

## The Cheat Sheet to My Life Thus Far



Sophie Bloom: Me. Sixteen. Phenomenal under-achiever. Life turned upside down by a midnight kiss from a bad boy that awoke my true identity as Persephone, Goddess of Spring. Am supposed to be savior of humanity in war between Hades and Zeus. I've got Persephone's most excellent powers, but no access to her memories. So much for coasting through life.

Persephone: Was kidnapped by Hades' son Kyrillos as the "screw you" move in his war against Zeus. She became Kyrillos' big love. Sixteen years ago, they plotted cosmic coup to usurp their dads, Hades and Zeus. Murdered by ?? for ?? No clue. Her spirit ended up in my newborn body. Would probably have murdered her myself because she's so annoyingly beloved by all.

Kyrillos (a.k.a. Kai): Stupid bad boy who kissed me. Also Persephone's boyfriend. Talk about complicated. Public enemy number one for betraying me and my friends by first stealing friend's magic chain in order to have his own revenge on Hades, then abandoning us and

leaving us to die in an exploding dragon's lair. Plan to blast on sight if I ever see him again. Except that somehow Kai and I are supposed to defeat Hades and Zeus and save humanity *together*. Payback will have to be more painful assault than full-on murder.

Theo: My best friend who turned out to be Prometheus, the god who gave fire to mankind. Has major grudge against Zeus. Responsible for spirited Persephone's dying body away and making some cockamamie deal with a crackpot witch at the cost of his own powers to put Persephone into baby Sophie. Memory spell included. Theo warded up our boarding school, Hope Park Progressive, to keep me safe, which is good because now Hades' and Zeus' minions hang about trying to get in and kill me. True owner of (now-stolen) cool magic chain that is one hell of a weapon. Between getting ripped off and having his plans bunged up by the kiss that jumpstarted my goddessness, Theo's not a happy camper these days.

Demeter: Persephone's mom who roamed the earth in grief when Persephone was kidnapped. Hasn't bothered to make my acquaintance, but I'm hopeful she's just in grave danger and will greet me with arms outstretched at first possible opportunity. Otherwise, sole maternal figure in my life is limited to drunk, adoptive socialite mother Felicia. *Shudder.*

Hannah: Gorgeous science freak and best friend. Obsessed with bloodthirsty creatures. 100% human. Still weird.

Bethany: Power-tripping Yoga girl who spouts new age BS to rule the school. Now also evil asshat with

magically enhanced popularity thanks to a tattoo on her arm, given for being a willing handmaiden to the insane dragon that almost killed the rest of us. Mutual hatred. Has not forgiven me for locking her in a bathroom and taking her place to go meet Kai, resulting in aforementioned stupid kiss. Because that worked out so well for me. *\*snort\**

Cassie: Offbeat human classmate. My awakening triggered her own prophetic powers, since she is a descendant of the original Oracle, Cassandra. Her mystical pronouncement of “one above one below alive awake a key it is no more it is no more,” did seem to support Kai’s earlier assertion that when “two became one”—i.e. he and I had sex—his power as son of Hades and mine as daughter of Zeus would allow us to seize control and, at the very least, stop our dads from using Earth as a battleground. They blame natural disasters for their damage. Humans have been the casualties long enough. That is going to change. On my watch. Cassie may also have prophesied that I was “an instrument of destruction” but really, that could be interpreted in so many ways, I can’t afford to worry about it just now. I have to spend all my worrying on my continued existence.

Hades: Lord of the Underworld. Despite having kidnapped Persephone, he was probably *not* the psycho who tried to kill her. Theo and I are on the hook, however, for having poisoned him during a little B&E visit to the Underworld recently. Which we totally didn’t do. Still, I’m hoping being poisoned keeps him busy. Hades hates Zeus more than hates me though, so you know, an upside.

Zeus: Were Zeus to put up an Internet dating profile, it would read as follows: Top god. Dark hair, brown eyes, mega-rich, loves action films, pistachio ice cream, and suits. Interested in warfare, himself, and adultery. Brunettes preferred. My, well, Persephone's dad. He recently kidnapped me up to Olympus. Father/daughter time not going so well. Probably time to bolt.

## One



Despite the lack of clearly marked exits, I'd figured fleeing Olympus was going to be a straightforward "blow-this-joint" operation.

Silly, silly me.

