



HALFLING
ACADEMY

4

POSEIDON'S TRIDENT

EMBER-RAINE WINTERS

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HALFLING ACADEMY

BOOK IV

EMBER-RAINE WINTERS

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“Ugh,” I glance out the window of my dorm.

The damn storms are still raging. It’s been weeks of strange weather. Ever since we came back from Sparta, storms have been raging.

“What are you thinking?” Raven asks from her spot spinning in my desk chair.

“I don’t know.” I flop back on my bed.

The new guy, Thaddeus, is the son of Poseidon. Could he have something to do with the storms or did we wait too long to realize there’s an actual problem with the weather? Maybe we should have left already to find the trident.

“I’m bored.” Raven groans. “I want to train but the wind is crazy out there.”

“You always want to train,” I chuckle.

“I’m Ares’ most powerful descendant, of course I do.” She continues spinning in my chair.

“Do not puke all over my floor.” I point an accusing finger at her and she stops spinning.

“I would never,” she scoffs.

“You’re going to make yourself sick.” I shake my head.

“I’m bored,” she repeats.

“You said that already.”

“I know, but like I can’t even see Greyson most days and I thought it would be different now that he’s on campus all the time because he’s gods touched and a danger to his pack out in the world,” she says.

“You would think Rebecca would be more lenient since we are all adults and the dorms are basically co-ed anyway.” I prop my head up on my hand.

“Nope, she found him a place in no-man’s-land. I would fight the evil little dryads again to see him, but he doesn’t want to rock the boat.” She uses air quotes with her fingers at the end.

“Wait, that gives me an idea,” I say and widen my eyes.

“Uh-oh. What can me complaining about how unfair Rebecca is being have given you thoughts in your devious brain?”

“A girls’ night. With Kira,” I say with a smirk.

She leans her elbows on her knees. “I’m still not understanding how your brain made the connection between the two.”

“She’s into Dax but he doesn’t understand normal social cues and basically is oblivious to the fact that she likes him.”

“And?” Raven asks. “I know there’s a point here somewhere, but you’re taking your sweet time getting to it.”

“I say, we have a girls’ night with Kira and devise a plan to get Dax to notice her.”

“This could all blow up in our faces, you know.” Raven drops her head down.

I spring up from the bed and round on her. “Are you being a voice of reason right now? Are you feeling okay?”

I reach for her forehead to see if she has a fever and she bats my hands away.

“I’m fine.” She rocks back in the chair to get away from me. “You think this will actually get him off your back?”

“That’s not why I’m doing it.” I cross my arms, glaring at my best friend.

“Sure, it’s not.”

“Do I even want to know?” Jayden’s voice startles me and I spin on him.

“Nope, girls only tonight, Jayden.” I place my palm on his chest with the intention of pushing him back out the door, but he grabs me and pulls me to him.

“What are you plotting, babe?” Jayden asks.

“Why do you assume I’m plotting anything?” I bat my lashes at him.

“There’s a look in your eyes you get when you’re plotting something, but you usually only get it when a monster is near and it doesn’t usually end well.” Jayden squeezes me closer.

I turn my glare on Raven as a gagging sound reaches my ears.

“That may actually make me puke on the floor.” She stands from the chair. “I’m gonna go see what snacks and drinks I can get from the Dionysus kids.”

I turn my attention back to Jayden and he kisses me hard. My body melts into his as his tongue demands entrance. He pulls my body flush with his and a tiny moan escapes my lips before he breaks the kiss and presses his forehead to mine.

“You still want to have a girls only night?” He chuckles.

“Yes.” I push at his chest.

Jayden takes a step back but his hands wrap around my wrists. His touch is electric and a groan escapes. Maybe this is a bad idea. But what about Kira and Dax? I want my friends to be happy, and Dax is oblivious to anything but strength. I need to show him that Kira is a badass.

“Does this impromptu girls’ night have anything to do with a certain Hephaestus girl pining over Dax?” Jayden raises a brow at me.

“Maybe.” I shrug.

Jayden sighs and shakes his head. “Beth...”

“Jayden.”

“Meddling never does anyone any good.”

“Having a girls’ night with makeovers and things like that isn’t meddling.” I step back. “Now go. I need to go find Kira before Raven gets back with the drinks.”

I shoo him out the door but he pulls me in, stealing a quick kiss before he turns and heads down the stairs.

Can’t they see my plan is perfect? Everyone will be happy once we get Dax to notice what a badass beautiful girl Kira is, I just know it. I race down the stairs to the first floor. The Hephaestus students all share the first-floor dorms. It’s symbolic of my evil stepmother throwing Hephaestus off Mount Olympus. It’s completely dumb but it is what it is.

I peek into the Hephaestus common room but don’t see Kira. Max glances up at me and scowls.

“Are you here for more potentially dangerous weapons?” he asks.

“No. I’m looking for Kira.”

“She’s not here. She’s stuck at the forge until this weather calms down.” He tinkers with whatever project he’s working on.

“Can you have her come up to my dorm when she gets back, please?” I ask.

“I’m not your secretary, daughter of Zeus.”

“Gods, what did I ever do to you?” I ask, throwing my hands up.

“Nothing,” he says and turns back to his project.

Fine, don’t tell me you have a chip on your shoulder when it comes to me. Ass.

I turn back to the stairs and meet Raven on the second floor. Her arms are full of snacks and drinks. I grab some from her and trudge up the stairs with her at my side.

“Where’s Kira?” she asks.

“She’s stuck at the forges until the weather calms down.”

“If it ever calms down,” she grumbles.

We reach the tenth floor—the Poseidon floor—and Thaddeus is sitting

alone in the common room. There's a fountain in the middle of the room and he's manipulating the water into different shapes. I grimace, not liking fountains after the damn rhyming fountain got us in Winslow. I turn to move up the stairs.

"You don't think he has anything to do with the crazy weather patterns, do you?" I whisper to Raven.

Her eyes widen as she glances back down the stairs. "The weather was weird before he got here. It wasn't this bad but it was weird. I don't think it's him. Maybe it's time for another mission?"

"Maybe, but I'm not in any hurry to fight more monsters."

We get back to my room and flip on my bed spreading out the snacks. I open a bag of chips and pop one into my mouth.

"What's the plan for when Kira gets here?" Raven asks.

"I don't know if she's even coming. Max is an ass," I grumble.

Raven tilts her head to the side. "I don't understand."

"I asked him to give Kira a message and he said he's not my secretary."

"What's that guy's problem?" she growls.

"I don't know." I shake my head.

"Well, we can watch the storm, and then when it lets up, we can go down and kidnap her." Raven grins.

"I like that idea. I have all the beauty products we could possibly need in the bathroom."

"What are you planning?" She rests her head in her hand.

"Girls' night makeovers and figure out a plan to get Dax to notice her." I grab another chip.

"That way if it works, it's not technically meddling. You might be onto something, B." Raven chuckles.

"Right. We aren't meddling, just helping him notice what's been right in front of him all along."

We wait until the storm lets up enough and rush down the stairs. Kira is

just walking in the door. A chill rolls through the foyer of the dorms and she shivers.

“Kira, come up to my dorm with us,” I say. “We want to have a girls’ night.”

“Girls’ night?” she asks with a bit of trepidation. “I don’t know.”

She glances at her dorm like someone is going to save her but Raven loops her arm through hers. “C’mon, it’ll be fun.”

Kira tries to dig in her heels and glance around for help, but Raven is too strong and tugs her up the stairs.

“Guys, really. I’m cold and wet and just want to sleep,” Kira groans.

“Sleep is boring,” Raven says, tugging her up the stairs.

“It’s hopeless to resist. Once Raven gets her mind set on something, she’s like Cerberus with a human leg bone.”

“Hey,” Raven snaps, glaring at me.

“What does that even mean?” Kira asks with a shudder.

“If you ever meet him in the underworld, you will definitely know what I’m talking about.” I laugh.

Raven swats at me with her free hand but I dodge right and she misses. We are both laughing but Kira is glancing between us like we’re lunatics.

“When we went to the underworld a couple months ago, Hades thought it would be fun to test us before we got there. We ran into trouble trying to get past Spot and Raven grabbed a human leg bone to throw like a toy.”

“I thought it was a stick,” Raven shouts.

“In the underworld?” Kira asks incredulously.

“I’ll have you know, there are tons of trees in the underworld. It wasn’t a horrible assumption.” She tugged Kira to the eighth floor.

Dax stands on the landing, his arms crossed over his barrel of a chest, and Kira squeaks in surprise. His eyebrows raise at Raven’s arm around Kira’s.

“What are you doing, Raven?” he asks.

“We’re having a girls’ night. No boys or bratty younger brothers

allowed.” Raven flips her hair over her shoulder.

“I’m literally a couple months younger than you,” he says.

“Right, you’re still younger,” Raven sings as she pushes past Dax.

“Kira doesn’t look too excited about a girls’ night with the two of you. What’s really going on?” Dax glances at me but turns away quickly.

“There’s nothing going on. We wanted a bit of normal before we inevitably have to go out and save the world again.” I planted my fists on my hips.

“Since when have you two ever had a girls’ night? That isn’t normal for either of you.” Dax sidesteps in front of Raven.

“That’s not a girls’ night; that’s just friends hanging out when it’s just me and Raven, silly. You can’t have a girls’ night without at least three girls.”

His eyes gleam at my words and I nearly smack myself in the forehead at what I just said, but luckily for him, he keeps his laughter and dirty comments to himself.

“Whatever you say, Beth.” He moves out of Raven’s path finally. “You sure you’re okay, Kira?”

“I’m fine,” she says and rolls her shoulders back.

I glance at Raven with a raised brow. Maybe this will be easier than either of us thought. He’s already showing a mild interest in her even if it is just to save her from the troublemakers. I can work with that. I smirk at Raven. We may just be onto something.

“Are you sure? I don’t know what these two have up their sleeves but it usually isn’t good and more often than not ends badly.” Dax glances between me and Raven.

“Which time that I saved your ass ended badly, Dax?” I ask, getting angry now.

“What about the Chimera? Or when Draven hit you with that spell?” He glares at me.

“You mean the time we saved the academy from a fire-breathing lion goat

thing? Yeah, that ended terribly,” Raven scoffs.

“C’mon,” Kira cuts into the argument. “Let’s have a girls’ night. Woo.”

She’s obviously just trying to diffuse the tension Dax created by being an ass but we take that as a green light and head up the stairs without a backward glance. I’m not taking any chances that she’ll change her mind.

When we get to the tenth floor, Thad is standing in the hall with a smirk. He waves his hand and all the water in Kira’s hair and on her clothes flies into his open palm.

“Neat trick,” I say, glancing at Kira who is now completely dry.

“Thanks. It comes with the whole sea god as a sperm donor thing.” He shrugs and stomps back into his room.

“I wonder what else comes with being the son of the sea god,” I mumble but continue up to my floor.

We get to my room and Kira’s eyes widen. I forgot it’s probably the first time she’s been up here. I shrug. The only things that are mine are the clothes in the closet and my go bag I have on the floor. Everything else was here when I got here.

“It still boggles my mind that you have the entire top floor to yourself.” Kira shakes her head.

“It’s okay. Sometimes I want company up here but I like my own space as well.” I sit back on the bed where I was before we kidnapped Kira.

It’s nice having another female friend and it will be even better if she and Dax get together. Kira glances around the room and wanders over to the window.

“I always wondered what the view from up here would be like. I realize now is not the best time to look.” Kira shakes her head and wanders over to my desk chair.

“It’s dreary right now but I’m sure the weather will let up eventually.” I rest my head on my hand as I lay across the top of my bed.

“So, what exactly is a girls’ night? I’ve never done one before. In case

you hadn't noticed, I'm not the type that people want to be friends with." Kira hangs her head.

"Seriously, Kira? Who are the girls that made you feel that way? Girls like Mia and her sisters? They are so caught up in themselves it's surprising they have any friends," I scoff.

"They're all siblings so technically they kind of have to like each other," Raven agrees.

"Look at me. I'm abrasive and take no shit from anyone. I am pretty sure the only person that I get along with the majority of the time is Raven." I point to my BFF.

"And me, everyone but Beth and Jayden are intimidated because I'm not only a weapons expert but a badass fighter. Other girls?" She pulls a face.

"Now, tell me why you don't think you're the type to have friends because what I see is a smart badass girl who can literally forge anything out of metal and needs to take life by the horns," I say and touch my stomach with a grimace. "Okay, that's a bad analogy. Who ever thought of that anyway?"

Maybe giving Kira the confidence she lacks is the perfect way to get Dax to recognize who and what she truly is.

"It's because I'm smart and spend all my time tinkering and figuring out how things work." Kira throws her hands up. "Sometimes I wish that I was born human or from one of the other gods."

Thunder booms over the academy and I flinch. "There is nothing wrong with being a child of Hephaestus. I mean, don't get me wrong, the automaton of the Chimera was pretty fucked up, but he's actually an awesome guy."

"Yeah," Raven speaks up. "He helped us find my father's shield even though he loathes my father."

"You met him?" she asks sadly.

Fuck. We are screwing up this lighthearted girl's night royally. How the hell do we salvage it?

“We have but we were saving the world when he helped us. I’m sure a time will come when we have to help him too. I’m sure the oracle will send the strongest Hephaestus student to aid us.” I wink at her. “Now, enough about the doom and gloom. You like Dax and we’re here to help.”

Kira gasps and peers at us both. “You know? How? And how do you plan to help?”

“Honey, it’s written all over your face anytime you look at him. My big dumb brother can’t see past his nose. We have a plan to show him what a beautiful badass you really are.” Raven grins and pops a chip in her mouth. “But first, I think we could all use a drink.”

She takes a swig from the bottle of wine that doesn’t have a label and passes it to Kira. She glances at the bottle before shrugging and taking a sip.

“Where did you get that?” she asks, smacking her lips.

“A couple of the Dionysus siblings owe me a favor. That’s where we got all this.” Raven waves her hand to everything laid out before us.

I take the bottle from Kira and tip it back. “Now, we do spa treatments that would make the Aphrodite students jealous and tomorrow we enact operation make Dax notice you.”

Kira eyes us up skeptically but eventually nods. Hopefully this plan doesn’t blow up in our faces. Kira’s our friend and we want her and Dax to be happy together.

“**T**here,” I shout as I put the finishing touches on Kira’s makeup.

We didn’t go dark, just highlighted all her best features. She doesn’t need to be overdone like the Barbies on the Aphrodite floor. That’s not what Dax is into. He’s into strength and power.

“I think we need to get to class,” Kira says.

“We have plenty of time. But if you’re worried, we’re ready now.” I grab my bag and head for the door. “Don’t forget. You’re not hiding today. You’re strong and confident and you’re going to sit in Dax’s usual seat.”

Dax usually sits next to me on my left while Adrian has recently been taking the seat to my right. Draven stopped sitting there after I punched him when he tried to kiss me after the last battle and I have no problem with that outcome. He deserved it after all the shit he pulled with us.

“Won’t that make him mad?” She curls her fingers together in front of her, fidgeting.

“He’ll be confused but I doubt he’ll be mad,” I say with a shrug. “Especially when he sees you looking so hot.”

He saw us last night practically dragging Kira up the stairs. He will probably sit behind her and ask her a bunch of dumb questions that Raven will end up slapping him for after class. It would be a typical Tuesday for us either way. I loop my arm through hers and we head down to breakfast in the

dining hall. Kira moves to her table but I shake my head.

“Come sit with us.” I lead her over to my table which has become the hangout spot for our little group of friends.

Jayden sits down next to me and kisses my cheek. “Good morning. How was the girls’ night?”

“We had a lot of fun.” I beam at him.

“You look nice, Kira. I hope Beth and Raven didn’t torture you too much.” Jayden bumps my shoulder with his and I stick my tongue out at him.

He leans in and takes my mouth in a heated kiss. I blink at him but sink into his body. He never really does things like this in front of everyone. Jayden breaks the kiss with a grin.

Kira coughs. “I wasn’t sure about it when they said it, but we actually had a lot of fun.”

“I’m glad,” I say with a grin.

Dax walks into the dining hall and I point him out to Kira. Her eyes widen as she moves to start the plan. She walks to the buffet line right in front of Dax and grabs something off the tray. She flips her hair over her shoulder as Dax mumbles something. His eyes are wide as he stares at her. Kira says something back and then races back to the table.

“What did he say?” I ask, giddy.

Raven sits forward and stares at her as well while Jayden huffs and grabs his fork. He should be more interested in this conversation but he’s a guy so I will cut him some slack.

Kira mumbles, “He asked why I cut in front of him in line.”

“That ass,” Raven growls and turns to glare at him.

Jayden chuckles. “He’s completely dense.”

I elbow him in the side and turn back to Kira. “What did you say back?”

“That I forgot something and was grabbing it real quick. I panicked.”

She buries her face in her hands just as Adrian walks up smirking at us. What does he know? Did he have a vision? I stare back at him but he shakes

his head. He has no intention of sharing his vision with me. I'll have to get it out of him later. I glare at him but he shrugs and sets his tray down.

"What do you know?" I ask.

"I know nothing." Adrian sits down next to Raven.

"You're a liar." Raven points her fork at him.

Kira glances between our group like we're all nuts and I wonder again how it is she's never really had friends. We are a close group that always has each other's backs. I glance up just as Dax finishes at the buffet and he stumbles slightly as he glances at my table. His eyes zero in on Kira sitting with us before he turns and stomps to the Ares table.

"What was that about?" Kira asks.

"I don't know. Some of the students get mad that we get away with so much, but when you have saved the academy and the world as often as we have, allowances are made." I shrug. "Only I decide who sits here and with Jayden sitting with us, I don't want to cause problems."

"Got it." Her shoulders slump and she scans the room.

Did we ruin everything by having her sit with us? I hope not because I like Kira and I want her and Dax to be together. He's my friend too—well, he was before he kissed me at the battle of the academy.

We finish our food and Jayden pulls me in for a kiss before we go our separate ways. He has his Ancient Greek language class first while the rest of us have ancient history.

Rain is once again pelting the academy as we step outside. I try to use my magic to clear us a path but it's no use because as soon as I clear the clouds, more roll in.

"It's not working," I say and pull my hood over my head.

We're going to be drenched before we ever get to the admin building. We race across the quad as fast as we can and finally up the steps to the admin building. We all stand there brushing off the water when Thaddeus walks up and dries our clothes and hair with his magic.

“Thanks,” I say and open the door.

We rush through the halls to ancient history and Cross glares at us and glances down at his watch. We aren't late yet, but there are others still in the dining hall. When I step inside the class, my face falls. Somehow Dax beat us to class and is sitting in his normal seat.

Shit. What are we going to do now? I glance at Kira and shrug before tugging her with me to my seat. The seat in front of Dax is open and I point to it. Kira raises an eyebrow at me but saunters to the seat and sits in it. She flips her hair over her shoulder as she turns to talk to me.

I glance at Dax from the corner of my eye but he's looking straight ahead. Straight at Kira's profile. Maybe there is some hope for them after all. I glance at Raven who is turned around in her seat, staring at Dax like he's a complete moron.

“Hey, Dax.” Kira brushes a lock of hair behind her ear. “Do you have a pen? I didn't remember to put mine back in my bag.”

“I'm sure Raven has one. She's always got extras.” He shrugs and glances at the back where Cross is walking up to the front to start class.

Raven throws a pen at his stupid head and it hits him in the forehead. “Here, hand that to Kira.”

Dax rubs his forehead and glares at Raven before handing the pen to Kira and she smiles as their fingers touch. He pulls his hand back as Cross starts the class.

“Everyone get in groups of two and discuss the ‘Odyssey.’ I want you to look at Homer's version of events and what we know to be the truth.”

I grab Raven before anyone else can ask to be either of our partners and nod my head at Kira. She turns to Dax who is looking around the room, absolutely clueless.

“Hey, Dax. You want to be my partner?” Kira asks.

He scans the room one more time before shrugging. “Sure.”

My hand itches to zap some sense into him, but Raven beats me to it and

thrusts her palm into his forehead.

“Ow, what the fuck, Raven.”

“You’re seriously dense, you know that?” Raven huffs and turns to me. “What can we learn about sea monsters before we ultimately have to go fight them?”

“Why am I dense?” Dax whispers to Kira.

“I don’t know.” Kira rolls her eyes.

If he still doesn’t understand what the hell is going on here, there’s no way any of us are telling him a thing. We’re just going to have to try harder.

We study together, learning about Odysseus and his problems getting back to his wife after the Trojan War. Will we have to fight the same monsters that he did? We’ve already defeated a couple sirens but if there are more guys with us, will we have double the problems? I’m more sure than ever that something’s going on with Poseidon.

I glance out the window and then at Thaddeus. He’s working by himself against Cross’ orders but Cross doesn’t seem to care. Maybe as a half brother he’s giving him leeway that he refuses the rest of us.

Cross ends the class when the clouds part for a bit of sunshine and we head out to our training sessions. I link my arm with Kira’s as we head out to the forest.

“Come train with us today. Dax is never far away.” I wink at her. “Let’s show him how tough you are.”

“Are you sure about this?” Kira asks, glancing around. “The two of you are far more advanced than the rest of the training class.”

Raven bumps her shoulder with hers and Kira stumbles slightly. “Sorry, still adapting to that strength.”

“It’s okay.” Kira rights herself.

“You gotta have confidence. You are a badass. You won’t show it until you believe it yourself.” Raven pats her shoulder.

“Okay, I can do this. You both are just kind of legends in this class and I

don't feel that confident." Kira rolls her shoulders back and cracks her neck.

"What's your weapon of choice?" I ask as we step toward the weapons wall.

I don't have to store mine there anymore because Ares gave me the charm on my necklace that can send any weapon into the ether. It's like Raven's ability to call on any of her weapons at any time and with the sword Claud made for me, it's a lifesaver because I can never lose it now.

"I like long range weapons that I can modify to whatever I want them to do," Kira says as she grabs a bow from the weapons wall.

Dax creeps up next to us and watches Kira. She pulls the seemingly innocent bow from the quiver it's in. It's strange that the actual bow is in there and there are no arrows. Dax cocks his head to the side as well.

"You put that where the arrows go. Where are the arrows?" he asks.

"There are no arrows. Not really anyway." Kira sets the quiver aside and steps next to me.

It's just like any other bow until Kira presses a button and an arrow nocks perfectly into place. It just appeared almost out of thin air.

"Wow," Dax says, taking a step toward Kira. "Where did it come from?"

"This bow has endless arrows. It's a combination of magic and machinery. The arrow comes out of a compartment here," she says, showing him the thin line in the gold.

"You made this?" Dax asks, awe in his tone.

I glance at Raven who has a grin on her face and we back away from the two of them. Maybe all it's going to take for them to get together is some cool magic and weapons after all.

"Bethany," a familiar voice calls out to me.

I turn to find the centaur Chiron stamping toward me with a smile.

"Chiron, I told you to call me Beth." I shake my head but greet him with a fist over my heart as always.

"I call warriors by their given names, Bethany." Chiron stamps his hoof.

“It’s time to train.”

I glance at Raven and she shrugs. “Can you train me too?”

Raven has been wanting to train with Chiron since we came back from Sparta and the centaur agreed to train me but has never asked before today.

“You are a talented warrior as well, Raven. It would be my honor.” Chiron plants a fist over his heart and bows his head to her.

Raven repeats the gesture and once formalities are over, the drill sergeant comes out of the ancient centaur. He starts us off with a run which no instructor at the academy has ever made us do at the beginning of a training session. We pass Thaddeus as we run and the sky opens up and pelts our skin.

The rest of the students all run for the dorms but Chiron stops us at the end of our run.

“You made good time. Let’s start with burpees.” He glances up at the sky as if disgusted by the word and a giggle escapes.

“Burpees?” Raven groans. “It’s pouring out here. We’re going to be covered in mud.”

“You need to train against the elements. There will be times that battles happen in the rain. Your enemy won’t stop because they are getting wet,” Chiron bellows.

We are both sweating by the end of the burpees and my training uniform is caked in mud. I’m not even sure how burpees will help train us to fight monsters but I don’t argue with Chiron. He was a great trainer of heroes a millennia ago. Things haven’t changed much in the way we fight, except the names we call certain exercises.

“Raven, you will fight with Thaddeus; Bethany, you’re with me,” Chiron barks.

I turn to find Thaddeus standing with us, being trained by Chiron, and can’t help but wonder why Jayden isn’t with us. Thad wasn’t even on the mission when we found Chiron lost and confused, walking down a highway to Chicago. Jayden should be here, not Thad, and my irritation only grows

with the sea demigod.

Thad glances at me like he wants to argue but shrugs and turns to Raven. She has a smirk on her face as she calls her ax from the ether. She loves that ax.

“Call your weapon, Bethany,” Chiron commands.

I’m fucking drenched and know better than to call my electricity when I’m wet so I pull my sword from the ether. The whip is more effective with magic arcing through it and I will never make the same mistake I made with the Minotaur again.

I face off with Chiron, falling into a fighting stance. The millennia-old centaur flips his sword in the air before bringing it down in an arc over my head. I thrust my sword up and the metal clangs together.

“Good block but it was a little slow.” Chiron grins. “Again.”

He swings out at me and I quickly block him again. We do this until my arms feel like lead. I’m breathing heavy and muddy and wet as the rain pelts my skin.

“I can’t hold my arms up,” I groan.

“Your training has been lax up until now. It will get easier the more you do it.” Chiron crosses his arms.

“The trainers here haven’t actually seen many battles.” I grimace.

“And it shows. You’ve been here for months and a basic sparring session has worn you out. This is unacceptable.” Chiron stamps his hoof.

Thad and Raven aren’t faring much better than I am. They are both gross and out of breath.

“I want you to show me how you fight with your magic,” Chiron says.

“That is a bad idea.” I shuffle my feet.

“You don’t even know how to channel your magic into your weapon?”

“Yes, I taught myself, but it’s raining and my magic is electricity.” I widen my eyes.

Chiron frowns down at me in confusion.

“She will electrocute herself,” Raven says, exasperated.

“What is electrocute?” Chiron asks.

“It’s like getting struck by lightning.”

His face flashes with horror and he nods. “We will find somewhere inside to practice magic next time. You are all dismissed. Rest because we will be doing this again tomorrow.”

I nod and slam a fist over my heart and bow my head to Chiron before me and Raven stomp off.

“How am I supposed to do that all again tomorrow when my arms are fucking jelly?” I ask Raven.

“I have a cream in my room for muscle aches. It works like a charm.” Raven bumps her shoulder into mine and I wince.

“Where do I get this magic cream?” I ask.

“I have a few jars in my dorm. You can have one,” Raven says.

“Thanks, because otherwise I may not survive more of Chiron’s training.” My shoulders slump in defeat.

How have I been able to defeat monsters all this time without proper training? Has it just been luck? How long will it be before that luck runs out?

“Beth?” Thad calls after us.

He jogs to catch up and I scowl at him. What is his deal? He’s always kind of hanging around.

“What do you want?” I ask, spinning on him.

I’m tired and cold, wet, and muddy. I have lost all patience for this rain and the constant storms and the son of the storm god just wants to have a chat in the middle of it? It’s bullshit and I should just walk away, but something in his posture stops me.

“Sorry, I know you can’t adapt to rain the way I can. I would offer to dry you and clean the mud but with the rain pouring on us, I fear it would just be a waste of time and energy.” Thad hangs his head.

“I’m cold and hangry, Thad. Can we get to the point?” Raven pipes in.

“I owe Beth an apology. We got off on the wrong foot when Ares brought you all back from the last mission. I’d only been here a couple days and kept hearing everyone talking about how you were all out saving the world and I got overly cocky and confident when I saw you.”

“That’s not an excuse,” I say, rolling my eyes.

“No, it’s not, but I was hoping that we could start over and maybe be friends?” He glances at the sky.

“I really don’t think Jayden would like that.” I turn to walk away.

“Please? I don’t what it is about me, but the other demigods don’t like me.” He pleads with me with his eyes.

My shoulders slump. “It’s because your dad is Poseidon. Let me guess. Draven has been talking shit to everyone?”

“Tall Hermes kid that you punched when you got back from Sparta?” he asks.

“Yup, that’s Draven. He feels threatened by anyone with more power than him. You’re from the big three gods. He will always hate you for it.” I sigh.

He pulls the same thing with Jayden all the time, but he honestly isn’t worth my headspace. He came back to the academy claiming to be a hero when the only thing he did other than bitch on that mission was to use his magic to save the other students.

“Why do they listen to him?” Thad asks.

“They’re all sheep and probably believe anything he tells them. It’s stupid,” Raven scoffs.

“You all keep to yourselves though and have a close circle of friends,” Thad says.

His words aren’t accusing but I still flinch. We’ve been accused of being the mean girl clique on more than one occasion. Kira even acted like that was the truth when we met her before we left for Sparta.

“It’s easier that way. The students here are intimidated and I think they all think I’m one tantrum away from smiting them like Zeus would.” I chuckle.

“There’s only a couple that you would actually smite though.” Raven bumps me again.

I take a step to the side because, shit, my arms still hurt and she keeps bumping me. I rub at my arm and her eyes widen.

“Sorry, B. I forget that you’re not a child of Ares,” she says.

“It’s fine, I’m just sore. I have no idea how we have saved the world three times and never been trained correctly.” I lean back against the tree but a

branch swats my ass.

A giggle fills the air as I jump and glare at the tree. Damn Dryads.

“Okay, so you won’t actually smite most people. Who do I need to avoid so I’m not hit in the crossfire?” Thad chuckles.

Raven and I share a glance and grin. “Draven and Mia.”

“I’m not going within ten feet of Draven, but Mia has been sniffing around. Why would you smite her?”

“Long story.” I shake my head.

I don’t want to get into why I hate Mia. She has been a thorn in my side ever since I stepped foot at the academy.

“I mean, we’re friends now, right? So we have plenty of time to cover that part of your past.” Thad takes a step toward the trees.

“I never said we were friends.” I narrow my eyes at his back.

“I figure since I’m not on your list of people to smite, that’s progress. I thought you were cold.” He waves for us to follow him.

My stomach growls loudly and I reluctantly trail after him. We need to get to the cafeteria before it closes and the damn Harpies go apeshit on us for trying to get food. I don’t ever want to repeat what Raven and Adrian went through when they tried to get provisions for the trip to the underworld.

“I guess I can accept your kind of apology that wasn’t really an apology.” I roll my eyes at his back.

“I apologize for the way I acted when we first met. I’m guessing it’s a trait I get from my father but that’s not an excuse either. I’m sorry. I will be a better friend.” Thad stares down at me seriously.

“Okay, I get it. I accept your apology.” I grin and shake my head.

I glance at Raven. She shrugs and trudges after Thad. I’m still wary of the sea demigod but I have questions for him. I need to know what’s going on. What if we continue letting the weather go crazy and then by the time we leave to go help Poseidon it’s too late and everything is destroyed.

I rush forward and catch up with Thad. I have seen him use some of his

powers but not all. Can he call the storms or get rid of them? I can do crazy things with the weather, so can he as a son of Poseidon do them too?

I step in front of Thad and glance around the quad. It's empty with the storms still raging.

"These storms are really strange. California never gets this much rain." I stare up at the storm clouds.

"They are. It was the reason I came to the states from Ireland. My father got word from a seer that something big was coming and I was needed at the academy." Thad shrugs.

"The weird storms are because he's lost his trident, aren't they?" I ask.

"I don't know, but probably. They call him the god of storms." Thad doesn't turn to me as he speaks.

"Can you control them? I can usually do some cool shit with the sky, but these storms are beyond my control, plus it takes a lot of magic to clear the clouds so I don't get soaked." My stomach rumbles again, emphasizing my point as we walk into the dining hall.

A loud shriek fills the silence and I know who it is before I ever turn in her direction. Mia. What is the psychotic Barbie going to attack me with this time? I roll my eyes and turn to the harpy with my arms folded over my chest.

"Jayden isn't enough for you? You have to go and get close to the new guy too?" she screeches.

"What?" Thad asks, raising his hands in surrender and taking a huge step back.

"Don't worry about her. She's a jealous hag who thinks all the guys in this school are hers and if anyone comes around, she loses her shit. She's a daughter of Aphrodite," I say.

"Ahh." Thad nods at me in understanding.

"You know the type?" I grin and completely ignore Mia's existence.

Jayden struts over and wraps his arm around my waist. He kisses my

temple and glares at Thad. Well, fuck. Let the pissing match commence. I turn to Raven and widen my eyes, pleading with her to help me when Greyson saunters over and pulls her into a kiss. Fat chance of her being any help now.

“I know the type and I also know your boyfriend doesn’t like me much so I’m going to get my food and go sit at my table.” Thad nods to Jayden and walks away.

“I was going to ask him if he could stop the storms when Mia went apeshit,” I grumble.

“Don’t you think he would have done it already if he could?” Jayden lifts a brow.

“From what I gathered, everyone has been kind of horrible to him so why would he want to help us when salt water regenerates his magic?” I ask.

“That’s a fair point,” Jayden miraculously agrees with me.

“I think he’s all alone here, Jayden. He said Draven has been hassling him and just being a dick so no one will talk to him. We both know we’re most likely going to need his help because I would bet my magic that we’re going after the trident next.”

“Don’t do that. Don’t tempt fate.” Jayden squeezes me closer.

“Apparently, the fates like me since I didn’t get beat with a cane the last time we were in Barstow.” I shrug.

“The fates don’t like anybody,” Jayden grumbles.

“She told me I did well and to watch out for betrayal. Can you think of anyone who has received a message like that from the fates?” I glare at him.

“No, you’re right, but what if it’s Thad who’s the betrayer?” Jayden nudges me toward the buffet.

I drown out the squawking that comes from behind us. Mia is still ranting about me standing next to Thad and having a conversation like that makes me a whore or something. The crazy bitch has lost her fucking mind.

“Can someone shut the crazy bitch up?” Raven yells.

“What?” Mia storms over to Raven and pokes her in the chest.

I grab Raven’s arm in an attempt to pull her back. Greyson is there holding her to his chest as Mia steps right in front of her.

“Greyson, let her go right now or she’ll never forgive you if Mia does something crazy like try to hit her.” I pull Raven from his arms.

“You have no room to talk, Raven. You’re as psycho as they come,” Mia growls.

“You really want to back the fuck off, Mia,” I warn.

Raven’s face has turned red and if I know my best friend, she’s about to lay the bitch out. Mia would absolutely deserve it but she’ll go to Rebecca and cry about it. I know she will. She steps up to Raven and pokes her in the chest again. Raven, as quick as lightning, snatches Mia’s finger and twists it around the idiot’s back.

“You should have listened to Beth,” Raven sneers. “You probably wouldn’t have a broken finger right now. You’re lucky that’s all I gave you.”

There’s a loud snap and Mia screams, thrashing in Raven’s grasp, but she doesn’t let go.

“I’m going to tell Rebecca. You can’t treat me this way. My mother is the goddess of love and will take all your relationships away,” Mia screams.

Raven shoves her away and she stumbles, holding her hand protectively.

Raven scoffs. “My mate bond goes far beyond a simple love spell. The fates decided that so run along to mommy and see if she can do anything.” Raven crosses her arms and glares, daring Mia to try something so stupid again.

Mia wails as several of her sisters drag her from the dining hall, glaring at us the entire time. What the fuck? All we have ever done is defend ourselves against the traitorous bitch and we are the bad guys amongst the Aphrodite students? It doesn’t make a damn bit of sense.

“They’re all crazy.” I lean back into Jayden’s arms.

“They are, but their mom is a powerful goddess so I would be careful.”

Jayden squeezes my hip and I finally walk through the buffet line.

My stomach rumbles as I get my food. Everything smells amazing and I pile more food on my tray than I'm sure I can eat. I glance over and notice Thad eating sponge at the Poseidon table and hang my head.

He really is alone. Maybe he was sincere and really just needs a friend. I turn to Jayden but he's not looking in the same direction as me.

"I need to ask Thad another question." I pat Jayden's arm, but he walks with me to the Poseidon table. "Jayden."

"I'm going with you. He may be playing you into being friends and if that's so and he's trying to take you from me, I want to know," Jayden growls.

Well, shit. Me and Jayden haven't defined our relationship because there are too many external forces that are trying to tear us apart but when he puts it like that, my insides go all gooey and I can't help but lean against him.

"Jayden, we've talked about this tons of times. Trust in me and the fact that I want you and no one else. Stop letting everyone else dictate our relationship." I shake my head against his chest.

"I'm trying but when we first met him, that guy got to me. He wants you for himself and his father is a big three god. Your father would probably approve of him over me." Jayden hangs his head.

"I have told you repeatedly that I don't care who my father approves of. When are you going to get that through your thick head, Jayden?" I slam my tray down on the table in front of Thad and he glances up, his eyes widening.

"I thought we had to sit at our own tables," Thad says warily.

"We get certain allowances because we have recovered so many gods' items of power." I shrug.

"So, you just basically do what you want?" Thad grins.

"No, I still should have asked for permission technically, but since you wanted to be friends and I had questions, I figured it would be okay," I reply.

Thad nods for us both to sit and Jayden wraps his arm around my

shoulders.

“What kind of questions?” Thad asks warily.

“Are you able to control the storms?” I ask again.

The crazy bitch Mia interrupted the last time I asked, and he never answered. I pick up a slice of pizza from my tray and take a big bite as I wait for his answer. Jayden is ramrod straight next to me as I groan at the explosion of flavor from the combination pizza complete with jalapeños.

“Do you think I would let everyone here suffer if I could control them?” Thad asks.

“Actually, after what you told me earlier about the assholes, I think you definitely would.” I smirk at him. “Salt water strengthens you and the rain is salt water.”

“You may be right on that, but no. I can’t control storms like my father.” Thad sighs.

Well, shit. There goes that plan. I tilt my head at him, wondering if he has any clues about the next item of power. I would bet anything that it’s Poseidon that we have to save, but I can’t be sure.

“Dammit.” I hang my head. “I was hoping we could get a few rain free days or weeks before we inevitably have to go fight more monsters.”

“Sorry, but if it helps, I agree that my father is probably the next on your list to help. He didn’t give me much when he said I needed to be at the academy. Actually, he didn’t see me at all. My brother Triton came in his place, which is always fun.” Thad rolled his eyes.

“Triton?” Jayden asked, his eyes gleaming.

What is his deal? The half siblings we all had that were gods themselves were usually a pain in the ass. What does Jayden know about Triton that we can use against him? Maybe we don’t have to use anything against him at all and he will just help us.

I push up to standing, my plate that was overloaded before nearly empty as I glance between the two demigods. One is mine while the other is my

friend, at least that's all I want him to be.

With demigods in this place, I never know up from down and even though Thad expressed an interest in friendship, with these guys I never know when one will go off the deep end. Better to keep Thad at arm's length until I know what's really going on in that mysterious head of his.

"What do you know about my brother?" Thad asks, leaning forward on his elbows.

"Just that he's vengeful and cocky and a momma's boy." Jayden shrugs.

Thad relaxes in his seat. "He's all of those things and he hates me, but when Dad sent him to find me, he did and gave me the information I needed to get where I needed to be."

"Which is here at the academy?" I ask.

"Yes. Pontus has a son. They call him the old man of the sea and he has the sight. He told my father what needed to happen and my father ordered Triton to find me," Thad says with a frown.

"So, it is very possible that the trident is the next item of power we need to find." I shake my head.

We all stand from the Poseidon table and head toward the bins. Most of the students have left by now since the storm eased up a while ago. After I place my tray in the bin, Jayden wraps his hand around mine and tugs me out of the dining hall. The rain is a slight drizzle instead of an all-out downpour which I'm thankful for since my clothes are still pretty grimy from my training session.

"Ugh, this weather sucks and I can't even give us relief," I grumble.

"I hope that we really are looking for my father's trident because at least then, the weather will stabilize and we can come up with a plan to get everything back in order," Thad says, staring up at the sky. "Hopefully."

"Me too," I say because without the weather stabilizing, we are in a world of trouble with the demigods that we have on our side.

“Ugh,” I grumble the next morning as I trudge down the stairs.

Despite the cream Raven gave me for the muscle aches, my arms still feel like lead. I’m pissed that the instructors for physical training haven’t been preparing us right. Chiton’s training would be a lot easier to deal with if they had been.

“You all right, B? You look like you want to murder someone.” Raven pats my shoulder when I get to the eighth floor.

“Not really. No. I’m kind of pissed that we haven’t been training for war this entire time.” I scowl.

We get to the first floor and my mood darkens further. It’s raining, again. It’s always raining and we are getting into the summer months. It should be sunny and at least warm, but this crazy weather just keeps persisting.

I flip up the hood to my jacket and we race to the dining hall. Thankfully, the rain is only a drizzle and we don’t get too wet. The second I step through the doors, Mia is in front of me.

“You have everyone else around here fooled, but not me. I know you are nothing but a whore.” Mia sneers.

“I have no idea how you can even think that.” I shake the water from my body and Mia screams when it lands on her.

Thad is at the buffet line watching the whole interaction with a smirk. He

flicks his hand and dries me and Raven collecting all the water into a ball that hovers over Mia's head. I take a step back knowing what Thad is about to do when the water loses its shape and falls on Mia's head, drenching her hair.

Black mascara streams down her face as she shrieks and lunges for me. "I don't have power over water. How do you think I did this?"

I dodge her hands with her perfect nails that resemble claws and elbow her in the back so hard she stumbles to her knees.

Raven crouches in front of her. "How many times are you going to try this and get your ass handed to you before you realize all you're doing is making yourself look like a jealous skank?"

"It's seriously pathetic, Mia. Get over it. You're going to end up getting seriously injured because fighting really isn't your thing." I turn my back on her and head for the buffet line.

She screams again from behind me, and then the sobs start. She wails for someone to help her and I roll my eyes. She is absolutely ridiculous.

"You, okay?" Thad asks.

"Yup, just another day in paradise." I grab a tray and fill it quickly.

Mia won't be a problem for the rest of the day. She has outbursts occasionally, but she'll slink off into her hole to lick her wounds now.

"She called you a whore and all you did was defend yourself." Thad lifts a brow at me.

"Mia can't fight. She thinks she can but it's pretty pathetic, really. She wouldn't even be a challenge and not worth my time." I fill my tray as Raven sidles up to my other side.

"Yeah, you should have seen her against the Sphynx. She was holding her sword completely wrong and was thrown into a tree in like two seconds flat." Raven sets her tray down.

"I missed a lot this year," Thad mumbles.

"Yes, you did," Jayden says as he walks up behind me, wrapping an arm around my waist.

I glance up at him and grin. He plants a kiss on my forehead. He's obviously staking his claim, but he isn't acting jealous at the moment, so I call that a win.

We finish getting our food and Thad trudges to his table all alone while the rest of us go to the Zeus table. We pass Kira and I wave at her as she chats happily with her siblings at the Hephaestus table.

Jayden never takes his hand from my hip as we get to the table and take our usual seats. "Should we have Thad come sit with us?"

"What?" Jayden asks, turning to me sharply.

"He's over there all alone. I have never had to sit alone here even when I wanted to." I bump my shoulder into his.

Raven shakes her head at me and widens her eyes. I drop the question because something is definitely off. Thad isn't a bad guy. He just decided to be the cocky son of Poseidon when he first met us and got off on the wrong foot.

Jayden's expression hardens as he sits back in his seat. He's not happy about the reminder that he was a pushy ass who used to sit at my table whether I liked it or not. Jayden doesn't respond and is quiet throughout the rest of breakfast. Why is that question the one that pisses him off so much and puts him in this broody mood?

"Let's get to class before Cross throws a bitch fit about us being late," Raven says when we're done eating.

Even when we aren't the last ones in the class, he still gives us the stink eye like we are wasting his time. Jayden wraps a possessive arm around my shoulders as we pass the Poseidon table. Did he just basically pee on me to show his territory? Fucking demigods.

I slam my tray into the bin and glare at Jayden. Everyone knows we're seeing each other. Why does he feel the need to do that shit? When we walk outside the clouds have parted and just a hint of the sun peeks through the clouds, warming me.

“How long do you think that break in the storms will last?” I ask.

I turn my face up to the sun and sigh. It’s not a cloudless sunny day but it’s a break from constantly being soaked. Jayden kisses my temple before he leaves for his language class and I reluctantly walk into the admin building with Raven.

Cross isn’t at the door glaring at us when we get to class and I frown. Did he start class without us? All my confusion melts away and I elbow Raven in the side to see the sight before me. Kira is sitting in the seat in front of Dax and they are chatting together.

“Did it work?” I whisper.

“I don’t know, but they look cozy.” Raven grins.

We wait for several minutes before Cross hustles in the room, clearly frazzled. Thad sits forward in his seat in the front of the room and cocks his head to the side. He notices the change in our ancient history teacher as well.

What is going on with him? Does he know more than he’s telling us? He’s a sea demigod too, but much older than the rest of us. He glances at Thad and then at me and frowns.

“Continue in your groups discussing the Odyssey.” He waves a hand and sits behind his desk.

I turn away from the desk and back to Raven who scrapes her chair loudly, turning in her seat. “Where were we?”

“Scylla and Charybdis?” I ask.

Raven shudders. “I hope that whatever we have to do to get the trident back doesn’t involve those crazy monsters.”

“A whirlpool with teeth doesn’t sound like my idea of a good time,” I agree.

“Do you think that the sea monsters are coming back too but we haven’t seen them because we haven’t gone to the actual oceans yet?” Raven asks.

“I don’t think anyone has ever killed those monsters,” I say as I flip through the pages of my book.

“Then how do we defeat them if we do have to encounter them?”

“I don’t know. I guess we just have to hope that we don’t encounter them.” I shrug.

“Why are you so sure you’re going on another mission?” Dax asks.

“You have noticed the freak storms, right?” I ask, turning to him.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean you guys will be the ones going.” He taps his pen on his desk.

“Are you sure about that?” Raven asks and throws a wadded-up piece of paper at his forehead.

I tune out the two of them bickering as I stare down at the pages of the book. The lights flicker just before the ground rumbles. I hold on to my desk as the entire building shakes beneath me and the windows rattle.

Are we under attack? Did something get inside the wards? Jumping to my feet, I race out the door with Raven hot on my heels. Students are pouring out the doors of the academic building in waves and blocking my path.

“Move! I think we’re under attack.” I push several guys out of my way.

We race down the steps to the quad, but there are no monsters in sight. The ground rolls beneath my feet and then opens up directly in front of me. Someone grabs my arm, pulling me back, and Jayden’s blue eyes stare at me in horror.

“Not a monster. It’s an earthquake.” I turn to Thad. “Your dad is known as the earth shaker, right?”

“Yeah, this is some seriously bad news.” Thad steps closer to the crack.

“What are we going to do? We can’t have earthquakes destroying everything. Do you all remember the tsunami a few years back that took out Japan? That’s what happens with huge earthquakes.” I rub a hand down my face.

The ground has stopped rumbling, but the evidence of it still remains. Cracks in the earth aren’t a huge concern, but the bad omens they represent are.

“Everyone, back up,” Cross barks at us.

I scan the quad but it’s only the four of us close to the huge gaping hole in the ground. I’m not surprised. It’s always us investigating the scene of an attack and anything dangerous. I’m not getting the warm fuzzies about the impending war we have to fight.

“Cross, what’s happening? Do you know something?” I ask.

“No, but I need you all to back up before someone falls in the giant hole in the ground.” Cross crosses his arms over his chest.

“But you’re married to a nereid. Surely, she’s heard something?” I press.

“It was just an earthquake, Beth. Not the end of the world. We are in California. They happen all the time here,” Cross says.

“You don’t actually believe that.” I glare at the teacher.

“It doesn’t matter what I believe. You all need to get to your training class.” Cross points to the clearing.

“What the hell is going on?” I ask as I stomp to the training yard.

“Why is he always like that when we ask questions?” Raven frowns.

The ground rumbles beneath my feet again. I stumble to the side, holding my arms out so I don’t fall. Jayden grips my hips, steadying me, but he’s wobbly too.

“Those definitely aren’t normal earthquakes,” Thad says as he crouched to the ground.

He digs his fingers into the dirt but nothing happens. What is he trying to do? Stop an earthquake? That’s not possible, right?

“We can’t do anything about it right now. Rebecca isn’t going to let us go on a hunch. We all know that. She gets increasingly angry with every mission the gods send us on,” I say with a sigh.

“Beth’s right. We need a concrete threat before she will let us go.” Jayden rubs his neck.

We pick carefully through the forest to the training yard as the ground finally settles. A dryad wails the closer we get to the clearing. As we break

through the trees, I hang my head. The ground tore up our training area and a tree fell through the center.

No one else is out here, not even Chiron is waiting for us.

I rush to the dryad, but she bats me away. “Stupid demigods did this.”

“We didn’t.” I hold my hands up in surrender. “There was an earthquake. There are cracks in the ground.”

“You,” she screams, pointing to Thad. “You’re an earth shaker.”

She races past me faster than I can blink and tiny green fists beat him in the chest. She keeps screaming what I guess are tree-themed obscenities. They are colorful and a laugh bubbles out of me as Thad grabs her wrists.

“It wasn’t me, dryad. There’s something seriously messed up happening.” Thad snaps at her.

“What do you mean?” she asks with a sniffle.

“It was an actual earthquake. I tried to take control of it with my magic, but it was too strong.”

“That’s what you were doing when you were playing in the dirt before.” Raven tilts her head to the side.

“Yes, I was trying to stop it. The dryad is right; I have minor abilities that revolve around earthquakes and volcanoes.” Thad releases the dryad and her shoulders slump.

“My tree,” she sobs.

“I’m sorry.” I pat her shoulder. “If there was something I could do to help, I would.”

“Maybe a Hermes kid could help?” Thad suggests and I grimace.

“I am persona non grata with all the Hermes kids because of Draven.” I shuffle my feet.

“Someone has to be able to help, right?” Raven asks. “What if we talk to Rebecca and ask her to talk to the Hermes students?”

“I might be able to get some help,” Jayden says.

“Persephone.” I slap my forehead. “Of course.”

“The goddess Persephone?” The dryad perks up with this idea.

“She’s my stepmother. She will help if my father will allow her to leave the underworld for a short time.” Jayden squeezes my hand. “Do you have the shell on you?”

He is referring to the shell we got on our first mission for helping the nereid with the sirens in her stream. I keep it on me at all times in case of an emergency. I pull it from my bag and hand it to Jayden.

