

“Don’t touch it. *Never* touch it.”

Those words kept echoing in her ears like a terrible scratched record. Chains rattled down the hallway, adding to the already melancholic chorus of blame and Pan shivered, rubbing her hands over her trousered, rangy legs. They hadn’t even been considerate enough to give her a blanket.

Shadows danced on the walls, cast by the flickering of the white-cold, electric lights of the Underworld.

Okay, so, maybe she deserved being stuck down here, Cerberus’ growling snores wafting down the hallway. Especially after it.

She clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, wincing, and twisted a strand of her short, ice-blue hair between her gracile fingers.

Keys jingled. Her ears perked up. Footsteps.

She stayed huddled in the corner, despite her eagerness to see her visitor, and busied herself by picking at one of her suspender straps. What she guessed were big, heavy boots, thudded against the stone cobbles, crunching something...

Could be snow...

Yeah, it was probably the snow.

Pan flicked her gaze to the rusty bars of her cell, holding her breath in anticipation. The footsteps stopped, as if they knew she was expecting their arrival.

“Typical,” she murmured, a puff of white fog drifting from her mouth as she remembered to exhale. She closed her eyes again and dropped her head against the cold basalt of the back wall, pulling her knees in to her chest as she tried to calm her shivering.

*Drip-drip*; only her breathing and the sough of the River Styx met her ears now.

She rubbed her fingers together, desperately trying to make heat. She would do anything for a ratty-knitted blanket, a stove, matches. *Titans*, she’d even go back to the Ceremony if it meant she’d feel

that sweltering heat again. A deep redness crept into her cheeks just thinking about it: the dark-clad *Tartari*, the Monarch, *Elites*. All of them, staring at her.

Pan's eyes swept around the cavernous Coliseum stands, wandering past the marble thrones of the Monarchs to the stony faces of the black-cloaked Elites. Soon, her gaze came to rest on Nyx; the tattooed, apprentice-less bodyguard of the Monarchs.

Her heart dropped into the pits of her stomach as her eyes sought some sort of clue as to if Nyx might have chosen her as an Apprentice —if anyone had chosen her at all. Even though she'd be happy to train with any of the Elites, Pan wanted to train with the Queen's protector more than anyone else in the world, and had for as long as she could remember. Seven years, perhaps? Maybe even all sixteen. She couldn't be sure.

Breaking her trance, the velvet call of a cello reverberated through the Coliseum. As one body, the Elites crossed their arms in front of their chests and began to hum. Slowly, the feverish clamor of the Tartari dulled to a gentle, expectant murmur, then stopped altogether. Pan's eyes snapped to the dais at the front of the Arena as the crescent symbol of Hades glowed a vivid vermillion, as if Prometheus himself lit the blaze.

The Ceremony had begun.

"Ladies, Gentlemen of Tartarus..." Kore, Queen of the Underworld, stood before them, swathed in sanguine silk; her elegant arms outstretched in welcome. She continued, "the Erinyes: forged of ancient chaos. The Erinyes: protectors of the old. The Erinyes: teachers of the young. And every year, the young ones have the honor to be selected to serve as apprentices..."

Pan sighed and rolled her eyes, nibbling at the inside of her cheek. The speech was always the same. They all knew the Erinyes were named for the Furies of old. They all knew to be chosen as an Erinyes was coveted. And they definitely all knew the Erinyes were sworn to celibacy.

She wished the Queen would hurry up and bring out the Book.

Pan allowed her eyes to wander along with her mind. Behind the Queen sat an empty throne: the King's. Odd, thought Pan. Usually, she waits... Pan couldn't remember a single Ceremony in which the King and Queen weren't together. She was still thinking about it when the deep notes of the cello sounded

again and two violet-clad Faceless Ones swept up the stairs, carrying the Book of Cronus, their curved horns — which peeked out from two slits in the hood of their cloaks — bobbing up and down with every clop of their hooves. Once they reached the stage, they knelt and slowly lifted the book upward toward the hand of the Queen. She reverently opened the tome: a heavy silence enveloped the cavern, only disturbed by the brittle swish of pages.

The Naming of the Apprentices. It would be alphabetical, per usual, so Pan only paid attention when she heard names she recognized.

“Archimedes of Lys, Alexandra of Elysium... Demetrius of Acheron... Helena of Acheron... Orion of Charon...” Pan could’ve squealed: Orion was her twin brother. Beaming proudly, she glanced down the line of Cadets until she caught sight of his shaggy, green-streaked, half-shaved hair, and attempted to make eye contact with him. He flashed her a cheeky, canine smile, then nodded encouragingly and stepped forward.

