Mara wasn't home and breaking in to search for clues. Not the most solid of plans, but a detective's search of a suspect's home had often provided information I could use to build an accurate profile that supported arrest, conviction, and treatment recommendations.

Just like Ari Fawkes.

The police had confirmed his connection to the young women's murders by searching his home and finding his collection of their birthmarks. But photos in his files had also revealed tidbits about Ari himself—his method of sorting belongings displaying a need for control, a single family photo of his mother indicating a complicated past, an altar to mythological gods displaying a belief in, well, gods.

I should have taken that last one more seriously.

I took a deep breath. Now wasn't the time to think about Ari Fawkes and his Grand Plan. I needed to fill out the profile of Mara by seeing her home. And I'd take everything I found very seriously.

I pounded the horseshoe door knocker against the steel plate beneath, but no one answered. Focusing my magic, I zapped each of the door's four separate locks and pushed the heavy door open. I expected it to squeak like a bad horror movie, but it glided open and shut quietly behind me.

Flames flashed to life in torches that hung on either side. I listened carefully for any sounds of Mara. But the house was as quiet as an empty interrogation room.

Even so, I stepped as silently as possible across the room where a massive fireplace took up half the far wall. Kneeling, I looked into the ashes to see if Mara might have burned any evidence and left remnants as clues. But it all seemed to be wood and newspaper.

I toured the next room, and another, and another... The furniture was handmade for Mara's special build, but nothing else grabbed my attention.

My phone buzzed, and I pulled it out to see a message from Finn. "You ok?"

I started to tap back a text. The screen went black. I tried to turn the phone back on, but no luck. *A dead phone?* Rainey would be humming horror movie music in my ears right about now.

The past couple of days had pretty much been a horror movie, with the exception of one too-short romantic scene. I took out Finn's keys, ready to call this visit a bust, when a cool breeze whispered across my cheek. Scanning the room, a gap in the fireplace caught my eye. I held my hand in front of it, and the sliver of wind blew again, as if air was coming from the other side.

I dropped the keys back into my pocket, stepped up to the fireplace, and felt around at the gap, up and down, all around. Halfway down the space

between the mantle and the surrounding rock, I felt a small protrusion of some kind. But it was too dark to see.

I pulled a torch down from the wall and held it up to the gap. An iron bar and sliding latch became visible in the light. I unlocked the latch, and the fireplace groaned.

The stony front shifted to the side, revealing a secret room behind the wall. Swallowing hard, I entered the dark space, torch held high. The flame bloomed around me and illuminated a barn-like room with concrete floors, wood-beam ceiling, and wood posts. Between the two far posts ahead shone a sun-shaped web woven in tight, silk lines.

My breath knotted in my chest.

The web was a massive dreamcatcher.

Behind it was a small, hazy light, maybe the size of a fist. I scanned the room as I went, skirted around the edge of the web, and ducked between two threads holding it to one post. A single strand stretched from the web through the light.

Only it wasn't a light. It was a glimpse into another room—a camera showing the scene. I recognized the room.

The alps' suite.

The strand there was invisible, but this view showed the connection clearly. The massive web in Mara's secret space was linked to the web above the alps' bed.

Mara was controlling the alps.

Mara was behind the nightmares. Baku's murder. All of it.

My shoulders drooped, and I lowered the torch. Sure enough, Mara had walked right into my office, claimed *she* was the victim, and I'd believed her. I'd never once been so foolish with my clients at the state hospital.

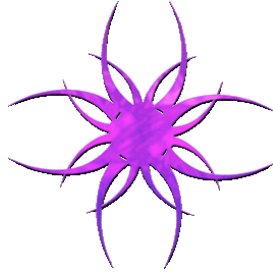
Had I lost my touch? Were mythicals just impossible for me to read? Had I simply seen what I wanted to see—someone I could help, not hurt, with my powers?

A door slammed in the main part of the house.

I set down the torch in the middle of the room, ran to the side, and crouched in the shadows. Holding my breath, I waited for Mara to enter.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

FINN



I peered into the dark window of Book Spirits. The bookstore was locked, the sign read Closed, and Seshat wasn't answering her phone. But then Seshat wasn't much for communication by phone, preferring ancient texts. If I knew any hieroglyphs, I could leave a note on the door telling her to call me and know she'd actually read it.

With the dawn had come both a quieting of the nightmares and a realization of the damage they'd caused. Akachi had reported how many bodies were at the morgue, and the number meant I was sure to know at least one person in the bunch. Probably several.

The catch in my throat felt like I'd swallowed a jellyfish. But I'd have to work through my emotions later. Right now, I needed to find Piper.

Why wasn't *she* answering her phone?

I sent another text: "Please check in. Are you ok?" I added a few more question marks before pressing Send.

My next phone call was to Bernard, who gave me a hasty report that no one had died at the resort—although five guests were in critical condition so even that wasn't certain. He passed the phone to Warner who praised Rainey's no-one-dies-on-my-watch management, then got interrupted and hung up before I could ask for details.

"Finn! Finn!"

I turned to see Narfi running toward me, eyes flared, chest heaving. "You okay, Narfi?"

He reached me, leaned over, and clutched his side. "Sorry. Out of shape."

I led him to a nearby bench. "What's up?"

He sat and let his breath settle. “I was at Baba Yaga’s Cafe when Seshat came through, looking for the alps. She said they’d attacked her and Akachi, but Piper ran them off.”

“You saw Piper?”

“Seshat said to tell you that Mara escaped and Piper went to her house.”

The heaviness in my chest eased. “How long ago? Is Piper still there?”

“Don’t know.”

I stood, ready to go after her. We had to stop the nightmares, and we’d do it together.

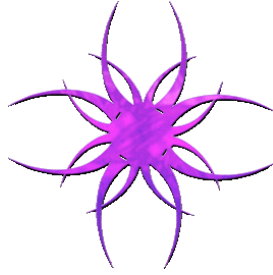
Narfi reached up and grabbed my shirt. “Please keep Piper safe. She’s one of the good ones.”

I smiled down at him. Such a frightened face for a man who’d once been a demigod. Yet he still held some wisdom. I nodded, released his hand, and whipped out my phone to call Phaethon.

If he was available, he’d know where Mara lived and get me there quicker than any other taxi on Muse Island.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

PIPER



Mara clip-clopped into the barn-like room, a torch raised in front of her and her tail swishing behind. “Finnian Kalani,” she called out. “I recognized your Jeep. Are you alone, or have you brought the troublemaker with you?”

I pressed my back against the wall and eased my breathing, trying to stay as quiet and still as possible. A nightmare creator thought *I* was a troublemaker?

Did she know about the prophecy too?

Mara shifted her head from side to side as she walked the length of the room. She reached the large web, paused with her back to me, and lifted her nose to the air. “Ah, I can smell your predatory scent, Piper Prince.”

I took a deep breath and stepped into the dim light. “You’re the predator, Mara.”

I expected her to turn and face me, but she lifted her hand and wiggled her fingers. Her long, white hair braided itself, wrapped around her head, and encircled her like a crown.

She can control her hair?

I’d have to watch out for that if this came to a fight.

“We know what you’ve done.” I pulled on my mark, brought forth my power, and focused its strength in my palms. “Turn yourself in. If you come peacefully, I can guarantee your safety.”

She snorted a laugh. “You guarantee my safety? I don’t need to be kept safe, and even if I did, I wouldn’t come to you.”

“You did when all this started.”

She brayed another laugh, loud and obnoxious, then quieted just as suddenly, her too-big eyes going wide. "By the way, Ari Fawkes says hello."

My breath stuttered, my magic flickered, my knees went wobbly.

"Ari suggested this plan?" My question came out as wobbly as my knees.

"No!" she screamed, her horse eyes rolling as she snuffed through her nose and pawed the floor. "It was my idea. All mine. He's not involved, simply enjoying the view."

"Here? Is Ari enjoying the view here?"

She snorted. "You humans think in such limited terms. Ari is finishing up his own business. But I plan to be here when he finally comes home."

Home? Muse Island was Ari Fawkes's home?

"You're Ari's pawn." I raised my power higher.

She turned and glared, seemingly unnerved by the power that had killed the Sons of Poseidon. And could have killed Tez, if I'd reached his rising ceremony earlier. "I do not serve Ari," she said. "I serve no one. No one but the night."

"The night?"

"The night is when both dreams and nightmares come to humans. But they do not come alone. They are *my* creations. You have no idea how wonderful it is to see your creations come to life." Her eyes widened, her cheeks colored, her chest heaved like she'd run a mile. "Finally, the beauty of my artistry is on full display."

Nausea swirled in my stomach. "You call the deaths of hundreds 'beauty'?"

"Don't you feel it, Piper?" Mara spread out her hands. "The rush of excitement that fills your veins when you use your power. It felt good to kill the Sons, didn't it?"

Her words struck me like a hard kick of her hoof. I hadn't wanted to feel that rush. But I *had* felt it.

She laughed. "I see it in your eyes. You know that feeling."

"I didn't kill innocents." At least there was that.

"Oh, you are as much to blame as I am. You removed the Sons' heavy hand on this island, and without them breathing down my neck, I could finally get rid of Baku."

“Another dream eater will come.” I studied her movements, the small ripples of muscle under her skin, and wished I knew more about horse behavior. She seemed skittish and aggressive all at once, which meant I was missing something. Something the old Piper might have picked up on.

“Perhaps. But you can’t imagine what it was like having my creations smashed night after night by that creature. Behaving like a bully toddler ripping apart the Mona Lisa.” Her volume rose with each word. “For once, I deserved to have the world see my art!”

“You deserve justice.”

But even though I said justice, my fingers, my power, itched for more.

“You think you’re able to deliver justice?” She laughed—a low, disbelieving horse-like whinny. “You, who slaughtered the Sons?”

Slaughtered. The word hit me with a sharpened point.

My power faltered. Mara’s smile spread.

I was letting her get to me. I pushed down the self-doubt she’d pulled out of me and refocused, my purple glow growing stronger. “Where are the alps?”

“Somewhere out there.” She shrugged. “Dancing like the puppets they are.”

“So you controlled them completely?”