“This may only be a temporary fix. I don’t know how many more earthquakes there will be.” I raise my brows at the dryad.

“Any help will be amazing. I will owe you all a debt.” She bows her head.

I nod to Jayden to call Persephone and we wait for the goddess to answer.

“Jayden,” she squeals. “And Bethany. How nice to hear from you both.”

“Hello, Goddess Persephone,” I say with a slight bow.

“Beth, none of that. What can I help you both with? You don’t use that fancy shell to call often.” She glares at us.

“I’m sorry. We’re busy at the academy. I will make sure Jayden calls you more.” I smile.

She’s so different than my own evil stepmother. Well, I assume she is because I’ve never actually met Hera, but with the stories of the atrocities she’s committed on Zeus’ children, I’m happy to stay far away.

Jayden pulls an annoyed face and I grin back at him.

“Look at the two of you finally getting along.” Persephone claps excitedly.

“Persephone,” Jayden cuts into her excitement. “We have a problem. We think Poseidon is weakening. An earthquake felled a dryad’s tree. Is there anyway Father will let you come to the academy to help us?”

“I’m due to go see my mother in a few weeks. I don’t think Hades will have a problem popping out to help quickly. Will you, dear?” Persephone glances to her side.

“As long as Jayden and Beth come to visit soon. Spot is getting anxious for someone to play with.” Hades chuckles.

“Deal,” I say before Jayden can decline. “I want to see Spot.”

“His names is Cerberus,” Jayden grumbles.

“Wait, what did I miss?” Thad whispers to Raven.

“I’ll tell you later.” Raven giggles.

“His name means spotted, Jayden, and your dad said he named him that as a joke and I love it.” I stick my tongue out at him.

Persephone squeals again. “Look how cute they are, Hades.”

“Persephone, can we focus, please?” Jayden throws his hands up.

“Right, sorry. We have a felled tree. I will be right there.” She waves a hand and the mist clears.

By the time it clears the goddess is standing in front of us in all her ethereal beauty. Thad’s eyes widen as he bows, but Persephone only has eyes for me and Jayden. The goddess wraps her arms around us and bounces on her toes.

“I knew the two of you would figure it out. I knew after everything you’ve done for all of us you would find a way to be happy.” Persephone is surprisingly strong as she squeezes us both.

“We are still working on it,” I say.

“Aphrodite is probably livid about this match.” She laughs like that’s the best part of the whole scenario.

I groan at the mention of the goddess of love and beauty. Mia. She probably went to her mother to have her place obstacles between Jayden and me. Stupid spoiled brat.

“Mia really would go to any low,” Raven scoffs.

When this is all over, there is going to be a reckoning between the demigod and me. She thinks she can have whatever she wants because of who her mother is, she is going to be proven horribly wrong.

God magic is seriously cool. Persephone starts to glow and the tree rights itself immediately. She touches the base of it and roots grow deep into the earth.

“That’s wicked,” Raven says.

“I am the queen of the underworld.” Persephone smirks.

“Thank you, goddess.” The dryad bows so low she’s practically in the dirt.

Her skin glows with vitality as she beams at the goddess. I’m glad we are able to help the dryad, but we still have other problems to deal with.

“Thank you, Persephone. I didn’t know how we were going to fix this.” I nod to her.

“I would do anything for you all. You saved my home and my husband from a terrible fate.” Persephone hugs me.

I’m startled for a second but return the embrace. It’s warm and almost motherly. How long has it been since I’ve had a hug like that? It’s been at least three years. I try not to think about it. At least my mom is happy in Elysium. The trip to the underworld gave me more than I could have imagined.

“We need to investigate and see if there are any more problems like this.” Jayden pulls me from Persephone’s grasp, only for the goddess to grab him in

a fierce hug as well.

“You let me know when you’re coming to visit, Jayden. I’m going to be with my mother on Olympus for a while, but I don’t want to miss your visit.” She glares at him before flashing out.

“She’s so weird.” Jayden sighs.

“At least your stepmother likes you. I still haven’t met mine and I’m sure if I ever do, she will try to kill me.” I bump my shoulder with his.

“Try having a half brother who lives to torment you.” Thad grimaces.

“All the gods families are pretty fucked up.” Raven grins. “My dad is dating the goddess of love and her ass hates me.”

“Apparently, she hates me too, so we’re in good company.” I raise my hand and Raven high-fives me.

I don’t care about Aphrodite or what she thinks of me. She put us through trials. Stupid goddess wanted to make sure her spoiled bitch of a daughter got what she wanted—Jayden. Well, Mia is desperate and I’m never going to let her get what she wants. Even if, gods forbid, we don’t work out, he will never be with her.

“I can practically see the steam coming out of your ears. It looks like training is canceled for the day. Let’s go see if we can pinpoint any more damage to the academy.” Jayden wraps an arm around my waist.

We pick through the forest as another quake hits us. It’s smaller than the others but still shakes the ground. Fuck, this isn’t good. How the hell are we going to stop this?

As we stumble to the quad, several more cracks are now visible in the ground, but they aren’t as big as the one outside the academic building.

“Did we wait too long to go after the trident? Why is it we are always running against a clock?” I whisper as I stare down at a spiderweb of cracks that intersect the steps students sit on every day.

“We have no clue if it’s even missing,” Jayden says and kisses my temple.

“This is pretty irrefutable evidence that it is, in fact, missing,” I say.

A deafening boom fills the air and the ground rocks more violently than before. Thad’s shoulders stiffen as he turns to the forges.

“There’s a fucking volcano here?” he yells.

“Yeah, I was surprised when I found out too. It’s where the forges are held.” I shrug.

“Fuck,” Thad runs a hand through his hair. “Show me.”

My eyes widen at the implication and I nearly face-palm that I hadn’t put those two things together a lot sooner. Volcanic activity is similar to earthquakes and plate tectonics. The volcano can definitely be affected by the earth shaker.

I race to the forges as I notice Kira and several of her siblings running from the dorms in the same direction as us.

The volcano can’t erupt in the middle of the Southern California mountains. That will bring too many eyes on us since there isn’t a volcano listed in any database the humans have in this range.

We are full-out sprinting to the volcano when another boom fills the quiet. The group of Hephaestus students run alongside us. Kira glances at me with terrified eyes.

“Claud is in the forge. The lava won’t hurt him, but what the fuck are we going to do if it blows?” Kira chews her lip.

“It can’t blow. It just can’t. It will take out the academy and we won’t be able to get out,” I say.

“The wards,” she says and curses, speeding up.

“Yeah, we have to find a way to stabilize it,” I growl.

I turn to the earth shaker demigod. He might be able to bide us some time. Thad nods as we run. He’s going to do whatever he can to stop the destruction of the academy. Good. We are out of our depths on this one.

The ground rocks beneath us again just as we get to the base of the volcano. This is total annihilation if Thad can’t stop it. There are cracks too

close to the forges for my liking. Rockslides could happen next. How will the students survive the crap that is inevitable while we try to save the world?

Kira yanks open the door to the forges and a blast of heat that's almost unbearable hits me. I take in a ragged breath, but it burns my lungs.

"What is that?" I choke out. "It wasn't that hot before."

"Something's wrong," Kira says. "I think there's lava in the main forge."

Thad races inside with the rest of the Hephaestus students and I take one step in the door before sweat drips into my eyes. Crying fills my ears in the quiet space and I recognize Claud's sobs.

"Where's Claud?" I cry. "He's in there."

Thad's cooling water magic rolls over me and I sigh as I race into the forge. I don't have a clue how he did it, but I'm nowhere near as hot as I was when we first stepped inside. I take a cleansing breath and glance at Thad as loud sobs meet my ears.

"Claud?" I call out to my friend.

Raven rushes up behind me with Jayden and Adrian hot on her heels. "Is he okay? Why is he crying? I thought the lava couldn't hurt him."

"It can't. I have no idea why he's crying," I yell.

"Didn't do it." Claud's voice breaks the silence.

I skid to a stop as I go into the workroom. Claud is under his workbench. His hands are covering his single eye as he breaks down in soft cries.

"Claud, why are you crying?" I crouch in front of his workstation.

"Beth, there's lava there," Jayden warns.

"I see it, but Claud is scared, saying he didn't do it. I need him to know that I know that." I turn to Jayden.

Thad steps forward with his head cocked to the side. "Is he a cyclops?"

"Yes," I growl. "One of the ancient ones."

"So, not a son of Poseidon." Thad nods.

"Definitely not. He was in Tartarus longer than your father has been alive," Raven says.

Thad nods and I turn my attention back to Claud. The poor guy's so childlike in his cries it breaks my heart.

"Claud, what didn't you do?" I ask softly.

"I didn't do it. I not shake the ground. Don't send me back." Claud wails, never looking at me.

"Claud, we would never send you back. What's wrong?" I try to coax him out, but he won't budge.

"Hey," Jayden says. "We're friends, right?"

Claud uncovers his eye and blinks at Jayden.

"Friend." Claud nods.

"Well, we don't send our friends to Tartarus because of things that aren't their fault," I pipe in.

"No? Not my fault," Claud whimpers.

"Not your fault. It was an earthquake, Claud. It was Poseidon weakening, not you. Can you come out, please?" I hold a hand out to him, but he shakes his huge head.

Kira runs in from the volcano with wide eyes. "I don't know what to do. The volcano is no longer stable. It could blow at any minute. What do we do?"

Any headway we had with Claud only seconds ago is gone as the cyclops wails again. "I didn't do it. Forges safe. I'm safe."

"You're safe, Claud." I smile and hold out my small hand for him to take in his huge one.

"Friends not safe." His eye widens as something occurs to him. "No heat."

Claud scrambles from under the bench and grabs me in a meaty fist around the waist before plucking Raven from the ground as well and standing at his full height.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Thad says as he stares up at us in the huge cyclops' grip.

“Claud, put us down.” I pat his hand. “We need to know what’s happening with the volcano.”

“No, fire hurt friends.” Claud shakes his huge head.

“Yes, the fire will hurt us but do you see him? He’s an earth shaker and can help us. We need to make sure our home is safe, right?” I pat his shoulder.

I’m probably talking too fast for him, but when he tilts his head to the side in thought, I think I’ve convinced him to put us down but I’m horribly wrong. Claud takes a threatening step toward Thad before I can stop him.

“Earth shaker. I not do it,” Claud roars.

“No.” Thad raises his hands in surrender. “You didn’t and neither did I. We need to figure out what’s happening with the volcano. I can help. Will you let me help?”

“Friend?” Claud turns to Jayden instead of me and Raven.

“Yes, Claud. I guess the earth shaker is a friend. He’s here to help.” I’m not the only one who can hear the reluctance in his voice.

He doesn’t want to admit it, but Thad is the best way for us to figure this all out. I glance at Jayden with a smile, still grasped in Claud’s fist. I pat his hand. Claud is a good friend. He’s so innocent and sweet, I just want to wrap him up in Bubble Wrap so he’s never hurt by anything.

“Friend?” His eye narrows with suspicion.

“Yes, Claud. He knows you didn’t hurt the forge or the academy. He can make sure no one even thinks of sending you back. We won’t let that happen. I promise.” I pat his finger.

“Thad, help,” Kira yells from the mouth of the volcano.

“Are you actually able to go in there?” I shout as Thad takes a step toward the door.

“No, I’m not lava proof.” Thad grimaces. “But there are other ways I can help.”

Thad picks his way to the metal door and places his hand on the wall. He

frowns before crouching on the ground outside the door.

“Are you going to play in the dirt again?” Raven asks with a grin.

“Shut it, Raven. The volcano is unstable. We need Thad’s help,” Kira barks.

I turn wide eyes on Raven. I’ve never heard Kira talk to anyone so forcefully. She is definitely finding her confidence. Raven scowls but I secretly love that we’ve had a good influence on our friend. Raven’s eyes meet mine and I can tell she’s not hating this new Kira either. Good for her.

Thad places his hands on the ground and closes his eyes in concentration. A rumble shakes the ground and Claud squeals and shuffles his feet.

“Shhh, Claud. It’s okay, the earth shaker is working his magic. We can’t let this volcano erupt inside the wards. Everyone in the academy is in danger,” I say.

“Friends in danger.” His head swings in every direction before he takes a single step and the ground shakes again.

“No, Claud. Don’t move. We need to let him work.” I brush his hand with mine.

“Sorry.” He hangs his head and a tear leaks from his eye.

“You’re okay, I know it’s not your fault. Bad people stole the gods’ items of power and we have to find them. The earth shaker, Poseidon is next. I’m sure of it.” I frown.

“How’s it coming, Thad?” Kira asks as he stands.

“I think I have it stabilized for now.” Sweat pours from his brow.

Did that take every bit of magic he has? Thad stumbles and the asshole Max catches him before he can fall on the ground.

“Whoa, Thad. I think you need to eat before you do anything else.” Max pats him on the back.

Good to know there are demigods Max isn’t an asshole to even if I’m not one of them. What is his beef with me? Do I even care when it looks like the school is going to be trapped under a river of lava? Not particularly. I have

bigger fish to fry, literally. We are definitely going after the trident; the only question is who will be coming with us?

“Claud, let us down. We’re safe for now.” I grin at the cyclops but his single eye narrows.

“We need to tell Rebecca now,” Jayden says.

“You do,” Max says. “Because if we have many more earthquakes, it won’t matter what Thad just did. The volcano will blow and it’s been dormant for centuries. It will blow sooner or later.”

“Fuck, how long do you think we have?” I ask but Max ignores me.

Claud stamps his foot when it’s clear that Max doesn’t want to answer. “How long?”

“Two weeks, but maybe less. It just depends on whether there are more earthquakes. It could be sooner. Poseidon needs his trident so we can be safe,” he says more to Claud than me, but I still take in the information.

How the hell are we going to find the trident within a week when the storms continue to rage and earthquakes are super random? We could go on this mission and end up coming back to a decimated academy.

I turn to Thad with a raised eyebrow. “How long do we have?”

“His estimation is generous. We need to leave immediately if there’s any hope.” Thad hangs his head.

“Well, shit.” Raven’s words ring through my ears, and I can’t help but echo them.

“We need to leave, Claud. Can you put us down, please?” I ask as I smile at him.

Reluctantly, Claud puts us back on our feet but I don’t get two steps before we are all crushed in a cyclops hug.

“Friends have weapons?” he asks as a tear trails down his cheek.

“I always have the awesome weapon you made me.” I grin.

I show him the necklace and rub the charm Ares gave me. I think about the sword that Claud made for me and it appears in my hand. Claud claps

with glee before he turns to Raven, but she already has her ax out to show him. Claud claps with glee. He is excited that he's helped us on our missions and that we will be safe.

"We will be back as soon as we save the world again, Claud. You'll keep the Hephaestus kids in line until then, right?" I smirk at Max. "Especially Kira. She's a troublemaker."

"Kira friend, not trouble." Claud eyes Kira before turning back to me.

"Very funny, Beth." Kira rolls her eyes.

"I know, Claud. I made a joke." I clap him on the shoulder.

Claud laughs as if he understands, but he doesn't get our humor yet. He's still got the mentality of a child but he will get it eventually.

"Don't worry," Kira says. "I'll keep an eye on him. Claud will be okay while you're gone."

"Thank you. I don't have a way for you to contact us while we're gone, but I'll try to get in touch to make sure he's okay. I hate to leave him." I hang my head.

"Just figure this out because even if they don't realize it, the entire academy and possibly the world is relying on you to find that trident. That has to be the problem." Kira shakes her head as Max steps forward.

"I'm still not your secretary, but I appreciate you doing the things most wouldn't." Max bows his head to me.

"Wow. I think that may have been the nicest thing you've ever said to me." I smirk.

"Don't get used to it, daughter of Zeus. I am still reserving judgment." Max says.

"Whatever." I turn from the horrible fucking heat of the forges and follow Jayden and Thad outside with Raven next to me.

"So, we have a new mission, I'm guessing," Raven says, eyeing the two demigods in front of us.

They don't like each other, but I have a gut feeling Thad is going to have

a huge role in this mission and Jayden isn't going to like it one bit.

“Yeah, I'm guessing drama will unfold. I hope it doesn't because we don't have much time, but it's inevitable, isn't it?” I ask and Raven nods. “That's what I thought.”

“There's nothing we can do, B. We haven't been along the coast or seen many sea monsters. That will be a serious help.” Raven groans. “Can they at least try to get along?”

I don't even know if they can get along for a second, let alone during a mission. This is going to be interesting.

“Let's hope they can or the world may end.” Raven eyes me.

I can't help the grimace I shoot her. If we can't do this, volcanoes and tsunamis will decimate our world and whoever is behind this will finally win. We can't let that happen. Not ever.

The cool rain is a relief when we leave the forges behind. Thad is a little worse for wear when we walk outside. His face is pale and his shoulders are slumped.

“That took a lot out of you, didn’t it?” I ask him.

“I don’t think I’ve ever used that much power before. There is something seriously wrong going on here.” He shakes his head.

“We need to look for the headmistress.” Jayden stomps past me.

He’s acting like an ass. I don’t understand what’s wrong with him. Anytime I talk to Thad, he scowls and barks at people.

“That’s what we’re doing, Jayden,” Raven sings.

The trees block out most of the downpour from the rain but we’re all still soaked by the time we get to the quad.

“Be on guard for Cross,” I say as we reach the admin building.

Thad tilts his head to the side in question. “Why are we on guard for Cross?”

“He hates it when we go inside the admin building. He thinks we’re snooping for something every damn time,” Raven grumbles.

I scan the hall as we rush inside. It’s dark and gloomy. I hate when the place is empty and the shadows flicker along the sconces on the walls. It’s creepy.

A door creaks down the hall and we all freeze. Raven opens a door to a conference room as quietly as she can and we all rush inside to hide from whoever is making their way to us.

The door is cracked open so whoever it is doesn't hear the click and find us and a voice I don't recognize fills the quiet.

"I have sent her to your people three times now and none of them were successful. What makes you think this will be any different?" The voice is agitated.

I creep to the crack in the door, but the floor creaks beneath me and I flinch. Shit. Who are they and what are they talking about? I turn to the others with wide eyes. The voice quiets for a long minute. I think whoever is there is going to open the door and find our hiding spot, but their steps continue down the long hallway.

"Who was that?" I whisper.

"I don't know," Jayden says with a frown. "What were they talking about?"

"I think they just confirmed our suspicions all along. Someone at the academy is helping the person responsible for all the chaos." I widen my eyes.

"How do you figure?" Jayden asks.

"You heard what they said. 'I have sent her to your people three times.' They were talking about me." I shiver with unease.

Who was that and who were they talking to? I wish the floor hadn't creaked or I may have gotten a good look at them. Someone at the academy clearly wants me dead.

"Let's go talk to Rebecca." Jayden wraps his hand around mine and squeezes it.

We creep out of the conference room and make our way to Rebecca's office but she isn't there.

"I'm not going back to no-man's-land. Those damn dryads there are

mean.” Raven crosses her arms.

“C’mon,” I say. “Maybe we can catch her in the quad before she gets behind the building.”

We race through the halls and luckily don’t encounter Cross or anyone else in the admin building. My skin is still crawling with the knowledge that someone here is working with the unknown enemy to kill me.

“Where’s Rebecca?” I ask a random student but she shrugs.

“Let’s go to the dining hall and get some food. Rebecca always finds us when she wants to find us.” I sigh.

As we’re walking through the quad, the wind picks up and the trees sway overhead. The wind swirls almost like a tornado, knocking me into Raven. The clouds roll in faster than I’ve ever seen, and freezing rain slams into me immediately after.

“I can’t wait until these storms stop,” Raven yells over the howling wind.

“I know. Let’s get inside before it gets worse.” I rush to the doors of the dining hall and wrench them open.

We stumble into the dining hall soaking wet. I scan the room but don’t see Rebecca anywhere. She must be dealing with something like the cracks that opened up all over the academy. We go through the line and get to my table, but I notice Thad isn’t with us anymore.

“What is he doing?” I ask, turning to Thad’s table.

He’s sitting alone at the Poseidon table. I set my tray down and Jayden stiffens as he grabs my hand.

“Beth, let it go,” Jayden growls.

“You know he’s a part of this. He went into a fucking volcano to stop it from erupting.” I sit down in my seat.

“He has been more help than Draven was and we aren’t even on a mission yet.” Raven points her fork at Jayden.

“He also has a thing for you.” Jayden narrows his eyes.

“We’re just friends, Jayden.” I shake my head. “He hasn’t tried anything

since his cocky stunt the first day we met. He's all by himself over there and we need his help so be nice."

Jayden's shoulders stiffen as I wave Thad over to my table. Adrian walks in at the same time and heads to us as well.

Thad glances between me and Jayden and for a second, I think he's about to refuse, but then he picks up his tray and stomps over, sitting on the other side of Raven, far away from me.

"Did you need something?" he asks.

"Yeah, sit your ass down. We need to figure out how to tell Rebecca that the academy is in danger, again." I stab a piece of chicken with my fork.

"She's not going to like it. She was less than pleased when we had to be the ones to find the shield," Raven says.

"It has to be us," Adrian pipes up.

"Did you have a vision?" I ask, sitting forward.

Adrian grimaces. "It's all doom and gloom unless we go."

"Well, that's comforting," Thad mumbles.

"So we just have to lay out the facts for her. If earthquakes like today happen again, then the volcano is going to erupt. Everyone will be trapped inside the wards and it will destroy the academy, our home," I whisper.

"That about sums it up." Raven takes a bite of her food and chews it slowly.

Mine is sitting like lead in my gut. We have to hurry. It seems like we're always on a race against the clock. The storms started getting weird weeks ago. Why didn't we go to get the trident when there was still enough time to make a plan?

"This sucks. Why is it always at the last possible second? Why can't we ever go before the stakes are so high that there's no hope to stop it?" I hang my head.

Jayden squeezes my shoulder. "It's not impossible. We have stopped the other disasters and we'll stop this one too."

“I just hate it. I know it has to be us, but what if we fail?” I ask.

I never show my vulnerable side to anyone but with a literal ticking time bomb over the academy, I don't know what else to do.

“Doom and gloom,” Adrian repeats. “Ow.”

“Why are boys idiots?” Raven asks, throwing her hands up.

Adrian rubs the back of his head like someone just slapped him and I smirk. Raven must have done it. His comment isn't encouraging at all. I already know there's no other option. We have to succeed. Crazy weather patterns and freak earthquakes could decimate the entire world. The ocean could literally wash everything away.

“Why am I an idiot? I just made a simple comment.” Adrian glares at Raven.

“She doesn't need to be reminded of what will happen if we fail because we will not fail.” Raven shoves him probably harder than intended.

Adrian flies out of his chair and lands on his ass on the marble floor with a thud. “Shit, Raven.”

“Oops, sorry. I forget my own strength.” She doesn't look up from her plate as she delivers that non-apology.

Adrian picks himself up off the floor and glares at her as he dusts himself off. “Not cool, Raven. You need to keep your hands to yourself until you know your own strength.”

“Don't make Beth feel even worse and put added pressure on her shoulders and you won't get thrown around.” She shrugs.

“All right,” I sigh. “Raven, it's fine. We need to figure out where we would need to go to find the trident.”

“I'm guessing the ocean.” Jayden pushes his food around on his plate with his fork and glares at Thad.

“Look, I know tensions are high. Let's all just calm down.” I pop a piece of chicken into my mouth.

The doors to the dining hall burst open to howling winds and Kira races

inside soaking wet. What's going on now? She glances around frantically before her shoulders slump in relief when her eyes land on mine.

"Beth, I've been looking everywhere for you." She rushes between the tables.

"Kira, what's wrong?" I ask.

She stops at the table and bends at the waist, heaving for breath. Everyone in the dining hall is staring and whispering. Draven glares at Thad and Jayden from his spot at the Hermes table while Dax simply looks curious.

"The forges. It's worse than we originally thought," Kira says.

"Lower your voice. We don't want to cause a panic." I eye the other students in the room.

"Sit down. You look like you're about to keel over." Adrian pulls out a chair for her.

"It's probably better if we go somewhere private to talk, then." Kira glances around the room.

"Let's go to the dorms. We shouldn't be overheard up on the top floors," I say.

Jayden growls. "No."

I spin on him. "What do you mean, no?"

"We're not all going up to your dorm, Beth. You don't have a common area because there is rarely more than one child of Zeus at the academy at a time." Jayden crosses his arms.

"So? You guys have been up there before." I frown at him until it dawns on me.

Thad. He doesn't want Thad in my room. Fucking fuck, but I can't blame him for that really. Thad had shown an interest in me and I need to at least set some boundaries.

"My floor is too crowded." Raven shrugs.

"Mine too." Adrian nods.

Jayden opens his mouth to speak, but Raven cuts him off. "Not going into

the creepy skull-infested common room.”

“We can go to the common room on my floor,” Thad says. “I need to send my father a message anyway.”

I turn to Jayden but he’s staring Thad down like he wants to use his hellfire on the demigod. I reach out for his hand, but he pulls away from me. Hurt fills me and I turn away from him. What the hell is his problem?

“Let’s go talk there.” I stand from my seat at the table and grab my tray and take it to the bin.

I don’t make eye contact with anyone as I dump my tray and head out into the freezing rain. I pull my hood up over my head and wrap my arms around my waist. I thought Jayden and I were past all this hot and cold.

Raven rushes to me and loops her arm around mine as we head across the empty quad. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I mumble.

“You’re a liar. A really bad liar.” Raven glares at me.

“Can we just focus on the task at hand, please?”

“You’re gonna tell me later.” She bumps my shoulder.

Jayden steps in front of us and pulls the door open. I refuse to meet his eyes even though he’s trying to get my attention. He hurt me when I was trying to comfort him and let him know we’re in this together. Why can’t he see past his own jealousy?

We trudge up the stairs behind Thad, still wet and cold, but Thad seems to be depleted after he worked with the volcano. His shoulders are slumped as he stomps up the stairs.

We pass whispering students on every floor and I cringe. Even though we’ve tried to keep things quiet, they still know something is happening. The crazy storms and freak earthquake have given it away.

Thad places his hand on the door on the tenth floor and the briny scent of the ocean fills my lungs. The entire common area has a large fountain in the middle. I take a step back, not trusting it. Raven giggles at my reaction.

“That crazy fountain is gone, B. It went back to Delphi, remember?”
Raven pats my shoulder.

“What fountain?” Thad asks.

“The fountain of Apollo. It makes anyone who gets close to it a rhyming weirdo,” Raven says.

“That’s not what it’s supposed to do,” Adrian cuts in. “It’s supposed to make you a poet, but something went terribly wrong with you guys and the wolves.”

“I’ll say. It definitely made me think twice before getting too close to a fountain.” I shudder.

“No crazy rhyming here.” Thad chuckles.

I take another step into the room. It’s like a beach paradise. Everything is done in light blues and sea green.

There are cushions on the floor like in a cabana and Raven plops down on one close to the fountain. Kira steps up next to her but doesn’t sit. She’s wringing her hands together, clearly agitated by whatever they found out with the volcano.

Once everyone’s inside, I turn to Kira. “What’s wrong?”

“The cracks are deeper than we originally thought. There’s so much pressure on the volcano it keeps releasing pockets of steam like it’s going to blow any minute. Even with whatever Thad did to it. I don’t know if we can stop an eruption.”

“How long?” I ask.

Dread pools in my gut as I stare at her. We need a win here. We can’t lose the academy. It’s the only safe place in the world for demigods, though it hasn’t exactly been safe since I arrived.

“We’re not sure. Maybe a week but it could be less if the earthquakes keep happening.” Kira runs a hand down her face.

“I’ll be back. I need to send a message to my father.” Thad rushes out of the common room.

“We need to tell Rebecca all of this. We need to come up with a plan. We don’t even know which ocean to go to.” I clench my fists at my sides.

“Will Rebecca have any more information than we do?” Jayden asks. “She said the oracle has been dodging her.”

“We have to try. The entire academy is at stake. I don’t think any of the gods will be pleased if their children die in a fiery explosion from a volcano.” I lean my head back, staring at the vaulted ceiling.

Poseidon would be blamed and a civil war could break out amongst the gods. Is that the plan? Whoever is behind the missing items of power wants the end of Olympus. Is this just another way of doing that?

Thad rushes back in with wide eyes. “My father confirmed our suspicions. His trident has been missing for weeks. He’s sent people to find it but no one has come back.”

“Why hasn’t he asked for help? This is fucking serious,” I growl.

“He’s an arrogant original Olympian. He didn’t want to admit he needed help from demigods.”

“That’s just stupid. Even Zeus asked for help when his lightning bolt went missing.” I throw my hands up.

“He’s asking now. He’s sent out his spies and his best guards, but none have returned. They are scouring the oceans but coming up empty.”

“I’m thinking that’s because demigods have to find it,” I say and turn to Adrian.

“Yeah, us specifically.” Adrian points at us.

“Figures. Kira, is there someone watching the volcano?” I ask.

“Yeah, we’re rotating. Claud is there too because the lava doesn’t hurt him.”

“Good. You’re going to need to stay at the academy and keep an eye on things. I want to make sure if the worst happens, we have someone here to get everyone out.”

I trust Kira far more than any other Hephaestus student on campus.

Especially more than Max.

“I can definitely do that.” Kira nods and races from the room.

“What else did your dad say?” I ask Thad. “The people who went missing, which ocean were they searching?”

“He didn’t say much. The connection was weak. I think because he’s weakening. He won’t admit that to me, but it fits with the stories I’ve heard.”

“So we still don’t know where to start looking.” I sigh.

“No, but Rebecca will know,” Adrian says. “She spoke with the oracle.”

“How do you know?” Thad asks him.

“I’m a seer. I see shit. All kinds of things that I don’t want to.” Adrian shudders.

“So, we need to go find her and let her know what’s happening.” I turn to leave the room.

Jayden and Raven follow quickly behind me. I turn to glance at Thad and he’s still standing by the fountain.

“Let me know what the headmistress says. I need to recharge. I’m depleted.” Thad runs a hand through his hair.

I nod to him and we race down the stairs. When we get to the bottom of the stairs, Jayden holds the door open for us and the icy rain hits my skin. I shiver as wind tears through the open door and pull my hood back over my head.

I have to get to Rebecca. We need to leave like yesterday for the mission or the entire academy could go up in flames.

“**W**here do we find her, Adrian?” I ask.

“She’s in her office, but if we don’t hurry, we’ll miss her and have to wait until tomorrow.” Adrian points to the admin building.

“Hey, Beth,” Dax calls out from across the quad.

“Hey, Dax, we’re kind of busy.” I turn to him.

“Sorry, just thought Kira would be with you. She left the cafeteria with you.” Dax’s cheeks turn pink.

Is Dax blushing? I peer at Raven whose eyes are as wide as mine probably are.

“She is either at her dorm or the forges,” I say and turn to the admin building.

I take off at a sprint as Dax yells a thank you to me. I grin to myself. Even with all the craziness, I’m happy for my friends.

“It actually worked,” Raven whispers at my side.

“It did.” I nod.

Jayden opens the door for us but narrows his eyes. “Don’t be overconfident in that.”

“That was the first time in months Dax didn’t give me sad puppy eyes or insist on coming with us. I’m calling it a win.”

“They are going to be so cute together,” Raven says.

We get to the office just as Rebecca is locking up for the evening. She sighs and opens the door and steps back inside.

“What’s going on?” Rebecca asks. “I have been dealing with the aftermath of the earthquake for the last several hours. You have no idea the damage it caused.”

“Actually, we do. We had to call Persephone to help save one of the dryad’s trees.” I take a seat on the couch in front of her desk.

“You just called on a goddess to help with a felled tree?” she asks, exasperated.

“It was either that or let her continue to pummel Thad.” I shrug.

“I was actually quite enjoying watching her beat on him.” Jayden smirks.

“It was pretty funny.” Raven flops on the armchair.

“It’s late and I’m tired. Can we please get to the point?” Rebecca massages her temples.

“We know who the next god is that is missing their power and we need to stop it from happening before the academy is completely destroyed.” I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees.

Jayden rests his hand on my back and rubs soothing circles there. The stress of all of this is going to make me gray before I’m twenty-five. It’s ridiculous. Rebecca raises an eyebrow at the gesture but doesn’t comment.

“Who is the next god and why do you four feel like it’s once again up to you to go and save the day?” Rebecca glares.

We knew she was going to hate this. She was stupidly pissed when Hermes came and asked Raven for help with his shield. I get it, but somehow this all revolves around me. I’m not conceited, but I know whoever that was in the hallway earlier was talking about me.

“We all know this started after I got here,” I say.

I open my mouth to tell Rebecca about the voice in the hall, but Raven’s scowl stops me in my tracks. Why doesn’t she want me to tell Rebecca about that? Is it not safe?

Is there a single faculty member in this place that we can trust with this information? Someone in the academy is working with the enemy. Someone close enough that they could say that they sent me to their boss' people. Could it be Rebecca?

"That is beside the point, Beth. I don't understand why it has to be you." Rebecca grips the desk she's leaning against in a white-knuckle grip.

"I'm the only living child of Zeus and the strongest demigod here. Of course it's going to be me. I'm the biggest threat to their plans. Whoever they are." I clench my hands into fists.

"We're getting off topic. Tell me what you know." Rebecca raises a brow.

"The earth shaker power set off the earthquakes today. Poseidon is weakening and the seas are turbulent along with the weather." I hang my head. "The forge has been compromised."

"Explain," she barks.

"The earthquake has made the volcano unstable. It's going to blow soon."

All the color drains from Rebecca's face at my announcement. It's more dire than she thought. "The volcano."

"Yes, it's connected to Poseidon's earth shaker abilities. Thad was able to stabilize it for now, but after the Hephaestus students inspected it further, they came to the conclusion that they may not be able to stop it if another earthquake hits the academy."

"I spoke with the oracle a few hours ago. I was going to call you into my office in the morning to tell you about this mission. The oracle insists that it must be you all." Rebecca scans our expressions. "But you already knew that, didn't you?"

"Yes," I say. "It's always going to be us, Rebecca. No matter if we have to find the items of power for every god and goddess on the pantheon, it's going to be us."

"Let's just hope it doesn't come to that." Rebecca stands and walks

around behind her desk to slump in her chair.

I don't like it any more than she does, but this is my life and with the mark of the warrior across my stomach, I doubt I have a choice in any of it. Artemis was concerned about the scar. It brands me and now that we are all gods touched, it makes things much more difficult.

I could live forever. I could live forever and never have a happy life. Those are the consequences of the trip to save Ares' shield. The only plus in this situation is that Jayden and Raven will be there forever too.

"What else did the oracle say?" Jayden asks. "Did he give us a direction?"

"North. Up the coast. He was adamant that you must stay along the coastline." Rebecca covers her eyes.

"How far north are we talking? Are we going to have to sneak into another country? I don't have a passport," I say and peer at Raven.

"Don't look at me. My passport expired three years ago." Raven shakes her head.

"I don't know how far north. The oracle didn't say. Just to stick to the coastline and keep going north." Rebecca sighs.

"Which coast?" I ask because specifics are needed. "Do we need to fly to Florida and go north or is it the California coast we're following?"

"No planes." Jayden shudders.

"What?" I ask. "Why?"

"I'm pretty sure Zeus nearly took me out when I flew in a plane with my mom as a child." Jayden's eyes are wide.

"I think I'm going to have a chat with my father about that," I growl.

"Don't. It will just make things worse." Jayden squeezes my hand.

"How is it that anyone can ever follow a conversation with the lot of you?" Rebecca asks. "You lose focus at the drop of a hat."

"Sorry, did the oracle say which coast?" I drum my fingers against my knee and wait.

If it's not the California coast, we are in a world of trouble. We can't take the time to drive all the way to Florida and then north up the coast. The academy will be completely destroyed by the time we complete the mission.

"He said to start in Santa Barbara and work your way north," Rebecca says.

I breathe out a heavy sigh of relief at the confirmation. We still have time to complete it. At least it won't take us a week just to get to the starting point.

"Good, at least that's one thing in our favor. The Hephaestus students say it could be a week before the volcano erupts but maybe less. Kira is standing guard to make sure everyone gets out if it blows while we're gone."

"You asked a student to guard an active unstable volcano?" Rebecca shrieks.

"I'm pretty sure that you aren't a child of Hephaestus and I don't believe I know of any faculty here that can withstand the heat of the lava." I glare at her. "Kira can withstand it. Plus, she has Claud."

"Claud," Rebecca says the name with distaste.

"Yes, he can work in the lava without it hurting him and can get the others out if needed."

"Fine, I won't say anything about the students guarding the volcano," she huffs.

"I think that covers everything, then." I move to stand but she holds up a hand, stopping me.

"The oracle also said that it wouldn't just be the four of you. The group total on this journey is six. I argued with him but he was firm on his answer. Your shifter and Thaddeus must go with the four of you on this journey."

"No." Jayden stands and folds his arms over his chest. "We can do this without the cocky sea demigod."

"The oracle was adamant that you will fail without him." Rebecca raises her tone.

"Jayden, we figured we would need him. What are you doing?" I ask,

standing too.

I reach out to grab his arm, but he yanks it away at the last second. I narrow my eyes on him, tired of his bullshit. My chest aches with hurt, but the anger fights for dominance.

Jayden turns and stomps out of the room. He's being a jealous asshole and it needs to fucking stop.

"We're taking Thad and Greyson with us. We will not jeopardize everything because Jayden is throwing a tantrum." I nod to Rebecca.

"Of course. He will calm down, I'm sure." Rebecca inclines her head to me and I do the same in return to her.

"He better fucking grovel hardcore after this," Raven says.

"Language, Raven," Rebecca scolds.

"Sorry, Rebecca." Raven hangs her head.

"Oh, he's going to grovel, and then we're all going on this mission in the morning," I say. "He doesn't get to treat me like shit because of his issues."

"Good. Make him pay, B." Raven grins.

Oh, he is going to pay. He's going to find out the hard way that no one dictates who I can be friends with. Yes, Thad had a minor lapse in judgment when we first met but has been nothing but respectful of my relationship with Jayden since and he's been helpful when dealing with the current disaster.

Jayden needs to stop acting like a spoiled baby and I know just what to say to make that happen, but I have to find him first.

"All right, you four need to prepare for your trip and I need some sleep and a plan for the academy in case things become dire." Rebecca shoos us out of her office.

I clench my hands into fists as I walk out of the office with Raven and Adrian on either side of me.

"Ugh, I didn't want to see that," Adrian groans.

"Keep your visions to yourself," I growl.

"Then keep your sex life to yourself." Adrian covers his eyes.

“How do you expect me to do that when you’re a powerful seer? It’s not like I want you to see that shit. I would much rather you didn’t.” I stomp ahead.

“Does he grovel though?” Raven asks with a grin.

“Stop it, Raven.” I shove her to the side a little harder than intended.

“You’re getting stronger, aren’t you?” Raven asks as she rights herself.

“I don’t know.” I peer at my hands as if they’ve betrayed me. “I guess?”

“I think it’s because we’re gods touched. Like earlier when Adrian ended up on the floor. I barely tapped him and sent him flying.”

“So we’re changing and I’m going to be even more of a freak,” I grumble.

Just fucking great. That’s the last thing I need.

“You’re not a freak.” Raven rolls her eyes at me.

“I’m not?” I ask.

I push open the door to the clear night sky. The stars shine down on us and my shoulders slump in relief. It’s a break in the ever present storm we’ve been in the last few weeks.

“No because if you’re a freak, that makes me one too and everyone knows I’m absolutely fabulous.” Raven grins.

Students dot the quad in small groups, taking advantage of the short reprieve from the storms. I wish we could tell them what’s happening without panic erupting through the academy. We wander past them, allowing them the simple pleasures while they still can.

“You definitely are, but now I need to go talk to a disgruntled and jealous demigod.” I roll my eyes.

“Good luck with that and make sure the asshole grovels.” Raven winks.

I trudge up the stairs to the door of the dorms and push it open. I stomp up the eleven flights of stairs to Jayden’s dorm, sure that he is in there sulking. As I get to the door to his room, I square my shoulders, preparing for battle against Jayden.

Knocking on the door does nothing but shove it open a little more. I push the door open and stare into the dark room. Shivers race down my spine when the skulls all seem to be glaring at me.

“Jayden?” I whisper.

He turns to me in the gloom, his blue eyes glowing with fury. “What do you want, Beth?”

“What do I want? Maybe I want you to stop being a jealous ass and talk to me.” I clench my fists to stop from zapping him.

“Why, when Thad is here to solve all our problems?” he asks.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I stomp forward. “He’s coming to help us. He’s already been helpful.”

“He wants you,” Jayden roars.

“So? I’m the only one who can decide what I want. And for some crazy reason, I only want you.” I ball my hands into fists.

“You don’t want him?” he asks, tilting his head to the side.

I throw my hands up in the air and stomp forward. Is he really so dense? What the fuck made him think that I want Thad? We’re just friends.

“Gods, Jayden. I don’t even know what to say to you. I thought we showed each other that we are good together when you stop letting your issues get in the way.” I turn to leave, but he grips my arm and spins me around.

“They aren’t just my issues, Beth.”

“Oh, they aren’t?” I laugh. “Did you forget that when we first got to the academy, you literally let Mia hang all over you every chance she got?” I poke him in the chest. “Other than when Dax kissed me and I pushed him away, have I ever let anyone else touch me?”

He hangs his head. He knows that the standard isn’t the same but he’s not budging.

“One girl, Beth. One. You have had three guys trying to get to you in a matter of months,” Jayden roars.

I take a step back. He really just screamed at me? He's going to have a problem if he thinks he can talk to me like that.

"Yeah, and you know the difference, Jayden? I *never* led them to believe there was a chance with me. I let them know from the beginning of whatever this is between us that they didn't stand a chance. Did you do that with Mia? No." I stomp my foot.

"I was never with Mia." Jayden stands and stalks to me.

"I was never with anyone else, but anytime someone shows the slightest interest in me, you punish me for it. How is that fair? I didn't kiss Dax. He kissed me and I fought that asshole Draven off on my own. You were there when I put Thad in his place. It doesn't matter though. You're always going to be like this, aren't you?" I shove him when he steps into my space.

Jayden stumbles back and his shadows writhe along his arms angrily. "You say you don't want them, but eventually you're going to have to choose someone your father approves of, Beth. It won't be me. He will never approve of me, and Thad is the sea demigod. Your father will approve of him."

"Bullshit," I yell. "So because Thad is suddenly here, you're back to the same old shit?"

"It's not shit, Beth. It's the truth. Your father will never actually let us be together long term. Even if we survive the coming war and save his throne." Jayden shakes his head.

"Do you really think I'm going to let anyone dictate to me like that?" I throw my hands up and change my mind, pushing him against the wall.

"You can't go against Zeus. If he wants you with Thad, he will make it happen." Jayden sighs.

"I can and I will, Jayden. No one tells me who I'm allowed to love." I shove at his chest and push him back against the far wall of his common area.

A skull stares me down as I back him against the wall. I shudder as I glance at it. It's creepy.

“What if I can’t? What if Zeus smites me for even thinking I can have a future with his daughter?” Jayden asks, his lips close to mine.

“Then we will be together in the underworld. Your dad and Persephone like me at least.” I step up on my toes and press my lips to his.

Jayden groans and his hands clamp down on my hips. “I don’t want you spending eternity in the underworld.”

“It’s a good thing that’s not your choice to make.” I line my body up to his and press my chest to his.

He is mine and I will do whatever I can to keep him, even if I have to go to war with the gods themselves.

“**B**eth,” Jayden groans.

He tries to get me to move, to take back control, but I refuse to give even an inch. I grip his wrists and pin them to the wall.

“Raven says you need to do a lot of groveling,” I say as I press my lips to his throat.

“You want me to grovel?” He smirks. “You’ll have to let me go for that, babe.”

“Not a chance.” I nip at his neck.

I let go of one of his wrists and release my shadows before he can reach for me. They wrap around his wrists, leaving him pinned and me able to run my hands over his chest and abs.

I strip out of my clothes slowly, dropping my shirt to the floor first and then my bra. Jayden growls when I bend down to remove my skirt and I let it fall to the floor before stepping out of it and move it to the side.

“What are you doing?” Jayden chokes out the words.

“I’m showing you exactly what you’re missing.” I run my hands down his chest to his belt.

“Beth,” he warns.

“You don’t want to see what I can do?” I pout.

I rub his cock through his pants and a groan escapes him. He’s impossibly

hard already. Maybe a little more torture will be good for him.

I have never had total control when it comes to Jayden. I've never been able to do what I want because he always takes all the power and controls my pleasure between his shadows and his body leaving me mindless. Not this time. This time I have the power.

I saunter to his bed and position myself in a way that he can see me. "What do you want, Jayden?"

I lean up on my elbows and stare him down. He knows what he needs to do for me to let him go. He knows he needs to beg. Will he, though? Jayden doesn't beg. He takes. Usually that's something I love about him, but right now is different.

"I want you to let me go so I can come over there and eat your pussy until you're screaming so loud the entire building can hear you." Jayden snarls.

"That's doesn't sound like begging," I say and lean back.

I let my thighs fall open so he can see how wet I am from this little game. I squeeze my breasts and pluck at my nipples with both hands, then run my other hand down my flat stomach.

"What are you doing?" Jayden squirms.

He attempts to move his arms, but they are locked right against the wall.

"Since you won't grovel, I guess you're going to have to watch me as I take care of this burning need inside of me." I arch my back and circle my clit with my fingers.

A strangled moan escapes his lips as he watches me touch myself. He's still yanking at the shadows, trying to escape, when I push two fingers inside of myself and gasp.

"You're gonna be in so much trouble when I get out of this, baby. I'm harder than granite just from the tiny sounds you make," Jayden warns.

"That doesn't sound like groveling," I sing.

Jayden's blue eyes glow as his gaze zeroes in on my hand. My fingers pump in and out of me as my thumb circles my clit. There's something about

him watching me pleasure myself that makes me feel like a goddess. I pluck at my nipple and my back arches as my spine tingles. I'm headed toward that peak but don't want to come yet.

"I'll show you what it means to grovel as soon as you let me out of these shadows and I can eat your pussy for hours until you're nothing but a writhing mess on my bed." He strains against his restraints again, but they don't budge.

I lick my lips as an idea forms. Jayden never lets me explore him for long when we're intimate. He never lets me play with him the way he toys with my body. I sit up and slide off the bed. Jayden cocks his head to the side and I sway my hips as I glide to him.

"Are you going to let me touch you now?" he asks.

I press my fingers to his lips to shush him, but his eyes flare with heat and he sucks them into his mouth, growling as he tastes my juices on them. I shiver and pull my fingers out of his mouth with a pop.

"I didn't say you could taste me yet." I giggle.

I reach for the buttons on his academy shirt and unbutton them one at a time exposing toned tan skin. I kiss his chest over his heart and then lick my way down to his pec. I suck one of his nipples into my mouth and bite down gently.

"Gods, Beth. You're killing me," Jayden moans.

I smirk as I lick my way down his chest over his abs because if he thinks I'm killing him now, he's not going to like where I'm going next. I fumble with his button on his pants and he strains against the shadows again as I drop to my knees.

"Are you ready to grovel yet?" I ask and lick my lips again.

I pull his pants and boxers down his thighs and his cock springs free. My gaze never leaves his as I slowly lick around the head.

"Fuck, baby. Fuck. You can't do that. I'm gonna come like an inexperienced teenager if you keep doing that." Jayden slams his head back

into the wall and squeezes his eyes shut.

Gripping him at the base, I lick the underside of his cock from root to tip and flatten my tongue so I'm licking him like an ice cream cone. Jayden's back arches as he strains against the shadows again. They are holding him tight.

"Beg me, Jayden." I suck the head in my mouth and hollow my cheeks out.

An animalistic noise fills the quiet room that borders on pain. "Baby, please. I'm sorry. I'll try to stop being a jealous ass. Please."

"Can you see now who I want? The only person I want?" I raise an eyebrow at him and lick around his head again.

"Yes, fuck. Let me go, Beth, so I can show you how sorry I am. So I can worship you the way you deserve."

A shiver rolls through me at his pleading words and I release the shadows. Jayden is on me in an instant, pulling me up under my arms and slamming his lips down on mine. He groans into the kiss, probably tasting himself on my tongue.

Jayden's hands slide all over me, caressing my skin until his hands are gripping my ass. He lifts me from the floor and I wrap my legs around him. He stalks forward with me in his arms, never breaking the heated kiss. Just when I think he's going to lay me down on the bed, he flips to his back.

"You want to be in control? You're in control. Ride my face until your juices drip down my chin and you're screaming for me."

I shudder at his dirty words but grip the headboard and pull myself over his face. I glance down at him warily. This isn't something I've done with him before and I don't want to smother him. Jayden grips my waist and slams me down over his mouth. His eyes glow as he sucks my clit into his mouth.

My hips buck and stars burst behind my eyes in a kaleidoscope of colors. I scream and rock against his mouth as something wet licks across my breasts. Jayden's brought his shadows out to play with me. They lap at my

breasts and something hard pushes into me even as Jayden circles me with his tongue.

“Fuck, Jayden,” I yell.

I roll my hips as his shadows continue to play with my body, taking me to the peak of a second climax. My spine tingles and I’m on the edge of oblivion when Jayden stops and rolls us so I’m on my back.

He sits back on his heels and stares down at me, watching his shadows play with my body as he palms his cock. “You’re so fucking beautiful. I still can’t believe you’re mine.”

I reach for him but he bats my hands away. The shadows at my center thrust inside me harder and faster and my back arches as a tongue licks across my nipples.

“Jayden,” I growl.

“I need to say this or I probably never will.” Jayden sighs. “I think the jealousy is my own insecurity that this isn’t real, that I’m imagining every interaction with us and I’m going to wake up one day and you’ll have chosen someone else.”

I lean up on my elbows, staring him straight in the eyes. What could possibly make him think that? I’ve never given him a reason to believe that, have I?

“Jayden, I’ve told you a hundred times and if I have to, I will tell you a hundred more. I only want you. I love you.” The words slip out without my consent and I widen my eyes.

Shit. I just ruined everything, didn’t I? I turn my head away from his heated gaze, readying myself to jump up and flee when Jayden’s mouth slams down on mine and he lays me back against the bed, crushing me beneath him.

His kiss is filled with every emotion as his tongue battles with mine. His shadows pulse and writhe over my skin, plucking at my nipples and sucking at my clit until I’m screaming again into Jayden’s mouth.

