

THE GATEKEEPER'S SONS: BOOK I

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This ebook is fiction. The characters are imaginary persons.

Chapter One: The Drowning
Chapter Two: Thanatos
Chapter Three: Sleep
Chapter Four: A Warning
Chapter Five: Figments and the Underworld
Chapter Six: Distractions
Chapter Seven: Visitors
Chapter Eight: A Deal with the Gatekeeper
Chapter Nine: Back Home
Chapter Ten: Setting Up
Chapter Eleven: Invitations
Chapter Twelve: Mortal Sensations
Chapter Thirteen: News
Chapter Fourteen: Therese's Prayers
Chapter Fifteen: Another Tragedy
Chapter Sixteen: Doubts and Conflicion
Chapter Seventeen: The Wildhorse Saloon
Chapter Eighteen: Hunting with Alecto
Chapter Nineteen: Questions and Answers
Chapter Twenty: Hunting with Tizzie
Chapter Twenty-One: The Furies
Chapter Twenty-Two: The Wildhorse Saloon Revisited
Chapter Twenty-Three: Meg's Falcon
Chapter Twenty-Four: Thwarted Attack
Chapter Twenty-Five: Hermes, the Messenger
Chapter Twenty-Six: Tortured Than
Chapter Twenty-Seven: Persistent Pete
Chapter Twenty-Eight: Back to the Dead
Chapter Twenty-Nine: Than's Apology
Chapter Thirty: Hope
Chapter Thirty-One: A Lot to Sort Out
Chapter Thirty-Two: Tagalong
Chapter Thirty-Three: Artemis's Gifts

Chapter Thirty-Four: Battle Rising
Chapter Thirty-Five: The Holts
Chapter Thirty-Six: Ambush
Chapter Thirty-Seven: Poseidon
Chapter Thirty-Eight: Mount Olympus
Chapter Thirty-Nine: More Gifts
Chapter Forty: The Last Supper
Chapter Forty-One: The Battlefield
Chapter Forty-Two: The Battle
Chapter Forty-Three: The Court Decides
Chapter Forty-Four: Sleep Returns
First Chapter of The Gatekeeper's Challenge
About the Author
Acknowledgements

Chapter One: The Drowning

Therese Mills peeled the white gloves off her sweaty hands as soon as she and her parents were in the car. Now that her mother's thing was over, she could finally get home and out of this blue dress. It was like being in a straightjacket.

Anything for Mom, of course.

What the...

A man glared at her through her backseat window. She jumped up, sat back, blinked. The man vanished, but when she blinked again, she could still see the eerie face behind her lids: the scruffy black beard and dark, haunting eyes.

"Thanks again for making tonight so special," her mother, apparently not seeing the man, said from the passenger seat as her father started the engine. "You two being there meant a lot to me."

"Did you see that man?" Therese peered through her window for the face.

"What?" Her mother also looked. "What man?"

"What man, Therese?" her father asked.

"Never mind."

Therese did not find it unusual that her mother hadn't noticed the man. Although her mother was a brilliant scientist, she wasn't the most observant person.

Just last spring after all the snow had finally melted around their house in the Colorado mountains, and Therese and her mother had been able to enjoy their wooden deck with the melted lake spread out in front of them and the forest rising up the mountains behind them, Therese had spotted the wild horse and foal she had seen just before winter. They both had reddish brown coats with a white stripe between their eyes, the foal nestled beside its mother's legs, staring intently at Therese without moving. The animals stood beneath one of two magnificent elm trees ten feet from their back door—the tree her mother said had gotten the Dutch elm disease. Therese relaxed with her mother at the wooden table on the deck, each of them with a mug of coffee in the bright Sunday morning. Her mother had the paper but wasn't reading it. She had that look on her face when she was thinking of a scientific formula or method

that she planned to try in her lab. Therese stared again at the horse and didn't move. She whispered, "Mom."

Her mother hadn't heard.

"Mom, the wild horses," she whispered again.

Therese looked from the beautiful creatures to her mother, who sat staring in space, transfixed, like a person hypnotized.

"Mom, are you deaf?" she blurted out, and then she heard the horses flee back up the mountain into the tall pines. She caught a glimpse of the foal's reddish-brown rump, and that was that.

As Therese strapped on her seatbelt, she also considered the possibility that she had only *imagined* the man in the window. She was, after all, prone to use her imagination and fully capable of making daydreams as real as reality, as she had, just now, with her memory of the horses.