"You seem to have two choices," Zeus' voice boomed around me via some invisible speaker system. "One, you meet me in the courtyard and we discuss this like rational adults. Two, you don't." His voice was scarily calm. But his subtext was blatant "co-operate or I'll crank your hurt to eleven and enjoy doing it."

I pressed myself deeper into the shadows behind a statue of his giant head, and willed myself not to slink back to my father like a beaten dog in the face of his command. Pops did commanding really well. Which, given his position as Lord of the Gods and twenty-foot-tall Big Kahuna, was probably to be expected.

"Two it is," Zeus said. *Click. Click.* Pops carried around a fancy silver pen that he obsessively clicked. I'd thought it disconcerting before, but now, with him after

me? It came through the speakers like atmospheric menace in a bad horror film.

I had to get out of here. I rolled my shoulders back, feeling the tension in my neck. My poor head felt stuffed full of cotton; a woozy by-product from the drugs Pops had been feeding me during my stay in Olympus. The ever-present scent of flowers in the air didn't help matters. Once pleasant, the aroma was now cloying.

Overcome by a momentary wave of dizziness, I placed one hand against the cool stone of the statue's massive ear to steady myself. *Focus, Soph.* Carefully, I peered out from behind the chiseled representation of my father's ego to survey the cavernous gallery.

Surprisingly tasteful spotlights illuminated hundreds of statues ranging in size from about ten to ninety feet. Each depicted Zeus posing in all his destructive glory, their shadows creating a creepy undertone of deadly narcissism.

The door which I'd snuck through to hide in here lay to my far left, but that way out was a no go. I could hear footsteps running up and down the corridor—no doubt everyone on the hunt for me.

Zeus' minions were in big trouble, which made them hellbent on finding me. Return the kid or suffer the shame (death) of losing a sixteen-year-old.

I touched the sapphire pendant hanging around my neck for good luck.

About the size of a small egg, it had been given to Persephone by Demeter. It was engraved on one side with a sheaf of wheat and on the other with a thunderbolt—the symbols of my parents. It fueled my resolve.

I readied my power to call up at a second's notice and willed myself to leave my hiding spot. I dashed across the room, ninja-ing my way across the marble floor to the far end, the *Mission Impossible* soundtrack in my head as I zipped between the gaudy statues.

The hair on the back of my neck bristled. The damn things freaked me out. I expected one of them to come to life and smite me. I wove around one of the largest statues, gilded entirely in gold, and spied a large patch of sunlight at the far end of the room. As I scooted toward it, my toe whacked something hard, causing me to stumble.

I stopped and knelt down. A large iron ring was set into one of the blue-veined blocks of marble tiling the floor. The ring felt warm and heavy as I tugged on its hammered surface. The block didn't shift but on closer inspection I could see a hinge, so theoretically, it should open.

Except, it obviously led downwards. And since that was the traditional territory of dungeons everywhere, not so much a direction I wanted to go. If Olympus even had dungeons.

Best not to find out.

I pivoted soundlessly, scooted over to the dust motes dancing in the sunshine and looked up at a windowless skylight. Beyond it lay nothing but the always perfect, bright Olympus sky. The warmth on my face felt delicious, even from this far below it. I shaded my eyes with one hand and peered up, guessing the distance. At least a hundred feet.

Lucky for me, heights were not an issue.

Unless I looked down. I really hated looking down.

I called up my stage one goddess power. A ribbon of moss green light flew from each of my palms, like vines. I fired the ends up to secure around a massive, hideously ornate crystal chandelier beside the skylight and began reeling myself up to freedom.

The most radically awesome thing about Greek powers is that they trump laws of physics. No way should light behave like it has substance. Then again, no way should my entire teen existence have been turned upside down with a kiss that had unleashed my true goddess self. Which just proved that truth was stranger than, well, everything.

About a third of the way up, the chandelier groaned and shuddered, swaying dangerously. My legs flopped from side to side. I froze until the steroid lighting fixture and I had stilled. I tilted my head up, coughing as plaster dust rained down squarely on my face.

Wiping my eyes with my forearm, I geared down to a crawl, inching myself up very carefully, gaze focused on the chandelier to see if it wanted to raise any more protests. All seemed well, so I continued my slow ascent, trying desperately not to think about the growing amount of space under my feet.

The track in my head switched up from “Mission Impossible” to “I Will Survive.”

“Sophie.” More cool detachment in Zeus’ voice as the speaker system came back to life. Weren’t dads supposed to sound mad, instead of psychopathically disinterested?



