



OMEGA

#1, Omega Series

SNEAK PEEK! (Chapters 1-11)

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CHAPTER ONE: ALESSANDRA

No man or woman born, coward or brave, can shun his destiny.

– Homer

For once, Tyche, could you grant me a little luck?

I slowed before reaching my favorite meadow in the forest, my heart racing and chest heaving. A grin stretched my cheeks, and I stopped to listen for the boy I'd challenged to a race. I heard ... voices. Male and at least two females.

"I guess not," I muttered aloud.

The damn nymphs had him. My giddy excitement faded. I was the one who managed to lure a teen boy from the nearby campground into our forest and, as usual, the nymphs stole him. I couldn't compete with the beautiful women. There were thirty of them my age, all unusually perfect, feminine and graceful. Even my guardian said they weren't normal, and we'd coined the term *nymphs* to describe the other girls at the isolated orphanage where I lived under the thumb of strict priests. The other girls were all my age, too, each of them destined for positions befitting their beauty, according to the priests.

It was disgusting. I couldn't stand them.

Then there was me. I was an athlete, uncomfortable in anything but tennis shoes and yoga pants, terrible in school and bearing a scar from childhood across one cheek. No matter how much makeup I plastered over it or how far forward I brushed my dark locks, I wasn't able to hide it. I was always late to class, always the last to understand whatever torture the priests were teaching us, always trying to catch the first light of Aurora in the reflecting pool or scaling a hill to watch the last rays of Hesperides.

The nymphs laughed at me. I hated them for it and me for not being able to fit in no matter what I did. I couldn't change the fact I was shorter, smaller and otherwise imperfect compared to them.

"Lose another one, Lyssa?"

"Yeah." I heard my guardian's approach and looked up into his scarred, ugly face. A mountain of a man with bright red hair, Herakles had never once understood why I was so disappointed to lose every guy I looked at to the nymphs.

"If a man can't outrun you –"

"– I can't bring him home with me. House rules. I know." It was a stupid rule. Surely there had to be one man somewhere who shared my deer-like agility.

My guardian chuckled.

“He was so handsome!” I whined with a sigh, recalling the gorgeous brown eyes and smile of the teenage boy I’d met today. When he had looked at me, my insides turned fluttery and warm. “He almost outran me, too.”

“Only because you slowed down.”

I rolled my eyes and spun away, headed towards the compound in the middle of a forest where we all lived. “So what? Everyone here has kissed a boy and I can’t even look at one without the stupid nymphs taking him away. They just bat their eyes and the boys fall all over them.” I made a show of shaking my hips and blinking rapidly in mockery.

“I’ve never kissed a boy.”

“You know what I mean!” Herakles was a jerk sometimes. His rules were designed to prevent me from ever having a boyfriend. There were moments when I didn’t think I’d care; my interests lay in martial arts and sports. If not for the nymphs conspiring to steal any boys I lured away from the campground and always taunting me about everything, I wouldn’t look twice at a boy. But I shared one sole trait with the nymphs: competitiveness. I wanted so badly to best them at something and earn enough respect not to be bullied every day for the rest of my life.

“You could try studying harder,” Herakles suggested.

“Right. Like that’s going to get me a boyfriend.”

“There is more to life than boys and whatever else it is your head is full of,” Herakles reminded me. “You don’t need a man anyway. You can take care of yourself. I’ve trained you to survive anything.”

“I know I don’t *need* one. I want one so the nymphs stop laughing at me. Just for a day, then I’d let him go like you free the rabbits I catch.”

“You noticed.”

I arched my eyebrow at him. “I figured it out after I caught the same one every day for a week when I was, like, sixteen. You know the nymphs don’t have to hunt rabbits, don’t you? They don’t have to run every day or build their own campfires and shelters on the weekends. They get to go to town, Herakles, and see movies!” I sighed, tortured by my miserable existence. “Can I be normal? Just for one weekend?”

“Normal people aren’t prepared for their world to change or to face the trials awaiting them.”

“The zombies apocalypse isn’t coming. The priests say the world has never known a time of greater peace and prosperity and the gods are happier than ever.”

“An apocalypse is not required to announce itself,” he stated.

I bit my tongue. I knew better than to argue with Herakles. He was of a singular mind and convinced the world was going to end any day. Nothing I’d ever said over the past twelve years had dented his obsession with self-reliance and survival. I learned to hunt game bigger than me, forage for berries, survive in extreme weather conditions and other

skills the nymphs – and even my teachers – often ridiculed. Sometimes he blindfolded me or hobbled one leg or arm so I had to survive for a weekend alone in the forest with simulated physical impediments. He first dropped me off in part of the forest alone with no compass when I was nine. I bawled for a day until he came to get me. Instead of taking me back, we stayed in the forest, and he taught me to navigate by the stars.

No one understood why he made me do these things, least of all me. I obeyed him because, above all else, I loved my Herakles, as weird as he was. While we were accepted here, we didn't fit in at the school filled with nymphs and priests. We had to stick together, two dented peas in a misshapen pod.

"The man you want will be able to outrun, outhunt and outsmart you. When you meet him, you can marry him. Until then, no man will do," Herakles said.

"I don't want to marry anyone," I said. "I just want to kiss him."

"Then you can kiss the man who catches you."

His conditions for me seeing someone were impossibilities. Herakles alone was the only man who could keep up with me. It was his way of saying I'd never have a boyfriend as long as I lived under his roof.

I glanced up at the green canopy overhead. The blue sky resembled puzzle pieces from this angle, and not a cloud was in sight on this warm spring day. What torture did he have in store for me on such a beautiful Friday? I had to climb a rope or navigate whatever obstacle course he built before I was allowed to go to bed at night. Weekends were worse. I was exiled to the forest for more survival training until Sunday night.

He was conditioning and preparing me for something. I had no idea what, and I suspected he was just a little off. A former Olympian, Herakles was the toughest, most honorable person I had ever known. He swept the annual Olympics for three years in a row before he stumbled upon me, rescued me from the house fire that killed my parents and brought us here. He didn't respect anything but physical prowess. He could barely read, and he had an almost allergic reaction to discussing anything regarding emotions.

But he was my hero in every sense of the word.

To this day, I was unable to recall what exactly happened the night I turned six except it involved Herakles catching me when I fell from the sky. Why or how I was flying, I didn't know. I still occasionally dreamt of falling – but no fire. My life changed that night. Herakles was unwilling to talk about it even after I turned eighteen and was considered an adult by everyone but him.

Herakles tugged the sleeve I'd tucked under my bra strap back down over the strange birthmark on my bicep that looked eerily like a double omega. The omega was the final letter in the Greek alphabet, or, according to Herakles, a sign of Armageddon. "Keep this hidden," he reminded me.

"I know." I pulled both sleeves down so I didn't look stupid with only one up.

Picking my way through the forest back towards the compound where we lived, I considered the topic I'd been meaning to broach to him but hadn't quite figured out the best way yet.

"We haven't talked about graduation," I started. "It's in three weeks."

"The world might end tomorrow. You should not think too far beyond today."

"Omigods, Herakles! I'm eighteen, and I'm graduating in three weeks! I want to go home!" Too late I realized I'd told him what I had hoped to discuss in a calmer manner. I didn't look back at him but focused on the path at my feet.

"You know there is nothing for you there."

"So you've told me every time I asked. But I have to go somewhere," I pointed out. "College. Waitress at a fast food joint. Holy Zeus, I'd become an initiate at a temple."

"No temple would have you."

It wasn't the first time I'd heard that, either. The priests didn't consider me disciplined or selfless or motivated enough to refer me for a position in the elite initiate corps. Half of the nymphs were headed to temples of the Greek gods while others were being sent to the households of influential politicians and nobles around the world. I could speak English, Greek and French like they did – a requirement to become an initiate – but my grades were sorry and my temperament deemed too unsuitable to be placed in a position where diplomacy and manipulation was required.

"You have more freedom here than the average person living beneath the thumb of the Supreme Magistrate will ever know," he said. "Why do you wish to leave?"

"Because that's what kids who graduate high school do. They get a life. Join the real world."

"Where did you learn this? Television?" He was genuinely confused. He rarely spoke of his childhood, but I'd assessed over the years that his own upbringing had been very different. "I must talk to the priests about censoring the programs they let you girls watch."

"They already monitor everything we watch. I guess I just want to know ... where do we go next? Because we are leaving, right?" I asked, sensing I was doomed to work at a fast food joint the rest of my life, if he let me leave at all.

"We are. But I'm not yet certain where."

"You've only had twelve years to figure it out," I shot back with some exasperation. "I want to see the world, Herakles, or at least somewhere beyond this forest."

"Until I know for sure –"

"– stay inside the boundaries." I wasn't allowed to travel beyond the red cord lining the perimeter of the priests' quiet property. Since arriving when I was six, I had never left. The nymphs went to town every weekend to shop or watch movies or eat food and whatever else they did that Herakles didn't approve of. It had to be more fun than navigating the forest in the rain with nothing more than a poncho and a knife while

Herakles timed how long it took me to get home to make sure I wasn't slacking before the inevitable end of the world.

We reached the edge of the greens where the compound proper started. Daydreaming about what was to come when I finally graduated, I missed Herakles stiffening.

"This isn't good," he said.

Blinking out of my thoughts, I stopped to see him staring at the long driveway leading from the road to the massive manor house that acted as our home and school. The priests had erected two small temples, one for a Titan god named Lelantos and another for the Olympic goddess Artemis, behind the school, beside the stables.

There was an extra car parked in front of the school, a black sedan with darkened windows. "We've had a lot of visitors lately," I said, unconcerned. "I imagine the employers of the nymphs are coming to interview them."

"It's not an employer."

The car wasn't there to take me away to the real world, and I doubted it was the first zombie from the apocalypse we were preparing for. Therefore, the vehicle's appearance meant nothing to me. "Okay. I'm going to my room."

Herakles paid me no heed and jogged towards the car.

I circled the house to the back entrance where the stairwell leading directly to our rooms was located. I took the stairs two at a time and strode down the landing of the girls' wing towards my room.

"Lyssa!" someone called as I passed.

"What?" I paused and stepped back, peering into the room of one of the nymphs, a willowy blonde named Leandra. She was finishing her makeup and wore a sparkly party dress.

"Wanna go to town with us tonight?" Leandra asked innocently.

"I hate my life," I muttered.

She laughed.

But I didn't leave. Playing on her television were news clips of the footage I'd missed two weeks ago when I spent my eighteenth birthday in the middle of the forest, shivering and buried beneath leaves in the final cold snap of spring, during one of Herakles weekend tests. The priests censored everything that reached us from the outside world, including the news. They removed what they didn't want us to see before letting us watch what was left.

"Hey, is that ..." I asked and walked into her room.

"Yeah." A wistful note was in Leandra's voice.

It took a lot to make the perfect, beautiful nymphs envy someone else. For once, I understood where she was coming from.

"The Silent Queen," I said in awe, gazing at the television. The Queen of Greece, known as the Silent Queen because she hadn't been seen or heard from until this month,

was plastered everywhere on the news. A girl my age, she was stunning with white-blond hair, pale blue eyes and a jawline sharp enough to cut ice. “Wow.”

“She’s just a symbol of the unity of gods and mankind. No real power.” But even Leandra sounded enthralled by the woman on the television. “She can’t speak. She gave her first address in sign language.”

“Wow,” I murmured again. In a sparkling diamond tiara and radiant silk dress, the teen looked more godlike than human. She was flanked by the Supreme Magistrate – the powerful political representative of humanity – and the hooded and masked Supreme Priest – the gods’ advocate on Earth. The three most powerful figures in the world were known as the Sacred Triumvirate, and each had his or her own private security force, according to the priests, which was how they balanced their power.

I couldn’t look away from the Silent Queen. The priests had drilled the history and importance of the hereditary Bloodline into us since we arrived. The Silent Queen’s ancestors were touched by the gods, and it was said only she could appeal directly to them in a way that defied even the priesthood. Throughout history, once Greece fell as a global power, the most powerful nation on the planet was given the sacred duty of protecting the Bloodline and housing the royal leader, which was how she ended up here in the United States. “She’s amazing.”

“I’m sure she’s been Photo-shopped for television,” Leandra said somewhat defensively.

I rolled my eyes. The nymphs knew they were special. There was something strange about thirty orphaned women of extreme beauty and charm, all born within three months of me, all under the strict protection of an orphanage run by priests who didn’t hold weekly worship ceremonies but taught us instead the Old Ways, as they called them. They were positioning the nymphs in places of eventual power, where they could then share the Old Ways with others.

If our world was strange, we had no idea. As far as we knew, this place and its customs were normal.

“I’ve been assigned to her court,” Leandra said.

“Seriously?”

“Yep.”

It made sense. Leandra was a hair prettier than the others and quite a bit smarter, according to the priests. I was suddenly crushed that I might end up taking food orders from hung over college students the rest of my life while the others went off to positions I could only dream of.

“Where are you going?” she asked, green eyes finding me. “To live with the Mountainman on some isolated peak?”

“He’s not a Mountainman,” I said, bristling. “He’s the greatest Olympic athlete in history.”

“A disgraced one who ditched his wealthy benefactor to live in a forest with us. He’s absolutely mad, and he’s turned you wild and ruined any chance you had at a decent future.”

My anger bubbled. I knew better than to cause a fight. I had stopped that nonsense when I was fifteen, but there were moments when I wanted to sock the pretty, perfect women around me.

My biggest issue with Leandra wasn’t that she was mean. It was that she was often right, and her words about Herakles stung. There was something wrong with him, and I sometimes thought maybe that meant there was something wrong with me, too. It was why I didn’t turn out like Leandra and the others and why I was definitely not going to the Silent Queen’s court.

I squinted to see the ticker at the bottom of the news. *Civil unrest grows. Supreme Magistrate places five more states under martial rule over SISA’s objections.* That made about forty states under martial rule by my count. The priests refused to tell us about the civil unrest when we asked, but sometimes, like today, tiny pieces of information slipped through their censoring and made it to us. I was dying to know what the world outside our boring forest was like.

“When I get to court, I’ll find you a job chopping wood or something,” Leandra said with a wide grin.

I stormed off to my room, followed by the sound of her laughter. I loved Herakles like the father I couldn’t remember, but there were days I was really embarrassed to be me. I hated that feeling. I had trouble making friends, more so because Herakles often had some bizarre requirement for me to hang out with someone. Boys had to be able to outrun me, and girls had to solve a riddle. No one ever succeeded at his challenges, except for the perfect little nymphs who hung out with me only to laugh at me.

Basically, I was always alone, and he seemed determined to keep it that way. I felt even more isolated knowing the nymphs all had plans of where they were going after graduation and I didn’t.

I went to my room and closed the door, sitting on my bed. I had barely pushed off my shoes before there was a tap at the door. “Come in,” I said and tossed myself onto my back.

“Lyssa, I have to leave for the weekend.”

Startled, I immediately sat back up. “Where? Why?” I demanded of Herakles, who had never left me for half a day let alone a weekend. “Is something wrong?”

“No.” His features were scarred beyond recognition, his smile lopsided and frightening. Everyone else winced when he looked their direction, but I loved every knotted scar and burnt piece of flesh on his face. He was my protector, my friend, the only father figure I knew. He had always been beautiful to me. “You are to travel to the

eastern boundary and back this weekend. Here's your surprise pack. Open it when you get there." He tossed the satchel onto the bed beside me.

"Ugh." I eyed it warily. He no doubt had planned another weekend of torture. I'd probably have a hat and spoon and nothing more to survive two days in the forest alone. While technically I should have had only three more weeks of this madness remaining, I had a feeling his plans were always going to trump mine. "You're sure there's nothing wrong? You've never left me before."

"I'm going to scout somewhere where we might settle after you graduate," he told me.

I looked up, thrilled. "I won't be trapped here for the rest of my life!"

"No, but you might one day wish you had been." He frowned. Every once in a while, my guardian had a mood I didn't understand. Naturally open, upbeat and focused, his features were now grave and unreadable.

I studied him, wishing I could read his thoughts or make him smile again. "Something is wrong," I assessed.

"Not wrong. It's always complicated to move from one place to another." He shook his head. "Anyway, you have a treasure hunt to complete this weekend. Your tasks are in the bag. You will not wish to wait until morning. I put up several traps and obstacles."

I muttered curses I'd learned from him under my breath. As long as we had been together, I never really knew what to expect on these adventures. "I'll see you Sunday night," I said reluctantly.

"Heed the boundaries and rules."

"I know." I pulled on my shoes obediently and a camouflage windbreaker. When I stood, he smiled at me again.

"Good girl. Don't get lost out there."

It wasn't possible and we both knew it. I'd been over every inch of that forest multiple times. "Have fun in town."

He turned and left.

I grabbed the bag and left my room for the forest once more.

No boys. No future. No town.

There were days when I wanted out of my life so bad, I wanted to scream.

CHAPTER TWO

Small opportunities are often the beginning of great enterprises.

– Demosthenes

Nothing bad had ever happened in five minutes, right?

Just as the sun sank below the horizon, I reached the red cord marking the boundaries of the priests' forest refuge. This end of the woods stopped before a natural lake surrounded by hills. I perched on a tree stump inside the boundaries, gazing at the serene lake with a combination of longing and frustration.

A hundred meters. I ran twenty times that distance five times a week. It would take me under five minutes to run to the lake, strip off my shoes and socks to dip my toes in the water and run back.

I chafed every once in a while at the restrictions Herakles put me under. I cared for him too much to want to disappoint him. But tonight, knowing he was gone, and I'd be leaving here soon, too, I just wanted to throw aside everything and be in control of my life for five minutes to see what it was like. With Leandra's laughter still in my thoughts, and my frustration with this place at a pitch, I was tired of being excluded and ridiculed for being different.

No one would see me if I just stepped past the boundaries for a split second. Herakles had left, and the nymphs were in town by now, so they couldn't report me.

I approached the red rope and nudged my toes up against it then looked around. I half expected there to be a siren or electrical shock or something after the constant reminders from Herakles and the priests never to leave the woods.

Nothing happened.

I stepped on the red cord.

Still nothing.

I stepped over the physical boundary of my world, and a thrill went through me. Not only was there no alarm but I didn't feel guilty or bad for doing it, emotions that might derail me from continuing. I stayed where I was, my heels butting up against the cord, and lifted my gaze to the lake.

The possibilities were endless. My whole life started right here and now.

I laughed at my overdramatic thoughts, realizing nothing was about to change except I might upset Herakles. That alone made me hesitate. I loved my crazy mountainman guardian, and it bothered me to think I was going to make him mad by doing this.

Assuming he finds out. The stubbornly independent side of me he spent hours trying to exhaust with physical activity knew there was only one way he could find out, and I

wasn't about to tell him. At least, not for three weeks. Maybe after graduation, when we were on our way to the Burger God I was going to spend my life working at, I'd tell him of the one time in twelve years when I defied him to dip my toes in the lake.

Crouching like it was a race, I breathed in deeply then bolted. There was no real reason to run. I was completely alone, and I laughed as I sprinted, tickled beyond anything to be completely free, if only for mere minutes.

Sprinting to the lake, I kept to my internal promise of not spending more than a few minutes off the property and threw myself to the ground. Wrenching off my shoes and socks, I scooted to the edge of the lake and dangled my legs over the rock on which I sat.

The moment my feet dipped beneath the cool surface, my world seemed to slow to a stop. I leaned over, marveling at the sensations. It shouldn't have been, but this was somehow different than a pool. This felt ... alive.

"Holy Poseidon," I murmured.

The sensation of being united with something living moved through my system, a wave that ran from my toes to the tip of my head, in rhythm with the water, then outward, rippling the grass around the lake. I shivered. Fascinated, I peered into the dark depths of the lake. My feet caused small waves that were pushed back by the natural tides of the lake. Deep within the depths, I caught a glimmer of something odd.

I squinted in the fading light. They weren't fish or rocks or anything. The lake was too deep to see its bottom, but I swore I saw ribbons of soft colors twisting like smoke through the waters. Their movements were too precise to be dictated by the tides. I blinked – and they were gone.

Realizing my five minutes were up, I lifted my feet and dried them on my pants legs then replaced my shoes and socks. I didn't feel nearly as urgent about returning to the forest where I'd spent most of my life and ambled back. It was strange, but I could almost feel the tide of the lake still moving through me, rocking from toes to head and back again before rustling the grass around me. It was gentle, soothing and peaceful. I was an extension of the water, and it felt natural, nice.

I had nothing to compare the experience to and couldn't help wondering if I'd spent my entire life cut off from such small pleasures. It made me despise the nymphs even more, since they probably spent every weekend *feeling* whatever this was out in the real world.

Stepping over the red rope, the internal rocking stopped, and I realized it hadn't only been the lake I felt. The breeze that stirred the surface of the lake stopped at the barrier, too, and its gentle touch on my skin fell away.

I missed them almost as soon as I left them. Facing the lake once more, I smiled. If nothing else, I now knew one of the secrets of the world outside my boundaries, and it was beautiful.

Beyond happy with my secret adventure, I moved five meters from the cord to an area big enough for a fire and built a little campsite. My assigned kit contained a canteen of water and the ingredients for s'mores. Herakles' thoughtfulness only added to my happiness. I went through my tasks of finding shelter, starting a fire and stretching out on the ground to watch the stars with a smile plastered on my face. After my treats, I let the fire die out and retreated to a small shelter I'd created from a poncho and tree branches. I had brought a sleeping bag and crawled into it.

My mind was on the lake, on my future and how incredible it was going to be to leave the compound once and for all and join the rest of the world. I slid into deep, contented sleep.

Something awoke me shortly before dawn. I opened my eyes, senses trained on the world outside my makeshift tent. Animals used their instincts and intuition better than humans, and Herakles had emphasized being more like the locals when camping out. So I listened in silence and stillness.

An animal was rustling quietly, but it wasn't close, and it wasn't in the forest, which meant it was large if I could hear it this far off. The sounds came from the direction of the lake. I crept out of my sleeping bag and covered the distance quickly between me and the boundary. Reaching the stump where I often perched to gaze at the lake, I squatted on top of it and stared.

It was an animal, but nothing like I'd seen before. Monster was probably a better description. The creature had a wingspan of ten meters and was the size of a linebacker with the long, lean musculature and grace of a feline. It stood on two legs and had two arms that looked pretty human. The sound I heard was of its long tail tapping the brush lining the bank of the lake. Its skin was an unnatural shade of stone grey. One of its ears stuck out at an odd angle and its eyes glowed like blue jewels in the night. It had fangs, talons, and a barbed tail, and its eyes were positioned facing forward, all of which were characteristics of a predator of some sort and not something I cared to confront.

It stood where I had sat earlier, peering at the lake, at the surrounding area, at the sky. It crouched beside the lake, tail tapping against the dirt.

It was horrifying – and magnificent. I couldn't have imagined a more incredible combination of man and beast. The raw power it exuded in each tiny, controlled movement exceeded anything a human or traditional predator possessed.

This is a dream. It had to be. No such creature existed, unless it was some sort of undiscovered animal or leftover dinosaur. And if that were the case, I didn't think this would be the first time I'd seen it. I spent too many days and nights in the forest for it to belong here. Where it had originated, and why it chose here to stop, I couldn't begin to guess.

There was intelligence in its movement and visual exploration of the environment. The man-beast hybrid wasn't something I was able to explain away. I pinched my arm to ensure I was awake. The light sting wasn't much of a reassurance when faced with a monster from a nightmare.

It stood and unfurled its wings. They were charcoal in color, lined with black fur, beautiful and wide, shaped neither like a bat's nor a bird's but something in between. With ease that left me astonished, one flap of the mighty wings propelled the creature into the sky effortlessly. Within seconds, it had disappeared into the clouds above.

For once, I was grateful for the red cords marking the boundaries of the property. The priests claimed they would protect us from unwanted attention. The creature hadn't glanced once in my direction, which made me think the ropes were working. Or maybe I was blessed by Tyche for once.

I stood on the tree stump, trying to get another glimpse of the beast in the clouds without success.

My gaze returned to the lake. What other surprises awaited me in the outside world? Was this creature the reason why the priests insisted I never cross the boundaries and if so, had I risked being eaten or killed when I left the forest earlier for the lake?

I shuddered, this time out of dread. If the priests knew, the creature would be on the list of animals to avoid they kept posted in the main schoolhouse as a warning of what wildlife not to engage.

No one, except maybe Herakles, was going to believe me if I told them about the creature. Easing back from the edge of the property, I returned to my shelter but wasn't able to sleep again, not with the knowledge something like *that* was hovering in the clouds above the forest. I silently thanked Herakles for his survival training and insistence I carry a knife with me wherever I went. I clutched it in my hand and remained still until dawn swept across the sky. Only then did I start to relax again and packed up my tent.

Bad things didn't happen during daylight, I told myself. I clung to the childish notion and decided to disobey Herakles for a second time.

I was going back to the school today without completing my assigned treasure hunt. There was no way I was spending another night in the forest while some creature big enough to eat me was on the loose. Bears were one thing, but this ... this was something even I knew better than to mess with.

It was a four hour trek back to the center of the property. I hiked through the forest, always sensitive to the fact there were creatures that lived here. While I'd catch and eat them if I had to, I also wasn't going to disturb their daily lives by leaving messes or destroying their homes. Herakles was strict about appreciating and respecting the domain of Artemis and Dionysis and all their children.

