



**lifestyles
of gods
& monsters**

Emily Roberson

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YOU WILL HAVE SEEN THEM, I SUPPOSE. THE GRAINY pictures, taken with a long telephoto lens. It has been fourteen years, but they still shock.

She has a face that everyone knows. Beautiful. Determinedly blond. Curated. The tabloid writers say, “Never a hair out of place.”

In the series of paparazzi shots, she strides across the pasture. No Photoshop. No airbrush. No filters. It is a long walk, and the photographers got her from every angle. As always, she is trim, tanned, and toned (another favorite tabloid description). If her sheet of golden hair and blue eyes are familiar, her expression is not. Usually her face in pictures is cool and composed. Icy. In these, she is ravenous.

She never could hide how she felt about that bull.

That face alone would have been enough to sell all the magazines in a newsstand. Enough to crash any server. Even without the wooden cow. But there is a wooden cow. A cowhide-covered box with legs and a head.

When the white bull walked out of the sea a few months earlier, people called it a gift from the gods. They said it was a sure sign that Daddy was a good king of Crete; that he still had the favor of the gods, even after my older brother's murder. Our tragedy. That Daddy had been right to go to war with Athens. They called it beautiful. For myself, I don't see what's beautiful about a bull, white or brown. They look like livestock to me. Not my type.

It was beautiful to my mother.

There are lots of theories about my mother and the bull—some people say Daddy should have sacrificed it instead of keeping it. Daddy thinks that's ridiculous. The gods would not have handed him such a valuable thing only to ask him to kill it. Other people say it was because my mother was too proud and the gods wanted to take her down a notch. However, she's still proud, even after her abasement.

I think it's because the gods are jerks.

Whatever the reason, my mother fell in love with a bull and when the bull didn't return her affection, Daedalus, Daddy's architect, built her the wooden cow and brought it out to the pasture for her.

The paparazzi pictures of what happened next were taken

from so far away that if you didn't know what you are looking at, you wouldn't know what you are looking at.

Unfortunately, I know.

Eventually, the bull returned to munching the grass, and my mother went back to the palace.

When she returned to the paddock later, Daddy's people checked the trees for paparazzi, so there were no more pictures.

No one knows why she stopped going to see the bull. Maybe her infatuation ran its course, like an infection. Maybe the gods thought it had gone on long enough. Maybe she got tired of the whole thing. Eventually, life returned to normal. More or less. Mother went back to her royal duties and her social whirl, and if people moo when her name is mentioned, they do it very quietly behind closed doors. After a while, the world's attention moved on to the next big scandal.

The bull was never the same afterward. It went crazy, charging around, breaking fences, tearing up pastures. Daddy got so irritated that he had Heracles capture it and take it to the mainland. Let it be Athens's problem, Daddy said. Maybe it missed my mother. Who knows. Bulls can't talk.

My mother can talk, but she never talks about the bull. Daddy blocks access to the sites where the pictures are posted, but it's like the Hydra, always popping up somewhere else.

You'd think people would stop caring, but I guess it never gets old.

A decorative floral ornament with the word "TWO" in the center. The ornament is symmetrical and features intricate scrollwork and floral patterns in a light gray color. The word "TWO" is written in a bold, black, serif font, centered within the ornament.

TWO

“**ARIADNE, LOOK UP FROM THAT PHONE,**” MY MOTHER whispers from behind her smile. “The cameras are watching.”

I don’t look up. The cameras are always watching.

I am in the stadium VIP box with my relatives and the visiting dignitaries. My family holds the front row, of course, and the VIPs fill the three rows behind us. In the center of the stadium, a Jumbotron simulcasts the live feed.

The stately procession of competitors, newly arrived from Athens, will begin in a moment, but right now, the only thing the live feed shows is us. There’s nothing like seeing your whole family broadcast one hundred feet tall, every feature blown up to giant size. I prefer to watch us on my phone.

My mother waves for the cameras. She is bringing it today:

a Chanel jacket, her tiara, her face so Botoxed that when she smiles, nothing but her mouth moves. The golden bracelet she always wears, with an image of my brother who died. She is ageless—icy and perfect. That is the only way I've ever seen her. If it wasn't for the photographic evidence, I wouldn't believe she could be another way.

Daddy is next to her, with his full beard and his three-piece suit. He takes up twice as much space as my mother. The golden sash across his chest and the heavy signet ring on his finger are the only outward signs of his power.

My parents look elegant and royal.

Elegant royalty sells.

Looking at them together, you can understand why their wedding still shows up on the list of the most-watched programming of the last thirty years. No episode of my older sisters' reality show, *The Cretan Paradoxes*, has ever broken the top one hundred. The first season of *The Labyrinth Contest* is in the top slot. Not that it's a competition.

The cameras turn now to my older sisters, the Paradoxes themselves, sitting together.

They have an uncanny sense of when they are being televised, and they both jump to their feet. Even that small action is greeted with rapturous shouts from the photographers and the crowd.