“I love you too, Beth. So fucking much it hurts sometimes. I think I have

loved you since the first moment I saw you in that little Irish pub,” Jayden says between heated kisses down my neck.

My fingers tangle in his hair as he moves lower and bites my nipple before lapping at it to soothe away the sting. He moves to the other breast, giving it the same attention as the first before moving lower.

“Jayden,” I cry out as he sucks my clit into his mouth.

My hands have a death grip on his hair and I yank on it, holding his mouth to me. Jayden chuckles and the vibrations set off another orgasm. I’m not even sure how I’m not a writhing puddle in his arms by this point.

Jayden untangles my fingers from his hair and sits back again. He’s staring at me like I’m a goddess. I reach for him but his shadows capture my arms and pin them to the bed.

“I can’t handle you touching me right now. Just give me a second.” He trails his fingers over the skin at my hip and up to trace the scar left by the bronze bull’s horn.

Why haven’t I thought of that? The mark of a warrior isn’t a good thing. It means that I will never have a quiet, normal life so any life Jayden and I could possibly have won’t be happy or normal. Am I dooming him to a miserable life if we’re together?

“What’s wrong?” Jayden leans down, pressing his lips to the scar. “Where did you just go now?”

I have to tell him. He needs to make the decision on his own, but am I ruining the moment by thinking about it?

“You remember what Artemis told us about this.” I trail my fingers over the raised pink lines. “Am I being selfish and dooming us both to a life that we don’t want?”

“The only life I don’t want is one without you in it. You’re not being selfish. I am.” Jayden grips my hips, pulling my body flush against his.

He rubs his hard cock along my slit and all thoughts of doom and gloom evaporate as he slowly pushes into me. He pulls me up so our chests are

pressed together and the angle has him pushing inside me in short, hard thrusts.

My nails bite into his shoulders as I rock my hips against him. Jayden growls and flips us, lying back on the bed. I run my hands down his chest as I continue rocking my hips. Jayden squeezes my waist and lifts me up before slamming my body back down on him. My back arches as he hits that spot inside me.

My whole body tingles and he does it again, thrusting his hips up at the same time he slams me down on his cock.

“Jayden,” I scream.

My hands are on his chest, my nails now biting into the skin at his pecs. My body writhes and shakes with the most powerful orgasm yet and all I can do is hold on to him as he thrusts up into me. Lightning shivers beneath my skin and Jayden groans as small arcs of electricity zap into him.

“That’s it, baby. Fuck, your magic feels so good against my skin. Don’t stop,” Jayden says with a growl.

I let a little more of my magic crackle against his chest and Jayden’s back arches and his hands clamp down on my hips. He pumps his hips wildly into mine as his orgasm tears through him. His whole body shakes beneath mine. I slump into his chest and bury my face into his neck. We’re still connected as he wraps his arms around me.

Jayden presses his lips against my temple and chuckles when I yawn. “Did I wear you out, baby?”

“No, I wore myself out.” I rest my chin over his pounding heart and stare into his blue eyes.

“You think you’re funny?” He tickles my sides.

“I know I’m funny.” I squeal with laughter and bat his hands away.

Arms like steel bands wrap around me from behind and pull me back into his hard chest.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Jayden whispers and nips my

earlobe.

“Somewhere that I’m not going to be tortured.” I look over my shoulder, batting my lashes at him.

“That’s not torture, babe. What you did earlier was a slow painful torture,” Jayden says.

“I had a blast torturing you. You deserved it,” I say.

He tickles my sides again and I zap him, forgetting that he likes it. Jayden growls and flings me on the bed. His hands become weapons as he finds every ticklish spot on my body.

“Stop, Jayden, stop.” I squeak and try again to get away, but he’s got me pinned.

“You’re not seriously trying to get away from me again, are you?” He grips my wrists above my head and plants a chaste kiss on my lips. “I meant what I said. I’ll stop. Will you stay here with me tonight?”

“Okay.” I nod.

He lets go of my wrists and pecks my lips again before rolling to the side, bringing me with him. I rest my head on his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart.

I can’t help but wonder if he was telling the truth. Would he someday resent me for the life we lead if we stay together? Will he wish for something normal and happy that we may never actually have?

Are we doomed before we ever really get our start? Does it even matter? We don’t know what’s going to happen on this mission and we definitely don’t know what will happen in the impending war. Am I just borrowing trouble from another day?

“What are you thinking about so hard?” Jayden squeezes me to him.

“Nothing important.” I shake my head and my hair flutters across his chest.

“Everything that you think is important.” He kisses my temple.

“I just don’t want you to resent me.” I press my forehead to his chest.

“Why would I ever resent you? I’m thanking the gods every day that you let me in your life. I’m sorry I act like a jealous fool. I’m just so scared that you’re going to wake up one day and realize that I’m really not good enough for you. Just like Draven says all the time.” He sighs.

I slap his chest and the loud crack fills the room. “Why are you still listening to Draven’s bullshit? I thought we were over this.”

“Ow.” He grabs my hand on his chest. “I’m not but when Thad showed up as a son of Poseidon, with all that power, I was sure you would leave me for him. I can’t help my jealousy sometimes.”

“Seriously, Jayden?” I pull my wrist from his grasp.

“I’m sorry. I’m trying. I don’t want to feel like this but I can’t help it.” Jayden stares up at the ceiling.

“You’re the son of fucking Hades, Jayden. You’re one of the most powerful demigods in the academy. You are god touched now. There is absolutely nothing wrong with you.” I smack his chest again and let my lightning arc into him.

“Fuck, Beth. Stop, unless you want to go for another round.” Jayden’s eyes sparkle with heat.

“Then stop tickling me and go to sleep. We have a mission tomorrow and there’s no way we can go into it exhausted.” I lay my head back on his chest.

“Fine, truce. We need to be at our best so sleep it is,” Jayden says on a yawn.

“I love you,” I mumble as sleep claims me.

“**H**as anyone told Thad we’re leaving?” I ask as we sit around my table in the cafeteria at breakfast.

“I haven’t seen him.” Raven shrugs.

I stab at the sausage on my plate. “Is everyone else ready to go?”

“I spoke to Greyson last night and he said he would be ready. There are no other packs in California so unless we’re going outside the state, he should be fine.” Raven pops a piece of bacon in her mouth.

Jayden leans forward on his elbows. “We’re most likely going to have to cross state lines. The oracle said north along the coast. For all we know we could end up in Alaska or something.”

“I hope we aren’t going that far. Can you even get to Alaska from California without flying or a boat?” I ask.

“We’re not going to Alaska.” Adrian shakes his head.

Thad jogs in with a bag slung over his shoulder and scans the room. When his gaze lands on the table, he slumps in relief and hurries over to us.

“I thought you guys left without me.” He flops into the chair next to Raven.

“We can’t,” Jayden says but there’s no anger or resentment in his tone this time. “The oracle was clear that you’re a part of this.”

“Okay then. When are we leaving?” He scans our little group.

“After we eat. We never leave the academy hungry. We never know when the next time is that we’ll be able to stop and get food.” I pop a spoonful of eggs into my mouth.

“That’s smart.” Thad nods.

“It’s from experience. We lost all our food in the underworld and starved and went half-insane.” I shake my head.

“You guys have lived a much more exciting life here than I’ve had.” Thad leans back in his chair.

“I don’t know if that’s the word I would choose,” I mumble.

There has been a ton of excitement, yes, but also a fair bit of danger and near-death experiences. I would take a boring life over that kind of excitement any day of the week.

“You went to the underworld. That’s exciting.” Thad crosses his arms.

Jayden raises a brow at him. “My father is Hades; I go to the underworld for family dinners. That’s not exciting.”

“You know what I mean.” Thad waves him off.

“Persephone would be super pissed if she heard you say that, Jayden. She might even look for ways to make the next one exciting.” I giggle.

Jayden’s face pales at the thought. Yeah, I don’t think anyone wants to challenge the queen of the underworld to make her family dinners exciting. They could end up complete with maiming and death.

We finish up our food and as we walk out of the dining hall, Raven nudges me with her elbow. I turn her way and she points to someone. Kira and Dax are together, walking side by side to breakfast. They are as close as they can get to each other without touching and I nearly squeal.

Jayden grips my hand and pulls me away before I can jump for joy like a total lunatic. “You’re gonna give yourself away if you react too strongly, Beth.”

“But look at them. They are freaking adorable,” I gush.

“I bet you they get together by the time we get back from this mission,”

Raven says, still staring at her brother.

The last few days, Kira has been doing her hair and makeup just like we showed her and looks gorgeous. Dax says something I can't hear because we are too far away and Kira laughs.

"They are definitely going to be together by the time we get back." I let Jayden tug me away by my hand.

"C'mon, they won't be if we don't leave for this mission to save everyone," Jayden reminds me.

"Way to be a buzzkill," Raven grumbles.

"Let's just go," I say, waving Raven off.

We trudge to the dorms and grab our bags from the hall closet on the first floor. I didn't want to carry it all the way to the cafeteria, and I wasn't going up and down the twelve flights of stairs just to retrieve my things. It's a waste of time and energy.

"How are we getting there?" Thad asks.

"Greyson has an SUV that will fit us all. He should be meeting us in the parking lot." Raven bounces on the balls of her feet.

Even with Greyson at the academy, she still doesn't get to see him much. No one knows what changes he may go through being god touched as a shifter. No one really knows what changes we will go through either.

It's for his pack's safety that Greyson stays at the academy. Monsters have gone after his pack before, but they could end up going after them more frequently if they sense a demigod there. That's basically what Artemis said when she found the ichor on our skin.

When we reach the parking lot, Greyson is waiting for us. Raven squeals and jumps into his arms. Greyson spins her around and kisses her hard. A growl rumbles through him. Jayden squeezes my hand and tugs me to the front of the SUV to give them a minute.

"We have a system by now with the seating arrangements." Jayden turns to Thad. "I drive and Greyson navigates from the middle seat."

“I have no problem sitting in the back or wherever.” Thad holds his hands up.

“Really? That was easy.” Jayden scratches his head like he doesn’t understand.

“Look, I heard about that idiot Draven and the shit he pulled last time. I’m not an asshole. I know the stakes and I’m genuinely here to help.” Thad nods and opens the back door.

“Not everyone is like Draven.” I bump my shoulder into Jayden’s.

“I know that. I was expecting an argument.” Jayden’s shock is evident.

Jayden opens the passenger door for me, and I stow my bag on the floorboard of the front passenger seat and turn to find Rebecca standing there with her arms crossed. Familiar black cards are clutched in her hands.

“Hi, Rebecca,” I say loudly to get Greyson and Raven’s attention.

They pull apart and Greyson sets Raven on her feet. He takes a step away from her, but she grips his hand in hers.

“You are all ready to leave?” Rebecca asks, scanning our group.

“Yes, we were just packing up the SUV.” I nod to the vehicle behind me.

“You can’t go without these.” She hands everyone a card.

“What is this?” Thad asks, his eyes wide.

“You each get a card in case you get separated and need human money. Did no one tell you how all this works?” Rebecca glares at us.

“It’s not like we’ve had a lot of time to run down the way missions work. We’re on a time crunch. We can fill him in on the way,” I say.

“Yes, well, like I said, start in Santa Barbara and make your way up the coast.”

“Santa Barbara?” Thad asks and grins.

“Why are you so excited about going to Santa Barbara?” I ask with a raised brow.

“I have friends that hang out around there. The water is cooler there than most places.” Thad hops in the SUV.

“Anything else?” I ask the headmistress.

“Be careful. You have medical supplies, yes?” she asks.

“I never leave for a mission without going to see the healers first. They stock me up every time.” I hop into the passenger seat of the SUV.

“Okay, good. Be safe and I’ll do what I can to keep the academy standing while you all are gone.” Rebecca turns on her heel.

Everyone piles into the SUV and Jayden turns to me with a grin. It’s quiet and peaceful as we head out of the wards. I shiver as they roll over me. They keep us in just as much as they keep the monsters out. I found that out the hard way when the students were being mind-controlled and leaving a few weeks ago.

“I hate the way that feels.” I grimace. “It’s like ants crawling over my entire body.”

“It’s the worst.” Thad agrees.

It’s crazy how pleasant the drive is when Draven isn’t with us. There’s no one scoffing or grumbling in the back of the SUV.

“This is nice,” Raven says. “I don’t feel like punching anyone or kneeling them in the gut to get in the back of the SUV.”

“Do you often resort to violence?” Thad asks, leaning forward in his seat.

Raven might be rethinking the urge to punch someone right about now. I glance over my shoulder at Thad in the back grinning at her.

“I’m a child of Ares, Thaddeus. I often resort to violence.” Raven rolls her eyes. “But only when people are being annoying or whiny babies.”

“Good to know. I’ve heard about your strength and don’t intend to push you toward that edge,” Thad says. “Also, only my mother calls me Thaddeus.”

“I like him much better than Draven,” Greyson says and chuckles.

“Thanks, but I don’t think it’s hard to be liked more than Draven. I’ve met the guy and have to say he’s a complete asshat,” Thad says.

“Fuckwit,” Raven says. “An asshat is being too nice.”

“You know, you’re right? Fuckwit does have a better ring to it.” Thad claps Raven on the shoulder.

A growl tears out of Greyson and his eyes widen. “Shit, I didn’t mean to do that. My wolf has been a lot more aggressive lately.”

I glance at Jayden in the driver’s seat before turning fully in my chair so my arms are hanging over the backrest.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Could this be a side effect of the god touch? Is his wolf changing already? I have a bit more strength I have noticed and so does Raven, but we haven’t really been able to test my magic much with all the rain.

“My wolf has been harder to control. I think it’s because I’m not with my pack and pretty much alone at the academy.” Greyson glances at Raven.

Raven has been a hot mess since Rebecca basically banned Greyson from the academy dorms. She thought she would see him more now that he was staying at the academy, but she still sees him about the same.

“I’m not sure that’s it.” Jayden glances at him in the rearview mirror. “It could be your wolf reacting to being gods touched.”

“I had the same thoughts. Have you noticed anything else?” I ask Greyson. “Are you bigger in your shifted form?”

“I can’t exactly see myself to tell, Beth.” Greyson chuckles.

“I’m sure you’re going to have to shift at some point while we are on this mission so we can find out then.” I shrug.

“What about you? Have you all noticed anything different?” Greyson peers at each of us.

“I’m stronger but that could be because my dad gave us all a boost of strength. He thinks I didn’t notice but of course I did.” Raven huffs.

“My visions are clearer.” Adrian sighs. “And more frequent.”

“Well, shit. That kind of sucks. I’m sorry.” I hang my head.

“It helps the rest of us but not when you see the things that you don’t really want to see.” Raven turns sympathetic eyes on Adrian.

“It’s fine. I have had visions a long time. I have learned to deal with them.” Adrian shrugs.

“By giving us crap about the things we do. That’s how you deal with them.”

“If I have to see that shit, then I’m going to embarrass you for it.” Adrian grins.

“Now I’m getting the urge to punch someone,” Raven grumbles.

Greyson grabs her hand and pulls it into his lap. He raises an eyebrow at her and grins.

“Don’t get all stabby, babe. He’s just joking around.” Greyson chuckles.

“He’s not though. He’s seen things he’s not supposed to and teased me mercilessly. But tell me something, Adrian. Do you know what’s going to happen with Kira and Dax? Is that why you gave me a knowing smirk the other night?”

“I can’t tell you that.” Adrian sits forward. “I know what happens if I do and it’s not the outcome any of us want.”

“And what outcome are you ‘hoping’ for?” I ask.

“The same as you. Dax is a friend and Kira is awesome. I want my friends to be happy.”

“Eek, okay, don’t tell me anything. I don’t want to ruin it.” I bounce up and down in my seat.

“Beth, calm down.” Jayden eyes me warily. “Turn around before we get pulled over or something.”

I turn around and stick my tongue out at him but he’s driving so he can’t retaliate. “You’re no fun.”

“I don’t understand,” Thad says. “Why are you so interested in this Dax and Kira?”

“Dax is a friend and he had a thing for me. Kira is also a friend and has a thing for Dax. It was an easy solution to a problem that has been plaguing us.” I shrug. “Everyone is happy.”

“So it wasn’t completely selfless, then.” Thad grins.

“No, but they are adorable together and I’m glad they are happy for now.”
I glare at the back of the SUV.

“I’m starting to rethink my stance on punching people.” Raven turns on Thad.

Thad throws his hands up in surrender. “I’m just trying to understand the dynamic at the academy. Somehow, I ended up in a car with the three most feared students and I’m trying to figure out why everyone is afraid of you because you all seem so normal.”

“Did you just say we are the most feared?” I ask.

I hate that. I don’t want the students at the academy to fear me. What the fuck?

“I guess I’m probably the fourth feared now since most of the fear comes from you being the direct offspring of the original three.” Thad sits forward again. “You, you’re just the best weapons expert anyone has seen there in a long time.”

“I already knew this.” Raven flips her hair over her shoulder.

“So, it’s just like the humans fearing what they don’t understand in a way.” I lean back in my chair.

“Yeah, I guess. They fear or covet what will bring them the most power which is why Draven is such an insufferable idiot,” Raven says.

“I thought we decided he’s a fuckwit?” Thad asks.

“He is a fuckwit but he’s also an insufferable entitled ass.” Raven shrugs.

“That’s what we call a git in Ireland,” Thad says.

“I like that.” Raven nods. “But not as much as fuckwit.”

“You just like saying fuckwit.” I turn to her.

“It’s a fun word and it absolutely describes Draven and some of my brothers.”

“Your brothers are nowhere near as bad as Draven.” I glare at her.

“They at least have some wits about them. This is true.” Raven nods.

“Gods, I wish traffic would move,” Jayden grumbles.

It’s going to take twice as long to get to Santa Barbara when traffic is stalled like this. I hate it. We need to move faster but getting anywhere in the LA area is crazy.

“It’s probably the worst time to try to drive in Los Angeles.” I slump in my seat.

“The volcano will hold. It has to,” Thad growls.

“I know it has to but that doesn’t mean it will. We have to trust that Kira will do what she can to get the others out if the worst happens.” I sigh.

“I did what I could and it drained me. They need to do what they can to keep the academy safe.” Thad hangs his head.

Jayden grips the steering wheel so hard his knuckles turn white. “They know what to do and they have Claud there to help them.”

“The cyclops?” Thad asks. “How is he going to help?”

“He’s ancient. Even older than our dads,” I say. “The Titans locked him away because he was too powerful. I think if it came down to saving his new home, he could figure out how to stop the volcano.”

“He’s older than even the Titans. It was Ouranus who left him in Tartarus. The Titans put Campe there to be his guard and torturer though,” Raven reminds me.

“Great legacy to live up to,” Thad mumbles.

“We don’t have to live up to their legacy. We have something they will never have. We have humanity. We have compassion and empathy. They don’t understand those things or just the sheer determination to live. Not just survive but truly live.”

“Go to the wharf,” Thad says, bouncing in his seat.

“It doesn’t look like there’s anyone here.” I scan the empty streets.

The wind howls and the storm rages all around us. It’s like a hurricane but California doesn’t get many hurricanes. The water is too cold in the Pacific. Palm trees sway dangerously as we pass.

“Are you sure the wharf is where we need to go?” Jayden stares out the windshield. “The water looks angry and choppy.”

“My friends will come when I call.” Thad grins.

“Okay.” Jayden glances at me.

He’s still wary of this whole situation but he’s trying and Thad already told us he’s here to help. We have to trust him at least a little bit.

“This is kind of creepy.” Raven tilts her head to the side.

“There isn’t a single person in sight.” I turn the radio to a Santa Barbara news channel.

“The authorities have issued a shelter in place warning. The storm hasn’t gotten to a hurricane level yet, but they expect it to become one before landfall later today.”

“Shit, that’s probably why the humans aren’t around. They’ve been told to stay indoors. The storms are too bad. We need to be gone before whatever they are expecting hits land.” I lean back into the headrest.

We park at the end of the wharf and get out. The wind blows my hair in my face and I stumble into Raven with the force of the gust. The sea below us churns. Waves crash angrily against the docks.

“C’mon.” Thad waves to us.

We follow him across the wooden slatted dock. I refuse to look down. This doesn’t seem very safe with the holes between the wood and the beach visible below. The farther we walk out to the end of the dock, the more the beach disappears and the angry waves crash against the support beams. Will this thing hold in a hurricane?

The waves are doing their best to take it out for sure. I glance at Raven with a grimace. Her expression is hard, but I can see the same worry in her eyes.

“Maybe we shouldn’t rely on a human made dock when the sea is so turbulent,” I say and chew my lip.

“It will be fine. The sea won’t harm us,” Thad calls over his shoulder.

“The sea won’t harm you, but the rest of us aren’t Poseidon’s children,” Jayden grumbles.

Thad waves him off. “My friends will help if something goes wrong.”

“Where are these friends? I still don’t see anyone, Thad.” I pull my jacket tighter around me.

The wind and rain are icy. I shiver against the rain and pull my hood farther over my face but it’s no use as the spray of the sea hitting against the wharf splashes at me as well.

“They aren’t on the land.” Thad turns to me and rolls his eyes.

“Of course they aren’t because you’re a sea demigod, right.” I shake my head.

What are we getting ourselves into? Is he going to just bring sea monsters to the wharf at Santa Barbara?

He leans over the railing and a weird echoing sound comes out of his mouth like a seal makes when it wants a treat.

“What was that?” Raven asks, taking a step back.

Greyson wraps an arm around her to steady her as she bumps into him. Thad turns his grin on us.

“That’s how I call them. They should be here soon. They don’t usually wander far. They like the wharf because humans think they’re sea lions and will feed them.”

“Not me over here wondering for the tenth time who these friends even are if the humans mistake them for sea lions.” I lean over the railing.

It’s a mistake. The waves crashing into the single support beam give me vertigo and I grip the railing hard.

“Why did I look down?” I groan.

“You’re gonna want to see them,” Thad says and calls out in that weird way again.

“What is that?” Raven points farther out to sea.

Something crests over the waves and I blink twice at the red and purple scales of whatever is heading our way. I reach for my necklace and rub at the lightning bolt. My whip unfurls in my hand, but I don’t dare channel my magic into it this close to the sea.

“You called sea monsters?” I ask.

“They aren’t sea monsters.” Thad turns wide eyes on me. “You don’t need your weapons. Put them away before you scare them.”

How does he expect me to believe that when whatever those creatures are headed toward us are huge and we know nothing of the sea. We haven’t been on a mission by the ocean yet and Cross just barely started discussing the monsters of the sea.

“How do the humans mistake those things for sea lions?” Raven asks.

Her hand clenches and unclenches but she doesn’t pull her weapon back out of the ether. I touch the charm on my neck and it vanishes just as a majestic horse head breaks through the waves.

It has the head of a horse but it doesn’t have a mane so much as purple

and green scales on it. It neighs like a horse and hooves splash down into the water. Thad tilts his head to the side.

“Is he communicating with it?” I ask, leaning over the edge again.

“I think so.” Jayden wraps an arm around me.

Thad leans even farther over the railing and I grip the back of his shirt to keep him from falling into the churning water at the hippocampus’ fins.

Thad turns a smirk on me. “I can breathe underwater, Beth. But thanks for caring.”

“We need your help. We can’t let you plunge to your death on the first day.” Jayden shakes his head.

Thad bursts into louder laughter. “This is Peanut. He says he likes you. If you put your hand on his head, you should be able to communicate with him too. Hippocampi are powerful creatures.”

Peanut nuzzles my hand with his snout, obviously wanting me to place my hand on his forehead. I reach out a tentative hand and the cool scales are silky soft beneath my palm.

Daughter of Zeus. You have come to save us, Peanut says into my mind.

Save you? What do you need to be saved from? Is there something different in the oceans too?

I glance at Thad, wondering if he’s hearing our conversation, but he doesn’t appear to be paying attention. A second hippocampus with red and purple scales surfaced and he’s chatting with it the same way.

The sea monsters have escaped their prisons in the deepest parts of the ocean. They are terrorizing the creatures of the oceans. Peanut dips his head.

Poseidon released all the sea monsters? I ask with a gasp.

Not Poseidon. Something else released them. We suspect they used the trident to do it and then hid it away where no one can find it.

Do you know where they hid it?

Instead of answering through my mind, he shakes his horsey head at me and whinnies.

Lord Poseidon has sent many to retrieve it, but none have returned. He can't control the storms and earthquakes without it. There are too many things going on at once. He's getting weaker.

We'll do our best to find the trident and I'm sure we will be battling monsters along the way. We will help as best we can, I say and glance over my shoulder at Jayden.

The storms and earthquakes are only going to get worse. You must hurry before all is lost. Lord Poseidon is preparing for war in case the worst happens. It's the only way.

Fuck. This isn't good.

Peanut nods his head and splashes back into the water. A single serpentine tail flicks out of the waves as he dives into the deep.

“What did he say?” Jayden asks.

“Nothing good. Things are more dire than ever.” I lean my head back on his shoulder.

“We always find out they're more dire than we originally thought.” Jayden squeezes me to him.

“Apparently, Poseidon had all the sea monsters from Greek history imprisoned in the deepest part of the ocean. Someone stole his trident and released them and then hid the trident. Poseidon is weakening and trying to keep his people safe and trying to control the seas and the storms. It's not working.” I rub my forehead.

“So, we were kind of right,” Raven says. “The sea monsters are back, but someone let them out. I would say that Poseidon has a mole in his midst.”

“I didn't even think about that. No one else could get to the deepest parts of the ocean to release them unless they were from the oceans.” I turn to Thad.

He's still speaking with the red hippocampus. I wave my hand in front of his face, but his eyes are closed. Shit. We need to warn Poseidon there's someone there that knows where the trident is being kept.

“Thad,” I shout.

Thad startles and turns to me. “What?”

“There is someone in the underwater kingdom working against us. Working against your dad. He needs to be warned.”

Thad’s eyes widen and he turns to the hippocampus to relay the message but the creature nods his horsey head and splashes back into the water below. He takes off like a shot, his serpent tail propelling him faster than my eyes can track.

“He’ll tell my father what we figured out. I don’t know that it will do much good, but at least he’ll keep anything to do with his plans a secret.” Thad blows out a breath.

“I hope so. Whoever is plotting to overthrow him has to be powerful. We can’t let them win.” I tap Jayden’s hand around my waist.

“Let’s go,” Jayden says. “We need to hurry every chance we get.”

“It’s not just the academy we’re saving here. Poseidon is preparing for war in case things go to hell and the gods come after him. We need to stop this in any way we can.”

We’re silent as we trudge down the wharf. The news is terrible and no one wants to voice the possibility that we could fail this mission horribly. What happens to the world? Billions of people’s lives rest in our hands, again.

I thought the threat of war if we didn’t find Ares’ shield was bad, but earthquakes have the ability to annihilate the entire planet.

“Are they getting desperate?” I ask as we get back in the car.

“Who?” Raven asks.

“Whoever is trying to overthrow the gods. What point would there be to overthrowing them if there is no one and nothing left to rule?” I ask.

“Honestly, I’m starting to think this is a really elaborate revenge plot on the gods. They don’t care who they hurt as long as they get what they want. They want to be the most powerful and the way to do that is to get rid of the

gods themselves.”

“I don’t know if I agree with that. You heard what their minions have said on past missions. There will be a divine righteous ruler once the gods are gone. What will they rule though if natural disasters destroy everything?” I glance over my shoulder, finding Raven leaning forward between the seats.

“Does it matter?” Jayden asks, squeezing my hand. “We aren’t going to let it happen. Not ever.”

“I guess not. I just would like to know who’s the mastermind behind all this. I feel like we are always playing catch-up instead of being ahead. If we knew who was behind everything, we could plan for the inevitable war we are facing.”

“I feel that so hard, B.” Raven pats my shoulder. “I hate not being able to strategize because we don’t know anything about the person behind this.”

“We have a couple facts though. Medea got away at the end of the last battle for the shield. She is definitely a part of this but not the mastermind at all. Hecate is in Tartarus for her crimes trying to wake the Titans and destroy the underworld,” I say with a sigh.

“Someone is at the academy who wants us dead and there is a mole in the sea.” Raven nods. “That doesn’t give us any clues though.”

Jayden glances at Greyson in the rearview mirror. “What highway are we taking north?”

“It looks like PCH is the only one that hugs the coast completely all the way north.” Greyson studies the map.

“PCH, which highway is that?” Jayden asks.

“It’s Interstate 1. It goes from San Diego all the way to Washington.”

“San Diego was a fun place to swim into.” Thad perks up in the back. “Are we close?”

“No, we’re going the opposite direction from San Diego.” I shake my head.

I have never met someone so excited to see the ocean before, but I guess

that's what he lives for as a sea demigod.

Wait, did he say he swam to San Diego?

"Um, Thad. Tell me you didn't swim to the academy from fucking Ireland."

"But I did. What's the problem? I told you I can breathe underwater." Thad frowns.

"How the hell did you even get from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean in the first place?" I scoff.

"It took a long time and I had to swim through the Gulf of Mexico to get to the Pacific Ocean but I made it and some new friends along the way. There are people from my father's kingdom all over the world in the different oceans. It was fun."

Maybe his cocky attitude when we first met was warranted if he swam around the world to get to the academy. That's impressive.

"Wow." I shake my head.

"I couldn't fly because Zeus doesn't like demigods of the sea in his space and I have been swimming my whole life. I wanted to compete in the Olympics but Mom said no. It wouldn't be fair to the humans." He shrugs.

Thad is so different than he made himself out to be when he first met me. He is basically an open book. It's refreshing in a way. He just tells everything as he sees it.

"Your mom knew what you are?" Raven asks with a frown.

Her parents have no idea who her real father is and they are safer that way. She grew up clueless like me, only they didn't constantly run from monsters and discovery the way my mom constantly had us running.

It wasn't until we saw her in the underworld that I realized she knew all along who and what I am.

"How does someone not know they had sex with a god?" Thad tilts his head to the side.

"My mom doesn't know that I'm a demigod," Raven grunts. "She doesn't

need to know.”

“I’m sorry,” Thad says. “I meant no offense by it. I was just curious how that’s possible.”

“It’s fine.” She slumps back in her seat. “Ares doesn’t really stick around long enough to explain things to humans.”

Jayden grips the steering wheel harder than necessary. “If you and your mother both know what you are, then why didn’t you come to the academy when you turned eighteen like you’re supposed to?”

He still doesn’t trust Thad? He’s basically telling us his life story here and Jayden is still being an ass.

“I didn’t know the academy existed. My mother didn’t either. We moved around to places close to the sea a lot growing up because if I stay away from the ocean too long, I get sick. If she knew about the academy, she didn’t tell me about it.” Thad blows out an irritated breath.

“It just doesn’t make any sense,” Jayden says. “I understand what happened with Beth not coming, but your mom had to know.”

“Maybe they weren’t in any danger in Ireland. We don’t know if the monsters are outside of the US tracking demigods.” I pat Jayden’s arm but he refuses to look at me.

He’s acting like a jealous ass again and I want to zap him, but in the bumper-to-bumper traffic we’re in on this highway, that’s a terrible idea.

“Um, guys?” Thad calls slightly panicked from the back seat.

I turn to find Adrian slumped into his shoulder. His eyes are white and glassy as he stares at something none of the rest of us can see.

“It’s okay, he does that a lot. He’s having a vision,” I say.

My shoulders slump though. What kind of fresh hell is he seeing now? Will he even tell us about it when he wakes up?

“Okay is relative, B. There is nothing okay about the visions he has and he doesn’t even tell us about them.” Raven crosses her arms over her chest.

We wait for what seems like forever before Adrian blinks his eyes open.

“Fuck. You’re not going to like this.”

“What?” I ask, dread pooling in my gut.

Are we doomed to fail? What did Adrian see that I’m not going to like?

Adrian shakes his head and turns to Thad. “Sorry about that. I have little control over my body when a vision like that takes me.”

“No worries. The white eyes are creepy as fuck though.” Thad shudders.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t know.” Adrian shakes his head.

“Are you going to tell me what I’m not going to like or does Raven get to start punching?” I raise a brow at Adrian.

I already don’t like it and he hasn’t even told me yet. Fuck, what is going to happen next? I don’t think I can handle one more surprise.

“**T**hat looks interesting. Let’s stop there.” Thad points at a sign that says Morro Bay.

“We can’t just go to random places, Thad. We’re in a hurry.” I glance at the sign.

“Well...” Adrian says. “That’s part of what you’re not gonna like.”

“What,” I huff.

“There’s someone waiting for us at the sea lion place there.” Adrian flinches.

“Hell no. No. Nope. I’m not releasing a bunch of sea lions into the wild. I don’t care how nicely she asks.” I cross my arms.

“What are you talking about?” Thad asks. “Why are there sea lions not in the wild?”

“It’s a sanctuary for animals that were injured and unable to return to the ocean.” Adrian pats Thad’s arm.

“Who do you think is there?” Raven asks, grinning.

“Don’t even say it.” I glare at her.

She knows whose waiting for us as well as I do. Even when we’re on the coast helping Poseidon, Artemis manages to cause trouble. What the hell would she want with a bunch of sea lions though? Just because they have lion in their name, she thinks we have to save them?

“I didn’t say anything and don’t forget she didn’t ask you to release the lions at the MGM. She just asked for us to release the ones at the zoo.” Raven shakes her head.

“Who?” Thad asks again.

“I would bet a hundred dollars that it’s Artemis with some other crazy request that could end in mayhem.”

“I don’t think this will end as badly as the lion enclosures at the zoo.” Adrian grimaces. “That was a freak request. Artemis genuinely wants to help.”

“Fine,” Jayden says. “I guess we’re going to feed the sea lions.”

He turns on the exit from the highway and pulls through the small coastal town and parks. The sea lions barking fills the quiet street.

“They are excited about food. Do the humans in there not feed them?” Thad frowns.

“They feed them. They’re endangered animals. Of course, they feed them.” I shake my head and walk inside the crowded gift shop to the counter. I hand the girl behind the counter my card to pay for our little trip through the aquarium.

The sounds of the sea lions get louder and a splash fills the space. There isn’t anyone in the place but there are shelves everywhere. I’m surprised Jayden and Greyson can walk through without knocking everything over as big as they are.

We open the door to the side and the sound becomes a roar as the sea lions sense Thad. They all bark at once and several dive into the water. One claps his flippers together while another blows a raspberry.

“What is this? They have no room to swim,” Thad yells, startling a couple walking out the other door.

His face turns red and blotchy as he scans the small space.

“Thad? Calm down,” I whisper.

“Calm down? They are all trapped in here. What about their families in

the sea?” He scans the room and I pray that he’s not looking for a way for them to escape.

Did this just become another zoo breakout? I’m not letting him do this. I can’t.

“Thad, they don’t look like they are sad. Can you communicate with them the same as the hippocampi? Ask them.”

Thad’s shoulders relax as he glances over at the nearest sea lion. He tilts his head to the side and his eyes close in concentration. The animals go crazy barking again and I grin.

“Okay,” Thad says out loud. “I get it. You don’t want to leave.”

“See?” I pat his shoulder and Jayden growls.

I glare back at the possessive jealous jerk and grip the tiny paper bag with fish in my hand.

“They are so cute.” I grin and reach out to throw some fish at him.

“They like the treats here.” Thad tilts his head to the side. “I still can’t say that I like this practice of keeping them here to entertain humans.”

“I know it’s weird, but they seem happy.” I throw another fish to a different sea lion.

The sea lion brings its flipper to its mouth and blows me a kiss so I throw another of the small pieces of fish at him.

“They do like it here. They aren’t in danger and the food is good.” Thad laughs. “It’s still strange.”

“If they’re happy, there’s no reason to remove them. They like performing for the humans?” I ask Thad.

“They do. They like seeing the happy smiles on the children’s faces when they do tricks and blow kisses at them.” Thad shrugs. “They are extremely empathetic creatures. They crave joy and they receive it here.”

“That’s good, then. I wonder what Artemis actually wants. If she isn’t here to free the sea lions, then why is she here?” I move quickly through the sea lion exhibit to the door at the back.

I grab the rest of my fish from the small white bag in my hand and throw them to the sea lion who blew me a kiss. He does it again and I repeat the action before he dives in the water below.

“He liked you even before you fed him,” Thad says. “He can tell you’re compassionate.”

“Do you hear their thoughts or were you able to understand their barking?” I ask, genuinely curious how that works.

“I think it’s a bit of both. If they choose, I can hear their thoughts, but if they are speaking what you call barking, I can understand them like most sea creatures.” Thad opens the door into the dark museum, and I stop to wash my hands.

Thad turns one last longing glance at the sea lions before the door closes again. “Look, Thad. I think it’s weird and I know you think it’s weird too, but the people here are helping those sea lions so they can eventually go back into the wild and if they can’t, they are happy here anyway.”

“Maybe my dad can help them, though, and they can adapt.”

“Don’t you think Poseidon has enough to deal with right now?” I pat him on the shoulder.

“You’re right. He does.” Thad hangs his head.

“Beth, we need to move through the dark to find the person who is waiting for us.” Adrian raises his eyebrows.

“You could always just call out for Artemis. We all know that’s who’s waiting for us.” I roll my eyes.

“You know I can’t tell you that.” Adrian shakes his head and moves through the creepy dark aquarium; the only lights are in the back of each of the small tanks around the room.

“Where is she waiting for us?” I ask.

Adrian waves me forward and I trudge along behind him with Jayden at my side. Raven keeps having to prod at Thad to keep moving as he frowns at the exhibits.

“Why would they keep the fish in here like this?” Thad asks.

“Humans like to be able to see things they’ve never seen before. The oceans to them are mostly uncharted and humans don’t like the unknown, but they love to be able to see it for themselves,” Raven says.

“It’s why they keep animals in zoos. They want to see animals of the world without actually having to travel the world.” I glance over my shoulder.

“I knew humans were weird, but I don’t like this.” Thad shakes his head.

“I find it hard to believe you’ve never lived in a place with an aquarium before,” Jayden cuts in with a scoff.

I round a corner even as I squeeze Jayden’s hand in warning. He told me he would try but he’s not. He didn’t even last a fucking day before he went back to his bullshit.

“I have but I never felt the need to visit because I can see all these things in the actual ocean.” Thad narrows his eyes at Jayden.

“Please don’t start a fight in here. We’ve already gotten in enough trouble for other things in the past.” I tug on Jayden’s hand.

“Sorry, I really don’t know what’s going on with me today. Of course, we can’t get into a fight and destroy the aquarium. We don’t want the humans coming after us again.” Jayden runs a hand down his face.

“Try harder.” I kiss his cheek.

Thad grumbles something I can’t hear behind me and I glance over my shoulder. He’s staring into one of the tanks with a forlorn expression.

“Thad, come on. We can’t. How would you even get them to the water quick enough?”

“I know.” He hangs his head and trudges after us.

It’s like herding cats with him. He wants to save all the sea creatures in this place but even if we could without getting in some serious trouble, we would have no way to get them to the water safely and I’m pretty sure all the creatures here wouldn’t survive in the ocean.

I round the last corner and there is Artemis standing with her bow strapped to her back as she whispers with a nereid. The woman speaking to Artemis has green hair and blue eyes. She glances up at our approach and I stop.

“I thought you lived at Lake Havasu?” I step forward.

“I think you have me mistaken for someone else, daughter of Zeus,” the nereid says in a lilting tone.

She doesn’t sound like the girl whose stream we saved from the rot the sirens left behind. Shit. Are we going to have to deal with more sirens? I sure as fuck hope not with four guys and only me and Raven not affected by their song.

“We met a nereid in Lake Havasu and helped her get rid of a siren problem.” I shrug.

“Ahh, I have heard from my sister about the fierce heroes who saved her home from the sirens plaguing her. She gave you quite the gift in return.” The woman bows her head slightly.

“The gift wasn’t necessary but it has been extremely helpful in our missions.” I nod to the woman.

The nereid gave me the conch shell to communicate with anyone as long as I say their name into it. It helped us to communicate with Adrian on the first mission to find the lightning bolt.

“I will tell my sister that her gift has helped you all the way you helped her.” The nereid nods.

“The sirens were a problem for us as well.” I shrug.

Raven takes a step forward. “Those bitches deserved to be ash. They tried to eat my mate.”

Artemis giggles and the sound is out of place in the conversation. “Beth, I see you have a new friend. I hope he’s more helpful than the last one.”

“He’s actually more of a friend than Draven will ever be. This is Thad, the son of Poseidon. He’s come to help us.”

“Good. Old Poseidon needs a good demigod to get him out of the mess he’s in. The gods on Olympus aren’t happy, Beth. They are blaming Poseidon now for everything that’s happened in the last several months.”

“What?” I shriek and then glance around.

“This wouldn’t be the first time Poseidon tried to overthrow Zeus and with the way the storms are raging and volcanoes activating all over the world, the finger is pointed firmly in his direction.” Artemis shrugs.

“But you know it’s not him, right?” Thad asks.

“I do, but my sister isn’t as trusting as me.” Artemis shakes her head.

“Which sister?” I fold my arms over my chest.

“Athena.”

“I have had zero interactions with the goddess of war and wisdom. Ares has been far more helpful.” I bump my shoulder into Raven’s.

“Same. Dad and Athena don’t really see eye to eye on much.” Raven shrugs.

“Yeah, well, Ares has always been a brawn over brains kind of guy.” Artemis nods.

“What is Athena saying? Why is Poseidon being targeted when his child was a target at the academy only a few months ago? Surely my father doesn’t think he was working with Hecate to drain Cross of his life force. Even a god wouldn’t weaken himself in such a way to throw suspicion off themselves, right?”

“I’m not sure. Athena may have her own agenda in mind. She does hold a grudge against Poseidon since he took her favorite priestess away from her.”

Medusa. Right. Athena really gave a fuck about her when she turned her into a gorgon because of what Poseidon did.

The gods can be vengeful assholes when they feel like they are slighted.

“That’s a long time to hold a grudge.” Raven whistles.

“Gods are timeless along with their memories.” Artemis shrugs. “The point is that there could be a war against the sea god if you all don’t find the

trident.”

Thad glares at the goddess and the most surprising thing is that Artemis doesn't seem fazed by his death stare. She takes it in stride.

“My dad isn't behind this. I know him as much as a half human can know their godly parent and he wouldn't have sent me to Halfling Academy if he was trying to take over Olympus. Especially not now right when I'm needed to help find his item of power.”

“Look, son of Poseidon. You don't have to convince me. I know these kids and I know they wouldn't be helping a traitor to Olympus. Beth gets mad every time I show up because she thinks I'm going to ask her to zap something and cause chaos.” Artemis chuckles.

“To be fair, our first meeting was you asking me to take out the electricity at the Oklahoma Zoo to release some big cats when you could have taken them on your own without all the chaos afterward,” I say.

“What would have been the fun in that? Plus, you met my little niece and made sure she and her mom are safe.” Artemis grins.

“You and your rhyming brother are diabolical,” I yell before glancing around again.

There's no one else paying us any attention in the little aquarium, yet I can't help but wonder who could be lurking around. Are any of these random people actually gods in disguise waiting to pounce on us? Or monsters that could be waiting until the goddess is gone. Are they just human and thinking we are freaks?

Shit. We are probably causing a scene with the humans. That's not fucking good. I peer at the people around me, but no one seems to be paying us any attention.

“Are you shielding us from view, Artemis?” I ask.

“I am. We can't have the humans seeing me like this. I'm getting weaker, Beth, and it's harder to hide my godly magic from them.” Artemis hangs her head.

“Fuck, that’s not good. The goddess of the moon and the hunt. What the fuck is going to happen next?” I throw my hands up in frustration.

“When did you lose your bow?” Jayden eyes the bow strapped to her back.

“This isn’t my item of power.” Artemis scoffs. “You think I hunt with the very thing that gives me strength?”

“Sorry, Artemis, I’m not having the greatest day with trust issues.” Jayden hangs his head.

“You four are going through some crazy changes from being gods touched. It’s going to be an adjustment.” Artemis waves him away.

“Do you know what the adjustment is?” I ask.

No one has been able to tell us what might happen to us now that we’re gods touched but with the aggression that Jayden and Greyson have been experiencing lately, it can’t be anything good.

“I don’t. I can’t find any account in our history of demigods being gods touched, only godlings and other creatures. Your human DNA is making things more difficult.” Artemis’ eyes are downcast.

“What about Greyson?” Raven asks. “He’s not human but he isn’t a god either. Why is he so aggressive in his change?”

“I don’t know,” Artemis says on a sigh. “One of my creations has never been gods touched before.”

“So we are basically just in a wait and see kind of situation.” I throw my hands up.

“You are, I’m sorry. You will need to be careful while you’re adjusting.” Artemis nods.

The nereid shuffles on her feet. “We need to go somewhere else. We have been here too long and the humans are getting anxious.”

“Yes, I know of a diner down the street where we can sit and have this discussion.” Artemis nods.

“Let’s go, then. We aren’t going to do ourselves any favors by letting the

humans get suspicious.” I nod to the goddess.

We’ve been made by the humans in the past and I don’t have any intention of making this mission any harder than it needs to be. The Bellagio fountain and the problems it caused were bad enough. The stakes are much higher this time.

“**W**e are shielded here. You can speak freely,” Artemis says as she sits at the table in the little diner we just walked into.

“I’m still wrapping my head around how they can blame Poseidon when Ares’ lack of power almost caused a nuclear war and demons escaped the underworld and feasted on humans when he lost his helm.” I sit in the chair Jayden pulls out for me.

“Only the trident can release the sea monsters from the deep. They think Poseidon has it still. Athena is pushing hard for war to stabilize the oceans before the academy and the world are destroyed.”

Could Athena be behind it all? Misdirection would be the best strategy when trying to take out the other gods. She is the goddess of war and wisdom after all.

“So she isn’t listening to the oracles or Apollo?” Adrian asks with a frown.

“Apollo has run off with a nymph to study poetry in Southeast Asia.” Artemis rolls her eyes.

“Gods, no more poetry,” I grumble.

“He’s the god of poetry; why would he need to study it?” I ask.

“He doesn’t. It’s an excuse to get out of war councils. He hates them. He thinks they’re boring and dull. Especially when no one will sing with him.”

Artemis steeple her fingers in front of her.

Something is definitely not adding up. Apollo has given Artemis information for every mission before this one and he's suddenly gone when Athena decides to shove the blame at Poseidon for everything that's happened?

"What's my dad saying about this?" Raven asks.

"He told her basically what you said, Beth. He and Hades suffered the same and no one blamed them for what's happening." Artemis pops a fry into her mouth.

"Whoever is behind all this is dividing the gods. They have tried to take everyone out one at a time and it hasn't worked. I think you might have a traitor on Olympus." I rub my temples.

"I've had the same thoughts." Artemis nods.

"Could it be one of the gods behind all this or is it someone stronger?" I ask.

"It could be anyone," Raven grumbles.

"We know it's not Poseidon, though," Thad growls.

"If my dad is speaking against Athena, I'm pretty sure we can rule him out too," Raven says.

"We already ruled out Hades and my dad can't overthrow himself." I chuckle.

"You all need to eat. You're on a time crunch with Athena trying to wage war on the sea. She's gaining support on Olympus, especially with the way things are at the academy. No one wants their children to die in a fiery volcano."

"We're always on a time crunch," I grumble. "We're trying to save the academy. Athena can give us the time we need."

I pick up my bacon burger and take a bite. The flavors burst across my tongue. I nearly moan but just barely keep it in. Jayden glances at me and his eyes glow blue with lust. I guess I wasn't as successful at holding that in as I

thought. Whoops.

“Athena doesn’t take much stock in heroes saving the world since so many of them weren’t actually heroes but out for their own gain.” Artemis taps her fingers on the table.

“Yeah, I know the stories. You still haven’t told us why you’re here though. The coast isn’t really your scene.” I eye the goddess.

“Thetis here is a friend and she has a request.” Artemis points to the nereid next to her.

“Thetis?” Thad asks. “The leader of the nereids?”

“I’m not exactly their leader, but that’s what the stories have painted me as because I’m the one who got into the most trouble back in ancient times.” She giggles.

“What did you need help with?” I crunch into a fry.

“There is a creature close to Monterey Bay that is terrorizing the local fishermen and the wildlife there. Many of Poseidon’s citizens have gone missing in the area.” She hangs her head.

“What is the creature?” I ask.

“There are conflicting reports on what it is exactly, but it snapped several boats in half. I think it might be a giant crab.”

“How big of a damn crab are we talking that it can cut a fishing boat in half?” I lean forward, resting my arms on the table.

“I don’t know. My best guess is that it escaped the deepest pit of the ocean with the other sea monsters.” She doesn’t touch her food but takes a sip of water from her glass.

“So, we need to go stop a giant crab from terrorizing Monterey Bay,” I huff.

“Please, the wildlife that live there are my friends. They are scared and being forced to leave their homes. It’s not just wildlife either; hippocampi live in the area too.” She turns her pleading eyes on Thad.

“My father’s guards haven’t tried to take it out?” Thad asks.

“They tried but were called back when the gods began blaming Poseidon for everything. Also, they are unable to get out of the water so the crab hid from them.” Her seafoam-green eyes meet mine.

Thad turns to me. “Monterey Bay is north, yes? It’s on the coast?”

I glance at Greyson, our all-time navigator, and he nods. “Yeah, we can get there from the coastal highway.”

“We need to help.” Thad slams his fist on the table.

“I’m not saying we won’t help, Thad. Of course, we will. You’re new to this mission stuff. We help people along the way. Always. And a lot of the time Artemis requests our assistance and you can’t really tell Artemis no.” I glare at her.

“I like how you think because I have a feeling I’m going to need your help sooner rather than later.” Her silver aura flares to near blinding, and I cover my eyes.

“You really are having issues, aren’t you?” I blink at her.

“I think the storms are affecting me too. The moon has an impact on the tide so maybe us both weakening is making things worse.” Artemis sighs.

“One thing at a time. You’re good for a bit while we figure out how to get the trident back, right?” I chew my lip.

Thad cuts in, staring at Thetis. “Can you give me exact directions to the place where the crab has been sighted?”

Thetis hands over a piece of paper with scrawled latitude and longitude numbers on it and Thad nods.

“I’m fine. Fix the oceans and the earth shaker first. I’ll be out with my hunters and you know how to get a hold of me if you need to.” Artemis vanishes with Thetis and I lean back in my chair.

“We need to finish eating and get back on the road. Poseidon and the fucking academy don’t have much time.” I pick up my forgotten burger and take another bite.