Her phone vibrated. A text from Jen read, "Heat sheets r n call me when u get home." Awesome, she thought. Therese was anxious to see who would share her heat in tomorrow's championship meet. She hoped she would be swimming breaststroke in the top heat against Lacey Holzmann from Pagosa Springs. She wanted to beat her this time.

She searched outside her window for the scruffy face but saw only a line of headlights as others, like they, exited the parking lot of the concert hall. Maybe she *had* only imagined the man. It was getting dark. The mountains across campus were barely visible as dusk turned into night.

"We're both so proud of you, Honey," Therese's dad said from behind the wheel.

Therese probably got her imaginative talent from her father, who was a successful crime fiction writer. As soon as his first book made the *New York Times* bestsellers list, he moved his family out into their big log cabin in the San Juan Mountains.

Therese saw her father eyeing her in the rearview mirror. "Aren't we, sweetie pie?"

She wondered at her father's need to praise her mother all the time. Didn't her mother already know she was brilliant and that her husband and daughter looked up to her? "Absolutely. You're awesome, Mom."

Therese's phone vibrated again. A text from Paul read, "Wat r u waring?"

She cringed and murmured, “Oooh. How gross.” She couldn’t believe he had got her number. He had been stalking her around campus just before school let out for the summer.

Before she had a chance to delete the text, Therese heard the rear window behind her head explode. “What the…” Glass shards pricked at her neck and bare shoulders. The car swerved left and right. She looked back to see the window behind her busted. The line of headlights had dispersed into chaos, horns blasting, people shouting.

“What the hell was that?” her father yelled. “Oh my God! Linda! Linda!”

“Dad, what’s wrong? Is Mom…”

Another explosion rang out, and something zipped just past Therese’s head.

“Therese? Are you okay? Get down!”

“What’s happening? What’s going on?” Therese cowered in the back seat as a third explosion sounded, this time near the windshield. Therese could barely breathe. She gasped for air, her heart about to explode.

“Stay down! Someone’s shooting at us!” her father shouted.

The car swerved, slowed, and turned. The smell of burned rubber permeated the air. Therese’s head whipped back as her father gunned the accelerator. Her fingers trembled so wildly, she was barely able to punch the correct numbers on her phone. She messed up twice and had to start over. Finally she pressed them in slow motion: 911. It seemed an eternity before a woman answered on the other end.

“Nine-one-one, is this an emergency?”

“Someone’s shooting at us! You’ve got to help us. We’re leaving Fort Lewis College. Dad, where are we?”

“Heading toward Huck Finn Pond.”

“Huck Finn Pond!” Therese screamed into the phone as the car swerved, her seatbelt digging into her hip. Then she noticed the blood dripping down the back of her mother’s neck and onto her mother’s silk scarf. “Oh, my God! Mom? Mom, are you okay?”

“She’ll be okay, Therese!” her father shouted.

“Oh my God! I think my mom’s been shot! You’ve got to do something! You’ve got to help us!”

A crushing sound shot through the car, and Therese felt herself jolted hard to the right. She hit her head on the window and dropped the cell phone. When she bent over and tried to pick

it up, the back end of the car lurched upward like a seesaw, and her head hit the back of her mother's seat in front of her. She sat up and saw they were sailing through the air over the lake. The front end of the car hit the water, causing her head to flop forward and back. She heard the air hissing through the airbags as they inflated in the front end. She was so stunned, she couldn't speak. She watched in silent shock as water crept into the front end of the car, up to her father's neck, the untied bowtie of his tuxedo floating around him. The front airbags pressed against her father's cheek, her mother's face. Water spilled over the front seat and onto the floorboard in back where she sat elevated higher than her parents.

She unfastened her seatbelt and leaned over and looked down at her mother in horror. A bullet had put a hole in the back of her neck, and blood rushed from it. Her head lay against the airbag turned to one side, toward Therese's father. Her eyes were open and she was gasping for air, but blood was pouring from her mouth and choking her.

"Mom! Oh my God! Mom!" Therese's teeth chattered uncontrollably as her mother strained to look at her. She reached down and caressed her mother's hair. "Mom! Oh my God!"

She realized her father had been shouting her name for several seconds. "Listen to me, Therese! Therese! Try to open your window. Therese! Try to get out of the car!"

His voice sounded like it did when he was cheering her on from the deck of the pool at her swim meets. "Keep going, Therese! You're looking good! Kick! Pull!"

