



**M**y life was not supposed to end this way, not on a self-destructing island with cousins who despised me, playing an unwinnable game against an unstable foe. I just wanted to go home, mend things with my parents, marry Adonis, and live happily together forever. But Mythikas Island's fire-breathing monster would never let me leave. The certainty made my skin feel loose, like a tunic I could easily step out of.

The ledge beneath my feet led nowhere. It jutted mid-air over lava hissing like a crimson serpent into a river raging far below. Specters of mist stinking of sulfur floated toward the moon. Even that benevolent orb had forsaken me, had turned her face aside until the merest outline of her cheek was visible, as if she could not bear to watch. I considered flinging myself over the edge, allowing my body to land where it may, putting an end to my misery. My fingers clutched the pouch of runes. They had led me to a dead end. It was their fault for making me believe then letting me down. I decided to throw them over instead.

"Aphrodite, no!" Diana reached around me to save the pouch. It caught on her outstretched fingers as she swayed dangerously near the brink.

I slid my arm around her waist and swung her behind me. Her cheeks were wan, lips bloodless, eyes half-closed with exhaustion. The return to life had not banished the darkness surrounding her since the encounter with her mother's spirit. Instead, her aura remained hate-filled black, ignited by the discovery of her mother's murderer, and fueled by her desire for vengeance.

I snatched the worn leather pouch from her trembling hand. "The runes betrayed me."

"If not for the runes, we wouldn't have found the underwater access to the tunnels. The other tunnel was hot. It made sense to try this one first," Diana said.

Athena turned from the vista of destruction, the bones of her knuckles white as she gripped her spear. "We have to try the alternate path."

Pale blond strands poking from her braids and purple shadows underlining her pale eyes gave her the look of a tattered owl. Her aura was strongest of all: mud red anger mixed with brilliant yellow fear of losing control, fear that drove her to cruelty. Understanding this did not lessen my dislike of her.

"And if the other tunnel doesn't lead anywhere?" I asked.

Diana stepped toward the edge for a better view. "I don't want to go back. We have to climb out here."

Athena reeled Diana to safety by her belt. "The rocks are too slick and sheer."

"And if you fall, you'll land in lava. Burning is not a nice way to die." Persephone's drenched black curls bled into the soot on her cape. A rainbow-colored aura encircled her head as she paced along the opening to the cave behind us.

"This is your fault," I said. "You woke the fire-breathing monster."

Persephone motioned for me to proceed with a sneer that made her lips fuller than usual. "Try diving. I won't stop you."

"Don't yell." Diana covered her ears with her hands. "You're making my headache worse."

I pictured the suffocating, skeleton-filled passage leading back to the alternate tunnel and cringed. My psychic skin could not survive another assault. "I can't face the ghosts again."

Athena pushed Diana toward the cave. "Then stay here and rot. We're leaving."

"The dead can't hurt you," Persephone said.

I reached inside the sack and tumbled the runes for comfort as images of the dead and dying danced before my eyes. "I feel the children clinging to me, hear them scream. I can't bear it."

Athena's gaze grazed my face. "They died a long time ago. There's nothing we can do about it now."

Persephone raked hair from her forehead. "You suffer from an overactive imagination."

"And your senses are dead."

Diana turned a paler shade of panic. "Why did they die in there? Why didn't they find the way out?"

"Maybe there isn't a way out," I said.

Athena scratched at the cloak ties chafing her neck. "All the other challenge groups returned without mishap. I refuse to give up."

"Pan's injuries were more than a mishap," Persephone said. "He was assaulted and nearly died."

"But they all returned and we will too."

My fingers encountered heat and withdrew a rune. "I don't want a seat on the council. This experience has not changed my mind. Actually, you're the only one mean enough to qualify. Diana is too naive and Persephone is half-Titan. They'll never accept her anyway. Why put us through this?"

Persephone's amber-flecked eyes flared dangerously as she stepped toward me.