“We didn’t have much time before and now we have even less,” Raven

grumbles. “Why does Athena have to stir up trouble?”

“I don’t know, but I have a feeling something isn’t right. It’s too convenient to blame Poseidon for everything when whoever is behind this has repeatedly gone after me and Jayden as well as Cross.”

“Be very careful what you put into the universe, Beth,” Jayden warns, squeezing my hand.

“I’m not saying anything at all, Jayden.” I take another bite.

“They have turned people into monsters for less.” Raven raises a brow at me.

Thad squirms in his seat but stares down at his food. “I don’t like this. Why is the sea so turbulent? We need to leave and get to Monterey. I have a bad feeling.”

Adrian turns to Thad. “Listen to that feeling, trust it. What is it telling you?”

“It’s telling me to hurry,” Thad barks. “We need to get out of here. I think another earthquake is about to hit. It will stop us from getting to the crab in time.”

Thad’s body shakes as he stares between the rest of us. Fear is bright in his eyes.

“I’m done. We can’t afford to get stuck here.” I stand from my chair.

The others follow close behind. If the son of the earth shaker says there’s an imminent earthquake, you fucking listen. Especially when he can control them.

We jog out to the car. Artemis likely already paid for our food as she usually does. Jayden rushes in front of me and opens the door for me before quickly running to the other side of the car.

Humans stare at us from inside the diner, probably wondering what the rush is, but I don’t care. They can do or think what they want. We have to get out of here. Quickly.

Jayden starts the car and peels out of the parking lot.

“How are we going to figure out where this thing is just from coordinates?” I ask, turning to Thad.

“I can read them. I think in nautical miles and not necessarily miles on land. This place is in the Pacific Ocean. I don’t know how anyone but me can get there.” Thad rubs his eyes with his thumbs.

“We can’t breathe underwater and we definitely can’t swim that far.” I bang my head against the headrest.

How are we supposed to go kill a giant crab in the middle of the ocean? We can’t let Thad go on his own. That could be suicide and we need his help.

“I could go alone.” Thad glances around at all of us.

“No,” I say and to my surprise Jayden says the same.

I glance over at him and smile, but his eyes never leave the road. “We will figure out another way to defeat the crab. We don’t split up. We learned that the hard way.”

“Not since Nashville. We don’t split up unless we have to. I’m sure we can find a way to get to the crab.” I glance over my shoulder.

Raven frowns at the reminder of the muses who were wreaking havoc on Nudies bar. They had decided that all the humans in there boasted too much and deserved their wrath. Jayden and I had to save them by promising to find their crowns.

“Okay, I might have some friends who can get us to the crab, but they aren’t going to like it.” Thad shakes his head.

“We won’t make any trouble for your friends, Thad. We can find another way,” I say.

“The thing they will be most upset about is being treated like steeds,” he says.

“I would never treat them that way,” I gasp. “The hippocampi are intelligent and deserve to be treated with respect.”

“You really are better than most demigods.” Thad nods his head.

My cheeks heat at his compliment. I have heard the same from several

gods and goddesses but not from many demigods who understand empathy and compassion. They are mostly selfish, entitled assholes other than the few friends I have.

“Does anyone remember a giant crab from ancient history?” I ask.

The whole concept is bothering me because I can’t remember ever hearing about a giant crab. Could Thetis be wrong about what we’re about to face?

“I don’t think so,” Raven grumbles.

“Could it be a primordial monster?” Jayden asks.

“I don’t know. I guess, but if it is, then how do we kill it?” I tilt my head up and stare at the ceiling.

“I don’t know. We will have to figure that out when we get there.” Jayden grips my hand in his.

“I hate not knowing what we’re up against. Usually, we have some idea but not with this thing.” I squeeze my eyes shut.

Am I once again letting my compassion for others put my friends in danger? I mean, we can’t let something like that continue to terrorize the coast, but how can we stop it if it really is primordial?

“Don’t, Beth.” Jayden pulls my hand into his lap.

“Don’t what?” I ask, turning my head to him.

“I can see it in your slumped shoulders. You’re taking blame for this and wondering if you’re putting us all in danger.” He squeezes my hand. “We know the risks and we will all get through this together.”

“Are you a mind reader now?” I grumble.

“No, I just know you and we’re coming up against a monster you don’t know how to beat. You like to blame yourself when you think one of us may get injured helping you save the world.”

“You can’t do that, Beth.” Raven pats my shoulder. “It’s not just your responsibility to stop this. The oracle has chosen all of us to do this because we have a better chance if we do it together.”

“But we don’t even know what we’re up against. It might not even be a giant crab at all and what if it is a giant crab? They already have superhard shells. What kind of crazy shell did the gods or the primordials give it?”

“Plus, giant ducking crab pincers,” Greyson mumbles.

“See?” I point to Greyson. “It literally snapped ships in half with them.”

“Hey, stop it. We killed the Nemean lion and you spayed the hydra by yourself. We defeated countless demons in the underworld and a fucking golem. We’ve fucking got this.” Raven smacks the back of my seat so hard I pitch forward and my seat belt locks, choking me.

“Raven, what the hell?” Jayden unbuckles my seat belt.

“Sorry,” Raven says.

“It’s okay,” I wheeze.

I fix my seat belt so it’s not trying to murder me before we ever get to the crab or whatever is waiting for us at Monterey and stare out the window at the ocean. It almost looks more turbulent than before. It’s only been a couple hours but it’s getting worse by the minute. Rain pelts the windshield in sheets. Jayden has the wipers on full blast and visibility is still low.

“How are we going to get out into the ocean without it killing us?” Greyson asks.

He’s staring out the window at the crashing waves. They rise up ten feet along the beach before crashing back down on the sand. The tide is rising higher than I’d like to see, but there isn’t much we can do about it. Trees sway all around us as the winds howl and swirl.

“Hey, Greyson?” Thad calls out to the shifter. “Can I see the map?”

Greyson’s grip on the map tightens like he doesn’t want to let go, but Raven nudges him with her elbow and he hands it to Thad.

“What are you looking for?” I ask.

“Shit,” he grumbles. “I was hoping there was an island or something at that location but there’s nothing.”

“Don’t crabs have to have some kind of land, though? How do we fight a

giant crab under the ocean?” I chew my lip.

Thad hands the map back and slumps in his seat. “We don’t. I’m going to have to fight it.”

“Nope. We do this together, no matter what. If this thing is primordial, it’s going to take more than one demigod to kill it.” I shake my head.

“If we can find a boat, we could fight it from there, right?” Greyson asks.

“It would be logical if the thing hadn’t already snapped several boats in half,” I grumble.

“It’s still the best option we have.” Jayden jerks the steering wheel and takes the exit to Monterey.

“Turn here,” Greyson says. “The entrance to the docks is that way.”

Jayden follows Greyson’s directions and parks the SUV in the parking area outside the docks. The rain dies down just as we get out of the car but the wind still howls. The docks are deserted but we find a boat rental place that still looks to be open and step inside. The gruff man behind the counter raises an eyebrow at us.

“What do you want?”

“We want to rent a boat.” I step forward with a smile.

“You want to go out in this? I guarantee you there are no whales to be watchin’ in these parts today, missy.” He taps his fingers on the worn wood.

“We aren’t whale watching.” Raven plants her hands on her hips.

“There’s no place for a bunch of kids out in the sea today.”

“So you won’t rent us a boat?” I ask.

It’s probably for the best since the boat likely won’t return in the same condition but it still pisses me off that he refuses to rent to a bunch of kids when we’re trying to save the world and their fishermen from a giant crab.

“I won’t be responsible for a bunch of kids getting themselves killed out in that ocean today.” He shakes his head. “Plus, I have had three boats go missing in the last week.”

“Missing?” I ask, cocking my head to the side.

“I have rented out three boats to groups going out deep sea fishing and none have returned,” the man growls. “So, no. I won’t be renting to a bunch of kids going for a joy ride.”

“Fine,” Jayden says.

He grabs me by the arm and leads me out of the boat rental shop onto the dock. There isn’t anyone on the docks. All the slips are full with the boats tied down tight and some even have the windows boarded against the raging storms.

“How are we going to find a boat?” I mumble.

“That old asshole will stop losing boats if he would just rent us one.” Raven crosses her arms.

“He’s human, Raven. He thinks the weather has just gone crazy. He probably thinks the weather is the reason the boats have disappeared.” Jayden runs a hand down his face.

“Probably but we need a damn boat,” Raven growls.

We trudge down the docks but everywhere we look is more of the same. There aren’t even any other boat rental places open.

“Why was the old guy even open if he doesn’t want to rent to anyone?”

“I think it was just he didn’t want to rent to us.” Greyson shrugs.

“That just makes everything harder.”

Thad runs a hand through his hair. “I can still ask my friends for help, but you all can’t fight while swimming in the turbulent ocean.”

“What the fuck?” Jayden says, pointing to the end of the dock.

A man with blue hair stands at the railing with his back to us. The wind blows his long hair in every direction. What is he doing out here in this weather just watching the sea? He’s the first person we’ve seen outside since we’ve been out here in search of a boat.

“Fuck. It can’t be.” Thad frowns.

“What? Who is that?” I ask.

The man turns violet eyes on me and I gasp as power washes over me

even from a distance. He's some kind of god, but I'm not even sure who.

“Sorry, guys, you're about to meet my half brother Triton. The heir to my father's throne.”

“Triton?” I ask.

He looks nothing like what I would expect the son of Poseidon would look like. I guess when your mom is a nereid, some of those traits spill over.

“Daughter of Zeus.” Triton’s cocky smirk flashes at me. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“Do you often just watch the waves in Monterey, brother, or is there a reason you’re here?” Thad steps in front of me, his arms crossed.

There’s a history there that I want to know more about, but for now I need to stay on my toes. There’s something about Triton I don’t like. His power pulses around him in a way that leaves chills racing across my skin.

“Father sent me. He said you would need transport. What’s the matter, *brother*? Does your lack of fins stop you from fighting a simple sea monster?” Triton sneers.

“I have no issues even without fins, but I’m working on a team and they don’t have power over the water like I do.” Thad points at us.

“Ahh, a team. How very human of you.” Triton spits the words like they’re acid.

“We are half human. I like my humanity, thank you very much,” I growl.

The cocky sneering god is pissing me off. If he’s meant to come help us, why is he being such an asshole?

“Humanity is a scourge.” He waves a hand in dismissal.

Raven lunges but Greyson catches her, wrapping his arms around her. “Stop. You can’t punch a god.”

“I can,” Raven growls.

“Easy, daughter of Ares, I don’t want to be on your father’s bad side for destroying his favorite living demigod.” Triton grins.

Raven struggles against Greyson but somehow, he’s able to hold her.

“Calm down, Raven. I don’t like it either but we have no other choice but to accept the arrogant son of the sea god’s help.” I glare at Triton.

“You’re some feisty females. I like that, but if you want my help, we’re going to have to leave soon. My father can only keep the seas calm and the storms at bay for short periods before they rage again, and then it could be near impossible to get where you need to go.”

I glance between my friends and shrug. We don’t have another option. Jayden’s expression is hard but he nods to me. He’s leaving the decision up to me. I turn to Thad with a raised brow.

“It’s the only way we are all able to fight the thing,” Thad says.

“Okay. Let’s go.” I wave a hand to Triton.

His glare meets mine. I don’t like this god. There’s something off about him. I haven’t come across many gods that I don’t like. Even Artemis. I like her even if she gets me into trouble sometimes. This guy is off and wrong.

Raven straightens and pats Greyson’s arm, letting him know she’s calmed down and not in danger of punching the asshole. Greyson stays close to her even after he releases her. It’s very possible that the god will say something else to set my friend off and he will be ready when that happens. I don’t blame him one bit. I would be ready for any eventuality too.

“Follow me.” Triton grunts as he stalks down the dock.

I glance at Thad but his expression is unreadable. There is obviously history between him and the prince of the sea. They have been acquainted before and it makes me wonder how. As far as I know the prince never leaves

the ocean kingdom of Poseidon. Has Thad been able to visit his dad beneath the waves?

It doesn't seem fair when the rest of the gods live on Olympus where none of us are allowed to go. Me especially. I would be too afraid to come face to face with the evil stepmonster. That has disaster written all over it.

We pass back to the other boats that are boarded up and past the rental shop where we were treated like children before we come up to a boat I am sure wasn't there before.

"Where?" I ask.

"God magic. My father told me exactly when I needed to be here and when to make the vessel appear." Triton shrugs and holds out his hand from the top of the gangplank.

I eye his hand like it's a snake that's going to strike and walk up the ramp to the boat. It's more of a luxury yacht than a fishing boat. It is more comfortable than any fishing boat I have ever seen so that's a plus.

I step onto the deck and scan the boat, still not exactly trusting the sea god. The couches and chaise on deck are plush sea green. Jayden wraps his arm around me from behind and pulls my back into his chest.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"No, I don't know if I trust this god. Which is something I haven't said about any god I have ever met before. He's off." I lean my head back on Jayden's shoulder.

"I wouldn't say that too loud. If he couldn't tell by body language alone that no one here wants to trust him, then..." Jayden shrugs.

Raven and the others climb onto the yacht. Raven's expression is stony. She really doesn't like the sea god. The feeling is entirely mutual.

"Did you see the sea creatures floating around the boat?" Raven asks as she bends over the railing.

I move over to the side next to her and peer down into the water. The hippocampi have harnesses on, strapped to the hull of the boat. I frown at

them. Are they okay pulling this giant boat? Why couldn't the boat just have an engine like the human ships do?

"It's okay, Beth," Thad says. "They live to serve my father. These are the hippocampi that drive his chariot."

"Are they going to be okay with this huge boat though? It's a lot different than a chariot with one person on it." I bite my bottom lip.

One of the hippocampi lunges up from the water and nuzzles my hand. I set my hand on his snout and gratitude pours from him to me. I nod back to the creature with a smile. They will be okay but are thankful that I care about them.

"You are too kind for your own good, daughter of Zeus." Triton steps onto the deck.

"Can we stop with the daughter of Zeus crap? My name is Beth."

"Fine, Beth." Triton frowns.

What the fuck is this guy's problem? I don't care if he likes humans or not. I just want to get out of here so we can stop a fucking evil crab from destroying Monterey. That's what we're here for anyway.

Raven glares at Triton but he's unfazed by her hatred of him. His smirk is firmly in place as he moves to the side of the boat and stares down at the hippocampi in the water. Without words the boat jolts and we pull out of the dock. I grip Jayden's arm as I stumble a bit, not expecting the sudden movement.

"A little warning would have been nice," Thad grumbles.

"You can't hear conversations with underwater creatures?" Triton asks with a *tsk*.

"I can."

"Then why would you need a warning?" Triton smirks.

"Not for me. For my friends. Why do you always have to be like this? What did I do to you?" Thad snaps.

"Being born wasn't enough?" Triton scowls.

I step forward, tired of this stupid petty bullshit. “You think any of us asked for this? We have no control over being born or who our parents are so stop being an entitled prick and just get us where we’re going.”

The smirk on Triton’s face turns to a murderous scowl as he takes a threatening step forward. “It doesn’t matter that you didn’t ask for it. You’re *human*. It’s a disgrace to the gods.”

“Then they disgraced themselves. They care about us to some degree so fuck off.” I narrow my eyes on him.

Raven steps up next to me. Her arms are folded across her chest but the flex of her hand says it all. She wants to call a weapon and use it on the arrogant bastard.

“I knew there was something I didn’t like about you,” I say. “You think you’re any different from us? Your mother isn’t a goddess; she’s a nereid so you’re only a half god too.”

“Watch your fucking mouth, demigod,” Triton spits out.

“You really willing to incur Zeus’ wrath?” I raise a brow.

“I have no problem incurring the king’s wrath if I’m insulted. You’re very rude.” Triton waves a hand.

Raven does call her ax this time. She growls at Triton as she clenches her other fist. “You’re an asshole.”

“Easy, Raven.” I pull her back. “He wasn’t kidding earlier about smiting you.”

“I don’t fucking care. He’s an asshole.”

“How dare you humans speak to me that way,” Triton snarls.

“She’s not wrong. You’re an entitled prick who has issues because he’s not the only son anymore. Get over yourself,” I yell.

“Beth, stop,” Jayden barks, pulling me away from Triton.

I snatch my arm away from him and he glares at me. What is his problem? I’m just sticking up for my friend. He needs to get over this.

“What? I’m tired of the way he keeps acting toward Thad and the rest of

just for the sake of being born half human.”

“He’s a god, Beth. You can’t just go up against a god, especially when we’re in his domain. He’s taking us out to sea.” Jayden throws his hands up.

“I think everyone should calm down,” Thad says.

Jayden whirls on him. “This is all your fault. If you hadn’t come to the academy and been all cocky arrogant attitude and then tried to be friends, she wouldn’t be this close from being struck down by your brother.”

“You’re right. This wouldn’t be happening because you wouldn’t have a harpies chance in Hades to complete this mission without me,” Thad yells.

“Harpies chance in Hades. I fucking love that line.” Raven giggles.

I glare at her because she’s not helping the situation at all. Jayden growls at Thad and lunges for him, but Adrian and Greyson catch him before he can punch Thad in the face.

“Can everyone just calm the fuck down?” I turn to Triton. “Is there a place I can take him so he can calm down?”

“There are staterooms below deck. Take your pick.” Triton waves me away.

I grab Jayden’s hand and pull him away from Greyson and Adrian. They are reluctant, not trusting Jayden to keep away from Thad, but I nod that I’ve got it under control and they let go. Jayden glares at Thad as we storm to the stairs. I have no clue what has gotten into him but it needs to stop.

I open the first door I come to and shove Jayden inside. I add a little zing of my power to my fingers and he jumps away.

“What’s going on? You flew into a rage out there for no reason.” I cross my arms over my chest.

“Why did you stand up for Thad against his brother?” Jayden asks, narrowing his eyes at me.

“Is this more about your damn jealousy, Jayden?” I throw my hands up in frustration.

“It seems like you’re getting a little too close to Thad.” He sits on the

chair next to the table.

My hands ball into fists so I don't zap him again. I thought we were past all this. He's acting like I'm going to run off with the sea demigod. He's fucking ridiculous.

"I am not getting too close to Thad. He's a friend, Jayden. That's all. I would stick up for any of my friends if they were treated the same. Even Dax."

"He wants you." Jayden stands and grips my arms.

"So, Dax and Draven wanted me too and did I get with either of them? No, Jayden. I didn't."

"Why are you putting yourself in danger for him?"

He still doesn't get it? How else I can explain this so it will get through his thick skull?

"Because his brother is an elitist douchebag and no one should have to take that shit from family."

"We are demigods; it comes with the territory. You have to have thick skin when it comes to dealing with the gods." Jayden leans back against the closed door.

"Well, I have half-siblings that are gods, and they don't treat me like pond scum," I say. "The ones I have met are actually pretty awesome."

"They all want something from you." Jayden sighs. "Most children of gods get treated just like Thad."

"What about you, Jayden? Do your siblings treat you like that?" I plant my hands on my hips.

"You met some of my siblings. The furies. They tried to barbecue our asses so yeah, I think it's worse than Triton throwing a few insults at Thad."

I forgot they were technically Jayden's sisters. What do they do to him when he visits the underworld? I take a tentative step toward him but stop.

"Just because it happens to most demigods doesn't mean it's right or fair," I scowl.

“The gods aren’t fair, Beth. You can’t take them all on because of some petty words. You’re gonna get yourself killed if you try.” He steps forward, placing his hands on my hips, then pulls me into him.

“I’m not going to get myself killed but they need to stop being assholes. The demigods don’t have a choice in who we’re born to and punishing us for the sins of our fathers isn’t right.” I press my forehead to his shoulder.

“They don’t see it like that. They see someone less powerful than them standing against them and they don’t like it. I already told you a hundred times that if you die, I’m dragging you back from the underworld.”

“I know that. I would do the same and I think your father would let me.” I grin up at him.

Jayden leans down and kisses my lips.

“Please just try to stop antagonizing the sea god and I will lay off of Thad.” He kisses me harder.

“Fine,” I grumble. “I don’t like him. There’s something off about him.”

Even the furies didn’t piss me off the way Triton has and they tried to fucking fry my ass. Now knowing that they have tortured Jayden, I’m not so sure I can say the same if I see them again.

“Thank you.” Jayden squeezes me harder.

“But if your bitch sisters show up to family dinner, I make no promises.” I glare at him.

“Don’t call them that.” Jayden shudders. “They’re just the furies.”

“Okay.” I lay my head on his shoulder. “Stop being a jealous jerk, please?”

“I’ll try but I think there’s something to what Artemis said about us changing. I have all this aggression I don’t know what to do with.”

“Why isn’t it affecting me in the same way?” I wonder out loud.

“Are you sure it’s not? You went off on Triton quicker than you normally would have.” Jayden raises a brow.

Is he right? Is whatever’s happening to them because we’ve been gods

touched happening to me too? Is that the reason I went off so quickly? It would make sense but what's to come? Why have we become angry and aggressive suddenly?

“No, I'm sure there is something just really off about Triton. I don't trust him.” I shake my head.

“He's definitely an asshole but we need him right now to get us to the crab thing without having to swim in Poseidon's territory.” Jayden shudders.

“You know we're probably going to have to swim in the ocean at some point during this crazy mission, right?” I pull out of his arms.

Reluctantly, he lets me go. “Yeah, I'm sure it will happen eventually. I just hope Poseidon realizes that we're here to help and doesn't accidentally obliterate us for being in his sea.”

“He needs our help and if that means going into his domain, that's what we'll do.” I turn back to the door. “Are we good now? We need to prepare for whatever this giant crab creature is going to do.”

“Yeah, as long as you don't piss off the sea god.”

“I'll do my best.” I grin.

“Why don't I believe you?” Jayden grumbles.

“Because I will do anything for my friends including take on a spoiled prince of a god.” I grip the handle of the door and pull it open.

“Exactly, so why did you even agree to it?” Jayden groans.

“So we can get back to our friends before Raven gets murdered by the sea god.” I flip my hair over my shoulder.

“You're going to be the death of me.” Jayden grumbles.

“Life would be boring without me in it though.” I joke.

“It would be boring and safe and completely unbearable.” Jayden's arms band around me from behind.

I shiver and tilt my head to the side as his lips trail over my neck. “Jayden, we have to go back up to the deck before Raven gets herself killed.”

“I know.” He sighs.

I pull the door open and he releases me reluctantly as shouts ring out from above deck. Shit. What the hell is going on up there? I race down the hall to the stairs and scramble up to the deck with Jayden close on my heels, then I skid to a stop. Jayden's hands find my hips as he stops himself from running into my back.

“What is that doing there?” I ask as I turn to the sea over the railing.

“I don't know but I doubt it's anything good.”

“**W**here did it come from?” Thad growls.

A deserted island with white sand beaches is only a few hundred yards away. There are palm trees dotting the center of the island. It’s small but from what Thad is saying, it definitely shouldn’t be there.

“Is that where the boats are going missing?” I lean over the railing.

Are we seconds away from a giant crab thing attacking us from the sea? I grip my necklace as I scan the water below, but all I see are the hippocampi pulling the ship along.

“It must be, but I don’t see any wreckage.” Jayden leans forward next to me and squints.

“Everything looks too pristine to be hiding a giant crab that’s been terrorizing the sea.” I stare at the island.

Thad runs a hand over his face. “There shouldn’t be an island here. What the hell is going on?”

“It’s just like the fountain. Delphi shouldn’t have been in the mountains in Arizona either.” I shake my head.

The hippocampi tug the boat closer to the island. The closer we get, the worse it looks. Pieces of wood float past us in the waves and pieces of metal bob along as if they aren’t the wrecked pieces of broken ships and the remnants of ended lives.

“This is as far as I go.” Triton calls from the bow.

The water isn’t deep here, but the thought of getting in the icy waters of the Pacific Ocean isn’t at all appealing to me. A hippocampus bumps my hand with its head nudging me to open my mind to it.

Get on my back. You won’t get wet.

The small voice in my head startles me and I jump. A trilling sound comes out of the hippocampus’ mouth that sounds suspiciously like a laugh. I narrow my eyes but climb over the railing onto the creature’s back.

Jayden’s hand is on my arm in an instant, attempting to pull me back. “Beth, what are you doing?”

“He told me to get on his back so I don’t get wet.” I shrug his hand off my arm.

We don’t have time for this. We need to stop whatever this crab creature is and get back on course. The academy is depending on us to save them.

“So, you’re just going to listen to the sea creature that speaks in your head? Unbelievable,” Jayden growls.

“It’s better than trying to fight a giant crab in wet jeans, Jayden,” I scowl.

“We know next to nothing about them.” Jayden reaches for me again but I’m already on the hippocampus’ back.

“They talk to me and I can feel that they aren’t malicious.” I rub the hippocampus’ neck.

“They like her,” Thad says as he hops on another hippocampus’ back. “She cares about their comfort. And genuinely doesn’t want to see them hurt. That means a lot to them.”

Jayden glares at Thad but climbs over the railing and puts a hand out to the nearest creature. Jayden nods before carefully getting on the hippocampus’ back.

“Fine,” Jayden grumbles.

Raven grins as she settles on the back of another and pats its shoulder, but Greyson is wary.

He tentatively holds his hand out to a purple and green hippocampus and it shies away from him at first. He reaches out to another and the same thing happens. His shoulders slump as he scans the ocean.

“I’m gonna have to swim, guys. They’re scared of me.”

My eyes widen. His wolf is the problem just like at the zoo when all the animals went crazy whenever he was near. I should have known that would be an issue.

“That’s a long way to swim, Greyson.” I stare at the island with a grimace.

“I don’t think I have much of a choice.” He reaches out one last time and the hippocampus backs away again.

I turn to Thad. “Can you help him?”

Thad cocks his head to the side, deep in thought. He narrows his eyes on the hippocampus.

“He’s a friend,” Thad says to the hippocampus. “He won’t hurt you.”

The hippocampus edges forward in the water at Thad’s words. He bumps Greyson’s hand with his snout. A trilling sound fills the air again and the hippocampus nods his head at Greyson.

“You’re good,” Thad says. “Get on his back.”

Greyson carefully climbs on the hippocampus’ back. It swims to the shore and the rest of us follow in his wake, but the closer we get to shore, the more obvious it is that this is the place we need to be.

“Don’t pick anything up this time, Raven. I’m pretty sure I see a pile of bones over there.” I grimace, pointing to a mound of something that smells foul even over the salty sea air.

“That’s disgusting,” Greyson groans, startling his hippocampus.

The creature bucks and Greyson nearly flies off his back, but Greyson wraps his arms around its neck. He pats the neck in a soothing gesture and the creature calms.

“I’m sorry, babe.” Raven giggles. “But that was funny.”

“Shut it before you scare him again and I do end up in the ocean,” Greyson whispers.

“Aww, I would laugh so hard at that.”

“I’ll get you for that later,” he says with a grin.

“Promises, promises,” Raven sings.

We get to the shore, giggling at their antics, and I pat the hippocampus’ head again as I hop off his back into ankle-deep water. It’s better than swimming to the island though.

“Where do you think the giant crab is?” I ask.

“Maybe we should follow the carnage.” Jayden points to a trail in the sand that appears to be blood.

The sand is no longer white but stained a dark brown and packed together in clumps, and small bits of human flesh litter the area around it. Bile crawls up my throat, burning my esophagus as I gag at the sight.

“Ugh, why do monsters have to be so gross?” I ask.

“Because they’re monsters?” Raven bumps my shoulder with hers.

“Just be glad your nose isn’t as good as a shifter’s.” Greyson frowns.

“It still smells awful even though I’m not a shifter,” Jayden grunts.

“Right. Same.” I hold a hand over my nose but it’s no use.

The stench is already tickling at my senses. My stomach roils at the awful smell. Why do monsters have to be so vile? Human bones litter the ground as we follow the blood trail deeper into the trees.

“Was that a finger?” Raven asks.

“I don’t know and I really don’t want to know.” I shudder.

“I actually think it’s a toe.” Greyson gags.

“I don’t care. It’s gross.” I pick up my pace.

Get away from the toe on the ground. This is fucking disgusting. It’s almost worse than the sirens. I actually almost prefer them to walking into the unknown carnage and having no idea how to destroy a giant crab thing.

“Watch your step,” Jayden says.

He steps over a large bone on the path in front of us and I squeak at the sight. It's huge and appears to be a femur.

This is fucking fantastic.

"Eww," I groan as Jayden grabs my hand and I carefully step over it.

"That's bigger than the leg bone I threw for Cerberus." Raven steps over it behind me.

"At least with Cerberus he wasn't actually going to kill us." I scan the trees.

There's no sign of the monster. How is it that we can't find a giant crab on a small deserted island that shouldn't even be here?

"Where do we find it?" Jayden runs a hand down his face.

"I don't know. How does a giant crab blend into the trees?" I hang my head.

We walk for a long time around the island until we get to the center but there's no giant crab. A small stream cuts through the space and I plop on the ground.

"What the hell are we supposed to do?" I scan the area but there are no dryads or nereids in sight.

How are the trees and the stream here with no nature spirits? That doesn't make any sense. Where are they? Are they hiding and where is the crab? Is it in the ocean? What will happen to Triton and the boat?

"Maybe we should get back to the boat." I chew my lip. "What if the crab is in the ocean?"

"It would have attacked us on the way to the island." Jayden squeezes my shoulder.

"Or it would have attacked us while we were on the boat." Raven shrugs.

"But what if it was waiting for us to leave the boat before it attacks?"

"I'm pretty sure that Triton can take care of himself." Jayden grips my arm when I fall.

"I'm not worried about him. I'm worried about the boat and the

hippocampi.” I dust the sand off my pants.

“Right. The boat is our way off this island.” Jayden pinches the bridge of his nose and turns.

“We can’t leave yet. We need to defeat the thing before it destroys the city.”

“Let’s just go back to the beach and check on the boat.” Jayden sighs.

“He’s right, B. We should go check. It may be the only way to find the stupid crab fucker.” Raven steps next to me.

“Okay, yeah.” I trudge down to the beach with my friends at my sides.

As we follow the trail of blood and bones back to the beach, dread fills me. What if the crab took out the ship? We will be stuck here with no way to get back to Monterey.

I stumble over the huge femur but Jayden catches me before I fall in the trail of gore. Thank the fates. I do not want all that nastiness all over me.

“Where is it?” Raven gasps as we get back to the beach.

“I didn’t hear a crash or anything getting destroyed and we haven’t been gone that long,” I grumble.

“There.” Thad points to a ship in the distance. “He fucking left us here.”

The boat is small in the distance but moving quickly away from the shore. Why the hell would Triton leave us out here when he was told to help us? Could Poseidon really be in on whatever’s happening? Did he tell Triton to drop us on the island to fucking rot? I hope not, for all our sakes.

“Motherfucker. I knew I didn’t like him,” I growl.

“How are we going to get off the island?” Raven asks.

“I don’t know, but we’ll have to figure that out after we find the crab,” I say.

“No one wants to address the elephant on the island?” Jayden folds his arms over his chest.

“What is that?” Thad asks.

“He said your father asked him to bring us out here, but he never said

anything about taking us back to Monterey,” Jayden says.

“What are you getting at? My father didn’t do this,” Thad growls.

“How do you know that? He could be the one trying to overthrow Zeus. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Enough, guys. It’s not Poseidon.” I throw my hands up.

“Triton is an asshole. This is just like something he would do to me.” Thad shakes his head. “He’s done shit like this to me before.”

“How do you know it’s not Poseidon?” Raven asks.

“Every time we have spoken to one of the minions and let them go on about their plans, they have sworn it was a woman that would finally overthrow the gods and become the matriarch of humanity,” I say.

“That’s true, but Poseidon could be working with whoever it is,” Jayden grumbles.

“He’s not. He sent me to the academy to help fight what’s coming,” Thad protests.

“Then why would Triton leave us out here?” Jayden asks.

“Because he’s a self-important dickhead who only cares about himself.” Thad sits on the sand, staring out to sea.

“Or,” I say. “He could be working with whoever is behind this to try and usurp your father’s throne.”

“Shit,” Thad curses. “That’s probably it. You saw how disgusted he is with my father.”

“He hates humans so all the earthquakes and storms could be a way to wipe them out before the Great War that’s coming.” I run a hand down my face.

Was it Triton who stole the trident to begin with? Is he the one who put this all in motion? It would have to be someone close to Poseidon to even get close to the damn thing.

“It’s a good theory,” Jayden says. “Especially since he left us out here to rot.”

“I don’t know,” I say. “It just seems too easy, right?”

“Yeah,” Raven says. “I would think he wouldn’t have shown his hand so early in our mission if it was him behind it.”

“We won’t know anything else until we find the trident so we need to hurry and find the crab so we can figure out a way off this damn island,” I say.

“Agreed.” Jayden squeezes my hand.

“That bastard just dumped us on an island in the middle of the ocean and fucking left us.”

The trees sway eerily on the island but there is no sea breeze anywhere. The ground rumbles and I reach for Jayden as I stumble.

“What was that?”

“Is it another earthquake?” Raven asks.

“I don’t know. I hope not.” I scan the island.

The trees rustle as another rumble tears through the ground. I bump into Jayden as I stumble to the side. That isn’t an earthquake. The rumbling is too similar to when we fought the golem in the underworld.

What’s worse, though? An earthquake rattling the world or the giant crab coming to try to kill us all?

I jump back as a tree falls, crashing into the sand just a few feet in front of us. As I peer closer, I see the tree was cut in half and the rustling is getting worse, like something is moving closer.

“Weapons,” I yell.

I press a hand to my necklace, touching all three charms at once. A shield of shadows forms in front of me as my sword appears in one hand and my whip unfurls in the other.

A pincer larger than me strikes out at us but bounces off the shadow shield and darts back. An arm wraps around my waist, pulling me back against a firm chest, as shadows dance along the arm. Jayden.

“What the fuck was that?” Jayden asks.

His warm breath tickles my ear and I straighten my spine. I need to focus on the monster in front of us.

“It was the giant crab and I think we might be in some serious trouble.”

“S
pread out,” I yell.

Jayden and Raven are on either side of me, their weapons ready for the beast that’s hiding in the trees.

“We still don’t know how to kill this thing or even what it is, exactly,” Jayden says.

“I’m thinking brute force,” Raven says.

“You’re always thinking brute force,” I say with a chuckle.

“So? You know who my father is.” Raven adjusts her grip on the ax.

“We need to get a look at it.” Jayden cuts into our banter. “If it has a hard shell, we will need to reassess where to attack.”

A huge pincer swipes out at Jayden while his focus is on me, and Raven and I shove him out of the way with more force than necessary and swing my sword at the crab claw. It bounces off the shell uselessly and sparks fly.

“Fuck,” Jayden yells.

He jumps back to his feet and dusts the sand off his clothes before grabbing his sword once again.

“Sorry, my strength has increased.” I shrug and face the crab.

“I have someone’s blood on me now,” Jayden says.

“You would’ve had your own blood on you if B hadn’t saved your ass,” Raven says.

“Right. Let’s kill this thing.” Jayden adjusts his grip on his sword.

“The claws are practically metal. My sword bounced right off.” I widen my stance as another claw comes at my shield.

It prods the shield and the shadows writhe to protect me from the razor-sharp pincers. They are like shark teeth ready to rip through flesh and bone. The creature scuttles from behind the trees and one of them falls, shaking the island.

Huge beady eyes stare at me from underneath red armor and something about the creature seems familiar but I’m not quite sure why. What is this monster and where did it come from? Why is it on this island attacking human ships when I’m sure it should be somewhere else entirely?

“The entire shell is metal. Fuck.” Jayden runs a hand through his hair. “How the hell are we supposed to kill it?”

“Can you see any kinks in its armor?” I ask as I dodge another swipe at me.

The creature is getting bolder by the second. It swipes a claw at Raven and she blocks it with her battle ax, pushing the creature back but not harming it in any way.

“I don’t see anything but metal,” Jayden growls.

“What about the underbelly?” I ask. “It should be soft, right?”

“No, Beth.” Jayden glares at me.

“No, what? It could be the only way to kill it.” I flick my whip out at the creature, filling it with electricity.

A high-pitched shriek fills the air as the crab scuttles back, tugging at the whip and pulling it along with him. I jerk forward, stumbling as the crab attempts to drag me along with my whip.

“Beth, let go and call it back to you,” Jayden barks as he stabs at the side of the creature but it does nothing.

Reluctantly, I release the whip and the creature scuttles back. I grip my necklace and the whip returns to my hand instantly.

“See, Jayden? Its shell is too strong. I need to get beneath it.” I glare at him.

“Why do you need to be the one to get beneath it?” He dodges as the crab attempts to stab him with the sharp point at the end of its claw.

“It keeps coming after me.” I spin out of the way as it swipes at me again.

“That’s probably because you shocked it, B.” Raven grins.

“Or it was brought back like the rest of the monsters with the sole purpose of killing me.”

“All the more reason not to get underneath the fucking thing,” Jayden growls.

I turn to Raven and Greyson on my left. “Can you guys distract it while I slide under it?”

“No,” Jayden says gripping my arm and spinning me behind him.

“Jayden,” I scream as a claw is aimed directly for his chest.

A huge spray of water hits the crab in the face, pushing it back away from us just before Jayden is gutted by the damn spiked claw. I spin around to find Thad with his hands out and water pouring from them.

“Go,” Thad yells.

I spin away from Jayden and pump my arms and legs as I race to the retreating crab. Thad continues his assault with the water and I slide under the crab just as a pincer comes down. Pain erupts in my shoulder and my eyes burn with tears as the creature retracts its claw and blood pours from the wound.

“Beth,” Jayden bellows.

“I’m okay,” I grit out.

The claw snaps down at me again but I roll out of the way. The claw buries deep in the sand where I was only a moment ago. My shoulder throbs as I roll away and sand sticks to the bleeding wound. Fuck, that hurts.

The crab scuttles to the side, nearly stepping on me with the points of its legs, and I roll again until I’m directly beneath it. I grip my sword in one

hand, calling my whip back into my necklace before I lose it for good. I can't move my arm where the crab got me in the shoulder so my sword is all I have to defeat it.

"Beth," Jayden shouts. "Get the fuck out of there. We'll find another way."

I ignore him as I shimmy farther down the crab's body. Water rushes over me from Thad's attack and Raven yells a battle call. They're distracting it for me. There isn't a lot of the body that isn't covered with the diamond-hard shell.

How the hell are we supposed to defeat the thing if we can't find the kink in its armor? I'm forced to roll with the crab as it scuttles sideways again and one of its sharp legs tears through my pants.

"Fuck, too close," I mumble to myself.

The others won't hear me over the sounds of battle. As I roll again, something glittering on the crab's underbelly catches my eye. Small balls of light form the cancer constellation. What the fuck?

The cluster of stars next to the main lines appear softer than the rest of the creature and I raise my sword but before I can strike, the crab shifts again and a claw comes down right next to my head and buries itself in the sand.

Carefully, I crouch beneath the crab, even at the protest of my injured shoulder. My arm lies useless at my side. I need to get closer to that constellation. Why would the crab have the cancer constellation on its belly?

Now isn't the time to wonder about it. I need to fucking move and kill the thing. I can figure that shit out later. The claw swipes at me from beneath it and catches me in the gut. I shout as all the air whooshes out of my lungs, and I fly into the crab's legs, slamming my back against them and shredding my skin.

I scream as blood oozes from the scrapes left by the legs and I roll away before they can trample me. Sand sticks into the wounds on my back, the small particles only cutting deeper into my skin and searing pain explodes

through me.

“Thad, Raven, keep distracting it. I’m going in to help her,” Jayden roars.

Shadows writhe next to me and Jayden appears. His eyes are black as night as he stares down at the wounds covering my body. I’m losing so much blood but I can’t stop fighting the creature. We have to destroy it.

“Jayden, there’s a constellation on its stomach. I think it’s the only place it’s vulnerable.” I wheeze.

“Can you move?” Jayden asks, his voice deadly calm.

“I think so. I need to kill this thing.” I move and white-hot agony tears through the wounds in my back as black spots tint my vision.

“Greyson,” Jayden roars. “Get her out of here.”

Shadows pulse around Jayden and seep into the sand around him, slinking out as he loses control. Greyson’s face fills my vision as he shudders from being shadow walked to me.

“Warn a guy next time,” Greyson grumbles.

Jayden growls and grips his blade before crouching and turning his gaze on the crab’s underbelly. “Just get her out of here.”

“What hurts?” Greyson asks with a frown. “Don’t answer that. It’s a stupid fucking question.”

“How are we going to kill this thing?” I ask.

I lean forward on my sword and try my best not to pull at the wounds on my back as I crawl to the best of my ability toward the constellation.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?” Greyson asks, gripping my good arm.

“We need to kill this thing.” I attempt to pull away from him but he’s too strong and I fall forward.

“You need to fucking heal.” Greyson glares at me, tugging me in the opposite direction.

The crab roars its fury and scuttles to the side. Pain explodes in my back and shoulder as Greyson covers me with his body and rolls us out of the way

of the needle like feet directly in front of the crab.

A claw snaps down and I scream a warning, but Thad uses his water and washes us away from the monster just in time before the claw can snap down on us. I splutter and cough water from my lungs as Greyson and I lay panting on the ground ten feet away from the fight that's still raging.

“What the fuck, Greyson. I have to get back in there.” I sit up way too fast and the torn skin on my back stretches and tears.

I blink back wetness as I grit my teeth to stop a scream from bubbling out. Blood seeps from the wounds in a hot trail down my back but I manage to crawl to my knees and stand with difficulty.

“You can't fight like that, Beth. Let Adrian heal you,” Greyson growls.

“He can heal me after we defeat the crab.” I call my whip. “Jayden's lost control. We need to help him.”

“You can barely move without wincing and your other arm is useless from the stabbing in your shoulder.” Greyson turns back to the fight.

Raven swings her ax at the creature as it swipes out at her. She jumps back and scans the beach. Her gaze lands on the wounds on my shoulder and back and she narrows her eyes.

“Don't even think about it, B. We've got this.” Raven glares at the whip in my hand.

“Jayden lost control, Raven. He's under that thing and has no control of himself.” I step toward the monster.

A claw snaps out, but shadow chains wrap around it before the claw gets anywhere near me. Jayden. How is he able to watch me and dodge the fucking monster's movements? The crab scuttles to the side and I gasp, hoping Jayden doesn't get caught the way I did.

Fuck this. I'm going in. I can't let Jayden die at the claws and legs of this stupid crab monster. Fuck no.

The other claw snaps out and Greyson ducks, rolling away, giving me the perfect opening to race beneath the crab. I dart under it even as my friends all

scream for me to stop. Fuck that. Jayden needs me.

I pump my good arm but every movement tears at the shredded skin at my back. I don't stop and I don't cry out even as tears form and my back and shoulder scream in agony. Adrenaline is the only thing that will keep me going. Jayden needs me and the thought of losing him forever is far more painful than a puncture wound and some shredded skin.

"Jayden," I scream.

He's on his knees, his shadows writhing around him and seeping into the sand, stretching out in every direction. His eyes are black pits as he turns his gaze to mine. There's no hint of the glowing blue that I'm used to.

"You're supposed to be safe," Jayden growls in that same multilayered voice from before.

"You've lost control." I narrow my eyes at him. "Do you even feel the slashes in your skin from the legs of this beast?"

He has gashes on both arms that are seeping shimmering red-gold blood. It must be the sand that's making it gold. Did he roll through it the way I had?

"Get out of here, Beth."

"No. I know how to kill it," I say.

"I tried that. It didn't work. All the monster did was kick me away." Jayden shakes his head.

He moves from his knees into a crouch and grips his blade.

"Did you hit him in the right place?" I glance up, scanning the underbelly of the crab even as the sounds of battle continue to rage above us.

"The cancer constellation. Yes."

"Which star?" I ask as I step closer to the constellation.

The crab scuttles to the side again and a claw snaps out at me. I roll to the side, only aggravating my wounds more, but I bite my lip to keep from crying out as I roll to my back beneath the constellation.

"I hacked at the main constellation. I don't think we can beat it like this."

Jayden shakes his head.

There's a ring of blue around his eyes now that I've gotten him to talk. I'm thankful for that. I don't know what I would do if something happened to Jayden.

"It's not the main constellation." I drop my whip and call it back to the necklace as my sword glints at Jayden's feet.

I bend to reach it and wince. Jayden growls as he grabs it and hands it to me. "Why aren't you healed?"

The black eats up the blue in his eyes again. Fuck. He's losing it again.

"I don't have time to get healed when my friends are fighting a fucking evil crab," I growl.

I grip my sword and stalk to the constellation on the underbelly, swinging my blade at any piece of the bastard that comes my way. It hurts. Everything hurts, but I'm done with this fucking battle. I need to be healed and I'm fucking over it.

A claw slices at me again as I reach the constellation. I bat it away with my sword, but it just comes back harder. I spin out of the way and cry out as the skin on my back tears again. Fuck. Black colors my vision and I blink the dots away in rapid succession.

"Beth," Jayden shouts.

"I've got it." I stumble to the side as I swipe my blade at the crab's claw.

Thrusting up into the cluster of stars in the constellation one-handed is hard but the sword slices through the soft underbelly like butter and gold ichor pours from the wound like starlight bursting in the heavens. The creature roars as it collapses into a pile of ash, and I drop to my knees with a cry of agony.

"Beth," Jayden screams and races to me.

The same gold ichor that reminds me of starlight coats his skin and I grimace as it covers his wounds. What the hell is this shit and are we going to be even bigger freaks now? My knees weaken and I drop to the ground on my

belly, heaving in painful breaths.

“What the fuck was that?” I growl.

“I don’t know, but your back is already healing, baby.” Jayden kisses the back of my head.

“What?” I ask and move to sit up, but Jayden presses a hand to my shoulder.

“Adrian, come here.” Jayden waves the seer to us. “She’s already healing but can you speed up the process?”

“No,” I say. “Save your strength. We need to get out of here.”

“You need healing, Beth,” Adrian says. “You too, Jayden.”

“Her first. She took the brunt of it. These are just scratches.” He glances at his arms. “Shit. They were scratches.”

I flip to my back with a wince and my eyes widen as I take in the golden unblemished skin that was torn only a moment ago.

“What the hell was that and why did it have ichor instead of monster blood?” I ask.

Raven gasps. “You were gods touched again?”

“I think so but this time it was different. I’m not sure what to make of it. The monster had the cancer constellation on its underbelly.”

It has to mean something, right? The cancer constellation is a crab but what does it have to do with the Greek gods and ancient history?

I climb to my knees and then my feet with little pain this time.

I sway on my feet as I glance around the beach. “We can figure that all out later. We need to get off this damn island.”

“I had a thought,” Adrian says. “The gods can’t interfere with the lives of mortals, right?”

“Right,” I say, not understanding his logic.

“What if Triton had to sail away until we defeated the beast so he didn’t interfere and piss the fates off?” Adrian raises a brow.

“I like the version where he’s a fucking traitor better,” Thad grumbles.

“Why, so you can rush in to save the day?” Jayden asks, crossing his arms over his chest.

His wounds are completely healed whereas mine are still knitting themselves back together. It fucking hurts but if I show it, Jayden is just going to get pissed at me again for not listening to him when he told me to have Adrian heal me.

“I’m not out for glory, Jayden. I want to help my friends and my father.” Thad crosses his arms over his chest. “Plus, I’m not so sure Triton isn’t a traitor.”

“Agreed. I still have my doubts but we can wait a little while and come up with a plan in case he really did abandon us,” I say.

I stare at the sea, waiting for any sign that Triton is returning to bring us back to Monterey, but after about an hour, my legs cramp and the pain in my back and shoulder become too much. Thoughts swirl of our friends back at the academy and what they are dealing with. We need to get off this island and back to mainland so we can continue the quest before it’s too late.

“He’s not coming back,” I say, glancing at Thad.

“No, I think you’re right.” Thad blows out an exasperated breath.

“What are we going to do?” Raven asks, shuffling from foot to foot. “We can’t all swim back to Monterey.”

“I may have an idea.” Thad grimaces.

“What kind of idea?” I ask with a raised brow.

Before he can answer, a roar sounds around us and I scramble to my feet as a huge sea serpent crests in the water with teeth bigger than my head. I pull my sword and hold it in front of me as I glance at the others. They are all ready for battle.

Fuck, I thought we only had one monster to fight on this island. Why can’t we ever catch a break?

The serpent thrashes in the water as it swims toward us. Fuck.

“Everyone, get ready. Looks like we have another beastie to fight before

the day's end," I groan.

Nothing is ever easy. Will we ever finish this quest and save the world or will everything burst into flames?

“S top,” Thad shouts, rushing in front of us with his hands raised.

“That thing looks like it wants to eat us, Thad.” I raise a brow at him.

“He doesn’t. Cetus is a serpent that does my father’s bidding. I called to him for help.” Thad shakes his head.

“How is he going to help?” Jayden asks, never dropping his weapon.

“He can ferry us back to Monterey.” Thad holds his hands up higher. “He agreed to help us.”

I step closer to the water and tilt my head to the side. The creature dives below the water and then comes back up, arcing in the sky like a whale before diving back into the depths.

“It’s as good a plan as any,” I say and turn to Adrian. “Do you know if it will hurt us?”

“I do and no, it won’t. Cetus takes his orders directly from Poseidon. Most of the time the god of the sea wants him to destroy travelers who have offended him, but if Cetus is helping us, all it can mean is that Poseidon wills it so.” Adrian nods.

“I think we should trust it. What do you guys think?” I turn to Raven and Jayden.

“I think it would be badass to get a ride from a giant sea serpent.” Raven fist-pumps the air.

“We don’t really have many options.” Jayden shrugs.

I glare at his comment because that’s not what I want to hear. I want him to trust my judgment, even when it comes to Thad. He’s proven that he can help us far more than Draven ever did in the last mission.

“No, we don’t and I think this could work,” Thad agrees.

“Okay then, let’s get off this wretched island.” I shiver.

Thad holds out a hand, calling the beast forward, and the serpent swims closer to shore. The sheer enormity of it is terrifying. What the fuck is that thing? Its body is long and snakelike, but it’s easily bigger than a whale, with sharp teeth ready to take down Poseidon’s enemies.

“Are we sure about this?” Jayden whispers.

“Do you have a better plan, Jayden?” I ask with a raised brow.

“No.”

“Okay, we just have to trust Thad to get us back to Monterey safely.” I chew my lip.

“Fine,” Jayden grumbles.