Except now it was tinged with desperation.

"I'm not leaving without you and Mom! I'm scared! Dad, please! Can't you get out?" Her teeth continued to chatter.

The water level rose to his mouth. He shook his head. "I'm stuck!" He shouted through the water. His eyes widened as the water crept to his nose. He was drowning right in front of her.

"Dad! Dad!"

In a state of frenzy, he turned from side to side, only the top of his head visible.

Therese watched in silent shock.

She looked at her mother. Her mother's eyes met hers briefly, then closed as the water washed over all but her red hair. Unlike her father, her mother didn't move, but simply relinquished herself to the water. Her hair danced like seaweed, like long veins of blood. Therese became aware of the coldness of the water that had been sucking her down. Its cold fingers crept up to her shoulders. Her white gloves floated beside her, pointing at her. *You! Do something!*

She took a deep breath and went underwater toward her father. She couldn't see in the dark, so she pushed against the airbag and felt around for the harness. The belt was undone, but the steering shaft was crushed across her father's lap. She pulled with all her might on the steering wheel. It didn't move. She tried to puncture the airbag but without luck. Then she yanked on her father's lifeless arm. She couldn't lift him from the seat.

Another memory shot through her mind: She was pulling her father's arm, coaxing him from his recliner. "Come see the deer," she was saying. She was small—maybe six. "Come on, Dad. Come see." He had laughed and made a comment about her chipmunk cheeks and dimples, that he'd do anything to see those dimples. She pulled at his arm and he laughed and climbed out of his chair to follow her outside.

But now she could not get her father to follow her.

She felt her mother's hand and flinched. She found it again. It was as cold as the water and as limp as a dead fish. She hugged her mother, held on to her for dear life till her brain hurt and she needed air.

There she popped back up near the top of the car for air, but there was none. She hitched her body up and hit her head on the roof of the car. She then noticed a bright light shine on her through her backseat window. She thought she saw someone swimming toward her. She heard another crash and a surge of water, but she needed air! Panic overtook her like a wild beast, and she opened her eyes as far as they would open, writhed her body against every molecule in reach, and strained her mouth wide open. Her lungs filled with burning water, the cold water burning her like fire. She gagged on the water, gagged, kicked, went wild with fear, and then stopped and gave in to the darkness.

Chapter Two: Thanatos

Humans didn't realize how lucky they were, Than thought as he took the woman's hand. At least, if they were mostly good, they could live a brief life with some kinds of freedoms and then spend eternity in a dreamlike trance, unaware of the monotony around them.

"Just this way," he said to the woman and the man as they floundered above the abyss, disoriented, like all of them were at this stage of the journey.

"What about Therese?" the woman asked. "Where's Therese?"

Than sighed. He couldn't imagine the pain they almost always showed on their faces. He couldn't imagine it because he had never felt it. At least it was temporary. The Lethe, the river of forgetfulness that flowed from the Acheron, would soon ease that pain, so long as these two souls were destined to the Fields of Elysium. The judges would soon decide.

"It's not too much further," Than murmured. "Come along."

"But what about our daughter?" the man asked.

The three of them now hovered up to the muddy bank where Charon waited on his raft. Than brought them down and allowed some of the water to wash up against their feet. It would help fog their memory until they reached the Lethe.

"Oh, that's cold," the woman said softly. "But it feels nice."

"Very nice," the man agreed.

Than gave a curt nod. "Time to board."

Charon nodded back as he dug his slender pole into the mud to hold the raft steady. He rarely spoke, with his nearly bald head, long, white mustache, and pale, cracked skin, and seemed more a cog in the wheel than any of them, churning on and on, back and forth, up the river and down, in an endless cycle. Than supposed Charon's existence was still worse than his own. At least Than got to travel the world. Charon saw the same sights day in and day out. His life never varied.

Than put a hand on the shoulder of each of the passengers, knowing it would comfort them. Yes, he thought again, humans were lucky. A brief, exciting life trumped a dull eternity. As his father always said, nothing ever changed. A few details might, but the big picture always

remained the same. Than realized that none of the gods was really all that different from Sisyphus who, each day, must face his rock.

But what if things could change? Than wondered, not for the first time. He sighed and once again shook his head and waited as the raft approached the gate.