She beamed a smile. “If by control, you mean amplified their efforts and brought out their best, then yes.”

“Is Tez involved?” If he played a role, I needed to know.

“Tezcatlipoca is an interesting development, but not one I am a part of. Though I suppose he appreciates the trouble we brought.”

“You and the alps?”

“No, dear. *We*, as in you and me.”

That sharpened point thrust deep into my chest, all the way to the hilt. “I tried to stop Tez.”

She stepped closer. “You’ve done nothing but bring trouble since you arrived.”

I took a step away from her.

“Had I been consulted, we might have discussed the possibilities your foolish removal of the Sons opened up for dark magickas.”

I flinched. Despite myself, despite my training, despite knowing exactly what she was doing, the need to defend my choices, who I was becoming,

rose in my throat like an unstoppable scream. I shook my head and opened my mouth—

Mara spun on her heel, galloped past the web, and lunged toward the portal. The scene of the alps' room slipped away, and a series of other images spun past like a flipbook.

No time to focus on my target, no chance to control my power. A stream of power shot out from my hands, hit the portal, and popped like a firecracker just as Mara dove through.

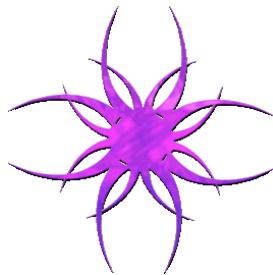
I turned away as a flash of light filled the room. A sizzle followed, and when I turned back, the portal had sealed itself shut, the end of the alps' thread singed and smoking, no longer tethered to Mara's web. Where Mara had gone in all those scenes, I couldn't even guess.

The bad guy had escaped, thanks, once again, to me.

Or maybe, the bad guy really was me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

PIPER



Mara's hidden room darkened as the last edges of the portal seared and burned away and my magic faded. My other senses heightened, and the scent of cedar and smoke surrounded me.

My chest clenched like a vise had cranked once, twice, three times.

Chaos and darkness and death. That's what the prophecy had said I would bring. Here I was with chaos and darkness, and the urge to add one more death had my fingers curled and cramped.

I took a deep breath and pushed against the desire, the *need*, I felt for the full, killing strength of my power.

A crash came from the front room. "Piper! Piper!"

Finn. Relief flooded my veins.

"I'm in here." My voice was low, but I knew he'd hear me.

Footsteps pounded into the room then slowed. "Whoa. What happened here?"

"Mara escaped. I messed up, closed her escape route so we can't even follow. She could be anywhere by now."

And I may be a killer at heart. But I couldn't say that aloud.

"And that thing?" He pointed at the massive web, no longer connected to the alps' room but still much too large and sturdy to be made by spiders.

I shrugged. "She weaved an exit."

"Huh." He scanned the room. "Well, Nancy Drew, what should we call this case? The Secret of the Barn Behind the Fireplace?"

My muscles relaxed, a welcome relief. No wonder I was so attracted to this man. He somehow made me smile.

Finn reached me and slid one arm around my waist. "We'll get her."

“By tonight? Because I don’t think the island can survive another night like last night.”

A heavy sigh was his only response, and it echoed around my heart, soured my stomach. Any deaths that happened tonight...they’d be on me.

I swallowed back my sudden nausea. “How did you know I was here?”

Finn’s hand on my back was steady and warm as he guided me out of the room. “Narfi ran into Seshat and Akachi. He passed along the message.”

Outside, I was shocked to see a Muse Island taxi and the bronze demigod I’d encountered soon after arriving on the island. He flexed his biceps and grinned at me. “Wanna touch the guns? Better the second time, I guarantee.”

Finn darted a disapproving glance at him. “Stop flirting with my girl, Phaethon.”

His girl? My stomach butterflies swirled into a tornado. I didn’t hate it.

Phaethon laughed. “Like you could compete with a bronze babe magnet.”

“Keep dreamin’, demigod. Piper has good taste.” Finn swept up to me, encircled my waist with his arm, and beamed that gorgeous smile at me. “She likes *my* guns.”

“Now is not the time for a gun show.” And if anyone was a weapon here, it was me. I shook that thought away. “We have a culprit to catch, and we’re wasting daylight.”

Phaethon and Finn snickered. Finn gave the bronze demigod a high-five-slash-handshake. “Thanks for the ride. Stay safe out there, bud.”

Phaethon’s face tightened, more serious than I thought possible. “You too.” He hopped in his car and drove off, lifting his hand in a sun-catching wave.

We walked to Finn’s Jeep, and I slid into the driver’s seat. Finn stood outside the door with one eyebrow raised.

I pressed my lips together. “Sorry. Guess I’ve gotten used to your Jeep.”

His mouth spread into a sultry smile. “I like you being in the driver’s seat. It’s hot.” He leaned in, lifted my chin with his fingers, and pressed his lips to mine.

My stomach butterflies went feral.

I brushed his prickly cheek with my hand, and he deepened the kiss. Something inside me clicked. Like a key in a lock.

This surfer-slash-resort-owner-slash-Protector had unlocked my heart. I'd lowered my barriers, let him in, trusted him, even with my most vulnerable parts. Others had gotten pieces of my trust—Philippe, my boss, Livvie and Seshat—but only Rainey had fully been in my circle. Now I was opening myself to Finn, giving him membership privileges to the sacred club of my heart.

I pulled away. I couldn't do this to him. Not when the prophecy screamed I'd hurt him.

And when using my power, even to kill, felt a little like a key clicking open a lock, sacred too.

Something low and dark twisted in my stomach. What did that say about me?

Finn groaned and rested his forehead against mine. "Right. We have work to do."

I *mmhmed* and let him think that was the reason.

He took the passenger's seat, and I pulled out of the driveway. "Even if we contain Mara," he said, "the nightmares will continue. The effect is stronger when she's near—or when combined with a couple of alps—but a dream bringer's power permeates walls, even magical ones."

"Why hasn't the Council sent another dream eater? Can't we borrow someone else's and get a break tonight?"

"Nearest dream eater is in Florida, and he's needed there. High concentration of mythicals. Some of the 'Florida Man' stories you hear? Strung-out magickas."

Rainey would have lots of questions about that.

I tightened my grip on the steering wheel. "There has to be another solution. Text the team. Have everyone available meet us at the house. We need a plan to find Mara, stop her and the alps, and control these nightmares within the next"—I checked the clock—"twelve hours."

Finn pushed his hand through his hair. "One of these days, Piper Prince, we'll have twelve hours ahead of us where the world isn't falling apart. When that day comes, I've got plenty of ideas about what we can do with that time."

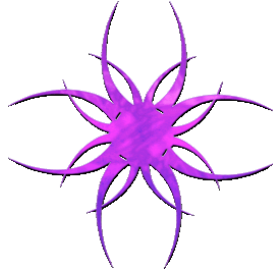
A flush ran up my neck and burned my cheeks. "I'm sure you do."

I also wanted twelve long hours with Finn, enjoying him and all the good feelings he brought me. Could I in good conscience indulge? Like one final hoorah?

I'd cross that bridge when I came to it. "First things first. Let's halt this Dreamocalypse."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

PIPER



Back at Bernard's house, Namika sat across from me, pert chin resting in her petite hands, her vision restored after a restless night at the sleep spa. Livvie perched on a tall stool, weary-eyed but bright-lipsticked. Rainey nestled close to Bernard on the far end of the couch, while Narfi perched between them and me. Finn had taken the chair nearby to where I sat on a worn and comfortable couch and stared at his wooden watch. As if counting down our remaining seven hundred minutes one by one.

"Any news from Akachi or Seshat?" I asked.

Namika shrugged. "Akachi's dealing with the overfilled morgue. Seshat's hunting the alps."

Rainey leaned forward and turned to me. "You said Mara controlled the alps, so if we find and contain them, this is over?"

Finn looked up and shook his head. "She's amping up the damage by using the alps, but even one nightmare bringer can do a lot of destruction on her own. Especially one as powerful as Mara."

"Then how are we supposed to stop her?" Rainey's voice cracked, overtired, overworked. Pulling all-nighters and stressing about villains was the last thing she needed in order to heal.

Bernard reached over and wrapped his pinkie around hers, subtle but reassuring. His gesture made me grateful but a little sad too—I'd always been the one to reassure Rainey.

Focus, Piper. Nightmares.

If I'd stayed focused before—not given in to the guilt and self-doubt Mara had distracted me with—we wouldn't be facing another night of violence. And Rainey could get some sleep.

“We can’t do anything until we find Mara.”

Livvie sighed. “Go easy on yourself, love. None of us knew that Mara was as mad as a bag of ferrets.”

Rainey blew out a gust of breath. “I know I’m still learning the ropes here, but how can an island of magical creatures be destroyed by one nightmare bringer? Isn’t Seshat a goddess? Can’t she just zap Mara or something? Like Zeus’s thunderbolt or Thor’s hammer?”

Finn pointed at Rainey and smiled at me. “Now that woman has read mythology.”

“Try comic books,” I said with a smirk. “She used to hide them in the textbooks she was supposed to be reading.”

Bernard moved his hand to Rainey’s back. “To answer your question, no. Mythical beings have powers, but they are specific in purpose. Seshat’s powers involve dimensions, the dead, and books, not zapping people.”

Finn sighed. “And the idea that gods are better than everyone else often isn’t about power as much as social class. The mythology world has a long history of hierarchy.”

Namika nodded. “Which is why Mara didn’t do anything with the Sons around. They were top of the food chain.”

Narfi bobbed his head in agreement. “The Sons were strong enough to keep her in place. But I’m still glad they’re gone.” His shoulders trembled, as if a shudder had overtaken his body at the mention of the Sons of Poseidon. Or with a stray memory of being frozen, like his nightmare.

Wait. The Sons.

I jerked forward and slapped my hands on my thighs. “The Sons were able to locate me using my magical signature. Why can’t we do that with Mara?”

“Niche power,” Finn muttered.

“So Aphrodisios has it?” I could probably get him to use it for us, if I promised protection in return.

Bernard, Finn, Livvie, and Namika all exchanged glances, as if checking in with each other about this idea.