Athena intervened. The rune tumbled onto the ground. "Enough with the rocks, we're leaving."

I retrieved the rune, tracing the symbol etched into black stone. The Torch face-up meant clear vision, a transformation or a beginning; face-down meant the end of a relationship, an illusion, or a life. Since Athena had knocked it from my grasp, the true meaning was lost. Athena shepherded the other two into the cave, leaving me alone to deliberate.

Mother's refusal to attend the leave-taking ceremony was an omen I shouldn't have ignored. When she hugged me fiercely enough to break my ribs, I should have realized something was wrong. Had her visions revealed terrors lying in wait for me? If so, why didn't she warn me, forbid me, throw her body over mine to prevent me from leaving? My

parents had been angry with me before, but never cruel. They would never allow anyone to intentionally harm me.

I placed the runes in my supply sack. It wasn't their fault. I was the defective one, the seer who couldn't see, unable to call forth visions and dreams to view the future. Reading runes and assessing omens were not specific enough for this situation. I needed clearer instructions. I reconsidered the drop. The river was a long way down. Swimming was second nature to me, but there was no way to determine how deep the water flowed beneath the churning surface. The plunge was too dangerous. There was no other choice. I had to travel through the tunnel of terror.

"I'll go first," Athena said, tossing her spear into the narrow passage. "Persephone, follow Diana in case she faints."

Next went her soiled leather supply sack followed by Persephone's. She launched her lean, muscled body up and in, guiding with her elbows, kicking with large, sandaled feet. It appeared the mountain was swallowing her whole as she belly-crawled from view. Persephone arranged Diana's bow and quiver to fit in the tight space and guided her patient inside. Diana entered with a breathy, mewling kitten protest. Persephone's short legs flailed as she maneuvered in. I latched onto her ankles and shoved.

"That hurt, you shrew!" Her retort was muffled.

"You're welcome."

The passage belched, a hint of decomposition in its breath. Though flesh was long gone from the bones, the memory of the stench remained, faint and fetid.

There was nothing in my supply sack to plug my nose and ears with to act as a filter. Shifting the contents did not make what I needed magically appear. I closed the drawstring and thrust the sack inside.

I snatched a final glimpse of starlight, gathered my hem as well as my resolve, and climbed in. I merely had to keep my eyes closed and remember to breathe. Sharp gravel and sharper bones dug into my flesh. My ankle throbbed where the viper had struck. The puncture wounds were fading but the memory never would.

Persephone halted. My supply sack bumped her. She kicked the supply sack back onto my face. "Stay back."

I paused until the gap widened between us. "I can't see where I'm going."

"It's my fault," Diana's voice floated back. Rustling indicated the shifting of her bow and quiver. "I got stuck."

Stopping was a mistake. Residual terror leached into my skin along with damp from the walls. My pulse skittered like dog toes on marble. Images of people dying filled my mind before I could block them. I focused on Adonis and our last night together inside Mother's windowless sanctuary. The fear of discovery had added to the thrill of being away from the tattle-tale children who liked to follow me wherever I went.

The image of Adonis's bronzed skin glistening in the dying firelight, his ember-colored eyes drooping with desire, flickered to life then expired. Invisible hands clutched my wrists and tunic.

No, I refused to let the ghosts in.

Adonis cradled my skull between his rough hands. Our bodies aligned as his lips met mine, shutting out all sight, all sound, cleansing everyone's mental debris from my skin. A scream wrenched me back to the present. Pale visages with empty eye sockets swam around me. Women hugged children and men clutched their chests as they competed for air. I didn't want their memories, their pain.

I cried out. "Leave me alone!"

I forced my thoughts back to the intoxicating elixir of Adonis's kiss. My flesh heated where our bodies met. We were on the verge of something I couldn't define. A kiss wasn't enough. We shifted onto the floor. I threaded my fingers through his silken locks and we kissed until we needed to break to breathe.

"There is something we need to discuss," Adonis said.