My mind kept returning to the creature. I wasn't able to flush the image of the terrifying creature standing beside the lake from my thoughts. It didn't seem to be a part of nature, yet it had to be. Everything was, except for the gods and goddesses, who were still part of nature, just a different nature from ours.

Lost in thought, I didn't notice the drone of an airplane until it roared overhead. I looked up, unaccustomed to hearing them quite so low, but not alarmed to see the plane. A municipal airport was nearby. It was how the priests brought in guest speakers and other visitors from outside the area.

Unconcerned, I continued on my hike, unable to prevent the occasional look over my shoulder. I'd hear the creature if it was following me, but similarly to my hope that bad things didn't happen during the day, I wasn't fully convinced.

The tip of the roof of the manor house was soon visible through the trees. Suddenly, the ground beneath my feet quaked. I caught myself against a tree and was about to curse under my breath when an explosion ripped through the air. Fire belched into the sky from the direction of the compound. I stared at it and the black smoke chasing it before bolting towards home.

My heart filled my ears, and I mentally went through one of the checklists Herakles forced me to recite during exercises. I was assessing what the sound was and how many priests were present during the weekend when I reached the edge of the greens and stopped.

The mansion was in flames. The small plane had smashed straight into it before exploding. Smoke billowed off the building into the sky while two priests in brown robes stood, stunned, in the greens. I hesitated only a moment before racing to them.

"Father Cristopolos!" I cried.

Both faced me. "Thank the gods," Father Cristopolos breathed. The eldest of the priests, he was around fifty, bald and beefy.

"Are you hurt? Herakles and I have a stash of medical –"

"Come with me." Rather than race towards the fire and those who might need help, Father Cristopolos snatched my arm and hurried towards the forest, back from the direction I just came.

"But –" I twisted, worried about those who might be trapped in the wreckage or fire.

"You are not to leave the forest!"

"Father, I can –"

"You are not to leave the forest!" This time he squeezed my arm tightly enough that my attention went from what was happening behind us to his face. His features were blanched, his eyes bulging and jaw clenched so hard, the muscles of his cheeks ticked.

We reached the forest, and he pushed me behind the tree line. Whipping off the red cord belt he wore, he tossed it at the edge of the greens.

"Do not cross the boundary," he ordered.

“What? But –”

“Alessandra!” He snatched both my arms and shook me until I met his gaze. “Do not step past the boundary or all we have done here for the past twelve years is destroyed.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, but his face and unusual intensity scared me. The normally calm priest was freaking out. “Okay,” I said, concerned. “Do you want to know where our medical stash is?”

“We have our own.” Without another word, he whirled and hurried back to join the other priest, who had moved to help a third stumble out of the collapsing building.

I watched helplessly, hating to be excluded like usual. The red belt near my feet was expanding and stretching the way the boundaries did whenever the priests adjusted them. There was some sort of magic in the cords, and the red rope snaked quickly away to outline the perimeter of the greens. I didn’t understand the importance of a barrier that didn’t actually prevent people from coming and going and paced, aching to help.

It wasn’t the apocalypse, but I was trained for emergency response and dressing wounds caused by pretty much anything.

Instead, I was sidelined again by the priests, left out when I should have been helping.

All of the nymphs and most of the staff were in town for the day. The five priests who stayed back were soon all accounted for with only one injured. I watched them huddle and speak, guessing they needed to figure out how to house thirty nymphs now that a plane had gone down in the middle of the compound. The building imploded completely into piles of rubble while everything that could burn continued to do so.

I stressed about wanting to help until the fire department came and put out the blaze. One priest was taken away in an ambulance while the others were checked out by paramedics and released.

I stayed in the forest, saddened to see my home of twelve years destroyed while also hoping this was the impetus to enter the real world and go to a hotel for the rest of the weekend.

I nibbled on food I’d taken for my camping trip. The firemen left the smoldering ruins of our home around one, and I stared glumly at the scene before me. I began to think the priests had forgotten about me when Father Cristopolos pointed in my direction.

Perking up, I stood as my favorite priest, Father Ellis, headed towards me.

“Is Father Thiebault okay?” I asked immediately.

“His arm was broken and he had some burns,” Father Ellis replied. “But he will be fine. The EMTs said he’d be released tonight.”

“And the rest of you?”

“We are well, Lyssa,” he assured me.

“Why wouldn’t Father Cristopolos let me help?” I demanded. “I know how to handle this situation.” Well, I thought I did at least. Herakles always said I was too eager to want

to try my hand at disaster, that there were things I would never understand until I went through them.

Father Ellis smiled. "I know," he said kindly.

Mollified, I drew a deep breath. "No survivors from the plane?"

"There was no one to survive. The plane crash was meant to break the boundaries. Hence the new one." He pointed to the red cord near my feet.

I arched an eyebrow at him. "Someone did this on purpose?"

"Lyssa, I need to ask you something, and I need you to tell me the truth," he said quietly.

"I always do."

"Did you leave the boundaries at any point recently? Or ever?"

My flushing face answered his question.

"I need to know when and where," he said.

"Does it matter right now? I mean, shouldn't we figure out where we're going to put all the nymphs? I doubt they can survive in the forest," I pointed out.

"We have it all figured out. The girls will stay in town. You will remain in the forest for now."

I frowned, dismayed. "That's not fair!"

"Now, where did you step outside the boundaries?" Father Ellis was always good at deflating my anger and tantrums. It was hard to oppose him when he was quiet, gentle and genuinely the nicest priest on staff.

"By the lake," I sighed and pointed in the general direction.

"When?"

"Sundown last night."

He appeared thoughtful, gaze on the charred ruins of our home.

"It was only for, like, ten minutes," I added quickly. "I wanted to dip my toes in the water."

"Did you?"

I nodded.

"How was it?" he asked almost absently.

"Amazing. So much better than the pool."

"Did anything happen at the lake?"

My mouth dropped open. It wasn't possible for him to know about the creature, yet he was asking the question like he did. At my silence, he met my gaze with another of his calm smiles.

"Whatever you did, it's okay, Lyssa. I just need to know," he said.

"I didn't *do* anything!" I replied. "I dipped my feet then went back to the forest. Then ..." I drifted off and shifted feet, not sure how to tell him about the creature without sounding crazy. "Well ... I saw something at the lake early this morning."

He waited, brows furrowing.

“It was a creature of some sort. Wings, tail, standing on two feet.” I cleared my throat.

“This ... creature. Did you speak to it?”

“Oh, no. I stayed in the forest. It was kind of freaky.”

By his expression, this wasn't the news he was expecting, though he wasn't surprised either. “Grotesque.”

“It wasn't gross. I'd probably say terrifying.”

“No, Lyssa,” he said with another patient smile. “It's called a grotesque. It's like a gargoyle only different.”

“A gargoyle,” I repeated. “It was ugly enough. Never heard of gargoyles flying around, though.”

“The grotesque has been rumored to exist in the service of the Triumvirate. Glimpses are seen every once in a while but have never been confirmed.”

“Um, okay.” *The old man's lost it.* Then again, I was the one who witnessed said creature.

An awkward silence fell between us. My gaze drifted once more to the school.

“So what's the plan?” I asked. “Have classes in a tent or something?”

“The plan is to move the girls out to their assignments immediately instead of waiting for graduation and for you to go to a similar site.”

“But I'm supposed to graduate and move on, too. Why do I need to go to another stupid school?”

“Father Cristopolos will tell you.” He glanced at me. For the first time since arriving, I sensed he was hiding something. I had always found the monks and their dedication to the Old Ways mysterious, but I never felt like their secrets pertained to me. Whatever he wasn't saying about *me*, however, snagged my attention.

The remaining three priests approached. I bowed my head to each of them as was appropriate. They exchanged looks I wasn't able to decipher but which made me uneasy.

Father Cristopolos addressed me. “Alessandra, why don't you take us to your and Herakles' favorite spot in the forest. I think it's a meadow?”

I nodded. My pulse was starting to race at the calm request. I'd wanted the attention of the priests my whole life and watched them dote over the nymphs instead. Now that the four of them were focused on me, I suddenly wanted them to leave me alone. “This way,” I said quietly and spun on my heel, leading them deeper into the forest. “Was Herakles in the house or something?” I asked uneasily, unable to identify why they wanted to go to my favorite place.

No one answered. They simply followed me.

I swallowed hard, edgy and scared that something had happened to Herakles. For all my complaining about the forest adventures and him not letting me near boys, I loved

him. He was the only father I really remembered, and I wasn't going to handle it well if something happened to him.

Maybe they know that. Maybe that was why four priests were following me, in case I went crazy and they had to tie me up or something. My sense of dread grew as we approached the meadow where Herakles and I trained. My step slowed out of fear of the bad news they'd give me once we reached it.

Setting foot in the meadow, I faced them with my arms crossed. "Is Herakles okay?" I asked and braced myself for bad news.

"He is well," Father Cristopolos replied.

I sighed. "Omigods. Then why all this?" I demanded and waved at their grave visages.

"We need to talk to you about your future," Father Ellis replied.

"Now? After our home was just destroyed?"

"Our home was destroyed because you left the boundaries," another of the priests, Father Renoir, replied coolly. He was probably my least favorite staff member.

"Renny," Father Ellis said gently. "This is a delicate situation."

"What're you talking about?" I asked. "So I left the boundaries for ten minutes. Am I being expelled for it? The nymphs go to town every weekend!"

"My dear," Father Ellis approached. "This all exists because of you. The school. The orphanage and property."

I waited, not understanding.

"Once every great while, a very special woman comes along," Father Cristopolos started. "Someone with great power that rivals the gods'."

"Yeah. The Oracle of Delphi who becomes the bridge between humans and gods," I recited from class. "They found the new one. Again." There had been five new Oracles found the past year alone, though they all turned out to be frauds.

"Focus, Alessandra," Father Cristopolos said with tried patience. "You are about to learn how different the world is from the sanctuary we created here, from the education we've given you. We brought you here to protect you from gods and men, to teach you how to survive in a world that wishes you crippled so they can use you. We wanted you to be the strong woman you are so you can bring back the Old Ways and save our people from wrath of the gods."

"You aren't making sense," I said with a glance at Father Ellis. There was a reason he was usually the priest dealing with me, and it was because I didn't really care for the flowery diplomacy of the others.

"The Oracle is captured and held in a state of tortured suspension, Lyssa," Father Ellis said. "Every second of her life is filled with pain and suffering. She is kept immobilized physically and her powers harnessed for use by gods and politicians, to keep the bridge between the world of the gods and our Earth open, to use her power to

suppress the people. The process is one of excruciating pain. But without her, the gods cannot draw off their sources of power and interfere with human affairs.”

I listened, able to follow Father Ellis’ explanation better than Father Cristopolos’.

“Twelve years ago, her successor was accidentally found during a raid and brought to us. We have protected her since then, sheltered her and most importantly, shielded her from discovery. These cords,” he motioned to the rope he wore at his waist, “are infused with the power of invisibility granted to us by our patron Lelantos, the Titan of everything unseen, whose goal has been to protect the next Oracle. Our patron goddess, Artemis, granted us this forest to hide you in. When you are enclosed by the cords, you cannot be seen by men or gods, only by Lelantos.”

“When you stepped outside the boundaries, everyone was able to see you again. The attack on our school was the first step. They cannot see you while you are here, so they destroyed the school to break Lelantos’ magic and will send in a ground force next to find you,” Father Cristopolos added.

They gazed at me.

I stared back.

“For the love of the gods ... you’re the Oracle, Lyssa,” Father Renoir snapped. “You revealed our location, and now, there is probably nowhere for us to hide where we won’t be hunted down and slaughtered like you hunt rabbits.”

I don’t slaughter rabbits. The irrational thought gave way to astonishment. I laughed. “No, no! You all have always told me I’m the *least* special orphan here, that I was graced by Tyche to be around the nymphs, who really are special!” I said with a shake of my head. “This is a well thought out practical joke, though.” My gaze fell to Father Ellis.

He wasn’t smiling. In fact, he appeared dead serious.

I choked on another laugh. There was no way – *no way* – their claim was real. “I don’t have godly powers! I don’t even get an allowance.”

“The cords shield you from the world and the world from you,” Father Ellis replied. “It prevents your power from awakening. Why else do you think we permitted Herakles to train you as he did? To survive at the hands of humans and gods, you need to be able to adapt to any circumstance if you are to fulfill your destiny.”

None of this made sense to me. Something really weird was going on, and only I seemed to realize it. My chest was being squeezed by an invisible hand. I couldn’t wrap my head around how any of this was possible – but they truly believed it, no matter how insane it sounded. “I’ll play this weird game. My destiny. What is it?”

“To break the bridge and send the gods back where they belong. To return humanity to the Old Ways, to freedom,” Father Renoir said quietly. “You only need to outlive the current Oracle. We hoped to hide you until that day when she passed, after which, you could live a normal life once the gods were gone. It is the deal we struck with Lelantos, the reason he wanted you hidden, and the promise we made to Artemis, whose heart has

been weighed down with the treatment of each Oracle. When she discovered you were only a child, she offered us her help. We must in turn deliver on our promise.”

I wanted to laugh, but something about the severity of their features stopped me. Everyone knew Artemis had a soft spot for little girls in trouble and about the brittle nature of the relationship between the Olympic gods and Titans after the war that saw the Titans exiled to another dimension. The Titans swore vengeance. The idea I was in any way involved in the doings of *gods*, when I’d barely been allowed to participate in sports on campus, was absolutely crazy. “You guys can’t be serious!”

“We are, Alessandra. And now that they know where you are, they’ll be hunting you.”

“They ... who?”

“Everyone.” Father Ellis said with a shrug. “The Supreme Magistrate will hire, coerce or order all of those beneath him to locate you, and the Supreme Priest will enlist SISA to do the same. You are worth more material wealth than anything that exists today. The gods will reward whoever finds you with ... I can’t imagine. A priest knows nothing of wealth except the reward is beyond the most ambitious dream of anyone alive.”

“You’re starting to scare me,” I said. “If this is a joke, it needs to end now.” I searched the face of each. “If this is not a joke, then ...” It was the craziest thing I’d ever heard. I had spent my life being treated like a burden by the priests and ugly little stepsister by the nymphs only to find out *this*? That I was the reason we were all in the forest? That everyone on the planet was searching for *me*?

That the Supreme Magistrate, the most powerful man in the world, and the person the priests despised most, knew who I was?

“We will have to go to the alternate plan,” Father Renoir said. “We need to reach the existing Oracle.”

Father Cristopolos responded, but my thoughts were in splinters after the bombshell they dropped on me. I struggled to digest all the new information I’d learned today and do what Herakles trained me: focus on what had to be done next.

“Anyone have a cell phone?” I asked. “I need to talk to Herakles.”

They fell silent and exchanged another look. “That won’t be possible,” Father Cristopolos replied.

“Because ...” I prodded.

“Because your disobedience not only cost us the school, but tipped off someone who knew to look for him,” Father Renoir replied. “He was captured.”

“No. He’s too strong.” Even as I said the words, I had the urge to run, to find him and demand he refute the story the priests were telling me.

“You’re right, honey. He’s probably distracting them to give us time to evacuate you,” Father Ellis said.

“Then we have to go get him!”

“Think about this, Alessandra. Assume everything we’re telling you is the truth, if you can’t believe it outright. People will give anything, do anything, to find you. The best thing you can do to help Herakles is to not be where he thinks you are. He loses his value to his captors at that point.”

“And they’ll free him?” I asked.

“Possibly.”

It wasn’t a ringing reassurance. If action movies were remotely based on reality, Herakles was probably in danger of being killed if he wasn’t useful to his captors. I was starting to worry this all was real. “All this just because I stepped outside the boundaries.” It seemed too crazy to be true.

“It was inevitable,” Father Ellis replied. “It was foolish of us to think we could cage you forever. What’s important is we find a safe place for you now.”

“And rescue Herakles,” I pressed.

“Herakles is the strongest man in the world. Chances are he will buy us time and won’t need our help to escape,” Father Cristopolos said.

For once, he made sense. I didn’t see Herakles staying anywhere involuntarily. “Can I ask where he went at least?”

“Washington DC,” Father Ellis answered.

I was born and lived just outside of DC until I turned six. If everyone in the world was looking for me, I doubted I could walk into the nation’s capitol and find Herakles unnoticed. Not that I was buying this nonsense ...

Except that I kind of was. I was scared enough to believe what they said without understanding exactly what it meant to be someone of importance. To be hunted.

To be an Oracle, the most cherished and highly regarded human in existence. It made little sense after my humble upbringing here.

“Where do I go?” I asked quietly, unable to dispel the urge to find Herakles, no matter what the priests said.

“We have a backup plan. We’re waiting for someone who will take you elsewhere.”

“Who?”

Fathers Cristopolos and Ellis looked at one another briefly in silent communication I didn’t particularly care for. “You needn’t worry,” Father Ellis said. “I’ll be going with you. In the meantime, I need you to keep this on no matter what.” He stepped forward and took my arm, wrapping a piece of red cord around my wrist.

I felt no different but assumed it was like the boundaries of my home, capable of blocking me and the world from one another.

“Do you have any belongings you need to collect?” Father Cristopolos asked.

I shook my head. I owned nothing of value.

“Very well. Remain here with Father Ellis.”

The four of them turned and left. I watched them. This didn't feel any more real than watching the strange grotesque-creature at the lake. It had to be a dream. A joke. An epic mistake.

"Things are about to change," Father Ellis said. "It's only right I give you this." He held out a small pouch. "Herakles left it with me for safekeeping in case something happened. I think this qualifies. It belongs to you."

I accepted the small velvet pouch and opened it. Something glimmered inside. I dumped it into my hand and stared at it. A teal gem on a plain chain with a bronze finish nestled into my palm. It was huge, clear and so bright, it almost seemed to glow. Its multifaceted surface reflected sunlight and caused faint rainbows to appear in the air around it.

"This is ... wow," I breathed. "It's mine?" Even as I asked the question, I knew the answer. It *felt* like it belonged to me. The strange sense wasn't something I'd ever experienced before.

"Yes. It was all you brought with you when you arrived. You don't remember how you came to have such an incredible piece of jewelry?"

I shook my head. "I don't remember anything from before the day we arrived here," I murmured. I closed my hand around the gem and considered replacing it in the pouch. It didn't seem natural or right for me not to wear what was mine. I tugged it over my head and tucked it into my t-shirt. The gem settled against my chest.

"It's special, whatever it is," he said.

I know. Uncertain how it was possible for me to understand a gem I'd only now laid eyes on, I stepped away, too wired to be still.

Father Ellis sat down and closed his eyes to meditate.

"How can you pray at a time like this?" I asked in agitation.

"What better time is there to pray than when you're in trouble?"

To each his own. I rolled my eyes.

CHAPTER THREE

There is nothing permanent except change.
– Heraclitus

How fast could reality, a world, life in general, transform into something I never knew existed?

I was waiting for Father Ellis to laugh and tell me he was joking about everything. But as the next two hours passed in silence, he didn't change his story. He was quiet and calm, choosing to meditate in the peaceful meadow. I initially paced then sat and stared at the sky, lost.

Everything they'd said began to sink in. When I realized this was real or at least, the priests believed it to be real, I also knew I had to do something. I stood. The monk was seated cross legged in meditation, his eyes closed.

"I'm going to get my emergency pack," I told him. I waited for him to tell me not to bother, because they were messing with me.

He opened his eyes. "Is it far?"

"Half hour."

"I'll wait here."

My insides were shaking when I turned away and started into the forest. Yesterday, I was desperate to leave the forest. Today, I was scared of the same thing. It was stupid of me to be so worked up! I didn't buy the idea of me having power, but I did know we couldn't stay here when the place we all lived was destroyed.

And there's Herakles. He was the strongest man alive and had been for fifteen years. But I worried about him. If there was something else going on here, like maybe the priests were lying to me for some reason or hiding something worse, then I wanted him with me. I trusted him. I loved him.

I couldn't leave him trapped in someone's basement or prison or wherever he was. Even refusing to believe that I was the Oracle, I found myself looking closely at the red cord around my wrist and wondering if it really did what the priests said it did – hid me from the world.

I moved through the forest to the place where we kept emergency packs and stopped at the base of the large, old tree in whose trunk we'd stuffed supplies. Pulling on the pack, I tightened the straps and rifled through the other supplies to make sure I wouldn't need them.

The crack of a branch made me tense, and I straightened, listening.

Someone was there. Not the priests, who didn't know how to walk with discipline, but someone who was trying to navigate the forest without being discovered. The occasional brush of cloth on wood, the careful placement of slow footsteps ...

Pulling free my knife, I faced the direction of whoever was following me. "I can hear you," I called.

There was a pause, as if the forest was waiting, too. Finally someone spoke.

"I seem to have gotten lost," the man said. He eased out from behind a thick tree trunk.

The stranger was dressed in the type of clothing indicating he wasn't a lost camper but someone who wanted to blend in with his environment. He carried several hunting knives and was built like he knew how to use them. His exposed forearms were scarred where there was no tattoo sleeve. A tattoo wound around his neck and disappeared into the clothing covering his chest. He was too handsome to be a priest by far, but it was the gleam in his eyes – the spark of a predatory awareness Herakles had taught me to be wary of – that disturbed me. He had the look of a soldier, aside from his medium length hair.

"Where are you trying to go?" I asked and eased away from the stash of supplies.

"You with the orphanage?"

"Where are you trying to go?" I repeated.

He snorted. "My employers are located somewhere in this forest. A priest named Cristopolos." His gaze went to our surroundings, and one of the tattoos on his neck stood out. The mark of Hermes – a winged foot – was surrounded by other ornate ink work. Herakles had taught me about the different guilds of the underground society of criminals. I filtered through what he'd forced me to learn to identify the marking.

"You're a mercenary," I said, surprised.

"Not a mercenary. A gladiator," the stranger corrected. "But I do merc work on the side during the off season."

I didn't think someone could bear the tattoo of a mercenary and *not* be one. Mixed martial artists belonging to the Gladiator Guild were street fighters paid handsomely for beating the daylights out of another of their kind. The line between the legal and illegal markets of being paid to fight was blurry, and I didn't fully understand it except that this man wore a tattoo that designated him to be something other than what he claimed he was.

"So you fight and kill people for money," I said, recalling what the priests told us about one of the occupations they favored least. They looked upon gladiators with disdain and mercenaries with outright horror.

"Not exactly the godly values they teach you, I know."

"I think it's cool. I can fight, too."

"Sure, kid." He flashed an insincere smile. "Which way is it?"

I bit back my response, irritated he didn't believe me. And to call me *kid* when I was eighteen, an adult by most standards ... though today, I felt like I was being treated like a ten year old again. The mercenary was younger than Herakles' age of thirty five, younger than the priests and the age of all my favorite Hollywood actors.

"Whatever," I muttered. "What kind of gladiator gets lost in a tiny forest like this?"

"One hired to fight not to track," he returned.

I was tempted to mislead him to teach him a lesson. A look at him, though, and I recalled what Herakles once said about not deliberately pissing off someone who could pound me into the ground. Priests were one thing. They adhered to strict rules about non-violence. But a gladiator or mercenary was another.

Turning away, I put my knife away and started towards the meadow. "I'll race you there."

"*You* want to race me?" He fell into step behind me, amused. He was over six feet tall and muscular in a way the teen boys at the campground neighboring the property weren't.

"Why not?" I snapped. "You think I can't run?"

"I think I don't want to explain to the priests what happened to the little girl in the forest who fell and impaled herself on a tree trunk because she tried to race me," he replied with arrogance that made me want to ditch him in the swampy part of the forest where I'd accidentally discovered quicksand one summer.

Really? This man couldn't know I had been raised by the strongest Olympian in the world. Satisfaction sank into me. I loved the opportunity to prove someone wrong, probably because I rarely had the chance.

"See if you can keep up," I challenged and then bolted.

For the first fifty meters, he almost did. I pushed myself harder. I had the advantage of knowing the forest and led him through a route that included a few downed trees.

Larger and heavier than me, the gladiator soon fell behind as he struggled to navigate spaces more suitable to someone my size than his. I reached the meadow triumphant and slowed to a trot as I broke free of the forest and headed back to the priest.

Reaching him, I turned to wait for the gladiator. He appeared a full two minutes later.

"I found the mercenary you hired," I told Father Ellis. "What made you all want to hire someone like that anyway? Don't you hate them?"

Father Ellis climbed to his feet, facing the gladiator striding across the field towards us. "We needed discretion and loyalty. Money buys both," Father Ellis said. "Though we paid for a gladiator of some honor, not a mercenary."

"Yeah, well, he has the tattoo of a merc." I observed the approaching gladiator. He was grinning, as if pleased by the exercise, his sharp gaze on the priest beside me. "Herakles said you should never pay someone like that. Besides, I can take care of myself."

“Not against what comes.” Ignoring my look, Father Ellis stepped away to greet the gladiator. “I am Father Ellis. You must be Niko.”

“I am.” The gladiator shook his hand.

“You’re late. We expected you hours ago.”

“The airport is locked down. I had to find a creative route here,” came the easy response.

