



Sixteen-year-old Diana is denied the leadership position in favor of her hated half-sister, Athena. Their rivalry heats up as they are left alone on Mythikas Island with cousins Persephone, granddaughter of a mysterious Heliot healer, and Aphrodite, pampered daughter of Poseidon. Diana fights for control of the group once they land but soon realizes nothing is what it seems. She is determined to prove she has what it takes to lead in a world where only the strong survive.

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Chapter One

My day of glory was at hand. I sprinted past thick limestone columns toward the Hall of Elders where Zeus, my father and head of the ruling council of Mt. Olympus, would name me leader of the expedition to Mythikas Island. The September winds howled through the archways ushering in sheets of misty rain. Thunder rattled torches in their sockets and their flames flickered in the predawn darkness. Had I lost track of time? I couldn't be late; for once I was getting something my egotistic half-sister wanted.

Athena and I had tried to outperform one another since we were seven. Throughout our training, we were graded on toughness, discipline and endurance. I ran and hurtled faster than anyone, read and ciphered better than Athena, and my arrows always hit their mark. Athena's strengths were hand-to-hand combat and chariot racing. What good would those be on the exercise? It was fitting for me to lead us on the final test of our abilities since our futures were riding on it. Succeed and we received a seat on the ruling council. Fail and we were banished from Mt. Olympus to live among the servant class of demoted Titans and native Heliois.

Strands escaped from a loose braid and clung to my cheeks as the ribbon unfurled. I had no time to stop and fix the dark blonde cascade streaming down my back. Hopefully it looked dramatic rather than sloppy next to Athena's nearly colorless locks. I slid to a halt at the entrance to the chamber. A large crowd had gathered despite the early hour. Squirring through the throng of

spectators, I lifted my chin and applied a fake smile. Hopefully no one noticed the corner of my mouth twitch.

I padded past ornate thrones displaying my aunts and uncles who formed the ruling council. Their tight expressions bristled with disapproval. I proceeded to the dais accompanied by growls of “late” and “again.” Only once in every generation were direct descendants of the original twelve Titans eligible to take a seat on the ruling council. This summer eight of us were selected, four boys and four girls. The boys had gone to Mythikas first, now it was our turn.

Everyone was speculating on how the first group of females would fare on such an exercise. They were probably taking bets and discussing our odds of survival behind cupped hands. Their whispers echoed around the vast chamber.

My father perched on his throne as if ready to pounce. His bushy white hair, pointed beard and piercing blue eyes reminded me of the snow cat fabled to roam the high mountain peaks. As a child, I had fantasized he was the cat come to life. I could almost see his tail thump in fury.

I increased my speed and licked my lips. Thankfully, we were in public, so my father could not turn me over his knee. I reached the platform where his white marble throne towered. Additional height was unnecessary, he ruled by virtue of sheer physical presence. No one ever challenged him, except my detestable stepmother Hera who roosted alongside him on a throne lined with lynx skin. Her hooded gray eyes and sharp beak of a nose earned her the nickname “Vulture,” though no one dared utter it in front of her. She cleared her throat as I slid into place beside my sister.

At seventeen, Athena was as tall as a man and her crisp white tunic did not have a single wrinkle. An indigo cape flowed from her shoulders in elegant alignment. Patterns on her spear matched those on her bronze cuffs. Her platinum locks were carefully braided and coiled. She stood next to me poised and perfect. I hated being six months younger and three inches shorter.

She glared at me through dark-lashed lids shuttering large gray irises. I inhaled deeply to calm the excitement coursing through my veins and met her gaze. We should have been allies. Both lost our mothers at a young age and had a mutual enemy in the form of Hera. The problem was Athena’s insistence that I bow before her. I would never do so. It was not in my nature. She plucked the ribbon from my shoulder and hid it in the pocket of her cloak.

“It is time,” Zeus’ words silenced the crowd as he straightened with care. Golden robes slipped down to cover his battle-scarred knees. Standing was painful for him and his bones ached when it rained, though he would never admit it.

His gaze traveled past me to Aphrodite on my right. She had arrived the day before from a remote coastal village with a swish of abundant red hair and a flash of lapis blue eyes. She was the same age as Athena and arguably more beautiful. As Aphrodite smiled down on me, I wondered

what her strengths were. She poked me in the side, wiped at her flawless pink cheek and pointed to my face. I frowned and ignored her. She licked her thumb and rubbed it across my upper lip.

“Stop it,” I muttered, wiping her saliva off with my forearm. I never tolerated anyone touching me, much less someone who reeked of honeysuckle. The stench hovered below my nose.

Hera rustled in her chair and regarded the two of us as if she had stepped in a pile of pig waste. I resisted the urge to stick out my tongue. Aphrodite grinned at her. This impressed me as most people cowered under Hera’s predatory gaze.