Livvie spoke first. “The way I heard it, the Sons tracking a magical signature was as strong and precise as it was ’cause there were six of them. Doubt a single Son could do much.”

Narfi was now looking down and rocking, as if soothing himself. I ached for him and what he’d gone through with the Sons—hated to even

bring up Aphrodisios—but another night of chaos could prove devastating. Not only for the island, but for us. Would everyone in this circle make it through another round of nightmares?

“If he could narrow the search area,” I said, “that would help.”

“Hold on.” Rainey crinkled up her cute nose. “Are these the real Sons of Poseidon? Like the originals from the myth? If so, how old are they?”

Bernard leaned in, like her personal tutor. “It is more like gods get reincarnated, with the myths repeating over and over. But yes, they are the real sons of Poseidon.”

Her eyes flew wide. “Really?”

“Really,” Livvie repeated.

“Interesting as that is”—I smirked at my younger sister—“could the mythology lesson wait until after we save the island?”

Though I’d be investigating more about that later myself. The books I’d read hadn’t been entirely clear about how it all worked. And if Bett and I had been kids together...

Namika interrupted my thoughts. “I say we talk to Aphro-what’s-his-name. I hate those exiled bastards, but we have no chance of stopping anything if we don’t find Mara.”

“Even if we contain her,” Finn said, “Mara can bring nightmares. How do we contain those?”

I stood, drawing everyone’s attention to me. “We talk her into stopping.”

“What?” Finn flinched, and the whole group stared up at me like I was three steps past crazy.

“Maybe we’re relying on mythical power too much.” And our ability to control it. “I have skills working with killers, you know. I once got an unhinged killer to let go of the glass shard he was holding against a staff member’s neck.”

Rainey straightened. “And she talked another guy into revealing where he’d buried two bodies in the woods.”

My heart lifted. My baby sister was proud of me. And saw me for who I could be.

If I could squelch this new killer instinct. A big, big *if*.

I cleared the lump in my throat. “I’ve also convinced other criminals to confess or cooperate in their cases. Since Mara told me why she’s doing all

this, I'll speak to her underlying fears and desires." *And when that doesn't work, I'll be the one to zap her.*

My muscles braced. This instinct would be hard to resist.

Livvie gave me a chin-up smile. "You sure know your onions."

Finn stood beside me. "You're not seeing Aphrodisios without me there. Believe me, the Sons try to cheat any deal they make."

"Fine." I'd argue with him not trusting my ability to deal with the Sons on my own, except that I wanted him to come. With Finn there, I'd be less likely to scratch this itch with Aphrodisios's untimely death. "In the meantime, Rainey, can you expand the emergency plans you used with the resort to come up with something to share with all the businesses and organizations on the island?"

She nodded. "But it would help to have someone who knows the island better than I do."

Livvie stood, making her ear bobbles swing like pendulums. "I can do that."

Namika waved her hand. "I want to track that faux-moon. It's been growing and making Urania nervous. I feel her tension."

Bernard squeezed Rainey's shoulder before standing. "Narfi and I will coordinate with Akachi and Seshat."

Narfi started from his trance and stared up at Bernard.

"For once, we can do the research," Bernard continued. "Perhaps discover some way to stop a nightmare bringer."

With assignments made, we left to pursue our tasks. But we'd barely stepped outside the house when darkness fell over us. I looked up to see Tez's moon, now nearly twice the size it had been when it started, blocking almost a third of the sky.

"Holy Moly," Namika muttered behind me. "That's not right."

I swallowed a new lump of stress. How many enemies did we have to deal with at once? Why couldn't Tez take a holiday?

A rumble rose up from the ground, pulsing through my feet, trembling up my legs. I looked around to see everyone else reacting with as much shock as I felt.

"What's happening?" Rainey asked.

I expected her to move close and grab my hand, like when we were little and Big Sister promised to banish the monsters under the bed.

But she moved closer to Bernard, and he wrapped an arm around her. I couldn't blame her. Maybe her nightmare had told her what I'd only recently considered—that Rainey needed someone besides me to be there for her. Someone safer.

Finn grabbed my arm, as if to steel me, but he and I were both shaking with the ground underneath. "Earthquake?" I mumbled at him.

"Never happened before."

The island stilled, and light shot out from some unknown location, right to the dark moon above. I gazed upward and realized it wasn't a light, but a hologram.

A hologram of Tezcatlipoca.

Instead of his ghoulish green mask, he wore the smile of a politician. Now that I could study his face, I could see he was handsome—firm jaw, pointed nose, dark and mysterious eyes. He wore no robe this time but displayed a full spread of tribal tattoos across his bare chest and shoulders. And there was something commanding about his stance, his appearance, his steady stare.

"Bloody hell," Livvie murmured.

"*Cualli tonalli*," Tez announced. "Good morning to Muse Island and its residents."

"Isn't this against your mythical rules or something?" Rainey asked.

Not everyone could see mythicals like I could, and they mostly hid from humans.

Finn shrugged. "He's not showing any actual power. For all humans know, he's a magician or a special effects guy."

"I am Tezcatlipoca, Aztec god of the nocturnal sky, giver of life, the embodiment of change."

Finn's eyes widened.

"Or a kook," Rainey muttered. "Claiming to be a god ain't normal where we come from."

Nothing was normal anymore. Not for us.

"Like you"—Tez spread out his arms in a welcome and turned in a circle as he spoke—"my heart is heavy from the losses sustained last night. We cannot and will not let this devastation continue. But how can we fight it? How?" He paused, a dramatic pause, as if letting the rhetorical question sink in.

My spine straightened. Everything I knew about Tez told me he wasn't just itchy with killer instinct, but infected. He saw nothing wrong with destroying everything in his wake to reach whatever goal he desired. Even if that goal was worthwhile—as long-gone Bett believed—he'd bring more devastation, not less.

I wanted to stop my chaos, he wanted to spread his.

Tez lowered his arms, bowed his head, took a deep breath. "I will fight for you."

"No, thanks," Namika muttered.

He raised his head and lifted his chin, as if bravely embracing his destiny. "To win against those who would sully the night requires someone who understands the night. As god of the night sky, I will bring an end to the living nightmares. Trust me, and I will return your island to you."

Rainey tapped my shoulder. "Honestly, I'm torn between voting for him and running for the hills."

Narfi tugged at my arm. "Can he do it? Can he stop the nightmares?"

I shook my head. "I've been studying everything I can find on Tez, and I haven't seen anything that gives him an edge on us for stopping Mara."

"Maybe he got to the alps," Finn said.

"Bloody hell," Livvie said again.

Tez lifted his hands to the sky, a take-charge gesture. "Put your faith in me, fellow islanders, and together we will prevail."

The hologram rippled then disappeared.

Silence fell over our small band of heroes. We'd been dwarfed by Big Bad Tez in the sky, standing in front of his dark moon like a werewolf ready to devour. A politically savvy werewolf whose charisma might convince a lamb to trust him.

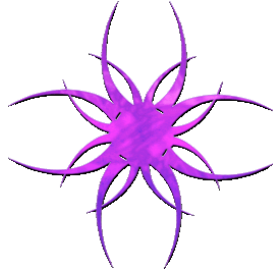
I shook myself out of my reverie. "Nothing changes. We can't distract ourselves. We'll deal with him later. We stop Mara now."

Without question or comment, everyone nodded and scattered, prepared to stick with our plan. Yet again, I was putting Tez on the back burner, choosing to confront a different crisis first.

I hoped their faith in me wasn't displaced.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

FINN



I glanced at Piper as she pulled my Jeep into Poseidon Point. Tension pulsed from her. Understandable, but I wished I could smooth it away—take her surfing at sunset, kiss away the wrinkles on her forehead as the waves rocked us, show her the stars at night from the water.

Until Tez and her prophecy were stopped, the best date ever would have to wait.

The parking lot at Poseidon Point was all but empty. It was starting to resemble a ghost town, except instead of an Old West vibe, it had a week-after-spring-break aura. Word was, Aphrodisios was shutting the place down, planning to renovate the hotel into beachfront condos.

If it wasn't a Son of Poseidon running the place, I would've applauded. The island needed more long-term vacation residences.

We parked in a front row spot, hopped out, and hesitated at the sidewalk.

A stooped-over genie waited at the entrance.

"Is he expecting us?" I asked Piper.

She'd kept previous meetings with Aphrodisios from me. No reason to believe she hadn't been in contact with him today.

But she looked as confused as I felt. "I'm not sure how, but it appears so." She straightened her shoulders and took a confident step forward.

I followed, surprising myself once again with how much I liked her take-command attitude. I'd always liked strong women, but Piper had the ability to be strong while still being vulnerable, and it made me see how I could fit into her life.

The motion-sensor doors of Poseidon Point yawned open, breathing out a blast of cool air, and we walked into the all-but-abandoned resort.

“He is waiting for you.” The enslaved genie held out her hand, guiding us down a side hall we’d avoided earlier, and it made my bones itch. She should be at home, playing with grandkids and watching the tide roll in, not playing Walmart-greeter for Poseidon’s son.

This was why Tez was appealing, his claim that he could free enslaved magical creatures. Bett wasn’t the only one who had a thing for underdogs. I could understand why she’d chosen Tez.

Still, I wished she could see Tezcatlipoca for what he really is. A tyrant. Any freedom he granted came at the cost of people’s lives and loyalty to his power.

Piper hesitated at my side, drawing me back to the here-and-now. She glanced at the door to her right, tightly sealed with burn marks around the edges. The room where she’d stopped the Sons, once and for all. We hadn’t come down this hallway on our earlier visit, but we couldn’t avoid the room now. Her delicate fingers turned into a fist, and she lifted her chin in the air, as if defying her own doubt.

I didn’t take her hand. She needed to know she could handle the aftermath on her own.

But I did edge closer, letting her know I was here.

The genie led us down the corridor, passing no-longer-working fountains and empty offices. Our footsteps clicked and echoed on the marble floors, until we stopped in front of a clear sliding door. A door that looked onto the pool and cabana.

Where the Sons had murdered my father.

I froze.

I didn’t trust this place. I didn’t trust this Son.

Piper took my hand. She didn’t know what had happened here. But she’d noticed my reaction all the same.