I kind of liked that Niko wasn’t fazed by the priest’s chiding. Niko wasn’t really what I expected of a mercenary. I had the vision of a gold-obsessed pirate in my head for some reason, and the clean-shaven, practically attired Niko was nothing like that. The edge of wary arrogance definitely fit the image I’d created.

“You’ve met your charge, I see,” Father Ellis said.

“What? This little girl?” Niko motioned to me. He looked me over critically.

I crossed my arms, irked that even the guy they were paying to take Herakles’ place was judging me. Before I could say anything, Father Ellis rested his hand on my forearm.

“Lyssa is humanity’s most precious member.” Father Ellis had stiffened.

“Coming from a priest who doesn’t believe in violence, that doesn’t mean much.” Niko flashed a quick smile, though his cold eyes were never still. “At least she’s tough and can run. I had expected someone more ... delicate.”

What was worse? Being called a *kid* who couldn’t run or fight or being considered unladylike? Niko wasn’t winning any points with me. I wasn’t a nymph, but I had outraced him.

“Can you really fight?” Niko asked me.

“I can,” I proclaimed. “I can climb, camp, hunt, run, fight ... I can do everything.”

“She had a very motivated guardian,” Father Ellis said with some disapproval. “Neglected her studies. But, she can run.”

What was wrong with these people? Judging me for being prepared for the situation they knew was coming? “Whatever. Let’s go.” I shifted my pack.

“Go where?” Niko asked, gaze once more on Father Ellis.

“To wherever you’re taking us,” I replied.

“My contract was for stationary service in a place with three squares and a real bed.”

I pointed towards the school. “That place was blown up.”

“We have a situation,” Father Ellis said simultaneously.

Niko planted his hands on his hips.

Seeing the priest squirm under his glare made me very happy after my day. “Are you going to tell him about the ground forces coming?” I prompted innocently.

“Quiet, Lyssa.” Father Ellis turned towards the school and began walking. “Come with me. Both of you.”

I went, mainly because I had nowhere else to go and a little because I wanted to see Niko and Father Cristopolos in an argument.

“I’m not going anywhere until the contract is defined,” Niko stated.

“If you wish to be paid, you will come with me,” Father Ellis replied.

I looked over my shoulder as I walked, waiting to see what the mercenary would end up doing. He was watching us unhappily. Finally, he started forward, tense and bristling, eyeing the forest with wariness I didn’t share. His long strides closed the distance to Father Ellis and me, and he stepped onto the deer path we walked on.

“Can you really hunt?” he asked me.

“I can.”

“Good. At least you’ll be useful if your priests try to pull one over on me.”

I glanced at him, not liking the sound of that.

“I will take you whether they pay me or not. There’s an underground market for someone like you.”

“Niko, do not scare her,” Father Ellis said. “You will be paid above and beyond what we promised.”

“What do you mean, someone like me?” I asked in confusion. “If I am what they think I am, there’s only one of someone like me ... of me ... of whatever you think I am.”

“You’re an initiate, aren’t you?” Niko asked.

“Do I look like an initiate?” I retorted.

“Lyssa, hush!” Father Ellis shot me a look. “Let us deal with him.” He stepped from the forest onto the greens. “Father Cristopolos!” he cried. The head priest and Father Renoir stood with a pile of items that had been salvaged from the building.

I started to follow, but all four turned to yell, “Stay in the forest!”

“Oh, my gods!” I groaned and jerked back to make sure I remained where they told me.

Niko appeared amused then hardened as he stepped past the red rope onto the greens. He paused several steps away and turned to face me.

“Who or what do they think you are?” he asked, leveling dark eyes on me.

I fell speechless. There was obviously something going on between him and the priests. It kind of felt like everyone was lying to everyone else. Niko claimed to be a gladiator but was really a mercenary, and the priests told him I was an initiate.

“Hmmm.” Niko studied me. He seemed to find answers where I didn’t mean to give them. “I’m guessing you’re worth much more than they offered. Better hope they’re willing to pay to keep me from kidnapping and selling you.”

I almost laughed but realized he was serious.

He winked and walked away.

I began to regret not sending him off in some random direction when we met. The fact he was doing this for the money that made me feel a little dirty. Or tainted. Or at least, capable of understanding why the priests looked down upon shady men like him.

Watching them speak, I waited for someone to yell or give some sign it wasn't going well. The distant sound of thunder reached me. There were no clouds in the sky, aside from puffs of smoke left over from the school burning.

Weird. Thunder and no clouds. The earth trembled. I waited for it to pass like it might in an earthquake, but it didn't. The tremor remained constant while the thunder loudened.

With the four of them busy talking, I dropped my pack and scaled a tree quickly. I reached the top and poked my head up above the canopy, expecting to see what I normally did: kilometers of woods followed by a break where the road was and more forestry on the other side of the break.

Trees were being knocked to the ground and flattened by machines I wasn't able to see from this vantage point. It had started near the road and was moving towards us, downing whole swaths of trees for a kilometer stretch.

What could do this to a dense forest of mature trees? Was it the work of the ground forces the priests spoke of? I was embarrassed to admit I had no idea whose ground forces they were referring to or even what ground forces were really. Did the military intend to run over the forest to grab me? Or was it the SISA, the international secret police force tasked with internal security of the human race by the gods?

Was it even legal for someone to mow down an entire forest?

I shimmied down the tree and replaced my pack. The four priests were huddled together a short distance from Niko, whose gaze was on the forest in the direction of the thunder. He alone seemed aware of something being wrong.

Catching my gaze, he lifted his chin back towards the direction we had come and mouthed two words. *Run. Now.*

Fear lit in my blood, followed by concern for the priests. I stood frozen for a moment, debating what Herakles would have me do.

Survive. And if I was what the priests said I was, I was probably putting them in danger by being with them.

I took one step back then another. Not at all certain I was about to do the right thing, I turned and began to make my way quickly through the forest, to the east. The crashing of trees soon became more audible, and I did as Niko said and sprinted.

I ran until I no longer heard the sounds of something crunching and grinding the trees of my forest beneath it and slowed only when the peaceful sounds of nature were present around me. Without stopping, I snacked on a protein bar and continued walking for another hour and a half, covering the distance between the school and the lake in record time.

And then I stopped at the boundary, as I had been trained.

Gazing at it, I couldn't help the guilt that floated through me. I was afraid to leave the forest this time, because I knew what happened if I did. A part of me remained in denial

about all that had happened in so short a time, that it was connected to the simple act of me going one step too far.

I sat on my tree stump, staring at the lake. It was midafternoon, and I hadn't forgotten the creature I saw either. No, I wasn't going to cause more trouble.

My determination lasted until I heard the birds begin to vacate the forest around me. The sound of machines wasn't present, but the animals were fleeing something. I had no idea where to go once I left the forest and remained where I was, on the verge of panicking yet knowing that was the worst thing to do in a crisis.

I miss Herakles. He would know what to do and where to go.

Twenty minutes later, the unmistakable sound of someone running through the forest reached me. I rose and hurried to a hiding spot close by, anxious to see who followed.

"Lyssa!" Niko's quiet cry reached me before he did. "Or ... Alice. Whatever your name is. We need to go. Now."

I peeked at him through the brush. He reached the tree stump, his gaze sweeping expertly around the area. He was sweating – and bloody. One hand was caked in it while there was blood on his shirt, too.

"C'mon, you little shit!"

With some hesitation, I stood. "Are you hurt?"

He whirled to face me. "No."

"Is someone else hurt?" I asked.

"You could say that." He strode over the cord towards the lake, oblivious to the importance of the red boundary marking the edge of my world.

I walked until my toes reached the rope, torn about leaving. "Shouldn't we wait for Father Ellis?"

Niko didn't stop. "No."

"He can't move as fast as us."

"What is your name?"

"Alessandra."

He spun to face me, backpedaling as he spoke. "They're gone, Alessandra. They took a different route out of here."

My jaw dropped open. "They left me?"

"These people pursuing you – pursuing *us* – aren't the kind of people I'm used to dealing with. This is SISA. They have the gods' blessings to kill fast and without mercy. Running was the smartest thing for them to do." He wiped his bloodied hand on his pants. "You can come with me now, and we'll make it out of here by the skin of our teeth, or you can stay right there and wait for SISA to get you."

Gone. In all my preparations for the apocalypse, or perhaps this incident, I understood being alone to be a part of the scenario but wasn't quite able to wrap my head around it

any more than I could the fact I was allegedly important. How could I go from being constantly surround by forty people to ... alone?

Why didn't they take me with them? This hurt more than anything.

"Fine. Good luck." He turned away.

"Wait!" I cried and started forward.

Realizing what I had done, I twisted to look at the red cord boundary I had spent most of my life avoiding. I was leaving it, the safety of the forest, my past, my home ... basically everything behind me.

It was scary and exhilarating all at once.

Niko wasn't waiting.

Unable to stop and contemplate the world behind me, I charged ahead and ran to his side. My eyes went to the sky automatically, and I sought whatever creature had tracked me last night. Reminded of the rope around my wrist, I wished I'd thought to ask more questions about its power, about what I supposedly was, about what in the name of Holy Olympus was going on.

And ... how could the priests just leave me with a mercenary they didn't trust? How was I so important – yet not worthy of a farewell?

The idea they were watching over me out of obligation and had never wanted anything to do with me stung hard. I kind of considered them to be my extended family, however dysfunctional that was. I never suspected they didn't feel the same.

"Where are we going?" I asked Niko to take my mind off the pain.

"You tell me. Where did your priests want you to go?"

I was quiet.

Niko glanced at me. "They didn't tell you, either, huh? Great. Well, you're not coming home with me. I don't even think I can go home if you're important enough for teams of SISA special forces to smash through the forest."

"I don't know where to go, Niko."

"Just ... pick a place. It won't matter so long as it's away from here."

"Washington DC."

"Worst place to be when the government is after you. Although ..." He drifted off, gaze going to the west, as if he could see DC from here. "It might also be the best place to be. SISA won't expect us to go there."

I didn't care what reasoning he found in it. I was going to find Herakles, the only man in the universe who wouldn't abandon me at the first sign of trouble like the priests did. The cracking of tree trunks sounded behind us, followed by the faint tremble of the earth.

"Won't matter if we don't get out of here. I hope you can run as far as you can fast. We need to move." Niko took off running towards another thatch of forest lining the opposite side of the lake.

I followed, unable to shake the sense of guilt, unease and fear churning in my belly. The destruction of our home was all my fault. Maybe that was the real reason why the priests abandoned me – because I destroyed everything they loved.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE GROTESQUE

Not even the gods fight against necessity.

– Simonides

“What have your prisoners revealed?”

I glanced up at my master and friend as he entered the isolated apartment where I lived on a compound in central DC. The compound housed little else than my quarters; there were too many secrets for me to live among normal humans.

“Nothing.” Washing my bloodied fists in the sink at the bar, I dried them and poured him his favorite drink. Unlike most men, the Supreme Priest preferred fruity drinks with umbrellas to shots of hard liquor. “They won’t say what’s in the forest.”

“But you felt something.”

“I did.” Something ... familiar.

“It bothers you.”

My hands paused as I finished his drink.

Lantos sat on a stool at the bar. He removed the mask he wore in public to reveal the face of a man in his thirties with sparkling green eyes and a smile that seemed out of place for someone with such a stately position as the gods’ advocate to humanity.

“I know you, Adonis,” Lantos chided gently. “Better than you know yourself. What did you sense?”

It was unlike me to hesitate to share any thought with the man who saved my life, yet something about what I’d experienced made me balk at the idea. I closed my eyes and tilted my head, bringing up the memory from the night before, of the calm lake reflecting starlight, the scent of pine and other trees in the air, and the peace that always came with leaving the confines of the city to hunt.

Beyond the pleasures of nature, I’d sensed ... a flicker of awareness, an instinct buried so deeply, it shocked me to feel it. What I’d experienced had nothing to do with the lake or what might’ve been present. Something inside me was awakening, and I wasn’t accustomed to such mysteries or surprises about myself.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Whatever they hide there, it’s familiar to me on a level I should know.”

“Your memories have begun to return?”

Opening my eyes, I shook my head. “Not at all. There is nothing before the night you saved my life.”

“Your beast instincts?”

“Baffled.”

Rustling from below me drew a smile. The tiny creature – an animated stuffed koala bear – was pawing my leg like she did every time I returned to the apartment. I had no memory of obtaining the toy, no idea how she'd come to life. I only recalled waking twelve years ago to find her and Lantos hovering over me in worry and the life-threatening wound in my side healed by the magic of Lantos' Titan father.

"Hello Mrs. Nettles," I greeted the toy and picked her up. I didn't remember how she came by that name either, but she insisted I call her this.

Pink. She said and shuffled over to the Supreme Priest. At times uncannily wise beyond my years, she was at other times nothing more than a moth drawn to sparkly or bright things. She was currently fascinated by the umbrella in his drink.

"For you, Mrs. Nettles." Lantos handed her the umbrella. "How are you today?"

I shook my head at his look. She was too bedazzled to respond. No one heard her but me.

"Any luck on figuring out if the Silent Queen or Magistrate are involved?" Lantos asked.

"They're keeping things tightly held." I mentally went over the reports and activities of the day. "We destroyed the forest and found these everywhere." I lifted a gym bag onto the counter and withdrew a red cord.

Lantos' eyes lit up. He picked up one and held it over his forearm then lowered it. The rope cord turned to something resembling smoke. His body absorbed it.

"Part of your power," I observed. "What is it?"

"These, Adonis, keep gods and men and everyone but my father from seeing what they protect." He lifted another and dropped it into his forearm. "I gave these to someone around the time I rescued you, under orders from my father."

"Who isn't about to tell you what he was protecting."

Lantos grimaced. A demigod, he was the disowned son of a Titan, marooned on earth when he disobeyed his father and cut off from everything and everyone but his own eclectic mix of powers. "No, but I can guess. The men downstairs in prison. What are their names?"

"Herakles and Thiebould."

Lantos grinned. He stood and paced, his step energized. "Adonis, you are incredible! One tiny instinct gave way to all this! We only need Herakles. Send the others to the House or wherever you make men disappear. And ... go back to the forest tonight. We need to know what happened to Herakles' charge."

Alessandra, said Mrs. Nettles. She was gazing at me. At times, I considered the notion my toy was possessed even more so than usual. Her voice was different when she said the name, and the gleam of intelligence was in her eyes. The umbrella was forgotten at her side.

An image I'd never seen before flashed into my thoughts, that of a little girl clutching a blue gem. Just as quickly, it vanished. "His charge? You think that's what the forest and cords were hiding?"

"I know it is. I gave these to Herakles and a priest twelve years ago. The last order of my father's I obeyed was to hide the new Oracle."

"Oracle," I repeated. "Finally. We'll be able to start Phase Two soon."

"Exactly. But ... we need to beat the Queen and Magistrate to her. The gods are too busy to prepare her trials. I've maneuvered them into letting the Triumvirate determine what challenges she must overcome before her power manifests fully, as is customary. Each of us gets to task her once."

I listened. Lantos was a man of shadows and secrets buried beneath a brilliant smile. That he'd been planning for an event no one knew was coming didn't surprise me. "You have a trial in mind already."

"I do." He smiled. "And it has to do with Phase Two."

Lantos' sole motivation in life was to carry out his father's revenge in the hopes of being granted asylum with the rest of the Titans. His single act of disobedience – saving my life – had seen him cut off. Together we'd risen in power with a combination of my unusually strong adeptness at political maneuvering and his magic, combined with his ambition. Despite my skill at obtaining power, I had no desire for it, but I would always bend my will to Lantos.

"We will get to her first." I considered. "You said Herakles is her guardian?"

Lantos nodded.

"I'll let word leak that he's here and post a reward in the online boards of the merc guild for capturing her. If she's got a fraction of the power of a goddess, she won't hesitate to unleash it to find her guardian. Someone will notice." I placed Mrs. Nettles on the ground and moved out from behind the counter. It was almost past sunset. I peeled off my weapons and watch in anticipation of the change. "Tonight I'll return to the forest and look for any trace of where she went."

The image flashed once more and this time, brought a stab of pain.

"Your nose is bleeding," Lantos said.

I touched my nostril and gazed briefly at the drop of maroon on my fingertip. The pain subsided and with it, the vision of the girl. "Just sinuses." *Why did I say that?* It wasn't sinuses, and I knew it. The urge to lie to the man to whom I owed my life had been instinctive.

Alessandra, Mrs. Nettles said once more.

Lantos was gazing at me closely, a flicker of something dark in his gaze. Normally, Lantos was the moon and me the night sky. His outgoing, optimistic personality sometimes grated on others whereas my silence was usually taken with caution if not fear. People were able to sense the predator I was without seeing me in my secondary

form. It helped that my reputation – well earned – was nonetheless much larger than my deeds.

I cleaned up my nose and felt the trickle of fire that went through me every time I was about to change. “How go your Holy Wars?”

“Exactly as planned. We’re keeping the Magistrate’s men busy outside the wall and the gods in disarray, fighting one another rather than us. I brokered another truce today.”

“Only you could do something like this.”

“Stop baiting me. It was your idea. Divide and conquer.”

By nature, I tended to toy with the people around me. It wasn’t malicious, more instinctual. I made every effort not to do so around Lantos for the simple reason that he was my friend.

“Like a true war leader. How do you come up with such ideas?” he asked, half in jest.

I shrugged. “It made sense for the situation.”

“It’s tied to your past. Your hunches are too ... good for them to be just hunches.”

“And I told you I’m not remembering anything yet. If I guess correctly, it’s not consciously.”

“Any insight or hunches as to what Artemis is up to?” Lantos asked casually.

Of all the gods stuck on earth, Artemis was the only who hadn’t sought him out to help establish a territory or broker deals with the Supreme Magistrate’s men. It was common knowledge among the gods and goddesses that Lantos was one of them. Crisis kept them from demanding his exact lineage or asking too many questions that might reveal him as the son of their enemy. “None. The gods are your business, not mine.”

“You’ve proven frighteningly accurate in everything.”

“If I knew, I’d tell you,” I replied. “I hear nothing through the networks and no indication your fellow Triumvirate members have any insight either.”

Lantos nodded.

“I’m about to change,” I said and pushed off my boots. “See you in the morning.”

“Fly well.” Lantos’ smile returned. He replaced his mask, bowed to Mrs. Nettles and left my flat.

I went to my room and stripped out of my clothing before heading to the balcony to change.

Mismatch. Mrs. Nettles never called me by the name I’d adopted after Lantos saved me. Mismatch was the name she claimed was mine before Lantos. She was shuffling after me as fast as her stubby legs would go.

“What is it, Mrs. Nettles?” I asked. “Quickly. It’s my time.”

Don’t hurt her.

“You know what Phase Two is. I must obey Lantos,” I replied gently.

You will see.

This was definitely one of her double possession stages when she seemed to have knowledge beyond her or my ability to access.

My attention shifted to the fire growing inside me. The moment the sun dipped beneath the horizon, my body began its nightly transformation. Black wings sprouted and spread from my shoulders outward. The hair on my body disappeared, and my head grew heavy, my features malformed and hideous, my body thickening and growing half a foot taller. Talons sprouted from my hands and toes followed soon after by a barbed, whip-like tail.

Not even Lantos knew how and why this transformation occurred. I resembled the stone grotesques and gargoyles perched on the temples of the gods. Beneath the dark gaze of Nyx, I flew and sat among them, waiting for any of them to come to life and join me for my nightly hunt.

They never did and I was left with a sense of loss to reinforce the knowledge I was alone.

Fly! Mrs. Nettles clapped silently and watched my wings flare out. The vacant look was back in her face. Whatever secondary possession took hold of her, it was gone once more.

Not entirely alone. I had never met another animated toy, either. We were different and unique, thrust together by circumstances I didn't recall.

I bowed my head to her and turned my attention to the sky. While my beast senses were strong even in human form, they were unleashed when I was a creature. I swept into the sky, barreling upward until I was above the city, then flinging out my wings to catch an air current and hover. My heart raced from the ascension, and my shoulders warmed from the exercise.

I turned my focus north, towards the forests of Maryland, and began flying. My grumbling stomach would wait for now; I needed to complete Lantos' mission first. The odd instincts were stronger in my beast form, the draw of what was hidden in the forest, the compulsion to find it ... her ... nearly beyond my ability to curb. I needed to know for certain if the image in my mind was accurate and why I'd done the unthinkable and lied to my only friend about something as unimportant as a nosebleed.

Whatever was going on, it didn't take the primal urges of a beast or warning of a stuffed animal for me to know the world was about to change.

CHAPTER FIVE: ALESSANDRA

Even a god cannot change the past.

– Agathon

I always imagined how I'd feel the day I left the forest. The reality, that I was forced out alone with no home to go back to, didn't hit me the way I expected. I was worried about Herakles, sad for the priests, glad to be away from the nymphs.

But I didn't feel like crying. It seemed ... weird. How was I so calm watching my life crumble?

"You still with me?"

I blinked out of my thoughts to look at Niko. He was driving a car he had stolen, much to my disapproval. We had fled the area of coastal Maryland, first on foot then by car, and were on a major highway headed south, towards DC. It was almost one in the morning, and I was exhausted. After my adrenaline wore off, I'd begun to wonder why he was helping me if he didn't get paid for the job.

"I'm fine," I said.

"You in shock?"

"Um. I don't think so. My skin isn't clammy and my pupils aren't dilated."

"I meant mental shock, you little shit."

I rolled my eyes.

He was quiet for a moment, eyes on the road, before he spoke. "If we're going to do this, we need some rules."

My brow furrowed and I studied his profile.

"One, you may know how to run, fight and hunt, but your guardian didn't teach you the most important lesson."

I tensed, not about to let him insult Herakles.

"You are out of your gods' damned mind if you think you should be talking to or trusting or otherwise not running at the sight of a stranger, especially one who looks like me. The men hunting you will try every trick under the sun to get you to turn yourself in peacefully or seduce you or outright blow off your legs to keep you from running again. No strangers. Ever. At all. Everyone you meet is the enemy, including any other gladiators or mercs that you think are there to help. You have no friends."

"But you were in the forest because the priests –"

"Wrong. If he looks like me, you walk away." He slapped the steering wheel lightly. "What would you do if you ran into someone like me in the store?"

With a sigh, I stared out the window. "Walk away."

“What about some injured kid or woman in the street?”

“That’s different. I know how –”

“Wrong. Walk away.”

“But that’s not right if I can–”

“Wrong!” he said more loudly. “No strangers. You’re not safely tucked away in the forest or at school anymore, Alessandra. You’re about to enter the real world, and it’s ugly. It will eat you alive if you let it. SISA means business.”

I listened. I hated to be schooled like this, and I was pretty certain if I saw an injured child, I’d stop, no matter what the consequences. *Which is why I’m here and not in my bed tonight.*

Ugh. I had real issues and no part of me was able to fathom the idea of people chasing me.

“Rule two, if someone asks you your name, it’s Lisa,” he continued.

“How can someone ask me my name if I’m not allowed to talk to anyone?”

“Don’t get smart. Gods know I hate smart women.”

I stared at him. “What do you mean you hate smart women?”

“Different story. No strangers, and you answer to Lisa. Rule three, no temples, police stations or hotspots, or anywhere else where people might be looking for you.”

“The police?” I echoed. “I’m not a criminal.”

“Who do they think you are?”

An Oracle. I didn’t answer, though, because I didn’t know who he thought I was.

“That’s what I thought. Rule four, don’t lie to me, don’t deceive me, don’t betray me,” he growled. “I have a real issue with that.”

“You have a lot of issues,” I mumbled.

“Yeah. Keep that in mind. Unpredictable mercenaries make for interesting allies.”

“You think they’re following us?” I twisted to look out the back window of the car.

“I know they will be if they figure out which direction we’re headed. We’re going underground. It’s my world, not yours, which means, rule five, don’t blow this for me. It takes years and money to get to a good place in the criminal underworld. I’m doing you a favor by taking you in. Don’t ruin my life.”

Criminal underworld? He wasn’t really giving me warm fuzzies about our future. “So we can’t ever go back to the forest.”

“No. What’re your rules?”

“No strangers. My name is Lisa. No cops, don’t lie to you and no blowing your reputation with your criminal friends.”

“Exactly.”

The glow of light pollution hovering over DC brightened the horizon. We were getting closer to where I was born, closer to Herakles’ location. “If someone was taken prisoner, how do you find them?”

“Depends on who has them. You talking a criminal or someone grabbed by the secret police?”

“I don’t really know.”

“If you know someone who got grabbed by the secret police, there’s no finding them,” he said.

“There has to be a way.”

Niko chuckled. “Look at you. All wide-eyed and innocent.”

“Stop it! I am so tired of people treating me like I’m an idiot!”

“You *are* an idiot if you think SISA will give up anyone without a good reason,” he replied. “They’re run by a man who doesn’t know the meaning of boundaries and who answers only to the gods’ representative on Earth. The laws shift around what he does, and no one is going to mess with him or his people so long as they’re under the protection of the Supreme Priest who advises the world leaders, among others, as to what the gods and goddesses expect of their elite, sleazy, ass-kissing politician underlings.”

I listened. The priests had taught me about the Supreme Priest and his connection to other high level politicians. He was one of the most powerful men in the world, according to the priests, who hadn’t liked him one bit because he – and the Supreme Magistrate – stood between the people and free will. The Supreme Magistrate controlled the military and was responsible for securing the borders as well as enforcing international policy and civil unrest, while the Supreme Priest had its own domestic security arm – and was more feared than the military.