My father stifled a cough as the wind combed through his thick mane. “Daughters of Olympus, descendants of the great Titans who founded our democracy —”

A snort issued from Athena’s left. Everyone turned toward Persephone whose head barely reached Athena’s armpit though she was eight months older. Oiled black ringlets wriggled to her knees. She met my father’s glare with a furrowed brow, her lips curved down as if she were disappointed, angry or both.

I swiftly placed my thumb between my first and middle fingers to ward off the evil eye. Rumor said Persephone’s grandmother caused milk to curdle, cattle to die and crops to shrivel on the vine with a simple look. I didn’t know if Persephone inherited her grandmother’s power but didn’t want to take any chances.

Zeus cleared his throat then threw his arms wide to embrace the crowd. “The world we live in is full of danger and uncertainty. As leaders, we are charged with protecting and providing for our people. This requires wisdom, courage and tough moral choices. Leadership is more than acquiring skills and completing courses, it is how you conduct yourselves.”

Zeus favored his left knee as he descended to the marble floor in front of me. “It is when you stop worrying about yourself and start worrying about the wellbeing of others whose lives you are entrusted with, putting their needs and welfare before your own.”

Zeus paced in front of Persephone. His words grew sharper with each syllable. “It is not enough to be born Titan, you must earn the right to be called Titan.”

Persephone tilted her chin to maintain eye contact. I held my breath.

Zeus raised his hand. “This mantle of responsibility cannot be accepted lightly. Having been trained and selected, you will be tested, far from the safe confines of home, under the most extreme circumstances. You will learn your strengths, your weaknesses. Confront your darkest fears.”

Not Persephone! As granddaughter of the deposed Heliot king she should not have been allowed to go at all. Anxiety fluttered in my chest, a butterfly attempting to free itself from a spider's web. "Persephone, do you solemnly dedicate yourself to uphold the traditions, dignity and high standards of the Titans? Do you have the courage, strength and determination to undergo this final test of your ability?"

Persephone's words dripped sarcasm, "I vow to uphold my traditions and standards."

My father shifted from Persephone toward me. I exhaled and the butterfly stilled, its white lacy wings opened. He passed me to pause in front of Aphrodite, smiling at her in a way he never smiled at me. The butterfly resumed its tortured attempts. My hands curled into fists. It took great effort to keep them rigid at my sides. Please not her. I knew nothing about Poseidon's daughter, what her special talents might be. He was my father's favorite brother. Would it make a difference? It had not occurred to me someone else's child could be chosen.

"Aphrodite," Zeus said. "Do you solemnly dedicate yourself to uphold the traditions, dignity and high standards of the Titans? Do you have the courage, strength and determination to undergo this final test of your ability?"

Aphrodite bowed gracefully. "Yes, please."

I sighed, relaxing the tension in my body. That had been close, too close.

"Few are chosen. Not all succeed." Zeus stopped in front of me. "You must willingly accept responsibility for those under your supervision."

I sighed as the butterfly soared free, bowed my head and bent my knees.

Zeus moved on to address Athena. Heat stained my cheeks as I straightened. The butterfly fell dead in mid-flight. A wave of grief closed my throat. It was not fair! Not Athena, not again, did she have to have everything?

"You must possess the moral courage to correct what is wrong and recognize others' accomplishments. The metamorphosis from follower to leader is a crucial step." Zeus placed his hand on Athena's head as she knelt. "Do you swear to maintain order and regularity and to ensure the safe return of those committed to your care?"

"I accept." Athena's voice was calm and controlled.

I wanted to protest, but no words emerged. Tears formed but I refused to shed them. Zeus was often cruel, but this was the worst. He had always preferred Athena and did not have the grace to hide it. Oh, to strike something— or someone.

Zeus took Athena's hand and they faced the roaring crowd. I pictured myriad ways to torture Athena: tie her to a tree and shoot arrows at her; drag her behind my horse down the mountain on the rockiest path; toss her in a pit with a thousand snakes.

My revenge fantasies evaporated as my father stood before me, "Do you solemnly dedicate yourself to uphold the traditions, dignity and high standards of the Titans? Do you have the courage, strength and determination to undergo this final test of your ability?"

Anger at being betrayed mingled with fear. Why should I bother to go? What purpose would it serve? Nothing I did could earn his approval. I hated being ordered around like one of his hunting dogs. It was tempting to refuse and humiliate him, but I made the mistake of meeting his eyes. We stood with gazes locked, blue sparring with green.

"Yes," I lied with jaw clenched, resolving to leave this hostile place forever. They could keep their meaningless challenge and their stupid council. I didn't need them. I didn't need anyone.

Zeus swept up the stairs while the noise of the crowd faded to a sporadic whisper. He reached his throne and turned for the final decree. "Complete the challenge successfully and you take your place on the council; fail and you leave Mt. Olympus forever. So it has been and so it shall be."

"So it has been and so it shall be." The solemn incantation echoed through the hall and dismissed us to prepare for the unknown.