Her soft thumb caressed the back of my hand, and she interlaced her fingers with mine, giving my hand a tight squeeze, lending me her strength. Her courage.

Then she let me go.

I’d have to deal with this aftermath as well, but not alone.

The sliding doors opened, and we walked through together.

Aphrodisios waited at a table set for three, with a full lunch buffet behind him. Away from the cabana, but still within sight. As if he wanted to be courteous while acting from a place of power. I met his eyes, and he gave me a slight nod, as if to confirm the message delivered.

My jaw tightened.

“Welcome, Piper Prince and Finnian Kalani. I see you made it through the night of dreams unharmed.” He spread his arms open, fully corporeal.

I scanned the empty area. “Looks like you didn’t so well.”

“To the contrary,” he said. “I am alive.” As if that was all that mattered.

Piper crossed her arms. “How did you know we were coming?”

He smirked. “Your magical signature is hard to ignore. Please sit. Eat. I’m sure you two heroes have worked up quite the appetite.”

I couldn’t remember when we’d last had a full meal. Lunch from Baba’s the day before? Had it been that long?

Piper glanced my way, as if to confirm the food was safe. I nodded and led the way, handing her a plate. The Sons also had a fabulous chef. But I still cast my Protector’s power over the buffet in a quick flash. No threats detected.

We loaded our plates with gourmet salmon burgers and sweet potato fries, fresh fruit and salad and sat down. While we ate, Aphrodisios walked around the pool. The day had turned warm, but a steady breeze kept it from becoming uncomfortable.

It was the perfect nap day. I checked Tez’s moon hanging out in the sky. Except for that guy.

“Aphrodisios,” Piper said as he made another lap around the pool. “We need to talk to you about Mara.”

And except for Mara’s obsession with killer nightmares.

I groaned, pushed my plate away, and grabbed a cup of coffee.

Aphrodisios joined us at the table. “Mara, the creator of nightmares.”

Piper took a sip of her tea. “You have a gift for locating magical signatures. We’re hoping you can use that gift and tell us where she is.”

Aphrodisios nodded, a slow, contemplating nod. “With the death of my brothers, I’ve lost some accuracy.”

Piper’s shoulders raised, just a tiny flinch, but enough for Aphrodisios to see his dart hit true. She kept her cool long enough to answer, “We understand. Even a general location would help.”

“Fine.” He toyed with a smile, but the curve of his mouth fell before it materialized. “But in turn, you must grant me a favor.”

Piper’s eyes narrowed, and a purple glow blazed under the table.

I put my foot on hers, distracting her. “What favor, Aphrodisios?”

He turned to me and smiled. “I do not know yet, but what kind of businessman would I be if I didn’t take advantage of supply and demand? You need my power to find Mara and stop her before night falls again, yes?”

Piper jerked her head. “Yes.” Even the word sounded clenched. But her purple glow had dimmed. Not disappeared, but dimmed.

“You see, I own the entire supply, and the demand is great. Therefore, I may set my price. And my price is this—a favor, to be granted at the moment I call on it.”

This had all the workings of a bad idea.

Given my experience with the Sons, I had every right and reason to answer *hell no* and storm out. But Akachi had texted casualty estimates from the night before, and the thought of losing any more islanders tonight was too much to contemplate, much less experience.

Didn’t mean I couldn’t negotiate. “You say your power is diminished. To use your words, the *supply* is damaged.”

He nodded.

“Then we’re setting a few terms. This favor may not cause harm to anyone, anywhere, at any time.”

Piper looked at me, her eyes brightening, her magic fading away.

Aphrodisios shrugged. “If a butterfly flapping its wings can cause a typhoon on the other side of the world, who am I to say this favor may not eventually cause harm. But for any consequences I can foresee, I agree.”

Piper leaned forward. “And this favor must be granted within a year’s time. I won’t be beholden to you for the rest of my life.”

A slow smile curved around the Son’s lips. “That will be fine, Piper Prince. A favor then, granted within a year, with no foreseeable consequences that cause harm. Your mark, please.”

Piper startled.

“We’ll use mine.” I rolled up my sleeve, exposing my Protector’s mark. “The favor will be granted by me.”

“No.” Aphrodisios did not break eye contact with Piper, and his expression turned greedy with an edge of cruel. “This must be granted only

by Miss Piper Prince. Your mark.”

“Fine.” She kicked up her leg, crossed it over her knee, and lifted the loose leg of her pants, showing her own, slightly raised mark on her calf, identical to mine.

Aphrodisios’s hand shot to her mark before I could think of another way, and he repeated the terms.

“I agree,” Piper answered, her words quiet.

Their magic combined, a flash of brownish-green, the transaction complete.

Aphrodisios smiled. “Mara has descended to a place of eternal darkness, deep within our island.”

“No riddles, Son,” I growled.

“No appreciation for theater.” He chuckled. He might be an improvement on the firstborn Son of Poseidon, but that wasn’t saying much. “She is somewhere in the caves.”

I groaned and stood.

“The caves? What caves?” Piper stood after me, looking between the two of us. “Roc Bottom?”

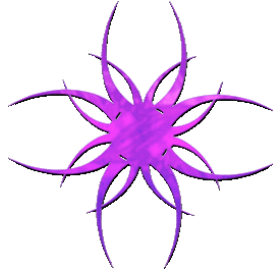
“No, not Roc Bottom. The golem caves. If Mara’s down there, she’s probably making an entire army of clay golems to protect her.” I led the way out of Poseidon Point without a see-you-later to my father’s murderer.

“An army of clay golems? What beats a clay golem?”

“We’re gonna need firepower. A lot of firepower.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

PIPER



Although we could hear Seshat murmuring the moment Finn and I walked into Book Spirits, it took a while to find her, as buried as she was behind stacks of books. The telltale murmurs of her guardians trickled through the musty air as she flipped the pages of a thick, ancient book.

“Any luck with the alps?” I asked.

She started and gazed up at us from the corner where she perched on a low, zebra-skinned ottoman. “Slippery little imps. They dodged my clutches by mere seconds. But I am determined to find them.”

“In those books?” Finn wrinkled his brow.

“Books are the doorways to much knowledge, if one knows how to use them.”

If I’d had time, I would have found paper and pen, jotted that down, and pinned it somewhere for inspiration. Or confirmation of what I already believed.

But time was something we never seemed to have.

Seshat stood and stretched, and the whispers of her guardians dissipated. With a wave of her hand, the books shut themselves, dispersed, and found their rightful places on the shelves. “By the looks of it, I’d say you did not recover Mara.”

“She’s in the caves,” Finn muttered.

Bernard strode in from the next room, and Narfi shuffled in behind him.

“The clay golem caves?” Bernard asked. “Only a fool goes there.”

“Then I guess we’re fools,” I answered.

He lowered his head. “I am sorry. I did not mean you, Piper. I was indicating that Mara’s decision to take refuge in the caves was a foolish—”

I halted him with a stop-in-the-name-of-love gesture. “It’s fine. It’s just been a long day.” Or night. Or weeks.

My bones felt as if they were filled with lead, exhaustion creeping through every inch.

Narfi jumped forward and held up a candy box. “Want a raisinet? They always make me feel better.”

I smiled and patted his shoulder. “No, but thank you. You’re very sweet.”

He beamed back at me.

Finn scanned the group. “If we’re going to confront Mara in those caves, we need as much firepower as we can muster.”

The door’s bell dinged as Finn spoke, and three more Protectors entered.

“Firepower has arrived.” Akachi gave a stoic bow of his head.

Livvie winked. “We’ve got your back, love.”

Namika grinned. “Let’s kick some horsebutt.”

“Any news about Tez’s moon?” I asked her.

“Nothing that helps us fight it.” Namika sighed. “It’s sitting low in our atmosphere, but there’s no scientific explanation of how it’s floating in our sky. Up close, it looks smooth, but I can’t identify its composition. Short story? I can’t tell you what it’s made of or why the big ball’s growing.”

I nodded and stepped into the center of the circle, taking the role of leader I’d grabbed several times over now. My lungs hitched. *Follow the leader*. That was the message Ari Fawkes had sent me when I’d first arrived on Muse Island, and here I was, with a crew of magical people following me. Was I fulfilling some destiny he’d seen in my future?

I shook away the worry. Rainey would probably say I was just being my usual bossy self.

“While we need firepower,” I started, “we need to be practical. Some of us have to stay behind, in case we don’t shut this down in time.”

Narfi popped a handful of raisinets, looking unconcerned that he’d be asked to go. Because of course, we wouldn’t ask him to go. He was a strange mix of magically advanced and mentally delayed, and as much as I liked him, he wouldn’t be reliable in a fight.

“We need the Protectors’ power, so Finn, Namika, Livvie, Akachi, you’re with me.” I nodded at each of them in turn. “Seshat, stay on the alps’ trail. They amplify Mara’s effect, so if we can capture them, that will help.”

She gave a regal nod.

“Narfi, you stay behind and help Seshat.” He nodded like a bobblehead and dropped another handful of raisinets into his mouth.

“Bernard...”

He stepped forward and flexed his muscles. “I offer all the ‘firepower’ in a genie’s arsenal. It is not that of a Protector, but it has its uses and all of them are at your disposal.”

I chewed on my lip. “I need you to stay with Rainey.”

His shoulders lifted and fell, and he shot a check-in glance at Finn. “You are an admirable sister to have such concern for Rainey, but night is several hours away and she is more than capable of managing emergency services during the day.” He met my gaze with a steady one of his own. “I shall come and help you capture the nightmare bringer.”

I glared back, feeling the challenge of his words. He was nothing like the genie back at Poseidon Point. He was free to make his own choices. And yet, I needed him to stay with Rainey, needed to know she would be safe, needed him to play that role I had filled for so long. “No. You won’t.”

A flash of *something* rippled through me. Bernard bent over and moaned as if in pain. Finn surged forward, took Bernard’s arm, and led him to a nearby chair. Bernard settled and exhaled, color slowly returning to his face.

The *something* in me had come and gone, leaving behind a shock to my system. A full-body, organ-deep shock. Had I somehow hurt Bernard?

