

Sophie's Top Ten List

of

Final Showdown Terrors



10) Getting Stabbed: As a crazed junkie jonsing for magic and blaming me for no longer having her amped up popularity and hotness, Bethany Russo-Hill will once again manage to gut me like a fish. This time with something that causes my accelerated healing powers to fail me, and so this attack will be fatal. Instead of merely bloody, exceedingly painful, and *almost fatal*, like the last one.

9) The premature death of my friends: Unable to break through the wards at the apartment of Hephaestus, God of Fire, Volcanos, and Technology (where I am currently staying) in order to kill me, Zeus and Hades will find a way past the wards at my old school and kill all my friends instead.

8) New deadly foes: Some other wackjob Greek god, who I have not yet met, will decide to show up and wreak havoc and/or try to kill me before the equinox.

7) Old deadly foes: Since it wasn't enough payback that my real mother, Demeter, pretended to be my drunk, adoptive, love-withholding parent Felicia for my entire life, she will make a deal with one of my enemies to somehow screw me over; thus hastening my downfall and death.

6) Not being up to the job: Even though my higher superior goddess power makes me capable of taking out the minions of Hades and Zeus, those gods have an inexhaustible supply of minions. When Zeus and Hades set them full force against me, which they're sure to do in the final battle, I'll be exhausted (and thus dead) before they've really tapped into their stockpile.

5) Kai being an idiot: Kai *won't* show up to perform the love ritual with me on the equinox, thus assuring Zeus and Hades emerge victorious, with more expendable human casualties in their ongoing war. It's totally unfair of Kai to be mad at *me*, Sophie, just because before my human self was even born, my goddess self chose to betray him. Stupidly, I still love that idiot.

4) Kai being a different kind of idiot: Kai *will* show up to perform the love ritual with me on the equinox. But because the stuff that happened with Persephone still hurts him, the ritual won't work, thus assuring Zeus and Hades emerge victorious, with more expendable human casualties in their ongoing war. Insert another Persephone rant here. And some choice words for Kai in the bargain.

3) Me self-destructing: This constant anger I feel since learning that Persephone betrayed both my mother and Kai, my mother pulling me out of Hope Park, and being stabbed and left to die will get the better of me. I'll spontaneously combust in a giant bomb of rage, spewing destruction across a massive blast zone, and ensuring Zeus and Hades emerge victorious etc etc.

2) Fear-of-aftermath affecting my game: Even if I win, what will my future hold? Can I put "saved world" on a college application? If I fulfill my destiny next week, where do I go from there? A *Where Are They Now* pity piece in some Greek god trash rag?

1) Me getting it all so wrong: The prophecy about me being the savior of humanity will be totally off-base and the one about me being an instrument of destruction will nail it. Come spring equinox, I, Sophie Bloom, will personally destroy the Earth and everyone on it. Probably including myself.

Good times.

One



Of all the Prince of Darkness' powers, his best were his bone-melting super-kisses. Which is why, when my boyfriend Kai, (formally known as Kyrillos, son of Hades, Lord of the Underworld) pushed me up against my bedroom wall with a liplock of mind whacking proportions, I didn't do much other than grip his shoulders, try to stay in an upright position, and willingly participate.

But as right as it felt, I also knew that it was very very wrong.

"We have to talk," I gasped as I came up for air.

"Overrated," Kai murmured, nudging his hips up against mine. Instead of talking, he opted for Plan B, which was pretty much a new and improved version of Plan A. His hand clasped the back of my head to pull me closer.

If I pressed myself any harder against him, I'd be behind him.

Maybe that would be a good thing. Then I wouldn't be distracted by things like the way his stupidly gor-

geous-lashed eyes fixated on me, their normal espresso brown darkened and full of heat.

Kai shook his head, flinging a wayward lock of dark hair out of his eyes. That just made me want to sink my hands into his hair. And like the most pathetic Pavlovian conditioning, one of my hands snaked up to twine my fingers into the curled ends just below his ears.

His breath caught at my caress.

Kai leaned forward and gave me the most fleeting, teasing kiss, his lips brushing mine. My stomach fluttered at hummingbird speed during that split second of connection.

Kissing, touching; our chemistry was off the scale.

Sadly, so was the weight of our baggage.

Despite the bubbly sensation his kisses gave me, my chest felt heart attack victim tight and I wanted to smack him if only to get him talking. One of us had to be the grown up and put an end to the whole messed up romance.

As much as I knew that intellectually, my body wasn't prepared to agree. My treacherous fingers gripped the front of Kai's blue sweater like a baby with a security blanket, refusing to break contact.

Kai brushed his knuckles along my side. "I miss your curves," he murmured, his lips at my throat.

Over the past few months, I had become a lean, mean fighting machine. My best friend Theo, a.k.a. Prometheus, had me on a crazy training regimen to build up my stamina and strength in preparation for my final showdown with Zeus and Hades.