My shoulders slump in relief that he’s not going to argue with me, and I rush toward the water lapping at the shore.

“How are we going to explain the state your clothes are in?” Raven asks, poking me in the back.

“Fuck, Raven, they aren’t completely healed yet,” I grit out.

Jayden turns to me with a glare. “Why the fuck aren’t they healed yet?”

“They were deeper than yours and I got a lot of sand in them?” It comes out as a question.

Jayden’s hands land on my shoulders and I try to hide a wince, but his gaze is on my face as he turns me around. “Fuck, Beth. Your back is completely shredded and you have a gaping hole in your shoulder. How the hell did you fight that damn monster?”

“One-handed and a lot of adrenaline,” I say and shrug but wince as pain spikes through me.

“You need to get the sand out of your wounds.” Jayden grabs my hand and pulls me through the crashing waves.

“What are you doing?” I pull back on his hand.

“Washing the sand off.” He frowns.

“In salt water?” I ask.

The very idea of getting salt in these wounds has me pulling back and attempting to free my hand from his grasp. Raven stomps forward, pushing Jayden away.

“She has open wounds, Jayden. We have water in our packs back at the car. Don’t wash those out with salt water. What are you thinking?” Raven shakes her head.

“Fucking ow. Can you two not play tug-of-war with me. I’m fucking injured,” I growl.

Raven drops my arm and takes a step back with her hands raised in surrender. “Sorry, B.”

Jayden doesn’t let go but he stops trying to tug me into the ocean to wash up.

Instead, he opens his pack and hands me a shirt that smells suspiciously like him. “Put that on until we get to the car so people won’t notice how torn up you are.”

“Will they even notice after that stardust display when the crab died?” I ask.

“It’s funny that you call it stardust because I think I know what that creature was.” Jayden runs a hand down his face.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Jayden never remembers the history lessons before the rest of us so how could he possibly remember this one?

“Let’s get on the giant sea serpent and head to the mainland and I’ll tell you.” Jayden grins.

“That’s reassuring for sure.” I shake my head.

Jayden grips my ass and pulls me up into his arms careful not to touch my back but my shoulder screams in pain even as I leave my arm limply at my side. The waves crash around Jayden's legs as he wades into them with me in his arms.

The sea serpent is close enough to shore that my legs aren't touching the icy Pacific Ocean as Jayden makes it to Cetus. This creature terrorized the Argonauts at Poseidon's order in ancient history. Again, it makes me wonder if Professor Cross knew we were meant to go on this mission soon.

Thad wades into the water and pats the serpent's head like a lovable pet. "It's okay. I promise he's friendly as long as my father doesn't order him to destroy cities. He's more of a protector anyway."

"That's good to know." I try to smile but my back and shoulder are still throbbing in agony.

Thad climbs up on the serpent's back and holds his hands out for Jayden to hand me up to him, but Jayden's grip on my ass tightens. I gasp as he stretches my wounds uncomfortably and the serpent's head whips in our direction, its snakelike tongue tasting the air and eyes narrowing to slits on Jayden's hands.

"Jayden, I would be careful about hurting her. The hippocampi talk to Cetus too and have apparently told Cetus of the caring female who they now adore and I think he's protective of her." Thad shakes his head.

Greyson swims over and hops onto the back of Cetus with Thad's help. "Hand her to me, Jayden. We need to go."

"Fine," Jayden says and his grip on me loosens.

"You know I don't need to be manhandled," I yell.

Cetus flicks his tongue out again, glaring between Jayden and Greyson as Raven comes forward in the water with Adrian at her back. "Just let them do what they're gonna do, B. You know they're going to do it anyway."

"Not if I zap them," I grumble.

"If you zap me, you're gonna end up soaking wet and freezing in the

Pacific Ocean, baby. Let Greyson help you on Cetus' back. Please?" Jayden whispers in my ear.

"Fine, but only because you said please." I reach up with my good arm for Greyson, still a little irritated that Jayden would treat me like a rag doll.

Greyson grabs my arm and pain shoots through my back as he and Jayden lift me onto Cetus' back. Even moving my good arm sends knives through my flesh and I can't help but wonder why Jayden's wounds healed so much faster than mine. Is it really because they were just scratches and mine are much deeper?

We were both affected by whatever that stardust crap was when I killed the crab.

"Wait. Shit. Stardust and the constellation cancer on the thing's belly. You don't think that big bad was the actual constellation cancer, do you? What was the story again? I feel like I know it."

"Oh, shit, B. The evil stepmonster," Raven groans.

"What?" I ask in a panic and scan the island for an unwanted visitor.

"Not here." Raven rolls her eyes.

"What are you talking about, Raven?" Jayden snaps. "We need to hurry up and go."

Greyson settles me on the back of Cetus behind him and Raven climbs up in front of him, leaving Thad in front of her and Jayden behind me. Jayden holds out a hand, pulling Adrian up to sit behind him.

"Okay, now tell me." I glance around Greyson to stare at Raven's wide eyes.

"You remember the labors of Heracles? The hydra?" she asks.

"Of course. I defeated the hydra to get to the spark." I flinch when Cetus moves and my back slams into Jayden's chest.

"I know we didn't just defeat the hydra but when evil stepmonster saw Heracles had figured out how to defeat the hydra, she sent the creature help in the form of a giant crab. I don't know how we hadn't figured this out before."

She throws her hands in the air.

“Fuck, you’re right. Heracles killed the crab but Hera made it a constellation in the sky to thank it for its service to her. So, now we’re not only fighting whoever is trying to take down the gods but also the evil stepmonster? Just fucking perfect.”

“We’re fighting two battles now?” Jayden groans against my neck.

“It looks that way,” I say with a sigh. “She can’t be behind this. She swore an oath to never move against him again. How could she get around that?”

“She can’t.” Raven turns her gaze on me. “So, this means we have to watch our backs double time.”

“How the hell do you bring a constellation from the sky back into existence and why did it burst into ash again once it died like the rest of the monsters that were brought back?” I lean my head against Jayden’s shoulder but suck in a sharp breath when my back and shoulder sting.

“Stop that,” Jayden hisses in my ear. “You’re hurting yourself.”

“I’m not trying to but we already had it bad enough without her gunning for us too. Is this part of her own scheme to punish Zeus and get rid of me since she knows that I’m important to my father? I don’t know that we can handle her bullshit along with finding Poseidon’s trident and stopping whoever is trying to take down the gods.”

“We’ll figure it out, but we have to make sure you’re healed first.” Jayden grips my good hand in his.

I nod because it’s the only thing I can do without hurting myself further. Jayden is keeping me at arm’s length so I don’t bump my shredded back to his chest. My skin tingles at my back with healing energy and I glance over my shoulder to Adrian with a frown. He’s getting a lot better in his healing abilities.

“Are you healing me without touching me?” I ask.

“What?” Adrian asks and shakes his head. “I’m not healing anyone.”

I pull at the shirt covering my shredded back. It needs to come off. What the fuck is going on with my back? Tingles race down my back. The skin knits itself back together as we race through the ocean on the back of a giant sea serpent. How did my life become like this?

“What are you doing?” Jayden asks. “You can’t take that off.”

“It hurts,” I cry.

It doesn’t exactly hurt but it does itch like crazy. What the fuck is happening to me? My back arches as the tingles become more and more painful.

“Thad, can we get to shore any faster? Something is going on with Beth,” Greyson calls but he sounds like he’s underwater.

Are we underwater? How the fuck did that happen? There’s no icy chill of the Pacific Ocean and as I glance around, everyone appears to be dry. The sun is shining over our heads. How is that possible when everything sounds so garbled?

“What’s happening?” I slump forward and the tingles in my back erupt more forcefully.

Thad turns from his spot in front of Greyson and his eyes widen. I glance down at my injured shoulder and shimmering gold blood pours from the wound.

“What the fuck?” Greyson says as he places a hand on my shoulder to staunch the flow.

“No, don’t touch,” I groan, attempting to bat his hand away with my good hand.

Jayden pulls up the back of my shirt and gasps. “You’re healing but everything on your back is shimmering gold as it does. That didn’t happen when my wounds healed.”

“I don’t know what’s happening. I got hit full force with Cancer’s blood.” I shake my head.

“It’s going to be okay.” Jayden flexes his fingers on my stomach since

it's really the only place he can touch me without hurting me. "You were already gods touched, so maybe defeating Cancer just sped up the process."

"I'm bleeding ichor, Jayden. I would say the process is pretty close to complete."

What the fuck is going on here and if I'm gods touched and have ichor running through my veins now, then why the fuck am I not healed already?

"Easy," Jayden says. "We'll figure this out."

He strokes my stomach with soothing fingers. They are all staring at me like I've grown a second head. What the fuck am I? What am I going to do now? Am I even still a demigod or am I something else entirely? For the first time since I became a demigod and started these crazy missions, I wish Artemis was here.

"I need Artemis," I breathe.

My whole body is shutting down and I can barely think straight. Convulsions rack my body as I slump forward into Greyson. His eyes are wide as I glance up at him.

"We're almost there, Beth. You gotta hold on for a while longer." He grips my arms to hold me up. "You look like you're healing quickly."

"No, this doesn't feel like I'm healing. It feels like I'm dying."

"You're not fucking dying," Jayden growls. "Remember what I told you?"

A smile tugs at the corner of my lips at his growled declaration. He won't let me die. If I do move on to the underworld, he will pull an Orpheus and bring me back.

"What about the elixir?" Raven asks. "It could help."

"Yes," I say, arching my back as agony slices through my shoulder. "It fucking hurts."

"It's in your pack in the SUV, baby. Just hang on. We're almost to the dock." Jayden kisses my head.

"What kind of stupid shit is that? We left her pack in the SUV while we

went to fight a giant crab? We fucking know better.” Raven throws her hands up.

“Adrian can heal now, Raven. It wasn’t a necessity and Beth needed to be able to move without worrying we were losing supplies,” Jayden argues.

“She wouldn’t let me heal her,” Adrian grumbles.

I blink in an attempt to keep my eyes open, scared what might happen if I close them for real and fall asleep. Not that the pain will allow me that luxury. My shoulder burns with white-hot fury. A whimper escapes as Cetus slows at the shore. The entire dock is abandoned and I thank the gods for small mercies.

How the hell would we explain walking out of the ocean after being dropped off by a giant sea serpent. Jayden jumps off Cetus’ back and reaches up to grab me as Greyson lowers me down into Jayden’s waiting arms. Jayden grips my ass, careful not to touch my back, and stomps through the water to the dock.

“Need sleep but I’m scared,” I mumble into Jayden’s neck.

“I know, baby. You’re gonna be okay. We will figure out what’s happening to you.” He strokes my hair in a soothing motion.

“Everything hurts,” I mumble.

My shoulder screams with pain as I bury my face in the crook of his neck, just breathing. Black spots tint my vision and I must pass out from the pain because I’m jostled awake as pain sears down my back when Jayden sets me in the front seat of the SUV.

“Sorry, baby.” He kisses my forehead.

“Need the elixir,” I mumble.

I bend to grab my pack but whimper as agony tears through my still shredded back, the skin ripping even more and undoing any healing.

“Don’t. I’ll get it.” Jayden stops me.

I hate this. Feeling helpless. I can’t move or do anything for myself as whatever this is moves through my blood, not healing but also making me a

freak.

Jayden reaches for my pack and pulls the elixir and dropper from it. I have the sudden urge to rip the bottle from his hand and drink the entire thing but I hold myself back, remembering the warning the healers gave me. I can't take too much. It could hurt me. But is that even true now that we don't know exactly what I am?

"Open up," Jayden says and I do what he asks.

He places three drops on my tongue and I sigh with relief. I slump back against the seat, ignoring the twinge in my back that is slowly going away.

"That's so much better," I breathe.

My shoulder tingles with healing magic and I blink my eyes closed, no longer worried about dying as the healing magic pours through my tired limbs. Sleep claims me right there in the passenger side of the SUV.

I jolt awake as someone squeezes my thigh. Jayden. I turn to our surroundings and we are parked outside a fancy hotel.

“What are we doing here?” I ask groggily.

“We thought it would be best to stay the night since you need to heal,” Jayden says.

I turn my back and there is no pain. I even lift my arm from my side and roll my shoulder a couple times without so much as a hint of discomfort.

“I’m fine. The elixir did its job.”

“Yeah, well, everyone is tired after the fight. Let’s just stay here tonight and we’ll get a fresh start in the morning.” Jayden unbuckles my seat belt.

I nod reluctantly and let him pull me from the SUV. The hotel we’re at is right on the water and I breathe in the salty sea air. For whatever reason, Mom always steered clear of the sea when we were moving around from place to place, but now I’m guessing it probably had something to do with Poseidon finding us and figuring out who I am.

We walk to a small villa in the back of the hotel and there’s a private beach at the back with a patio. The others are sitting in comfy deck chairs, staring at the churning waves as we round the back of the building.

“How are you feeling, B?” Raven asks. “You scared the hell out of us.”

“Good as new.” I shrug and expect a bite of pain in my shoulder but

nothing happens.

“We need to go inside. We can’t let humans see her like this.” Jayden steers me to the glass doors with his hand firmly on my ass, making my skin tingle.

“I put your stuff in the big bedroom,” Raven calls out to me.

“Thank you.” I nod.

Jayden leads me into the bedroom and shuts the door behind us before spinning me into his arms and crashing his lips to mine.

“Fuck, Beth. You can’t do that to me.” He rests his forehead against mine. “I thought I fucking lost you more than once today. Fuck.”

“I’m right here, Jayden. I’m not leaving you.” I kiss him softly, melting into his touch.

I trail my fingers down his back and a shuddering sigh escapes him as he reaches back and grabs my hands, pulling them off him.

“I need to check your injuries, Beth. We can’t do this right now.” Jayden clasps both my hands in his between us.

“I’m fine, Jayden. I’m healed.” I tug on his hold but his grip is firm.

“I need to see them, Beth,” Jayden says.

“Fine.” I yank my wrists out of his grip and rip his shirt over my head.

It’s covered in blood and ichor. We should probably burn that along with my clothes. My own shirt is sticking to my skin where blood poured from me and it’s a little more difficult to get off. Jayden grips the hem of my shirt at my back and rips it down the middle which isn’t so surprising since it’s already shredded.

“Not a single scar.” Jayden kisses my shoulder where the crab gored me.

He steps around me and groans when he sees my back. His lips trail over my neck as his fingers brush over the healed skin there.

“I told you I was healed.” I turn to him and he groans.

“I told you I needed to see it for myself but now I don’t know that I can keep my hands off you,” he whispers.

“What if I don’t want you to?” I ask, turning to him.

“I thought you were angry with me.” Jayden grips my hips, pulling me closer.

“You’re an overprotective, jealous idiot.” I lean in closer.

“Maybe Thad isn’t so bad,” Jayden grumbles. “He has been way more helpful than Draven ever was.”

“See? You have nothing to worry about. He’s been helpful and I have no interest in anyone but you.” I reach up on my tiptoes and peck him on the lips.

Jayden groans and wraps his arms around my waist, pulling me in closer. “Are you sure you’re okay? No side effects of whatever blood got on you?”

“I’m fine, Jayden. Other than gold blood pouring from me earlier, I don’t feel different.” I rest my head on his chest.

“Good.” He sighs.

He tilts my head up to meet his gaze and crashes his lips against mine. My arms snake around his neck as he pulls my body flush with his. He grips my ass in both hands as he deepens the kiss.

His hands roam up from my ass and across my back, his fingers trailing over healed skin and leaving tingles in his wake. He skims his fingers along the seam at the bottom of my bra.

“Jayden,” I whisper against his lips.

“What do you need, baby?” he asks as he plants soft kisses down my neck.

“You. I just need you,” I moan.

“You have me, beautiful. Always.” He licks down my neck to my collarbone.

Nimble fingers tug at the clasp of my bra until it snaps free. The straps fall down my shoulders and Jayden’s lips follow the path over one shoulder. Shadows dance up his arms and over me, kneading my shoulders and back.

Jayden pushes me back and I stumble into the bed behind me, falling onto

the soft bed and bouncing once. “Jayden.”

“Hmm?” he asks as he covers my body with his.

“You just threw me on the bed.” I laugh.

“I can’t wait any longer for you,” Jayden growls against my nipple.

A moan tumbles from my lips and my back arches into his kiss. His shadows slink over my shoulder and to my other breast as Jayden nips my nipple between his teeth.

“Then take me,” I growl.

“Don’t rush me.” He sucks my nipple into his mouth, hard, and I gasp.

“You said you couldn’t wait,” I say but his hands wrap around my wrists, bringing my arms up over my head.

His shadows slink over them, holding them in place, and Jayden glances up from my breast with a wicked grin. I tug at the new restraints as his fingers trail down my arms and he licks my breast.

“I’m perfectly content getting you nice and warmed up before I fuck you until you come all over my cock, baby.”

“Stop teasing me.” I yank at the shadows again, but they don’t budge.

“No,” Jayden says.

“What do you mean, no?” I groan.

“I’m going to tease you as long as I want.” He kisses and licks his way to my other breast.

“Jayden.” I buck my hips but his hand slams down on my waist, pinning me to the bed.

He chuckles against my nipple, the vibrations tearing a moan from my lips. “You’re so beautiful.”

I squirm beneath him again, needing friction. Needing something to stop the ache. I can’t even pull at the shadows at my command because I can’t touch my necklace and it’s infuriating. “You don’t play fair.”

“Whoever said I did? Be careful before I tell my shadows to wrap around your legs too so you can’t move at all,” Jayden says, sucking my nipple into

his mouth again and rolling his tongue around it.

I wrap my leg around his waist and buck my hips in a futile attempt to flip him over and take control. He's too strong for me to flip like this with his shadows controlling my arms and I pout. "Jayden."

"What, beautiful?"

"I need you to do something." I stick my bottom lip out at him.

"I am doing something." He smirks. "I'm enjoying myself and your torture."

He nips my breast again before moving lower. His tongue licks down over my belly as I continue to struggle against his shadows. Jayden's hand moves from my waist down to my thigh and around to my calf that's wrapped around his waist. He peels my leg away from his body with an ease that shouldn't be possible since we are basically of equal strength.

Jayden pushes my leg back down on the bed and holds it there with one strong hand as his lips trail over me, down to the waistband of my torn jeans. He licks a path along the waistband to the button where his other hand flicks them open. A groan escapes him, rumbling through me.

"If you be good, I'll take these off and show you how much I want you," Jayden whispers against my skin.

"Be good?" I lift my head and narrow my eyes at him.

"Hush." He sits back on his heels and tugs at my pants. "You're not being good right now."

"You're being a cocky smirking asshole right now who needs to fuck me already," I roar.

"Do you want our friends to hear you?" He clamps his hand over my mouth. "Adrian, I'm not worried about. The fucker sees everything, but what about the others, hmm?"

"You say you're going to make me scream anyway so what does it matter?" I gnash my teeth at him.

"Yes, I am going to make you scream for me." He lifts my leg over his

shoulder.

“Promises, promises,” I parrot Raven’s words from before.

All trace of humor is wiped from my face as Jayden stares down at me and his shadows slink down my belly to my center. A phantom tongue laps at my core. Jayden smirks and licks his lips as if he can taste me on the shadows. My back arches as something thrusts inside me hard and fast. A whimper explodes from my lips.

“You were saying, baby,” Jayden says.

“Fuck, Jayden,” I groan.

My hands fist in the sheets above my head, still immobilized so I can do nothing but take the assault. More shadows writhe, nipping and sucking at my breasts as Jayden leans forward, kissing me hard.

“I love seeing you like this, writhing beneath the touch of my shadows, helpless to do anything but feel.” He nips my bottom lip as his shadows torture my body.

Tingles race down my spine as the beginnings of an orgasm build but Jayden backs off. “What?”

“You didn’t think I would let you come so easily after your sassy mouth, did you?” Jayden chuckles.

“Quit teasing me,” I growl.

“Make me.” He sits back on his heels.

My leg is still propped over his shoulder but as I attempt to move it to kick him in the chest, he wraps his arm around it, pinning it down. Fuck. He really is in complete control and I’m helpless to do anything but take the torture.

“Jayden, I need you,” I whine.

His shadows slither idly over my skin, caressing every inch of me. It’s maddening. Jayden grips my thigh, staring down at my body where the shadows are slithering over me, touching me everywhere but where I need them most. He trails his fingers down my inner thigh as something presses

inside me so deep it hits the spot that has all thought fleeing my mind.

My head thrashes as his shadow sucks my clit again. My whole body shakes with the force of it but just before I can fall over the cliff, everything stops again. A frustrated growl escapes as I come back down and my thighs clench on nothing.

“What the fuck, Jayden?” I glare at him, tears burning the backs of my eyes.

“You scared the hell out of me today. It was fucking torture not being able to help you. Now I’m going to enjoy torturing you the best way I know how.” He nips my inner thigh and licks it to soothe the sting.

The bite of pain mixes with the fleeting pleasure and I groan. He’s going to fucking kill me if he doesn’t let me come soon, but from the look in his glowing blue eyes, that’s not happening anytime soon.

“I didn’t mean to scare you. We were in battle, Jayden. Shit happens in battle.” I shake my head.

If only my hands weren’t bound in shadows, I’d reach for him and pull him closer. I need him like I need air, but he’s just sitting there, staring down at me. Is he replaying the battle and the aftermath in his mind? What is he thinking? I’m desperate to touch him and as I tug at my wrists again, a frustrated groan escapes.

Jayden drops my leg to the bed and with one hand, he rips his shirt over his head, his toned tan chest on full display. I lick my lips as I squirm at the sight of him. He’s gorgeous and completely mine.

Jayden leans over me, his face so close to mine I can reach up and press my lips to his. “It doesn’t always have to be you who runs headfirst into battle like that.”

“It does, though, Jayden. It has to be me. The monsters are after me. I don’t know why but this all started because of me, and I won’t let one of you die because of me.” I lean up, kissing him hard, but he pulls away much too quickly for my liking.

“Fine,” he says and grins before standing up from the bed.

“Where are you going?” I ask and tug at the shadows again.

Jayden doesn't respond as he turns to the door and for one heartbreaking moment, it appears he's planning to leave me like this. Jayden sighs before flicking the lock on the door and spinning around to face me.

“Do you have any idea what it would do to me if I lost you in battle?” Jayden stalks to the bed.

He crawls up the bed, devastation in his eyes as he covers my body with his. We've been over this probably a hundred times, but it's not going to stop me from fighting and killing the monsters that need to be destroyed.

“You need to have faith in me, Jayden. In the team we've built here. They won't let me die any more than I let them. Is it dangerous? Fuck yes, but it's our responsibility.” I kiss him again and he doesn't pull away immediately this time.

The shadows release my hands and I trail my fingers into his short blond hair, pulling him closer. “Fine, just promise me something.”

“What?” I groan.

“Don't die,” he says and trails kisses down my neck. “I don't think my father would let me take you from the underworld.”

“I'll try not to.” I moan and rub my thighs together, needing friction as he kisses over my breast again.

Jayden stares up from my breast with a wicked gleam in his glowing blue eyes and his shadows are back touching me, caressing me, and licking me. My back arches, pressing my breast firmly to his wicked tongue.

“What do you want, baby?” Jayden asks.

“I want you to fuck me already,” I moan.

Jayden sits back on the bed before hopping off and stripping his pants from his body. I lean up on my elbows, watching as his thick cock springs free. Fuck, he's gorgeous. I lick my lips, wanting my own taste of him.

Rolling to the edge of the bed, I sit up and reach for him. His cock jerks

in my hand as I wrap it around his base and stroke him once. A guttural groan fills the quiet room.

“What are you doing?” Jayden asks.

“Just getting a taste of what’s mine.” I lick the head of his cock, swiping at the bead of precum at his tip.

“Fuck, Beth. You make me fucking lose control,” he says and his shadows writhe along my body.

Something presses into me as I continue stroking him and lick the underside of his cock. Jayden fists my hair. Whether he’s pushing me away or pulling me closer, I don’t know.

“I like it when you lose control.” I wrap my lips around him and suck his cock into my mouth.

Hands reach for me and the next second I’m airborne. My back hits the bed again but before I bounce back, Jayden is on me. He wraps my legs around his neck and licks all the way up my center. He circles my clit once with his tongue and those same tingles erupt over my skin, leaving me breathless.

“You don’t come until I’m inside you.” His voice rumbles against my clit.

The vibration of it tears through me and I fist the sheets at my sides, unable to form a coherent response to his command. Jayden continues his brutal torture on my clit, lapping at it and sucking it into his mouth as the tingles turn to convulsions.

“Jayden, I’m gonna come,” I whisper.

His head snaps up and he licks his lips before crawling up my body and kissing me hard. My legs fall from his shoulders but he grabs one thigh and rests it over his elbow as he finally pushes inside me with a growl.

“You’re so fucking perfect. Gods, how did I get so lucky.”

He thrusts inside me hard and fast, hitting that spot inside me that takes me even higher. His lips crash down on mine as white spots tint my vision. I

scream in ecstasy, but it's muffled by Jayden's kiss.

Jayden's pace is punishing and one orgasm blurs into two as he fucks me hard. I grip his shoulders, digging my nails into his skin, and he groans as he licks my collarbone before nipping it lightly.

Pleasure builds until it's almost painful and my magic dances beneath my skin, ready to come out to play. Sparks light at my fingertips where they are holding Jayden's shoulders and he growls, slamming into me harder than before.

Jayden rolls us so I'm on top and grips my wrists as he thrusts up into me from the bed. He places my hands on his chest, allowing the sparks to shock him again and again as I ride out the wave of my orgasm.

"More," Jayden commands. "I need fucking more of you."

I run my hands down his chest to his abs as I gyrate on top of him. The angle has me rising to that peak all over again. Little shocks coat his skin and his hands flex on my hips, his fingers digging into my skin.

"Fuck, your magic feels so good, baby. I'm gonna fucking come. Need to be on top when I come." He rolls us again and slams into me one final time with a roar and I tumble into the abyss right alongside him.

The ocean breeze tosses a strand of hair in my face as I sit alone on the private beach. Everything is fucked up around us. The waves churn angrily in the sea.

I stand from the comfy deck chair. Everyone else is still asleep and a peaceful walk on the beach is just the thing to soothe my fried nerves.

The beach is deserted. There are no humans around so I let my magic loose and sparks crawl over my skin. They aren't blue anymore but tinged in gold and the new color bothers me. Why is everything turning gold? What was the deal with gold blood gushing from my shoulder? I wish Artemis were around, as crazy as that is.

She already told us she doesn't know what being gods touched will do to us but pair that with the mark of the warrior on my skin and nothing makes any sense.

I wander aimlessly down the beach, staying far enough from the water that the churning waves don't hit me, and play with my magic. It's soothing.

"Help," a distant cry startles me but it's so low.

Did I imagine that? I turn in a circle but find nothing out of the ordinary. "I'm losing my mind now?"

I stroll farther down the beach, still scanning the area. It was probably nothing but my stomach knots with worry. What if it wasn't nothing and

someone dies because I didn't think there was anyone there?

"Help," the shout sounds again, a little louder this time.

I rush forward down the beach and scan the waves. "Is someone there?"

"Here. Help me, please." A hand shoots out from the ocean.

"Fuck," I mumble to myself. "Why would anyone go into the ocean like this?"

I race to the water. It's freezing and my teeth chatter almost instantly. I wade out until the water is waist-deep but all that's there is the top of a man's bald head in the distance. Seaweed surrounds him.

This is such a bad fucking idea. What if there's a sea monster out there? What if the man himself is a sea monster looking to lure unsuspecting travelers to their doom, pretending to need help?

"Please, help," the man screams again.

He sounds desperate. I can't just leave someone to die because they might not be what they look like. I have to at least try and if Poseidon strikes me down or the man turns out to be a monster, I guess I will face those consequences.

I dive into the water, careful to call my sword beneath the waves so the human doesn't see it. Why on earth would this man be in the water like this? I swim faster as I glance up. The man's head can't even be seen now from the top of the churning sea. There's no sign of a surfboard or anything near him and if I don't hurry, he's going to drown.

Fuck. Why did I go out alone? Why didn't I bring Jayden with me? It would be so much easier.

I kick my feet beneath me as I stop right at the edge of the mass of seaweed. It's tangled all around the man, pulling him beneath the sea. Raising my sword, I hack at the seaweed closest to me and move closer to the man but it's too slow. He's already completely under the water. How long can a human hold their breath?

I dive beneath the waves as something crawls up my legs. The seaweed is

wrapping itself around them. I kick out at it but it just squeezes tighter until I can't even keep myself from sinking beneath the sea.

Gripping my sword, I slash the seaweed again and again until my legs spring free and I shoot closer to the man. He's been under too long. I have to help him. With my free hand, I tug the seaweed from his ankle and slice at the piece around his thigh, careful not to cut him with my blade.

The seaweed retreats away from the man. Is that even seaweed at all? What the hell is it? There's no time to waste wondering though. The man's eyes are closed as he floats in the water. I wrap an arm around him, pulling him up to the surface, and gasp for air. I was almost right there with the man I was trying to save.

The man coughs and splutters as I tow him to shore. Relief floods through me. He's still alive. I was able to save him from the demon seaweed.

We finally make it to shore and the man flips on the ground. The cold breeze sends an icy chill through my body and I rub at the goosebumps prickling on my skin.

"Are you okay?" I ask the man.

He stares up at me a smile painted on his face but his eyes are what grab my attention. They are eerie like someone who has seen too much. What the fuck have I done? I take a step back, gripping my sword in one hand and I call my whip to me with the other as I widen my stance and prepare for the attack.

Fuck. I did just rescue a sea monster or something. Dammit. Jayden is going to be fucking pissed.

"You have nothing to fear from me, daughter of Zeus."

"What the fuck? How do you know who I am?" I ask, taking another step back.

"I know many things." He shrugs.

The words remind me of someone I used to know but he isn't this guy. He's too old and power pulses off him in waves.

“Who are you?” I ask.

“I go by many names but you are probably most familiar with the old man in the sea.” He grins.

Why does that name sound familiar? I stare at the man as I think back to Cross’ ancient history class. My eyes widen as it hits me.

“Nereus?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says.

“You don’t just show yourself to anyone though, so why me?” I ask.

I don’t trust it. The stories of the old man of the sea say he’s elusive and a powerful seer. Why would he seek me out? There’s no way the old man in the sea was drowning.

“I have my reasons, but mainly my curiosity about you won out over my need to stay hidden.” He shrugs.

“You were curious about me?” I ask, confused.

What is there to be curious about? I don’t understand why this old man who is usually elusive purposely sought me out.

“Yes, very curious. People have claimed that demigods were heroes in ancient times, but that wasn’t the case. Most of their acts of bravery were done for selfish reasons or to atone for some sin against others like Heracles.”

“You wanted to see if I would let someone drown to save my own skin?” I ask.

The very thought of doing that is disgusting to me. “I don’t know whether to be curious myself or insulted.”

“You risked much to come into the sea and rescue a random stranger. And you have yet to ask for anything in return.”

“You weren’t actually drowning.” I narrow my eyes.

“Of course not.” He chuckles.

“Not cool, Nereus.” I touch my necklace and stow my weapons.

“I’m not sure what you mean, my dear. It was a test to see if you are what the gods say you are.” He waves off my comment.

“And?” I ask, sitting on the sand next to him.

“Well, of course you passed.” He smiles.

“I’m so glad I passed your little test,” I drawl.

What the hell is it with the gods and immortals playing with our lives like they just have the right to do that? Artemis has done it and Triton too, leaving us in the middle of the fucking ocean. I cross my arms over my chest, annoyed that I played his little game so well.

“Don’t be angry with me, daughter of Zeus.” Nereus pats my shoulder.

“It’s Beth,” I say with a sigh.

“I know.” His eyes twinkle with mirth.

“Then why all the bullshit?” I raise a brow.

“I’m as old as time. I have to get my fun somewhere. You’ll see someday. Immortality is both a blessing and a curse.”

“What do you mean by that?” I ask.

Does he know more about the gods touch? A better question is will he tell me about it? Probably not.

“Just that when you’ve been around as long as I have, life becomes boring and dull. I have to find my joy in something and occasionally that’s tricking demigods into sitting and chatting with me for a while.” He bumps his shoulder into mine.

“No, I meant the part that I will see someday,” I say.

“Are you asking me to tell you the future?” He chuckles.

“Only to clarify your meaning. Do you know about the gods touch and what it’s going to do to me and my friends? Even Artemis isn’t sure.” I run a hand down my face.

“That is something you’re going to have to learn on your own. The fates tie my hands as well as those of the gods.” He sighs.

“I figured as much,” I grumble.

“You have many trials ahead of you, my dear. It’s a shame the weight of the world rests on shoulders so young. Atlas is millennia old and he bears that

same weight to the point it crushes him.”

“That’s Atlas’ punishment for his part in the Titan war, though. Why am I being punished?” I ask.

“I don’t think you’re being punished, per se. You were just brave, noble, and compassionate enough to answer the fates’ call for a savior,” Nereus says.

“Either that or just stupid,” I say.

“You know that’s not true. I’ve never come across a demigod who would risk the wrath of the sea gods to save the life of another without asking for anything in return. You defeated Cancer at great risk to yourself. You almost died.”

“It was killing people and I was asked by one of your daughters for help.” I shrug.

“Exactly. Compassionate and noble and answered the call without asking for anything.” He grins. “How many times have you set out to save the world, my dear?”

“This is the fourth time. It’s the right thing to do.”

“Yes, well, you continue to prove my point. I bet you never asked for anything either.”

“That’s not entirely true.” I grimace. “Claud was stuck in Tartarus for millennia. He’s so sweet and good. He didn’t deserve that.”

A laugh explodes from Nereus’ lips and he leans back, holding his stomach as if he can’t contain his laughter.

“What’s so funny?” I ask.

“The one thing you asked for in return was for the benefit of someone other than yourself. Someone you’d just met and saw was wronged for millennia. And you still doubt yourself.”

“I don’t know that I doubt myself or the idea that I’m so different from anyone else.” I trail my fingers through the sand, drawing lines in it.

“You are different, Beth. You’re good and brave and strong enough to

defeat your enemies. It's a miracle that you came from the king of the gods."

"I will defeat my enemies because it's the right thing to do and I have no choice."

"I have every faith in you but there are many trials ahead. Especially on your current quest," Nereus says.

"Is there anything you can tell me about this quest?" I ask hopefully.

"Follow the sea all the way north. There's an island off Vancouver. That's where you will find the trident, but you must pass every trial along the way or you will not be able to access the island."

"Of course it's on an island," I grumble. "Wait, did you say Vancouver? It's in Canada?"

"Yes, it's a long journey for certain, and the clock is ticking. The sea god grows weak and I fear what will happen to the seas if another god takes the power from him."

"No pressure," I say.

"I have every faith in you, my dear. Trust your friends. They are your only lifeline in this journey you find yourself on, but you already know that."

"Is Triton trying to take over for Poseidon?" I ask. "I got bad vibes from him when he left us in the middle of the ocean."

"That, I cannot say for sure. There are things hidden even from me. My guess is as good as any, though, and I fear if that is his intention, it will no longer be safe for humans or demigods to travel the seas."

"What happens to the gods of the sea if no one travels them?" I ask.

"Good question. You're smart. If humans don't travel the seas, we run the risk of fading away. The sea monsters will rise from the depths and lay waste to humanity. Triton thinks humanity is a scourge but really, they're his lifeline."

"Just one more reason to make sure we retrieve the trident." I swipe at the lightning bolt I drew in the sand.

We have to keep moving. We can't let Triton take over for Poseidon and

we need to stop the earthquakes before they destroy the academy.

“One more question?” I ask.

“Of course.”

“Do you know who's behind all this? Who is taking the gods' items of power and trying to destroy the world?” I ask.

“I do not.” He shakes his head. “They are either very powerful or are using powerful magic to hide their movements from the sight.”

“It was worth a shot. We already uncovered two powerful sorceresses working for them. That's probably how they're hiding.” I ball my hand into a fist.

“They are still most likely powerful in their own right but having the magic of Medea and Hecate behind them wouldn't hurt their chances of success either.”

“Hecate is in Tartarus. Would she still be able to help shield them from Tartarus?”

I wouldn't think she should be able to affect the mortal world from the depths of the pit but if that's the case, do they have more than one powerful sorceress assisting in covering their tracks and who the fuck are they? Why are they after me and the destruction of everything?

“No, Hecate is very much incapacitated for now.” Nereus stands and brushes the sand from his clothes.

“Then whoever this benevolent matriarch is must have more help.” I bite my bottom lip.

Are half the characters from my ancient history book helping this lunatic take over the throne of Zeus and destroy the Olympians? Why? What purpose does it serve? The only thing that makes sense is vengeance. We already stopped the Titans from rising once. It can't be them.

“There's a long list of beings who have a vendetta against the Olympians. Finding the culprit is easier said than done, but I have a feeling they will reveal themselves sooner rather than later.”

“I hope you’re right. It’s difficult to fight an unknown enemy.” I blow out a breath.

“If anyone can do it, I believe it’s you and your friends. Remember my warning. You must follow the sea and pass the trials. I must go. Your friends are looking for you.” Nereus hurries into the water that I pulled him from not long ago.

Even though he answered my questions, I’m still more confused than ever. What are the trials and what happens if I fail to complete them? One thing races through my mind.

Death. We will die if we don’t complete this mission; the entire world will burn in a fiery volcano.

There isn’t one damn thing that’s going to be easy, I can feel it down to my soul, but then again, is anything ever easy for us? Will we ever have normal?

The sun is high in the sky as I trudge back down the beach. I spent too long speaking with Nereus about everything and nothing. I'm no closer to figuring out who is behind this and the knowledge that Hera released Cancer from the sky is definitely cause for concern.

I rub at the goosebumps on my arms as I walk down the beach. The chill continues to cling to my bones. My hair drips salt water down my back as the villa comes into view. I was gone way too long.

We should have packed up and left already, but who could pass up a chat with Nereus the elusive sea god and father of the Nereids? I would have been an idiot to pass that up.

I walk up the path to the villa and an eerie silence fills the space. Where is everyone? There should be at least some kind of noise coming from inside the place.

"Hello?" I call. "Where are you?"

Nereus' words come back to me full force and I turn to go search for my search party. They woke up and I was gone so they're all out looking for me. Just great. We have a damn seer in our group. He couldn't have seen that I was talking to Nereus?

I step outside and onto the beach, holding my hand up to my eyes as I scan the shoreline for any sign of my friends. Where are they searching for

me? They had to know I wouldn't go far, or maybe not. I do have a tendency to run headfirst into danger.

Case in point: Nereus' stupid fucking test. Why the fuck did I fall for that? Is it my damn bleeding heart?

"Beth," Jayden bellows and I turn.

He's sprinting to me with terror in his black eyes. As he gets closer, his eyes are bluer than they appeared before and he slams into me, wrapping his arms around me and picking me up off the ground.

"Jayden, what are you doing?" I ask.

"Where the fuck were you? We've been searching everywhere. I woke up and you were just gone." He sets me back on my feet and cups my cheeks in both hands.

"I'm fine, Jayden. I went for a walk." I lean forward and plant a chaste kiss on his lips.

"Why didn't you wake me up? What have you been doing this whole time?" He pulls my head to his chest.

"You were sleeping, and I wanted some alone time to process all this shit." I sigh.

"Being alone out in the human world is the last thing you need, Beth. What if Hera has found out about this mission? She's the one who sent Cancer after Heracles to help the hydra. She's the one who made Cancer a constellation. She could have sent something worse."

"Stop saying her name." I cover his mouth with my hand. "We don't speak that name here."

"We can't protect you from her if we aren't with you, Beth. You need backup," Jayden growls.

"Jayden?" Thad calls from the sea. "What are you doing? Did you find her?"

"Yeah, tell the others she's back from her walk," Jayden shouts over his shoulder.

“She went for a fucking walk. Unbelievable,” Thad grumbles.

“That’s enough out of you, fish boy,” I yell.

“That was hurtful, Beth,” Thad shouts. “Real hurtful.”

Jayden turns my cheek so I have to stare into his eyes. Most of the black in his eyes has faded since he first found me. “Are you okay now? You should really learn to control the shadows. They’re growing inside of you.”

“I know but it’s only when something happens to you.” He kisses my lips.

“So your shadows are protective of me, then?” I grin up into those blue eyes that flash with something I can’t name.

“They will destroy the world for you, Beth.” Jayden’s hand on my hip tightens.

“We won’t let it come to that,” I say.

“No. We definitely won’t because I’m not dealing with your wrath if that happens.” Jayden kisses me again.

“Good. We’re trying to save the world, not destroy it,” I say.

“Why were you gone so long? We have been looking for you for a while,” Jayden says.

“There was an unexpected complication.” I glance away from him.

“What kind of complication?” Jayden growls.

“A sea deity that wanted to test my compassion and selflessness,” I grumble.

“What the fuck? What happened?” he roars.

“I would rather tell everyone once we’re in the SUV and on our way out of this place.” I rub at my chilled arms.

Jayden’s eyes widen at the movement and he pulls his hoodie off, handing it to me. “Why are you wet?”

I wrap the hoodie around me and it smells like him. I take in a huge breath through my nose and Jayden smirks as I snuggle into the warm fabric.

“It was a part of the test.” I shake my head.

“Beth?” Raven yells, racing to me. “Where the hell were you?”

“I’ll tell everyone once we get out of here.”

“We’re already packed. We figured you just needed some time, so we packed the car, but you were gone for hours.” Raven skids to a stop in front of me.

“I’ll tell you all about it when we leave,” I repeat. “Where are the others?”

“Why are you wet?” Adrian asks as he strolls up the path.

“Am I going to have to repeat myself like a million and a half times?” I ask, throwing my hands up.

Thad walks over and waves a hand, pulling the water from my skin and hair. “There, you’re not wet anymore.”

It does nothing to relieve the chill from my bones, but being dry is a definite relief. “Where’s Greyson?”

“Here.” Greyson jogs up to our group and narrows his eyes. “You smell like you went for a swim and rolled around in seaweed.”

“Something like that.” I grimace.

“Explain,” Jayden barks.

“I was given a test. Basically, the old man in the sea wanted to test me and pretended to be drowning to see if I would risk everything to rescue him. I did.” I turn to the path.

Jayden is going to lose his shit any second and I really don’t want to see that right now. I’m cold and confused and just want to get out of this town.

“You jumped into the sea and saved a god from not drowning?” Jayden asks.

I shrug. “Yup, basically.”

“I’m going to need more to go on than that,” Jayden shouts at my back.

“I’ll tell you all in the car. Gods, why do I have to keep saying that to everyone. It’s like you’re all my parents and I was out past curfew. I went for a walk. I’m back now.” I huff out an exasperated breath as I stomp to the SUV.

“We’re a team,” Thad says and I flinch.

He’s not wrong and teams are supposed to work together. I didn’t do that when I took off on my own, but at the same time, if I hadn’t, I wouldn’t know exactly where we need to go right now.

“We are, and I’m sorry, guys, but I don’t think he would have shown himself or given us information had anyone other than me been there. He didn’t mean me harm and I think he would have saved me had things not gone as planned.” I stop at the SUV and turn to them all.

“Fine.” Jayden sighs. “Let’s go and you can fill us in on your little side adventure when we’re on the road.”

“Thank you,” I say.

Jayden steps next to me and runs a finger down my arm. I turn wide eyes on him and he winks as he opens the passenger door for me. “Just next time you decide to go for a walk, take me with you. It could be fun and at least you’ll have backup.”

“I’m not going to wake you up just to go on a walk with me.” I hop into the SUV.

“You should. It would be worth it.” He kisses me hard before pulling back and closing the door behind me.

“Promises, promises,” I say when he hops in the driver’s seat.

Raven chuckles from the back and Jayden glares as he wraps his hand around mine. “Tell me who you met this morning.”

“I told you—the old man in the sea,” I say.

“Yes, but refresh all our memories.” Jayden raises a brow.

“Nereus, the father of all fifty Nereids? The elusive primordial sea god who can see the future,” I say and Thad whistles low as Jayden pulls out of the parking space.

“My father even has trouble finding Nereus. He sought you out?” Thad asks with wide eyes.

“He even hides from Poseidon? He made it sound like he gets all the

gossip from the Olympians.” I run a hand down my face.

Was the sea god lying to me or did he just see what the other gods are saying about me? Why would he put me through that test if he didn’t know what I was about?

“He even hides from my father, yes.” Thad nods. “Father said Nereus was the one to tell him when the time was right for me to go to the academy.”

“If he hides from Poseidon, how did he tell him?” I ask.

“When father started weakening, he sent people out to find Nereus. They were told to scour the seas and find his hiding place. All came back empty-handed. No one knew where to find him.” Thad chuckles.

“Okay then, how did Nereus tell him?” Raven asks, turning in her seat.

“Nereus can only be found when he wants and by whom he wants. His gift of sight and his millennia on this earth make him almost impossible to find. So many heroes in the past tried.” Thad shakes his head.

“I don’t think I like that term anymore.” I lean my head back against the seat. “Not the way it pertains to the demigods from ancient history. Nereus said they always had an agenda or wanted something when they were brave. That’s not what I’m about.”

“That’s valid. They were always after something. The humans say they were great heroes but there was always a reason behind what they did,” Raven says. “Even Heracles’ hands were stained with blood.”

“But was that because of himself or something the stepmonster caused?”

No one knows for sure but the stories say that the queen of the gods in her rage messed with Heracles’ mind and that’s what caused him to murder his family and pay penance with his labors. How terrible for someone to not understand and have to live with the fact that their wife and children died at their own hand because of a vengeful goddess.

When we met Heracles and Theseus in the underworld, they were trying to fight off a demon come to suck what little life the souls of Elysium had left. They didn’t seem like terrible men, just demigods in similar situations to

me and my friends.

What will be said about us in the future? Will we be made out to be selfish as well? I don't like it. The gods know whose side I'm on in this war and I do everything for the good of the world.

"Nereus said I have the weight of the world on my shoulders and I'm starting to think he's right," I mumble.

"Nereus is very wise," Thad says solemnly. "Since joining you all at the academy, I have noticed that you're practically the leader of the students. Well, most of the students. There are a few who I think are questionable."

"It doesn't matter. You don't have to carry the weight that Atlas does," Jayden says, squeezing my thigh. "We are here to carry it with you."

"What if it's not your burden to bear?" I ask.

None of them deserve to feel this crushing weight every time we are once again tasked with saving the world.

"How is it not our burden?" Jayden asks. "We were all selected by the oracle at one point or another. Me, you, Greyson, and Raven were the first the oracle said would save the academy. This is our fight too, baby. We aren't leaving it all to you."

"You're right. It's just Nereus knows something that he wouldn't tell me. I didn't push because the fates have their hand in everything and he said he couldn't." I rub my eyes.

"What did he tell you? You were gone for a long time," Jayden says.

"He told me about an island off the coast of Vancouver. He said that's where the trident is being held and that we need to follow the coast to get there." I lean my head back.

"We have to go to another country?" Raven asks, bouncing in her seat.

"How in Hades are we supposed to get into Canada? We don't have passports," Jayden grumbles.

"I don't know. I've never gone to another country before, not even Canada." I shrug.

“Maybe we don’t actually have to go into Canada,” Greyson says. “I’ll need a different map once we’re closer.”

“Yes,” Thad says thoughtfully. “Vancouver is a coastal city, and the tip of Washington is coastal too. If we can find a boat, we can probably find the island without ever crossing into Canada.”

“Are we sure about boats?” Jayden asks.

“The trident is on an island, Jayden. We are going to have to go into the sea at some point.” I sigh.

“I just don’t like it. My father was always clear—stay out of the seas and the skies. His brothers won’t like me being in their domain.”

“I get it. Nereus made a comment about me risking a lot to come into the ocean and help him because other sea gods may try to attack me for it.” I nod.

“You shouldn’t have risked yourself like that. You should have gotten help,” Jayden growls.

“I thought he was drowning. There wasn’t enough time. I thought if I didn’t help him immediately, he would die.” I cross my arms.

“I know.” Jayden grips my thigh harder. “I just wish I had been there to help.”

“Everything turned out fine.”

“Guys?” Raven calls. “Look at the ocean.”

I turn and look out Jayden’s window as the water retreats too far from the normal tide. Thunder crashes overhead and the skies open up as rain pelts the windshield.

“It’s getting worse. Is there about to be a tsunami?” I lean forward into Jayden’s space.

“It’s not to that point yet,” Thad says. “The water will build for a couple minutes and then crash back into the sand.”

“Or on the highway,” I say, watching the ocean warily.

I should trust Thad to know these things about the ocean, but I have seen the devastation the sea has caused in the human world. Anything can happen

when Poseidon is weakened and unable to control the waters.

The rain comes down in heavy sheets and we can barely see anything as the announcer comes over the radio.

“Interstate One has been closed after a freak mudslide has covered the highway outside of Half Moon Bay. All traffic is being diverted while crews do their best to clear the roadway.”

“Well, shit. You think that’s where the next trial is?” I chew my lip.

“The only other way out of Half Moon Bay doesn’t go along the coast. Nereus told you we had to drive along the coast, right?” Greyson asks.

“Yeah, he said we must drive along the coast and there are trials along the way. We have to pass each trial to gain access to the island.” I lean back in my seat.

“Then we have to stop,” Jayden says.

Thad rests his arms on the back of Greyson’s seat. “I can probably clear the mud faster than the humans, but I can’t do it while they are there. I’ll have to do it at night.”

“Okay, so we are decided, then. We stay in Half Moon Bay tonight. Hopefully we don’t encounter anything too nasty.” I shudder.

I turn to the sea as it crashes back into the beach without destroying the road ahead of us. What are we in for in this quiet little seaside town? The sea retreats again even farther this time and I grimace. What will happen to all the humans here if there’s a tsunami?

Hundreds or thousands of people will die if a tsunami hits these little towns. An even greater urgency rushes through me as the waves churn and crash violently against the beach. It’s not just the academy at stake if we don’t hurry, but we don’t have a choice in stopping.

The instructions from Nereus were clear. We must travel along the shore and pass all trials. We have to stay and face what is to come, even if it slows us down.

Gods, please don’t let us be too late to save everyone. It will mean the

destruction of everything.

Jayden pulls the SUV into the parking lot of a local diner. Thunder crashes overhead louder and more violent than I have ever heard since coming to California. A puddle lines the curb and threatens to spill over to the sidewalk and flood the small restaurant.