He slowly lifted his head, looked at me, and nodded. “Your wish is my command. I will stay with Rainey.”

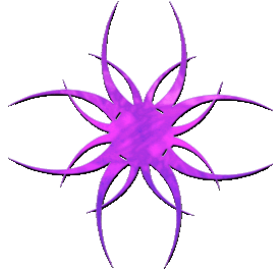
Finn darted his eyes between Bernard and me, as if trying to figure out what had happened. But I didn’t know any more than he did.

“Thank you.” If anyone else was staring at me, I was doing a great job of ignoring them. “Then let’s get this show on the road.”

Without looking back, I marched toward the front door of the bookshop, hearing the footsteps of my followers behind me, and hoping we had enough firepower to take Mara into custody once and for all.

CHAPTER THIRTY

PIPER



I let Finn drive.

My hands were trembling, and I didn't trust myself. What had I done to Bernard?

Akachi, Livvie, and Namika squeezed into the backseat.

No one spoke.

Finn turned off the road, switched the Jeep into four-wheel drive, and bounced us down a rocky, unpaved trail until we burst out of the trees and onto an empty stretch of beach.

Pink sand kicked up around our tires, and a few feet away, the turquoise water lapped at the beach. Tez's moon hung over the center of the island, like a regret tattoo.

Ahead, the ground rose and the terrain changed from beach to cliffs. Large rocks made driving difficult, and towers of boulders stood in the water, as if Muse Island had lost ground centuries ago.

Finn stopped the Jeep and broke the silence. "This is as far as we can drive. We're on foot from here."

Everyone piled out. The sand was soft around my tennis shoes, clung to them in clumps. Finn opened the back door, pulled out four wetsuits, and tossed one to each of us, with the exception of Livvie.

Namika and Akachi began to strip, taking off their shirts and revealing toned bodies, followed by their pants. Akachi's Protector's mark was on his left breast, right above his heart. Without a word, they pulled on their suits. Livvie stood off to the side.

I darted a panicked look at Finn. "We're swimming?"

He pulled off his shirt, and my mouth went dry. His skin glistened in the sun, and I resisted the urge to fan myself.

“The entrance to the caves is partly submerged. We’ve got to swim to get in.” Finn’s voice was a little gruff, and I wasn’t sure if it was from the effort of pulling on his wetsuit or the leftover effects of what I’d done to Bernard. “Are you a good swimmer, Piper?”

I thought back to all my summers spent in the shallow end of the pool. “Um, I can stay afloat.”

The four Protectors darted glances at each other.

“You’ve got to do more than stay afloat in this current.” Finn jerked his head toward the cliffs, where white water beat against the island, and I could just see an opening in the rocks.

I wanted to whine about my foster families and how it wasn’t like any of them were all that worried about my swimming skills. But then, I’d rarely needed swimming skills. Until now.

“I’ve got her.” Namika stepped forward. “I’m the strongest swimmer, and I can ask Urania to lessen the pull of the moon. It should make it a little easier.”

Finn nodded and turned to Livvie. “You’ve got the entrance?”

Livvie nodded. “Anything tries to get past me, it’ll get shot right in the cherry tart.”

I translated her rhyming Cockney rhyming slang to Livvie shooting right at the heart and hoped that wouldn’t be necessary.

As I started to undress, Finn and Akachi turned their backs. Sweet, but they hadn’t turned for Namika.

Once I was in nothing but my skivvies, Namika helped me into my suit. Finn handed out flippers, and we trudged toward the water nearest the opening to the caves.

At the water’s edge, Finn wrapped an arm around me and kissed my temple. “Listen to Namika and stay safe. I’ll see you inside.”

He and Akachi shoved their feet into their flippers, waded into the water, and disappeared.

Namika walked to the water’s edge and rested her hands on the surface, so that they bounced and pulled with the waves. She muttered something, and her light blue power glowed in the water like bioluminescent jellyfish.

The waves seemed to settle.

“We only have a few minutes. Any longer could be a disaster for the oceans. You float on your back while I swim us in. Just kick your feet, and please please please, no matter what happens, don’t struggle.”

I nodded, my pulse beating against my throat. “I can do that.”

I wasn’t scared of water, but I’d be insane not to fear this water. It seemed to have a mind of its own, intent on battering giant boulders into pebbles.

Namika waded in ahead of me and held out her hand. “I got you, Piper. Let’s go fight a nightmare.”

I glanced back at Livvie, and she gave a you’ve-got-this-love wave.

I pushed my feet into the oversized flippers, took Namika’s hand, and let her lead me into waist-deep water. The current pulled at my calves, stronger than I’d expected. Namika pressed her body against mine and pulled us into deeper water, her arms crooked under each of mine, my head resting against her collarbone.

My legs swished out from under me, Namika’s against mine.

“Now kick with me. One-two-three.” We kicked together, as the current swelled around us, and the waves sucked and pulled.

Saltwater splashed into my mouth, up my nose. We went under then popped back up. I fought the urge to use my magic to blast me out of here.

I forced my body to relax, focused on kicking, fought down the panic when I couldn’t breathe, and trusted my life to a woman I’d just met.

Namika’s strong calves pushed us into the current and directed us toward the cliffs.

“C’mon, Urania.” She groaned as we dipped under another wave.

The current lessened. Namika gave one more strong kick, and we slid through the shallow opening into darkness.

The drop in temperature was immediate. Stalactites dripped from the cave, glistening from some unseen light source. The water turned a glowing shade of blue-green, and the current pushed us further inside before the water calmed and Namika let me go.

I turned over and doggie paddled after her. Each splash of water echoed through the cave, making us sound bigger than we were. Soon, my flippers grazed the bottom of the lagoon, and Namika and I dragged ourselves out of the water.

Finn and Akachi were nowhere in sight.

We tugged off our flippers, and Namika pulled my dry shoes from the plastic bag tied to her waist and tossed them to me. We'd fight in our wetsuits if we had to, but our hope was to sneak in, grab Mara, and get out before any of her golems attacked.

If she'd made golem bodyguards, that is.

First, we had to find Finn and Akachi.

We crept forward, following an unmarked path through stalagmites reaching toward the roof of the cave.

Something grabbed my leg, but before I could scream, a hand covered my mouth and yanked me behind a column of rock.

"Shhh," Finn whispered in my ear and held me close to his body.

Akachi had done the same thing with Namika, but she'd stomped on his instep and was in the process of flipping him over her shoulder.

Akachi "oofed," and Namika clapped her hand to her mouth. We all froze.

Finn cocked his head, listening.

Silence.

We waited a few breaths more, but nothing came for us. Namika helped Akachi up, mouthing an apology, and Finn pointed ahead then crept forward. We followed.

He led us to a boulder we could just see over if we were standing. We slowly popped up, and Namika and I got our first look at what we were up against.

Big, hulk-like creatures thrust themselves out of the cave floor, first their hands, then their heads, then their too-thick necks and big-as-a-rhino bodies. As soon as they were free of the dirt, they stood at attention and opened their mouths.

Mara clip-clopped forward, pacing up and down the row of golems, and placed rolled pieces of paper in their mouths. Her control spell.

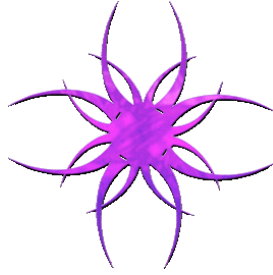
Each golem would be unstoppable until we could remove the paper from their mouth.

My throat thickened, and my bones ached.

Beyond this row were several more—over a hundred golems between us and Mara. Between us and stopping the nightmares from ravaging the island once again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

PIPER



As we squatted back down behind the rock, Namika uttered a curse word. Akachi sported his usual solemn gaze, while Finn rubbed his hand through his hair with the force of rake gathering dead leaves.

I yanked on his wetsuit, pulled him to me, and whispered in his ear, “Who leaves a mob of clay men in a cave to be activated by the nearest lunatic?”

He whispered back, “They didn’t. Mara birthed them with a spell. Few know how, but the Sons kept a magical barrier over the caves, just in case. Guess it’s gone now.”

I slumped against the rock. I’d killed those Sons of Poseidon, thus bringing even more chaos than when they’d been in charge of this island.

“What do you want to do?” The hiss of Finn’s whisper now carried to Akachi and Namika, but his question was directed at me.

What I wanted was a whole afternoon to study up on clay golems back in my office at Seshat’s bookshop. I didn’t like going into a patient interview unprepared, much less a fight against the crazy nightmare lady with a clay army. “There’s no way we can get the spells out of all of their mouths.”

“We can try,” Namika said. “With four of us, we could do a lot.”

Akachi dipped his chin. “Or add ourselves to the morgue’s list.”

I straightened, gave Finn a check-in glance, and nodded at his reassuring smile. He trusted me, or at least knew I had more power than the three of them combined.

I leaned into the circle. “We can’t stop the golems, but we can slow them down. Go after the clay men, take out as many as you can, keep them

busy while I head for Mara. If I can take out the spell-giver, that should confuse the golems long enough to get things under control.”

I hope.

“And if any escape the cave,” I said, “Livvie will shoot their cherry tart.” Not that golems had a heart, but Livvie would aim true and do what she could. For as long as she could.

The three Protectors nodded at my instructions, steeled their expressions. I rose to a crouch, lifted one finger, and waited.

Mara slid one more spell into a golem’s mouth, and her tail seemed to swish with delight.

My stomach tightened. All along, I’d been playing catch-up, reacting to her moves, following her plans. I was more than ready to tilt the scales back to our side.

My side.

The right side.

How long my side would be the right one, I wasn’t sure. But that was a question for later.

I felt Finn’s hand on my back, and his chin nuzzled up against my neck. “If I don’t make it, I just want you to know...”

I held my breath, wondering what he’d say next. That he loved me? I spun to face him. “You don’t need to—”

He cut me off with a *shh* finger over my mouth. “I want you to know that you are smokin’ hot in that wetsuit.” He pulled his mouth into a broad smile and kissed the tip of my nose.

I was stunned breathless for a moment while warmth radiated through my body. Then I turned around and gave the go signal—finger forward.

Akachi, Namika, and Finn bolted out from behind the rock, firepower blazing in colored streams of light.