Which was next Thursday.

Exactly one week from today.

And speaking of said battle ...

The fate of the world rested on Kai's and my shoulders, and right now, that was a very unstable place to be. "We can't keep doing ..." My voice rose an octave as he nipped at my happy spot in the hollow of my neck. "... this."

I pushed him away, placing my hand on his chest to keep him at arm's length.

Kai shot me a look of pure sorrow. "I know," he said, his voice full of misery. There was a brief pause during which neither of us moved. A pause which would have been the perfect moment to finally—after all the kissing, avoidance, and waaay more kissing—talk about the Persephone-shaped elephant of betrayal in the room.

"Honey, I'm home."

My friend Hephaestus, better known as Festos had returned. His cheerful voice drifted into the guest bedroom of his apartment located in the industrial area in Seattle, where I'd been living for the past couple months. After Bethany had left me stabbed and bleeding on the ground in my school parking lot on that awful night, when Festos had kindly taken me in to heal.

And then kept me because I had nowhere else to go. I couldn't return to school, and not because of Bethany. No, my adoptive, drunk, socialite mother Felicia—a.k.a. Demeter—had made sure to burn that bridge for me but good. She'd wanted me out from under the safety of the wards at the school and back in her clutches.

Guess she'd planned on "convincing" me to honor the original deal between her and Persephone which would let Demeter rule Olympus, after Persephone and Kai took down their fathers on the spring equinox.

Persephone had reneged on that deal. Demeter had murdered her. *Our* relationship was only marginally better. I wasn't giving Mommy Dearest squat. Besides, if she'd been willing to kill Persephone, who she loved, there was no way I was letting her get her hands on *me*, her giant disappointment of a daughter.

"Soph?" Festos was getting closer.

Kai tensed against me. I knew what was coming and grabbed at him, but he was faster than I was. He disappeared.

I screamed in frustration, picked up my desk chair, and threw it across the room. It landed on the plush brown rug with an unsatisfyingly muted thud. I stomped around, swearing with every step. I was madder than a court ordered participant in an anger management course.

Seventeen years ago, the dying spirit of Persephone, Goddess of Spring, was magicked into my newborn Sophie body. A fact of which I'd remained blissfully unaware until last Halloween. That's when a prank I'd pulled on my "frenemy minus the 'fr'", Bethany Russo-Hill, had resulted in a kiss from a bad boy (two guesses who *that* was). The kiss had awakened my goddess identity, and given me a whopper of a responsibility as the Savior of Humanity in the ongoing war between Zeus and Hades here on Earth.

Although I'd gotten Persephone's powers, for the longest time, I didn't get her memories back.

Until that glorious day when I did, in all their Technicolor vividness. That magnificent day when Kai also declared his love for me, and, for a whole freaking hour, I'd felt on top of the world.

Reality is such a bitch.

Later that night we'd learned that, back when Persephone and Kai had been voted "the couple most likely to nauseate everyone with their happy bliss," she had actually been planning to use and betray him.

Kai had walked away from me at that point. And while he hadn't been able to stay away from me, hence the on-going locking of lips, he had refused to talk about it. Just a lot of bottled anger and making out.

Which made me feel both happy and crappy.

Lately though, I seemed stuck in the latter gear.

Festos popped my door open, leaned against the doorframe, and crossed his arms. His left foot was permanently turned inward, and he held the sleek black cane he used in one hand. Although his hair was now bright blue, his jeans were saucily skinny, and his trademark fedora was at as rakish an angle as ever, the blurriness in his eyes belied the sparkiness of his look.

Festos pointed his cane at me accusingly. "Do not *e-ven* tell me that a certain spawn of the Underworld was in your bedroom again, doing lip things that were not talking."

I opened my mouth to lie and deny, but he cut me off, whipping one hand up. "One week, honeybunch.

Do you remember what happens in one week if you and Kyrillos don't sort yourselves out?"

Hot anger rose up inside me and I scratched furiously at the familiar itch on my arms. "Yes!" I snapped. "Our love ritual doesn't work. Hades and Zeus win and humanity bites it. I get it. I'm trying Fee, but—"

"But what? Hmm? His lips are laced with a paralytic that make you unable to converse? You promised me you'd speak to him."

I stared stubbornly at a spot on the opposite wall as my eyes got hot. No way was I going to cry over this.

Again.

I took a deep breath and forced myself to speak to Festos calmly. "Kai won't talk to me. When I push him, he disappears. When I follow him, he blocks me out with wards around his place. What am I supposed to do?"

Festos scowled and banged his cane on the ground. "I don't care but do *something*. Because Prometheus thinks you and Kyrillos have worked things out. And I won't keep being an accomplice in a lie to my boyfriend any longer." With a final glower, he stomped away.

Suitably chastened, I shuffled to my bed and sat down on my heavenly blue comforter. With the exception of a better mattress, I'd furnished Festos' guest room with all of the stuff that I'd had back at my boarding school, Hope Park Progressive.