The security force managing the police state had many names. Secret Police. Divine Police. And other slang names Herakles had told me that offended the priests when I repeated them. Their official title, though, was SISA – the Sacred Independent Security Apparatus of Our Heavenly Fathers and Mothers, whose members were colloquially known as Sacs, according to Herakles, or Sisans according to the priests.

They were said to be charged by the gods with managing internal affairs of the human race and keeping the peace around the world. They answered to no nation state but to the Supreme Priest. I didn’t have any idea who ran the SISA. He wasn’t of interest to the priests, or I’d have been taught his name.

The world was sounding more dangerous by the minute, and I didn’t like it. The priests’ claim that they’d torture me if they found me was sounding more likely given the grim words of Niko.

But there had to be a way to find Herakles. I couldn’t think of him as being completely lost or worse, at the hands of someone Niko said worked outside the laws. The real world outside the forest, however, was completely new to me.

Red signs warning of an enforced curfew and mandatory checkpoint ahead began to appear along the highway. Two miles from the checkpoint, Niko pulled off the highway onto an exit leading into a quiet town near the forest.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“You have a biotag?”

“I’m not sure what that is.”

“Then we aren’t going through a checkpoint where we can get thrown in jail for not having one, now are we?”

I rolled my eyes. He was moody at best tonight, probably tired like I was.

He drove through quiet neighborhoods before pulling into a long driveway leading to a sagging doublewide trailer surrounded by a fence topped by barbed wire. Huge dogs barked at our approach, and a man with a large caliber rifle sauntered out of an outhouse sized guard shack beside the road.

Niko stopped at the rolling gate, and I looked from a scene out of a horror movie to him.

“Really?” I asked.

“Shut up. These people don’t like strangers or fugitives and you’re both.”

I sank into silence.

He rolled down his window and shook the hand of the man outside. “Hey, Mike. Need some work done.”

“You got money this time?” the man named Mike asked and leaned down, peering at me.

“Yep. Quite a bit.”

“Who’s this?”

“No one. New girl toy.”

“They getting’ prettier and younger.” Mike seemed to find that funny and laughed. He stood. “I’ll tell Mama you’re here.”

“Thanks, Mike.” Niko left his window down and waited for the gate to roll open before he began driving again.

“Your mother lives here?” I asked.

“No.” He snorted. “Mama is the head of the criminal underground. No one knows her real name. They have to tell her anytime anyone enters her compounds. If she doesn’t like you, she’ll order you killed on the spot,” he answered. “Stay close and keep quiet. We’ll get you a biotag and be on our way.”

He pulled around back, an area populated by more men with guns drinking beer kept cold in a kiddie pool filled with ice. I looked at him skeptically.

“Don’t judge these people or me,” he grumbled. “Your damn priests died before paying me what they owed. If you’re worth half what I think you are, you’re the one on the most wanted posters so don’t tempt me. This is coming out of my pocket, and those rednecks out there might just save your life.”

I said nothing. I was too tired for my temper to flare.

“Come on.” He climbed out of the car.

I exited more slowly, not at all convinced I wanted to leave the car with the rough men in the backyard. I leaned into the back to grab my knife from my pack and placed it at the small of my back, just in case, then trailed Niko.

He was weaving through the thugs and criminals, greeting those he knew and smiling like he belonged. Which he probably did. I eyed everyone I passed, my nose wrinkling at the stench of beer, marijuana, gun oil and body odor. These were not the kind of people Herakles or the priests would want me around. Most of them were too drunk or wasted to pay attention to us, and others jostled into me or spilled beer on me without apologizing.

I went with Niko into the house – and almost gagged at the cigarette smoke fogging up the air. I sneezed then coughed.

“Knock it off,” Niko said and grabbed a fistful of my shirt, hauling me through a living room and down a narrow hallway. He released me outside a door and turned to face me. “Don’t talk to anyone. Don’t make eye contact. Don’t leave this spot. Got it?”

I grimaced, not at all happy at breathing air that felt like it was choking me.

“Hey. You got it?” He pushed one shoulder against the wall.

He wore an expression that warned me we weren’t in a place he considered friendly. His muscular frame was tense once more, and an icky feeling slid through me. I knew nothing of this man, and Herakles would say that no one with a shred of honor would go merc.

What if he was here to sell me out?

“Yeah. I got it,” I said and tugged free. “Just be quick.”

Niko knocked on the door beside us and opened it without waiting for someone to answer. He walked in and grinned widely at whoever was inside.

The door closed behind him. I lingered for all of ten seconds before deciding I really didn’t want to be around criminals and had no reason to trust a man who said he was going to sell me if the priests didn’t pay him.

Which he claimed they hadn’t.

The barrage on my senses here made my skin crawl. I returned the way we had come and stepped out onto the back porch, waving away the last of the smoke. The stench here was muted compared to the inside of the trailer. I gazed around briefly before deciding I’d rather take my chances alone than stay here.

I wove back through the armed drunks and druggies towards the car and paused at the end of the sidewalk before the driveway.

A figure in a hood and cloak stood leaning against the driver’s side of the car. He didn’t seem to be armed, and he made no move towards me. Unable to make out facial features or anything about the person, I hesitated to confront someone in this place where everyone was armed. But I did move a little closer and peered at him.

“That’s, um, our car,” I said awkwardly.

No response. No movement. I felt him watching me.

“Hey! What’d I tell you!” Niko belted from the direction of the house.

“Great.” I rolled my eyes and turned. “I couldn’t breathe in there!”

“Get your ass back here.”

“Are you gonna let this guy steal your car?” I pointed over my shoulder and then turned.

The hooded figure was gone.

“The smoke is getting to you. Hurry up so we can leave.” The screen door slammed closed behind Niko.

I walked around the car and searched the night visually for the figure I saw before finally doing what Herakles told me no one ever does. I looked up.

The hooded figure had scaled the tree behind the gravel parking area and was clinging to it.

“Just, uh, don’t steal our car,” I said and then turned away to obey Niko before he yelled at me again. “I mean, *the* car. It’s already been stolen once tonight.”

This time I covered my nose and mouth with my t-shirt when I entered the disgusting lair of Niko’s criminal friends. He waited for me in the hallway.

“Knock it off, Lisa,” he grumbled and yanked my shirt off my nose.

“This place is disgusting,” I complained.

Niko got into my space until I took a step back. “You may not like these people, but they’re going to help us. So stop acting like a child and pretend to be grateful they aren’t asking questions,” he snapped quietly enough for only me to hear.

I felt bad after that. He was right. I didn’t want to be here, but if they could help me get into DC where I could find Herakles ... “Sorry,” I murmured.

“Good. Now go.” He pushed me towards the door cracked halfway open.

I entered with some trepidation, not certain what I’d find. It resembled what I imagined a criminal’s hangout looked like, only with more guns and beer. The guy working at a makeshift desk topped with bundles of money and small cases of drugs was close to my age. He waved me over. Several more men were in another corner, probably guards by their beefy statures, while two women were sorting pills on another table.

I sat before the kid at the table.

“How do you not have a biotag?” he asked, his direct gaze showing no sign of intoxication despite the beer bottles lining one side of his desk.

“Stop it, Marty,” Niko replied.

“It’s easier to reprogram an existing tag than insert a new one,” Marty said in irritation.

“Yep. I know. New one is twice as expensive, too.” Niko nudged me.

I said nothing. Maybe I should’ve been grateful, but I wasn’t feeling it. The hairs on the back of my neck were on end, and my instincts were restless.

Marty snatched my wrist and began waving a wand-like device lined with lights over one forearm then the other. “No tag,” he said. “You know where I have to go to get these?” he asked me, clearly blaming me for whatever criminal act he had to perform.

“No,” I replied.

“Corpse. I have to dig them out of dead people.”

I pulled my hand back, grossed out.

“Niko, keep her still.”

Niko gripped my wrist and pinned it to the table with strength I wasn’t able to shake. I watched Marty lift a second device resembling a handgun and read something on the small screen on one side of it.

“Your name is now ... Holly. Holly Rodriguez, and you’re supposed to be Mexican.” Marty eyed me critically. “You know Spanish? Because this says it’s your only language.”

“Who cares,” Niko replied. “There are white Mexicans somewhere. Shoot her up. We’re in a rush.”

Marty positioned the gun in the center, underside of my forearm and pulled the trigger.

“Ow,” I muttered at the sharp sting.

“Congrats. You now have a biotag,” Marty said and lowered the gun.

I raised my forearm. A drop of blood hovered over a dark, square microchip planted just beneath the surface of my skin. The idea it had been in some other woman’s body, and she was dead, weirded me out.

“You want me to cut off that rope?” Marty asked, tapping the red cord around my wrist.

“Nope. Just the biotag,” Niko replied. He pulled a wad of cash out of a cargo pocket and plunked it down on the desk. “As agreed.”

Marty counted it then added it to one of the stacks on his desk. “Pleasure, as always. Good luck, Holly.”

I stood and moved towards the door, holding my forearm. The pain was gone, but I was still disgusted by the biotag. I turned to wait for Niko and saw him slide money from one of Marty’s stacks into his pockets. He had distracted Marty by showing him a knife.

I left, not wanting to be around if the thugs in the corner caught on and shot Niko. Returning to the car, I peered again into the tree branches without seeing the figure I had spotted earlier. I didn’t really believe in magical creatures the way the priests and others did. Herakles was very pragmatic, not at all into the supernatural outside of the gods, and I had adopted his realistic view of our world. There were no sprites or monsters despite the myths claiming otherwise.

Except ... the creature from the lake. I wasn't afraid of whatever it had been by our car, not like I had been of the grotesque. Now *that* was worth worrying about. But a man in a hood hanging out in such a place? No comparison.

"Come on, Holly." Niko strode by me to the car and opened the driver's side door, sliding into it.

Eager to be out of here, I hurried around to the passenger side. "Do they know you stole their money?"

"Quiet, kid." He turned the car around and headed back down the driveway.

The gate rolled open, and Mike-the-guard waved us through.

Ten minutes later, we were driving down the highway toward DC again. Traffic slowed at the checkpoint, and Niko released a sigh as we were waved through rather than stopped by men dressed all in black wearing masks and carrying weapons.

"That's it?" I asked.

"They don't usually wave you through, and my luck has been bad for a while," Niko replied.

"If you're a criminal, wouldn't they be more interested in you than someone without a chip?" I asked.

"I have my ways of avoiding detection."

I had a feeling they were just as illegal as everything else he did. Too tired and interested in DC to speak, I focused on the buildings we were approaching. Signs and banners telling citizens to report terrorists spouting anti-gods and anti-government activity and beliefs to the SISA were everywhere, squeezed between parking meters, fast food restaurant ads and plastered on the sides of buildings.

Graffiti was everywhere, too, and I noticed a theme among the colorful tags as we passed. They all started with *Mama says* ...

... *don't trust the gov't.*

... *destroy the SISA!*

... *go home gods!*

... *bring back the Old Ways.*

"Mama is popular," I said.

"She's outfoxed SISA for ten years."

"She must be really smart."

"Probably. No one's ever met her. I sometimes think she's a figurehead that doesn't exist. Even us criminals want to know we have someone to take care of us, I suppose."

"Why are you a merc?" I asked. "Doesn't being a gladiator pay enough?"

He laughed. "You know nothing about the real world, kid. I don't know any gladiator who isn't involved in the merc guild or some other criminal enterprise."

“I had no idea,” I said softly, somewhat disappointed to learn the fighters we watched on Wednesday nights on the Gladiator Guild channel were criminals. “What made you choose that instead of becoming a normal citizen?”

Niko gave me a weird look. “You mean a slave to the gods and their human underlings? Why would I want that? If you don’t want to live a life of fear, you end up like me on the streets and make a living where you can.”

I frowned.

“*Normal* people are afraid to speak their minds, to live their lives the way they want, to follow their dreams. They are oppressed, Alessandra, by the gods, by SISA, by the Supreme Magistrate. People disappear every day and are never heard from again. No trials, no justification, no real reason. Heresy is the biggest excuse given, and there’s no one to tell SISA they can’t do what they’re doing. And that mess is ideal compared to what’s been going on outside the wall since the Holy Wars erupted five years ago.”

“Holy Wars? What wall?”

He eyed me. “Gods damn the priests! It’s not my job to school you in the ways of the world. You’re lucky I got you a biotag, you little shit! That came out of my salary.”

“You stole the money back!” My gods. This guy had issues. Why was he helping me for free when he clearly didn’t like me? “We should return to the Old Ways,” I said, hoping for a topic that didn’t make him yell quite so much.

“Exactly. You’re not as stupid as you seem sometimes. You know what the Old Ways are?”

“Of course. I learned in school. A time where humans governed themselves without the influence of the gods. Life, liberty, equality and the pursuit of happiness,” I recited from class.

“They don’t teach that shit in school. The knowledge has been lost, or would have been, if not for Mama. It’s what she wants – to return to the Old Ways.” He smiled faintly.

“Strange. Our priests taught us the Old Ways are supposed to return soon.”

“I’m liking your priests more and more. They’re clearly academics out of touch with the real world, though. It’s impossible for the Old Ways to exist alongside the gods.”

Unless the gods are gone. Puzzled, I rolled his words and those of the priests around in my head. I was beginning to understand that my world of twelve years wasn’t the same as this one. The idea the Old Ways were almost lost when I’d lived every day reciting *life, liberty, equality and the pursuit of happiness* was odd. If the priests were right, if they hadn’t been messing with me about being the Oracle, I was beginning to see why they wanted me hidden until the old Oracle died. The Old Ways could emerge only after she was gone. *But why not get rid of me instead of imprisoning me?*

There was a lot that didn’t make sense to me yet. I had much to learn about the real world and a ton more to think about.

Niko stayed off the bigger streets through DC and angled us to the side of the city closer to Maryland, finally stopping in a rundown section of town that shouldn't have surprised me but did. The buildings were blocky with barred windows, and vehicles that appeared to be abandoned lined one side of the street. The thump of bass came from a house squeezed between block apartment buildings. Masked SISA police patrolled the neighborhoods on foot.

"SISA's everywhere inside the wall and the military everywhere outside it." Niko glared at the police.

"You prefer it otherwise?"

"The military is secular and has a justice system. They answer to the people and don't make people disappear for saying the gods are nuts."

We weren't completely different. Aside from Artemis and Lelantos, I was raised to be able to identify the other gods and Titans but not to worship them.

He parked out front. We got out and went to the door. There was no mistaking the round chinks in the concrete walls on either side of the door for anything but bullet holes.

Thus far, I wasn't impressed by the outside world or those who inhabited it.

"Are we visiting more of your friends?" I asked.

"No. This is one of my places." He unlocked the door and walked in.

I trailed. He locked the door behind us and went to the stairs on the far side of a lobby with scuffed floors and sagging ceilings. He led me to an apartment on the second floor. It was clean, neat and practically decorated. Grateful not to be stuck in a place like the trailer, I put my backpack on the floor.

"Bathroom through there. There's only one, so lock the damn door if you're in there," he said grouchy and pointed. He walked into his bedroom and flipped on the lights.

The apartment had a small kitchen and dining area along with a balcony overlooking the street behind where we parked. The balcony doors, however, were barred, preventing anyone from using the outside space.

"Hey, Niko?" I dropped the curtain and moved towards the couch, peeking into the cracked bedroom door.

He was on the phone, his back to me. My instincts stirred once more, and I had the same urge I did at his redneck friends' – to leave him sooner rather than later, even if I had nowhere else to go.

CHAPTER SIX

Tomorrow. I was too beat to take a shower and slung myself down on the couch. I had spent two nights a week sleeping on the ground; the lumpy couch was good enough for me. As busy as my mind was, I soon drifted into a doze.

Arguing voices pulled me out of a deep sleep. I struggled to rouse myself, lost the battle then forced my objecting body into a sit. I blinked rapidly and sighed. It was probably the television in Niko's room, except ...

Instincts. The ones that made me worry about bears during fall and great cats during wildfire season. I rolled off the couch and orientated myself quickly before rising and going to the door to his bedroom cracked open.

"Niko?" I called.

Silence.

I pushed the door open to see him on the floor, bare chested in sweatpants. The hooded figure I had seen earlier stood over him, gun in hand.

"Stay where you are," hissed the person in the hood.

Niko motioned towards my left, and I looked. The top drawer of his dresser yawned open, and I caught the faint gleam of a gun butt. I moved towards it.

"If you try it, I'll shoot him," the hooded form threatened.

"You'd be doing the world a favor," I replied. "He's kind of an asshole." Snatching the gun, I flipped off the safety and walked towards them. "But I need him for now and I do know how to use a gun."

The person was still for a long moment. The tip of the gun lowered, and Niko knocked it away, snagging the hooded person's arm and shoving him into the wall. The hood fell away, and I started to smile.

The figure who bested Niko was a pretty woman with cocoa skin and a tattoo on her forehead.

"You couldn't stay away, could you, Dosy?" Niko growled and searched her roughly.

"I'm not here for you, you arrogant pig!" came the saucy response.

I switched on the lights. The tattoo was the same symbol on the Temple of Artemis: a bow. The woman wore a robe of gray beneath the hood. "Wait, did a priestess just kick your ass?" I asked Niko. I put the gun on the dresser.

"I was sleeping!" he retorted. "No one knows where this place is." He released the woman, angered and tense, and stepped back.

"She probably followed us from Marty's," I guessed.

"I was in the trunk." Dosy turned to face Niko. With a glance at me, her cool gaze fell to him, and her chin went up a notch in what I knew from experience was defiance. "Not the first time I was relegated to a cold, dark place at Niko's hands."

“I had nothing to do with that,” he replied.

“Except abandoning me.”

“That was ten years ago, Dosal, and you walked away!”

“You can’t walk away from someone if he’s already gone.”

“You must be the smart woman he hates,” I said with an uncomfortable laugh, uncertain how else to react to their violent reactions to one another.

The two of them glared at each other. Niko’s jaw was ticking, and he appeared ready to pounce while Dosal’s unfaltering gaze was cold. The tension between them was so thick, my cheeks grew warm. Whatever their history was, I was guessing it was pretty personal.

“I’m just gonna go back to my couch,” I murmured and stepped back.

Dosal started towards me, and Niko grabbed her.

“I’m here to protect you from him! Niko will sell –”

“Holly knows you’re full of shit!” He had her arms, and she pushed at him. “I should put a bullet in you and leave you for your goddess to take care of. Oh wait – the gods haven’t helped us in five years! They abandoned us the way you did me ten years ago!”

My brow furrowed. Before I could pursue, Niko reached over to grab the priestess’s weapon. “Wait!” I cried. “You can’t just kill a priestess in your apartment!”

“Oh, I can.”

“He can’t hurt me,” Dosal said calmly. “And since I know that ... Holly, I came to give you a message about your birthright.”

“Shut up, Dosal.” Niko made a show of putting the gun to her head. “You have no idea what I’ve become.”

“Wait, wait, wait!” I scrambled forward and pushed Niko to keep him from hurting her. He pushed me back. “I don’t know who I am or what I’m supposed to do! If she does then ...” I grunted and shoved him far enough away to squeeze between them. “Then I need to know. *We* need to know.”

With me in the way, Niko lowered his gun arm without releasing his grip on Dosal.

“He’s already sold you out twice by now,” Dosal said, smooshed between me and the wall.

“Stop stirring the pot!” I snapped. “Just think about this for a minute. Both of you. You both want something from me and if you’re fighting, I’m walking out that door without either of you.”

“I wouldn’t let you,” Dosal responded.

“Not happening,” Niko said at the same time.

“Oh, good. You’re agreeing with each other. Niko, go over there. Now!” I ordered him.

He gave me a look that said he wished he’d left me with Marty but reluctantly moved to the other side of the bedroom, near the door. I stepped away from Dosal.

“Glad to see someone here has sense.” Dosy straightened out her clothing. “For the record, Holly, he wouldn’t have hurt me. He’s always talked big, acted small when it came to me.”

“In any case!” I shouted over Niko’s objection. “Why are you here?” I asked Dosy.

She relaxed some, her focus shifting to me instead of the man she had a history with. “I’d like a glass of water.”

“Oh, let’s. We must be civilized.” Niko strode angrily into the living room, the muscles of his thick frame rippling beneath the colorful tattoos covering his back, shoulders and chest.

I shook my head and followed, as did Dosy. When I reached my couch and sat down, I realized they were both staring at me.

“Um, what?” I asked, unsettled by Niko’s fiery look and the odd expression on Dosy’s face.

“You aren’t what I expected,” Dosy replied first.

I sighed and held my face in my hands. Irritated at the latest person who wanted to belittle or insult me, I rose and lifted my pack. “I’m out. You people have issues I can’t fix.”

Dosy laughed softly. “You took that wrong. I meant it as a compliment. I was expecting a scared, silly teen with no sense. You can use a gun and hold your own with Niko. That’s impressive.”

I lowered the pack, my ruffled feathers smoothing out.

“Herakles was rumored to be with you. He taught you to have a backbone?”

I glanced at Niko, who was listening intently. Uncertain what to think of Dosy or how she knew Herakles, I hesitated to respond.

Dosy sat on the chair near the kitchen. “Water, Niko,” she snapped. “How did you get through the checkpoint so easily?”

“They waved us through,” I said with a shrug.

“That doesn’t just happen. I’m betting Niko’s made arrangements.”

He appeared ready to refute her but whirled and went to the sink. He wasn’t kicking her out or trying to kill her anymore, which made me think she was right. As badass as he acted, he wasn’t going to hurt the woman he had feelings for at one point.

“Herakles,” Dosy prodded. “Why is he not with you?”

“He was captured,” I said. “We’re here to rescue him.”

“We’re what?” Niko demanded.

“Rescue?” Dosy’s eyes widened. “If he was taken, it was by SISA. There’s no way for you to get to him.”

“I don’t believe that.”

Niko brought her a glass of water. This time, the look they exchanged was one of uneasiness.

“Why is a priestess looking for me?” I asked her.

“*High Priestess*,” Niko said, using air quotes in mockery. “What do the gods want with some initiate?”

“Not your concern, Niko,” she replied.

“But you came to find me, right?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“And tell me ... what?”

“I came to find and protect you from people like Niko,” Dosal admitted. “People who might figure out who you really are.”

Niko was studying me the way he had in the forest when we first met.

“So do you know what’s supposed to happen next?” I asked.

“Pardon?”

“Where I’m supposed to go, what I’m supposed to do. The priests at the orphanage seemed to think there was somewhere.”

“You were raised by priests,” Dosal repeated, surprised. “That’s not how this was supposed to happen.”

“Okay, first, what is *this*?” Niko asked and motioned to me.

“Holly is of –”

“Omgods. My name’s not Holly,” I muttered. “It’s –”

“Lisa,” Niko cut me off. “And shut up.”

Dosal appeared taken aback for a moment before she met my gaze. “Do you know what you are?” she asked uncertainly.

“Allegedly what I am? I was told yesterday,” I replied. “Niko thinks I’m an initiate.”

“So Herakles isn’t with you, you were raised by priests and you don’t know how to be what you really are,” Dosal summarized.

“Yes,” I said. “And I want to rescue Herakles.”

Agitated, she rose and paced. “After hearing all this, I think rescuing him will be the easiest thing you do.”

Niko and I exchanged a look. We didn’t know enough to share her alarm.

“Okay.” Dosal drew a deep breath and approached me. “First off, don’t take off the red cord. If it is what I think it might be, it’ll keep people from tracking you. Second ...” She trailed off, at a loss for words. Blinking rapidly, she shook her head. “I can’t even begin to imagine a second. Just stay underground for a while. Niko, if you betray her to you-know-who, I will gut you.”

It was a wonder either of them were alive, given how often they threatened each other in the short span we were together.

“Hard to protect what you don’t know you have,” he pointed out.

“I’m an Oracle,” I said. Whether or not I should have, I didn’t really care at the moment. I wanted to see what they did when I said it, to gauge how bad things really were.

Dosy gaped. “Don’t ever tell anyone that!” she yelled when she’d recovered. “Ever!”

“A what? You mean ... you mean *the* Oracle?” Niko was staring at me. “And those damn priests were going to pay me the rate for a typical teen runaway? Now I’m glad I cut them down before the security forces moved in.”

I gasped.

“This is what I’m talking about.” Dosy pointed at him. “This is why you’re better off with me, Holly. Lisa. Whatever your name is.”

My ears were ringing from Niko’s confession.

“You do not walk into –”

The two of them began shouting at one another again, and all I could think about was the blood I’d seen on Niko’s hands. It hadn’t belonged to the enemies. It had belonged to the priests he let me think had abandoned me.

“How could you do that?” I shouted above them and pushed at Niko. “How could you *kill* them?” I reached for his weapon, emotion boiling despite my exhaustion.

Dosy stepped back, and Niko grabbed my arms, gaze dropping from her to me. He wrestled with me, finally wrapping both arms around me and shoving me face first into a wall. I struggled in a frenzy until it was clear I wasn’t going to best him this way. I panted and went limp, my mind racing.

“Look, kid, it was –”

“Don’t call me kid!” I struggled to pull away, but he kept me in place. “You’re a murderer!”

“It was an act of mercy.”

“Bullshit!”