Akachi’s gray shot the first golem, and it stumbled backward a step. Namika’s light blue shot from each hand and pegged two golems right in the face, making their heads jerk. Finn went for the legs of the whole first row, and their knees buckled and bent. Seconds after each hit, the golems righted themselves and snapped back into place.

Mara shrieked something I couldn’t understand, but it sounded Slavic. The golems moved forward, lumbering step by lumbering step. Most of the creatures plodded toward the Protectors, but a fraction stayed to guard Mara.

Her head darted around the cave, looking for someone.

Looking for me. I inhaled sharply through my nose. She knew I was here.

The golems enveloped her, like wagons circling the women and children. Somehow, I had to get through and stay out of the reach of unstoppable clay men long enough to take Mara down.

I glanced at the Protectors, making sure they were okay. They'd made an inroad into the army and taken down a few golems. Namika thrust her hand through the back of one clay head and yanked her hand back out, then tore up the small piece of paper. The golem cracked apart, but another took its place.

My team was surrounded.

And losing.

I had to remove Mara, fast.

I didn't know much about geology, but caves had a reputation for being unstable. Maybe I could use that to my advantage.

Above us, stalactites dripped down like ready-made weapons, but even if I speared golems in half, they'd re-form seconds later. The cave floor itself was steady, made from enough layers of clay to form this army, so disrupting the ground was out.

"Looks dire, yes, it does," came a familiar voice.

I almost screamed. I definitely jumped.

The tenth Muse stood at my side, as if she'd always been there. "You're doing well, my little chaos bringer."

She patted my arm. A trail of my magic followed her touch along my skin, and it was like a hit of an addictive drug. Power surged through me, lifted me to my toes, and a pleasant shiver coursed from my knees to my head. I couldn't think, much less protest against what she'd called me.

Chaos bringer.

"You've got to learn some control, though. I can't have you wrecking this island before my time comes."

"Arche," I half-mouthed, half-whispered.

"You know my name." She drifted her fingers up my arm, my shoulder, my neck. She cupped my jaw and leaned in, and I caught her scent—something dark and delicious and destructive. Her lips brushed my cheek. "Nightmares are best controlled by falling back asleep."

I felt a stiff breeze, and then she was gone. I fell to the ground, at once exhausted and exhilarated. *Deep breaths, Piper. You are in control.*

I calmed my buzzing power with a few more meditative breaths.

Akachi let out a war cry, jumpstarting my heart.

“Nightmares are best controlled by falling *back* asleep.” I murmured Arche’s words, and the nightmares I’d had as a child came roaring back. Once I’d learned to go back to sleep and fight the nightmares, I’d won.

What if I could turn nightmares on Mara?

I sat against the rock, crossed my legs, and closed my eyes. No way could I fall asleep during a battle in a cave, but research had identified a similarity in brain waves during dream sleep and meditation. Could meditation work?

I focused my breath, drawing air in and out through my nose and counting each rise and fall of my chest until my thoughts slipped away, until the fighting cries of Finn, Namika, and Akachi seemed distant.

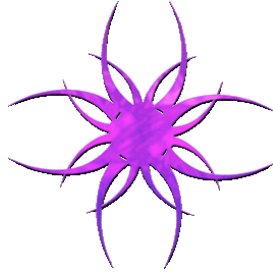
“Mara,” I whispered and let my power swell in my chest, “it’s time to create.”

I returned to the clearing, to the circle of the Council of the Gods.

And took Mara with me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

PIPER



The Council of the Gods stood in a circle around Mara. She looked around, confused.

I stepped out from my hiding place. Draped in a robe of the Council, I entered the circle and became one of them. But instead of banishing the tenth Muse, we were banishing Mara.

Ancient Greek poured from the Council and wrapped around Mara.

I could only hope that whatever happened in this dream-like state distracted her long enough in the waking world to let my team get the upper hand.

She stood, lifted her head, and laughed. “Clever girl. But *I* am the nightmare creator, not you.” She turned and addressed the Council. “Esteemed judges, you have a traitor in your midst.” She pointed a finger at me.

As one, the Council turned to me and raised their hands.

My robe disappeared. My hair grew, long and tangled, wrapped around my neck, and pinned my hands and feet to the dirt.

I couldn’t move. I couldn’t summon my power. I couldn’t even feel my power.

“Piper Prince, you are condemned,” the Council intoned, no longer speaking Greek. “You have been found guilty of misuse of power. You have been found guilty of murder. You have been found guilty of bringing chaos.”

The weight of their words felt heavy, physical, as if something was sitting on my chest.

Weren't the charges true? Wasn't that what I myself believed? That I was chaos, even more than Mara or Tez or even the Sons. Maybe more than Ari, if the prophecy was true.

Yet Finn thought I had a good heart. He'd said we would find a way.

Rainey too. Her nightmare showed she had a sliver of worry, but she also believed in me.

And all those Protectors had turned to me, trusted me. They had my back.

I didn't have all the answers. But I knew who I wanted to be.

I pushed away the Council's words, pushed aside my self-doubt, and lifted my head proudly. "Yes, I've used my power badly at times. I've killed beings. I disrupted the previous order. But I never intended harm. I've acted to help people, to help this island, to help the mythical world."

The Council hesitated.

I shifted my gaze to Mara. "You only want power."

The Council pivoted as one to face her.

She thrashed, and the weight on my chest lifted a small amount.

"I'm not the chaos bringer," I continued. "You are."

The Council lifted their arms, as if about to pronounce judgment.

"No!" She looked around, her face turning red, her hands curled into fists, and stomped one heeled foot on the ground.

I took a deeper breath. "I don't fear you, Mara. Your nightmares hold power only as long as—"

I opened my eyes. I was back in the cave. Mara sat on my chest, her hair wrapped around my neck.

"—the person dreaming stays asleep," I gasped. Power flared into my hands and slashed at her hair like a knife.

The pain around my neck loosened as Mara screamed.

Her golems answered, and the cave shook under their feet as they stampeded to save their mistress.

I flung her off me. Power surged through my veins and electrified the places Arche had touched. I wanted to kill Mara. I so wanted to kill her.

The nightmares would stop. I'd save the island.

But I would not be chaos, I would be justice.

I let power fly from my hands and wrap around Mara like a cocoon. The song of the island rose in a symphony around me, notes and colors only I could hear and see. "Call off your army."

“Never,” she rasped.

I tightened her bonds, moved them up so they covered her mouth and nose.

She struggled, let out a muffled scream.

Her army thundered closer.

“By the time they get here, you’ll be dead.” I had no intention of killing her, but she didn’t have to know that. I added several thorns to her bonds, little pricks of pain that reminded her who I was, who had died at my hands before her, and then loosened the power binding her mouth.

“Stop!” she yelled, her voice growling through the cave.

The golems stopped their advance.

Finn, Namika, and Akachi paused for a moment, as if checking to make sure the battle was really over, then made quick work of removing the scrolls from their mouths. Mara’s army turned back to broken bits of clay.

“You will pay for this,” Mara warned. “I can still create nightmares from a prison cell.” She chuckled, or rather cackled like an evil witch. Like the very idea of getting to curse the night amused her.

The rest of my team appeared at my side. Namika sent out a sky-blue thread of magic, and Akachi’s gray and Finn’s green streams joined hers. Together they encircled Mara, holding her in place.

“We’ve got her,” Finn mumbled.

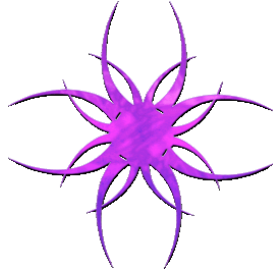
I let my magic fade away. My shoulders relaxed, my heart slowed, my breath eased.

We’d captured Mara.

But how would we stop her?

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

PIPER



Our race against time wasn't over.

I barely lifted my head when Finn and Namika walked into my office at the back of Book Spirits where we'd gathered. Finn wore a bright, tropical-flowered shirt, like a splash of optimism in a world still dark while Namika wore a polka-dotted romper I couldn't pull off in a million years.

I wore a frown.

Finn spoke. "Mara's contained in a special cell that limits magic, but Mykos agrees it's not enough to stop the nightmares altogether. He's heard of two more deaths today and a lot of property damage."

Narfi whimpered next to me. "Not the ice again. Please, not the ice."

I set down the book I'd been reading on top of the others I'd perused and patted his knee. "We'll figure it out."

Seshat and Akachi lowered their books, but Livvie tossed hers aside with a fling of her wrist. "I'm too knackered to read anymore. Nothing useful in them anyway."

I tended to agree. In the remaining hours of daytime, none of us had found an answer to stopping the nightmares without a counterpart, and the new dream eater wouldn't arrive for two more days. Meanwhile, the sun was setting, night was coming, and Mara's creations would once again roam Muse Island.

Frustration streamed through my veins, tinged with a faint trail of despair. I shot up from my chair. "If you can't keep nightmares from going crazy without a dream eater, why aren't there more dream eaters?"

Seshat and Akachi, the eldest two in the room, exchanged a knowing glance.

Seshat tilted her head, and her golden earring brushed her shoulder. “The Eater Controversy of ’82. Suffice it to say their ranks were diminished, and now more populous and human-inhabited areas are given priority.”

I shook my head and my itinerant thoughts away. I’d ask for the history lesson later. We were still up against a clock and losing the battle.

Finn strolled to my side and squeezed my arm. “I heard from Bern.”

“And?”

“He and Rainey are finishing up the rounds then heading back to the resort to hunker down.” He gave a long sigh. “I feel like I should be there, but here too.”

“Cloning ourselves would help,” I muttered. “But we have to face facts. Tonight will be better, but it won’t be good. The best we can do is keep as many people as possible awake and patrol the island to do damage control.”

It wasn’t enough. Not nearly enough.

A piece of me longed for the days when I felt more than capable of doing my job. Even though I was so much more on Muse Island, I was still never enough.

Akachi stepped forward. “Then we need to spread out and cover as much of the island as we can.”

Namika yawned. “I need to get moving or I’m gonna fall asleep on one of Seshat’s comfy rugs. And my nightmares are weird. Really weird.”