“I’m starving but are we sure this is safe?” I ask.

“Nothing about this entire mission is safe,” Jayden grumbles.

“True,” I say with a sigh. “I just don’t want to get swept away in a flash flood or tsunami.”

“That would be a disaster.” Raven shakes her head.

“Let’s go eat and see if we can figure out why the fates forced us to stop here. We know that they have their hands in this and that’s why we had to stop.” I flip the hood up on my sweatshirt and reach for the handle.

“Wait,” Jayden growls and hops out.

He jogs around the SUV and opens the door for me with a grin. I should be used to that by now, but it still shocks me after that first time I got in his car to go to the academy. We race from the vehicle to the little diner and wait to be seated by a hostess.

“Hello there,” the girl says with a grin that’s only for Jayden.

I step up next to him, looping my arm through his. “We need a table for six, please.”

“Right, well, this way.” She eyes my arm looped with Jayden’s before spinning on her heel.

A flash of something catches my attention above the wooden breakfast bar and I turn to a TV mounted there. In big red letters in the right corner it says MISSING. I nudge Jayden’s side and point to the screen. The clacking of silverware makes it near impossible to hear what the reporter is saying.

“Ten tourists have gone missing in the last week and sources close to each of them state that their last locations were the caverns on the beach just outside Half Moon Bay.”

“That’s strange,” I mumble. “I wonder what’s going on and why the humans haven’t sent out search parties for them.”

“I’m sure they have but just can’t see anything. Especially if there’s a sea monster in those caverns,” Jayden whispers.

“Guys, c’mon,” Raven calls us over to a table in the corner.

The seats against the wall are left open for us and I take the one next to Raven. Jayden grumbles something under his breath as he sits next to Thad but it’s too low for me to hear. I elbow him in the ribs and glare before picking up the menu.

“There have been strange disappearances here,” I say to the group.

“Where?” Raven asks and I point to the TV where the news is still discussing the disappearances.

A picture of a beautiful rock formation flashes on the screen. There’s a small entrance tall enough for a grown man to fit through but it’s thin. Only one person can walk through it at a time and the waves crash nearby almost to the entrance of the cave.

“In high tide, that whole cave would be flooded,” Thad says. “Why would humans go in there when they may not make it out?”

“They like to explore the world around them even when it’s dangerous.” I shrug.

The waitress strolls up with a pad of paper in her hand and takes our

orders but before she can leave, I stop her. “Tourists have been going missing?”

“It’s just terrible, isn’t it? All the locals know that those caves fill up with water every couple days and don’t go in there, but tourists don’t really pay much attention to us. They just want to see all the sights.”

“Has this ever happened before?” I ask.

“No, occasionally someone will be trapped inside, but unless there’s a major storm and the tide is too high, they just have to wait for it to pass so they can get back to town. Having ten people go missing in the caverns in a week is extremely startling to the whole town.”

“I can imagine it would be frightening.” I nod.

She turns and hustles away to another table to take their order and I glance at my friends with wide eyes. “What do you think is in the caves?”

“It’s only been happening for a week and never happened before that. It’s gotta be a monster, right?” Jayden runs a hand down his face.

“Agreed, but what monster and why is it terrorizing tourists and not the locals?” I ask.

“She said the locals never go out there so maybe it’s a lack of options,” Raven says.

“Could be. So the monster doesn’t leave the cave? Why?” I pinch the bridge of my nose, trying to remember anything about a sea monster in a cave but come up empty.

“Maybe we should ask more of the locals if they’ve seen anything strange,” Jayden says.

“If it’s Greek they won’t though. Humans can’t see the monsters which is convenient for us to stay hidden but seriously fucked up for them.” I sigh.

“I wonder what all those men saw attacking their ships when Cancer was destroying them,” I groan.

“Probably thought it was the storm.” Jayden shakes his head.

The waitress comes back with our food, and we all fall quiet while she

sets all our food in front of us. I pick up my fork and dig into my food. The chicken fried steak is perfectly cooked and smothered in gravy. I groan at the flavors as they burst across my tongue. The waitress leaves and I scan the room.

The diner isn't super busy but there are several families sitting around tables, chatting and laughing. No one seems overly concerned about the missing tourists or the extreme weather in the area.

"Should we talk to more people about what's going on and see if anyone has any ideas?" I ask.

Jayden pops a fry into his mouth. "We need to find a hotel for the night, so maybe we ask the people at the front desk if they noticed anything strange?"

"I think that's the best plan we have," I say.

"Either way, we're going to those caves, right?" Raven says with a frown.

"You know what Nereus said. I have to complete every trial. If the fates made us stop here, then there's a reason for it. We have to stop whatever monster is killing humans." I shrug.

"Okay." Raven grins.

Anytime she can prepare for a battle, she's happy. It makes her essential on these missions, especially since she balances the overprotective crap that Jayden pulls on a daily basis.

"You're not going to rush in headfirst and without backup," Jayden says.

"Was that a request or a command?" I ask.

I cross my arms over my chest and narrow my eyes at him. He leans forward, staring me down and growls before dropping his gaze to the table.

"It's a request," he grumbles.

"Good." I lean over and kiss his cheek.

I push my plate away and sit back in my chair. I glance around at the diner again. Everything is normal when there's obviously a monster in the town. Humans are weird. No one is scared or even curious about the

disappearances. The news is like white noise in the background.

“Are you ready?” Jayden runs a hand over my back.

“Yeah, let’s go so we can figure out what’s happening.” I nod.

We pay for our meal and move to stand. I grab the waitress before we go. “Is there a hotel you would recommend close to the beach?”

“Yeah, it’s two blocks left. You can’t miss it.” She smiles and rushes away.

We stroll to the door. The rain is still falling in sheets and thunder rumbles overhead. I race to the SUV with my hood pulled tight over my head and jump when thunder crashes as I reach the vehicle. Jayden opens the door for me and I climb in.

Thad works his magic on all our clothes and hair, but it’s a lost cause since the rain continues to pour as we reach the hotel the waitress mentioned.

“Can you use your magic to stop the rain?” Raven asks.

“I can’t do that in front of humans, Raven.” I shake my head. “I would have done it at the diner if I could.”

“This rain is awful.” Raven sits back in her seat with a pout.

“The faster we get to the trident, the faster we make it stop,” Jayden says, hopping out of the SUV.

He pulls my door open and offers me a hand. I pull my hood tight as we sprint into the hotel.

The mat on the floor inside the doors of the hotel is drenched when we step inside. Drops of water pour from my face and hair. We are going to drip all over the opulent lobby. Shrugging, I walk to the front desk.

“Hi there, how can I help you?” the man behind the counter asks with a smile.

“Do you have a three-bedroom suite available?” I ask, placing the black credit card on the counter.

“We don’t, but we do have a villa overlooking the ocean. Would that be suitable?” he asks.

“Is it close to the caverns I’ve heard so much about?” I ask.

“You don’t want to go to the caverns, do you? Something strange has been going on there in the last week.” He shakes his head.

“Oh,” I ask, playing dumb. “What’s happening?”

“I’ve checked in three different guests who went to the caverns and never returned. You haven’t seen the news?”

“We just got into town,” I say. “We wanted to check them out but if you’re saying it’s dangerous, we may just continue on our way.”

“I don’t know that it’s dangerous, but it certainly has been odd with the strange weather patterns and people going missing. No one has been able to check the caverns.”

“We’ll take the villa. I think I do still want to explore the caverns though. I love a good mystery.” I grin.

“I would just be careful. There is something strange going on.” The man hands me a few keys and I thank him. “Here’s a map to the villa. The cavern is just on the other side of the cliff from there.”

“That is very helpful.” I take the map from him and turn back to the others who are all still dripping on the floor mat by the door.

“What did you get?” Jayden asks.

“A villa overlooking the ocean near the caverns.” I grin and wave the map at them.

“What information?” Raven asks.

She’s bouncing up and down excitedly, ready for another fight. She’s always giddy when there’s a prospect of a fight.

“Nothing much. Just that because of the weather, they haven’t been able to check out the cavern to see if the people are still alive.” I hand Greyson the map.

My clothes and hair are a lost cause as we drive over to the villa the man at the front desk marked on the map. It’s more of a mini-mansion than a villa. The view of the tumultuous sea would be breathtaking if it wasn’t for the rain

and wind. An icy chill forms in my bones so cold it almost burns as I unlock the door.

“Okay, Thad. Can you do your thing?” I ask.

Thad waves a hand and the water moves from my clothes and hair and settles in a ball in his palm before dissolving completely.

“Thank you.” I nod and sit on the plush brown sofa.

Thad helps the others with their clothes and hair and once we’re all dry and seated, I lean forward on my elbows. Jayden’s hand rubs at the tension in my back.

“We need a plan. I’m guessing the sea is too high for the humans to access the cave.” I turn to Thad.

“I can move the water long enough for us to get inside the cave but what happens if the tide rises?” he asks.

“We can all swim, just not as well as you.” I shrug.

“I’m not a fan of having to swim in the sea. There are too many sea deities that might take offense to us being there,” Jayden says.

“We may not have a choice.” I hang my head.

Something Nereus said niggles at my mind. If there are other sea gods trying to usurp Poseidon, then they could come after us simply for being in the ocean. And because we intend to stop them. That makes what we’re about to do exceedingly more dangerous.

“If the other sea deities come after us, we will just have to try to reason with them,” Thad says.

“How do you suppose we do that?” Jayden asks.

“I’m Poseidon’s son. They might listen to me.” Thad shrugs.

“Not if they’re trying to overthrow him,” I say. “Nereus said something to me about Triton and the possibility that the other sea gods may be trying to weaken him so they can control the seas.”

“Then we definitely shouldn’t be going into the ocean.” Jayden folds his arms over his chest.

“You do realize we are on a mission for the sea god, yes? At some point we are going to have to get in the water,” Thad says.

“Look, we will cross that bridge once we come to it. For now, let’s go explore the cavern and see what kind of beastie we are dealing with.” I pat Jayden’s hand.

“Fine, but I still don’t like this,” Jayden grumbles.

“Agreed,” I say. “They will come at us harder than the others because of our fathers. We just need to be careful.”

We step out on the terrace and I sigh in relief that the rain has slowed enough that we won’t be fighting it while we are heading to the cavern. Did Poseidon gain some of his control back? Just enough to help us this small bit.

“He said it was on the other side of the cliff.” I lead the way to a small trail that leads down the cliff to the caverns.

Rocks and gravel fall free as we shuffle down the trail. I stumble on a small rock but Jayden’s arm wraps around me before I can fall down the steep incline.

“Careful.” He squeezes me.

“Thanks,” I say, breathless.

That would have been a very long fall down the rocky cliff. I place a hand to my pounding chest. We need to get to bottom of this damn cliff fast or I’m going to lose it.

I skid down the cliff on the loose gravel and nearly fall again but at the last second right myself. “This damn mountain is hazardous to my health.”

“You’re just showing us where not to step.” Raven giggles.

“What’s that, Raven? You want me to zap you? I’m busy right now but give me a minute,” I call over my shoulder.

“Nope, I’m good,” Raven says.

“Too bad. Keep being a smart-ass and I’m gonna zap you.”

We finally make it down the mountain to the sandy beach below. There are several other cliffs and I turn to the left where the water is higher and the

mouth of a cave sits half-submerged in the thunderous waves crashing against the shore.

“What do we do now?” Greyson asks.

“Be on guard. Everything looks normal but that can change in a second.” I touch my necklace and grip my sword in my hand.

Tentatively, I move toward the cave. Maybe whatever is in there will come out and we won’t even have to explore the cave to find it. I only get as far as the shore before Jayden pulls me back.

“We need to let Thad do his thing and part the water for us.” Jayden squeezes my shoulder.

“Yeah, so much for hoping it would come out and fight us on the beach.” I shake my head.

Nothing can ever be easy. I should know this by now. I take a step back as Thad moves toward the crashing waves. His hands are raised toward the ocean. The waves still before slowly receding back from the mouth of the cave.

“Hurry, I don’t know how long I can hold it,” Thad yells, his voice strained with his exertion.

I race for the cave with the others hot on my heels and skid to a stop just inside. What the fuck is that?

I stumble on a bit of stone and reach down to pick it up. That can’t fucking be real. No way is it real. I turn the piece of stone over in my hand. It’s a small bug encased in stone.

“Keep going,” I say as I drop the stone object.

My sword glows with my power in the blackness of the cave and I’m careful to keep it held high so I don’t electrocute us all if the water rushes back in.

We come to a fork in the cavern with two separate tunnels leading in opposite directions. The scuttling of small animals makes me jump. Jayden places a hand on my shoulder as I stop.

“Which way should we go?” I ask.

“I don’t know. Probably not the direction the animals have gone. It sounds like they’re fleeing something.” Jayden frowns.

“There’s something in here for sure.” I hold my sword up higher as water laps at my boots.

That couldn’t hold it forever, but the icy water is seeping into my boots and I shiver as the bite of cold hits my socks, soaking them through.

“What is that?” I ask as I step into the tunnel to the left.

Another stone object that shouldn’t be in the cavern sits on a stalagmite. It is in the shape of a rat. What the fuck is going on here?

“Why would someone carve a rat out of stone?” Jayden asks, peering even closer. “It’s so lifelike.”

“I don’t like this,” I whisper.

“Me either, but we have to see it through,” Jayden says.

We shuffle through the tunnel until we come across a statue. It’s so lifelike that I curse under my breath.

“Motherfucker. You can’t be serious. That is not a fucking sea monster,” I growl.

“What is it?” Jayden asks.

I point to the statue of the woman. It’s not a statue at all. There’s a gorgon in this cavern and I can guess which one. The only one that wasn’t at the battle of the academy.

“We have to defeat Medusa.”

“**F**uck, everyone, look at the ground,” Jayden commands. “No one look up.”

“How are we fighting Medusa?” Thad asks. “Perseus killed her.”

“You know that the monsters of ancient history have been coming back to terrorize the earth. It makes sense that whoever’s doing this would bring Medusa back too,” I say.

“Um, B. We need to hurry because the water’s rising.” Raven points at the pool of water.

It’s around our ankles now and will probably only continue to rise. Hissing sounds in my ears and I jerk my head but stop at the last second. Don’t look up.

“I heard her snakes,” I say. “She’s fucking close. Probably toying with us.”

“Where?” Jayden asks.

“Don’t look.” I grip my sword tighter. “Jayden, your shield.”

The shield comes down in front of me and I breathe a sigh as I glance back at my friends. Raven has her shield up in front of them as well. An eerie screech fills the cavern and I flinch.

“She most likely knows we’re here and why. All the other monsters could smell me.”

“How are we going to do this, B? Her eyes turn people to stone.” Raven grips her shield tighter.

“We defeated the others by making them look at each other. We only have Medusa here.” I bite my bottom lip.

“Keep going farther into the caverns. Maybe we will find something that can help us.” Jayden nudges me forward.

“This is her domain. She’s been here at least a week. She knows this place better than we do.” I shake my head.

“What do we do, then? The water is up to your knees and climbing by the second.” Jayden points to my knees.

He’s right. The tide is coming in fast and if we’re not careful, we won’t be able to get out.

“There has to be a bigger cavern in here somewhere. If we can find it, maybe we will be able to get her to follow us and kill her with some actual room to fight.” I adjust the grip on my sword.

“Yeah, and maybe if there’s more space, the water won’t fill the cavern as fast and will buy us some time to defeat her and get out of here.” Jayden takes a step forward.

“Easy, no one look at eye level. Not even if you hear a crazy sound. We don’t want to turn to stone,” I say.

“We know how to bring you back if you are, though.” Raven explains to Thad and Greyson.

“If your statue is still intact. I would rather it not come to that and I’m not even sure if it would work on Greyson or do more harm than good.” I step through the small opening into another tunnel.

The others follow close behind me with their heads down. A hiss fills the air, growing louder the longer we creep through the winding tunnels that seem to go nowhere. I train my eyes on the shield even as the hissing sounds right in front of me.

I slash out with my sword blindly and a grating cackle is all the response I

get.

“Zeussss,” Medusa hisses in time with the snakes in her hair.

“Medusa, why don’t you quit hiding and come out here and let me kill you like I did to your sisters,” I call out into the cavern.

“Wretched girl. I will turn you to stone and smash your statue to pieces,” Medusa wails.

Something rams into Jayden’s shield and I stumble back into Jayden and wave my sword in a wide arc at nothing but air.

“Swinging blindly isn’t working,” Jayden says.

“What do you suggest I do, then?” I ask.

“Just keep going. There has to be a larger cavern in here. We’ve only seen one statue. At least nine more people went missing.” Jayden urges me forward.

“She’s leading us somewhere, Jayden. I don’t like following her where she wants us. It’s reckless.” I square my shoulders.

“I know. I’m hoping it’s somewhere with more cover.” Jayden squeezes my shoulder.

“That’s actually smart,” Raven says. “Right now, she has us where she wants us, but if there were more places with cover we could spread out.”

We wade through the cavern and I hold my sword up higher as my teeth chatter from the freezing water that comes to my waist now.

“The water could be an advantage,” Thad says. “We will be able to see her through the water without turning to stone.”

“Or we could see if we can’t find something to cast a reflection in the water,” I mumble.

“What about your magic?” Thad asks.

“No,” Jayden and Raven shout at the same time.

“Okay. Jeez.” Thad throws his hands up in the air.

“Sorry.” Raven pats his shoulder. “Her power is electricity and that doesn’t mix. She could end up barbecuing all of us.”

“I only electrocuted myself that one time.” I shake my head. “And I got the fucker I was trying to kill, so fuck off.”

“He’s also come back from the dead twice since then,” Raven singsongs.

“I can’t help it if the fuckers don’t stay dead after I kill them. It’s bullshit.” I turn to the side to squeeze through the cavern.

Stalagmites rise in the large cavern and there are several other statues way more than what has been reported. “How long has she been here and why hasn’t anyone reported more disappearances?” I ask as I step up to a statue.

“I don’t think these are all recent.” Raven glances at the sandals on one statue’s feet and they appear to be the sandals worn by warriors in ancient Greece.

“Her entire cavern was transported here like the fountain of Apollo at Delphi. Shit.” I scan the ground, not trusting the crazy gorgon not to pop out of nowhere and turn me to stone.

“Um, Beth?” Jayden asks. “Do you remember what happened when we broke the rhyming curse?”

I rack my brain trying to remember and my eyes widen. “The whole thing crumbled to dust.”

“How the fuck are we going to get out of here before that happens?” Jayden asks.

“Maybe it won’t,” I say, turning to Adrian hopefully.

The seer grimaces. “The original cavern will still be here, but all of this will be sucked into oblivion.”

“How do we get out?” I ask again.

“I can’t say. It will change the future.”

“Fuck,” I say and a screech fills the cavern again.

“Spread out,” Raven yells and rushes to a stalagmite.

The water did recede some when we got into this cavern but it’s still up to my knees and running through rushing water proves difficult. Jayden dives behind a huge rock formation next to me as a splash sounds from the other

end of the cave.

“Zeusss, come out. It won’t hurt being turned to stone,” Medusa cackles.

“Fuck off. I’ll have your head before you turn my bestie to stone,” Raven roars.

“Raven, don’t antagonize the gorgon,” Greyson growls.

“I antagonize everyone in battle, babe,” Raven says.

“We need a better plan than playing hide-and-seek with a gorgon,” I groan.

The water rises higher and I glance around at my friends but don’t find Thad. Was he the one who caused the splash before?

“Where’s Thad?” I ask.

“I think he went in the water to see if he could figure out a way to kill Medusa from below,” Jayden says and points to something just below the surface of the water.

His dark outline underwater is swimming toward Medusa. What is he doing? He’s going to get himself killed.

“Wait, Beth.” Jayden plants a hand on my arm as I lunge to get out from behind the rock formation.

“What?” I snarl.

“I think I have an idea, but we need Thad to distract her.” Jayden peers around the rocks.

“Thad. Water,” I yell.

Thad jumps from the water like a dolphin on steroids and blasts Medusa in the face with a stream of water. While her eyes are closed and she’s distracted, Jayden nudges me around the rock formation and we wade as quietly as possible through the water.

“Take that, you trout-faced gorgon scum,” Thad whoops as he continues to spray her in the face.

Medusa gurgles a scream, but Thad never relents.

“What’s the plan?” I ask Jayden in a whisper.

“We get behind her and take her head while Thad keeps spraying her with water. That way there’s no chance of anyone being turned to stone.”

“Good idea.” I press through the now waist-deep water.

The cave is filling up fast and if we don’t hurry, it’s going to trap us inside. I can barely keep my feet on the ground beneath the water and contemplate swimming to her instead, but quickly dismiss the idea as my sword flickers with electricity.

I’d have to stow my weapon and I have to stay ready, plus the entire cave would be plunged into darkness. It would help with not turning to stone, but I don’t want to fight a crazy gorgon in the dark.

Thad continues his assault on Medusa as she lashes out at him with long talons even though she can’t see him. It seems the tables have finally turned and she’s fighting wildly against nothing instead of me.

“We need to hurry. The water’s rising higher,” Raven yells.

“Working on it,” Thad calls back. “I hope you have a plan, Beth.”

“She does. She always figures something out.” Raven glances around the stalagmite and winks.

If we weren’t trying to be stealth and not give away our location to the gorgon bitch, I would tell them this was Jayden’s plan, but the need to kill the bitch and get the hell out of here is greater than the need to talk about who’s plan this was.

“We can tell them later,” I whisper to Jayden.

We slink through the water until we are on the other side of the cavern behind Medusa. My eyes are downcast just in case Medusa turns.

I motion for Jayden to stand back and keep my gaze on Medusa’s back as I ready my blade to strike. Thad shouts a battle cry and Medusa turns her talons, slashing at me at the last second. I jump back and swing my blade. Green goo sprays as her talons are cut from her hands.

“Disgusting,” I growl.

Medusa shrieks in anger and pain and lunges for me, but I spin away from

her and swing my sword at her back. More green goo sprays out from the cut at her back but she spins on me with a snarl.

I call my magic back to me and dive below the water coming up behind her again. I don't hesitate and swing my blade in a wide arc. She ducks at the last second and I slam my eyes closed before her gaze can meet mine.

I circle her slowly as the water continues to rise. It's nearly up to my shoulders when Jayden comes up behind the gorgon. The snakes in her hair spit and hiss, snapping at me as I swing my blade. Medusa screams as one of the snake heads flies into the water.

"Now, Jayden," I scream.

Jayden grunts and swings his blade and Medusa's head splashes into the water between us.

"Shit. That sucked," I say, pulling in a deep breath.

"What the fuck is happening?" Jayden stares at the gorgon's body as it convulses.

The body is still upright in the water and shaking like there's something still alive. "We killed her. What is this?"

"I don't know, but you need to get back," Jayden says, moving away from the gorgon as well.

The water is up to my throat now so I swim back a bit and watch in horror as the body floats to the side and her stomach protrudes with something.

"Is this like that alien movie? Is there some kind of evil creature about to rip from her body?" I ask.

"No, it's like something out of ancient history, but that's impossible." Raven swims closer to me.

"What are you talking about?" I narrow my eyes on her.

"You don't remember this part of the Perseus and Medusa story?" Raven asks.

"Oh, fuck no. That's not possible." I shake my head and back farther away.

“What?” Jayden asks.

“We should get out of here now. That must be what the magic is waiting for and why this hasn’t been sucked into oblivion yet.” I turn to the cavern, but it’s already flooded completely.

“What’s happening? It looks like something’s trying to get out.” Jayden leans closer.

“Stay back. Something is trying to get out. Two somethings actually.” Raven raises a hand to stop him.

“In the lesser known version of the story of Perseus killing Medusa, she was pregnant with Poseidon’s sons Pegasus and Chrysoar. When Perseus killed the gorgon, her two sons sprang from her body,” I say.

“If they already did, then why is it happening now?” Jayden swims back from the body.

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen anything like it, but we’re trapped in this fucking space with them since the exit is blocked with rushing water. How do we get out of here?” I turn to Thad.

“Wait, did you say Pegasus?” Jayden asks.

“Yup.”

“As in the flying horse?” he asks.

“That’s the one.” I sigh.

“You’re telling me we are about to be trapped in this cavern with a flying horse that has no access to the sky while we slowly drown?”

“Basically, yes.” I nod.

“What the actual fuck. Thad, how do we get out of here?” Jayden asks.

“The only way out is to swim against the waves. The tide is high and it’s flooding this place.” Thad runs a hand over his slicked-back wet hair.

“We aren’t sea demigods. You can’t part the water like you did before?” Jayden asks, almost desperate to get away from the creatures that are about to share in our doom.

“The sea regenerates me, but that takes a lot of power, especially when

fighting against Poseidon weakening. I need to recharge from the last time.” Thad shakes his head.

“Fuck,” Jayden shouts.

He backs himself against the rocky wall as far away from the headless body as he can get. The water has reached my chin and the sword is heavy as I hold it above my head to give us just the smallest bit of light.

“We’re running out of air,” I say, kicking my feet to stay afloat.

The stomach stretches and deforms. A fist punches at it from the inside—at least I think it’s a fist.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Raven says. “That’s disgusting.”

“It really is like that alien movie. They are just going to rip themselves free of her dead body.” I turn away.

A ripping sound fills the cavern and I gag. I don’t dare look to see what’s happening.

“Gods, what the fuck?” Jayden shouts.

Flapping wings blow my hair into my eyes and I turn to find Pegasus neighing and thrashing. He’s trying to fly but the cavern is so small now that he can’t fly and it’s churning up the water as the winged horse freaks out.

“He can’t swim and there’s nowhere to fly,” Thad says.

“Are you able to talk to him?” I ask.

Thad has proved useful with sea creatures and since technically Pegasus is his half brother, one would think he could communicate with him.

“I think I can,” Thad says.

“Try to calm him down. He’s stirring up the water and making things worse,” I yell.

“I have to be able to touch him I think, and he’s too wound up for me to get close.” Thad swims to the horse, making soothing sounds in his throat.

“Fuck.” My head is barely above water. As Pegasus continues thrashing, the water spins in a circle, throwing me into the cave wall.

My back screams with white-hot pain searing through me in waves. My

feet falter and I sink for a second, barely gasping in a breath before I'm pulled under the swirling vortex. Something brushes my leg and I nearly open my mouth in a silent scream but remember to hold my breath.

A hand bands around my ankle from under the depths and I kick out with the other to dislodge it, but it is like an iron vise.

My lungs burn with the need for oxygen, and I flail my arms in an attempt to swim back to the surface, but the hand tugs me down below the depths. Whatever has a hold of me is going to kill me. I fight the best I can underwater and thrash at the hand. Black spots tint my vision as the creature pulls me through the exit into the tunnels.

I need air. My lungs scream as my movements become sluggish. My body is giving out from the lack of oxygen.

Air. I need air.

My limbs are lead as the creature pulls me out into the deep. The sea deities really do want me dead and they may just get their wish. I should have listened to Jayden. He was right and I may not live to tell him that.

Water sprays from my lungs and I cough as I blink my eyes open. Thunder booms overhead and the sea churns around me.

“What the fuck? Where am I?” I glance to either side, unable to move past the net I’m ensnared in.

I close my eyes in an attempt to remember what happened. Medusa. We fought Medusa, and then Pegasus and Chrysoar were born. Pegasus freaked out and now... I’m here being towed through the sea like the gods damn catch of the day.

“I’m not dinner for sea monsters, asshole,” I shout.

“I’m not feeding you to the sea beasts,” the creature growls. “You are safe.”

“Then why am I in a fucking net?” I ask.

“Because you were a dead weight and this is easier. Now stop struggling.” He yanks at the net and I go still.

“Where are you taking me? This isn’t the way back to shore.” I scan the horizon but there is no sign of the mainland.

“I’m taking you somewhere safe,” the creature says.

“I need to go back to the mainland. We have a mission to complete for Poseidon,” I argue.

“I know about your mission for Lord Poseidon. I am here to help,” he

says.

“Then help me by taking me back to the mainland,” I say with a growl.

“I can’t take you to the mainland. The town you were in is gone. It’s wiped out and flooded.”

“What?” I ask. “How? When?”

“A great tsunami ravaged the coast halfway across the place you call California. There is no place to safely take you there,” he says.

“What about the academy?” I gasp.

“I’m not sure what’s happening with your academy, but the tsunami rocked the California coast and I need to take you elsewhere.”

I turn and a giant green and blue tail flicks out behind me. Is he a merman? His features are horselike. Can he be some kind of fish centaur?

“Is all this going to be in vain? The academy is a main reason we started out on this stupid mission in the first place,” I say.

“I don’t know. I’m just doing what I’m told by the sea god. He weakens more every day and we fear he will not be able to last much longer. You, young demigod, hold the fate of the world and the gods in your hands,” he says solemnly.

“Same shit. Different day,” I say bitterly.

I glance around the churning sea and my shoulders slump. There’s no way back to California but I don’t need to go there anyway. I need to get to Vancouver so maybe being towed like I’m the prize catch to an unknown location in the Pacific Ocean is actually helpful.

“The gods only call on those brave enough to answer their call,” the creature says.

“Shit. Where are my friends?” I ask, scanning the ocean for any signs of them.

Why would he only grab me? Is this a fake ploy to take me to Triton or some other sea deity so they can kill me before I find Poseidon’s trident?

“Your language patterns are intriguing.” The creature shakes its long blue

mane. “Your friends should be along shortly. We could only get through the caverns one at a time.”

“They are coming to the same place?” I ask hopefully.

“Yes, when Prince Thaddeus called for aid, we came immediately to help you all get to a safe place.” He turns to me.

“Thad called you?” I ask, shocked.

It’s also the first time anyone has referred to him as Prince in my presence. I’ll have to tease him about it when I see him again.

“He is protective of his friends since he hasn’t had many in his life,” he says and my heart breaks a little for Thad.

“I didn’t know that. He seemed so cocky and confident when I first met him,” I say.

That’s super sad. Did he think he needed false bravado when he met us so he could fit in with the heroes of the academy? I hate thinking of myself like that but it’s kind of true. We have saved the world and the academy several times already and probably will several more before this is all said and done.

I glance ahead as an island comes into view. It’s got the purest white sand beaches and palm trees dot the edge of the space. There is a mountain in the center that raises up the horizon. It appears deserted. Appearances are almost always deceiving though. Especially when dealing with the gods.

What new fresh hell is this creature dropping me into? It appears peaceful but I’ve learned never to let appearances deceive me.

“This is where I will leave you. You can swim, yes?” the creature asks.

“Yes, but is it safe for the daughter of Zeus to swim in the sea unaccompanied?” I raise a brow.

“Lord Poseidon has offered you and the others his protection. You will be safe from all but the monsters of the deep,” he says.

“That’s comforting,” I grumble.

“You have killed many monsters already, have you not?” he asks.

He tugs at the net and releases me. I flip ridiculously into the water, but it

isn't as cold as I'm expecting. There's no way the Pacific Ocean should be this warm.

"I've never had to do it while swimming in the ocean," I say.

"Fair enough. I will watch you from here until you get to shore. I don't have a human form that allows me to walk on the land."

"Thank you for the rescue." I nod to him. "It was looking pretty dire back there."

"It was and I forgive you for the kick to the face." He rubs his cheek.

I flinch. "In my defense, you kind of scared the hell out of me when you grabbed me. I was in fight mode."

"There was little time to warn you. Chrysoar had almost risen and once that happened, you would have been sucked into oblivion and the world would surely fall."

"I understand. More than you could possibly imagine." I kick my legs to stay afloat.

"I don't doubt that, young demigod." He nods. "Now go, Prince Thaddeus is anxious for his friends to arrive on the island."

"Thank you." I turn and swim to the island.

It's not far but it's been a while since I have swam and never long-distance. The island grows the closer I get to the shore and the shadow of a man stands with his hands on his hips on the beach. The waves are much calmer here and I have to wonder if Poseidon is holding them off or if this is another place taken out of ancient history.

Either way, we need to be on our guard. This island shouldn't be here.

"I was just carted in a net across the fucking ocean," I yell as I make it to shore.

"Half Moon Bay is gone," he says, hanging his head.

"I know. There was a tsunami." I stomp toward him through the sand.

Thad raises a hand and the water in my clothes and hair fly to the palm of his hand. He stares out at the ocean as the waves lap at the shore. It's the

calmest I have seen the turbulent sea since we went on this mission.

“The others should be here soon. My friends were able to get you all out before Chrysoar was born,” Thad says.

“A little warning would have been nice, Thad. I thought I was being attacked and kicked him in the face.” I cross my arms.

Thad bursts into a fit of laughter. “I bet my father’s captain of the guard loved getting kicked in the face by a demigod.”

“He said he forgives me.” I shake my head.

I scan the horizon but see no sign of the others. Where are they? My rescuer said the only thing we had to worry about were sea monsters but what about sharks? Could they attack or are they a part of Poseidon’s kingdom?

“Don’t worry, Beth. They’re safe. The guard is protecting them as they bring them closer to the island.” Thad pats my shoulder.

“I don’t think there is a safe place in the entire world, Thad,” I grumble.

“Let me out,” Raven’s scream reaches me from the ocean, and I step toward the waves.

Thad drops a hand on my shoulder, stopping me from rushing back into the water. “Most of the guard doesn’t speak English as well as the captain so they likely don’t know what’s happening.”

“Raven,” I call out. “Don’t fight. They’re friends.”

“B?” she shouts again. “Where are you?”

“I’m on the island. You’re going to have to swim.”

“This asshole won’t let me out of this fucking net.”

Thad chuckles and shakes his head. “I knew this wasn’t the greatest plan, but I did what I had to do on the fly.”

“I get it, but your father may have one less guard if we don’t do something,” I say.

Thad stomps to the water and places his hand in the waves. A huge splash sounds and then a scream of absolute fury from Raven.

“What the fuck,” she bellows.

“You have to swim, Raven,” I shout. “They can’t bring you to shore.”

“Fucking hell,” Raven yells when there’s another splash and I scan the water for any sign that she’s in distress.

Thad stands and crosses his arms, no longer communicating with the guard. “She’s swimming through the water. Nothing will touch her. Jayden is close too.”

Jayden. Thank the gods. The water ripples as Jayden stands, wading through the waves. How did he get here faster than Raven? I didn’t even hear him like I did her. I race to the edge of the water and jump into Jayden’s arms, kissing him hard.

“Beth, thank the fates. You went under the water, and then I couldn’t find you.” He squeezes me closer.

“I was rescued but I thought I was being attacked. Thad failed to mention he called in backup, but I’m glad he did.” I kiss Jayden again.

“Oh no, I’m not a drowned rat or anything,” Raven snarks as she splashes through the sea.

“You were loud. I knew where you were.” I smirk.

I untangle myself from Jayden and lead them over to Thad. He’s standing on the shore, a grin on his face. “You really upset my father’s guard.”

“I was kidnapped and brought to a stupid island. What do you expect?” Raven growls.

“Sorry, I didn’t have time to warn you all of the plan. It had to change abruptly as well.” Thad raises a hand and dries us all.

“What do you mean it changed abruptly?” Jayden asks.

“A tsunami hit the shore. It wiped everything out. The mainland is gone.” Thad sits on his ass in the sand.

“How much of the mainland is gone?” Raven asks.

“Half the California coast.” Thad covers his face.

“The academy?” Jayden asks.

“The academy is safe, for now, but this is all getting worse and we need

to hurry,” I say.

“Where are Greyson and Adrian?” Raven asks, scanning the sea.

“They are swimming to shore now.” Thad grumbles behind his hand.

“It will be okay. There has to be a reason that Poseidon had us dropped off here. Maybe Nereus is pulling strings and this is another trial.” I turn toward the island.

“I think you may be right, but it looks deserted,” Jayden says.

“Looks can be deceiving, always.” I lean my head on his shoulder. “We need to stay alert and figure out what’s here that Poseidon or Nereus wants us to find.”

“We should call the academy too. I want to check on Kira and Claud.”

“Are you even sure you’ll be able to call them from here? It feels like this island doesn’t belong here. Like it’s wrong.” Jayden wraps an arm around my back.

“Greyson,” Raven shouts.

I turn to my friends. Raven races to the water and practically tackles Greyson to the ground. Water crashes over them and I can’t help the laugh that bubbles up despite the direness of this mission.

“We should move inland now that we’re all together.” Thad stands and dusts the sand off his pants.

“Raven, Greyson, let’s go,” I shout to the waves.

“I thought he was dead, B. Give me a minute,” Raven says with a growl.

“She’s right,” Adrian says. “We need to move. We’re running out of time.”

I stare at Adrian. “How much time do we have?”

“I can’t say exactly, but we need to move.” Adrian shakes his head.

Raven gets up and shakes her hair out before reaching for Greyson’s hand to help pull him back up. She glares at me as they stomp through the water.

“Killjoy,” she mumbles.

“You didn’t do the same thing to me?” I raise a brow.

“C’mon, oh wise one, where are we going?” Raven glances at Adrian.

“There’s something here, but it’s shrouded. I just know we have to defeat it before we can leave.” Adrian runs a hand through his wet hair.

I call my weapons as we stalk up the beach, hoping whatever monster we’re meant to fight here is on land and not in the ocean. I never want to see the ocean again once this mission is over.

“Adrian? Is that my pack over your shoulder?” I ask.

I’d totally forgotten I didn’t have it with me during the fight and hadn’t noticed Adrian carrying it until just now.

“Yeah, I grabbed it from the villa before we left. I knew we would need it.” Adrian shrugs.

“How in hades did you manage to keep it intact during the battle and the trip through the sea?” Jayden asks.

Adrian hands Jayden the pack and he throws it over his shoulder.

“It wasn’t easy.” He shakes his head.

“Good thinking because the rest of our stuff is gone. Probably washed away with a tidal wave.” Jayden adjusts the pack with one hand, gripping his sword with the other.

“I hadn’t even thought of that. Just all the poor humans that were lost.” I hang my head.

The diner flits through my memory. All the normal happy families just sitting around the table without a care in the world. My heart aches for them. Are they safe or did they all die when the waves crashed on their homes? The captain said the place was flooded. Did everyone drown?

“Natural disasters happen a lot, Beth. It’s a way of life. There are certain risks anywhere someone might live.” Jayden squeezes me closer to him.

“I know. It’s just... we are taking too long and the longer we take, the more likely more people will die.” I step over a palm frond.

“There’s nothing we can do to move faster, baby. Nereus said we had to complete every trial to get to the trident. So, every place the fates send us, we

need to be ready for a trial.” Jayden kisses my head.

The palm trees sway overhead in the slight ocean breeze and the sand turns to dirt and rock the farther we go inland. The mountain looms over our heads. The terrain is vastly different with tall pines on the mountainside.

“Where do you think it’s going to be?” I ask.

“Our luck, in a cave on that damn mountain,” Jayden grumbles.

“Aren’t we supposed to be fighting sea monsters?” I ask.

“Some sea monsters go on land. The hydra is technically of the sea,” Jayden says.

“I already killed the hydra,” I growl.

“That doesn’t mean they couldn’t bring it back,” Raven reminds me.

“At least I will know how to kill it if they do.” I shake my head.

The sky darkens as we move through the forest. The temperature drops and I rub at the goosebumps on my arms. A yawn escapes me as I realize how tired I really am.

“I think we should make camp,” Thad says. “We have been on our feet for what feels like days.”

“We need to set up a watch schedule. Just in case.” I glance over to Jayden.

“I’ll take first watch,” Jayden says.

“I’ll watch with you.” I wrap my hand around his.

“You’re exhausted. You should sleep.” Jayden squeezes my hand.

“I’ll sleep when someone takes second watch,” I say.

“Fine. There’s no arguing with you anyway.” Jayden pulls me over to a palm tree and sits down with his back to it.

“Hand me my pack, please?” I reach for it.

Jayden hands me the pack and I pull out the granola bars I always keep stashed in there and hand them out.

“Thank you,” Thad says.

“It’s not much, but it’s all we got unless we can find some food.” I shrug.

“We can fish in the morning. The sea will provide for us.” Thad grins.

“It’s not weird eating fish?” I ask. “Aren’t they your father’s subjects?”

“Everything is a balance. Some of the smaller fish are simply there to feed the bigger predators just like in the jungle. It’s the circle of life.” Thad shrugs.

I finish my granola bar as everyone else settles in for a few hours’ sleep before their shift to keep watch. I sit back, leaning against Jayden’s chest and watching the scenery around our little clearing for any sign of a threat.

“I thought you wanted to check on Kira,” Jayden says.

“Shit, yeah. I need to check on them.” I rummage through my pack until I find the shell. “Kira, Daughter of Hephaestus, Halfling Academy.”

The mist appears quickly, showing me the forges and Hephaestus students running around in a panic.

“What’s going on? Kira?” I call through the mist.

Kira turns to me, ash and soot smeared across her face. “Beth, what the fuck?”

“It’s the shell I got when we defeated the sirens. That’s not important. What’s happening there?” I ask.

“It’s bad, Beth. The coast was wiped out by a tsunami and the earthquakes are getting worse. Claud is trying to hold the volcano together but we aren’t sure how long it’s going to last. We may have to evacuate the academy. How close are you to finding the trident?”

“It feels like it’s going to take forever to get there. It’s been one disaster after another.” I sigh and glance over my shoulder to Jayden.

“Well, hurry because at this rate there may not be an academy to come back to.”

A splash sounding like a bomb going off wakes me and I shoot up from my spot in Jayden's arms. Thad and Adrian are on their feet, weapons at the ready.

"What was that?" I ask.

"I don't know but it was something big," Adrian says, not glancing in my direction.

I nudge Jayden until he blinks his eyes open. "There's something on the island."

"What? I mean, I'm sure there's something here, but how do you know for absolute certain?" Jayden asks as he springs up from the ground.

I call my weapons to me and hold them at the ready. "How far are we from the ocean?"

"About a mile. So a splash that loud had to be something huge." Thad scans the clearing.

"What the hell could it be?" I ask.

There's a great deal of sea monsters that it could be, some bigger than the others. What are we dealing with on this crazy island?

The ground shakes. A tremor passing through the entire island sends me into Jayden with a gasp. Was that an earthquake or is there something beneath the island?

“What the hell is going on?” Jayden asks as his hands band around my arms.

“I don’t know, but if that was another earthquake, we have problems with the academy and the mainland,” I say.

“I don’t think it was.” Thad runs a hand through his hair. “It doesn’t feel like my father.”

“What do you mean?” Jayden asks.

“I think it’s a monster,” Thad growls.

“What kind of monster is that big?” I ask.

“I don’t know. Cetus is on our side so it can’t be them. They’re friends,” Thad says.

“They?” Jayden asks.

“There’s more than one Cetus. They are a group of large sea monsters that are loyal to my father,” Thad says.

“So, it’s not them. The captain of the guard said we have Poseidon’s protection. The only thing we have to worry about here are sea monsters.” I take a step back from Jayden.

“Then we need to keep on guard. Sea monsters could be anywhere.” Jayden sighs.

“That’s a monster and I fear which one.” Thad runs a hand down his face.

“Which monsters are big enough to make a splash like that and rumble the ground?” I ask.

“There are a few but Ceto and Echidna are the most likely. Scylla and Charybdis are pretty stationary. If we were on Scylla’s island, we would know about it,” Thad says.

I shudder at the mention of the two most feared sea monsters in ancient history. Will we encounter them on this mission? Most likely. I just wish I knew when and how to defeat them. I have never heard of a hero actually killing them but simply making it past them and I refuse to sacrifice my friends for that purpose.

“Yeah, we’d already be dead five times over,” Raven says.

“So, are we thinking Ceto or Echidna?” I ask.

“I mean, they are both sea monsters,” Jayden says, tightening his grip on his sword.

“Technically, Ceto is a primordial sea goddess,” Thad says.

“So we are potentially going up against a sea goddess? That’s just fucking great.” I throw my hands up in the air.

“Ceto is monstrous. She is the mother of all sea monsters for a reason.” Thad shrugs.

“Just fucking great,” Raven scoffs.

“Speculating isn’t getting us any closer to passing this trial and getting the hell out of here.” I glance toward the shore.

Are we really a mile from the shore on all sides or just a mile from the direction we walked to begin with? It doesn’t really matter because I’m sure whatever inhabits this island already knows we’re here and wants to take us out.

“Which way did it come from?” Jayden asks.

I point to the right beyond the tree line with my sword. Please don’t be Ceto. I don’t know how we could possibly defeat a goddess. Especially one that’s related to the Titans.

“Let’s go see what it is,” I say with a sigh.

We trudge through the forest of tall pines and underbrush. Another enormous splash startles me and I jump. Fuck, that is huge. Whatever it is, it’s going to be difficult to defeat.

“Are we sure it’s a monster and not just a whale or something playing in the ocean?” Raven asks hopefully.

“Do we ever have that kind of luck?” I scoff.

“No, but it’s wishful thinking,” Raven says.

“I prefer practicality,” Jayden grunts.

“We know that, oh practical one. You won’t even go over the speed

limit.” Raven pushes him in his shoulder.

“Ow, Raven,” he groans.

“Let’s not injure each other before battle.” I shake my head.

I hope there isn’t a battle, but I’m not getting those hopes up. This has *walking into battle* written all over it.

We walk slowly through the forest until we break through the trees on a rocky cliff. The ground shakes beneath our feet with a roar somewhere below us.

“What was that?” I ask, grabbing on to Jayden’s arm.

“I think that’s whatever monster we’re supposed to fight.” Jayden steadies me.

“That was a roar of pain,” Thad steps forward. “Are we meant to fight the creature or save it?”

“I don’t know.” I chew my lip.

Have we been wrong about what this task is this whole time? Is it not Echidna or Ceto?

“How do we get down the side of the cliff?” Raven leans over, glaring down at the crashing waves below.

“A leap of faith?” Thad asks.

“Fuck no,” Jayden says.

“Can you bring the water up here and carry us down on top of it?” I glance at him.

“I should be able to, yes,” Thad says.

“Should?” Jayden shouts. “I’m not working off a *should* when there are jagged rocks in the water at the bottom of the fifty-foot drop.”

“We could test it first,” I say.

“What will we test it on?” Jayden asks.

“Test it on me.” I cross my arms over my chest.

“No.” Jayden grabs me. “Not fucking happening.”

“Why not?”

“Because I have a better idea.” Jayden whistles.

Wings flap in the distance and I raise a hand to cover my eyes from the sun. A black figure flies toward us in the distance, its skeletal wings flapping in the wind.

“You called Skullrider?” I ask.

That skeletal horse hates me. He’s constantly a pain in the ass. A puff of smoke billows from his snout as he gets closer and I stick my tongue out at him. Yeah, I know. Real mature, but he needs to stop listening to my thoughts. He shakes his head and snorts flames from his snout this time.

“Yeah, well, the feeling is mutual, buddy,” I growl.

“He’s going to carry us down the cliff, Beth,” Jayden says.

“I like the idea of riding the water better.” I cross my arms.

“Thad doesn’t even know if he can do that,” Jayden says as the beast lands next to him.

Skullrider bumps Jayden’s cheek and snorts. I glare at the stupid horse.

“I’m more worried about him dropping me than Thad, Jayden. He won’t stay out of my head and then gets all huffy at my thoughts and tries to drop me.”

“He wouldn’t actually drop you, Beth. He was just trying to scare you.”

Can horses smirk? Because that damned horse has an air of superiority to him right now. I narrow my eyes at him, knowing he’s listening to my thoughts again. Bastard.

“Fine. I’ll get on the creepy horse,” I grumble.

The horse backs away, shaking his head and stamping his hooves angrily. What the hell is his problem now? I said I would get on and he’ll probably try to scare me again, but it is what it is.

“C’mon, Skullrider, please? We’re running out of time.” Jayden pats the horse's shoulder.

Another rumbling roar booms from below, shaking the ground. Rocks fall from the edge of the cliff. I brace myself but don’t fall as I widen my stance.

Is whatever's down there going to topple the cliff down on top of it? Thad steps forward again, but Greyson clamps a hand down on his arm.

"It's in pain," Thad says.

"You're gonna be in pain if you fall over the edge of that cliff," Greyson scowls.

"The water won't hurt me." Thad yanks his arm from Greyson's grip.

"The rocky cliff will if you hit it on the way down," I say.

I turn to Skullrider since this is the only way Jayden is going to stop stalling so we can get to the cave below the cliffs. The horse snorts flames again and shakes his head.

"He doesn't want to take me on his back, Jayden. We need another plan."

"No. Skullrider, behave. We need to go before they try to get down on top of water." Jayden turns the horse's head in his direction.

"Look, I'm sorry, okay? I just don't like beings listening to my thoughts without permission." I step closer to the horse and this time he doesn't back away.

Progress.

Jayden breathes a sigh of relief and pats Skullrider again before swinging up on his back. He holds a hand out to me and pulls me up in front of him.

"We are going down to see if we find anything. Skullrider will be back for you," Jayden says.

"Okay," Raven says.

Without warning the horse leaps straight in the air, eliciting a squeak from me and I swear to the gods the damn horse snorts a laugh. Asshole.

"Skullrider, be nice," Jayden says.

We circle the cliff once before the horse dives unexpectedly. I grip Jayden's arms as we drop into a free fall. I scream as we fall, my nails digging into Jayden's arm. The horse evens out and flaps his wings just above the crashing waves.

"Fucking horse thinks that's funny," I grumble.

“C’mon, Beth. He’s trying to help even if he’s being a pain right now.” Jayden squeezes me tighter to him.

Skullrider’s wings flap as he hovers over the sea and he nods his head to the craggy rocks of the cliff. A bellowing roar blasts from the cave entrance and something splashes, sending a spray of sea water pelting my skin. I shiver with the cold.

“What is in there? It really does sound like it’s trapped.” I peer through the darkness inside the cave.

“How do we get in there without it sending us back on a crashing wave?” Jayden asks.

Skullrider snorts and shakes his head toward a ledge to the right of the cave. It’s just big enough for us to step on one at a time. He flies over to the ledge and Jayden helps me down from Skullrider’s back onto the ledge. I press my back to the cliff and edge closer to the dark cave.

“Wait for me,” Jayden says, hopping down next to me. “Skullrider, go get the others.”

The ledge circles around the craggy rocks and I follow the path into the dark cave. Another roar pierces my ears and I wince. It really is a roar of pain and not necessarily anger. I just hope whatever is causing it pain doesn’t make it want to kill us.

“Can you see anything?” Jayden asks.