“While I appreciate that for a human, you are showing a lot of pluck, you are also exhibiting quite the annoyingly short-sighted will to live.”

*Click. Click.* The pen made me think of claws clacking on the floor as the monster approached. Which, I guess, was apt.

My arms were starting to tire from going at a snail’s pace. I ignored their trembling and the chandelier’s protests to focus on the sunshine above growing warmer on my head. I could smell the lemony fresh air. That had to be a good sign.

Yes, think positive thoughts. Like this would get me out of Olympus somehow and I wasn’t currently doing the ‘ole “frying pan into the fire” routine. That the over-inflated lampshade above me wouldn’t come loose and pancake me to the ground in a mass of glass shards and pulpy flesh.

Or better still, that I lay comatose in a boring hospital bed and this was all a figment of brain damage. That would be nice.

“It would go far better for our relationship if you would behave more like your essential Persephone self. A lovely girl.”

Ah yes. The familiar refrain of “Persephone, how great thou art.” I was sick of it.

Demeter, my real mother, had roamed the earth in grief when Persephone was abducted down to the Underworld. But when I’d been awakened, she hadn’t even sent me a postcard. Hadn’t bothered to make herself known to me at all. Instead I’d been stuck with my drunk, adoptive, socialite mother Felicia, whose one act of kindness

was to keep me at Hope Park with my friends. Something she threatened to rescind whenever I pissed her off.

Then there was Kai. He'd had this God-defying love for her. And even Zeus claimed fondness, which for him was favored status.

Persephone inspired adoration from parents and boyfriends alike. Sophie got absentee parenting, death threats, and betrayal.

With every passing day since I'd found out about Persephone, I'd felt less and less whole. Here *I* was, Sophie, my human self, which until recently was the only personality I'd ever expected to have, teenage mood-swings notwithstanding. Then my goddessness had surfaced.

While I now had special bonus features like kick-ass powers, sped up healing time, and a destiny to save humanity, I was still, for all intents and purposes, human. First and foremost, still me, Sophie.

So why did I feel like some kind of container for the magnificence that was Persephone?

Why did I feel like I was competing with her?

And losing.

I peered up to see how much farther. Another twenty feet and I'd be outside.

Shoot me now. Pops was still waxing poetic about Persephone. I glared up at the vicinity of his voice. "Your perfect daughter planned on coup d'étatting your ass. So bite me." That felt good. Even if he couldn't hear me.

"That was all Kyrillos. He led my Persephone astray. I don't like him," Zeus said flatly.

Whoops. Guess he could hear me. “Well, goody. We have something in common. I don’t like Kai either.”

As if my voice GPS’d my location, the door I’d originally entered through crashed open below me and Zeus stepped into the room, expensive weighty pen held loosely in his right hand. *Click. Click.* His large, broad thumb was getting a real workout on that pen’s button. “Leaving us already?”

I startled and froze, dangling in mid-air, more than a bit uneasy at his appearance. I cleared my throat and went for nonchalant. “Well, hospitality Chez Zeus leaves a lot to be desired. No mint on the pillow, room service is more jail than four star, and check out time seems to be never.”

A couple of his minions entered to flank him. Called Photokia, or as I thought of them, Gold Crushers, they would have fit right in at a biker bar for the otherworldly. Leather clad, seven feet tall, bald, and solid muscle, with gold thunderbolt tattoos snaking over their heads, these dudes shot lightning from their glowing gold eyes. Needless to say, our previous run-ins had not been pretty.

Time to Speedy Gonzalez my ass out of there. I amped my ascent to “blur,” feeling the wind against my face as I streaked upward. The chandelier shuddered violently, moaning its displeasure, but it was still definitely the lesser of all the jam-packed evils here.

So near and yet so far. In a fluid motion, one of the Gold Crushers flew through the air at me. He tackled me to the floor, the fall snapping my light ribbons as I crashed down on top of him with a hard thud. His body was slightly less cuddly than an anvil.

Holy Hannah that hurt. That was gonna bruise.

I kned him in the crotch, grateful that it worked on bad guys of every species, scrambled to my feet, and fired my light at him. Once I'd gotten over the initial horror of my capabilities when my powers had first surfaced, I'd stayed firmly in "kinda impressed with myself" territory.

I rather enjoyed the whole process now.

My vines caught the Gold Crusher around the ankles, entombing him like a fly in a spider's web. The light spun faster and faster, wrapping him tighter and tighter. He began to age rapidly, his muscles sagging, his skin wrinkling, until with a *poof*, my light constricted and he disappeared into dusty oblivion. I smirked in victorious delight and snapped my light back into my palms.