Who knew what that meant, but I didn’t want to find out.

I turned to Finn. “Could the rest of you figure out assignments? You all know the island better than I do.”

Narfi tugged on my sleeve. “Please don’t let me sleep. I don’t want to have the nightmare again.”

Finn nodded at Narfi. “You’ll be with me, buddy. I’ll keep you revved up and wide-eyed.”

I smiled at Finn, and he walked over to consult with the other Protectors. I took a moment to text Rainey, wish her well, and tell her I loved her. I paused, my fingers hovering over the screen, then typed out one more sentence: “And I will always use my power to protect you.”

She needed to know that her worst nightmare was only a dream. The real me would always take care of my baby sister. No matter what.

Finn and Narfi took the south side of the island, where Muse Island Resort was located. Namika and Seshat took the east side, home of Urania’s

Planetarium. Livvie and Akachi had the west side, where both of their Muses' sanctuaries were. And I was given the north side around Poseidon Point, the reasoning being that Aphrodisios wouldn't use this opportunity to hurt me with my promised favor dangling out there for the future.

As usual, Finn insisted on me not going alone, which is how I ended up with my partner as Gwen from Nyx's Sleep Spa. Apparently, she was determined to help. And since Rainey and Livvie had put in a good word for me, Gwen was no longer convinced I was disaster incarnate. Suspicious, but not convinced.

The island's other Protectors and the faerie also spread out over the island. And Phaethon had organized Muse Island Taxi drivers to report in as they spotted anything unusual.

Finn gave me the keys to his Jeep and took Narfi's El Camino.

I drove toward the sleep spa to pick up Gwen, keeping my eyes peeled for any walking nightmares. The nightmares seemed fewer, but no less menacing.

Not having slept for approximately forever, I was in desperate need of a long, tall, and handsome cup of coffee. As I neared the tourist area of Muse Island, a horde of rats ran alongside the Jeep, but with a long press on my horn, they disappeared. Apparently, the loud honk woke the sleeper.

I turned to make sure the rodents were really gone, and when I turned back, a tigress was standing in the long stretch of abandoned road ahead of me. Panic ripped through my air pipe and came out in a scream, just as I swerved to avoid hitting her.

I came to a stop in front of a massive stone wall, my lungs heaving and my pulse slamming my wrists. Behind the wall, spray from the ocean misted the air.

Two seconds later, I was out of the Jeep and running toward the now-human and completely nude Bett who stood in the middle of the road. A purple glow rose from my hands. "You'd better be a nightmare, or I'm going to—"

"Do what?" She cocked her hip to the side. "Kill me? Finn wouldn't like that."

I halted, but kept my power ready just in case. "Real or nightmare?"

"I'm always *your* nightmare, Piper." She smirked. "But I'm real."

I scoffed. "Shouldn't you be with your new master, kitty-cat?"

“I’m nobody’s pet. But I am here to make sure you pay attention to what’s coming.”

I opened my mouth to deliver some yet-unplanned retort, but a beam of light shot up at the moon again. Tez’s moon.

My magic flickered, but I held it back just as Tez’s hologram appeared in the sky.

Dread squeezed my chest, sucked away my breath.

“Your nightmares will soon be over,” Tez boomed. “I, Tezcatlipoca, god of the night sky, promised deliverance, and I am true to my word. Sleep tight, Muse Islanders. And remember that I will fight for your safety, your welfare, and your peace.”

Tez’s image faded, and I waited, my heart in my throat. What could he possibly mean by—

The screams and alarms of the night fell quiet, a calm settled over the area, and the island felt different. Or rather, it felt like it had before the nightmares had come.

My heart dropped back down. “What did he do?” I whispered.

Bett grinned.

From the jungle opposite the seawall, Tez emerged, a woman at his side. She had angular facial features but a stocky body and could have been twenty or fifty years old, her appearance seeming ageless. But most striking was the webbing that ran up each of her arms, as if a spider had woven thread into her skin.

Anxiety curdled in my gut.

“Piper Prince”—Tez waved at hand at her—“meet Asibikaashi, the Ojibwe spider woman who captures nightmares in her web and devours bad dreams. She graciously came to the island at my request.”

She was definitely not the dream eater we were expecting in a couple of days.

Tez pulled his robe off his own shoulders, revealing a bare muscled torso and tattoos that encircled his neck and shoulders. His long, dark hair settled low on his back, and his angular jaw seemed like a rendering of art rather than biology.

He draped the robe over Bett’s shoulders. Bett flashed him a smile and tied the belt around her waist.

I glared at Tez. “You’re hardly in a place to make introductions, since you and I haven’t met. Not properly anyway.”

He laughed, a hearty laugh more charming than I expected from him. “Bett told me about you. *Feisty* is the word I think she used, along with a few other colorful words.”

I shot her a grimace. “I’ll bet.” I turned back to him. “Why are you here?”

“To help, of course,” he said. “Like you, I’m bringing necessary changes to the island, righting wrongs, fulfilling my destiny.”

His voice was silky, like the chocolate that had originated in the land of the Aztecs. But I’d learned in my research that the Aztecs sometimes mixed human blood into chocolate for their rituals. Tez’s silk came at the cost of bloodshed.

“Nice campaign speech.” I crossed my arms. “Try again.”

My purple power danced at my fingertips, but I wasn’t ready to shoot. If the woman next to him—Asibi-something-or-other—really was a dream eater, she might not take well to me firing at her employer. And, no matter how much I disliked the one who hired her, Muse Island needed a dream eater.

Tez stared at me for a long time then dipped his chin at the spider woman. “Thank you for coming, Asibikaashi. Please make yourself at home here. I will come to visit soon.”

She nodded gravely, then turned and studied me for a long moment. “I do not believe you have had your worst nightmare yet. But we will see.”

My bones clenched, but before I could answer, she broke apart into webs and floated away into the night. Behind her, the jungle shadows darkened, lengthened, stretched toward our little trio. I was very much outnumbered.

Tez approached. “Now that we are alone...”

My stomach tensed. “Not quite. Your housecat”—I cocked my head at Bett—“is still here.”

She growled at me, like a seriously pissed-off housecat, but didn’t pounce. She was letting Tez take the lead.

“Your power is impressive,” Tez said. “But not as impressive as mine. All that effort you put forth to catch one little nightmare bringer, and what did I do? I stopped the nightmares.”

“I believe it’s Asibikaashi who’s stopping nightmares.”

He snorted a laugh. “As far as the island is concerned, it was me. I am the face of peace, restoration, salvation. Who do you think the islanders will

love? You, who caught one, or me, who saved many?”

I didn't want it to be true, but I had a feeling he was right. Psychologically speaking, people gravitated toward those who doled out rewards.

The roar of a loud muffler broke the night, and Narfi's El Camino screeched to a sideways stop behind Finn's Jeep.

“Piper!” A green glow lit the night as Finn leapt from Narfi's car and dashed across the road.

Bett straightened and stiffened, and something in her expression uncurled and went vulnerable.

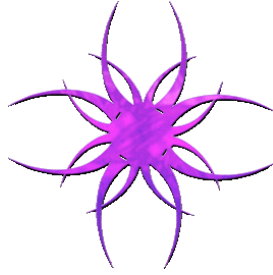
Finn stopped at my side, breathing heavily. “Tezcatlipoca. I am Finnian Kalani, Protector of the Muse Terpsichore, and I demand you leave this island.”

“Ah yes. Mr. Kalani. A master who freed one slave. For that, and out of reverence for my beautiful Bastet, I do not attack you as we speak. But we shall not meet again without conflict.” Tez turned toward me and bowed. “A pleasure meeting you, Miss Prince. In you, I sense a kindred spirit. May we find a path that allows us to coexist.”

He raised his hand, slashed the air, crooked his arm for Bett, and the two of them stepped into a hole made in the shadows.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

PIPER



Finn followed me back to Book Spirits, the night quiet and clear. Outside the bookstore, cars lined the sidewalk. We parked a block away.

The bell chimed as we walked in the door, and a loud chatter of voices masked our entrance.

Everyone had gathered in my other-dimensional office.

Everyone.

Livvie, Akachi, and Namika huddled in a Protectors' clique by my reading chair. Bernard, Rainey, and Narfi leaned against my desk. Seshat stared down Gwen and the Coven of Nyx, who were raiding the snack table.

And in the middle of the room, two little men wearing red caps were tied, back to back, and slurping on chocolate milkshakes. The alps.

Finn and I entered my office, the dimensional portal slipping like cool water over my arms.

Everyone stopped talking. The only sound in the room was the slurp of the alps' milkshakes.

I stepped away from Finn, taking the lead. "We met with Tez."

They waited.

"Or rather, he and Bett met with us. Tez has brought a spider woman—a dream eater—to the island. She's stopped the nightmares."

"Asibikaashi?" Seshat brought her clutched her hand to her breast, and a note of hope lingered in her question.

I nodded.

"I do not understand. She is a light magicka. Why is she with Tezcatlipoca?"

Finn stepped to my side. “You know her?”

The goddess pressed her lips together. “I did. A long time ago.” She swatted at the air, as if that could get rid of the sudden sadness emanating from her. “She is good for the island. Why would Tezcatlipoca commit a beneficial act?”

“When entering a new province,” Finn said, “the prince must have the goodwill of its inhabitants.”

I shot him a confused look.

He shrugged. “Rough translation of something Machiavelli said in *The Prince*. The point being that if you want to take over, start by getting people on your side. However you can.”

Gwen moved to the forefront. “It’ll probably work too. If the Sons of Poseidon had been all bad all the time, they would have lost control long ago. But they kept both sides—light and dark magickas—just happy enough that they didn’t rebel.”

“I agree.” Livvie shook her finger at the group. “People will flock to him like pigeons to Trafalgar Square.”

I shook my head, even though I knew she was right. “It’s a common tactic in my line of work—do something nice for the patient to establish rapport. Once someone trusts you, they’re far more willing to give you what you want. In my case, I was trying to get information or a confession, but what Tez wants—no matter what he says—is power.”

A long silence fell over the room.

Finally, Rainey waved her hand like a schoolgirl trying to get her teacher’s attention. “So what do we do now?”