“No, it was,” Dosy seconded. “The secret police would’ve done unspeakable things to them. Since the SISA chief, Adonis, took over, it’s been nonstop carnage and oppression. They’re aggressive and harsh. If you’ve got something to hide, suicide is a better option. It’s not something that’s easy to explain, except that Niko did them a favor, Holly.”

My name’s not Holly! I blinked. My eyes were blurred by tears. A tremor of emotion swirled through me. There was no situation under Zeus where I could imagine the priests committing suicide. Was the world outside my forest that bad? *Why* had they kept so much from me? Did I not need this type of knowledge in order to help them with their plan to bring back the Old Ways?

“You okay?” Dosy’s voice had softened.

“No,” I replied. “They were my friends.”

“Holly, I know this is hard, but trust me. They are better off in Thanatos’ hands than SISA’s. You learned about Thanatos, the god of death, didn’t you? About his realm?”

I calmed some, recalling that good people like the priests weren't really gone. They lived on in a different realm, one ruled by Thanatos. "Yes."

"Then you know death is simply a gateway into a much better place."

It was easier to let myself believe her, trust her, than to sort through emotions I wasn't prepared to feel. The priests had never been close to me like Herakles was. I wanted to believe them better off, the way they taught us in school. But if Herakles followed them into the underworld of Thanatos ...

I would do whatever I had to out of revenge. Herakles was my heart, my life, the only thing keeping me from acknowledging the desolation stemming from understanding that the world I knew was now completely gone. I wasn't ready for that.

"Don't wuss out now, kid," Niko said in a quieter voice. "You're tough. Stay tough. I don't kill unless I have to, but all of us knew what was coming. I did it quick."

"I do agree with him there," Dosal said. "SISA will do anything to find you."

"Let me go." I tugged at Niko's grip.

He did so.

I left the wall and sank onto the couch, trying to rein in the emotions I couldn't quite categorize. Herakles would tell me they were right, that I needed to stay focused not emotional, that the priests were in the part of the underworld saved for the most righteous. Yet the image in my head of Father Ellis falling beneath Niko's knives ... I wasn't happy at the orphanage, but the priests didn't deserve to die. What was worse – this all happened because I disobeyed them and went to the lake.

Father Cristopolos was right. In ten minutes, I had undone years worth of their work and killed no less than four priests.

What was I that pious men committed suicide rather than reveal my identity and location? That SISA came for me?

My stomach hurt from emotion I didn't know how to process, and I rested back against the couch, struggling to recall something Herakles had told me that might help me think straight about all of this.

"You swear they felt no pain?" I asked Niko.

"I swear it."

It didn't really help. In fact, I had the urge to scream and attack him and demand to know why he hadn't told me before. I was sliding to Dosal's side of the court and starting to hate Niko.

"Why did you bring her to DC?" Dosal asked Niko. "It's the worst place to be."

"Or the best, right under the nose of –"

"No. It's the worst. You're up to something. I know it."

Niko fell silent.

"You need to get her out of here now."

“No,” I said, rousing myself from the deep thoughts. “I’m not leaving without Herakles.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Niko replied.

“If you think I’m stupid, then fine. I am! But I’m not leaving without Herakles! You already killed everyone else who matters to me.”

They weren’t taking me seriously. Dosy shook her head and Niko rolled his eyes.

Fury flooded me. “What happens if I take this off?” I asked, tugging at the red cord. “Oh. That’s right. They come and get me and torture anyone found with me. We wouldn’t want that to happen, would we?” I maneuvered it up my hand to my palm.

“No!” Dosy said. “Just ... leave it on.”

I paused and waited.

“Look, I might be able to find out where Herakles is by pulling some strings, but I can’t guarantee anything. Not even that,” she said quickly.

“Even if she does, I’m not breaking into a SISA prison,” Niko said stubbornly.

“This seems like the fastest way to find Herakles. By being taken prisoner with him,” I mused, lifting my hand so they could see the red cord. “Niko will definitely never get paid and I’ll enjoy watching him at the hands of SISA. I don’t know what happens to you, Dosy.”

He eyed me at the mention of money.

“I’ve got friends,” Dosy said. “I’d be fine. Niko wouldn’t be.”

“If nothing else, my biotag is worth money, isn’t it?” I asked Niko. “If I die in the attempt, you can dig it out of my arm out and sell it to Marty then steal more of his money.”

Dosy shot Niko a knowing look, and Niko shrugged. “You do make a good point.”

“You can’t be serious. Even you aren’t that stupid, Niko,” Dosy said.

“Hmm. So you don’t want me to do it. Looks like I’m in, kid.”

I snorted, not at all certain if I’d really won or if he was so determined to spite Dosy, he’d get us both killed.

“I’ll do what I can,” Dosy said, gaze on me. “Niko, make up your mind. You gonna keep her safe, or do I need reinforcements to take her away from you? I don’t need to remind you how few men your people have in DC.”

I waited.

The two went into stare down mode again. Finally, Niko shifted.

“Fine. I’ll take her to find this friend and dump her off at the front gates or wherever,” he said finally. “I’m not going to risk my neck for her.”

“No surprise,” Dosy muttered. “Good enough for me. I’ll be back in the morning with any information I can find out about Herakles.” She strode to the door.

“Hey. You haven’t answered my emails,” Niko called as she opened the door. “How’s ... Junior?”

“He’s *not* Junior. He’s nothing like you!”

“You guys have a kid?” I asked, astonished. “My gods. That poor little guy.” This earned me two glares.

“It’s why I’m the only person immune to Niko’s knives and guns. We’ll talk about it later.” Dossy left and slammed the door behind me.

The look Niko gave me made me think I should sleep with one of his guns. But I was just as upset and glared back. He spun on his heel and stormed into his bedroom, slamming the door.

That poor kid.

While I’d never experienced it first hand, I imagined this was what it was like if my parents were fighting. Except my parents didn’t go around mercy-killing priests. I locked the front door and settled down on the couch again, a little out of place and worried about what was going on that no one wanted to tell me.

At least I might soon know where Herakles was. If I were in trouble, he would come for me. It was only fair I did the same.

Father Ellis is dead. I wanted to hate Niko, but ... well, I was horrified to admit I was a little too angry with the priests for lying to me my entire life to feel complete compassion for them.

I was too confused to figure out what I felt. None of this seemed real. I wanted to wake up at home in my bed at the orphanage and trek into the woods with Herakles for another survival lesson.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Hateful to me as the gates of Hades is that man who hides one thing in his heart and speaks another.

– Homer

The next morning, I stood across the street from the thick metal gates of SISA headquarters located in downtown DC. Maybe it was stupid of me, but I hadn't really considered it might be hard to get to Herakles until I saw those tall, thick gates guarded by half a dozen men on the street side. Herakles had taught me to be self-sufficient in every scenario I could think of to the point I thought myself somewhat invincible. But those gates ...

There's no way I can sneak in.

I had to, though. I'd rather be trapped with Herakles in prison than stuck alone in an insane world I didn't understand. The morning crowd, consisting of tour groups and businesspeople, walked past the wall, seemingly oblivious to the compound. I couldn't look away.

At least, not until one of the masked guards looked my way twice. The masks kind of freaked me out. They covered their entire faces and heads. Each guard was identified by a patch with a number on it rather than names and faces.

I left the sidewalk and went into the café behind me. With the money I'd pilfered from Niko, I bought a Greek coffee and sat near the window. The streets and sidewalks were churning with rush hour activity. Part of me was thrilled to realize I was a part of this world, at least on this surface. Buying coffee, smiling at people whose paths I crossed ... no one knew I was different.

I kind of liked that.

The gates across the street opened once to reveal a second set, these much smaller, and guards and tire shredders in between the two. Beyond the second gates sat a white building with marble pillars. I wasn't able to gauge how large it was in the two seconds the two gates were simultaneously open.

Niko had claimed this building was more secure than the White House. Dossy disagreed, claiming this was an offsite and the *real* headquarters was located in Northern Virginia. She said this site was abandoned before a month ago and considered its reactivation a ploy of some sort. I was inclined to take her word over his, out of principal because I had no idea either way.

The two had still been fighting about something that didn't matter to me when I left. They argued about *everything*. I didn't even have to be subtle – just walked out.

Herakles would tell me to evaluate everything I could about the compound. So far, I'd figured out there was no going over the gates and I had no clue whether the sewer system was an option. The only thing Dossy had been able to find out was that Herakles was in the east wing, which wasn't visible from the street.

Official visitors entered the gates on foot and by car. Their identifications were scanned, and they, their belongings and vehicles were searched. My eyes followed the walls down the block. I stood, grabbing my coffee to walk the perimeter and see what other gates were present.

Half an hour later, I was forced to admit there was one way in and out of the compound. I returned to the café and sat with another coffee, toying with the red cord around my wrist.

"You little shit."

I looked up to see Niko at my table. He sat down without waiting for an invitation.

"You all clearly had some things to work out," I replied.

"When you meet that special someone who turns out not to be as interested in you when you are them, you'll understand."

"I doubt it. Herakles told me never to let any boy derail me from my goals, and I won't." While frustrating, it had been easy to let go of the boys the nymphs stole. I wasn't letting anyone near my heart, because Herakles said that's when bad things happened.

"You think it's a choice to fall in love, to have a kid you aren't expecting," Niko observed.

"Everything in life is a choice."

"No, kid. It's not." He was amused. "But I do hope to see the look on your face when you realize that."

"Whatever. Are we gonna do this?" It was hard to talk to him when I wanted to explode about the priests.

"Do *what*?"

I pointed towards SISA building. Niko looked briefly.

"Let's get something straight. You're insane to want to go to the one place you should never want to be," he replied.

"You know why you're here right now? Because you murdered everyone else who could help me," I shot back.

"Shut up, kid. I was going to tell you, Dossy sent me down here to dissuade you, but I have a different idea."

I waited, surprised to sense he was on my side. And irked he didn't even blink when I mentioned the priests.

"There's only one way into that place," he continued. "We need to be invited."

"What does that entail?"

“A mercenary bounty hunter claiming to have the real Oracle in tow might warrant an invite.”

I brightened. “That’s brilliant, Niko! Let’s do that!”

He eyed me. “Does anything penetrate that thick skull of yours? Like how dangerous this is, how small the chances are you’ll be able to walk out the same way you walk in? What they might do to you?”

“Can’t be worse than what you might do to me.”

“You have no idea how big of a favor I did those priests. They didn’t even pay me.”

What an asshole. “Herakles will fix everything,” I said, missing my friend even more.

“We don’t even know where he is.”

“Yes we do. The east wing.”

“You’re not getting it.” Niko sighed and studied me. “You might get in but you won’t get out.”

Maybe he was right. But why did I want to leave if Herakles was trapped and being tortured? My world – except him – was crashing and burning. I was trying not to face that reality and holding out for Herakles to fix things. I didn’t care what happened to me if it meant he was gone.

I didn’t tell Niko any of this. It was obvious he thought I was insane. To discuss what I felt made it more real. It was easier for me to push away my emotions and put all my faith in the man sitting in a cell somewhere in the east wing of SISA headquarters.

Herakles had spent over a decade taking care of me. For once, it was my turn to do the same for him, and nothing Niko said was going to dissuade me.

“Well, come on,” he said and stood.

“Where are we going?” I asked suspiciously.

“Dosy knows some people. You and I are going to walk into SISA and hope she can get us out.” He stopped outside the café and pulled out a pair of handcuffs. “I’ve never seen footage of a potential Oracle walking in voluntarily.” He slid one cold cuff around one wrist then the other.

“You’re really going to help me?”

Niko met my gaze. “No one else I know would consider me walking you into SISA *helping*,” he replied. “When we’re inside, chances are they’re going to separate us. Count to a hundred and then pull off your red bracelet. If you really are what Dosy says, it’ll cause some sort of chaos and distract them long enough for me to slip away and find Herakles.”

“This is a great plan,” I said, my hope building.

“It’s a terrible plan. We have no exit strategy.”

I didn’t care. All I could think about was Herakles. “I can take care of myself,” I told him when I saw the worried look he cast the walls. “I know self-defense and I can run.”

“You have no clue, kid.” Without another word, he took my arm and marched me across the street.

My stomach churned as we approached the guard post.

“I found the real Oracle,” Niko proclaimed.

“Move along,” one of the guards said, unconcerned.

“Look, I’m a merc. I’ve been tracking her, and I found her,” Niko insisted. “If you check with your boss, he’s expecting me.”

Say what now? I eyed him.

“Whatever, sport. Keep walking,” another guard replied.

Niko glanced at me. “Can you do anything Oracle-y to prove it?” he asked.

“Not that I know of.”

He muttered something I couldn’t hear then reached for the red cord at my wrist. Tugging the knot free, he pulled it away.

A wave – invisible yet strong enough to shatter the glass of car windshields – rippled outward from us. The gate before us shook, and the plastic chairs outside the café flipped onto their sides. Everyone within ten feet of us was flattened. The wave lost power the farther it traveled down the block.

Niko and I exchanged a look. We alone were left standing while the guards sprawled onto the ground where they’d fallen. Replacing the red cord, Niko faced the nearest guard, who appeared too stunned to react.

“If you don’t want her, I can sell her off on the black market for at least –”

The guards erupted into action and shouting. Someone screamed for the gate to be opened while two more charged and grabbed us both.

“It’s working,” I mouthed to Niko, not fighting the men jostling us towards the gate.

He rolled his eyes.

We were escorted past the first gate where our entourage doubled before we were permitted through the second gate. The compound inside consisted of three buildings I could see edging a courtyard and entrance to an underground parking garage.

We stopped there while one of the guards radioed into someone. He was too far away for me to hear, and my gaze fell to the building to the east, where I thought Herakles might be. It was impossible to tell anything about the buildings and what they held by their uniform, blank facades. There weren’t even numbers on them. The building on the left was boarded up.

Someone in a suit emerged from the eastern building to wave the guard forward. I was corralled in that direction while Niko remained in the courtyard. I automatically began to count as he had instructed.

The interior of the building was as plain as the exterior. A foyer consisting of an empty space flanked by two doors held two men in business suits and a doctor or nurse in scrubs.

“Just one guard,” one of the businessmen waved the others away. He wore spectacles and carried an iPad. “You won’t be any trouble, right, princess?” He glanced at me.

What an ass. But I was polite. “No, sir,” I replied.

He waited for the door to close behind the other guards before motioning for his assistant to open one of the doors leading into the interior. We walked into the building, and I peered into the offices we passed.

They were empty and appeared to have been for quite some time. The cameras in the hallways all pointed at the floor or the wall behind them rather than in the direction they should. Dosy’s claim about this place being a set up for ... something began to make more sense.

“Name,” the man in the suit said to me crisply.

“Holly.”

“A pleasure, Holly. We’re going to do some paperwork and then send you in for a medical exam. We’ve had quite a few frauds lately, so I’m sure you’ll understand the precautions we must take. There’s a great deal of wealth involved.”

“Wealth?” I echoed.

He stepped into an office and motioned me to sit in front of a desk. “Yes. The Oracle of Delphi’s fortune has been growing for ten thousand years. It’s the number one reason for fraud. People have been after her money for years.”

“So she’s rich.” I frowned, not understanding the divide between what the priests told me and this. “And the downside ...”

“Downside?” He gave me an odd look. “What downside is there to being one of the wealthiest people on the planet, handed power on a platter and having the honor of communicating directly with the gods daily?”

“I guess there is none.” Something wasn’t right about this. If what he said was true, why did Niko say every potential Oracle who came here did so unwillingly? The priests had only said the Oracle was tortured. They never mentioned wealth or anything else. I knew they favored the Old Ways and found myself wishing once more they’d taken the time to tell me something more than they had. Like, the full truth. Did they fear I’d be swayed to ignore the Old Ways by money?

The guard took off my handcuffs while the assistant scanned my arm. “Holly Rodriguez,” he said, reading the screen. “According to this, you’re thirty eight and wanted for murder in two states.”

All four of them stared at me.

“About that ...” I cleared my throat.

Note to self: tell Niko never to use Marty again. Then again, this was probably karma after Niko stole money from his criminal friends.

“It hasn’t been reprogrammed,” the assistant continued. “Which means ...”

“You either killed Holly Rodriguez or bought a biotag on the black market,” Spectacles finished.

“I didn’t kill anyone,” I said quickly.

“There are no traces of her old biotag being removed. How did you come to have no biotag?” the assistant asked.

“I’m not even sure what a – ow!” I snapped and yanked my arm back. A tiny, sharp prick of pain throbbed on my forearm in the spot where he had removed the chip.

“DNA sample,” Spectacles directed the medic. “There’s more than one way to uncover your identity.”

“I’d like to know that, too,” I told him.

They gave me the same look Niko did pretty much every time I spoke.

I was escorted down the corridor, past more empty offices, to a small medical lab, past a hallway with *Prisoners 0-24* listed on the wall, and motioned to a chair in the doctor’s office. Realizing I had lost track of my count, I started at fifty and watched the doctor prep a needle. He wrapped rubber around my arm and then tapped the bluish vein inside my elbow.

“You’re very calm,” he said with a glance at me.

“I’ve had my blood drawn before,” I replied.

“No, I mean with all this.” He motioned to the guard at the door and the assistant of Spectacles, who was typing into his iPad.

The insertion of the needle stung, and I watched the plastic vial fill with blood.

“I guess I don’t understand what the big deal is,” I replied truthfully.

His eyes lingered on my features, as if he didn’t believe me. It was hard for me to be deceptive about something I knew nothing about.

He finished when I got to ninety nine in my countdown, so I kept counting. I didn’t want to knock everyone down when there was a needle in my arm.

“You really don’t know, do you?” he asked and slid the needle free.

“I don’t even know enough to know what I’m supposed to know about,” I quipped.

“Hold the cotton ball for ten seconds.” He smiled. “I see a lot here, and everyone is usually trying to get something over on someone else. It’s the political nature of DC. Even the frauds are trying to game the system somehow. But you ... you’re not right.”

“I get that a lot, Doc.” I lifted the cotton ball to check the prick beneath.

“A place like this will destroy you if you aren’t her. The trials might do the same even if you are. The gods are not happy. Be careful.”

I looked up, not expecting the compassion, however distant and passing it was. “Thank you. I’m sure I can handle it.”

“I’m done.” He motioned to the guard.

I joined the guard at the door. A closer look at the mask showed me it was almost sheer. There was nothing to impede the breathing or sight of the man beneath it. The color prevented people from seeing his features.

“Where to next?” I asked the guard curiously. This wasn’t the ideal area to unleash my strange magic wave. I wanted to be closer to the prison.

“We wait for DNA results to identify you based on the genetic profiles kept in the biotag database,” the assistant to Spectacles said. “You can wait in John’s office or the courtyard.”

“John’s office sounds great,” I said cheerfully.

Even he looked at me like I was crazy. I didn’t understand what everyone was concerned about. I had a feeling I’d be in trouble if I were a fraud. But I wasn’t, and I didn’t think being the Oracle could be worse than lying to people with no senses of humor who were probably quick to pull the trigger on a fraud.

We returned to the office. John wasn’t there, and the guard took up his post outside the room. The assistant started to sit. Wanting as few people around as possible when I took off the bracelet, I spoke up quickly.

“Hey, can I get some water?”

The assistant glanced at me and stood once more without responding, leaving the room.

I had long since passed the count of a hundred and hoped Niko wasn’t in trouble. I listened until I heard the sound of the assistant’s footsteps fade then crept to the door and untied the cord at my wrist.

In a confined space, the weird shock wave was way worse. It shattered the glass office windows behind me and slammed into walls, reverberating back towards me and knocking me to the ground along with the guard. An alarm went off in response to the building shaking, and the lights in the hallway flickered. I hastily replaced the cord and made a mental note never to take it off inside again. My ears rang as I scrambled to my feet ahead of the guard.

Before he could stand, I had snatched his handgun.

I bolted towards the direction of the hallway where I’d seen the sign for the prisoners. Darting down it, I heard someone shout for more security forces. The alarm blared. I covered my ears. My heart was slamming into my chest and my adrenaline racing as I reached the intersection at the end of the hall.

This one wasn’t labeled. I was a little turned around in the building that had no windows in the corridors. After a split second of debate, I raced to the left, which I hoped would take me toward the wing with the prisoners.

The alarm turned off. “Thank the gods!” I murmured and paused near another intersection. I heard the sounds of mobilized guards from the direction I came from but couldn’t determine if or which way was where I wanted to go.

I headed left once more. The boring, whitewashed hallways expanded and emptied out into a courtyard at the center of four buildings. Ducking behind the wall to keep the guards rushing around from spotting me, I saw another sign indicating the prisons across the courtyard from me and waited.

One guard in particular seemed to be directing traffic in the center of the courtyard. Dressed similarly to the others, he wore a red patch on one arm I took to mean he was a commander or someone up the leadership chain. The courtyard was lined by long dead bushes and shriveled trees.

Once the traffic in the courtyard dissipated, he strode away as well, and I inched out from the hall. Herakles had taught me how to hunt without alerting my prey, and I used those principles to move into the courtyard stealthily to the edge of the covered positions behind a post.

I stopped to listen and let my senses read what they could from my surroundings. A good ten meters of open space stretched between me and the building I wanted to be in. There were cameras in the corners of the courtyards, all facing the sky rather than the open area, and no guards. In fact, the courtyard was silent, the calm eye of the compound. I began to think the twenty or thirty guards – some out front and some I had seen in the courtyard – were the only other people present. The large compound was a ghost town.

Despite the fact I saw and heard nothing to alarm me, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I didn't move for a long moment, waiting for whatever it was to pass, but the sensation remained. It was more than being watched, more than the surge of adrenaline in my system. If my senses hadn't told me it was clear behind me, I'd almost think someone was there.

Herakles had trained me to trust my intuition over my eyes. I gripped the handgun more tightly and then whirled.

The man with the red patch was behind me, close enough to grab me. He reacted with agility that stunned me, arcing back and knocking my arm away while whipping out his own handgun and pressing the cold metal muzzle to my forehead.

All within the time it took for me to gasp. I went perfectly still. I had never seen anyone move with such speed, even Herakles. His weapon was centered on my forehead while my weapon was trained at his feet or would be, if I dared move my arm.

The mask obscured his face. Unlike the others, the commander didn't wear body armor or carry a rifle, as if it were rare for him to leave the compound or maybe, because he was confident enough not to need such things. He was a good head taller than me, lean and sinewy where Niko and Herakles were thick. He even breathed silently.

"You're fast," I said, unable to help the honest words. "Like really fast."

"So are you."

I tilted my head. There was something familiar about his soft, gravelly voice. I had never heard it before, but I almost felt as though I had.

“Can you use that gun?” he asked.

“It may come as a surprise, but yes,” I replied. “Though why that continues to amaze you people I’m not a defenseless little girl, I don’t understand.”

“I tend to give my opponents the benefit of the doubt, whether or not they appear to be defenseless little girls.” He nudged my head back an inch with the weapon. “You’re brave.”

“I’ve been told I’m stupid not brave,” I said.

“Entertaining, too.”

“Um, thanks.” *What in the name of the gods ... this guy is messing with me.* “Anyway, I’m just going to leave.”

He nudged my head with the gun again as if to remind me of its presence. As if I could ever forget.

“You don’t want me dead, or you would’ve shot me. You want me scared enough to obey. Which I’m not.” I eased back. “I’m leaving. You can shoot me if you want, but either way ...” I held out my arms and backed away, not about to lose the gun but sensing this guy wasn’t going to be the one who pulled the trigger.

He didn’t lower the weapon but stepped with me with grace and silence I envied. Perhaps I should’ve been more cautious. The man was a predator of a different kind, one without the moodiness of Niko or the friendly warmth of Herakles. Something about the way he spoke to me ... the fact I was pretty certain that – however improbable – he had been standing behind me long enough to shoot or subdue me and chose not to ... the uncanny sense he wasn’t going to call for backup ... the suspicion he was as intrigued by me as I was by him ...

The masked man was a freaky enigma, one even this brave fool knew was the most dangerous person I’d ever met.

“Are you a gambler to risk your life like this?” He sounded ... curious.

“No,” I replied. “I’m weird. Everyone says so. But at least I can run fast.”

“Faster than me?”

What in Hades? I meant it as somewhat of a nervous joke. I didn’t get why he was standing here talking to me, or why I didn’t feel the need to run. If anything, there was something holding me here. It wasn’t my will or fear or anything else I controlled. It was ... him. Was it a trick? Magic? He moved like no human. Could he be a demigod?

“Maybe.” I cleared my throat.

“Down the hallway to your left is a fountain. Make it there and back before I do, and I’ll let you walk out of here. Fail and you remain as my master’s guest.”

“Did you just challenge me to a race?” I asked, startled. *This guy definitely plays with his food before he eats it.* Herakles said this kind of opponent was the worst and to be drawn into their game was the greatest kind of danger there was.

But ... if I really did have a chance to walk out of here by simply outrunning him, I'd be a fool not to play a game I could win.

“Ready.”

He put his gun away. At least it was a race. I stood a chance. I kept telling myself this despite the warning from Herakles beating mercilessly against my brain.

“Set.”

I put my weapon away, too, tucking it into the hem of my pants at the small of my back.

“Go.”