Pops had the gall to slow clap me. "Lovely display."

He brushed a spec of lint off of his jacket, all pimped out in a cream linen suit with a matching lightweight fedora. Obviously custom made, unless there was some kind of Big 'n Tall for the giant Greek mover and shaker. From the gleam on his nails to his smooth shaven cheeks and perfectly coiffed hair, dad was a big old metrosexual.

The cute grey leggings and tunic I'd originally been wearing when I'd arrived were long gone, and I felt like a hobo in my loose, none-too-white pajama-type outfit, dirty bare feet and hair desperately in need of a wash.

I cast a wary glance at the remaining Photokia, calculating my next move. Gold Crushers and I didn't have the best relationship. Mainly because they were big, grudge-holding babies with an unquenchable thirst for death and destruction. And seeing as how I had annihilated a bunch of their brethren (creaturen?) during our

brief acquaintance, I shuddered to think what any one of them would do with me now.

But I would never show them my fear.

I gave the Photokia a saucy fingertip wave. “Hey there, Gold Crusher. What’s up, you snaggle-toothed freak?”

Zeus’ eyes crinkled in amusement. “Don’t taunt the minion, child,” he said. He lifted his fedora to sweep a lock of dark hair from his forehead. “It’s bad form.”

The Photokia didn’t seem to find me as funny. Not even in a “laugh at” not “with” kind of way. The expression he turned on me spoke of pain happily bestowed. His eyes began to glow.

Zeus held up a hand to cut off his minion’s assault. “How about a deal?” he asked me. I don’t think he was even aware that he had sped up his pen clicking, now going about 100 clicks a minute.

I know this because it kept pace with my racing heartbeat.

He caught me staring at his hand. His expression darkened.

A shiver ran through me.

I forced myself to meet his eyes as my stomach churned with the jitters. “What kind of deal?” I inched my way back under the chandelier in case I needed to book it out of there.

“Tell me where you and Kyrillos are planning to enact this ridiculous coup d’état ritual of yours and I’ll let you go.”

My brow furrowed. “I have no idea. I don’t have Persephone’s memories.”

Zeus looked at me thoughtfully. “Yes, you keep saying that,” he murmured.

Huh? “Keep? You’ve asked me this before?” Of course. “That’s why you were drugging me, wasn’t it? What’d you use?”

Zeus waved me off. “There’s truth serum in the water. And you know, hydration is essential to good skin.” He made a circular motion around his face. “You practically glow with youth and vitality now. In the cheeks. Also, I’m immune to the more adverse effects.”

Yeah, because younger, more radiant skin was a top priority of mine right now. I shifted my weight and glared up at Pops. “*That’s* why you kidnapped me. To get the location. Why?”

Zeus pursed his lips, considering. “Is this where I do the arch-villain bit and divulge my plan?”

I fired my index finger and thumb at him, gun-style, but stayed on high alert. I readied myself to move quickly, weight on my toes. “Got it in one.”

He shot me an assessing glance. “Persephone wasn’t mouthy like you.”

I stiffened involuntarily.

Zeus pulled a tube of moisturizing cream from a pocket, uncapped it and squeezed a blob into his hands. “Touchy, are we?” He rubbed the cream in with brisk strokes. “While ‘prophesied’ doesn’t mean guaranteed, always better to be safe than sorry when dealing with attempted coups. Your turn.”

I shook my head, doleful. “I wouldn’t want to overstay my welcome. We can catch up another time. I’m

free on Thanksgiving. We'll celebrate our dysfunction with turkey and stuffing."

Zeus pinned me in his gaze. "I don't think so. In the event of any other possible candidates coming forward with the ridiculous notion of overthrowing me, I'd like to destroy the ritual location. Can't go around battling every spawn I ever produced."

Pops spawning. Could I memory repress *that* visual?

I exhaled deeply. This conversation, like my entire relationship with my father, was hopeless. But since I couldn't let him seek and destroy this location that was so vital to stopping him, I had to get out of here.

"Can't help you. And won't." Planting myself in a firmer stance, knees slightly bent, I narrowed my eyes at the remaining Photokia, and made a "bring it" motion with my right hand.

"If you insist," Zeus said. He snapped his fingers and in an instant a half dozen more Gold Crushers had shown up.