Chapter Three: Sleep

Therese opened her eyes and found herself standing on a cool, muddy bank. Fog curled around her, and through it she could see water in front of her, and it flowed in a narrow gorge between two ominous granite mountains. “Mom! Dad!” Her screams were stifled by the thick fog. “Mom! Dad!” She looked around the empty bank. Her bare feet sunk into the itchy mud. Where were her shoes? Her white gloves were back on her hands, her gown perfectly dry, and her hair back up in its fat clip. Tall blades of grass as high as her knees grew in tufts along the shore. Mosquitoes swarmed over one area of the water. Three large boulders leaned in a cluster on the left side of the shore against the base of a steep, massive wall of rock. How did she get here?

She waded into the icy lake. The cold water crept up her thighs. She couldn’t see Huck Finn Bridge. Nothing looked familiar, but she had to find her parents. Isn’t this where they went under in the car? She dove into the freezing water.

Long, snakelike tendrils of hydrilla weeds grabbed and scratched at her ankles. She flinched, kicking her legs all about.

“She’s moving,” a familiar voice above her said.

“Therese?”

She resurfaced. “Who said that?” Her voice was only a whisper, though she tried to speak loudly. It was hard for her to move her mouth. “Who, who said that?”

When no answer came, she dove back into the icy lake. “Mom! Dad!” Why was she looking for them? Her memory went fuzzy. “Mom? Dad?” She could talk underwater as though she were talking through air. She could breathe without water entering her mouth. How strange, she thought to herself. She felt as though she had turned into some kind of mer-creature. The lake transformed into a beautiful world of colorful coral, tropical fish, and sunken treasure chests.

She swam back to the muddy shore. “I must be dreaming.” She walked over to the three boulders and sat on one of them. “Or I’m dead.” She pulled off the wet gloves and tossed them on the ground.

Therese jumped into the air and swam a breaststroke through the fog, like she always did to test if she was dreaming. She went up above the curling, iridescent moisture where she could see the twinkling stars. Therese turned somersaults, forward and backward, dolphin-kicked a loop-de-loop, and then floated on her back. “Yep. I’m either dreaming or I’m dead.”

She made the fog disappear so she could see all around her. She reached up and touched a sparkling star, turned it into a diamond ring, and put it on her finger. Then she plucked her flute out of the air and played a Handel sonata. The flute felt comfortable in her hands, the cool, shiny metal beneath her fingers. The tones flowed smoothly as she blew, moving from one fingering to the next with perfect fluidity.

“I’ve never seen anyone like you,” a voice came beside her.

Therese stopped playing. She hadn’t willed him, as she had willed other guys to appear in dreams past, but she was glad he was there floating in the night sky alongside her. His thick golden hair covered his ears and fell on his forehead almost into his eyes. His eyes were blue, his skin fair, and his lips moist and peach. They parted into a smile.

“Are you checking me out?” he asked.

Therese blushed. “This is my dream, isn’t it? Or am I dead?”

“You’re not dead.”

“So I’m dreaming, then. I can do whatever I want.” She tossed the flute and willed her parents to appear, and they did.

“Mom! Dad!” She flew across the sky and into their arms. They were still in their formal wear. Her mother’s neck, face, and scarf were perfectly clean, and she smelled like Haiku, her favorite fragrance. Her father smelled like musk, like the deodorant he always wore. Unlike Therese, her parents wore their shoes. Therese decided she should have her new shoes back, so she willed them to appear on her feet.

“Fascinating,” the boy said. He wore a white, opened shirt, and his tight abs gleamed in the moonlight. White loose pants covered his legs, and he wore brown sandals on his feet.

Therese willed his shirt off, and the shirt disappeared.

The boy laughed. “You have so much control. Very few people are lucid dreamers, and I’ve never known anyone like you.”

Therese turned to her parents. “I thought you were dead.”

“Silly girl. Of course not,” her mother scolded. “Give me a kiss.”

She kissed her mother's cheek. It felt warm and soft and fully alive.

"Who's your friend?" her father asked.

Now that Therese had been comforted by her parents, she could let them go for a while.

"I'll be home later. 'Kay?"

"Not too late," her father said.

Therese willed him to take it back.

"Whenever you get home is fine," he said.

Her parents vanished, causing a vague sense of panic to quell her excitement over the boy, but she pushed the panic down, reminding herself this was just a dream. She turned to the sexy guy, still shirtless, beside her. "So what's your name?"

"I have many. Most people call me Hip, short for Hypnos."

Okay, that's strange. Whatever. "Hip. I'm Therese."

