

# OUR VENGEFUL SOULS

IT ALL STARTED WITH A CURSE

KRISTI MCMANUS



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SOULS



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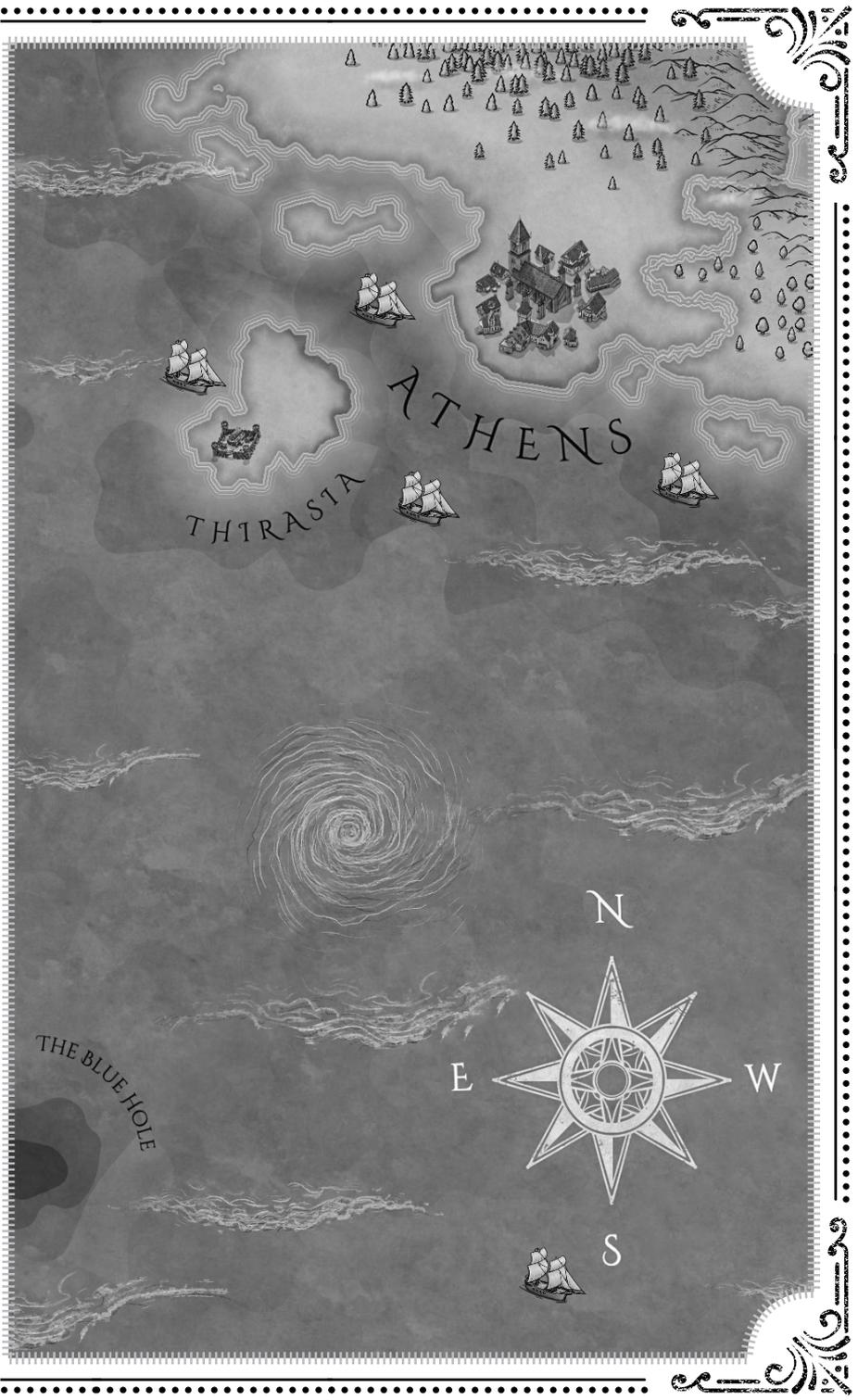
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ATHENS

THRASIA

THE BLUE HOLE

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## CHAPTER ONE



Our swords collide with a deafening crash, sparks sizzling before dying off in the water as the blades strain against each other. The moment they touch, they break apart again, like opposing magnets never able to resist each other yet never able to truly connect.

I pivot quickly, narrowly missing Triton's next strike as the blade swings by my cheek. The disturbed water brushes softly against my skin like a caress, but a warning sings in my veins of how close he came to spilling my blood.

Spinning to face him again, I clutch my weapon with both hands, fingers tightening along the hilt while eyeing my prey. His tail is curved, coiled like an eel preparing to strike as he takes inventory of me, just as I am of him. His cerulean blue eyes are narrowed, lips parted, muscles tense. His chest heaves, panting breath escaping through clenched teeth, evidence that he is winded. The longer we face off, the angrier he becomes. Not at me, necessarily, but at himself for the effort it's taking to defeat me.

We've been at this for hours, barely allowed a moment to rest. Not that either of us would admit to needing one. To require rest

would be to admit weakness. That the other is skilled enough to push us to our limits. Such a concession is unacceptable. Beyond our teachings of strength and focus and our endless hours in this ring, our pride is the strongest factor in our stamina.

We never back down from each other.

He surges forward through the water without warning, blade poised overhead in his iron grip, ready to hand out a match ending strike. But I am faster, lithe and swift, bringing my sword up to block the impact inches from my face.

Rather than retreat again and continue our dance, he remains poised above me, his superior height blocking the few rays of light piercing through the water until he is little more than a silhouette before my eyes. His blade presses against my own, metal grinding in protest, neither of us relenting.

My muscles quiver at the effort it takes to keep him at bay. They burn with an exquisite pain, reminding me that I am alive, that I am powerful. My teeth grind, lips curling back as I stand my ground. I see a glint of light reflect off the steel in my hands, shaking as I resist the possibility of defeat.

His full lips curve into a grin, teeth grinding despite the playful, goading expression. Golden hair spills from the tie at the nape of his neck, dancing around his face, attracting the light from the surface. The sharp jaw and angular features that cause the other mermaids to swoon are tense from the effort of our fight.

“Tired, Sister?” he asks coolly. Despite his attempt to appear indifferent, the lines of his face are hard, his jaw tight. He is struggling. Weakening. The realization causes my lips to quirk into a smile to match his own.

“Not at all, dear brother.” Bringing my face closer to his, and in turn, closer to our connected blades, magic prickles beneath my skin. Strands of my white-blonde hair wave around me like a crown under the influence of the sea, my green eyes burning into his. “I

will endure as long as you require. I wouldn't want to bow down too soon, thus not giving our precious heir a suitable sparring partner."

My taunt does as I hope. His teeth snap as a growl erupts deep in the back of his throat. The moment I feel the pressure of his sword weaken, I strike, swiping my tail outward and knocking him off balance. He collides to the sea floor with a thunderous impact, sand and stone billowing out from around his prone form. Pride tingles through my muscles, burning away the exhaustion. Putting Triton to the ground never ceases to thrill me, no matter how many times I best him.

A gasp ripples from those around us; the select few permitted to watch us train. Several of the maids present, hovering in the corner to gawk and swoon at my brother, cover their mouths in horror. His muscular frame lies sprawled across the floor, hair once smooth and controlled, now wild and loose in the gentle current. No longer does he look as perfect now that I have cracked his confidence.

Beyond the coral halls and glistening stone floors of the living quarters, banquet halls, and meeting rooms, rests the arena in which we barter our worth. Sand floors and towering stone walls breaking into an oculus ceiling high above allow the remaining reach of the days sun to breach to our depth. There is an expanse of weapons edging every wall, blades and staffs, all with the singular purpose of training the royals.

Casting a glance to the edge of the hall, I find my parents lingering in the shadows. Their scales glitter, catching the light like precious gems, brighter than those around them. Even without their crowns, they exude regal poise.

Something I have yet to master.

Looking their way is a mistake, of course. A weakness I repeatedly chastise myself for, as it never provides the assurance I hope. And yet, every time I force Triton to his knees, I cannot help but look for a sign of approval.

My mother watches our battle with keen green eyes, the kind of look that makes you feel as though she is cutting right through your soul. Her hair, the same white-blond as my own, plaited down her back is contrasted against the deep greens of her sea lace top. Long sleeves adorned with pearls cling to her slender, enviable frame, the neck high to her jaw. Her skin shimmers like diamonds are embedded in her skin, a symbol of our kind, luminous and beckoning. She is stunning, her mere presence demanding attention and respect. And her hypnotizing gaze is locked on me, a proud smile toying with the corner of her coral lips.

Against my better judgment, I allow myself to glance at my father. He is as I expect to find him; lips curled in disgust, his deep blue eyes locked on the shape of his eldest son and heir pushing up from the ground. Displeasure radiates off his form, causing the water around him to ripple against his power. When his eyes turn to me, I do not see pride. I see fury, barely concealed.

He isn't proud that his daughter is a skilled fighter. No more than he is proud that my magic exceeds that of my brother's. He is angry that I dare embarrass him by putting Triton on his back.

My confidence wavers under his stare, grip weakening on the hilt of my sword.

The momentary distraction is all Triton needs. I feel the water move before I see him from the corner of my eye. By the time I tighten my hands around my sword, steady my stance, he collides with me, knocking the air from my lungs. His massive weight knocks me back, forcing me to drop my blade. I twist out of the fall before I hit the ground, coiled and ready to respond to his next attack, but he doesn't retreat or pause his pursuit, satisfied with disarming me. Instead, his large hand grips my throat, and he throws my body to the floor painfully, poising his blade above my heart. Breath knocks from my lungs at the impact of the ground at my back, bones aching in protest and muscles burning.

My hands grapple with his arms, body writhing against the weight pinning me, but it is no use. He has won.

A smile curves his lips as he loosens his hold on my neck. “Always so easily distracted,” he taunts, running the blade along my cheek like a lover’s touch. “Well done, baby Sister.”

I growl, unable to form words, as he releases me and pushes up. Soft applause fills the hall as he swims away, arms raised above his head, relishing his victory, the muscles of his back flexing with each flick of his tail. The maids in the corner of the arena titter as he comes their way, running their fingers through their hair, their tails swaying seductively.

I lay on the floor a moment longer, my eyes trained skyward, looking through the oculus to where the sun dances beyond the surface of the water. Its brightness is muted at this depth, battling against the power of the sea. The sand is soft at my back, like a gentle touch consoling my loss.

From where I lay, staring through the open ceiling of the arena, the ombre blues of the ocean leading to a world beyond this one, I can almost pretend I am somewhere else.

Rubbing my face with my hands, I exhale a long breath before pushing up and accepting my defeat.

I don’t look their way, but in my peripheral vision I can see my father patting Triton on the back, congratulating him for his win. My jaw clicks against the force of my teeth biting together. It doesn’t matter that I had him on the ground or that I could have ended the match in my favor more than once. All that matters is, in the end, Triton was victorious.

That is all that ever matters to him.

Swimming off the floor, I head toward the exit, desperate to make it back to my quarters. All I want now is quiet, solace, to collect myself and my pride. Fury ignites the spark within me as my magic simmers under my skin. Flexing my fingers, my magic crackles as

it comes alive, whispering consolations and reminders of where my true power lies.

Before I can escape, I am met by my mother at the edge of the hall.

“You did wonderfully, Sereia.” Her hands reach out to tuck a lock of my hair behind my ear. She usually scolds me for allowing my hair to be loose, reminding me of the expectation of our position that it be tied and tamed rather than left wild and free. Today it would seem she recognizes the dent in my pride and holds her tongue.

“I lost, Mother.” The words are bitter on my tongue. I run my fingers over the scales of my tail, feeling each ridge, watching the iridescent colors merge from blue to green to purple. I lose myself in the tactile sensation, grounding myself and my body.

*I am powerful*, I remind myself silently, a chanting prayer to sooth my honor. *I am strong. I have magic beyond his wildest dreams.*

“Only because you allowed yourself to be distracted,” Mother says gently, pulling me from my thoughts. “You lost focus, allowing Triton to take advantage. If you had remained in the ring, both mind and body, I have no doubt—”

“No doubt that Father would have continued the match until I was weakened, exhausted, and breathless so Triton could use his strength to win.”

Her lips curve downward, the green of her eyes darkening. “Never allow yourself to dwell, Sereia. Whether Triton is meant to be victorious is irrelevant. It does not diminish your skill or your worth.”

Looking up from under my lashes, I find my brother and father conversing with a member of the council. No doubt already deep in conversation about kingdom matters. Things that my sister and I are not privy to.

I cannot help but wonder what my father would have done if I had been the first born. If rather than a son born in his likeness, a

daughter bright and powerful were his heir. Would he still dismiss me? Think me nothing more than breeding stock to his line?

Following my gaze, my mother's lips purse.

"Your brother may be superior in strength, my daughter," her voice breaks me away from the sight, "but you harness the most potent magic of us all. While he excels in the ring, you strike fear and power through your gifts in a way no one else in our history ever has. Never doubt yourself, Sereia."

I nod in silent agreement, ready to change the subject as my eyes skim the room.

"Where is Asherah?" I ask, pulling my shoulders back to straighten my spine. I refuse to appear defeated, for others to see me cower, even if my soul wishes to escape and lick my wounds.

Mother's lips twitch. "Off on another adventure, I'm sure."

A single laugh escapes me. "If Triton or I ran off so frequently, we would have been dealt the whip," I remind her with a quirked brow.

Mother waves her hand dismissively. "You seem to forget all the trouble your brother and you got into when you were her age. Just because you are of age now, don't fool yourself to think you were never as tenacious as she is. You were hardly obedient or cautious."

I snort in response but don't bother arguing. Memories of breaching the boundaries of the kingdom, venturing into the darkest depths of the sea, are still fresh in my mind. With Triton at my side, I was fearless. Unshakeable. Just as he stood taller knowing I had his back, that nothing could defeat us when we were together.

It feels like a century ago. When our childhood was still filled with freedom and possibility and the expectations of our birthrights felt like far-off dreams. Before we were pitted against each other; the heir versus the girl who grudgingly held the position of spare.

"You let her run wild like a hellion," I point out gently, earning myself a soft look of warning. I smile innocently but continue. "She's still a princess. Anything could happen—"

My words are cut off by a flurry of raised voices, the swishing of tails in the corner of the arena. Breaking my gaze from my mother, I watch as a group of guards approach my father, their faces hard. Their golden armor catches the dying rays of sun from the surface, the dark obsidian scales of their tails, marking their rank, imposing in contrast.

General Aenon, the leader of the guard, reaches my father first, removing his helmet in respect. His face is all sharp angles and rough skin, a scar leading from the corner of his lip to his eye. An unfortunate encounter with a human hook as a child that marred him for life but added a sense of strength when coupled with his rank. With a small, almost imperceptible, bow, he brings his lips to Father's ear, whispering rapidly. From where I stand, I cannot hear their words, but I don't need to. I can read my father's face like the pages of a book, and as his eyes widen and skin flushes, I know there's trouble.

"What's going on?" I whisper, my voice barely audible despite the deathly silence of the room.

"I don't know," Mother replies, taking my hand and pulling me toward the group.

My initial instinct is to pull away, to remind her that I have no place in their gathering. Despite my blood, as second born and female, I am still excluded from all forms of kingdom matters. But my mother's grip is firm, whether in fear or assurance, I cannot tell. I do not refuse her, hoping if nothing else, my presence gives her strength.

Drawing up to Triton's flank, I wait silently.

"I told her not to go there," Father growls, the ground quivering against his rising rage. The walls of the arena shake, groaning in protest against his power. Sand and stone fall, dripping from the walls like blood. "I swear, the girl is careless."

"We have sent a group after her," General Aenon replies, assuring him as he casts a glance to my mother's worried face. "You have my word, Your Majesty. We will bring Asherah home."

With a nod, the general turns to his troops, quiet mutterings of plans and tactics already spilling from his lips.

“What happened?” my mother asks, her hands falling on my father’s thick forearm.

For as harsh and cold as he is to me, he is soft and loving to her. The way he looks at her, cherishes her, is the source of legend throughout our land. It is the only proof to me that he has a heart at all.

“Asherah,” he sighs, shaking his head, “she escaped her guard detail. Again. They’ve gone after her along the edge of the Blue Hole, since she tends to frequent the places she is forbidden.” He pauses, his eyes turning soft, and I know he is considering holding the next statement back. But he never refuses my mother and knows she will ask if he does not offer everything he knows. “They saw humans in the area. Several ships, poaching from our waters without limit or remorse.”

A gasp catches in my mother’s throat, her delicate hand coming to her lips. “Poseidon—”

Turning away from the court, from the guards, and even from my brother, he brings his hands to her arms. In this moment, I know no one else is present to him. He sees only her. My heart aches at the unwavering adoration in his gaze.

“We will bring her home, Amphitrite. I swear to you, I will bring our daughter home.”

As he pulls my mother against his broad chest, tears burn at my eyes. Fear for my sister grapples against the jealousy I fight to ignore, the pain of the affection he has never shown me, like powerful seahorses pulling me in two directions at once, threatening to tear me in two.

My father releases her before turning to Triton, all softness fading like the dying light of day. “Be ready to leave in five minutes,” he barks, calm leached from his voice. “We will need all the help we can get to find her.”

Triton nods once, pulling his shoulders back in pride. This is the first time my father has allowed him to take part in such tasks, and the thrill of the opportunity flickers through the deep azure of his eyes. The chance to prove himself worthy of the throne and the trident which would amplify his power and solidify the right to rule.

The trident is all Triton has thought about since first truly understanding what his birthright entailed. Of the power, the amplified magic it would bestow upon him, unmatched by any other weapon remaining in the world since its twin disappeared more than a millennia ago. Where the lost trident has faded to legend and myth, the remaining is all my brother now covets.

Before they can step away, my mother reaches out, grasping my father's arm.

"Wait." She clutches my hand, pulling me forward. "Take Sereia with you."

Shock and disgust drips over my father's features, making my stomach turn. The way his eyes widen in surprise before narrowing in defiance at the mere suggestion causes my eyes to fall to the floor. His lips pull back, revealing his white teeth.

"Amphitrite, this is not a training exercise. We—"

My mother cuts him off with an angry glare, her voice as sharp as coral. "Sereia is the most powerful weapon we have, and you know it. If you wish to control the sea, to prevent the humans escape if they dare have Asherah, she is the only one strong enough. This is not a game. This is our daughter's life!"

Tension pours from my brother like lava escaping an underwater volcano, heating the water around us. I don't look his way. I don't dare. I am not foolish enough to miss the insult thrown his way as Mother reminds everyone around us of my power.

A level of power my brother does not possess.

Swallowing a bitter retort, my father lifts his chin. "Very well."

Turning to me, his eyes harden. “Keep up. If you fall behind, we will not wait for you, nor will we go in search of you if you become lost. Don’t embarrass me by becoming a liability.”

I am not given a chance to respond before he spins away, tail thrashing through the water toward the armory. The guards follow without a word or glance, churning the water violently in their haste.

My mother’s beautiful face comes into my eye line. Reaching a hand to my cheek, she swipes her thumb along the skin under my eye. Her silent way of wishing me well before she retreats toward her chambers to wait. Her mermaids in waiting follow, each with heads bowed, until I am alone with my brother.

The water is heavy all around me, crushing me under its weight the longer neither of us speak. The heat of his gaze scorches the side of my face, his knuckles cracking as his fists clench. In this moment, I am certain he wishes he had plunged that blade through my heart while he had the chance.

Ignoring the frantic beating of my heart, the uncertainty coursing through my veins like ichor, I take a deep breath. The corner of my lip threatens to turn upward, but I refuse it. A smile now would be asking for a fight. But I cannot ignore the pride that runs through me, erasing the fear and shame.

Finally, I can show my father what I can do. If I succeed, he can no longer ignore me, casting me to the side.

Slowly wiggling my fingers, magic courses through me like a silent predator.

*I am powerful. I am the master of waves and swells. I am descended from the gods.*

Risking a glance toward Triton, I find him staring at me.

Fire licks behind his eyes, sparks igniting at his fingertips. I wait for him to speak, whether to assure me that we will save our sister or to damn me for daring to intrude on his moment to prove himself,

but he says nothing. He merely glares at me, his silence almost as bad as any harsh word or scathing insult.

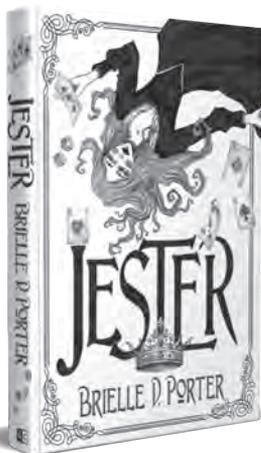
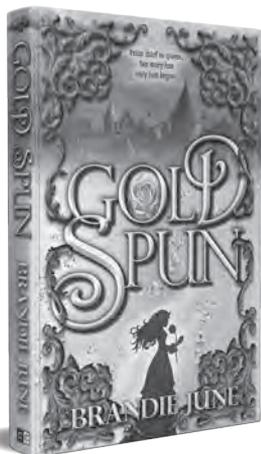
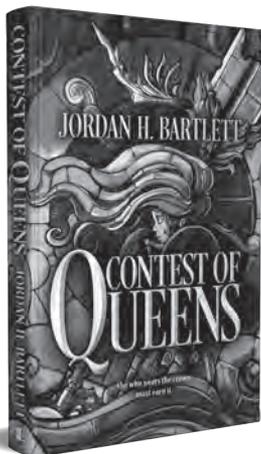
Our father returns, an army at his back, and neither Triton nor I have moved. Hovering at the entrance to the hall, he is adorned in steel and gold armor, an ornate helmet taming his long golden hair. The family crest—a trident overlaid upon a triangle—is embossed on his chest, marking him as King. The trident is in his grip, shining and terrifying.

While he shouts for both of us, he only looks to Triton.

“Come, we need to move. Now!”

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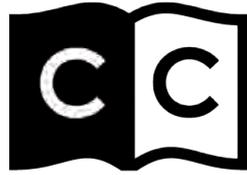
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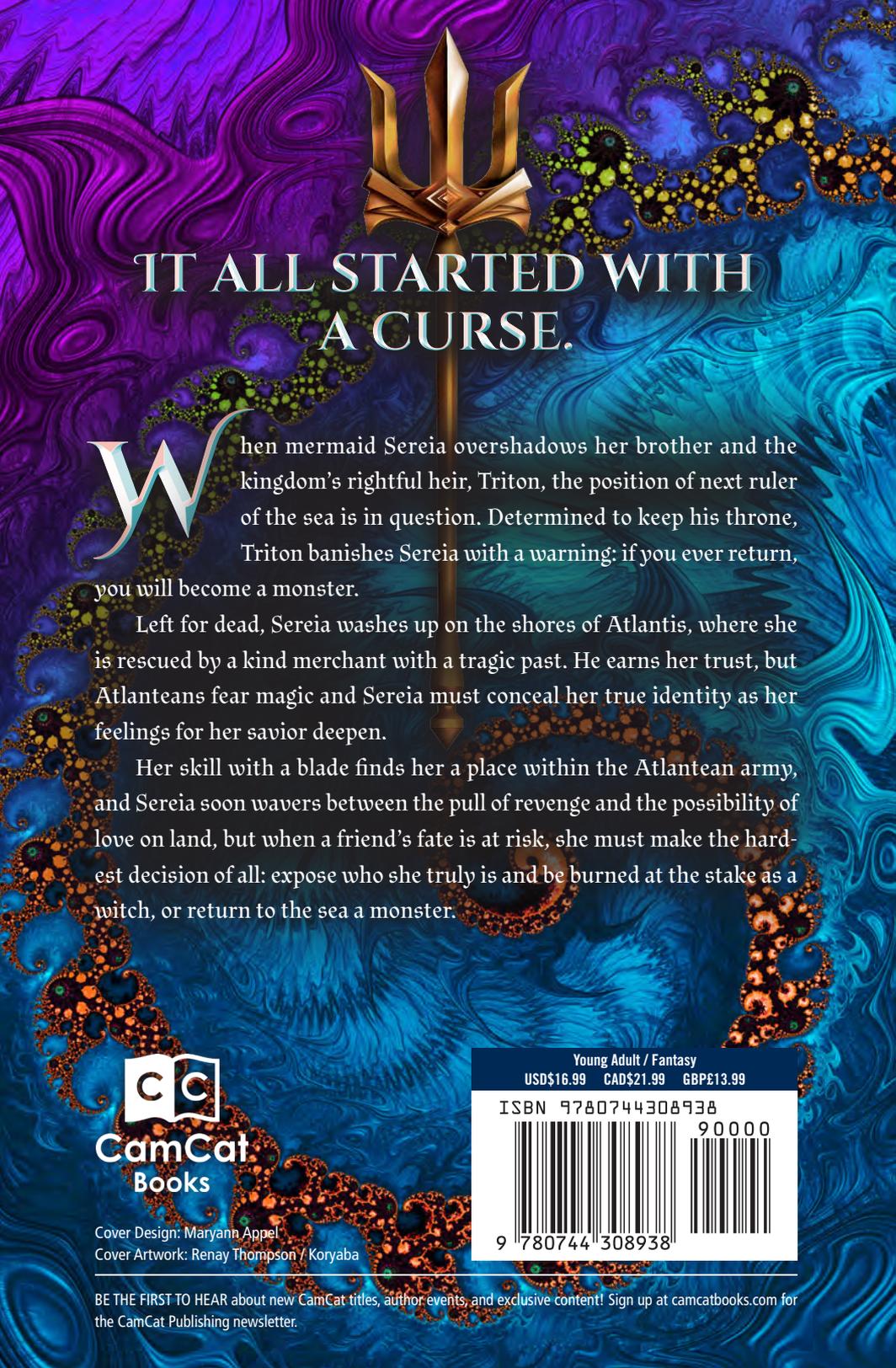
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# IT ALL STARTED WITH A CURSE.

**W**hen mermaid Sereia overshadows her brother and the kingdom's rightful heir, Triton, the position of next ruler of the sea is in question. Determined to keep his throne, Triton banishes Sereia with a warning: if you ever return, you will become a monster.

Left for dead, Sereia washes up on the shores of Atlantis, where she is rescued by a kind merchant with a tragic past. He earns her trust, but Atlanteans fear magic and Sereia must conceal her true identity as her feelings for her savior deepen.

Her skill with a blade finds her a place within the Atlantean army, and Sereia soon wavers between the pull of revenge and the possibility of love on land, but when a friend's fate is at risk, she must make the hardest decision of all: expose who she truly is and be burned at the stake as a witch, or return to the sea a monster.



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