“No, it’s too dark. I don’t want to use my sword just in case we anger whatever’s in here.” I shuffle around another curve in the rock.

A dim light in the cave catches my attention. It’s not enough to see anything but the outline of the creature. It’s large and appears to have a humanoid shape. Is it a giant? Are there giants in the sea? That is slightly terrifying.

Jayden grips my arm as my foot slips on the slight ledge we’re on. The sea water is making it slippery the deeper we move into the cave.

“Careful, watch your step,” Jayden growls.

“There’s something in here. Can you see anything?” I ask Jayden.

“No, only shadows.” Jayden shakes his head.

“Who’s there?” A woman’s voice booms through the cave.

The walls shake with the loudness of her voice. What the hell? What is this woman doing in the cave? Why is she in pain?

“We’re demigods on a mission for Poseidon,” I say. “Are you trapped down here?”

“Yes,” she wails and something splashes in the water again, the force of it knocking me back into Jayden.

His arms wrap around me as we steady ourselves against the onslaught of the salty sea water.

“Do you need help?” I ask.

Jayden stiffens. “Beth, are you sure about this? We can’t see her and she could be a threat.”

“She’s trapped here, Jayden, and she’s clearly in pain.” I turn my gaze to meet his.

“Did you think that maybe there’s a reason she’s trapped down here?”

“What if it’s like Claud?” I ask.

Jayden’s shoulders slump in defeat as I move closer to the woman or whatever she is. I’m not getting monster vibes from her, but I could be wrong. We will have to cross that bridge when we come to it.

“How are you trapped?” I ask her.

“Chains, they hurt.” She wails again.

The closer we get to her, the more the ledge widens until we are able to stand side by side. I still can’t make out her features as she’s shrouded in shadows. Is this a trick? Is she luring us to our deaths?

I clench and unclench my fists. Is this a good idea? What if Jayden is right and this creature was chained here for good reason? Will I fail the task by setting her free?

Another thundering splash knocks me back into the wall as a stream of

water pelts me in the face, some getting in my nose and mouth, and I cough to expel it.

“If you can hold still, we can try to get you out of the chains,” I say.

“Why would you do that?” the creature asks me.

“Because you need help and I think that’s why we were brought to this island.” I shrug.

“No one has ever tried to help me before,” she cries.

The ground rumbles with her cry and a rock falls close to me, barely missing slamming into my head, but Jayden pulls me back at the last second. I place a hand on my racing heart, gasping in a breath.

“Can you calm down?” Jayden snaps. “We can’t help you if we’re dead.”

“You don’t even want to help me. You think I’m a monster,” she growls.

The sound is definitely akin to a monster growl, but I shake the thought off and step around the rock that smashed into the ground at my feet.

“Are you a monster?” Jayden asks.

“Jayden, stop it. She needs help.” I smack his chest.

“Beth? Jayden?” Thad calls from the mouth of the cave.

“We’re here, follow the ledge,” I yell back to him.

“Who is that?” the creature asks.

“He’s a friend. We’re going to help you.”

I shimmy around the cave where I’m sure the creature’s head is as Thad and the others round the corner. Greyson stiffens as he glances at the woman.

“Beth, that’s not a good idea. Get over here,” Greyson says.

“What?” I ask.

“You can’t see her. We need to go. Now.” Greyson grabs Raven’s arm and tugs her back.

“What do you see, Greyson?” Raven asks as she yanks her arm from his grip.

“Nothing we want to release from chains.” He frowns.

A splash cracks through the cave and the water blasts into Greyson and

the others, sending them flying back into the cave wall. I step back from the creature, wondering if I had gotten it all wrong. Is this some sort of trick? A trap because I often let my compassion for others get me in trouble?

The creature begins to laugh, the sound terrible as it shakes the walls of the cavern. “Your compassion will be the end of you, daughter of Zeus.”

“My sword will be the end of you.” I reach for my necklace and call my sword.

My magic fuels the blade and soft white light drowns out the shadows so I can finally see what the creature in front of me is. Raven pulls her ax as Thad curses under his breath.

“So you didn’t expect me, did you?” The creature laughs.

It’s not a creature though and I have a feeling we are completely fucked. She rips the chains off her wrists with the ease of the monster she is and stands on two huge serpent tails.

I widen my stance, holding my sword out in front of me, but how do you kill the mother of all monsters? The head of one of her serpent feet strikes out at me and I roll back to Jayden.

“What do we do?” Raven asks.

She swings her ax at the other serpent leg that slithers to her. The thing recoils but snaps out again.

Echidna laughs. “You may as well give up now. You scrawny heroes will never defeat me.”

I glance at Raven. This could be a fucking death sentence to mention, but she nods her head like she knows exactly what I’m about to say. Here goes nothing. We either defeat the mother of all monsters or we die trying.

If we die, the world burns to the ground. No pressure.

“Pretty sure we defeated someone stronger than you.” I smirk. “We shoved Typhon back in Tartarus.”

Echidna roars and the ground shakes violently, threatening to topple the cave down on our heads. Fuck. That was probably a stupid thing to say to the wife of the Titan but anger in battle makes a person reckless and that’s the idea here. We need an advantage and that’s the only thing I’ve got.

“Beth,” Jayden bellows and his shadows wrap around me as a rock falls over my head.

It crashes to the shield he created before bouncing back and slamming into Echidna’s gut. She roars her anger, shaking the foundation of the cave.

“You think you can make it out of here alive after that comment, daughter of Zeus?” Echidna bellows.

“Like you were ever going to let us live.” I shake my head.

“B, I think I have an idea,” Raven whispers. “Go for the snakes.”

“Why are there always so many snakes?” I whisper back.

“Really? That’s your thought process now?” Jayden scoffs.

“Ancient history liked snakes and lions way too much,” I grumble.

A serpent head slithers closer to me and I swipe at it with my sword, barely missing the long tongue. Those bastards eat human flesh and I like my flesh where it is, thank you very much.

“You’re right,” Echidna says. “And I brought along a friend to help me ensure you don’t make it out of this cave alive. I believe you’ve met.”

A piercing roar comes from a tunnel I hadn’t noticed until now and I flinch. She can’t be serious. Please don’t be what I think it is.

Stomping steps precede the roar down the tunnel as fire spews out of the opening. Fuck. She’s the mother of all monsters for a reason but she’s not the mother of that particular beast. I step back and glance at Raven with wide eyes.

“This is going to be tricky,” I say. “My magic is volatile around water but it’s the only thing we have that will kill the beast.”

“What are you talking about, Beth?” Jayden asks. “What’s coming?”

“They brought the fucking hydra back,” I growl.

A snake leg snaps out at me and water sprays my face as it coils to attack me. I swing my blade at it and Echidna wails as my blade connects with the snake but doesn’t cut the head off.

“The hydra? Fuck,” Raven groans.

“Your weapons won’t work. I need you to distract Echidna while I kill the fucking hydra again.” I turn my gaze on the others.

“Wait,” Jayden says. “My hellfire could help.”

“Right. You come with me and the others distract the psycho until we kill the beast.” I nod to Raven.

The walls of the cave shake violently the closer the seven-headed bastard gets to the cave from the tunnel. We can’t let it get inside the cave. It’s too small to properly fight Echidna as it is.

“Hey, ugly snake lady,” Raven yells. “I cut off one of your husband’s fucking heads.”

“Raven, stop,” Greyson roars at the same time a wave of water crashes into them from Echidna’s stomping snake.

“I’ll kill you slowly, daughter of Ares,” Echidna says.

“You’ll have to catch me first, psycho.”

Raven drops to her knees in front of Adrian who has an arrow nocked in his bow. He lets the arrow fly true and it lodges into Echidna's eye.

"Hell yeah, Adrian." Raven pumps her fist as Echidna roars. "Do it again."

"C'mon." Jayden grips my arm, pulling me around Echidna.

My friends are no longer within my sight and I hate it, but we all have our parts to play and they are holding their own against the Titan monster.

"How did you defeat the hydra, again?" Jayden asks.

"I used my whip and my magic together. You have to cut off the head and then burn the neck before it can grow two more heads." I grip my necklace and call my whip.

"I don't think you should do this. Maybe we can work together so you don't have to use electricity and possibly electrocute yourself." Jayden's shadows pulse along his arms.

"Good plan, but my whip is more effective and if I'm not in the water, I can use my electricity without hurting myself."

We stop in front of the entrance to the tunnel, the flames inside not touching us except for the heat warming my chilled bones. If the hydra was ever good for anything, this would be it.

I unfurl my whip at my side as I crouch into a fighting stance and wait for the creature to surface.

"What if Echidna splashes again at the wrong moment?" Jayden asks. "I would feel better if you didn't barbecue yourself today."

"Fine. I'll just use the whip as a last resort." I touch my necklace sending the whip back to the charm.

"Thank you," he says just as the first dragon head pops into view around the door.

Jayden lunges for me as the monster spews flames at me with an almighty roar. We hit the ground to the side of the tunnel as the heat of the flames blisters against my skin. Fuck, that was close.

I jump to my feet, gripping my sword, and swing at the first head of the hydra, but Jayden's shadow chains are wrapping themselves around the neck and squeezing.

I call my whip and wrap it around the neck, swinging myself up to the dragon's neck and glance down at Jayden. "You ready?"

Jayden nods and I swing my blade in a wide arc, taking the head from its body to tumble to the ground. "Now, Jayden."

Hellfire burns too close to my skin as I jump from the neck of the hydra. I gag at the stench of burning monster flesh. But the neck lies still on the ground as the other six heads roar their fury from the tunnel.

"No, you aren't supposed to defeat him," Echidna bellows, turning to us.

One of her eyes is closed around Adrian's arrow. A snarl paints her lips. What the fuck did she expect to happen when there are six of us against her? Seriously? Monsters really are dumb.

"I defeated this thing single-handedly when I had a lot less magic." I grin.

Stupid Echidna. They keep underestimating us and losing every time. I grin as another head makes its way through the crack. I crack my whip at it without the electricity flowing through it because water fills the floor of the cavern as the tide rises.

"Jayden, get ready." I swing up on the neck, but another head snaps out from the tunnel and flames shoot by me.

I scream as fire burns through my shoulder and I lose my grip on the other neck and my whip. My stomach drops into my throat as weightlessness grips me. My arms pinwheel in an attempt to stop the fall but a second later, shadows wrap around me and I'm in Jayden's arms.

"Beth, are you okay?" Jayden asks.

"It burns," I groan.

"Fuck, it got you with magical fire." Jayden inspects my shoulder. "You need the burn cream."

"No time. Jayden, watch out." I shove him to the side as one of the heads

snaps at us.

I swing my blade in my good arm, taking the hydra's head clean off its neck. Shit. I jump to my feet to use my electricity but Jayden is already there, hellfire spews from his palms at the neck flopping uselessly on the ground.

"Five more to go," I pant.

"You need the burn cream," Jayden growls, reaching for me, but I shake my head.

"We need to fucking end this."

Echidna screams behind me, and I spin to find Raven's ax sticking out of one of her serpent legs. The entire cave rumbles as the mother of all monsters bellows.

I pull away from Jayden and slash at the third hydra head, but it dodges, snapping at my sword arm. I spin away from it but teeth rip into my shirt on my sword arm. It rips the sleeve and teeth graze my arm.

Fire burns in my veins. Is its bite poisonous? Fuck. Jayden is going to lose his mind. I hiss at the sting but I still have the use of my arm for now.

I jump from the ground and dodge the fangs that lunge for me. The body of the hydra is visible now and all four heads lunge at us as they drag the other three necks with them into the cave.

"Shit. Jayden, we need to kill it before it fills the whole cavern." I rush forward.

"You need to stop. You need to get the burn cream." He glances at the gash on my arm. "Fuck. Did it bite you?"

"It grazed me. I'm fine." I pull my arm from his grasp. "We need to defeat this thing."

"You're not fine." Jayden glares at me.

Two of the hydra heads lunge for us and we dive away from each other. I bring my sword up in a wide arc and take the head off the one closest to me with a yell of fury.

"Jayden. Hellfire," I shout, but Jayden is still dodging the other head.

I jump up from the wet cave floor and call on my whip midair. My magic sizzles through it as it wraps around the hydra neck. The skin of the neck sizzles and burns but it's not fast enough. I'm weightless as I fall back to the ground and I only have seconds to pull my magic back before I get electrocuted from the water at my feet.

"Jayden. It's growing back. Hurry," I scream.

My electricity isn't doing the trick fast enough and I'm going to hit the water at any second. If I don't want to electrocute every single person in the water, I have to let go but Jayden is still fighting off the other head with his hellfire.

Two necks split off from where my whip is frying the neck. Somehow, it's not on the ground in the water yet. I rock my body through the air trying desperately to gain some momentum as the ground rumbles and a stalagmite rises from the ground beneath me. What the fuck? I turn and Thad smirks as he sprays Echidna with a stream of water.

How did he do that? I nod my thanks and steady myself on the rock as two heads sprout from the neck I just severed. "Fuck."

At least from my spot on the rock formation there's no chance of me electrocuting everyone unless they can't keep Echidna distracted. The newly formed hydra heads snap at me in unison and I duck below them. The heads smack into each other, dazing them both.

"Beth," Jayden screams.

He's finally defeated the head but quickly gains the interest of one of the newly formed heads and dodges it and one of the others. We're back down to four with the one he destroyed but the hydra's body is slower to move, dragging for necks behind it.

Two heads lunge at me from my place on top of the rock formation and I light up my sword with electricity as they shake the dizziness away from the headbutt they both just suffered.

I swing my blade in a circle to get both of them, but one head tears back

at the last second. My blade sizzles with electricity as it slices through the other one and cauterizes the neck immediately, sending both the head and the neck crashing to the ground and shaking the cave. I stumble but barely catch myself before falling to my doom.

I glance at the ground where Jayden shoots his hellfire chains at the other head. We are down to two and I sigh with relief before fangs snap on my leg and I cry out in agony.

Fuck. That thing got me. I swing my blade again and take the head from its neck but tumble off the stalagmite to the shallow water below. My sword slips from my hand and I let it because there's no way I can control the power with the poison of the hydra's bite flooding my system.

"Thad," Raven bellows from somewhere far off.

I can't see anything with the black spots tinting my vision. My stomach jolts as I hit something hard and cry out as freezing water meets my back. I'm brought slowly to the ground and Jayden's black eyes fill what's left of my vision.

"Jayden, did we get it?" I mumble.

He pulls my pack off his shoulder and grabs for the vial of red liquid, but I bat his hand away. "Can't too much."

"You've been burned and poisoned, Beth. Take the fucking elixir," Jayden says.

He doesn't give me an option as he shoves the dropper in my mouth and squeezes it. Ambrosia fills my mouth way more than is safe for a demigod and I try to spit it back out but he covers my mouth with one hand. I have no choice but to let it dissolve on my tongue. Did he just damn me to a lifetime addiction to this substance?

The black spots fade from my vision as tingles race down my arms where I was burned and scratched by the hydra. I blink as Jayden's face comes into full view and glance at his hands. Golden ichor coats his skin where his hand clamps on my leg. Did I turn into a god? Why did my blood turn that color?

Is that even my blood?

“Jayden, what is that?” I ask.

“You’re turning into a goddess, I think, Beth. That’s your blood.” Jayden hangs his head.

“No, that’s not possible.” But even as the words come out of my mouth, there’s a finality deep in my soul that says he’s right.

I’m gods touched and now I’m becoming one of them. Will this be my friends’ fate too? My leg stitches itself back together, my healing much quicker than before, and I bat Jayden away, needing to stand and end this fucking fight with Echidna. Raven and our friends are holding their own, but we need to hurry the fuck up and get out of here.

“Let’s end this,” I growl but Jayden grips my side.

“You’re injured, baby. You need to sit this one out.” Jayden shakes his head.

“I’m fine. The elixir healed me.” I roll my shoulders back.

There’s no pain from the burn or the scrape anymore.

“Beth...”

“No, Jayden. I have to do this.” I pull away from him and call my sword.

This bitch thinks she can fuck with me? I’ll prove to her why you don’t fuck with the daughter of Zeus. I grip my sword in my hand as I stalk to my friends. They all appear to be exhausted but uninjured. Echidna has taken most of the damage. Several of Adrian’s arrows are lodged in various places in her body.

One of the snake heads on her feet is gone completely and I grin. My friends are formidable in their own right, even if they’re exhausted right now.

I step around Echidna with my sword in hand. She screams in fury as she sees me alive and well. She turns to the decapitated hydra and back to me, eyes blazing with fury.

“Mother will not be merciful now that you killed my brother.”

Thad steps forward. “Ceto has always been neutral. It’s how she and

Pontius kept their positions within the sea. You think she will go against Zeus now when it doesn't suit her?"

"She cares not for Zeus or the mutts you call demigods. Only for terrorizing the sea and her children," Echidna roars.

"You really think she cares? She only cares about maintaining her power or she would have stood with the Titans when the Titan war happened." Thad crosses his arms.

"Enough talk. We need to fucking get out of here," I shout.

All the attention turns to me and I grimace. Yeah, I shouted but everyone's eyes are wide as they stare at me.

"What's going on?" I ask, turning to Jayden.

"You're glowing. Like a goddess."

"Fuck. No. How do I turn it off?" I panic but it somehow brightens.

I hold out a hand instinctively and a lightning bolt sails from me into Echidna's broad chest. The mother of all monsters sails back into the far wall and chains wrap around her, glowing gold and white-hot.

"You will never escape my prison," I yell.

Was that my voice? It sounds off and full of power I shouldn't be able to contain. What the fuck is happening to me? I turn to Jayden with wide panicked eyes as Echidna screams. The chains fasten to the wall but her screams rock the foundation of the cave. I stumble into Jayden and my shoulders slump with exhaustion.

"What the fuck was that, Beth?" Jayden wraps his arms around me and picks me up as we flee the crumbling cave.

I don't have a clue what that was and as I peer down at my hands and arms, the glowing fades until my skin is back to normal.

Surely I imagined the glow, right? I can't be changing into a goddess. I just can't.

We reach the others and Jayden is still carrying me, my energy sapping from my body. I'm still not sure how I used that much power. Did I really

just chain Echidna to a wall? How is that even possible?

I bat at Jayden's arms. If I'm some kind of goddess now, I can't appear weak. Reluctantly, he lets me down just as the ceiling is about to cave in over Raven. I lunge for my friend and push her aside but I'm too slow to help myself as a pile of rocks lands on top of me, throwing everything into darkness.

What in the actual fuck have I gotten myself into now?

Darkness is everywhere as I take in my surroundings. A group of boulders creates a dome over my head but the water leaks between the cracks.

“Beth?” Jayden’s terrified voice meets my ears. “Are you okay?”

“I’m not injured but I’m trapped under a dome of rocks,” I call back.

“Thad, can you get her out?” Jayden asks and I smile.

He’s finally trusting a demigod that he didn’t like for so long. It’s progress, or maybe his need to keep me safe overrides his distrust of Thad. Either way, I’ll take it as a win.

“I can’t move the earth, only reform it with my earth shaker abilities,” he says sadly.

“Watch out,” Raven says. “It’s about time I was able to put my crazy strength to good use.”

The water is trickling in between the cracks in the huge boulders and I shiver as it chills my bones. I’m never going into the damn Pacific Ocean again after this mission. The cold burrows beneath my skin and I’m afraid I’ll never be warm again.

“Raven, you have to be careful,” Jayden says. “You could topple those rocks on her and water looks to be flooding the space.”

“I won’t let her drown,” Thad says. “I’ll do what I can to get the water out while Raven takes care of the boulders.”

“There’s a lot of water coming in,” I shout through chattering teeth.

If I’m becoming a goddess, shouldn’t I be immune to the cold? This is bullshit. I feel robbed as I stand in the water with no way to blast myself out of the rocks without electrocuting everyone. I would probably be fine at this point after my display of godly power, but my friends would not. So as the small crevice fills with water, I wait in silence for Raven to dismantle the dome.

“Her teeth are chattering,” Greyson says low in his throat. “She’s freezing. You need to hurry.”

“You can hear my teeth chattering?” I ask. “You really do have super wolf hearing.”

“She’s making jokes but she’s going to freeze in that water if we don’t get her out,” Greyson snaps.

Huh. I didn’t realize the puppy cares about me so much. It’s probably because the world would end and Raven would be devastated if something happened to me but it’s nice to know all the same.

“Aw, Greyson, you care about me living?” I shout through the rocks.

“You’re a pain in the ass but we couldn’t move forward without you and save the world, so yeah, I care, dammit. Someone get her out of there before she fucking dies.”

The rocks above my head rumble and debris rains down on my head. A small pebble smacks me in the forehead. “Easy, that isn’t exactly stable,” I growl.

“Sorry, B. The dome is pretty tall and I had to jump. I’ll get you out in a sec,” Raven says.

The cave shakes and Thad curses. “I think we have a problem.”

“What is it?” I yell.

“The cave is disintegrating like the one Medusa was in. I think we passed the trial but we have to move before we’re sucked into oblivion.”

The dome above my head rattles as the entire cave releases a tremor. Is

the whole island going to disappear? Where will it go? I had a feeling it didn't belong in the Pacific Ocean the second I saw it, and now we are going to be trapped on it or torn to shreds and thrown into oblivion. Fuck.

"Hurry, Raven," I yell.

The power in my gut wants to come out. It wants to blast a hole in this stupid dome and rescue my friends from an unknown fate, but Raven is up there using her strength to get me out and my power is still electricity even if I'm ascending into a goddess. I could still electrocute myself and my friends if I'm not careful.

"I'm moving as fast as I can, B," she shouts.

"Get down and everyone, get out of the cave. I'm going to try something." It's a long shot but if they can get to safety, I might have a shot at getting out of here myself.

"No," Jayden yells. "I'm not leaving you here."

"Jayden, I'm going to use my power and this won't be the fun kind of shock," I bellow back.

Would the overprotective male just listen to me one time and save himself? What the fuck?

"You won't hurt me. I know you won't. The others are leaving but I'm staying," Jayden says.

"Like hell I am," Raven barks. "I'm almost in the damn dome. I can do this."

"We don't have time," Greyson says. "We have to move."

"Go," I call. "All of you. Greyson, Thad, if you have to force them, do it now, please?"

The power in my gut swirls with the need to escape before I'm sucked into gods know where. I need my friends safe but Jayden and Raven are too loyal and protective to leave me behind even if it will save themselves. I love them for it but I need them safe in the same way they need me safe.

"I've got Jayden," Adrian calls. "We'll see you outside."

“What the fuck, Adrian.” There’s a scuffle.

“It’s the only way, Jayden,” Adrian says. “It’s our only chance.”

Silence fills the cavern and my power builds in my gut with the need for release. The only sign that they’re gone is the heavy silence that beats at me.

“We’re outside, Beth. Do what you need to,” Thad yells in the distance.

Finally, everyone is safe. My power builds more and I raise my hands to the top of the dome and unleash the fury of electricity that’s been building inside me.

The rocks above me explode into dust and I stagger to the ledge we came in on. The dust sparkles in the sky as the bright sun now beats in through the cave mouth. Where the fuck am I? Did I get sucked into oblivion with the cave?

The second I step out of the cave, it seals and a new beach that I’ve never seen before lies before me. What is this place? This can’t be the same island, can it? White sand beaches roll as far as I can see. I’m completely alone when I scan the island. My friends are nowhere to be found.

“Where did they go?” I ask the sky.

I don’t expect an answer but music drifts to me and I stiffen. What is that? Are there people on this strange island? Have I somehow managed to make it back to civilization? How, when I’m not even sure where I was to begin with?

I follow the sound of the thumping bass, my brows furrowed in confusion as I pass several flowering plants in my wake. There are no trees, but sand and hills dot the landscape. The sun is high in the sky, warming me after my dip in the freezing sea water.

Contentment fills me the longer I walk down the beach toward the music. What is this place? Do I really care? I just want to find the source of the music and dance the night away. I twirl as I skip to the sound. Where there’s music there are people and maybe they can help me.

Wait, help me with what? My life is completely content. I don’t need any

help. What could I possibly need? I twirl in a circle to the beat of the music as I continue forward. When I crest the last hill, an inviting fire glows on the beach. It looks so warm and I'm so cold.

I stumble down the hillside to the bonfire that's raging. People dance magnetically toward each other as if they don't have a care in the world. I'm almost envious of them. I wish I had no cares in the world.

Wait, why am I envious? The only thing that worries me is the cold seeping into my bones and the fire is already drying my clothes. I sway to the beat of the music but something niggles at the back of my mind before I swat it away.

I don't need any worries. I am in a beautiful paradise and nothing can possibly get me down. A man with white-blond hair and crystal-blue eyes grins at me from his spot at the bonfire. He almost looks familiar but I shake the thoughts off. I don't know anyone here. I don't even know how I got here to begin with.

He takes a step toward me and holds out his hand. "Would you like to warm up by the fire? You look like you're cold."

I place my hand in his and electricity jolts up my arms. I gasp. What the hell was that? Why do I feel a connection to this stranger? I study his face again, sure that I recognize him from somewhere but can't place it.

"Would you like some Kavu? The locals swear by it and it will certainly take the edge off of whatever is going on in that sexy little head of yours, baby."

The word baby niggles at the back of my mind, but surely those sinful lips have never called me that before, right? I would definitely remember that.

"Sure," I say, taking the small pink drink from between his fingers and his brush against mine.

A thousand memories surface at his touch but before I can grasp on to any of them, he pours the pink drink between my lips. The most intoxicating

fruity taste hits my tongue and a moan escapes just before the man's lips crash against mine.

Something is off. I've tasted something similar before but every time I try to grasp on to the memory, it flits away.

I shake my head and break the kiss. "You can't just kiss me and not tell me your name."

"I'm wounded, baby. You don't remember me?" he asks with a smirk. "Maybe we should fix that."

His arms wrap around me again, pulling me into the circle of his arms, and I melt into him. "Wait, should I remember you?"

My head is fuzzy between that drink and this place, and everything starts to tilt on its axis. What is this place and what is that drink? Who is this man that I feel like I should know down to my bones but can't seem to place?

"Jayden, who do we have here?" another man with sandy-blond hair bellows.

He has a surfer vibe and is familiar as well.

"Beth finally joined us, Thad, isn't that amazing?" Jayden grins.

Something about the interaction is off. The man, Thad, doesn't look at all happy that I have joined them. Jayden is a little too happy at the prospect of us all being here together. What the fuck is going on? I step away from Jayden and Thad wraps an arm around my shoulders. The gesture is friendly and not at all sexual.

"Let's take you to go find Raven and Adrian. We've been looking for you." The frown on Thad's face is all the encouragement I need to sober just a little.

"You know it doesn't work like that." Jayden steps forward. "I'm hers and she's mine. She stays with me."

"Not until you get your head out of the Kavu, Jayden," Thad growls.

"What?" I blink in surprise because Jayden just poured that drink down my throat mere minutes ago.

Am I going to be like that? Caring for nothing but having a good time? I'm pretty sure that I have something to do. Something important to do but no matter how hard I try, I can't remember what it was.

"You don't want to test me, Thad. Beth is mine as much as I'm hers."

"Then stop with the Kavu and come with us, Jayden. We're on a mission even if you can't remember it." Thad places a hand on my back.

"What mission are you on?" I ask but even as I ask them, I remember.

It's not their mission. It's mine. How could I forget my mission from the gods? How could I forget the fate of the world rests in our hands?

"C'mon, Beth. He's lost to the lotus flower. Raven and the others are awaiting your arrival." Thad places a hand on my back and I recoil at the feel of his skin against mine.

It's wrong. His touch isn't the one I want. I glance over my shoulder at a frowning Jayden as Thad leads me away. What the hell is going on here?

"Lotus flower? What are you talking about? What is even happening?" I ask.

"See?" Jayden throws up his hands. "She doesn't want to go on the dangerous quest for your father. We should just stay here. We'll be safe here. C'mon, Beth."

Jayden holds out his hand for me to take and for a second, I almost take his hand because the idea of living in a place where we don't have to worry about anything is appealing. We don't have to worry about the war that's coming or the gods' items of power going missing. We can just live out the rest of our days warming ourselves by the bonfire.

"No. We can't just hide here away from the war and let everyone else die, Jayden, you know that. We have to fight, but if you're done fighting, then you can stay here and we'll go on without you." I turn my back on my love, hoping that he will follow us and give up on whatever this lotus flower is doing to him.

He's stronger than the effects of some plant, isn't he? He has to be

stronger than it because if not, I have no choice but to leave him behind.

“You don’t mean that, Beth,” Jayden chokes out. “You would really leave me behind?”

“Nereus told me the weight of the world rests on my shoulders, not yours or anyone else’s. I have to do this. I would rather do it with you.” I shake my head as I storm over to Raven and the others.

How could Jayden, the most practical person I have ever met, let that stupid flower take over his mind so thoroughly? He’s my rock. My voice of reason when I don’t really want to deal with that voice.

We fight and we fuck and we are the best of each other. I love him more than anything still in this world and he just wants to throw it all away for the euphoria some stupid flower gives him? Fuck, did I just think that? Do I really love Jayden? Not possible, right? After everything he’s done to hurt me, how can I love the idiot?

“B?” Raven races toward me. “Are you okay?”

She wraps her arms around me, and I bury myself in the comfort of my best friend. She’s been here from the beginning, even if I didn’t know at first. She’s the one person I can break with and my chest aches as sobs rack my body. What the hell is wrong with Jayden? Why is he acting like this?

“Is there a problem here?” A man’s voice booms behind me. “Why are there people fighting and crying on my island?”

“Ty,” Thad says. “We are just figuring things out. We will leave you all to your revelry.”

“It doesn’t look like you’re figuring anything out and your females are upsetting my guests,” Ty growls.

“Excuse me?” I bark. “We are the only thing standing between your guests and complete destruction so shut the fuck up.”

“You dare speak to me like that. Who are you, female?”

“I’m the daughter of Zeus and the last line of defense between this world and destruction so learn your fucking place before you talk shit to me.” I turn

to the man.

“Ahh, the daughter of Zeus, I was wondering if you would grace our celebrations with your presence. Wouldn’t you rather come and dance with your bonded instead of fighting for a world that cares little about you?”

“They may not know or care about me, but they deserve to live and thrive and I’m not going to give up on the world just because they don’t know or care about my existence,” I scoff.

“Why not? Here you can be selfish and revel in your own desires and wants. You don’t have to care about others, only your base desires. You can have anything you want here.”

“I want the world to be a safe place for all, not just you and your people,” I say. “It won’t be a safe place for anyone if Poseidon’s trident isn’t recovered.”

“You don’t have to worry about the rest of the world here. That won’t hit our island. Nothing from the outside world hits the island of the lotus eaters.” Ty crosses his arms.

“And that’s okay for you to just live on your little island for eternity while the rest of the world and humanity burns?” I shout, drawing the attention of more of the locals.

“What did caring about humanity and the outside world ever give us but heartache and grief? No one on this island ever has to die and we can live out eternity doing whatever we desire.” He takes a step forward into my space.

I push him back. “And what happens if my desires don’t align with yours? Would you force your desires on me?”

Jayden’s gaze snaps in my direction at my words and a growl tumbles from his lips. The first sign of the fire I have missed in him since I found myself on this crazy island with these crazy people and I’m glad for it.

“What are you doing, Ty? She’s mine and I’m hers. You can’t have her,” Jayden snarls.

“I was just telling her our way of life. It is your new way of life, right,

Jayden?” Ty says with a smarmy grin.

“No,” I say, backing away from Jayden. “Tell me you didn’t take what you want in this place.”

Jayden shakes his head, but his expression is hollow. “There were moments before you arrived that I didn’t remember anything, baby. I didn’t do anything though, I promise.”

“He didn’t, B,” Raven says. “We were all looking for you, but Jayden got caught up in the madness of this place.”

My gaze never leaves Jayden’s as Raven confirms that even when he didn’t remember me or anything else, he still didn’t do anything that would hurt us. Do I believe them though? He looked very happy dancing and having a good time when I barely got him to dance with me when we were in Nashville.

“What will it be, Jayden?” I ask. “We have to get off this island. We can’t stay here. You know what that Kavu is, don’t you?”

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“Hecate,” I say.

“Fuck,” Raven growls. “I knew that shit tasted familiar.”

“What am I missing?” Jayden frowns.

“The little pink drink that Hecate gave us outside of New Mexico, Jayden. It was Kavu. She somehow had it on the mainland.” I cross my arms.

“Impossible,” Ty says. “No one knows the secret to Kavu.”

“Not even the goddess of magic?” I scoff.

This guy is extremely self-important. What the fuck is his deal?

“It’s the same drink.” Greyson steps up next to Raven. “I smelled it in the plants as soon as we were dumped on the island, but I didn’t remember until now where I smelled it from.”

“Fuck.” Jayden runs a hand through his hair.

Is he still thinking about staying? Is he going to choose this crazy island and rip my heart from my chest? Tears burn the back of my eyes, but I refuse

to let them fall. It's his choice to take himself out of the war and out of my life. I don't get that choice. The world will burn without me finding this damn trident.

All our friends still at the academy will be forced to leave when the volcano erupts. I can't let that happen. I won't.

"Jayden, come back to the party," a girl calls over to us and I stiffen. "I want to dance."

"Really, Jayden? You did nothing?" I glare at him, and then turn my gaze on the girl.

"No, I didn't. I didn't even dance with her to begin with, Beth. I don't want anyone but you." He grasps both my arms to pull me close but I step back.

"You didn't even remember me part of the time, Jayden." I sigh. "I don't have time for this. We have to go."

"What?" Jayden asks.

"Are you coming with us or not?" My heart aches that I actually have to ask that question.

Jayden has been there from the beginning. Even when I hated him, he still lurked in the shadows of my presence like an annoying bug. I turn away to glance at the others with a nod and take a step away. We have to get out of here. I'm not sure how much time we've wasted but the academy and the world are in danger.

Thad wraps an arm around my shoulder and squeezes. "He'll come around, Beth. He's so fucking in love with you, there's no other option."

"Why are you trying to help? When you got to the academy, you acted like you wanted to be with me," I say.

"I did at first, but seeing you and Jayden together made me realize that was never gonna happen. You two are meant for each other. He just needs to get out of his own way."

"I don't think you're right about that." I glance over my shoulder at

Jayden.

He's standing in the spot where I left him, glancing between us and the bonfire he left behind in confusion. My heart drops to my toes that he's even questioning where he wants to be. He doesn't love me. If he did, there would be no hesitation. He would come with us immediately.

"What are you doing?" Ty steps in front of us.

"We're leaving," I say.

"You can't. No one ever leaves this island."

"You see, Hecate told us something similar at her hotel months ago and here we are in the same fucking situation. Save your bullshit 'Hotel California' nonsense and let us be on our way." I growl.

"What are you talking about?" Ty frowns.

"B, he's been living on this island for eternity. He doesn't know the Eagles." Raven chuckles.

"Is that the Eagles? Why do we keep coming across the Eagles?" I ask. "First Winslow, Arizona, and now this?"

"It's a pretty funny coincidence," Raven agrees.

A crowd forms around us as we banter about the classic rock band. Glazed eyes stare at me with anger. They don't like that we're disrupting their day. Oh well. They can go back to their damn party and bury their heads in the sand once we're gone.

"You can't leave. The magic won't allow it," Ty says.

"The magic can kiss my ass." I cross my arms.

"B, we're surrounded," Raven grunts.

I glance over my shoulder, but Jayden is still in the same place. He's made his choice, then. Can I ever forgive him for this? For leaving me alone in this war?

"Your magic doesn't mean shit to me," I yell at Ty. "I'm gods touched and obviously Hecate has been here and left so get the fuck out of my way."

"It doesn't have to be like this, Beth. Your love has made his choice. Why

don't you choose to stay with him here and live an eternity together?"

"Yes, he made his choice and it wasn't me so why would I ever choose him? He can have whatever he wants here, except for me. I have work to do and it doesn't involve being stuck on this island for eternity. The world needs someone to save it and the fates chose me." I glare at Ty.

My chest aches with the words. I'm not enough. I'll never be enough for Jayden. Why did I ever think I would?

“**B**eth,” someone screams but it sounds far away as sand explodes around me in a swirling vortex.

The gritty sand gets in my mouth and sticks to my skin as it swirls around me. I’m weightless when my stomach drops with the force of the movement.

What the hell is happening to me? Am I doing this or is it Ty? Is he trying to imprison me somewhere? What the fuck? I suck in a sharp breath as pain ricochets through my bones. I fall to my knees as the swirling sand disappears. I spit out the sand coating my mouth and tongue. Fucking disgusting.

“Beth, oh my gods, are you okay?” Jayden reaches for me and I recoil.

What’s he doing here? He made his choice. It wasn’t me. He chose to stay on the island so where are we? Are we still there?

I glance up the rocky shore and the glimmer of modern architecture meets my gaze. We aren’t on the lotus eaters island anymore.

“I thought you chose to stay on the lotus island?” I stand, dusting the dirt from my pants.

“Lotus island? What are you talking about?” Jayden asks, confused.

“It was literally ten seconds ago that you picked that fucked-up island over me. What are you doing here, Jayden? Go back to the island. I know that’s where you really want to be.”

“Ten seconds ago I was on this beach searching for you. I have been here for over a day scouring the beach and everywhere to find you. What are you even talking about?” Jayden throws his hands up in frustration.

“The island fucked with your memory. Where are the others?” I ask.

“Are you okay? Where have you been? We’ve been worried sick since Echidna’s cave.” Jayden reaches for me.

I take a step back. I can’t let him touch me. He chose the island. It doesn’t make sense for him to be here.

“It was a test, little sister.” Hermes pops into existence next to me.

“What?” I ask, grabbing my chest, startled.

“Jayden and the others weren’t actually on the island with you. It was a test.” Hermes pats my shoulder.

“That was some fucked-up test, Hermes,” I growl.

“Your buddy Nereus said it was imperative.” Hermes shrugs.

“Fucking Nereus.” I turn to Jayden. “You weren’t on the island of the lotus eaters? You didn’t choose to stay there even though I had to leave?”

“The island of the lotus eaters?” he asks.

Jayden’s eyes widen and he shakes his head. He steps forward. His eyes plead with me to believe him. To understand something that I don’t quite know what.

“They had the drink like Hecate gave us and they said we couldn’t leave. You chose to stay but that wasn’t my choice.” I shake my head.

“I would never choose to leave you.” Jayden steps closer and this time I don’t move away.

Can I trust those words? Everything felt so real.

“It was the magic. Nereus said we had to know what you would choose.” Hermes pats my shoulder. “You chose wisely, little sister.”

“There wasn’t a choice. I don’t have any choices. If I were to stay, the world would burn. People would die.” I shake my head.

“I told Nereus the test was unnecessary, but he was insistent,” Hermes

says. “You have choices, Bethany; you just always make the selfless ones.”

“I know,” I grumble. “I hate it. When can I have a choice that’s just mine?”

“I don’t know that you’re capable of making a selfish choice,” Jayden says.

He inches closer and I let him wrap me in his arms but I’m still reeling over Nereus’ little test. It was so fucked up. What if it had been real and Jayden really did choose to stay on that island? Would I ever be the same again?

Dread fills me and my chest aches. That test feels like an omen of things to come. Why do I have a feeling I’ll have to choose between the man I love and saving the world again before this is all over?

“Where are we?” I ask.

I straighten my spine. We need to get back to the task at hand. I don’t even know how long I was separated from my friends on that damn island and we’re racing against the clock.

“Just outside of Seattle. There’s a crab fishing boat that is run by a son of the sea god willing to take you to the next stop on your journey to Vancouver,” Hermes says.

“Our next stop?” I ask, confused.

“The strait on the way to Vancouver has seen some odd occurrences as of the last few days. Nereus thinks you will be able to figure out what’s happening and stop it.”

“Another of his stupid trials,” I growl.

“Yes, he’s sure that you will not be permitted onto the island unless you prove yourself worthy.”

“I haven’t done that yet? For real? I have saved the world from demons and war. I saved the academy and I just had to fucking prove that given a choice I would choose to save the world over the thing I want most in this world. I’m fucking tired of proving my worth.” I throw my hands up.

“Easy, baby. We’ll get through all this.” Jayden pulls me to him.

“I know, but you didn’t just experience heartbreak like I did.” I shake my head.

The pain in my chest is subsiding as Jayden has me wrapped in his arms, but I don’t dare hope that’s the last time I’ll have to make that choice. The fates love to fuck with me. They will give me another impossible choice before their games are through.

“We are going to talk about that later. I want to know what this magic did to you. Something is different and I don’t like it,” Jayden whispers.

“Go to the docks. Cal will meet you there.” Hermes claps me on the shoulder before vanishing.

I pull away from Jayden. My emotions are still raw and my heart is shredded to pieces. I can’t get his expression out of my head. The anguish that I didn’t choose to stay with him. It cuts me deep, clawing my heart from my broken chest.

“Hey, that wasn’t me, Beth. I don’t know what you’re seeing right now, but it wasn’t me.” He spins me around and cups my cheeks in his palms.

“You looked so devastated that I didn’t choose you, Jayden. But you chose...”

Jayden stops me, pressing a finger to my lips. “Listen to me, Beth. I would never choose an island or a stupid fucking flower over you. Do you understand?”

“Yes, but this test feels ominous, Jayden. Like the fates are seeing what I’ll do if it comes down to that again. What if they make me choose again?” I ask.

“Then you choose the exact same way you chose in that test. You choose the world and damn the consequences. I would lay down my life for you in a second.” He presses a chaste kiss on my lips. “If the world burns, we all do, and I refuse to be the reason you die and the gods are overthrown. You will make the right choice.”

“I don’t know if I can do that, Jayden,” I whisper.

Tears spill from my eyes and my chest cracks wide-open. If it had been any other way and Jayden hadn’t chosen something else over me, would I have been able to choose the world over him? If it had been any other situation, if it was between Jayden’s life or saving the world, could I do it?

“B?” Raven shouts from down the beach. “Guys, Jayden found her.”

Jayden presses a kiss to my forehead and pulls away just as Raven slams into me.

“Missed you too, Raven.” I smile and wipe the tears from my cheeks.

“What the fuck? Why are you crying?” She spins and stabs Jayden on the chest with her finger. “Why is she crying?”

“I’m fine. Jayden didn’t do anything. Well, not the real Jayden anyway.” I sigh. “I’ll tell you about it later. We need to get to the docks and meet Thad’s half brother on his crab boat.”

“You’ve been gone for an entire day, B. I’m gonna need more than that.” Raven crosses her arms.

“The gods were testing me,” I grumble. “It was fucked up and my emotions are still raw. Can we drop it for now? Please?”

“Okay,” she says but eyes me warily.

“Were you able to get a car or clothes?” I ask.

“Yeah, we rented an SUV. We didn’t get any clothes though. We were busy looking for you.” Raven clenches her fists.

“As soon as the guys get here, we need to get to the dock. If I’ve been gone for an entire day, we are seriously running out of time.” I run a hand down my face.

Thad runs up to us, his expression concerned when his gaze lands on mine. Fuck, I don’t want to keep rehashing that damned test, but Thad acted like a friend on that island. Were his words of comfort true or was that just the test trying to make everything more difficult for me?

“You okay?” Thad asks.

“Yup, I’ll be fine.” I shrug.

It’s not a complete lie, but I have to make it true because there is no other option. I give myself a mental shake as Adrian and Greyson stop in our little group. Jayden chose the island over me. He wasn’t even there. Maybe if I tell myself that enough it won’t feel so real.

“C’mon, the SUV is over here.” Greyson waves to a parking lot.

We trudge up the bank to the SUV. Everything is off though. The silence is deafening, but I can’t get out of my own head. Nereus is an asshole. I thought he was trying to help and maybe he was. Why all the tests though? Why put me through all these trials?

The weight of the world should not be on the shoulders of someone so young. His words blast through my mind. It doesn’t matter what should be. The weight is there and it’s crushing any bit of happiness I carve out for my own.

Will I come out of this war unscathed? I press my hand to the scar on my stomach. I’m not unscathed as it is. How can I think we aren’t just going to keep getting worse before anything gets better?

Jayden grabs my hand and squeezes it in reassurance. He’s my rock. My voice of reason. Will I be able to survive without him? My skin glows gold at his touch. Just another thing that’s uncertain.

“You’ve always been a goddess to me,” Jayden whispers. “Looks like you’re becoming one for real though.”

“I don’t even know what it means,” I say.

“You were the one brave enough to answer the call,” Jayden says.

“Where did you hear that?” I ask, confused. “I don’t think I told you Nereus’ exact words.”

“I didn’t hear it. It just kind of came to me. Nereus said that to you?” Jayden scratches his head.

“Yeah, he said that to me on the beach in Monterey the first time he tricked me.” I shake my head.

“Weird.” Jayden grips the handle on the SUV and pulls it open for me.

I settle in my seat and Jayden kisses my forehead before he closes the door behind me. He’s being overly attentive, probably to show me that he won’t leave me. He won’t choose anything else over me ever again. That niggling doubt is constantly in my mind though.

I thought he chose Mia over me but that was a misunderstanding. I thought he chose the island over me, but that was a test. It’s a me thing, not a him thing. I lean my head back against the headrest and stare at the ceiling of the SUV as Greyson calls out directions to the dock.

“What happened?” Raven asks me, sticking her head between the seats. “You’re off, B, and we’re probably facing some bad shit soon. You have to be on your game.”

“I was on the island of the lotus eaters and Jayden chose the island. I chose to leave. It was a test,” I say.

Raven cocks her fist back and punches Jayden in the arm.

“Ow. Raven it wasn’t actually me. I was with you, remember?” Jayden rubs his arm.

“Still, test Jayden fucked up, royally. And I needed an outlet for my anger.” Raven sits back in her seat.

“Do you feel better now?” Jayden asks.

“No,” Raven growls. “Who decided to fuck with Beth’s head while we’re on a damn mission to save the world? That’s just stupid.”

“It’s over and done with now. Let’s just drop it,” I say.

We pull up to the docks and Jayden hops out and rounds the car. He pulls my door open for me and grabs my bag at my feet.

“C’mon, we need to find Cal.” Jayden holds his hand out for me.

“I know where Cal will be,” Thad says, taking the lead.

He rushes through the docks, not paying any of the luxury yachts or house boats any attention. He’s a man on a mission and somehow when it comes to the ocean, he always knows exactly where he’s going.

I can't stop thinking about what he said to me during the test. I know it wasn't really him but is it true? I know how I feel about Jayden, but is it obvious to everyone but me how he really feels? Was the test playing on my insecurities about my relationship with him?

"Thaddeus," a voice booms as we round a corner. "It's been a long time, little brother."

The tall broad man claps Thad on the back in one of those weird bro hugs before turning to the rest of us.

"Cal, these are my friends." Thad waves at us.

"This is who the gods have asked to save us all? You're all a bunch of kids." Cal frowns.

"We're not kids." I glare.

I'm in no mood for bullshit today. I just need to get on the boat and get out of here, the faster the better.

"Sorry, daughter of Zeus. I didn't mean anything by it," Cal says.

"She doesn't like being called that. Her name is Beth," Thad corrects him.

"Apologies, Beth." He winks at me.

Jayden steps closer to me and narrows his eyes on the older demigod. Him and his jealous bullshit are not welcome here today. I let a tiny spark of electricity out and zap his arm. Jayden turns to me, his eyes filled with heat. Fuck. I can't even punish him properly because he likes my sparks.

"No worries. Can we go now? We're on a bit of a time crunch. The academy doesn't have long before they are going to have to evacuate." I bite my lip.

"When was the last time you talked to them?" Raven asks.

"Last... no, wait, two nights ago. They're in trouble. Claud is holding down the volcano the best he can but it's going to blow and soon if we don't get the trident back."

"Then let's go," Cal says.

He waves us all onto the crab boat. I shudder as I remember the last crab I

encountered. I don't think I'll ever be able to eat crab again which is a shame because I really liked it before.

"Boats have been going missing through the strait which happens from time to time, but it's happened every time in the last week. The Coast Guard found a lone survivor blabbering on about something he couldn't see just snatching up his buddy from right next to him," Cal says.

"Fuck. Is there no other way around this?" I ask.

Cal shakes his head. "I was told you all would have to go this way."

"What is it, B?" Raven asks.

"If my suspicions are correct, the two monsters I really didn't want to face." I rub my eyes.

Why them? Why can't we deal with anything but the two monsters that no demigod ever actually killed. Jason got past them but at the cost of some of his men. I won't risk my friends or let them get caught up with those creatures.

"You don't think..." Jayden pales.

"Yup, it's too dangerous for you guys. I'll go on my own."

"The fuck you will," Jayden barks.

"No fucking way." Raven crosses her arms. "We do this together. I'm the daughter of fucking Ares."

"And slayer of ugly fucking monsters, yeah, we know." Greyson pulls Raven into his arms.

"If it is what I think it is, there's no way to slay these beasts. No one ever has," I argue. "I would rather you guys be safe."

"No way," Thad says, shaking his head. "I have to help you until the end. You don't have power over the sea like I do."

Fuck. They aren't going to get off the damn boat. Thad's right though. I'm basically powerless in the sea since my magic doesn't mix with water. I eye my friends warily, but they all have matching expressions that say not a fucking chance. I sigh.

“Fine,” I say. “Let’s get this over with.”

“It’s about a three-hour trip to Vancouver and an hour to the strait. You all can go below deck and I’ll call for you when we get to the big bad.” Cal points to the stairs behind him.

Jayden grasps my hand and leads me down the stairs to the cabin below deck. He pulls me through an open door into a storage room. His lips crash down on mine as he shuts the door with his foot and pushes me against the wall.

“The next time you suggest that I leave you alone on a mission, I’m going to chain you to my bed and edge you until you’re crying and begging for me to stop. Understand? I’m not fucking leaving you, ever.”

“Jayden,” I whisper.

“The next words from your mouth better be *I understand* or I’ll give you a taste of that right here,” Jayden snarls.

Black is bleeding into the blue of his irises as he loses what little control he has on his shadows. They pulse and writhe up his arms.

“I understand,” I gasp just before he smashes his lips to mine again.

“I searched for you for an entire day, baby. I did nothing for an entire day but scour the entire coast of Seattle. Even with the waves crashing like thunder.”

“I’m here now, Jayden. I need you guys to be safe though, and being around me obviously isn’t safe for any of you.”

Jayden cups my cheeks. “I already told you I would die for you. I would burn the world to the ground if it meant you were safe.”