Gold lightning lit the sky as the minions came at me, eyes blazing. I couldn't dispose of them on a rib-bony-death-by-ribbony-death basis, so I had to boost things up to the next level of my power.

I fired single blasts of green light from my eyes and palms, obliterating them one by one as I ducked and bobbed, dodging their blasts. Seven against one.

Whatever.

The secret weapon bonus of dad's minions was that he had an endless supply. So even though my superior goddess power made me capable of taking them out quite

easily, if Zeus ever set them full force against me, I'd be exhausted (and thus dead) before he'd barely tapped into his stockpile. That fact currently listed as number six on my list of "Final Showdown Terrors."

Lightning scorched across my side. I let out a mangled curse.

"Language," Zeus cautioned me.

With a growl, I took out the rest of them before they could do any more damage to my breakable human exterior. Done, done, and ... done.

Panting, I swung my eyes toward Zeus. Me and him.

He tilted his head with a cat-like grin. "I think you missed one."

Hundreds of Photokia poured into the room.

Bastard.

I fired my vines upwards, wanting out through the skylight, since flight seemed more prudent than fight.

Zeus smirked and gestured with his hand. "Not yet, my girl."

The minions lunged. I managed to swing past them and land on the head of one of the statues, calling my light back inside me. I planted myself in a solid stance, then dug my toes into the sculpted locks of Zeus' hair to get a better grip on the slippery stone. "You're contravening basic parenting commandment number seven, Pops. "Thou shalt not try to kill thy kid."

Forget escaping. I had to take the Gold Crushers out first. I reached down deep within myself, ratcheting up to my highest power level.

I blasted a full-body, all-powerful shockwave of green



light, almost falling off the statue since the recoil on that move was a kicker.

Damn! The move destroyed all the Gold Crushers, as I knew it would, but left my father standing infuriatingly intact.

Power-wise, firing the shockwave severely depleted me. I was too limp and spent to do more than heave while hunched over, hands braced on my legs. I'd never done it more than once without needing to majorly recharge, which required being outside. Being Goddess of Spring meant my powers were tied to the outdoors. I was the ultimate solar battery. The light filtering down from above was helpful but wouldn't totally recharge me.

Since my kaboom hadn't taken Pops out, my only option was to flee. And fast.

*Please let me have enough power to ribbon myself out of here.*

I gave 'er. And all I got were two weakly glowing palms.

I leaped off of the statue hoping I wouldn't break both legs, as dozens more Photokia showed up and attacked me. Kind of like being caught in a sea of battering rams.

The bodies dogpiling on top of me knocked the breath right from my body. I couldn't blast them, didn't even really have the power to fight them at all. Before I could catch my breath and attempt *something*, I heard Zeus say, "Let's wrap it up, shall we?"

I was plucked from the pile by a large, knobby, minion hand and thrown high into the air. Before I could process what was happening, Zeus called "Pull!" and lightning enveloped my body.

Son-of-a-bitch, he was skeet shooting his own kid.

“Pull!”

My body snapped back painfully, somersaulting with the force of the electric blasts. I tried to blindly send out my light vines but nothing came out.

“Pull!”

My body spasmed uncontrollably as more lightning struck it. My head snapped to the right, my fingers flailed like I enthusiastically counted by tens and my legs made a pumping motion much like cartoon characters as they gear up to run, all while still flying upwards through the air.

Lightning shots give quite the endorphin kick. The last enveloping hit knocked my energy from foul ball to home run. My eyes widened on a manic high. I felt pleasantly warm. Colors were sharper, no detail too small to notice. *Whooeeee.*

It passed five seconds later, leaving me falling in wet noodle mode.

I would have cried out had I been capable of speech. Instead I just made a moaning sound and drooled. I smelled burned hair and charred flesh and saw plumes of smoke rising from various parts of my dangerously overheated skin.

Bye-bye, endorphins. Hello, pain crashing into my system. From the bruises forming from being tackled, to the burning pain ripping through my side—my injuries were intense.

I took a shuddery breath and flailed as my muscles seized up in a grand finale. I hit the ground with a hard thud.

*Ooh floaty stars ...*

I blinked rapidly, until the spots had disappeared from my vision. I was completely winded.

The one bit of good luck was that I lay in a patch of sunlight. And maybe it could recharge me enough to be able to escape.

Zeus motioned for the Photokia nearest him to come over. The minion placed his foot on the middle of my chest and pressed down until I could feel that one more lean into me and his boot would smash through my body.