I ran. I beat him to the entrance of the hallway but he soon pulled ahead, making it look easy to outdistance me when I knew how fast I was. Pushing myself harder, I caught up to him before the dry fountain and nudged him aside to take the inside track. I pushed him a little too hard – he caught himself against a wall – and I silently apologized and sprinted ahead.

The man soon caught up to and passed me. I was two steps behind him, my instincts screaming for me to escape before I lost and he devoured me for dinner. The moment we hit the courtyard again, I bolted off towards the wing where I hoped to find Herakles, counting on putting distance between me and the commander before he noticed I wasn't playing his game anymore.

For several steps, I was convinced I'd done it – outsmarted and out distanced him.

And then something smacked into me, driving me to the ground.

I rolled and leapt to my feet, barely putting up my arms in defense of a kick that was aimed at my head. I stumbled back but soon let my instincts take over, the way they did when I sparred with Herakles.

The commander fought with the same agility with which he ran. I struggled to keep up with his pace and when I thought for sure I was about to face plant and end up dead, he eased up.

It hit me then he was testing me. It was a matter of survival to me, but it seemed to be the next level of his game to him. Uncertainty turned to mild panic, and I suddenly had the urge to back down. I wasn't good at games. I didn't like them, and I never, ever won. Something about the mental manipulation component defied my preference for a direct confrontation.

I fought and looked for my out. He could've killed me ten times over by now, but I had one secret weapon. I dropped my defenses completely and snatched the red cord off my wrist. If I couldn't win fairly, I was going to win however I had to.

The cord fell away. The man snatched my wrist and yanked me into his body.

I caught myself against his wide chest and cursed silently. His arm coiled around me, pinning me in place. He figured out, or maybe just knew, whoever else was in my space wasn't going to be affected by the wave. But it wasn't this that startled me most. It was

how I ... *experienced* him. I had hugged Herakles, the priests, the nymphs. But I couldn't recall noticing them – the shape of their muscles, the light scent of their bodies, even their warmth.

Which was silly, because they were no different than this man. Flesh, blood, yadda yadda.

Why did I find it fascinating that I could feel his heartbeat beneath my right hand? Why was I breathing in deeper to try to taste his scent? Why was his smell as familiar as his voice, and I'd never experienced either before?

The shockwave was stronger this time, and I twisted to see behind me at the damage. The earth around us shook while the ground beneath our feet was perfectly still. Alarms erupted once more, along with the sound of glass shattering.

"Dammit!" I murmured breathlessly and pulled at his grip. I was losing my chance to act.

He didn't release me but bent and grabbed the cord to replace around my wrist. The moment it was secure, the world around us ceased trembling. "It's foolish to unleash power you cannot control," he told me. He gripped my neck with one hand and stripped my weapons from my body, tossing them away. He whipped off his mask next and tapped the microphone on his shoulder, speaking one word into it. "Courtyard." His gaze fell to mine.

The man who could outrun, outsmart and outfight me was a kind of beautiful I didn't know existed. Green-blue eyes surrounded by long, feathery lashes beneath thick eyebrows were so bright, they almost glowed in an olive-toned face. His features were too perfectly chiseled to be natural. A shock of black hair clashed with his bright eyes. He was clean shaven, hard of expression and too strong and nimble to be real.

I knew him. Or at least, like his voice, I *felt* like I did. It was the same weird instinct I had felt when I touched the gem Father Ellis gave me. Like this man belonged to me.

Which was the craziest thing yet in my adventures since setting foot outside the boundaries of the forest.

"Quick, Lyssa." Niko's voice broke the spell. "Get out of here."

I twisted to see him emerge from the depths of one hallway, armed with two weapons trained on the beautiful stranger. "Did you find him?" I asked eagerly.

"Not this time. We need a better plan. Exit that way." He motioned with his weapon to a hall I hadn't been down.

"Ni–"

"Now!"

If I weren't rattled by the man I'd just met, I would've probably argued more. As it was, I wasn't feeling quite right about all that happened. I'd met someone I couldn't physically beat, and I wasn't about to stick around to find out what happened next. I pulled away from the stranger and went in the direction Niko indicated.

But something stopped me before the first intersection. I was so close to Herakles, I didn't want to leave, especially since I didn't think I'd be able to use the same trick twice to get in here. After running into *him*, I didn't want to risk a second meeting either.

I halted then turned, creeping back down the hallway towards the courtyard at the center of the buildings. Niko had sent me into the north building while I was determined to go to the east.

Niko and the man were talking. Niko's guns were down, and their distance bespoke the comfortable distance between acquaintances rather than enemies. I edged closer and strained my senses to hear what they said.

"... as agreed," the commander was saying.

"Yeah, well, it cost more than I expected to get her here. The finder's fee doesn't cover my expenses."

Finder's fee. Coldness trickled through me, and I thought about what Dosy had insisted to be true about Niko.

"You'll be compensated for expenses," the man replied. "And docked ten percent for not contacting me before bringing her here. We had a plan, Niko, and you bulldozed it as usual."

"Come on," Niko complained.

"I also won't tell your boss you brought her to me instead of him."

"Total dick move."

"Take it or leave it."

Niko started to bristle. Just then, three guards filed out of one of the hallways into the courtyard. Not that the man he faced needed help. Niko didn't know how dangerous he was.

I didn't know how dangerous Niko was. Betrayal hurt more than leaving my home. It made me more desperate to find the only person I'd ever trusted, the man who could right the world tumbling rapidly out of control.

"I'll take it," Niko said reluctantly, eyes on the newcomers.

You bastard. He had tried to warn me against men like him, and I assumed he was talking about everyone else. I didn't think he'd be the one to turn on me. If not for Dosy's insistence about what he'd done, I'd suspect him of murder rather than mercy-killing the priests.

The commander motioned someone forward. "Take him to John and escort him out," he instructed.

"What happens to her?" Niko asked.

"Not your concern anymore, now is it?" came the cool response. "Oh, and Niko?"

"What, Adonis."

"I know you aren't here as a merc. Whatever your boss is planning, assume I'm going to bill him."

Who was Niko's boss? How were Adonis and Niko connected? The questions were tumbling around my brain, and the only answer I cared about was how I was going to find Herakles and escape.

After several lewd curses, Niko lingered for a fraction of a second then left.

A heavy feeling sank into my stomach. This had been his plan all along. Dosy was right, and I'd been too worried about Herakles to care what Niko's motivations were for helping me. I was a fool of the worst kind, one Herakles would be disappointed in for letting my emotions lead me into danger instead of rationally thinking my suicide operation through.

"Instructions, sir," one of the guards approached the man in the center.

"Secure the exits. I'll take it from here." The commander's gaze went towards me.

I eased back, hoping he hadn't realized I was there. I was alone and no closer to finding Herakles. Slinking back down the hallway, I was careful to tune in at every intersection, both to my senses and to the intuition that might be the only sign the commander had found me. I had never felt anything but confident in myself, yet here, I was a trapped rat in a blind maze. I felt like I did the night I spotted the grotesque; I was waiting for something to swoop out of nowhere and grab me.

The buildings were, for the most part, abandoned. Every once in a while, I thought I sensed something and eased away from the direction I had been headed. I went deeper into the compound, farther from the east wing, and into the center of a building that seemed to consist of old barracks. I peeked into several and identified only about four rooms among the several dozen that appeared to be in use.

It was as I entered the only decorated area in the center of the compound it hit me I'd been herded in this direction discreetly by my opponent. The apartment was the sole part of the compound that appeared to have been used continually. There was no other way I'd end up here if I hadn't been manipulated. The airy flat featured high ceilings, its own bubbling fountain, and marble features everywhere. It had to be *his*, because it smelled like him, a faint scent I barely registered when I had met him but which was stronger here. I wasn't able to place it except that it was his.

One wall was jammed with awards, citations, degrees, certifications and other proof of recognition. The largest: the plaque naming him the chief of SISA.

My heart took off again when I realized who I'd been unknowingly messing with. "Only the Big Bad Wolf," I muttered to myself. I mentally kicked my own ass at the thought of teasing the man charged with oppressing opposition and policing everyday people. Adonis Wade wasn't a cop or a security guard but the man charged by the gods with the security of the entire human race.

And he knew who I was because I'd been stupid enough to challenge him. Niko had allegedly mercy-killed four priests to keep this man from torturing them to discover me, and I walked through the front door and challenged him to a duel.

I had never felt real fear until I stood before his wall of accolades and began to understand why Niko and Dosy said rescuing Herakles was tantamount to suicide. I was dying to ask Niko if he'd made a deal to bring me in before he met the priests or if he was looking out for his own interests after I told him what I was.

I'm an idiot. Dosy was right. I never should've said anything about being an Oracle, never should've trusted a situation that appeared too perfect to be true. It wasn't a coincidence Niko helped me break into SISA. It was part of a plan by strangers who knew what and who I was.

"Now that you understand ..."

I whirled. Adonis Wade didn't look old enough to be the boogeyman his brag-wall claimed he was. He wasn't much older than twenty five. He was dressed in the dark uniform, hands at his sides and mesmerizing gaze on me.

"Understand what?" I managed.

"Who you're dealing with," he replied.

"As long as you know who you're dealing with." I lifted my wrist to display the red cord. It was self preservation that made me need to put something between us. The intensity of his presence and look was too much for me to handle without help. I slid behind a table with an expensive vase on it.

"Better than you do." His gaze went from me to his wall and back to me. "Stay here for now."

"Um, no. The minute you leave, I'm gone."

"The fate of Herakles is in your hands."

Just like that, my anger and defiance melted.

"I repeat. Stay here for now." He strode towards the door.

"You're not going to tie me up or anything?" I asked. Too late I heard the words. As if he needed me telling him to tie me up.

"I don't need to. If you care about Herakles, you'll do as I say. If you want to know who your parents were, who *you* are, you'll worry about not pissing me off."

His words slammed into me. The one man in the world I shouldn't want anything to do with was dangling everything I wanted in front of me. "My parents." I didn't think of them often, probably because I didn't remember them. I wasn't a complete idiot. I knew they had existed at one point. "You're serious."

"What do you recall of your life before Herakles?"

"Nothing."

"At all?"

"Sometimes I dream of falling." I shrugged. "That's all."

"I'm about to know everything, Alessandra. If you leave, you'll never learn any of it."

He walked out.

I stared at the closed door, not at all certain what just happened. I was trapped in the apartment of the chief of the SISA. *I think I'm in trouble*, I thought, gazing around warily.

But I wasn't about to leave. Not when the answers I needed were right in front of me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I was falling again. It was nighttime and the sky above overcast. Down, down, down ... and Herakles was there to catch me, like always. My hero, my friend, my Herakles.

I missed him even in my sleep. As I awoke, I silently swore it was my turn to rescue him.

“Alessandra.”

My eyes snapped open. There wasn't just one person hovering too close to me but three. I sat up quickly from my spot sleeping on the couch and stared first at the man with the face that made my heart race unnaturally and then at the doctor and John. It took me a moment to orient to this place and recall I had fallen asleep on the couch of the man who was probably supposed to be a super villain to my super-Oracle self.

Herakles would not approve.

“We have your DNA results,” the doctor said and held up a file folder. “The reports are going to the Triumvirate. They'll decide whether or not to release them to you. I imagine the press will figure out your identity before we can alert the gods.”

“What made you voluntarily – and quite publicly – walk into this place?” John – Spectacles – asked. “Controlling the media's response has become a nightmare.”

Everyone was searching for me, but no one actually wanted to find me? I couldn't catch a break. It was too early for nonsense and questions. I needed coffee and a toothbrush.

Swinging my legs over the side of the couch, I was at a loss as to how to respond. For having found the Oracle they sought, none of them appeared remotely pleased.

“I have no idea what's going on,” I said finally and stood. “I know you're god around here, Adonis, but do you have a spare toothbrush?”

Silence.

“I can use yours. People act like I have rabies, so I figured you wouldn't want that.”

“Second drawer in the bathroom,” he replied at last.

“Thank you.” I walked towards the bathroom, unusually aware that he was watching me. It was weird how my instincts picked up on him and only him like that.

After I had freshened up, I returned to the living area to find all of them gone. Truth be told, I was kind of relieved. Adonis made me nervous. I wanted to think it was because he was a badass in his own right but ...

I recalled that tiny moment of something in his arms yesterday. My fingers remembered what it was like to touch his chest, and his scent drifted in the air around me. It was more than a memory, though. I *felt* him. As if we were connected somehow and I was being drawn towards him when every part of me knew that was completely wrong. It

was stronger today. Twisting around, I sought some sign of him being present and spotted him on a balcony overlooking a courtyard that hadn't been tended in years.

What made him *live* on an abandoned compound?

While I wanted to know what was going on, if Herakles was safe, I didn't want to deal with *him*, the man four people I knew had committed suicide to avoid.

There's something here. Something unnatural I didn't yet understand. I wasn't afraid. I had a list of reasons I should have been, but I wasn't. Neither was I comfortable around him.

The fact he could outrun and outfox me left me unsettled. Herakles had taught me to take care of myself but never bothered to mention what happened when someone bested me and I was subjected to being trapped by mind games. We never talked much about emotion or mental strife, and he scoffed at the priests' attempt to teach me diplomacy. I rarely found fault in my guardian, but I was starting to suspect I'd missed a few things.

Like how to deal with a man resembling Adonis Wade. He was too young to be in such a powerful position and not to be a super genius, ambitious, and strong enough for anything I could throw at him. I had to figure this situation out – *him* out – get my answers and help Herakles escape.

As if feeling my gaze, he spoke. "You haven't asked about him," the head of SISA said without turning. One hand rested against his temple as if he had a headache.

It bothered me that he could sense me better than I did him. I was really hoping he wasn't able to read minds, too. "How is he?"

"In one piece for now."

I shifted feet, not liking the response at all. "Can I see him?"

"No."

"Why should I just take your word?"

"What choice do you have?"

"Yesterday, I might have been compelled to agree," I replied. "Then Niko sold me out and you decided to threaten Herakles with bodily harm if I didn't cooperate ... you can see why I'm not really interested in trusting anyone right now."

"Nonetheless you have no choice but to behave in the hopes I don't do to Herakles what I'm known to do to people like him."

It was probably the scariest thing I'd ever heard. The priests always told us straight out what the consequences were for acting out or disobeying, and rarely was their discipline discouraging to me.

I knew only tiny hints about what this man was capable of and that four priests had committed suicide via Niko so they didn't have to fall into his hands. Add to that a High Priestess that feared SISA and even Niko – a mercenary who stood to make money off me – who was at first unwilling to deal with this man, and my imagination knew no bounds as to what someone had to be capable of to scare so many people.

“You were testing me yesterday,” I said quietly. “Why?”

“Curiosity.”

“Hmmm. That’s it?”

“What else is there?” He faced me, his intent gaze rattling me.

My cheeks grew warm for reasons I wasn’t able to figure out, and I crossed my arms, feeling exposed. “I don’t know. It seems beneath you.” At his silence, I continued. “You have a billion awards and citations and run this mega huge security force that terrorizes the entire world. How does one person rate your curiosity?”

“How does the Oracle not know who she is?” he countered.

“I know exactly who I am. It’s everyone else who seems surprised I’m not someone else,” I said, perplexed. “I can defend myself, survive under any conditions for any length of time, and am generally what I consider to be a good person. Who cares if my Greek is basic, I hate chic flicks and have never kissed a guy?” Too late I heard the part about kissing and flushed. Not that I cared what he thought, but ... was this all going in some sort of official record? Was I going to go down in history as the Oracle who never kissed a boy? Because I couldn’t think of anything more embarrassing.

“You don’t know everything, or you wouldn’t have stayed here voluntarily.”

“You call me being here voluntarily?”

“You want to know what you really are,” Adonis stated. “You want to know where you came from. You want to know why. You may think you know what you’re capable of, but you don’t have any idea and that’s why you stayed.”

I drew a deep breath. He was like Leandra – the wrong person delivering the right message. And I hated that. “Okay, yes. I want to know those things. But I stayed for Herakles. I will always stay for him.”

“At the risk of everything you are and could be?”

“I really don’t care what *you* think I am or could be, and I definitely don’t have a problem with who I think I am. I care about him.”

Adonis was hard to read. He didn’t seem to know exactly how to take my honesty. Or perhaps he was offended by it. I wasn’t able to tell except I had the impression he was constantly evaluating me. I had no answers for him. He already knew more about me than I did.

“Can you tell me who my parents are?” I asked.

“Not unless the Triumvirate approves the disclosure of such information.”

“How can their names be of any importance whatsoever?”

His silence was stifling. This line of discussion appeared to be closed, to the dissatisfaction of both of us, if I read his tight features correctly. “Why do I get the impression no one wanted to find me?” I asked.

“Politics.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know.” He clearly wasn’t willing to enlighten me. “The Supreme Priest will see you soon and the Supreme Magistrate when he’s done. I would recommend you be on your best behavior.”

Like I’m not now? “And if I’m not?” I asked, a little irked by anyone telling me how to act.

“You probably won’t like the consequences.” His words were too casual.

His vague threats were a million times worse than anything Herakles or the priests had ever threatened me with.

For the first time in my life, I had the feeling I was so far out of my league, there was no bridging this gap. “You are really good at this game,” I whispered.

“Game?”

“Passive intimidation.”

“I’ve never heard it called that.” The smile was cool and fleeting. He left the balcony and approached me.

My senses, and a few random emotions, were thrown into a frenzy that caught me completely off guard. I was finding it hard to focus on the fact I never wanted this man within striking distance. Instead, I was lost in a state of confusion until he was almost toe-to-toe with me and then, not about to back away because ...

Well, I never backed away from a challenge. And that’s what this was. A predator sizing up how hard his prey was going to fight back. I’d fight to the death, and I wasn’t afraid for him to know it. I met his dazzling gaze.

“People are cautious when dealing with me,” he said. “They hide their true intentions, lie when they feel threatened and stick to the peripheral because they sense the danger inherent in drawing my complete attention. You tend to walk in blindly swinging a bat. You know no fear, and you’re honest beyond a fault.”

Heat spread up my neck and face. I sounded like an idiot. I didn’t want to care what he thought, but some part of me was acutely aware of the fact I was always too different.

“Intimidation is an art form with one key component: uncertainty. How will you react when you don’t know what I’m capable of?” he continued quietly. “My *game* is people, and you’re not playing it like others do, hence my –”

“– curiosity.” The word was almost choked out.

“Yes.”

I couldn’t handle his intensity or my growing unease. I shifted away, wanting to put something between us, even if it had no chance of standing up to him if he chose to attack. “Just ... uh, putting this out there.” I was starting to babble, too, unable to control it. “You are scaring me. Kudos to you for that. I’m probably going to have to try to escape so whatever punishment you’re planning ... *this* is already pretty freaky. I’d probably rather choose physical torture than this mind twisting stuff. If you take ... suggestions.”

“Not usually.” Was he amused?

I had no idea. I’d never met someone I had less of a read on, and more of a sense about, than him. In fact, that’s what was bothering me foremost: the draw. The uncanny familiarity of a man I had never met, the need to know more about him despite suspecting he was constantly on the verge of killing me. “Who are you? Do you have some sort of magical power?” I asked. “Or ... have we met before?”

“It’s a game. Nothing more.”

Of all he had told me, this was the only thing that sounded false. It was intuition again, whispering secrets I couldn’t quite make out. “That’s not true,” I said aloud. “This ... *I* am not just a game to you. You do know me. I mean something to you.”

“A promotion.”

“No.”

“Stop there.”

The low threat was almost a growl, and he was tensing. My breath caught. I didn’t dare look away from him, not about to be caught with my guard down if he came at me.

“There are limits you are not ready to push,” he added.

He knows me. Not the Oracle or someone he had a dossier on. *Me.* But how? My mind raced with possibilities, none of which were remotely feasible. I kept coming back to the suspicion he had some sort of divine power that gave him insight or maybe even foresight. With the senses and reactions of an animal, he had to be more than human. According to the priests, the discreet offspring of gods and human women existed in several high up positions in the governments. Viewed as competition by gods, and distrusted by humans, demigods were said never to announce what they were.

Or ... did he feel what I did? The draw?

So engaged was I in figuring him out, I barely noticed he had left until I heard the door close.

Adonis Wade freaked me out. There was no way I was staying here.

I counted to twenty then went to the door. To my surprise, it wasn’t locked and no guard was posted outside the door.

Closing the door, I gazed at it for a long moment. This was a dare. That much I figured out. I had no clue what this guy’s end game was – but I doubted I wanted to be involved.

How did I find and rescue Herakles?

I debated for a moment before an idea dawned on me. Spinning around, I went to the bedroom of Adonis and searched it for a guard uniform.

CHAPTER NINE

Two hours later, I managed to scout an exit route and made it to the prison in the east wing. It went quickly, since there was no one at all in two of the four buildings on the compound.

Similar to Adonis' apartment, the prison area showed signs of regular and continued use. Having never been in a prison before, I still thought the cells were too small. Maybe six by six, which meant my poor Herakles couldn't stretch out on his bed. It took some self control not to plant in the middle of the corridor and yell for him. I had to pretend like I belonged, which mainly meant not drawing too much attention to myself. Adonis had an iPad in his apartment, and I pretended to walk and check it, like I was doing something.

Entering the prison cells, though, required me to cajole the reluctant guard and convince him I'd lost my pass card. He let me in – probably because no one in their right mind would want to break *into* a prison – and I pretended to check my iPad screen and peer into the one-foot square window of each cell.

They were all empty but well maintained. Unable to understand the purpose behind the compound, it was beginning to weird me out.

When I found him, I nearly squealed. Herakles was alive, lying on his side on his bed and staring at the wall. One arm was in a cast and he had a black eye. I didn't see any other wound or bruises, though he appeared paler than usual. Resisting the urge to tap on the window, I used the loaner pass card the guard had given me and swiped the door open.

Herakles twisted towards me.

I strode in. I didn't dare take off the mask, not with the camera in the corner. It appeared to be the only live one on the compound. "Hey," I said. "Pretend like it's not me."

He sat up. "What are you doing here, Lyssa?" he hissed, his face draining of all blood then flaring red. "You cannot be here! Everyone –"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm the Oracle."

Speechless, he stared at me.

"Aaaaahhh. You didn't think anyone would tell me, did you?" I said, unable to prevent the note of pure glee that entered my voice. "Well they did. The SISA razed the forest and the priests committed pre-emptive suicide. I came here with a mercenary, ran into a High Priestess then got captured by a guy named Adonis who turned out to be the head of this horrible place. Now I'm here to rescue you."

He listened, unable to help the upturn of his lips at my story. "If you were any other person, this might surprise me." He rose. "What's your plan?"

I glanced at the camera. “We need to get rid of that first.”

Stretching upwards, he knocked it to the side. “Done.”

I didn’t hesitate. I tossed the iPad on his bed and shimmied out of the outer layer of clothing. I had overlapped two pairs of the guard clothing and gave him one and the oversized boots I’d stolen from Adonis.

“To leave, go out the way you came in and follow the signs to the D Street exit,” I instructed him.

“You can show me.”

“Um, no.” I straightened and turned my back to him while he changed. “I gave it some thought. I think you should leave without me.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Okay ... he’s tracking me, Herakles. Don’t ask me how, but he’s keeping an eye on me. I need you to leave, so he can’t threaten me anymore.”

“Who?”

“The head of SISA.”

“Terrible plan, Lyssa.”

“Or is it secretly brilliant and you don’t want to admit it?”

“Not at all.”

I sighed. “Look, Herakles. They’re onto me and for whatever reason, this Adonis guy is serious about messing with me. But he also knows things I need to know. About my parents. My life before we met. About *me*,” I explained.

Herakles gazed at me.

“I want to stay long enough to find out some things. That’s it. If you leave, you can find help and break me out.”

“You make it sound simple,” he said with a concerned frown. “Do you know what he is?”

“Sort of,” I said. Truthfully, I didn’t. I knew he was more than I could see, that there was something about him connected to me, but I didn’t know what that was.

“Did he hurt you?”

“No. He’s trying to play mind games with me.”

“You suck at games.”

“Yeah, I know. But he wants me alive and has information I want, too.” I wasn’t about to tell him I was afraid of Adonis.

“I won’t leave you here, Lyssa.”

“Herakles ...” I sought some kind of argument. “Please. I’m not a little girl anymore. You prepared me for this my whole life. Give me two days here then knock the front gate down and rescue me.”

He was considering me. I didn’t know why my overprotective guardian hadn’t already dragged me out of here, unless ... would he betray me, too? He knew I was the

Oracle. Were the priests and he working together on whatever was going on? I crushed the thoughts. My Herakles would never disappoint me.

If he was listening, it was because I had to be making sense or he thought me old enough to make my own decisions.

Or ... something else was going on here. I was skating on the semi-frozen surface of a lake waiting for it to crack and me to plunge into the dark, cold waters below. No matter why my stomach was churning, no matter what reason he might have for leaving me here, I had to know he was safe before I'd feel comfortable skating onward.

"Really. There's no way for both of us to leave here. He can sense me somehow. I'll endanger you. Our best shot is for you to escape and bring back an army of ... someone. Just avoid the mercs, cuz they'll stab you in the back. Adonis has said he won't hurt me, at least not before I meet the Supreme Magistrate in a few days." *Yeah, I totally just lied to my only friend.*

There was a brief silence, and then Herakles chuckled. "My Lyssa. All grown up after two days on her own." The terse note in his voice was one I hadn't heard before.