"Are we going to make out now, or what?" He took her in his arms. "Your beauty, as well as your power, draws me. Is this a projection, or your real image?"

Therese had willed many sexy guys to appear in her dreams and have romances with her, but even there, she had kissed and made out with them on her own terms, and in the awake, real world, kissing was still a faraway anticipation. The eager look in the boy's face made her wary.

She pushed him back. "Why are you in such a hurry?" She looked over her body. She decided to make her boobs bigger. She smiled down at the soft, round flesh protruding from the top of her blue formal gown. Nice cleavage, she thought. "How's that?"

He threw his head back and guffawed. Then he shook his head, regaining his composure, and said, "I liked them better before."

"You've got to be kidding." She blushed and deflated herself. "It's my dream, not yours, but okay."

"No kidding. And I like your dimples. You've got a cute round face and full lips. I wouldn't mind kissing them."

Another voice sounded above her. "Therese?"

"Who *is* that? Who keeps calling me?"

A vague inkling of a car in a lake threatened to impose itself into memory, but Therese turned back to the boy and took in his beauty, forgetting all else.

Hip said, "They're trying to wake you up. But I'm not ready for you to go yet. You're such a nice diversion from what can sometimes be my dreary existence."

"How old are you?" She turned and floated on her back and looked down her body at him where he hovered near her shoes.

"Ancient."

"You look eighteen. I'm fifteen. I'll be a sophomore this year."

Down below, she noticed a raft floating across what she now saw was a river. There were four people on it, but she couldn't make out who they were. She swam the breaststroke through the air toward the water to get a better view. Her teeth felt loose. They started to crumble. She willed her teeth back into her mouth and licked them to be sure they were set correctly. Satisfied, she smiled.

Hip was fast behind her. "You're so incredible. People usually wake up when their teeth fall out."

She saw an old man standing on the raft dragging a long paddle through the water. Alongside him stood two familiar people and one other she didn't know. "It's my mom and dad. Hey, wait up." She flew above them, but they didn't seem to notice her.

The old man and the other passenger, whom she could now see was another guy, as cute as Hip, looked up at her. He looked sad and serious, like the silent moody type. His eyes were blue, and his hair was nearly black. He's so awesomely beautiful, she thought. He wore loose white pants and an opened white shirt like Hip had worn earlier, and, as with Hip, she willed the shirt to disappear. The boy looked startled, but her parents didn't react. They stood expressionless on the raft.

Hip laughed at the other boy's bewilderment. "That's my brother, Thanatos. Everyone calls him Than. I'm pretty sure that's a first for him."

"He looks a lot like you."

"We're twins, but not identical. I got the sense of humor, the easygoing disposition, and the charm with all the ladies. He got, well, not a whole lot, actually. I suppose he's trustworthy. My father says dependable and responsible, but those are pretty boring qualities, if you ask me. I sometimes feel sorry for him."

"What's he doing with my parents?"

"He's taking them to the Underworld, where all the dead go."

“My parents aren’t dead.” Again, the vague inkling threatened to return to memory, but Therese shook her head. She willed herself back home in her own cozy bed with her dog, Clifford, curled beside her. Hip was not with her.

“Time to wake up,” she said to Clifford.

The brown and white fox terrier licked her cheek.

Therese tossed back her comforter and climbed out of the bed, the warm, wooden floor familiar beneath her feet. She dropped some hamster food into Puffy’s hamster cage and turned on the lamp over her Russian tortoise’s tank.

“Good morning, Jewels,” Therese said.

The tortoise winked at her.

Therese headed downstairs. Clifford bounded behind her, as usual. Her parents were in the kitchen sitting at the granite bar drinking coffee and reading the paper, as on any Saturday morning.

They were still in their pajamas, but she was in her blue formal gown.

She replaced the gown with a nightshirt. *Poof*: There, better.

“Good morning,” she said to her parents.

She went through the screened front porch and out into what she was expecting to be the sunny morning on their wooden deck in the mountains but was instead the night sky over the foggy river. Hip greeted her.

“Nice outfit.”

“So this really is just a dream,” she said. “None of it’s real.”

“What makes a dream any less real?” he challenged.

“Hip, let her go!” the boy from below on the raft warned. “They need to revive her or she’s going to die!”

“Therese?” a voice came from somewhere above.

Than flew up and pulled Therese away from Hip. “Let her go, brother. You’re endangering her life.”