I bit my lip at the searing pain of my ribs spearing my torso. I was glad I couldn't remember the location of this planned overthrow, because any more pain and I'd have handed it over with a hand-drawn map.

My father loomed over me. "You can make this stop, you know. Just answer my question."

Ignoring my screaming neck muscles, I turned my head up to face Zeus.

Exhaustion and pain threatened to pull me under but I didn't think closing my eyes would be a good idea in this situation. I forced them open by digging my nails into my palms as hard as I could.

I jutted my chin out at Zeus, stubborn and silent. The stoic effect was only slightly lessened by the tears of pain streaming from my eyes. I squirmed against the Photokia's foot. No go.

*Click. Click.* Again with the damn pen. "Enough of this, child. Tell me the location."

The Gold Crusher slowly grinding me into the floor turned his head to say something to the minion beside

him. He leaned back a bit as he did, letting up the pressure on me.

Now or never.

I hadn't been recharged much, but I had to try. Flinging myself hard to the side and knocking the Photokia off balance, I fired a puny ribbon of light out to shove him farther back so I could make my escape. Instead, I knocked Pop's pen out of his hand and sent it flying toward me.

I leapt up, my legs wobbly, and narrowly grabbed it. At least I wouldn't have to listen to anymore clicking.

Zeus took a step toward me, hand outstretched for the pen.

As I'd seen, even my highest power level didn't faze Zeus. So I had two options. One, I could meekly comply and see what happened, or two, go for the low tech choice.

Two it was. I jumped up and jabbed him in the thigh with the pen with all my might, then pulled it back out again with a resounding *click click* for added insult.

Zeus didn't make a sound. Merely noted the hole in the leg of his suit, rimmed with blue ink and blood. His expression hardened. Cold. Severe.

Pure terror was a great motivator for finding my last dregs of energy. As was the accompanying adrenaline rush that hit me.

I ran, my heart racing, desperate to make it back across the room to the door and a way out.

Zeus's hand closed on the back of my neck and I felt something clamp around my left wrist.

My body started to tingle. Not in a good way, either. More like my blood starting to heat up.

I stared down at the three inch, black metal cuff on me embossed with the letters “FeE,” then glowered at my father, struggling to summon any power at all.

Zeus squatted down to my level and wound a thick chain attached to the cuff around my upper body. I gasped and arched back as every nerve I had went into screaming overdrive.

Pops smiled serenely. “Hurts like a bitch, doesn’t it?”

My fingers white-knuckled the pen. Man, did I want to stab him again. Repeatedly.

Tears streamed down my face. My head throbbed and my entire body strained against the sensation of being caught in a vice. With needles attached for extra probe pain. “What ... ?” It was all I could manage to say.

Zeus held the other end of the chain up in his hand, a matching wrist cuff for my right arm swinging from its final link. He gazed at it, almost dreamily. “It’s really a thing of beauty. This binding both calls up your power and prevents it from going anywhere. There is nothing you can do to stop it. And since you can’t use your power, it’s not like you can blast the manacles off and free yourself. There you are, stuck with an ever-increasing pressure with no release.”

He stroked the right wrist cuff, with a long, index finger. “It’s calibrated perfectly so that eventually you’ll die, but not too soon. Most go mad way before then.” Head tilted, he cast a critical gaze over me. “You will for sure.”

How comforting.

I ground my teeth together.

“You might want to take a deep breath,” Zeus said and manacled my other wrist.

My eyes bugged out. It felt like my power was trying to rip through my skin. By chewing its way out.

“Relax,” Zeus said, “it’ll settle down in a minute.” He leaned down and stroked my hair with his enormous hand in a surprisingly gentle gesture. “Don’t struggle. It’ll just be worse.”

Total psycho! I jerked out from under his touch.

He was right about the pain though. It did settle. From unbelievably unbearable to barely-keeping-conscious tolerable, which was worse. Had it stayed at its initial level, I would have blacked out and been put out of my misery. But, as that wouldn’t have been as fun for my father, awake and in excruciating agony it was.

I refused to die like this. Not that I’d planned my demise, but it would have involved being much, much older. Having saved the world. Had sex. Stuff like that.

I shook my head in a couple of sharp jolts, trying to stop the itchy squeezing of my brain. If I could just Velveeta it out through my ears, I’d be okay.

“All good now?” he asked. He picked me up like a trussed turkey and we blinked out of the room.

No. Not good at all.