"It's been a learning experience," I said, quoting him. "Will you go? Please? I don't think I'm in any danger right now. If anything, I think Adonis wants to see what makes me tick."

"I can see that about him. But the members of the Triumvirate will destroy you. I imagine they will wait for the full moon, when the barrier between our worlds and that of the gods is thinnest. That gives me a week, but I wouldn't take that long. They won't harm you before submitting you to the trials, either."

Trials. More evidence he knew so much more than he had ever shared. It wasn't the right time to ask him to share. I wasn't remotely scared about some stupid trial. I just couldn't live with myself if Herakles was hurt or worse because of me.

"Exactly. It's a plan. Leave, go get help and rescue me. Then things will go back to the way they were, and we'll be happy in the forest again."

"Lyssa," he said gravely and turned me to face him. "Things will never be the way they were."

"Yes, they will. They have to be. You can make them be," I said, a tremor of emotion in my voice. I didn't want to admit this was my life. Gazing into his dark eyes, I was forced to face some of the emotion I'd been avoiding. "I love you," I said, my throat tight. "I want us to be happy again."

He hugged me to him hard. "Then I will do as you ask, Lyssa."

"Thank you." My eyes were brimming with tears. We both knew my hope wasn't founded in reality, but I wasn't yet able to admit how far gone my comfortable world was. I needed him to buy into my dream, however crazy it was. "Now go, before someone figures out what happened." I pulled away.

“I will make it out of here,” he assured me. “And I know who to ask for help. I just have to find them.”

“Sounds good.” I gave him the pass card and boots then sat on the prison bed. With a long, final look at one another, Herakles pulled on his mask and left. I closed the prison door behind him and sat down on the bed, suspecting Adonis was going to figure out what I had done soon enough.

As I waited, I struggled not to doubt my guardian. He had given me no real reason to. *Except lying to me my whole life.* It was too quiet in the tiny cell, too small for me to exercise or work off some of my apprehension and worry.

The guards came to the door and opened it an hour later.

Ugh. I was hoping not to deal with Adonis directly. He stepped into the room. I lifted my head from the wall behind me and waited to hear what he had to say. A man this striking should speak in rainbows and puppies, not be in charge of the organization that suppressed humanity and tortured people.

“You had the chance to leave,” he noted and studied me. “Why didn’t you take it?”

“You have information I want, Adonis.” The subtle draw was back like an itch I couldn’t reach. It left me warm and agitated. “You can leave me here, by the way. I’m happy in a cell.”

“Far be it from me to make you unhappy, but since I’m the only one you can’t outsmart or outrun, you’ll stay with me,” he replied with cool sarcasm.

The reminder of how unnatural his skills were didn’t help my irritation. He motioned me out of the cell. I went, mostly because I was afraid to push him when I was trapped in a room that small. The nearness of Adonis made my instincts so sensitive, everything agitated me. A guard escorted us out of the prison building.

I couldn’t take the thick silence between us or the fear I was in the kind of trouble I didn’t know how to get out of. I kept telling myself that Herakles was free and would come for me. I just had to survive on my own here a day or two, and I could do that.

But *this* ... I stared at the back of his head, not understanding how I was dutifully following him down the corridor like a puppy when I knew I should at least *try* to run.

Because he knows me. I wanted to learn more about being an Oracle and my past, and this man claimed to have that knowledge, if I could survive him long enough to learn.

“On a scale of one to ten, one being stuck on the couch again tonight and ten being flayed alive, where am I in terms of trouble?” I asked finally.

“Three.”

I invented the scale and had no idea what that meant. What alarmed me: his response wasn’t *one*. “So you are upset about Herakles leaving?”

“Not at all. He served his purpose. I didn’t impede his escape.”

Holy Zeus. Adonis knew all along. He was toying with me, once more the predator.

“Then why a three?” I demanded.

“You moved slower than I expected. I’m a little disappointed.”

I almost choked to keep from speaking. *Stop falling for it, Lyssa! He’s playing games with you!* It was unnerving. I had to stop folding to my discomfort and just shut up, as Niko had ordered me.

So I did. I said nothing all the way back to his apartment.

He left me there. Alone. No guard. No handcuffs.

This was the part of his game where I cringed – and admitted he was right. I was blindly volunteering to stay in the hopes he at least enlightened me about who I was before he did whatever they did to Oracles.

I had the distinct feeling I’d one day look back on this moment and wish with all my heart that I’d run.

But for now, I was staying put.

Rustling came from the direction of his bedroom. I started towards the open door but stopped.

I’m not alone. This instinct was the worst.

Turning, I spotted someone in a military urban camouflage uniform dropping onto the balcony from the direction of the roof. He was followed by four more men, all armed to the teeth. They entered the open space.

“Sorry, kid. Boss wants you back now.” Niko pulled off his mask. “You gonna come quietly? Help Uncle Niko get a second bonus?”

“Whatever I can do to help you pay your child support,” I retorted. I was really starting to hate him.

He held up a pair of handcuffs. “Well then come on, you little shit.”

He was an asshole, and Herakles believed Adonis was bad news. I needed to know who my parents were but at what cost? No one I’d met yet seemed remotely trustworthy. The weapons of his men were trained on me. He wasn’t taking chances this time.

“Let me get something first,” I replied and strode into the bedroom before he could object.

A man like Adonis had to have some sort of weapons around. He was always lightly armed compared to the other SISA members and the military guys with Niko, but there had to be something.

The teddy bear on his bed made me look twice. If I had time, I’d have laughed at the idea that a demigod slept with a teddy bear.

I ransacked his closet and chest of drawers without finding anything but clothing. He had the personnel here needed to secure a prison with one occupant – Herakles – and a single doctor to run a DNA scan. The only markings on the walls were for the prison, the only offices in use for the doctor and one government employee, and there was no weapon anywhere in the compound I could get my hands on.

If it weren't impossible, I'd have thought this place was a trap for one person, and I was beginning to suspect that poor idiot was me.

"C'mon, Lisa," Niko called.

There was nothing to use as a weapon, not even my lucky knife.

With no real options before me, I decided to go with Niko and wait for an opportunity to escape. The odds were better facing him and his men than Adonis. I emerged from the bedroom.

Niko and his military guard weren't alone. Four men in dark purple – the color of the Royal Guard, the security arm of the Silent Queen – stood behind Dosy. This time, the High Priestess was dressed for a fight, well armed and wearing fatigues like her men.

Before I could figure out what was happening, the door to the apartment opened. Adonis entered, flanked by two of his own men. Not that he needed them. If he showed up alone, it was enough for the others to be uneasy.

SISA. Military. Royal Guard. It didn't take Leandra explaining what was happening for me to understand what was going on. This was a Triumvirate turf war – over me.

Adonis was the first to act. He launched at Niko and smashed him into the men with him before he kicked Dosy back. Settling into a fighting stance, he waited.

"I'm not picking a fight with you, Adonis," Dosy said.

"You entered a SISA property without permission. I call that picking a fight," Adonis replied.

"Agreed. Whereas I was invited," Niko said.

"You were not invited," Adonis replied in the same tone. "I've already alerted the Supreme Priest who will ensure the Silent Queen and Magistrate are aware."

"This was authorized," Niko replied. His preference for the military over SISA began to make sense. Niko was one of them.

"Same," Dosy said and stretched for the knives at her back. "By all rights, protocol, custom and tradition, she was supposed to come to us first. I was authorized to use lethal force. How about you boys?"

Niko glared at her.

"Thought so. May Ares bless your weapons like Artemis has mine." Dosy drew her weapons and lowered into a fighting stance. "The usual rules. No firearms. Let's get this over with."

Mesmerized by the three of them, I could deduce several pieces of information. The first: they all knew each other well enough to tell me this type of *politics* happened often. Second: if they were messing with each other, their leaders weren't all on the same page like the news claimed they were. Third ... Dosy could fight.

And that made me extremely happy after being told by the nymphs and priests at school fighting wasn't a proper womanly pursuit.

The three all drew weapons and began circling one another while their companions stood back. I assessed my situation. The fastest – and safest – exit strategy was probably going to be the balcony and the ropes Niko’s men had used to drop onto the balcony. I couldn’t see whether the rest of Adonis’ forces were outside the closed entrance door of the apartment. There were three of Niko’s men between me and the balcony. With their attention on their fighting leaders, I just had to time this right.

Sparks flew off the weapons smashing into each other. Dosy had started – and Niko joined in. The three began a deadly dance as skillful as it was scary. Adonis was unmatched as far as speed, but Niko and Dosy managed to team up on him between taking swipes at each other. The two of them were amazing, and the dynamic of all three of them locked into a battle to the death held me in place.

Until I realized the others were equally entranced, and no one seemed to think I was capable of anything like I planned. For once, I wasn’t upset about being underestimated. I inched closer to the men in my direct path, eyes on the three warriors holding nothing back. While I knew nothing of their bosses, I was secretly rooting for Dosy, hoping Adonis didn’t get killed and not at all concerned about Niko.

Their fight moved away from the balcony, pulling one of the military members with him. With two between me and escape, I didn’t wait.

Snagging a knife from the nearest, I smashed him over the back of the head with both hands then sprang forward to knock the other off balance as he turned to see what the noise was. Herakles had taught me to disable rather than use lethal force, though I knew how to kill as well.

But I didn’t. I smashed an elbow into the second man’s nose then punched him in the throat. He bent over, gagging. I slid the hilt of the knife between my teeth and darted to the nearest rope. The courtyard below held five of Adonis’ men.

“Up it is,” I murmured. With a quick tug, I confirmed it’d hold and began to half pull, half walk my way up the side of the wall. I was close to the roof when I heard someone shout to alert the three fighting.

The sound of them pounding into one another ceased. I focused hard on moving as quickly as possible, not caring about my burning arms and thighs as I neared my destination.

“Kid!” Niko shouted and grabbed the rope I was on, wrenching it back from the wall. Dosy was scaling her way up a second rope while Adonis had disappeared.

I’m not a kid! Clamping down on the knife so hard it hurt my jaw, I hauled myself the rest of the way up with upper body strength and reached the top. I dragged myself over the top and dropped, panting from the effort. Not about to give someone like Adonis the time to take the stairs to the roof, I decoupled five of the ropes rapidly before starting to cut Dosy’s free.

“Go back, Dosy!” I called, sawing through it.

“Not on your life!”

She was as stubborn as Niko. I didn't bother to check and see if she was okay after the rope snapped free but stood back and looked around wildly. Niko's men had gotten up here somehow; I could escape the same way.

My gaze settled on the grappling equipment on the far side of the roof. I dashed towards it and caught myself on the wall, leaning over to see the rope dangling into another of the plentiful courtyards. This one butted up against the wall of the compound. With any luck, I could scale that wall too or find my way back to the exit I'd found earlier for Herakles.

People were shouting from somewhere in the buildings. I wasn't sticking around to find out which of the security forces was going to win and grab me. I slung one leg over the edge of the roof and gripped the rope.

A throwing knife grazed my calf, and I glanced down. It pinned my pant's leg to the wall behind me. There was only one man I'd bet money on to make that shot, and I wasn't about to let him near me. I bent over to pull at the knife only to find it was too sleek to grip. Dropping the cable rope, I strained to wriggle the knife free frantically.

“Stop now, Alessandra!” Adonis warned.

“Gods dammit!” I straightened and wrenched back.

The knife didn't give on the first try, so I yanked again.

This time, it did, and I toppled backward, clutching at the rope. A rush of adrenaline flooded me as I began to fall. A sense of déjà vu swept over me, and I was once more in my dream, falling ... falling ... waiting for Herakles to catch me.

Adonis snatched my wrist, and I looked up, startled. I shook off the weird sense.

“I won't let you fall,” he said.

I laughed. “It's okay. It's not far and I'd rather have a broke leg than ...” I yanked at his grip. The rope was right beside me anyway; I wasn't going to fall more than a couple of feet.

“You're a fool!” he breathed.

“Yeah. Now let go!” I tried to pry his hand off my wrist with my other hand. When that failed to work, I reached for the red cord around my wrist.

“Stop!” Adonis snatched my other wrist. I heard the sounds of more than one person running towards us. From the look he cast over his shoulder, they weren't his men.

He kept his grip on the wrist with the red cord and released my second hand. I expected him to draw a weapon but he snatched the rope. Seconds later, he leapt over the edge of the roof.

The man had a serious set of feline reflexes. I could barely register what was happening, while he was reacting. He grabbed me around the waist and slid us both down the rope until my feet hit the ground. It happened too fast for me to react, and the moment we were safe, the arm around my waist was around my neck.

“If you kill her, Adonis ...” Niko yelled from the roof.

I was able to see the shadows of him and Dosalon on the ground, along with several other forms of their guards.

“Game over. Leave, both of you!” Adonis returned.

“Don’t give up now!” I called.

“The Triumvirate wants you alive. They don’t care if you’re missing limbs. Do *not* tempt me.” These words were for me, spoken close enough to my ear for his warm breath to brush my skin. I shivered. His grip was tight but not yet severing my air supply. Herakles would say he was going for control rather than the kill. I was hauled against his hard body, once again aware of his scent and the strange sense of familiarity I hadn’t yet shaken.

This wasn’t the calm Adonis that challenged me to a race. This was the Adonis who was about to use one of the weapons he carried, and I didn’t think even he knew who he was going to use it on.

I stretched for my knife, not about to ruin the only good escape opportunity I had.

Dosalon was descending the wall rapidly. Niko was gone, and I assumed he was taking the stairs.

Adonis hauled me to face Dosalon, one of his weapons out. I waited until she was close enough to engage him then smashed my heel into one of his feet, stabbed him in the arm with my knife, and wrenched away.

Adonis released me. I stumbled away, caught myself, and bolted. He showed no sign of pain but deflected Dosalon’s strikes and then pushed her aside.

“If you run, you’ll never know who you are!” he called after me.

I stopped at the mouth of a passageway. The words were kryptonite. I wanted away, yes, but I wanted to know who I was, too, why I was important.

“Run!” Dosalon cried. “You don’t know what they’ll do to you.”

“I can return your memories to you,” Adonis added.

I turned to face him. “No one can do that.”

“It’s one of the benefits of working for a demigod representing the gods on Earth. A direct line to Mnemosyne.”

I glanced at Dosalon, who hadn’t yet lied to me that I knew. “Is that true?”

“Probably, but it’s irrelevant. Assuming you survive the trials, the Supreme Priest and Supreme Magistrate will enslave you with your magic.”

It sounded a lot like what the priests had told me.

“I’ll spare the girls and priests we found in the town nearest your compound,” Adonis added and took two steps towards me.

My breath caught. The other priests had died because of me. I couldn’t let that happen to those remaining or to the nymphs, however many hadn’t escaped. They were in SISA control because of me.

“Okay.” I dropped my knife and raised my hands.

“Alessandra,” Dosal objected.

“I’m with SISA. For now,” I replied.

Adonis strode towards me, none too pleased, and kicked the knife away. He pulled my arms down and cuffed me.

“Leave, Theodocia,” he said to the High Priestess. “Take Niko with you, or I’ll toss him in prison.”

“You can have him.” Dosal was frowning. “What’re you planning on doing with her?”

I looked at Adonis at the question.

“Submit her to the first trial,” he replied.

“Before the other members of the Triumvirate interview her?”

“I have my orders.”

“And you always follow your orders.” The look they shared told me they knew a lot more about each other than I did about anyone I’d met. “I don’t have to tell you or the Supreme Priest this is highly unusual. She deserves some prep time or something.”

Adonis dropped my hands. “If she’s the Oracle, she’ll survive. If not, she won’t.”

My interest increased. “Why? Is it dangerous?” I asked, excited at the chance to put the skills I spent a lifetime learning to use. “Like really dangerous?”

They both looked at me. Dosal appeared ready to chastise me the way she did Niko while Adonis’s expression was that of scrutiny, as if he was trying to figure out if I was messing with him.

“Shut up, kid,” Niko growled, emerging from a nearby hallway. “Even you aren’t stupid enough to want to go through the trials without preparing for them.” He sheathed his weapons. “My employer called me off with a promise he’s got some words for your boss about how she’s being handled. You win this round, Adonis.” Without another word, Niko stalked towards the front of the compound, trailed by his entourage.

“Next time,” Dosal promised the quiet head of SISA. “Find your way to the Silent Queen and me, Alessandra. We won’t imprison you.”

“Sounds good,” I replied. I watched her leave as well before Adonis stepped away. “Do you really have my friends?”

“I do.”

“Niko killed three of them.”

“They’re better off.”

I didn’t like that at all. “But you’ll spare the others now?”

“Will you go through the trials without me forcing you into them?”

“Yeah, sure. Can’t be that bad.”

He shook his head. “You’re something else. If you’re not the Oracle, you’re the bravest fool I’ve ever met.”

From him, I was certain it was a compliment of sorts.

“Submit to the first trial, and they’ll be freed,” he added. “Try to escape again, and I’ll kill them off in front of you, one by one.”

“No need for threats.” I raised my hands and took a step towards the center of the compound. “I’m cool with this. What are these trials?”

He gave me an indecipherable stare.

“Assume I know absolutely nothing about what’s going on,” I said impatiently. “I’m not fighting you. I’m just asking a legitimate question.”

He studied me. “Usually, three gods sponsor the incoming Oracle and design trials to challenge her, test her magic, mental toughness and willingness to obey them,” he explained. “The gods were too preoccupied to nominate sponsors for you, so each member of the Triumvirate is giving you a trial instead. You’ll receive three tasks you must complete.”

“Hmmm. What happens if I don’t?”

“You’ll never have full access to your power.”

I can do more than create earthquakes? “It can’t be that bad.”

Adonis lifted his chin towards the hallway behind me in a silent command.

I retreated to the passageway leading into the compound then stopped.

No voices came from the area, but my intuition was doing it again. Tingling.

I returned to the corner looking into the courtyard. Adonis was alone. He was on his knees, holding his head, face scrunched up in pain. I watched him, not expecting the man with the strength and agility of a great cat to be vulnerable or hurt. He didn’t look as if anyone had touched him from the fight with Dosy and Niko. I’d nicked his arm, but he didn’t seem affected by the wound. His hands lowered to his sides, and he shook his head and rose.

I eased back and hurried away on tiptoes through the compound to the apartment without crossing any of his men. It would be so easy to flee ...

But I wasn’t going to risk the lives of anyone else I’d grown up with.

I returned to his apartment and nudged the door closed behind me with my hip. Something was rustling again. I inched forward, towards the source of the sound in his bedroom, and pushed the door open.

I was expecting to see someone left behind from Niko or Dosy’s camp, but there was no one present. The sound was gone, too, and I scoured the room.

Spotting the last thing I ever expected to see in the room of a man like Adonis, I laughed. “I forgot about you!” I crossed to his bed and sat down, grabbing the stuffed animal resting against one pillow with my bound hands. “No way he has a toy like this.” The stuffed koala bear was ancient, its original tan fur visible in the crease of one ear while the rest of it was darker, dirtier brown. It smelled clean despite its grungy appearance. “You wouldn’t happen to have any handcuff keys would you?” I asked it playfully.

Dresser.

I looked around. It was almost like a whisper but not quite audible. Like it was in my head. Taking the toy with me, I went to the dresser I had ransacked earlier for a weapon and this time searched out a handcuff key.

“Awesome,” I said and set the toy down while I unlocked my cuffs then tossed them on the dresser. “Come on, little guy.” I picked up the bear and went into the living area.

CHAPTER TEN

My latest escape plan foiled, I did what any teenager would do. I flipped on the television. Accompanied by Adonis' toy, I sank onto the couch, my attention at once snagged by the news.

Real news. None of the censored stuff the priests fed us at the orphanage.

Except, as soon as I began watching, I began to feel ... ill. The world outside my forest was ugly and the people untrustworthy, but it seemed far better than what was going on outside of the region entirely.

"The death toll this year outside the wall has reached ten million, ten percent lower than last year. Experts claim the trend has been decreasing every year since the Holy Wars began five years ago, which they take as a sign the wars between the gods are losing steam due to the political posturing of SISA and the military," claimed one anchorman.

"Fantastic news, James," said the woman beside him. "With forty three states under official martial law, many are crediting the military and Supreme Magistrate with keeping the peace."

I watched in interest as they showed stock images from the wall and a map of the territories claimed by the gods and goddesses as well as those currently conflicted. The map of North America was riddled by colors indicating pockets of different deities' territorial claims. Images from those areas were ... horrifying. Smashed towns, long breadlines, massive temples in perfect condition where the gods and goddesses lived surrounded by destruction and images of the extreme poverty and disease afflicting humanity.

The television flipped off.

I blinked, stunned, and faced the door. Adonis had a second remote and tossed it on the couch.

"Is this real?" I asked.

"Is what real?"

"The wars. The wall."

He eyed me. "How do you not know anything?"

"We were sheltered. But you're telling me the continent has been torn apart by gods infighting?"

"Not the continent. The world, except for about a thousand square miles of the eastern seaboard and Mount Olympus in Greece, their adopted home here."

My jaw dropped open. It wasn't what the priests had taught me.

"Gods grant favors for a price and manipulate humans as required to amass their power and money. It's the way it's always been," Adonis said.

“But the Sacred Triumvirate is supposed to balance the power with humanity.”

“They did at one point. Power is all that matters now, Alessandra. Power, influence, control. The gods have been at war with one another on Earth for five years. Which is why it’s important we found you. We weren’t planning on you appearing quite so soon, before my master had a chance to complete his preparations.”

Five years. There it is again. But I was too incensed to follow that line of thought.

“Even to the Supreme Priest? Isn’t he the liaison between gods and people? Can’t he make the gods stop hurting everyone?”

“Politics at this level are about one thing: power. No cause, no morality, no other concerns than power and survival matter once you reach the Triumvirate.” He gave me a look saying he didn’t quite believe I was so naïve.

I stared at the blank television screen. I was beginning to understand better why the Old Ways were needed, but I didn’t know why the priests hadn’t just come out and told us all about what was going on in the world. What else were they hiding?

“Your first trial awaits,” Adonis said. “My master has given me your tasking.”

A trial didn’t sound that bad. If anything, it sounded easy. I knew myself well enough to believe I could withstand anything.

“After the trials, I get my powers and I can stop the Wars, right?”

“If the Triumvirate wishes it.”

“Like I care if they do! Ten million people have died this year. The Oracle helps people.”

“The Oracle obeys her masters.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I don’t care what they want. I’m going to do what’s right. Send the gods home and free the people.”

“You think you have a choice.”

I hated it when he said something like that. The only way to uncover exactly what was going on was to face these trials and come out on the other side an official Oracle. Whatever this test consisted of, it couldn’t be that bad. I was trained for everything and I had the additional motivation of knowing I could save the world.

I picked up the teddy bear. “You stay here,” I said sternly. “Hey, why do you have this?”

Adonis’ cold glare was his only response.

“Whatever. Where is the first trial?” Propping up the stuffed animal where it could see the television, I stood and went as close to Adonis as I dared.

He tilted his head towards the entrance to the apartment. “Courtyard.”

“It’s ... here?”

“Yes. But first ...” His eyes went to the bear and lingered. “... first you have been blessed by Mnemosyne.”

Mnemosyne. The goddess of memory. Excitement rushed through me. “What does that mean? I meet her? She returns my memories?”

“You’re the brave fool. Go find out.”

Intrigued yet certain he was setting me up for something quite awful, I went to the door.

“You’ll need this,” he called after me.

Turning, I caught the sheathed hunting knife he tossed me. “Thanks. How long does it take for her to return my memories?”

“Do I look like a god?”

“Yeah, but ...” Hearing my response, I groaned. “Never mind. I’ll go see the goddess then to the courtyard.”

He stood stoic and still, hands crossed in front of him. I was getting no information out of him, but at least he hadn’t reacted to my comment about him looking like a god.

A trickle of red seeped from one of his nostrils. “Nosebleed,” I said.

He touched it gingerly then rested his knuckle on his temple temporarily.

“You have a headache?” I asked, sensing the strange weakness in him I’d witnessed in the courtyard. A man this strong didn’t seem susceptible to the headaches I got with my fall sinus infections.

“Not your concern.”

“Peppermint helps. Or, you could ...” My eyes swept over the couch again. “I thought I put it up on the cushion.” His teddy bear was lying on its head on the floor. Crossing to it, I plucked it up and replaced it, this time in a corner. “Stay! Your daddy has a headache and can’t pick you up.”

“You are the most bizarre person I’ve ever met,” Adonis said. “Is there any sense in there at all?”

I shook my head at him and returned to the door. “See you in a few,” I said. This time, I didn’t hesitate but opened the door and stepped into the hallway.

Or ... more accurately, into a forest. I stopped in place, startled, and stretched out one hand towards the side of the hallway I should’ve been able to feel, if this were a mirage.

Nothing. A warm breeze swept the scents of flowers and earth by me, and pine needles rustled far overhead. I started to turn to see if I could still see Adonis.

The forest surrounded me on all sides. There was no door. As far as I could tell, I’d stepped into a different world.

Could be stranger, I told myself. “If my trial were surviving the woods, I’d be set!” But ... supposedly, I wasn’t here for my trial. I was here to find a goddess who held my memories.

