



Never trust a Titan. The warning rang inside my head as I surveyed the undulating sea separating me from everything I loved.

“How are you, Yia Gaia?” I whispered to the wind, but it could not tell me if grandmother’s followers had learned of her dilemma and my absence. I was equally a prisoner, surrounded by hostile terrain and tethered to cousins I distrusted on an island where no one lived.

“The sea is unsettled.” Aphrodite etched shapes in the moist sand with her fingertip.

A series of moss-coated stone arches stretched toward the horizon. Beyond them a vast expanse of tall cliffs ended our plan to follow the beach to the pickup point at the northern tip of the island. Aphrodite stepped back to inspect her work.

“What does it say?” Diana asked.

Aphrodite dusted her hands before answering. “Runes to show we were here.”

“The evening tide will erase it.” Athena embedded her spear in the ground. She untied and folded a wool cape before stowing it.

Diana shifted her bow and quiver to the left shoulder. “We have no choice but to head inland.”

Athena scratched at the welts the cape’s ties left on her throat. “At least we have daylight left.”

I massaged my thrumming temples. Bandaging, medicating, and preventing them from eating poisoned plants was more exhausting than supervising small children. They bickered like small children as well. I couldn’t imagine any of them governing anyone.

I searched the horizon for a glimpse of Poseidon’s ship. “Do you think he’s out there?”

Athena picked loose strands of hair from her pale eyelashes. “Not for another twenty one days.”

“Perhaps we should build a raft,” I said.

“Why?” Athena turned to me. “You wanted to move inland a few days ago.”

“I don’t like the look of that.” I pointed to an ominous gray cloud obscuring the mountaintop. The council was cruel to leave us with no way to contact them. So many things beyond our control could go wrong.

Aphrodite rubbed her arms. “As I pointed out, the tide is rough and there are sharks.”

A brisk gust cooled the sweat at the nape of my neck and sent shivers down my spine. Thunder vibrated the sand beneath our feet. Scaling the massive cone rising like a pustule at the center of the island held no appeal and there was no telling what dangers lurked in the forest.

“And, I feel a storm brewing,” Aphrodite said.

Athena hefted her supply sack. "We can weather another storm."

Aphrodite's curls blazed in the patchy sunlight. "The runes warn of danger."

"That isn't a storm cloud," I said, not needing Aphrodite's overwrought imagination to recognize a bad omen. "It is smoke."

Diana's brow creased as she fell in beside me. "Is the mountain on fire?"

They knew so much about weapons and fighting and so little about the natural world. If I wanted to make it home, I would have to educate them as well. "The mountain is a cauldron of liquid fire," I said. "Don't they teach you anything? Haven't you heard of horrifying eruptions that wipe out entire villages? Or the days of suffocating ash that follow?"

Athena aimed for the rustling tree line. She did not visibly acknowledge pain, proudly wearing wounds gained while outrunning wolves as a sign of courage. She should have let me tend them properly.

"We don't have time to debate the matter," Athena said. "We'll scale the ridge until we find another beach."

"But the runes—" Aphrodite limped after her, emphasizing her disability with heavy breathing, "something awful is up there. Fire-breathing monsters live in mountains. What if one decides to come out?"

"Your stories are infantile and unwelcome." Athena increased her pace. "Can't any of you simply follow orders?"

The incessant surf grew muted as we thrashed through a nearly impenetrable tangle of black pines and chestnuts. Weeds and leaf mold clogged the forest floor. The plants looked wilted and diseased in the dim light. Some leaves suffered blight, others were too pale. Multicolored fungi clung to rotting bark. Mushrooms sprouted everywhere. None were edible. Everything reeked of decay.

"You should listen to me," Aphrodite said. "Most people respect my abilities as a seer."

"We have enough real worries without your imaginary ones," Athena replied over her shoulder.

"I believe her," Diana murmured to me. "We didn't expect giant wolves or bears either."

Diana was delusional, swearing that she saw her dead mother on the island. Still, something caused her to hallucinate. Perhaps mold or sap coating the plants, or the food she smuggled from Helios could have been tampered with. Her symptoms seem to cease after she killed the bear. Knowing how much she loved animals, the shock of killing one must have sobered her. I shuddered at the memory of the bear's claws within inches of Athena's head, the way Diana's arrow impaled the bear's face, and the horrific moans of pain as he lumbered off to die.

"The volcano is fuming," I said while stretching. Every muscle ached from endless nights on hard ground. "We should concentrate on finding a way off the island."

"Let's go back to the beach," Diana said. "We could build a boat."

"Both of you," Athena gestured to Aphrodite and me, "stop scaring the infant."

"I should've let the bear maul you," Diana said.

Athena ruffled Diana's hair before pushing her forward. Diana retaliated with a jab to Athena's ribs. From what I observed, this challenge had not made the two sisters friends. Stranding us all on this forbidding outpost had so far served to make us dislike each other more. It felt so pointless. How someone behaved under difficult circumstances might illuminate his or her character, but this situation strained us beyond that point. Being exposed to life-threatening danger didn't encourage us to calmly negotiate solutions. It forced us to act and react at a most basic level. The council had to know we could all die here. Perhaps that was their true objective.

If the point was to teach us to work together, we could do so from the safety of our homes. We could discuss our differences and find ways to peacefully coexist. If the Titans were trained as negotiators instead of warriors, they might open their minds to a better way, a nonviolent way like ours. Then we could live in harmony. Instead we were perched on opposite sides of a growing chasm that threatened to destroy us both.

I set aside my misgivings and began the ascent. The ridge rose like an emaciated rib cage up the mountain. Tumbled boulders forced us further into the forest, cutting us off from the security of the shore. We passed from scorching sunlight into deep shade and out again as the morning grew muggier.

Climbing over a cluster of boulders, we encountered a chasm discharging sulfurous vapor. I covered my nose and peered over the edge. The bottom was hidden by noxious steam. I tossed in a rock but did not hear it land. I shivered in spite of the heat. Further proof the island was unstable.

Diana swabbed at her streaming nose. "Can't you make this go away?"

"That would be useful," Athena said with a chuckle. "Pity your powers aren't the practical kind."

"You are all alive aren't you?" I said.

"Did you charm us?" Diana asked.

"I've healed you. Isn't that enough?"

Athena indicated Aphrodite's bandaged leg. "You haven't healed anyone yet."

"Your gratitude is overwhelming," I said. "If not for me, the viper bite would have killed Aphrodite."

"She did save me," Aphrodite said. Her skin was pale beneath the sunburn and sweat beading her brow.

Athena smirked. "Or she is making you worse on purpose."

"Why would I do that?" I said.

"To make her indebted to you," Athena said.

I bit back a retort. Athena's mind worked in such vile ways. I led Aphrodite from the crevice. She needed to rest with her ankle elevated instead of being forced mercilessly on. With Athena at the helm, we'd be lucky to make it through this ordeal alive. Her bullying and Diana's immaturity were the source of all of our troubles thus far. I bunched

Aphrodite's blanket under her head. "Those two deserve each other, but what have I done to deserve them?"

She emitted an elongated sigh. "It's our punishment."

"For what?" I asked.

"Not cooperating with our parents' plans for us."

"I don't think they have a plan," I said tucking her supply sack under her foot. "I think Titans simply enjoy torturing people."

Athena stalked off alone. I dismissed Diana's suspicion that she conferred with people sent to monitor us. If aide were within reach, Aphrodite's snake bite had been cause enough to summon it. Athena probably hid to cry. Being responsible for other people's lives was harder than it sounded.