Festos and Theo had even painted it the same raspberry color that my other best friend Hannah and I had used for our dorm room. I missed being back at Hope Park with her so much. Sometimes I could convince myself that my room here was my room *there*.

If I squinted really hard.

And it was dark.

And Hannah had come to visit.

Thinking of Hannah and that life I could never go back to just made my heart hurt. Like burning razor-blades were systematically and quite thoroughly shredding it apart.

Turn the misery to rage. Use it.

“No,” I snapped, “and shut up. We are going to get through this peacefully.” Yes, I had become the crazy person talking to the voices in my head.

Okay, one voice. Persephone’s.

Ever since I’d gotten her memories back and my life had turned to a massive pile of suck, I’d heard her egging me on. Urging me to wrap my fury around me like a blanket and do unto others with a heap of goddess retribution whoop ass.

I did my best to ignore her. Mostly by obsessing about how hearing her voice meant I was probably going bat-crap crazy. Which was why I hadn’t told anyone about it either.

Rationally, I understood that it wasn’t literally Persephone talking to me. It was me, channelling my insecurities or neuroses or deep dark fears, and projecting them in her voice.

Didn’t make it any less weird though.

I flung out a hand and smacked the button on the CD player docking stand on my bedside table. It was black, thin, and oozing with priciness. Festos loved his tech toys.

Soothing water sounds flowed out of the speakers. I crossed my legs, closed my eyes, and breathed in and out to the sound of waves lapping at the shore. Low flute music accompanied the water.

So relaxing.

So ... blech.

I hated this stuff. I massaged my temples, feeling the beginning of another headache. They'd become pretty constant companions of mine, along with hot itchy arms.

Brilliant.

I breathed through my tension, doing my best to relax my body one muscle at a time from my toes to my scalp; a technique I'd used a lot since I'd learned how Persephone betrayed Kai.

I forced myself to unlock my jaw.

The gentle waves began to crackle. Opening my eyes, I turned my head and hit the side of the speaker with my open palm. The crackling only got louder.

I rocked back and forth. *Oh no. Not again.*

There was a loud *whoosh*.

I scrambled off the bed. Fumbling for the cord, I yanked it out of the wall, unplugging the CD player. Maybe I could stop the vision before it hit me full on.

But it was too late.

I was outside. Ash and smoke blinded me. The burn in the air scratched the back of my throat. I coughed, trying to yell out for help but the fire roared too loudly. Besides, who would hear me?

My stomach clenched hard, practically doubling me over with cold fear and the queasy knowledge that I was all alone on Earth.

I balled my fists, tense against the mocking laughter that I knew was coming. That I was helpless to prevent.

My fault.

I'd failed.

SMACK! “Sophie!” Festos had my shoulders in a death grip; his face inches from mine.

Dazed, the despair of my vision still clinging to me, I touched a hand to my jaw. I felt the blood rushing to warm the spot that Festos had bashed.

“Thanks,” I said, my voice cracking. I cleared my throat. “Thanks.”

“What the Holy Hell just happened?” he asked. “I walked past and found you standing blank-eyed and shaking in the middle of your room.”

I opened my mouth to tell him but the words wouldn't come out. I hadn't told anyone about this disjointed vision I'd been having. I was terrified that saying anything out loud would make it come true. “I think I'm losing it,” I told him.

Festos rubbed his index finger over his bottom lip as he studied me.

I tried not to feel like a zoo animal as I stood there fidgeting.

“Talk to me,” he said gently.

“I'm having ... visions,” I muttered, wrapping my arms around myself, utterly self-conscious.

“Visions, huh?” Festos pushed my arms away. He snatched the hem of my black waffle knit shirt and tugged it up to just under my boobs, ignoring my protests.

I glowered at him as he traced the white puckered scar running vertically along the right side of my gut.

“Sometimes extreme trauma can cause a disconnect,” he said.

This had been extreme, all right. Despite all the supernatural attacks, the one with the most lasting damage had come from a human. My classmate and long-time nemesis, Bethany, had freaked out when I destroyed the magic tattoo that gave her enhanced popularity. She’d been using it to try to attain global celebrity and push her vapid, dangerous ideas about social status.

I’d stopped her.

She’d stabbed me.

I hadn’t died.

Moving on.

I swatted Festos’ hand away. “Leave it. What does that have to do with anything?” I pulled my shirt back down to cover the ugly slash.

He slung an arm around me. “How do you feel about tattoos, honeybunch?”

I blinked and thought about it. I’d never considered a tattoo. But I’d always believed that with the right design, there was something empowering about them. Maybe the first step in my straightening out this giant mess involved doing something small to reclaim my body. To feel right within myself again, instead of the slightly off-kilter grossness that had dogged me for the past couple of months. Maybe it was time to turn my pain to power. I nodded. “Tell me more.”

He did.