His lips were cold. I peered beneath my lashes, my mind ripped back to the horror of the present. A hand clutched my hair and kept me from recoiling as a ghost sucked against my mouth, drawing air from my lungs. He was suffocating me the same as he had been suffocated. I fought but my hands passed through his torso.

Persephone kicked the supply sack backward onto my face. "Aphrodite!"

I struggled. The ghost wouldn't release me. Consciousness ebbed as my lungs emptied.

Persephone's voice sounded remote. "I think she fainted. There isn't enough room to examine her."

"Aphrodite!" Athena and Diana's combined shouts lashed my ears.

The ghost dissipated. The skin of the supply sack adhered to my face as I inhaled. A chorus of shouts urged me to wake up. Persephone's foot jostled the supply sack. My skull felt too heavy for my neck to support but I turned my face aside. The scent of singed hair and burnt flesh tainted the musty air of the passage. I gulped it anyway. My lips moved but no words emerged.

Persephone rustled the supply sack with her foot. "Aphrodite?"

I cleared my throat. "I hear you."

Drawing on the last of my strength, I crawled through the panorama of suffering, blocking and failing, until the walls of the passage expanded. I achieved a crouch and propelled Persephone faster than she could accommodate. She resisted. I squeezed by her as soon as space allowed and easily set Diana aside. My lungs were on fire. I couldn't bear the confinement one moment more.

Athena provided the last hurdle. I shoved past her and skidded to a halt beside a shimmering pool. Sunbeams slanted through a hole in the cavern's roof. Another day had dawned. I ground my teeth together to end their chattering and splashed water on my face. The image reflected in the pool was a hag with dried up skin and hollow cheeks, the face a sharply angled version of the one I knew surrounded by unmanageable, blood-brown spirals sticking out in all directions.

"I'd trade my second favorite puppy for a roaring fire and hot drink," Diana said. She settled beside me and scooped water with her hands. Most of it seeped between her

fingers before it reached her lips. Diana had started out with two water flasks and now had none. I passed her mine.

Strange what some people valued. Athena had deemed only Diana's bow and quiver worth saving from the fire that nearly destroyed them both. Diana briskly rubbed her upper arms while I donned socks and boots. "Sorry, I didn't pack extra boots."

"I'm not cold," Diana said.

Athena indicated the searing breath of the alternate tunnel. "You won't be cold in there."

Diana tightened the sandal laces around her ankles. "We'll never reach the pickup point on time."

Athena fingered the notches on her spear where she marked off the sunrises. "We should have fifteen days left."

"Feels like we've been underground forever," Persephone said. "I've lost all sense of time."

Her heavy-lidded eyes drooped with exhaustion as she stroked the metal scales of her snake necklace. Her supply sack gaped open. She had abandoned her ornately carved chest and the salvaged medicines were about to tumble out.

I adjusted the strap on her shoulder. A stinging current traveled up from my wrist where she grasped it. My hand jerked back.

"Don't touch me," she said.

"I'm trying to help."

Persephone gathered the sack tight against her body. "I don't need your help."

Oh, but she did need help. When she was not emitting colorful rays of healing, her aura was encapsulated in yellow ochre. Her need to analyze and control would be the death of her if she did not learn how to balance it, not that she welcomed my advice. She had disliked me from the beginning.

Diana passed the flask back to me. "I hope this tunnel leads us out."

Athena picked up her supply sack. "We have to trust it will."

Diana adjusted the quiver, picked up her bow and followed Athena. Persephone placed her hand over her heart and murmured unintelligibly before disappearing into the heated hole. As I drained and refilled my flask, a slow ripple spread across the surface of the pool, radiating from a patch of tiny bubbles. I waited for the fish to materialize, prepared to dive in after it. Providing food might restore me to Athena's favor.

The patch of bubbles grew. A shadow lurked beneath the surface. It was too large for a fish. I sprinted into the tunnel, dragging my supply sack behind me, plunging further into the lair of the fire-breathing monster.