The Queen was getting closer to her name, now.

Pan clamped her teeth together and curled her toes in her boots. Her mouth was dry and she kept trying to swallow, but it felt like she was choking on sandpaper. Pandora of Charon. Pandora of Charon. Say Pandora of Charon.

“Rhode of Acheron...Zoraida of Ceres...”

Pandora of—

The cello again. But this time, the peal was dark; final. In an instant, marrow and blood turned from fire to ice.

“Cadets of Tartarus, those of you who have been chosen as Apprentices, come forth. Should you choose to accept, you must swear loyalty to the Ways, People, and Monarchs of the Underworld—”

Pan ran her tongue over her teeth then bit down, hard, breaking through the skin. She winced as pain jolted through her tongue and blood began to fill her mouth. She could feel her breathing slowing. Don’t let them see you cry. Don’t let them see you. Don’t— Her vision began to swim and standing

seemed altogether impossible and she would've fainted right there in the moon-red sand if not for the crowd gently pushing her forward.

She stumbled out of the Arena with the red-cloaked Cadets and newly purple-cloaked Apprentices, and bit down on her tongue harder than ever, the taste of copper filling her mouth; her vision nothing more than blurred heat spots. Right foot caught left and she tripped, slamming onto the ground, just barely catching herself with the palms of her hands as wasps of pain stung up her arms. She felt someone— she didn't care who— grab her shoulder to help her up, the gentle press of fingers keeping her from erupting into a volcano of sobs. She didn't even bother to wipe the sand from her hands or her clothes, just tottered ahead.

After what Pan calculated to be an eternity, the Cadets finally made their way out of the Arena. Ducking behind the rocky face of a stalagmite, Pan ripped off her cloak and allowed a sob to escape her throat. She heard someone behind her and was about to tell them to leave when her brother's arms wrapped around her, anchoring her. She slumped into his embrace, her shoulders shaking violently as her tears and snot soaked the shoulder of his new cloak, deepening the amethyst to a dark violet.

"It's okay, Pan." Orion crooned.

Okay for you, maybe: you were chosen. She thought bitterly. She'd wanted this for as long as she could remember and this was her last chance. Next Ceremony, she'd be seventeen and it would be too late.

She was past crying, now, down here in the dungeons of Hades. Now, she was just angry. First the Ceremony, then it, then she was thrown down here. She was almost glad she had done it. No, she was really pleased. *Screw the Monarchs. Screw Tartarus. Screw—*

“Pandora.”

*Oh no.* Her tirade thus interrupted, Pan clapped her hand over her elfin lips, as if she had been thinking out loud: he never came unless something was really serious.

And doing *it*, she guessed, qualified as “really serious.”

The crunch of bones beneath boots outside the bars of her cell tickled her ears and stopped just a few paces away from the door.

She was right. They were boots; ragged boots, familiar boots, *his* boots. She would know those boots anywhere.

She began to count the cracks in the stone floor, eyes lowered, doing anything she could to keep from staring at him. *Three years gone, and he shows up now?*

“Pandora,” he said again. “Look at me.”

Scrunching her face together, she apprehensively lifted her head. Charon, the ferryman of the dead stood before her. Charon, a founder of the *Erinyes*. Charon, her father.

Long, curly, burnt-ash hair hung around his forlorn face, the taut skin disrupted only by a jagged black-ridged scar which carved through his forehead, split down his eye, and stopped just at the tip of his mouth, which was pursed in thinly veiled displeasure.

Pan didn’t look anything like her father.

“Thanks for coming to visit me in prison...” She pulled her lips into some paltry semblance of a grin, hiding the resentment which boiled through her veins. Her poor attempt at humor was quickly stifled by the flames in his dark, virescent eyes; the only thing with him which she shared.

Wordlessly, Charon removed the tarnished ring of skeleton keys from his patched, charcoal boots and placed a key in the lock of her cell and turned it to the left. The lock clicked and he nudged the door open with his foot; a loud creak disrupting the silence.

He turned and began to walk away, which Pan took to mean she was expected to follow.

A pang of regret roiled in the very pit of her stomach as she pushed herself up off the wall and started after him, eyes locked on the blood-soaked tail of her father's ancient overcoat. She watched as the chameleon fabric flicked from side to side as he walked, alternating between cobblestone shadows and frost-flecked gleams, eliciting visions of chartered souls who had stared at the same smoke-tattered coat.

This wasn't a rescue, she was certain.

It was a death sentence.