“We’re trying to save the world, not destroy it,” I whisper.

“I don’t care about the world. I’m a selfish asshole. I’m only here because you are. You care about the world and have this need to save it, but I just want to save you.” Jayden kisses me again and I open for him, letting our tongues battle together.

I pour everything into this kiss. Every emotion I’m not ready to name and

he does the same. It's a claiming kiss. My body heats up as I grip his T-shirt and pull him closer to me. Jayden presses me harder into the door, his hips pressed against mine, and the bulge in his jeans rubs my thigh.

"Jayden," I whisper against his lips. "We can't do this here."

"We can if you can be quiet. Can you be quiet for me, baby?" He kisses and licks down the column of my throat.

Jayden's hand pushes inside my jeans and panties and he growls at the wetness he finds as he circles my clit with his thumb.

"Jayden," I say and he nips my neck.

"That's not being quiet," he growls against my throat.

"We shouldn't be doing this here," I say but my hands dig into his back, pulling him closer.

"I need you. Right fucking now, baby. I was terrified when you disappeared right out of my fucking sight—just gone. I need to feel you."

I'm already close between his words and his deft fingers circling me. I'm climbing to the peak. Maybe it's the forbidden that has me pulling him closer and sliding my hands beneath his shirt to trail my fingers over his rock-hard abs. Someone could walk in at any moment and that just ratchets up the excitement.

"I'm right here, Jayden," I say, breathless.

Jayden pops the button on my jeans and pushes them down my thighs before spinning me around so I'm pressed against the door.

"You're so fucking perfect," he whispers and kisses the back of my thighs.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"I'm worshipping my goddess," he says.

His tongue runs up my entrance and a heady moan escapes my lips.

"Shhh. I told you to be quiet. You don't want them to hear us, do you?" Jayden asks before sucking my clit into his mouth.

Fuck. This asshole is torturing me. How the hell am I supposed to be

quiet when he does that? A whimper escapes and Jayden stops. He laps at my pussy in slow, languid strokes, edging me just enough to drive me insane.

Jayden pushes two fingers inside me and curls them just right before pulling back out and repeating the motion. He circles my clit with his tongue before sucking into his mouth again, and I bite my lip to keep from moaning.

If I make a noise, he will stop. So I remain silent and take in the pleasure. My spine tingles and black spots dot my vision as my orgasm erupts through my veins. Jayden stops and pulls me close before clamping a hand over my mouth to muffle the scream.

There's a knock on the door and my eyes widen as the handle jiggles. "B, are you in there?"

Fucking Raven. She's being a cock-block right now.

"We're talking. Give us a minute," Jayden snaps.

"We don't have a minute. We're coming up on the strait and we need a game plan," Raven yells.

"Fuck," I whisper.

I glance at Jayden as he adjusts himself in his jeans.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

"Don't be." He kisses my lips. "I got to worship you the way you deserve. That's all I wanted."

"C'mon, guys, enough of that lovey shit. We have a world to save," Raven shouts.

"Fuck off, Raven. We're coming," Jayden shouts.

"That was TMI, Jayden," Raven says.

"You think you're so funny," Jayden says.

"I know I'm funny." Raven laughs.

Jayden pulls my jeans back up my thighs and buttons them for me before standing and placing a kiss on my neck. "When we get back to the academy, you're mine for a whole night and maybe half the day."

"Deal." I run a hand up his chest.

It's a deal I have no problems making because we will make it back to the academy. All of us. The academy will be safe and we can have a little bit of peace.

If the monsters will allow it and we can stop whoever is after the gods before all hades breaks loose. Until then we have another trial and very few have encountered these two monsters and lived to tell about it. I just hope we can make that very short list.

“**T**hat’s the strait?” I ask as we come up to a narrow passage big enough for one large ship or several small fishing boats.

“Yes,” Cal says. “It’s narrow but if we skip through the middle, we should be all right.”

“No, Jason was going to try the same, but Charybdis is on the other side making the thing practically impassable,” I say.

“How did Jason get through?” Jayden asks.

“It’s not an option. I won’t sacrifice people to get passage.” I shake my head.

Not a fucking chance in hades of that happening. We’ll find another way.

“What about the whirlpool?” Thad says. “There’s a goddess that was so terrible, they chained her to the sea floor, right? Maybe I could go distract her long enough that the boat can pass by to safety.”

“I don’t know, Thad. That’s risky even for a sea demigod.” I wring my hands together.

“We still have Scylla on the other side of the strait,” Jayden says.

“If we are close enough to where Charybdis is supposed to be, Scylla won’t be able to reach us,” Thad says.

“I still don’t know.” I lean forward and glance at the map. “Do we even know where they are in this strait?”

“If we are going by the stories, then they will probably be here.” Raven points to the spot where the two sides of the strait are closest to each other.

“Yeah, that makes sense. Scylla will be on this side.” I point to the left island. “She inhabits her own island and is a giant crab-like creature.”

Fucking crabs. Just like fucking snakes and lions. It’s all bullshit.

“I think I’m our best chance of escape,” Thad says again.

“We’re driving into the strait,” Greyson says from his spot looking out the porthole. “We probably have about ten minutes before we need a solid plan.”

“I say we take our chances with Scylla. I can use my lightning to keep her at bay.” I tap my fingers on the worn table.

“She’s fast, B. What if we don’t even see her before she snaps at us?” Raven asks.

“We don’t have any other good options.”

“Yes, we do,” Thad says. “I can do this.”

“What if she turns on you and no one is there to help you?” I ask, throwing up my hands.

“I’ll be fine. I’m the son of Poseidon. I can swim fast.”

“Faster than a giant whirlpool?” I raise a brow at him.

“Probably, but it will get you guys and the boat safe passage and I’ll meet you on the other side of the strait.” Thad grins.

I don’t like it but he has a point. With Charybdis out of the way, we won’t be close enough for Scylla to attack. We could be the first to get through the strait between the two sea monsters in all of history, not like I’m going to brag about it or anything, but maybe we can all get through this together.

“Fine. You have five minutes to distract her not a minute more. If you can’t get the whirlpool to stop, we are changing course and going closer to Scylla.” I glance at everyone.

They all nod and stand as we prepare for some of the scariest monsters in the sea. We can’t defeat them. No demigod ever has. I hope getting past them

will be enough to get rid of them. Like the boar. We just had to chain it to defeat it. Just like Heracles did.

We're banking on this being the same concept as the boar and the fountain of Apollo. Once the magic is gone, they will be gone as well.

We trudge up the stairs to the deck and I lean on the ledge on my elbows. There are land masses on either side of the boat and if the sun was out, they would be blotting it out.

The water is murky but I dare not search its depths. Are there bodies down there of the people that the beasts killed? What about the wreckage of all those ships that the creatures terrorized?

I glance away from it, staring as we get closer to the midpoint of the strait.

"What is that?" Cal calls from the captain's chair.

We race to the front of the boat and Cal points to the swirling water. The whirlpool is fucking huge and takes up a third of the sea here.

"That would be Charybdis. It's go time, Thad." I clap him on the shoulder.

Thad winks at me as he rips his shirt over his head and tosses it on the deck. "I'll see you on the other side, guys."

Thad dives in the water and my heart skips. My stomach does a somersault as we wait to see what will happen. Will Thad be able to distract the goddess under the waves long enough to let us past or did we just send him to his doom?

"I hope he knows what he's doing," Jayden says.

He props his chin on my shoulder and we wait.

Two minutes go by, then three and four. There's no sign of Thad anywhere. The whirlpool is exactly the same the entire five minutes. Fuck, we have to take our chances with the crab bitch. Great.

"Change course," I say to Cal.

"Wait, just give him one more minute. That kid can do anything he sets

his mind on.” Cal doesn’t take his gaze away from the churning whirlpool.

“C’mon, Thad. If anyone can do this, it’s you,” Jayden whispers close to my ear.

I turn to Jayden in surprise. “You have a very different opinion of him now, then you did before.”

“The guy is growing on me. He just needs to keep his hands off my girl.” Jayden squeezes me.

“Good because your girl only wants you.” I grin.

I turn back to the whirlpool and sigh. It’s still there. We can’t wait any longer. We have to try our hand with Scylla. Shit.

“Change course. We have to go closer to Scylla.” I hang my head.

“Are you sure you can’t wait just a few more minutes? Thaddeus won’t fail,” Cal says.

“We need to hurry. I hope Thad is okay but we still need to hurry.” I run a hand down my face.

“Okay,” Cal says and glances at the whirlpool again. “I have never seen that kid fail.”

“Change course and if you see the whirlpool disappear, we can always head back that direction,” Jayden says.

I nibble my lip, worried for Thad and for the rest of us. We are fighting monsters that were never actually defeated in ancient history. Craggy rocks dot the cliffside, and something scuttles along the top of the cave, the clacking sound of claws meeting my ears just before a pincer comes down toward Jayden.

I lift my hands and white-hot electricity pours from my fingertips as another pincer races toward Raven. She has her ax in her hand in a second, hacking at it once before it retracts and a guttural roar shakes the foundation of the island.

“I got it,” Raven whoops and pumps her fist.

“Raven,” Greyson howls as he shoves her out of the way, but the pincer

grabs him by the shirt to pull him out of the boat.

“Greyson,” Raven bellows. “Shift.”

Greyson shifts into his huge gray wolf and slips out of the shirt. He crashes into the deck with a thud and a whine, but there’s no time to see if he’s injured as another claw attempts to strike. I blast it with lightning as fast as I can, but I’m shoved to the ground as a pincer snaps at my head.

“Fuck,” I whisper. “That almost got me.”

“You’re welcome.” Jayden kisses my neck, then helps me to my feet.

Jayden twists me around until we are back to back, both with our weapons out. I touch my lightning bolt and my whip unfurls in my hand. Electricity arcs off it as I snap it at a pincer and an agonized wail rumbles the cliffs.

“If she keeps making noises like that, she’s gonna cause a damn rockslide,” I grumble.

“We’ll have to be careful not to get too close,” Jayden says as shadows coat his sword.

“We’re already too close and if we move farther away, we’ll get sucked into the whirlpool.” I flick my whip at a pincer.

“Not if Thad would hurry his ass up and distract Charybdis,” Jayden groans.

Raven slashes at a pincer with her ax and cuts it in half. “Ha! Take that bitch.”

Charybdis wails again and a huge boulder knocks loose from the cliff. It tumbles and other rocks and debris tumble from the cliffside, splashing into the water just as I flick my whip at another pincer. Water sprays the boat and Jayden dives for me, ripping the whip from my hand at the same time the water hits us.

I crash to the deck of the boat and Jayden lands on top of me. His whole body is twitching.

“Jayden? Jayden,” I scream. “Raven, cover us.”

I roll Jayden off me and his eyes are closed. His left hand is black where he grabbed the whip from me.

“Jayden, oh, no, no, no. You stupid demigod. Wake up.” I slap his cheek but he continues to twitch as the electricity rolls through him. “Adrian. We need a healer.”

Fuck, why did he touch the whip in my hand? How could he do this? He sent a million volts of electricity through his body as we were sprayed with water.

“Adrian,” I yell again.

“Beth, he’s been electrocuted. I can’t help here. I honestly don’t know how you’re touching him right now. He’s still sizzling with power.”

“No, you have to help him. I’m not a healer. I can’t heal and I can’t lose him. Adrian, please,” I beg.

“Beth,” Cal snaps at me. “Do you want our healer to be electrocuted too?”

“No, but Jayden. I need him.” My body glows with that godly aura again and Cal’s eyes widen.

I have to do something. I can’t let Jayden die. I won’t survive this without him. I grip his shirt with glowing gold hands and lean over, kissing Jayden hard. I pour everything I am into the kiss, but nothing happens.

“Hades,” I scream. “You can’t fucking have him.”

“Beth, you need to calm down.” Adrian sits beside me, careful not to touch Jayden.

“Calm down?” I scoff. “You want me to fucking calm down, Adrian? He is *mine* and Hades can’t fucking have him. I’ll steal him back from the underworld myself if I have to.”

“That would be ill advised.” Persephone pops onto the boat out of nowhere.

“I don’t care,” I growl.

“Bethany, Jayden isn’t dying. It’s not his time and while you were here

throwing this tantrum, your friend cleared a safe path for you.” She points across the strait.

“Fuck, fall back. Thad did it.” I yell to Cal who whoops.

I can’t bring myself to feel the same with Jayden still twitching in my arms and Raven and Greyson fighting Scylla. All I can think of, all I can see is beautiful Jayden, my rock, my voice of reason, lying on the wood of the deck, twitching because he saved my life.

“Silly boy should have known that a little electricity wouldn’t kill a budding goddess.” Persephone *tsks*.

“Budding goddess?” I repeat the words slowly. “What are you talking about?”

“All four of you are turning. You’re just turning the fastest. I mean, of course you are. You’re the daughter of Zeus.” She giggles.

“How do I help him?” I ask.

“Do you have the elixir? The ambrosia mixture the healer gave you?” she asks.

Raven rushes to me, tossing me the pack. I catch it in one hand and rummage through it, finding the bottle and the dropper.

“Three drops,” I whisper.

My hands shake as I try to open the bottle and put the dropper inside. My heart beats thunder in my ears as I pray that it’s not too late to save him.

“Bethany.” Persephone lays a hand on my arm. “He’s going to need more than three drops. He’s turning like you did.”

“What? The healer said we should never take more than three.” I shake my head.

She’s distracting me. Jayden needs this, now. Is she stalling because Hades wants his son in the underworld at his side full-time? I won’t fucking allow it.

“He’s turning into a god. The healer said not for demigods, but gods live off ambrosia. You need it.” Persephone takes the dropper from me and

empties the entire thing in Jayden's mouth before I can stop her.

"Fuck. What?" I ask but Jayden groans and his skin glows gold.

"What happened?" Jayden mumbles.

"Oh my gods." I lunge for him, throwing my body over his and kissing his face. "Don't you ever fucking do that to me again."

"Baby, what's wrong? Are you okay?" Jayden grips my arms, concern tinting his features.

I brush the tears away hastily and poke him in the chest. "You could have fucking died. What were you thinking?"

Jayden grabs my hand, holding it to his heart. "The Minotaur was one of the scariest days of my life and you were about to do it again. Only this time, I was there to stop it from happening and I did."

"At the possible expense of your own life? Fuck, Jayden. You can't do that again." I shake my head and the stupid tears fall again.

"I told you I would die for you." Jayden stares up at me with so much adoration it almost hurts to look at him.

"Well," Persephone cuts in. "Fortunately for you two. The possibilities of that happening are much slimmer than they were before you turned."

"What do you mean, turned?" Jayden asks. "Don't tell me we're vampires now or something, Persephone."

Jayden sits up and wraps his arms around me as a booming laugh escapes Persephone. "Not at all. You were demigods and then gods touched and now you're little baby gods. I'm so proud of your bravery, Jayden, but if you do anything like that to me or Bethany again, I will throw you in Tartarus for a day."

Persephone pats Jayden's cheek a little too hard and then blinks away.

"What the fuck just happened?" Jayden groans and rests his head against my shoulder.

A roar of anger from Scylla reaches my ears, interrupting my words, and I turn to see her island crumble to dust.

“We got past Scylla but what about Charybdis?” I stand and scan the calm waters of the strait.

“Thad did it,” Raven shouts. “They are both gone.”

“Are you sure?” I ask, leaning over the edge.

“Do you see the bitch anywhere?” Raven spreads her arms wide.

“Let’s not test fate. We need to get through the strait and meet with Thad.” Jayden pulls me to him.

His skin is glowing with a gold sheen like mine. How is this even possible? How are we turning into gods ourselves? It shouldn’t be possible.

The boat’s engine roars as Cal pushes the throttle, going full speed ahead past where the swirling whirlpool was only minutes ago. Water rushes and splashes along the sides. I hold on to Jayden like a lifeline. That had scared the life out of me.

“I may have yelled at Hades and told him he couldn’t have you,” I say to Jayden.

Jayden chuckles. “Is that why Persephone showed up?”

“Probably. I said I would come steal you from the underworld, Orpheus style. Your stepmom was not impressed by my hysterics.” I lay my head on his shoulder.

Open water greets us at the end of the strait as the boat slows to a halt. I scan the ocean for any sign of Thad, sure that he’ll surface from the water at any moment.

Thad doesn’t surface and I chew my lip. “Where is he? He has to be okay, Jayden. Fuck, I knew this plan was stupid.”

“Calm down. He could just be farther out to sea. We’ll find him.” Jayden pulls me against his chest.

“I know it wasn’t real and Thad wasn’t actually there, but he protected me during that test. He was a good friend to me when my heart was breaking. We can’t lose him, Jayden.” I lean over the railing, searching for any sign of Thad.

A small head pops out of the water by me with a trill of excitement. The blue and green hippocampus from days ago lunged for my hand.

“Hey there.” I hold my hand out for the creature. “Do you know where Thad is?”

The hippocampus nods and bumps his head into my hand.

The island. You need to find him on the island. Hurry.

“What island?” I ask.

The island of the lost things.

“What the hell is the island of the lost things?” I turn to Cal, hoping he’ll know but he shakes his head.

“Can you show me this island?” I ask the hippocampus.

There’s another trill and the hippocampus nods as he darts into the sea. “Follow him. He’s going to take us to the island. He made it sound like Thad is in trouble there. We need to go fast.”

“I’ll go as fast as I can for my baby brother,” Cal growls and I smile at his words.

That’s what a sibling should sound like. Maybe Thad doesn’t have it so bad after all in the family department.

The hippocampus takes off like a shot and Cal guns the engine into the open waters beyond. Hang on, Thad.

We’re coming for you on the island of lost things. Maybe there’s a way we can find the trident and save our friend as long as we don’t die in the process.

“Is it safe to drive this fast?” Jayden yells over the roar of the engine.

“I don’t think Cal would risk us all dying and losing his boat,” I say, patting Jayden on the shoulder. “The hippocampus said that Thad is on the island of lost things. I have no idea what that is, but I’m hoping the trident is there too since it’s lost.”

“That would be convenient to say the least,” Jayden says.

“Don’t dash my hopes. We need to be done with this damn mission and save the academy.” I cross my arms over my chest.

“I’m sorry, baby. I know. The academy needs us. The world needs us, but do you really think the trident is there?” Jayden pulls me into his arms.

“There’s only one way to find out.” I point to an island not far from us. It’s too tropical to belong in Canada but that’s more of the same for this mission.

Nothing has been what it seems. I still want to kill Nereus for his part in the lotus eaters test. I hate it.

The boat slows and the hippocampus trills in the water, bouncing his head up and down in the water. That’s the island we’re meant to go to. That’s where Thad is. How he got there, I don’t know, but that’s where we will find our friend.

“Let’s go.” I hop over the railing and drop down into the water.

I'm tired of waiting. The water only goes to my knees and at this point I've been cold for what feels like forever so a little cold water isn't going to make things worse. The others follow behind me, weapons at the ready as we wade through the water to the tropical island.

"Be on guard. Someone else besides Thad is here." I glance over my shoulder at Raven, Greyson, and Adrian.

They all have grim expressions on their faces as I step onto the white sand beach. No one comes out to greet us or fight us.

"What is that?" Raven asks.

She crouches down to pick up some trinket and I cock my head to the side. What is that? I crouch next to her to examine the locket in her hand, but when she tries to open it the thing is jammed.

"The hippocampus called this the island of lost things so maybe when people lose things, they end up here?" I ask.

"It makes sense. I just didn't realize that people could be lost things," Raven grumbles.

"Thad wasn't lost. He was taken and we're getting him back."

Jayden puts a hand on my shoulder. "I don't think we should be touching the lost things."

"He's right, the thought of touching them is giving me major red warning flags." I nod to Raven.

That's someone's personal property and not ours to take or touch. Just because it ended up on this island doesn't mean we have the right to touch it.

"Let's keep moving. We need to get Thad and get out of here." Jayden helps me to stand.

"Agreed. We need to get Thad and find the trident so we can go home." I sigh.

We trudge across the beach, coming across different trinkets and things in our journey. They litter the sand and rocks.

"This is kind of creepy," Raven whispers.

“There are so many things here that have been lost, it’s unreal.” I step over a teddy bear that has one eye.

Adrian frowns at the bear. “So many memories here, lost and forgotten. It’s sad, really.”

“It is, but that’s human nature,” Jayden says, placing a hand on my lower back. “Always have to move on, move forward, and do their best to forget the past.”

We shuffle into the forest and the trees blot out the sun. It’s even creepier in here with shoes and stuffed animals hanging from tree branches above our heads like at any second they’re going to come to live and attack us from above.

“This place isn’t in our ancient history book,” Raven whispers.

“No, I never heard of it until the hippocampus said this was where Thad was.” I shake my head.

“How are we supposed to find him, though? This island is a lot bigger than the others we were on and he was basically our compass.” Raven grips her ax tighter.

Is she itching for another fight already or is the unease that’s making my stomach turn affecting her too? There’s something about this place that’s just wrong. I don’t like it. My gut’s telling me I need to leave, that if I stay here too long something terrible will happen.

My skin shimmers with gold as we pick through the trees and underbrush. “Have you guys heard a single animal? A bird or anything?”

“No,” Jayden says. “That’s strange. Other than our footsteps and voices, it’s eerily silent here.”

I turn to Greyson with a raised brow. “What about your enhanced hearing?”

“I hear a stream not far off but no animals or birds. My wolf doesn’t sense anything either.” He sniffs the air and nearly gags. “This doesn’t smell like a tropical island. It smells of rot and decay.”

I straighten my spine at his words. Is that the sense of unease I'm feeling? Is everything here rotting until it's no longer a part of the world at all? Will that happen to us if we stay too long? Fuck. We need to hurry.

I pick up my pace but stumble over a tree root that I'm sure wasn't there a second ago. A giggle meets my ears and I turn my glare on Raven.

"You think this is funny?" I ask.

"What? That wasn't me." Raven scans the forest. "Fucking dryads."

"Wait, be nice. If there are dryads here, maybe they can help us," I say.

"Or they could lead us to our doom," Raven mumbles.

"I tend to like the second option," a high-pitched voice says from behind a tree.

"Is that why you tripped me?" I ask.

"Maybe." The green girl steps out from behind the tree. "Or maybe my mistress just doesn't want you on her island."

"Mistress? There's someone living here?" I ask, shocked.

"Of course there is and she doesn't like nosy demigods sniffing around her treasures." The dryad taps her foot impatiently.

"We don't want her treasures. We're looking for a friend." I hold my hands up in surrender.

"The boy? That's her newest treasure. It's been a long time since we trapped a sea demigod. A long, long time." She grins.

What the fuck? Who is this mistress of hers and what does she want with Thad?

"Look." Jayden takes a step toward the girl. "We just want our friend, and then we'll leave. We won't tell anyone what we found here and leave the island in peace."

"Ohhh, what kind of demigod are you? The mistress will like you very much," the girl says, ignoring him.

I step in front of Jayden and grip my sword. I don't give a fuck if she's a damn tree spirit, I will cut her down if she thinks she can look at Jayden that

way.

“Your mistress won’t fucking touch him,” I growl.

“B, you’re turning gold again.” Raven elbows my side.

“I haven’t learned to control that yet. Shut it.” I never take my gaze off the dryad that’s still eyeing Jayden like a piece of meat.

“Girl. I would keep my eyes to myself before Beth cuts them out of your head,” Raven says. “Tree spirits don’t need eyes, do they?”

“Nope.”

“Everyone, calm down. We at least know Thad really is here and that someone is holding him hostage. She knows where this person is and maybe she can help us find the place,” Jayden says, smiling.

“You want me to help you? No, no, no, the mistress wouldn’t approve.” The dryad shakes her head.

“You could bring us to her like an offering,” I suggest. “A way to show her you are on her side. You don’t know what we are up to.”

“Nasty demigods,” she screams and vanishes into her tree.

A branch smacks me in the back and I glance up at a noise above my head. The trees are swaying, forcing the stuffed animals into a macabre dance above our heads.

“Oh, fuck no. I’m out.” I take a step and nearly face-plant again.

This bitch is testing my last nerve. I hang on to Jayden’s arm as I step around the fucking root she put in front of me and watch the ground so I don’t have it happen again.

“Watch out,” Raven yells and grabs me just as a branch is about to hit me in the face.

“I didn’t even do anything to you, evil little tree spirit,” I shout at the sky.

That evil little giggle sounds behind me again and I growl. We just need to find this mistress and get Thad so we can get to the trident.

“I hear something,” Greyson says and puts a finger to his lips. “On the other side of those trees is a house. There’s meat roasting on a fire. I can

smell it.”

My stomach rumbles at his words. Fuck. How long has it been since I’ve eaten? I can’t even remember. The granola bar the other night on Echidna’s island, I think.

“We are eating everything when we finish this mission,” I grumble. “Why do we always end up starving?”

“C’mon,” Greyson says. “It’s this way.”

“Are you saying we just follow your nose?” I laugh.

“I’m an expert tracker, Beth.” Greyson grins.

“Then why didn’t you lead with that and track Thad?” I ask.

“I can’t scent him anywhere. He’s either drowned out the scent from being in the ocean or there’s no trail because he was transported here.” Greyson shrugs.

“But only the gods can transport people. What are we dealing with here?”

“Either the person on this island is a god or they are working with a god,” Raven groans.

“That is not good fucking news, guys. You think it could be Triton?”

“The dryad said mistress, so it has to be a woman.” Raven stomps on a tree root.

“You’re just gonna piss the dryad off more by doing that,” I point out.

“She tried to take your head off, B.” Raven raises a brow.

“Shhh. We’re almost there,” Greyson says.

We pick through the rest of the forest until we come to a run-down old house. There’s no way a goddess is living in that shack. Who the fuck are we dealing with here? I step closer and find more stuffed animals and trinkets hanging from the patio in front of a busted door.

“This is some seriously creepy shit,” I whisper to Raven.

“We need to go in there, though.” Raven steps on a twig and it snaps. “Fuck.”

“Who’s there?” a woman’s voice calls from inside.

I grip my lightning bolt and call my whip to me. It unfurls in my hand as a blond woman steps out of the broken door. Power sings through her but not the same as the gods. What the fuck is she? Is she a sorceress? Could this be Medea? We never found her at the battle at Ares' temple.

"Who are you and what have you done with our friend?" I ask.

"Ahhh, my newest guests have finally arrived. I'm so glad you've come. You must sit and eat with me." She waves us forward but none of us move.

This is not Medea and I have learned enough from ancient history to know better than to take food from anyone. Nope. Too much bad shit can happen.

"We aren't here for food. We just want our friend back and we'll be on our way." I shake my head.

"You can't go. Why would you want to leave? I can sense that you're all starving from your long journey. Sit and eat with me, and then we'll talk about your friend." She waves us forward.

"No, show us our friend first and we might sit and eat." I grip my whip, hoping I don't need to use it.

The woman seems lonely but the façade could be fake. I'm not taking any chances. The mission is too important. We need to get Thad and the trident and get back to the academy.

"You shun my hospitality when you arrived uninvited on my island?" she shrieks.

"You stole our friend and are hiding him on this island. Of course we came looking and we want him back." I raise my sword.

"Hera told me I could keep him and you're not taking him from me," she yells.

"Excuse me? What does she have to do with this?" I ask, taking a threatening step forward.

The woman just laughs. She's batshit crazy but she has some kind of magic. What does Hera have to do with this psycho taking Thad? Why would

Hera even give a shit about the sea demigod? It doesn't make any sense, unless... the crab.

"We've had this all wrong from the beginning, guys. It's not some outside entity trying to destroy all the gods. It's Hera trying to start a civil war." I widen my eyes at Jayden.

"Fuck, how in hades did we miss that? The monsters all always seem to come after you. The Hesperides said someone wanted you dead and they are servants of Hera. Fucking Cancer." Jayden runs a hand through his hair.

"This is fucked up, B," Raven says.

"I know. What the fuck are we going to do in a civil war among the gods?" I ask.

"Nothing." The woman giggles. "You will be here on the island far away from all the bloodshed."

"Not a chance in hades of that happening," I snarl.

"You must. Hera said she would release me from my prison if I kept you here until Poseidon lost all his power. It won't be long now."

"Who the fuck are you?" I ask.

White-hot electricity flows through my whip as I stare the woman down. She hasn't threatened us, but if this is her prison from the gods, I'm guessing she's been alone here a long fucking time. No wonder she's fucking crazy.

"Calypso. I'm sure you heard of me. My father was a general in the Titan war. I wasn't a part of that, but Zeus still punished me." She pouts. "I hate Zeus."

My shoulders stiffen. No wonder her power felt different. She's the daughter of a Titan? Fuck. I glance at Raven with wide eyes. We need to figure out where Thad is and get off this fucking island.

"We could leave and go find the trident and come back for him," Raven whispers.

"No," Jayden says. "If it's anything like the others, we need him to retrieve the trident."

“It’s rude to whisper,” Calypso says.

I ignore the crazy chick and scan the area, hoping I can come up with a plan. Wait, where are Adrian and Greyson? I turn a glance behind me, but they’re nowhere to be found. I glance at Jayden and widen my eyes, but he shakes his head.

Did he know about this? Are they using us as a distraction? What the fuck? Why didn’t anyone tell me about this?

“Do you know Hera’s plans?” I ask. “Oh wait, no, you couldn’t possibly know her plans. You’re all alone on this island for millennia. I’m sure she has other more useful minions to tell her secrets to.”

“You’re a nasty little demigod. Hera told me all about the bastard daughter of Zeus and that you’re just as awful as your father.”

“See, she doesn’t know anything. Let’s go, guys.” I turn my back on her, pretending like I’m going to leave.

“I know you have a spy at your precious academy.” She laughs.

“That’s nothing new. We’ve suspected that for weeks.” I shrug.

She really is that dumb or maybe she’s just so starved for conversation she’ll say anything to get us to stay.

“I know who stole the trident and where it’s being held. It’s right under your noses, but you’ll never find it,” she sings.

“My bet is on Triton. The bastard that left us on an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.”

“Wrong, wrong, wrong. He had a part to play all of his own, but his mother stole the trident right from under the sea gods’ nose,” she says.

“Are they all just a bunch of conniving bastards?” I throw my hands up, my whip flicking out and zapping into some kind of ward.

The air sizzles around it and the scent of brine and sea water hits me. A rustling in the bushes catches my attention and I turn to find Adrian and Greyson sauntering up with Thad right between them.

“Thad, thank fates. I think the trident is here.” I point to the shield around

the house.

“No,” Calypso screams. “How did you escape?”

She holds up her hands and energy flies from her palms. The wave hits me and I fly back into a tree. What is that? I’ve never seen power like that before. It’s invisible and just shock waves through the air.

Pain skates down my back as I slump to the ground. The bark of the tree scrapes at my skin. How are we supposed to get to the trident when this bitch has magic we can’t see? I groan and turn. Jayden is slumped a few feet away from me. He shakes his head and rolls his body across the ground and jumps to his feet.

I get up slowly and as soon as I’m on my feet, I’m blasted right into Jayden, and we go back down.

“If you won’t stay willingly, I’ll just have to kill you. Hera will reward me for your destruction.” Calypso cackles.

Fuck, we’re so screwed.

“**A**re you okay?” Jayden grips my arms.

“I landed on you and you’re asking me that?” I shake my head.

“You can land on me anytime, baby.” Jayden grins.

“So not the time, Jayden,” I scoff. “Can you use your shadow chains on her? At least to stop the crazy magic.”

“I don’t know if it will get through the shield.”

I roll off him but stay on the ground. “Can you try? We need to keep her distracted so Thad can get through his dad’s magic.”

Jayden lifts his head off the ground and raises his hands. The shadows writhe and a golden glow coats his skin. Jayden grunts as he shoots the chains at Calypso. They wrap around her wrists and the crazy Titan hisses as they glow gold.

“That’s new.” I jump to my feet. “Thad, go. Inside.”

Thad races to the dilapidated house and through the wards. The magic falls away instantly and Calypso screams, breaking the shadow chains.

“What in hades?” I say as I call the shield of shadows.

Calypso sends more shock waves of power at Raven and Greyson even through the chains that Jayden has tightened around her wrists.

“It’s not working. She can still use her magic,” I call to Jayden.

His eyes turn black as he loses control of the shadows. Fuck, is this going

to be a problem?

“You’re not strong enough to stop me,” Calypso sings.

She attempts to break the chains, but Jayden grunts and doubles his magic. Shadows pool around him, spreading out in an inky blackness that spells trouble for his enemies. Calypso continues to taunt him, and I send a bolt of electricity at her but she ducks out of the way.

The bolt hits a tree behind her and smoke billows up as flames lick at the wood and climb to the branches.

Where Calypso’s house was now sits a cave. Magic crackles along the entrance. All that can be seen of the cave is sea green magic that smells of brine and salt water. That isn’t where we can see him so he must be inside the cave searching for the trident.

Calypso screams and blasts her weird magic at me but it bounces off the shadow shield that’s a shimmering gold and hits her full force.

“You’re not demigods at all, are you? You’re little goslings now. You’re still no match for me.”

“What about me? Am I a match for you, Calypso?” a gruff male voice calls from behind her and she spins.

Green magic coils around her body, pinning her hands to her sides. The man steps forward with a sneer.

“Lord Poseidon, I-I’m s-sorry.” Calypso hangs her head.

“You think saying you’re sorry will save you from my wrath, Calypso?” Poseidon laughs.

“No,” she whimpers.

“Poseidon, it’s Hera, we have to warn my father and the other gods,” I say.

“Hera is behind all this? That crazy conniving goddess,” Poseidon growls. “I was accused of her crimes while she sat back and laughed. This will not stand.”

Poseidon tightens his magic around Calypso until she gasps and another

god pops into existence next to me. Artemis.

“Good job, kid. Where’s the trident?” Artemis bumps her shoulder with mine.

“Thad went in the cave after it. We can’t go in because it’s Poseidon’s power.” I nod to the cave.

“Artemis, we need to warn my brother of the dangers to come if his wife continues on this dangerous path,” Poseidon scowls.

“What?” Artemis asks. “Which brother?”

“Zeus,” I say. “Hera must have finally cracked when she found out he had another demigod. She’s behind it all. She’s been trying to kill me from the beginning.”

“Your demigod will never get the trident. There are traps inside that cave,” Calypso sings.

“Thaddeus is the strongest of all my sons. He won’t fail.” Poseidon shakes her.

A rumble shakes the ground as Calypso struggles against Poseidon. I stumble to the side into Jayden as debris falls at the cave mouth.

“Excuse me,” Artemis says, waving her hand at us. “Can we get back to the part where my mother is starting a fucking war, please?”

“Ask Calypso. She had no problem telling us all the secrets. Like Poseidon, Amphitrite stole your trident and Triton helped in his own way, stranding us on the island with the constellation Cancer.” I cross my arms.

“Is this true?” Poseidon snarls in Calypso’s face.

“Yes, my lord,” she whispers.

“My family has betrayed me?” Poseidon growls.

“I wonder how many of the Olympians have already started choosing sides?” I ask.

“Athena,” Artemis says. “Fuck. She’s the one who started blaming Poseidon from the beginning.”

“I bet she’s in on it.” I shake my head.

“Shit,” Jayden says. “The oracle has been dodgy too. You don’t think Apollo is in on this too, do you? That could be why no one can see them.”

“My brother is a momma’s boy. He would definitely be on her side.” Artemis clenches her fist and glances at Adrian. “Sorry.”

“No problem. I’m not my father. Just because he chooses Hera doesn’t mean I have to.” Adrian shrugs.

“Medea helped her with the theft of Ares’ shield so I’m betting Ares won’t take her side.” I tap my index finger to my lip.

“My father and Persephone never cared for Hera. Plus, they like you.” Jayden nudges me.

“This is going to get so much worse before it gets better.” I lean my head on his shoulder.

“I need to go talk to the other gods.” Artemis blinks away.

“Are we just going to speculate?” Raven asks. “Because obviously my dad isn’t siding with Hera after the shit she pulled.”

Another rumble shakes the ground. Is it an earthquake? What’s happening at the academy if we’re still having earthquakes. I glance at the cave but the magic snaps off at the same second.

“I think he’s got it.” I race to the cave.

Calypso screams but she’s unable to do anything but thrash against Poseidon’s magic. I reach the mouth of the cave at the same time as Raven and Jayden.

“Where is he?” I ask.

“I don’t know. He should be coming out if the magic is gone. Is he okay?” Raven steps inside the cave as water rushes out on a wave.

“Watch out,” Thad roars, riding the damn waves.

I pull Raven to the side and dive out of the way as the water crashes into Calypso, drenching her. Thad whoops as he brandishes the trident triumphantly. As the water runs away, Calypso is the only thing left in a heap on the ground, soaking wet. Serves the Titan bitch right for taking the wrong

side.

Poseidon stands over Calypso with a sneer, his power threatening to pulse out at all of us in waves. Please don't fry us. Please don't fry us.

"Father," Thad says. "I got it."

"That you did, Thaddeus. I'm so proud of you." Poseidon claps Thad on the shoulder.

Thad's grin is brilliant as he soaks up his father's praise and hands the trident to Poseidon. The ground rumbles again as the trident returns to its rightful owner.

"Poseidon, the academy is in trouble. We need to do something." I clench my hands into fists at my sides.

"The volcano is stabling itself as we speak. The academy is safe, little niece." Poseidon grins at me.

I blow out a breath and my shoulders slump in relief. The academy is safe for now, but what happens when the lines are drawn? What happens when everyone finds out their parents are on opposite sides of a civil war?

"The academy is safe for now, but things are only going to get worse before they get better," I grumble.

"The queen fled." Hermes pops up next to me, startling me. "Her followers are doing the same."

"Who's left?" I ask.

"Only those loyal to Zeus have stayed. Myself, Ares, Hephaestus, Artemis, and Hestia." Hermes runs a hand through his hair.

It's such a human gesture I almost laugh but this is a dangerous game we're playing and lives will most certainly be lost.

"Have my father and Persephone said anything?" Jayden asks.

"Hades is difficult to get a hold of; he hates Mount Olympus." Hermes shrugs.

"What about Persephone? She's staying in the mortal world with her mother," Jayden asks.

“Demeter has chosen her side.” Persephone steps forward. “I can’t condone her actions in this game they are playing with fate. Hera is jealous and yes, maybe she feels slighted by Zeus and his many conquests, but trying to destroy creation is beyond despicable.”

“Are we going to have any more gods pop in and scare the shit out of me?” I grumble.

Persephone giggles. “Sorry, I figured I needed to see how you’re faring after the near-death experience.” She stares at Jayden.

“You said he wasn’t dying,” I growl.

“Did I?” She taps her index finger to her lips. “He was near death, but in no danger of actually dying. He’s a god now.”

I narrow my eyes on the goddess, but Jayden pulls me to his side. His gaze is penetrating, telling me not to piss his stepmom off. I rather like Persephone when she isn’t lying to me about his condition.

Persephone cups Jayden’s cheek as she stares up at him. “Your father is so proud of the man you’ve become. You will be a merciful god with Beth by your side.”

“This is a great little family chat and all, but I have an entire realm to fix after what that crazy queen has done and I have a gift for the budding goddess, Beth.” Poseidon cuts into the conversation.

“Why would you have a gift for me?” I ask. “Thad saved the trident in the end.”

“I was told by an elusive seer that I have you to thank for all of this. Had you not made the choice you did to come back from the island of the lotus eaters, these demigods would still be out searching the seas for you and all would have been lost,” Poseidon says.

“Fucking Nereus and his tests,” I grumble and glance at Jayden.

“Nereus is very wise, but yes, he loves his games.” Poseidon nods.

Thad walks over and wraps an arm around my shoulders, pulling me away from Jayden and over to Poseidon. Jayden doesn’t protest or even

scowl at the friendly gesture from Thad. Progress. I grin, happy that he's finally getting over his jealousy—or at least containing it.

“His games are a pain in my ass,” I say.

“Beth,” Persephone gasps.

“What? I do believe I called Hades out for the games he was playing with us when we went to the underworld.” I raise a brow at her.

“It's one of the reasons my husband adores you, sweet girl.” Persephone pats my cheek this time. “I'm going back to the underworld. If my mother is siding with the queen, there's no reason for me to stay in the earth realm.”

“Will that mess with the weather?” I ask with a frown.

“You have seen the weather in recent weeks, yes?” she asks, glancing pointedly at Poseidon. “It's supposed to be spring. I don't think me going home to the underworld will make much difference after all this devastation.”

“That was Hera's doing and she will pay,” Poseidon growls.

“Yes, yes, I know that. I'm just saying my little bit of springtime magic won't make a huge difference in the face of all this.” Persephone waves Poseidon off. “You two little godlings must come to dinner soon. Cerberus misses you both terribly.”

“We will,” I say and finger wave at her as she disappears back to the underworld.

“What are you going to do with her, Father?” Thad asks, pointing at Calypso.

“I think my brother would like to know what she knows. Hermes, take this Titan to Zeus.”

“My pleasure, Lord Poseidon.” Hermes grabs Calypso by the arm and pulls her to her feet.

“I didn't do anything,” Calypso screams. “Hera promised me freedom. That's all I want.”

“You think you will ever taste freedom again, psycho?” I ask. “You fucked around and now you're about to find out.”

“Good one.” Raven high-fives me.

“Thanks,” I say as Hermes blinks away with the screaming Titan.

“That woman is annoying,” Poseidon huffs.

“She’s absolutely batshit crazy and I kind of think the gods are to blame for that. Whose idea was it to leave her alone on an island for fucking millennia? It’s no wonder she took Hera up on her deal,” I say.

“It was a group decision,” Poseidon growls. “She could not be trusted being who she is, but she didn’t oppose us so we couldn’t justify sentencing her to Tartarus.”

“But you could leave Claud there?” I raise a brow.

“Claud?” Poseidon asks, confused.

“The ancient cyclops that Cronus sent to Tartarus that the Olympians just left there because they were too powerful.” I cross my arms.

“We have been wrong in many things, godling, but we can admit that now. Not even gods are perfect, even if we would like the world to think we are.” Poseidon glares at me.

I nod because that’s more of an admission of guilt than I ever expected to get from any of the gods.

“We need to get back and check on things,” Raven says.

“You’re right. Poor Kira looked frazzled the last time we spoke,” I agree.

“You can’t leave without your gift.” Poseidon steps forward.

He waves a hand to me and my necklace cools with the water of the sea. “What’s this?”

“I do know how much you love your necklace.” Poseidon grins.

“What does it do?” I ask.

“It gives you the power over the sea and you can breathe underwater.” Poseidon nods to the small trident on my neck.

“I can breathe underwater?” I ask. “Cool.”

“Lucky,” Raven grumbles. “I want to breathe underwater.”

“Let’s get you all back to the academy so you can check on your friends.”

Poseidon waves a hand.

I spin through time and space. Is this a trap or is Poseidon sending us back? It has to be Poseidon, right? We helped him.

Is he really sending us back or is he really on Hera's side?

I slam into the ground. My teeth clench as my bones pop. I groan. “Fuck, that sucked.”

“He could have been a little more gentle with us,” Raven grunts.

“We did fucking save the world again,” I agree.

I roll over into Jayden and rest my head on his chest. I could eat an entire cow and sleep for a week.

“Beth, you’re back,” Kira yells as she sprints toward us.

“We are. Is the volcano stable?” I ask as I sit up on my elbows.

“It is. Whatever you did to stop it, worked. You saved us all, again.” Kira grins.

Dax stands at her side. A grin spreads over Dax’s face as he pulls Kira to him. They are absolutely adorable and I grin at my friends.

“We don’t have to worry?” I lean back against the ground again and stare up at the sky.

We did it. We saved the academy once again and stopped the crazy storms. The dark clouds roll away, letting the sun shine through for the first time in I can’t even remember when. How long has it been since we had the sun warm our skin at the academy?

“No, we’re all good, Beth. You guys did it again.” Dax reaches out a hand to help me up.

“What about Claud?” I roll to my feet with Jayden by me.

He wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me to him before kissing my temple. I don’t know how I ever thought he would choose a stupid fucking flower over me. This mission was fucked and more treacherous than we ever had before, but we got some much-needed information for the days to come.

We know who’s behind the monsters coming back and why. We know that my evil stepmonster is behind everything. What we do with that information is the question.

“We need to find Rebecca.” I scan the forest where Poseidon dropped us.

“No one has been able to find her for days,” Kira says.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Where the fuck is Rebecca and why hasn’t anyone seen her? Is she on the wrong side? Is she on Hera’s side after everything? What are we going to do?

“I’m here,” Rebecca says as she storms toward us.

“Where have you been, Headmistress?” Kira asks. “We needed you. We thought we would have to evacuate.”

“I was called away. You don’t get to question me, daughter of Hephaestus.” Rebecca raises an eyebrow at Kira.

“What the hell is going on?” I ask. “You’re the headmistress. You’re on our side, right?”

Electricity fills my palms as I square my shoulders. What’s going on with Rebecca? She’s always been here for the demigods at the academy. Is her godly parent on Hera’s side? Am I going to have to fight against the headmistress of the academy?

“Rebecca? What’s going on?” I ask, stepping in front of everyone.

Something isn’t right here. Why is Rebecca acting like this? She was the one so angry about students having to help the gods and not being able to offer us protection.

“The gods are divided and I’m not sure where anyone stands.” Rebecca folds her arms over her chest.

“I know where I stand. Where do you?” I ask.

“You stand with the misogynistic rule of Zeus?” Rebecca scoffs.

Chiron canters up behind her and nods to me. I just hope he’s on our side because I don’t think we can stop the war at the academy if everyone is at odds with each other, and I have no idea who the fuck will take over the academy if Rebecca abandons us for Hera and her stupid games.

“My father has never tried to kill me, Headmistress, but apparently Hera has been trying to kill me since I turned eighteen and everyone found out I existed,” I say.

“What?” Jayden asks.

“The monsters are all her doing, Jayden. Even when you were hanging out around the bar and following me home from work, that was her. My mother is dead because of her.”

“Who is your godly parent?” Jayden steps in front of me. “We know who is trustworthy at this point and who isn’t based on their godly parent.”

Electricity forms in my hands as I stare at Rebecca. Whose side is she on? Who are we dealing with right now?

“It doesn’t matter that Athena is my mother. I am on the side of the academy.” Rebecca holds her head high.

“Bullshit,” I growl. “You’re not on our side. Especially after asking about Zeus’ misogynistic rule. Are you even hearing yourself right now?”

“You must have seen in your history lessons and even in your missions the way women are treated. Hera plans to change everything to a matriarchal society where women rule the world.” Rebecca stomps her foot.

“Hey, Jayden,” I ask sweetly. “Who rules the world?”

“Women definitely rule the men who rule the world, baby.” He pulls me back into his chest.

“Exactly. We can change things, but not the way Hera is going about this. She’s crazed and making enemies left and right. She’s focused on revenge and hatred instead of actual change and that’s why she’s going to lose this

war.” I straighten my spine.

Sometimes brute force is the answer and sometimes it’s finesse, but the gods obviously don’t understand that concept. They just fuel their own desires and treat others as pawns. The demigods that side with their parents on the side of Hera will become cannon fodder.

Some of them I couldn’t care less about like Mia. She will undoubtedly let her hatred for me fuel her ire because of my relationship with Jayden, but others like Adrian will hurt more. If he sides with Apollo, I don’t know what I will do. I glance at him under my lashes and his gaze lands on me with a conviction I’ve never felt before.

I blow out a relieved breath. Even though Apollo has sided with Hera, we still have our seer, our friend. He’s been with us since the first mission, even if it was only through his visions. We need him, especially if the oracle is on Apollo’s side.

“Whose side are you on, Rebecca, because you can’t be our headmistress and side with Hera too.” I grip my sword.

I will fight her if I have to. I have no problem doing that even though she’s older. I fought a millennia old Titan just hours ago. I don’t really want to, though, because she’s the one who has always been there. She was the one who told me what I am and started this whole journey. Was it all a lie? Did she only bring me here to die at Hera’s hand?

“I’m on the side that makes the most logical sense. So many have suffered at the gods’ hands.” She deflates.

“I met Medusa on this fucking mission and if I remember correctly, it was Athena who turned her to a gorgon while pregnant with Poseidon’s twins. Isn’t Athena your mother? She was the one who damned her. Not the misogynistic hierarchy.”

“If Poseidon...” Rebecca trails off when I raise a brow.

“Yes, Poseidon was horrible in what he did to her. Full stop. But what your mother did blaming the victim and turning her into a monster was far

worse. So Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite, and whatever other goddesses are in their corner decide that their ways are better than Zeus and Poseidon need to look in the mirror because there is blood on their hands just as thick and crimson as the gods.”

“Beth,” Jayden says, pulling me back.

“No,” I say. “Even Persephone sees it. She understands what’s happening is wrong and refuses to stay in the mortal world for spring and summer. This shit needs to stop before things happen that none of us can take back.”

“That’s not possible, now, Beth. There’s a war on the horizon. Whose side will you be on when the final bell sounds?” Rebecca eyes me.

“I’m on the side of what’s good and right. I’m on the side of the humans who will be caught up in this fucked-up war. I’m on the side of my father and the Olympians that don’t follow Hera. I will do whatever I can to stop her from winning.” I nod to Chiron behind her and he snatches Rebecca up in his arms.

“What would like me to do with her, little goddess?” Chiron bows his head to me.

“Take her somewhere safe until Hermes can retrieve her. We aren’t taking any chances in this war. Detain anyone who tries to stop you.”

I’m done with being the nice, compassionate one. Hera wants a fight, she can have a fight, but on my terms and only once I know who my real allies are.

“No, you can’t do this to me. I’m the headmistress of this academy,” she screams as Chiron carts her away.

I slump against Jayden and scan the crowd that has formed. “Look, I get that some of you want to align with your parents, but some of them have been complicit in trying to kill us all four fucking times. How many did we lose in the battle of the academy?”

I scan the growing crowd. “How many did we lose in the battle for Ares’ shield? What happens to your human families if these gods succeed? They

have already killed thousands in their quest, for what? For vengeance for some utopia that doesn't exist and you'll never be a part of?" I ask.

"How do you know we will never be a part of it?" Mia calls, her voice grating on me.

"Because you'll never survive the war that's coming, Mia. A daughter of Aphrodite like you has no chance." I shake my head.

She steps forward, but one of her sisters pulls her back and whispers something in her ear. Mia's eyes widen before she glares at me and steps back.

"Good. From now on, Chiron's in charge and we're doing things very differently."

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