I started into the forest. And then I glimpsed it through the foliage. A wall stretching from the earth towards the heavens, made of what appeared to be concrete. *Different world or somewhere else in my world?*

Eager to see if what the news said was true, I headed in that direction.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Know thyself
– Thales

The wall was sheer with no stairs, doors or ladders with which to scale it. After trotting back and forth along a kilometer stretch, I rested my hands on it. It was cool to the touch, and my palms came away chalky.

Not concrete. Not stone.

I had no idea what the material of the wall before me really was, though I was grateful it appeared to be porous and more prone to chipping than say, marble. I retreated to the forest. I had a knife and the forest to supply me with materials to help me scale it.

Because I was meant to. The woods extended in all other directions with no end, and yet, I was drawn only to the wall. I gathered some moss, flexible branches from saplings and four chubby sticks the length of my forearm.

“Piece of cake!” I sang to myself, thrilled Mnemosyne thought to challenge me to a game of survival. I’d spent years learning from Herakles and was eager to put my knowledge to good use and maybe even impress a goddess.

Beneath the warm, afternoon sun, I set to work creating the tools I’d need to scale the wall. The rope took me several hours to create, and I went back twice to the forest for more saplings and moss until I’d braided a cord about two meters in length. Setting it aside, I carved points into one end of the fat branches and then spent a few grueling moments starting a fire with the first point. I rubbed it into the channel I’d created fast and hard, rotating it as I went. My goal wasn’t a fire but to help crystalize the points of the branches, to make them harder than wood, so they stood a chance against the wall.

Glancing at the sun, I sat back once I was done with all four.

“Definitely not the real world,” I observed. The sun hadn’t moved despite the hours of work I put into my preparations. The breeze was steady and warm, the sound of pine needles brushing one another soothing and pleasant. Any other time, I might not want to leave such a peaceful place.

Shaking the thoughts away, I rose with my tools and crossed to the wall. I stretched upward and dug a tiny hole with my finger, placed the point of one branch into it, and then hammered it in with another. The branch went in with some resistance, causing a spray of chalky dust to rain down on me.

I sneezed and tugged at it. It held.

Pleased to discover my plan was going to work, I tied the rope around me, placed the belt and knife sheathe around my hips and tucked the extra stakes in the back of my pants.

I began the arduous climb, using one stake to balance my feet and two to haul me up. With no worry about running out of room on a wall that ran for kilometers in each direction, I ascended at a diagonal, stair stepping my way with excruciating slowness, careful not to move too far out of reach of the branch at my feet so I could wriggle it free and move it. I was careful to anchor my rope to the highest stake as I went.

Foot, hand, hand, foot. I made a song of the climb. My enthusiasm held out until I began to wear down physically. Sweat rolled off my face and tickled my neck and chest. I took a breather, wishing I'd thought to drink a liter or two of water before I started.

I looked down and up to gauge my progress. "This is ... good," I said aloud. "I think." I was far from the ground but didn't seem any closer to the top of the wall. I rested for a moment. The sun still hadn't moved, but I was wearing down. If I had to guess, I'd have said it was close to my normal bedtime around nine in the evening. I had no food and no water, and I was stuck in the middle of a wall. "I really wish I had a ..." I grunted and stretched to bury the branch in its next hold. "... hippolectryon. It could fly me to the top and then I could eat it for dinner." I laughed at the idea of the horse-chicken creature from Greek mythology. Herakles never cared for the monsters, but I found them fascinating.

I soon returned my full focus to making sure I didn't misplace any hand or foot and end up plunging to my death before I'd seen what was on the other side of the wall.

Just as I was beginning to wonder how long it would remain midday in this odd place, the sun plunged towards the horizon and disappeared. Within seconds.

Startled, I twisted as far as I dared to see the sky. I was half a kilometer above the tops of the forest. A bright moon worthy of the goddess Selene herself was nestled into the bosom of Nyx. Stars glimmered around it.

"Herakles will never believe me when I tell him about this place," I murmured. The moon kept my climb from being impossible, but it was far more difficult to place the branch tips well without squinting to see. I took one and began chipping away at a new spot, using the now dulled tip to create a small hole in the wall.

Tap, tap, tap. I squinted to see if it was deep enough only to realize the sound continued.

Tap, tap, tap. Three more times it went. I froze and then shook my head, sensing I was close to exhaustion.

I tapped twice more with the dulled point and stretched back, ready to plunge the branch into the concrete with what strength remained.

Tap, tap.

I lowered my arm. There was definitely someone else tapping. It wasn't just me being tired.

I tapped the wall again, and more tapping answered. Forcing my tired mind to focus, I swiveled my head to my right, the direction the sound came from, and gasped.

A hippolectryon was pecking the wall with its beak. With the body of a horse and the legs, head and tail of a chicken, it had wings and was uglier than I expected. I stared at it, wanting to dismiss the possibility it existed, before recalling that I was in a magic place where the sun stayed overhead for over twelve hours and then dived across the sky to set in the time it took me to sneeze.

"You're smaller than I expected," I said to the creature not two meters away from me. It was the size of my foot. "Too little to eat. Too little to carry me on your back."

The creature looked at me, as if waiting for me to tap again. I did more out of curiosity than anything else. It pecked in response.

And then it hit me. The creature wasn't flying. It was *walking* up the wall on spindly chicken feet.

"How in Hades is that possible?" I muttered. I tapped the wall beside me. The creature tapped back, moving closer as it did. When it was within reach, I picked it up to study its feet.

It squirmed with a clucking sound, but in the moonlight I could see its feet weren't magical or suction cups or anything else. I dropped it away from the wall, unconcerned about it falling since it had wings. Rather than drop downward, the hippolectryon landed on the wall again.

With some caution, I drew one leg up from the branch it was on and rested my knee against the wall. My balance shifted to it, as if gravity itself were changing around me, and I felt the heavy sense of lying on my stomach.

I lifted my second foot into place next, not about to lose my death grip on the two branches preventing me from falling. With incredulity making my heart sprint, I cautiously sat up. I was kneeling, bent over my handholds.

The hippolectryon began pecking again and walked on, as if bored now that I wasn't playing with it anymore.

Disorientated, I released one hand then the other and risked a look in the direction that had been down seconds before.

The forest was where it had been, and my stomach lurched at the idea I was about to fall.

But I didn't. I breathed deeply and released my final grip on the branches. The hippolectryon was two meters away again, pecking and pacing.

With some apprehension, I stood. I didn't topple into the forest, and the wall beneath me didn't give out. "Ha!" I couldn't help the baffled laugh. "I'll take it. I'm sick of climbing. Thanks for rotating the world for me, Atlas." Wrenching my remaining foot

and handholds out of the wall, I tucked all but one into my cargo pockets and clenched the fourth, in case the world's gravitation changed on me again.

I began walking then trotting up the wall, towards the top, followed closely by a hippolectryon that sometimes ran, sometimes flew to keep up.

"You have an interest in what's over the wall?" I asked, slowing. It landed beside me without answering. The distance to the top of the wall was much greater than I expected, a full kilometer and a half past the point where I began walking. Finally, after fifteen minutes, I saw the edge of the top come into view and silently admitted I'd never had made it if I had to climb all that way.

Readying my stake in case I was about to plunge down the other side, I knelt and leaned over the edge. The top of the wall was about a meter wide. I tapped on the surface, waiting for the hippolectryon to test it out.

The creature went. He didn't fall. Just ... stood there.

"Okay. Please do it again, Atlas," I begged the Titan quietly. Blowing out a breath, I lay down on my stomach and crept over the top. My stomach dropped, and the same lurching sensation returned as gravity changed around me once again. "I'd think this was a dream if I didn't know I was awake."

I rolled onto the top and lay on my back, staring at the sky briefly. The hippolectryon pecked at one of my hands, and I moved it out of reach. Tired, I nonetheless was exited to move on and shifted to my knees to peer at what lay at the bottom of the wall on the other side.

A single, solitary house stood half a kilometer from the foot of the wall. Otherwise, there was only ... darkness. Not the kind of darkness that occurred when the sun set. This was unnatural. Nothingness. I wasn't certain what I expected of a blessing from Mnemosyne but it wasn't this. I readied myself for the odd sensation of gravity changing and leaned carefully over the side of the wall, waiting for the unsettling sensation to leave my belly.

"All right. We're set," I said cheerfully and stood. "You ready?" I looked back.

The hippolectryon was gone.

"I guess not." I started forward, down the side of the wall, not looking at the house for fear of becoming disoriented once more. When I reached the bottom, I knelt and placed my hands on the grass ahead of me.

"Atlas, just one more —" I toppled onto my face. "Gods dammit!" I muttered and sat up. "Thanks anyway." With a sigh, I looked around. Nothing else had appeared. Just the house. I dropped the stakes and rope at the wall and strode down a sidewalk towards the house. Nothingness ran on either side. I peered over the edge of the sidewalk once then not again, not about to wade into the void on either side.

Pausing in front of the two-story house, I studied it. Was I supposed to know it? Because it wasn't remotely familiar. A small porch and several windows faced me. It

seemed so very normal, the kind of cookie cutter suburbia I imagined everyone lived in, before learning the world was in a state of chaos brought on by warring gods.

“Mnemosyne?” I called. I wasn’t expecting her to magically appear and wasn’t disappointed. I’d never been blessed by a god or goddess. I knew less of the protocol handling one of them than I did about the people who lived outside my forest.

Uncertain if I was supposed to waltz in or knock first, I decided to be polite and knocked. The door creaked open under the force of my knock. I pushed it the rest of the way open. Lights I couldn’t see from the outside glowed from the second floor of the house. Stairs were ahead of me, a formal dining room on one side of the foyer and a formal living room on the other side. The hallway to the left of the stairwell led to a kitchen. Nightlights positioned in outlets along the walls lit up the bottom floor.

It was quiet, calm and ... familiar. Not like Adonis, who I felt I’d never met before, but familiar as if I had been here before. As if I should know this place.

“Hello?” I called.

No one answered. I started up the stairs, to the part of the house beckoning me to it with bright, cheerful light. Three bedrooms, a study and bathroom. Thus far, everything about this place screamed ordinary. While all the lights were on, the door to one bedroom was wide open, and I went to it.

Stuffed animals and dolls were scattered on the floor. A television with a pink remote control was at one side, a twin bed with a purple canopy on the other. The dressers and furniture were bright white, the curtains overlooking the space behind the house pink and green. Purple, heart-shaped rugs were on the floor.

I smiled, liking the bright, happy colors of the room. Beside the TV remote, in front of a blanket that appeared to have been wrapped around a small form before being pushed off, were a shoebox and a scrapbook. I knelt beside the scrapbook, curious to see the child who lived here.

Flipping open the cover, I was surprised at the title page.

The Oracle of Delphi

I turned the page. The scrapbook was filled with articles cut out of newspapers and printed from computers about the current Oracle of Delphi. Pictures, news reports, tabloid covers. There was nothing personal in the book at all.

“Someone’s obsessed with the Oracle,” I said and closed it. The shoebox beside it was empty, and I stood, puzzled as to what I was supposed to do next.

I started towards the door, wondering if there was more information in the next room over, when I tripped over something hidden in the blanket at my feet.

“Hey. I know you.” I bent and retrieved the stuffed koala bear I’d first seen with Adonis. It appeared almost new, and it was ... rumbling. My fingertips vibrated with the strange sensation. “Some kind of talking toy?”

Mrs. Nettles.

The voice from Adonis' bedroom.

"Uh. You're not talking to me are you?" I asked, holding it away from my body.

Mrs. Nettles.

I dropped it then gasped. "Oh, gods, I'm so sorry." I picked it up and gazed at it. "Are you hurt?" My face turned hot at the idea of talking to a toy.

The stuffed animal blinked. It *blinked*.

This time when I dropped it, I leapt back. "The flying horse-chicken was a little weird. But this ..."

The koala climbed to its feet. I had the sudden flashback to a horror movie I once watched where a doll came to life and slaughtered people.

Mnemosyne sent Mrs. Nettles to guide you.

"What does that mean?" I demanded of the quiet world around me. "What is a Mrs. Nettles?"

The koala pointed to itself then began to stroke one of its ears.

"You're ... you're Mrs. Nettles."

It nodded.

"Oh." If this world weren't surreal, I might short out. I decided to accept a walking talking teddy bear as I did the wall. "Okay, Mrs. Nettles. I'm trying to figure out what Mnemosyne wants me to do here. Do you know?"

Mrs. Nettles extended her arm in my general direction.

"I'm not sure what that means."

It did it again.

Not getting whatever she wanted me to know, I knelt and cautiously drew nearer to her. "Do you know ... Adonis?"

Mrs. Nettles nodded and waddled towards me. She paused at my knees and then shifted forward to try to grasp the red cord around my wrist between her two chubby paws.

"You, uh, want me to take it off?"

It nodded.

"You know what happens if I do?"

Another nod.

I'm in some weird world where toys can talk. Why not? I tugged the red cord off and braced myself to hear the shattering of glass.

Immediately, the world around me erupted into activity and color. Thin, shifting ribbons twisted and twirled around every single thing in the room. I knew them. I'd seen them before, and I racked my brain to figure out where.

The lake. In the water, I had witnessed smoky, faded ribbons like these twisting in the depths.

“What are they?” I asked, stunned by the life in the room filled with inanimate objects. The toys on the bed had two ribbons each, one blue and one yellow, though the exact hue and widths were unique around each toy. Mrs. Nettles, however, had three – blue, yellow, and faded green.

Mrs. Nettles had no answer.

Mesmerized by the colors and movement, I let my gaze roam over everything in the room. Even the television had two ribbons. I looked up towards the ceiling to see if I had any floating above my head. If I did, they were invisible.

Rustling came from the direction of the window. I blinked out of my amazed stupor to find Mrs. Nettles had moved. She was beneath the window, staring up at it, unable to reach the pane or see out of it.

“Don’t tell me you fly,” I said with a half laugh and rose. I crossed to the window and froze.

The nothingness had retreated. The house had a backyard, complete with a picket fence, tree house and a sandbox. Toys were scattered across the yard, and if I leaned out the window, I’d see a small herb garden beneath the kitchen window, next to a ...

How do I know that? I didn’t recall ever seeing Mrs. Nettles or the house or the backyard before. Why was I certain of the herb garden?

I was starting to remember.

“Mrs. Nettles! Can you find him?”

I whirled. A little girl around the age of six bolted into the room, faded and transparent, a ghost in every aspect. She was trailed by the ghostly version of Mrs. Nettles. They searched for someone or something before she crossed to the dresser and opened the bottom drawer. She pulled out a brilliant blue-green gem that glowed unnaturally before she hurried out the door.

My heart was starting to pound harder, and my instincts tingled. I touched the teal gem beneath my t-shirt and tugged it out. It was identical to the little girl’s.

My Mrs. Nettles was waddling towards the door.

I followed her and reached the door in time to see the spectral girl race down the stairs. Sweeping Mrs. Nettles up, I hurried down the stairs, following her. She darted out the back door and towards the tree in the corner of the backyard. I watched her climb the ladder on the trunk to reach the tree house then disappear inside.

The sounds of men shouting from behind us made me reach for my knife. I slunk through the house to the front door just as it burst open, and I was overrun by men in black uniforms.

I cried out, startled, and stumbled back, slashing at the figures.

But these were ghosts, like the girl. After the brief heart attack, I realized they couldn’t see or hear me at all and grew braver. I walked out front to see the world had grown once more. The house was one of many identical ones lining a street in the

suburbs. The men originated from one of five black vans. Several were huddled around one van. I was about to go inside to see what happened to the little girl when I caught a flash of red in the moonlight.

I'd recognize Herakles' hair and size anywhere. I started towards him, wondering if he could see me. My step slowed as I waded through the spectral figures around him. This Herakles I'd only seen in old pictures.

Gorgeous, handsome, bearing none of the scars he did now, Herakles was twenty three, at the peak of his physical shape, dressed in black fatigues like the other men and issuing orders from the iPad in his hands.

"No parents!" someone cried from the door of the house.

"They're already dead," Herakles sad without looking up. "Saw to it yesterday, after they revealed her location."

My breath caught. *This isn't my Herakles.* I'd never heard that tone or seen that expression on his face. I didn't like either. My Herakles was a gentle athlete, not ... this.

"We've got her! She's trapped in her tree house," a soldier said, hurrying towards them. "This way."

"Thank the gods. I'll be glad to get this over with," Herakles said.

"Quite a change from being the People's Champion," another man said beside him.

"Yeah. Master's orders."

Master? I didn't want to see what happened next. My Herakles didn't deserve to have his honor and goodness besmirched by this bizarre place. As far as I knew, he never had a master, unless he was talking about the benefactor who sponsored him at the Olympics.

"What in Olympus is that?" someone gasped.

They all looked up, and I did as well. A creature I never knew existed before last week soared overhead, its grey body blending in with the partially cloudy sky. Eyes glowed teal, and he passed with the threat, silence and intensity of a thunderhead.

Grotesque. My heart quickened once more. The creature was headed towards the backyard. I watched it, unable to explain how my whole body seemed to come alive when I saw him. My heartbeat turned erratic, while blood roared in my ears almost too loudly for me to hear. I was fevered, thrilled yet scared, curious and dreading all at once.

I raced through the house to the backyard, wishing I could warn the little girl it was coming, and stopped cold.

The grotesque was tearing into Herakles' men. His tail, fangs and claws shredded anyone that came near. I watched, somewhat disgusted, and uncertain whose side anyone was on. His agility, his feline speed and strength, were somehow ... familiar.

The four men were soon in pieces, torn limb from limb. The grotesque straightened and looked around, tail tapping the tree, before he lifted into the air effortlessly. He went to the opening of the tree house, and my breath caught.

I hurried forward instinctively. “Don’t hurt her!” I cried at the ghost that couldn’t see me.

To my surprise, the girl emerged cautiously from the house and smiled at the grotesque. It wrapped her in one arm and picked up Mrs. Nettles as well. She laughed as the creature lifted her into the air over her house. The monster wobbled in midair, as if unaccustomed to carrying others.

Herakles and two others raced around the side of the house. The men with him fired at the grotesque, which hovered closer to the rooftop. If he were hit by a bullet, he didn’t show it.

“We need something bigger!” one of the attackers called.

The grotesque began to rise straight up into the sky.

“I got this.” Without any sign of strain at all, Herakles wrenched a picket free from the fence, positioned himself as if throwing a javelin, and launched it straight up.

Even I doubted he’d get anywhere close to the grotesque flying twenty meters over the house.

But he did. The picket pierced one wing and pinned it to the side of the monster, running all the way through him to stick out of his other side.

A roar shook the windows of the house, and suddenly, the creature – and girl – were falling.

“No,” I whispered, horrified.

The girl came free from the monster’s arms as they tumbled out of the sky, screaming as she did.

One of the men cursed, but Herakles trotted a short distance, spread his legs wide and held out his arms.

Falling ... and Herakles caught me. I shook my head, suddenly dizzy, suddenly able to feel the air rushing through my hair as I fell once more ...

Down, from the night sky ...

Down, from the arms of the creature trying to rescue me ...

Down, into Herakles’ arms.

I dropped to my knees, struggling to right myself. Mrs. Nettles tugged free and waddled away. Blinking, I forced my mind to focus here and now and not on the dream.

Herakles had the girl. The grotesque smashed through the roof then crashed through the first and second floors, sounding as if he landed on and crushed the kitchen table.

“It’s okay.” Herakles’ voice was gruff.

The other men were panicking, one calling for an ambulance while another barked for someone to bring a first aid kit.

I climbed to my feet and approached, fearfully watching Herakles and the girl. She was shaking and scared, staring not at Herakles but into the air above his head.

“Is your name Alessandra?” he asked.

My heart dropped to my feet.

The girl nodded.

“My name is Herakles.”

“Bad people,” she whispered.

“Not bad. You’re special, and we’ve been trying to find you.”

“You’re ... hurt.” She was staring at the air above him. “Broken.”

Herakles breath caught audibly. “What did you say?”

“The ribbons. They’re broken.”

I blinked. I’d done my best to cancel out the ribbons around everything to concentrate on what I was watching. I saw what she meant. Herakles had four ribbons, but the colors were tie-died rather than solid, the edges jagged instead of smooth. They appeared to have been stitched together from other ribbons.

Frankenstein. He referred to himself as such on occasion. I thought it was because of his size. I saw the truth now, the confused Franken-ribbons unique to him.

“I can fix them.” Baby Alessandra raised her hands and began to manipulate them, using her fingers to smooth and shift them.

Herakles staggered and dropped to his knees, releasing her. She rolled free of him with a grunt and then sat up, appearing irritated to have been disturbed before she finished. She continued to manipulate the ribbons until the edges smoothed out and the colors were uniform.

Herakles contorted on the ground as she worked. When she was finished, he fell still, panting and sweating.

“Now we have to save Mismatch,” the girl said and stood.

“Mis ... what?” Herakles struggled to lift his head.

“My gargoyle.” She started towards the house.

“Stop!” he called. “You can’t ... it’s dangerous.” With some effort, Herakles pushed himself to his feet and staggered forward before regaining some part of his composure.

“What did you do to me?”

“The ribbons.” She pointed.

Herakles passed a hand over his head as if to see what was there then brought his hand before his face. He stared at it before he looked down at his body. “This isn’t me. This isn’t who I am.”

“Mismatch!” Alessandra cried.

I circled Herakles. The coldness was gone from his features, and he appeared ... aware where he was mechanical before. He had been broken or at least, not quite right, as little-me said. I didn’t understand the source of his Franken-ribbons. Something terrible had happened to him, perhaps in the youth he refused to reveal to me.

“Herakles! The Supreme Magistrate is on the way. We need to get her to the House,” someone called.

His face skewed in response, and he glanced towards the girl making her way up the stairs. Herakles snatched her.

“But – ” she started to object.

“Quiet. The bad people are coming. We need to leave.”

He took her out the back gate and disappeared into the night.

The scene faded. I was standing behind the house. The yard was gone, along with the men.

Realizing how tightly my chest was clenched, I bent over and took several deep, steadying breaths.

I was slow sometimes, but even I understood what I’d seen.

Me. Herakles. The forgotten events of the night that changed my life. But was it real?

Yes. I felt it just like I felt the gem at my chest belonged to me, like my grotesque had belonged to me.

Herakles killed my parents. He was going to turn me over to the people he hated most in the world. My protector, like everyone else in my life, wasn’t who I thought he was. I *ached* inside. The man I never thought could disappoint me had turned out not to exist.

“Don’t freak out, Lyssa,” I whispered, sucking in air.

Aurora was lining the horizon. With no concept of how time worked here, I forced myself to straighten. Mrs. Nettles was standing in the doorway.

“So, were you ... mine?” I asked as I approached, straining to control the emotions.

She nodded. *Mrs. Nettles.* Turning, she pointed towards the kitchen.

Not at all certain I was ready to see what happened next, I went.

The grotesque lay in the center, a pool of dark blood beneath him. The ghost Mrs. Nettles was tugging the picket out of his side. I felt bad for her, wanting to tell her no one could survive such a wound except ...

I had seen him. I knew he did. Somehow.

Five ribbons floated around him, one of which was green.

The sun came up, albeit not as fast as it went down, and something even more incredible began to happen.

The monster became human. Its change was silent. Wings melted away, and the athletic, feline body turned from gray to olive-skinned. Dark hair grew on his head, and the talons withdrew into him.

“No!” I breathed. “It can’t be!”

By daylight, the grotesque was Adonis.

“No, no, no!”

But, similar to Herakles, he wasn’t the Adonis I knew. He was younger for one, in his teens. When he awoke, his expressions were open and aware instead of cold and withdrawn, his gorgeous eyes warm. He sobbed out of pain, and spoke gently to Mrs. Nettles.

“Is no one who they seem to be?” I whispered, stricken by the sight of anyone in pain. “He tried to rescue me.”

He’s yours. Mrs. Nettles’ tiny voice said into my head.

“Mine.” I didn’t understand fully what that meant or how this man was the same who slaughtered people right and left, who kidnapped Herakles, destroyed my forest and was universally feared and hated by everyone. What changed? Why had he wanted to rescue me when I was a child and turn me over to the Sacred Triumvirate now?

Confusion was trumped only by helplessness at seeing him hurt. Whatever our past and present, I ached for him strongly enough that tears pricked my eyes and I resisted the urge to weep. We were connected on a level I had no clue existed but which made his pain real to me.

I wiped my eyes. “Dream. Memories. Not real.”

Mrs. Nettles pointed towards a door I guessed would lead to the garage if this were reality. In this version of things, my name was written on it, and I instinctively knew I wasn’t going to find two cars behind it.

I didn’t want to leave, but she waddled in the direction. I trailed, this time apprehensive about what lay behind the door.

She stopped before it and looked up at me.

“You want me to ... open it?” I asked.

A nod.

A sense I wanted to ignore was creeping up on me. It was more than familiarity this time. It was the idea that Adonis was right. I basically knew nothing about anything and had to acknowledge there was a piece of me that had been hidden from everyone for too long.

I didn’t know me, either, and this scared me. Terrified to learn more about how Herakles wasn’t the man I thought he was, I was likewise starting to tremble to think I was about to find out who I was. What if I were as bad as Herakles had been? What if my secrets were the worst?

Who – or what – am I?