All eyes turned to me, as if I had the answer. But only one idea was foremost on my mind. “We sleep. It’s been much too long, and we can formulate our next steps after a good night’s rest, when we’re all thinking clearly.”

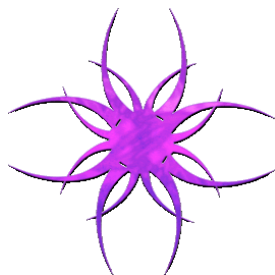
Bernard’s tattoos glowed, and a pillow appeared on my desk.

“Thanks, Bernard.” I grinned at him. “But I think I’ll wait until we get back home.”

Home. There was that word again, and every time I said it, it felt a little more natural.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

FINN



You'd think an island-wide crisis and a dark moon overhead would dampen the mythicals' desire to play, but Roc Bottom was practically a madhouse. I led the way, snaking our group—me, Piper, Rainey, Bern, and Narfi—through the crowd. We found a small gap at the back of the cenote and settled in with our gear.

Piper dropped her things onto the poolside chair we had to share. “When people lose a loved one or have a near-death experience, they can have a new sense of their mortality.” She waved at the party atmosphere. “Celebrating life is natural. It’s like this study I read, in which—”

Rainey slapped her hand over Piper’s mouth. “No psychology. We are making up for the day we didn’t get, and I want to fully enjoy it. *Capisce?*”

It took a lot of restraint to hold back the laugh I wanted to let go.

Piper nodded twice before Rainey released her hand.

Narfi shuffled up to Piper. “You’re sure?” he asked for the twentieth time.

“Yes, I’m sure.” She gave him a reassuring smile. “It’s been a week, and Asibikaashi has all the nightmares under control.”

Rainey slipped off her flip-flops. “She’s actually a sweetheart. Seshat was right—Asibikaashi is a light magicka, and I trust her.”

No one said it, but we all knew the one we didn’t trust was Tezcatlipoca. And Bett. I no longer trusted Bett.

I turned around, shucked off my shirt, and tried not to think about the weight in my chest. Instead, I spun back around, hoping to catch Piper once again looking at my body while pretending she hadn’t noticed. She was beyond cute.

I lost my breath.

Piper had slipped off her own cover-up, a muumuu-like thing she'd insisted on bringing, and revealed a fire-red bikini with a golden ring on each hip. Did she have any idea what she was doing to me?

She looked up at me, guileless. "What?"

Nope, she didn't know. Not completely.

I stuck my tongue back in my mouth, figuratively—I think—and cleared my throat. "That's a new outfit."

"Rainey." She rolled her eyes. "I decided not to fight her this time. It makes her happy, you know."

"And you?" I drew her close to me, traced the bare skin at her waist. "What makes you happy?"

Water splashed us, and we jerked apart.

"Hey!" Piper yelled while I wiped the water off my face.

Rainey and Bernard laughed, both of them having jumped in the pool. Narfi followed them in, balancing himself on his duck float.

"Shall we?" I asked Piper.

She nodded. I expected her to put a toe in the water, graduate up to an ankle, and within a half-hour finally be submerged. But she perched on the edge of the pool, lifted one leg, and took in a flying leap right into the middle.

I chuckled and jumped in after.

Finding Piper's oh-so-fabulous legs, I wrapped my arms around them and slid up her body out of the water. She shivered in my arms, and I had a feeling it wasn't because the water was cold.

I leaned in to kiss her, my new favorite hobby, and a shadow fell over us.

My muscles froze. Not a shadow. More than that.

A collective gasp rose from the creatures around us. Piper and I tilted our heads back to look through the opening at the top of the cavern. Tez's moon had spread, and was still spreading.

Light faded from the cenote, slowly, slowly. As it dimmed, Piper's grip tightened on my back. I lifted my hand and shot out a beam of green light. It was soon joined by others, but nothing could combat our realization that the whole sky was turning back.

Someone yelled, "The god of the night sky is coming to deliver us."

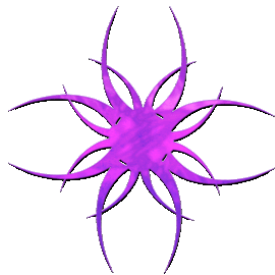
Shouts exploded and echoed around the cave, some cheering him on, others shouting him down.

“Tez,” Piper murmured.

I simply nodded. The night wasn’t over. It had only just begun.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

APHRODISIOS



Aphrodisios kneeled in front of the fire in his abandoned resort. Only his one genie remained, more his caretaker than he was her master. She reminded him of Mother. Not her looks, for no one could compare to his mother's beauty, but her spirit. Gentle, and not at all deserving of her fate.

He lifted his hand, and his demigod magic breezed out of him and wrapped around the fire, painting the orange and blue flames in apple-green.

Even his magic reminded him of his mother. Beautiful Aphrodite, for whom he was named, loved green apples and smelled of apple blossoms in the summertime.

Aphrodisios would give anything to earn her forgiveness, to feel the summer sun warm his skin once again.

He *was* giving anything. And everything.

His power, his brothers, his island. Piper Prince.

Aristos Fawkes flickered to life in the flames, his image clear and tinted green.

"It is done." Aphrodisios bowed, awaiting Aristos's rage. For the moment, he was glad of the distance between him and this too-powerful being. He would not have the protection of flame when Aristos came to Muse Island.

"Night has spread?" Aristos asked, without looking up from his project.

"And the mare is defeated."

"Killed?" Aristos looked up then, the flame in his eyes a distant reflection of the summer sun. Aristos Fawkes was Aphrodisios's path back

to the sun.

“Not killed. Contained.”

Disappointment darkened his expression. Miss Prince was supposed to kill again. To ready her spirit to accept what Aristos would eventually offer.

“And rendered powerless.” A voice boomed out from behind Aphrodisios. “Thanks to my influence.”

The Aztec god of chaos and darkness stepped out from the shadows.

“Tezcatlipoca, how nice of you to join us this evening. I was not aware you had been invited.” Aristos looked to Aphrodisios, fire flashing in his dual-colored eyes.

“Nor was I.” Aphrodisios stood, his long silent heart giving a faint but hard thump. For this, he would pay.

“The island is safe and wrapped in my cocoon.” Tezcatlipoca stepped forward, and even though the light from the fire brushed against him, his shadowed form remained.

“Your cocoon? I believe you mean Asibikaashi’s cocoon.” There was an echo of a snarl in Aristos’s voice. He did not like surprises. “She is a light magicka. No matter what you have promised her, she will act in the island’s best interests. Never yours.”

“Are you so sure of that?” Tezcatlipoca let something dangle from his fingers, a small spider. A spider that was crying. “I have her children. She answers to me. And only to me.”

Aristos stood, his project forgotten behind him. “Children are not bargaining tools.” Flame rose behind him, around him, from him.

“Small sacrifices to be made for the greater good. You should know this best, Aristos Fawkes. You, who sacrificed your own children to greed so long ago.”

Aristos’s fire faltered.

“Yes, Mr. Fawkes. I know who you are. What you are. And while I do not understand your full plan, I understand enough to know Muse Island is in your sights. You wish to use my ascension to build your army? You have greatly underestimated my power.” Tezcatlipoca slashed his hand through the air. The fire and Aristos’s image vanished.

“You would do well to realign yourself, Son of Poseidon.”

Aphrodisios waited until Tezcatlipoca had disappeared, stepping into a shadow, before he sank to the ground, refusing to let his hope waver.

But it did waver. It did. And the sun seemed more distant than ever before.



Dear Reader,
First of all, thank you for taking a chance on this series. We hope you have enjoyed your time on Muse Island!

If you did, we would be eternally grateful if you could [write a review](#) on Amazon (even if it's only a sentence or two). Every review matters to authors and helps other readers discover the the book.

Book 5 of the Muse Island Series: Death of the Slayer, is currently in the works and will be released this fall. Make sure to [sign up for our Museletter](#) to receive updates about new releases (plus a free short story)!

We look forward to continuing Piper's journey with you. See you soon on Muse Island!

Love,
Kris and Jules

P.S. You can get a taste of the Muse Island life at [MuseIslandSeries.com](#) and on our [Facebook page](#). Hope to see you there!

THE MUSE ISLAND SERIES

[Mark of the Gods \(Book 1\)](#)

[Power of the Song \(Book 2\)](#)

[Rise of the Storm \(Book 3\)](#)

[Curse of the Night \(Book 4\)](#)

Death of the Slayer (Book 5) ~ coming soon!

MUSE ISLAND SHORT STORIES

Finn's Call

ABOUT JULES LYNN



Jules Lynn knew precious little about mythology before meeting Kris Faryn. Indeed, *The Iliad* is one of only two novels assigned in high school she didn't finish reading. But she's been in a crash course of late and discovered some very interesting stories that make her wonder if Homer just needed a good editor. Her favorite mythology thus far is Egyptian, but she's still learning and that could change.

Among close friends, Jules is known for her surplus sarcasm, her growing collection of boots, and her willingness to grab a karaoke microphone at the slightest nudge. She has finaled in or won several writing contests, including the Golden Heart®, the premier manuscript contest from Romance Writers of America®.

As Julie Glover, she also writes young adult and cozy mysteries and is one of four hosts of the blog Writers in the Storm, consistently named a *Writer's Digest's* best website for writers.

Get to know Jules Lynn at:



ABOUT KRIS FARYN



[Kris Faryn](#) has been mildly obsessed with mythology since reading *The Iliad*, which she adores, cannot believe Jules Lynn never finished, and makes a point to re-read every few years. Additionally, she is a big fan of the mythology surrounding Greek Sirens—who have wings, not fishtails—and has a [YA urban fantasy series out featuring Sirens](#), the men they love, and the sacrifices they have to make.

Kris is known for her love of bean burritos, of traveling, and of her patooties at home, including the grown-up one and furry ones. She also loves baking, cooking, a good book, and a crackling fire.

Kris Faryn is a multi-award-winning author of Young Adult Fantasy books and [Adult Suspense](#). Most importantly, Kris believes in turning dreams into realistic goals and that everyone has something special and unique to offer the world.

Get to know [Kris Faryn](#) at:

