



A leader who could not remain conscious was not much of a leader. Pain radiated from the broken left forearm into my skull. I clenched my stomach before shifting the splint. My back rested against one of the pillars forming a stone circle that marked our pickup point. Its surface had cooled overnight, sucking the heat from my flesh. I needed to move from the shadows but could not summon the strength. I stared at a patch of grass and fought the urge to curl up there.

Zeus would answer for consigning us to this torture. Lead your sister and cousins from the drop-off to the pickup point within thirty sunrises, he said. As a reward, you will earn a seat on the council and join the illustrious ranks of ruling Titans, he said. He left out the volcanic eruptions and oversized predators plaguing the island. He didn't warn me that giant waves could strip us of everything except our tunics, hunting knives, and what remained of our sanity.

I cursed the pride that led me to so eagerly embrace the opportunity to prove I was more than Zeus's favored daughter, that I was a leader worthy of succeeding him as head of the council, that I was better than a son.

The council had mentioned a strange ship sighted off the coast of Helios. It couldn't be a coincidence that eight strangers were scouring the rocks below, salvaging what was left of their decidedly non-Titan ship. It could be Hyperboreans, the phantoms of fireside tales no one really believed in, the savages that collected skulls and consumed the flesh of their enemies. They left out that the strangers might show up on Mythikas. Extraction would be difficult as long as they occupied the beach.

A gale swept down from the frigid north and heralded an early rainy season. Another variable we hadn't prepared for. I desperately needed a blanket and a fire, but smoke would alert the enemy to our position. The timid sun hovered near the horizon, as if afraid to confront the ash cloud that shrouded the volcano's summit. I would embrace its tactics and hide until reinforcements arrived.

The splint made me look like a warrior who had lost a battle rather than someone who could win one. My hair stuck up like dry grass, smelled of mildew, and resembled a stallion's tail covered in feces. Every inch of skin was scratched, scorched, or bruised. The image I presented might send the men running out of disgust rather than fear. I attempted to stand without putting pressure on my left hand and slid down.

Diana observed their progress from the promontory's edge. She had proven she could shoot when required and I could gladly call her sister. Even so, she looked small and vulnerable lying on her stomach in the grass. Her arrows flew true, but she was no match for me, much less hardened men, in combat and her bow was as lost as my spear.

Persephone paced, circling my outstretched feet. The challenge had etched lines around the healer's mouth and across her forehead. Sea salt and ash coated her soot-colored hair. She resembled an elder more than an eighteen-year-old. It was hard to believe

we were only six months apart in age. Her aptitude with medicines would not make up for her lack of experience with spear and shield in a fight.

Persephone paused beside me. "How bad is the pain?"

"Gone."

"Liar." Persephone resumed her pacing. "Wish I had poppy extract."

"Wouldn't take it. Not a good time to be unconscious." I rested the splint on my knee. "I used to dream of meeting Hyperboreans while sailing with Poseidon to the edges of the River Ocean."

"It appears you'll have your wish."

"Not until Poseidon arrives."

Persephone paused beside Aphrodite. The council's briefing had not prepared me for either of them, their fantasies and fury, both on the verge of losing their minds when they weren't attempting to kill each other.

Aphrodite slept curled on her side with both hands resting beneath her sunburned cheek. Her short flame-colored hair licked her face. Her long-legs lay bare. A spot of glossy pink skin at one ankle was all that remained of the viper bite. The challenge had stripped her of her runes and her reason. I discounted her suggestion that the circle had negative energy, but the stone table at the center hinted at our fate should the men prove to be flesh eaters. I had no desire to become their next meal.

Persephone's sandals flicked mud as she completed her limited circuit. Her knee-length curls writhed in the breeze and flapped against my face. "What if Poseidon didn't return to Helios to wait? Or if he sailed to Mythikas early? His ship could have been destroyed by the giant waves."

"Helios is two day's sail and we've only been here twenty-four days. I think."

Persephone frowned, her winged eyebrows touching. "They should have seen the ash cloud from Helios. They've had more than enough time to rescue us. I don't think they're coming."

"Poseidon will keep his word." I ran my swollen tongue across cracked lips and shifted my arm. The bindings pressed the sticks into my swollen hand. The whole thing itched. I refrained from digging at it with the tip of my knife.

Persephone laughed, harsh and ugly. "Even if the rebellion has begun and the Helios have control of Poseidon's ships? Two of the strangers could be Helios. What if they're here to rescue us?"

"There are eight of them. They couldn't have taken all of us with them. Who do you think they've come for?" I didn't believe Aphrodite's nonsense about monsters in mountains, dark children, or snake women, but Persephone's loyalty bound her to her Helios grandmother, not Titan cousins. If Gaia had gained control of Helios, she would send someone to collect Persephone, not us.

Persephone averted her gaze. "The strangers are as stranded as we are."

"As Aphrodite pointed out, they might be more interested in wooing than fighting. I'm not prepared to do either."

Diana sprinted toward us, half-crouched, head low, like a puppy that had not grown into her paws. Her mouth gaped and her moss-colored eyes bulged. Her dark blonde braid dragged the ground, picking up twigs and leaves. She skidded to a halt beside me. “Two of the men are headed up.”

Diana clasped my broken arm eliciting another shaft of pain. “Pig swill!” The shout echoed inside my skull. A tear drained from the corner of my eye. I lowered my voice and gained my feet. “They were supposed to stay on the beach.”

“Guess they didn’t hear your instructions.” Diana released me. I leaned against the standing stone for support as the ground swayed. It took a few moments to be certain it was my head swimming, not actual ground tremors.

“There isn’t a beach,” Persephone said. “What the sinkhole didn’t swallow the waves removed. We can’t expect them to stay down there. They need food and water too.”

“What should we do?” Diana asked.

I stiffened my spine and my resolve. “We run and hide. We’re in no shape to stand and fight.”

“You’re in no condition to run.” Persephone stood over Aphrodite. “She isn’t either.”

“We have no choice. Wake her.”

“The debris from the flood is treacherous. You’ll make the injury worse if you fall.”

“I’m supposed to keep you safe and I say we move.”

Persephone slung her sack over her shoulder. She still had a cauldron, one soaking wet blanket, a flint, and a bunch of damp weeds she called medicines. She crossed her arms and opened her mouth to protest further.

I cut her off with a flick of my hand. “I have no desire to find out if they prefer brown, red, or blonde hair. Do you?”

Aphrodite woke and nodded understanding at Diana’s whispered explanation.

“How long before they reach the top?” I asked.

“Not long. There’s a twisting path. It’s a moderate climb,” Diana said. “The rest of them should be able to follow with whatever they salvage.”

“Won’t they camp at the stone circle so they’ll have a view of the shore?” Aphrodite asked.

“I wouldn’t. They’ll need to build a new ship,” Persephone said.

Aphrodite ran a hand through her hair. “They could have more ships on the way.”

“I hope not.” Eight men were bad enough. If I were in fighting form, I could have taken half of them by myself. More meant we had no chance at all.

“The forest isn’t safe. Another fire could break out at any time,” Persephone said.

“Between the rain and the waves, everything is too wet to burn.”

Aphrodite yawned, setting off a chain reaction in the rest of us. Diana plucked at her lips while staring at my splinted arm. “We need a place to hide. We should search for a cave.”

“They might explore a cave,” I said. Nights trapped in the cave system had instilled a loathing for tight, enclosed places. I never wanted to be trapped in the dark again. Ever. I pushed off against the cool stone and tested my balance. White dots swarmed across my field of vision. Holding my arm up made it numb, allowing it to dangle made the throbbing worse.

“The further in we are, the less chance they’ll see us when they reach the top. Our only advantage is that they don’t know we’re here. Let’s keep it that way.”