Therese felt weak and she tried to wriggle free but nearly fell from the air.

Than held her up. “You shouldn’t be here,” he whispered, close to her ear. He sent a shiver down her spine, but his breath was sweet.

She didn't like the direction this dream was going. In the dreams in which she was about to die, she usually bolted into the air and changed the events into something happy. Although she couldn't find the strength to jump up and twirl around, she did manage to throw her arms around the good-looking boy holding onto her. She could make the dream into a new romance. "My dream," she managed to say as she clung to him. She put her lips against his lips. "You're...so...lovely."

"Whoa, brother," Hip said. "Today's full of all kinds of firsts for you, man."

Than seemed shocked. He looked at her like she was an alien. "You can't do this," he said, but he didn't push her away. His eyes closed, he sighed, and, almost reluctantly, it seemed, he put his strong arms around Therese, who felt weaker. She could feel his mouth near her forehead. A sound came from his throat, something like a groan.

She liked being in his arms. "You're...so...lovely," she murmured, growing weaker and weaker.

"Take her back." Than seemed to be fighting an inner battle. "I'm to take her parents, but not her. It's not her time."

Therese willed herself up. "My parents? Where are you taking them?"

Than looked into her questioning eyes. He looked as though he wanted to kiss her. She wanted to kiss him, too. His face moved closer. She nearly lost her breath. But her parents! She flew from his arms and down to the raft.

"Charon, don't board her!" Than growled, fast on her heels. "She's not to go across."

"Mom! Dad!"

Her parents didn't seem to hear her.

"This is my dream, dammit. Look at me!"

Her parents turned toward her. "Therese?"

Than gave Therese a look of astonishment. "How did you do that?"

Therese flew down to her parents.

Strong arms went around her and pulled her away from the raft. The brothers were on either side of her. She was fighting a futile battle. The brothers were much too strong for her to break free from them.

Than smiled. "You're right. She's a powerful soul. I've never known someone to follow loved ones down this far."

“You’re forgetting Orpheus and Hercules,” Hip pointed out.

“But they were demigods.” Than’s hands tightened their grip on Therese. Hip started to say something, but Than interrupted, “And Odysseus was sent down, so he doesn’t count, either.” Hip opened his mouth, but as before, Than was too quick with his retort, “And Aeneas had a guide and a golden bough, unlike this girl who came all on her own with no bribes.”

Hip finally got his say, “I *told* you this girl was powerful. You’re *making* my case, brother.” He pulled Therese closer to him. “I want to keep her.”

Therese wondered if they could possibly be talking about her. *Powerful?* She was anything but, as her inability to break free from them proved.

Than frowned. “If you try, she’ll die, and then what fascinates you about her will be lost.”

“Therese?” the voice from above called.

“Let her go!” Than implored.

Hip moved his lips to Therese’s ear. “Seek me out in your dreams. I want to find you again. Look for me. Call for me.”

Chapter Four: A Warning

Still jarred by his brother's foolish risk, Than waited in the poppies, until he fell asleep, and then he sought out Hip in the dream world.

Than knew exactly what Hip would be doing when he found him.

"I'll get you, my pretty! And you're little dog, too!" Hip's voice rang out over the abyss.

"Maybe not exactly," Than thought, rolling his eyes at his brother's projection of a little green woman in a pointed black cap. "Hey, witch!"

Hip turned in surprise and spoke in the voice of an old hag. "What are you doing here? I'm kind of in the middle of something."

Than looked at the pretty girl cowering in fear before his brother. Then he asked his brother, still in his witch form, "Since when has this been your style? What happened to lover boy?"

"Now come on, brother," Hip said. "I've been doing this for over a millennium. Shows how often you come to see me."

"What exactly is this?" Than asked. "I don't think that particular character has been around for over a millennium."

"Details, details," Hip said. "I'm talking strategy here, not the details."

"Scare them to death?"

"Never to death, brother. Then you'd get them. I just scare them enough to want a protector." Hip changed his witchy projection back to himself and spoke in his own voice. "There, there, Melody. I'll save you from that nasty witch."

The girl ran into Hip's arms.

Hip gave Than a smirk and a wink. "Works every time," he said over the girl's head.

Hip's mouth fell on the girl's. "Nice," Hip said in between kisses.

Than remembered the feeling of Therese's arms around him, her lips pressed against his.

Hip read his thoughts before Than could block him. As twins, they had a special insight into one another's minds.

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