Since Acalles's best side is her left and Xenodice's is her right, they have a limited repertoire of poses they can do together effectively. There is also the small matter that what they are the

most famous for is their bottoms, encased in Spandex, and it's really hard to get faces and backsides in the same picture. Though they do try.

The photographers yell, "Turn around, girls, turn around!"

Obediently, my sisters spin and wiggle. The camera zooms in, blowing up their tushes, larger than life. In the next frame, my mother glows with maternal pride.

Tushies sell.

Now it's my turn. My sisters are famous for their online makeup tutorials, but I could teach lessons in invisibility. I see myself, on my phone, slouching in my chair, staring at my phone, which holds a picture of me. It's like one of those paintings where someone looks at themselves in a mirror. An infinite loop.

I wish I was wearing jeans and a hooded sweatshirt to hide my face, but that is unacceptable to my mother and the fashion police. My mother would love to have her stylists make me fabulous, but I'm not interested. I don't want to be seen. Not like that.

So, we have compromised. I'm wearing a knee-length black dress with short sleeves and a square neckline. Pockets for my phone and the ball of silver thread I carry everywhere I go. Flats. I don't have any makeup on, and my long hair is down. I'm like the "before" picture in a makeover photo shoot. I seem tasteful and conservative. Like I'm going to the funeral of someone I didn't know particularly well.

Tasteful and conservative don't sell.

This fact doesn't keep the cameras from zooming in on me. I keep my eyes on my phone. I move my hair so they can't see my face. I wish I had my mask.

"Smile, Ariadne." Daddy's voice is a low rumble.

I flash a quick one. Nothing enthusiastic, but enough to get credit for it. No one cheers.

Then I get to see my face, blown up on the huge screen, one hundred feet high, broadcast to millions. I can feel all the eyes on me. I shiver.

Finally, the live feed cuts from us to the procession of competitors coming up from the harbor. Thank the gods. Now I can do my job. The reason I'm here.

Every year, my family holds a contest that is televised live worldwide. Fourteen Athenian teenagers, seven boys and seven girls, the bravest and most beautiful, come to Crete to face our monster, the Minotaur, in our maze. We are never short of competitors, even though it is a fight to the death.

The winner gets more money than most people see in a lifetime, and enough in sponsorships to support an entourage, but that's only a small part of why people enter. Killing a big-name monster is the fastest route to something even more valuable—fame, eternal glory, their name written in the stars, a way out of an ordinary life—the thing that everyone seems to be seeking.

Except for me. I'd be more than willing to accept a boring, ordinary life, if anyone was offering.

The Labyrinth Contest makes the path to killing the Minotaur clear, even if it isn't easy. First, move to Athens, since the only

requirement to enter is that you be a resident of Athens at sixteen. Kids go there from all over the world for their chance to become one of the thousands who will be in the televised qualification round, where the biggest risk is that your trip through the obstacle course or bathing suit competition will go straight to the blooper reel. Qualifications run for two weeks and include obstacle courses and wrestling, a half marathon, a quiz show, and competitions in bathing suits and evening wear.

Finally, if you make it through and get chosen as one of the honored fourteen, you have two weeks of training in Athens, learning orienteering, weapons skills, and monster psychology, and end up here, in Crete, marching into the stadium in a blue-and-white tracksuit while you wave an Athenian flag. They are the bravest and most beautiful, and they know it.

None of them are thinking about the odds.

Which is a good thing, because the odds are terrible.

It's been ten years, and so far, the score is heavily weighted toward Crete—140 to zero. However, as the ads say, *The Minotaur is not immortal*. Any one of these competitors could hurt or kill him.

Which is why I'm here, in the VIP box, assessing the strengths of the competitors based on my previous experience with them. I am the Keeper of the Maze, in charge of leading the competitors to the entrance gate of the maze, where they will face the Minotaur. I'm also responsible for keeping him healthy and ready for each new run. So I rate the competitors. It may seem callous to think about them this way, but they signed up for this.

They have families and fans, millions of people to worry about them. The Minotaur only has me.

On my phone screen, I watch the competitors, looking at their faces and their body language, so I can see what they are hiding.

I choose a boy—small and compact with short curly hair—he was the acrobat, the one who flipped and twisted his way through qualifications. His kind of flexibility and explosive strength can be very useful going through the maze, but will he keep his head level enough to use them? I go in close on his eyes, ignoring his muscular torso and his smiling face. They flicker with fear. In my experience, panic is the thing that dooms competitors the quickest. If they freak out in there, the maze will get them before the Minotaur does.

Next, I look at one of the girls. She is supermodel beautiful, taller than the boy, maybe the tallest girl I've ever seen. She is Hippolyta, the Amazon, the only competitor whose name I remember from qualifications. She moved to Athens so she could be on *The Labyrinth Contest*.

Hard for me to imagine moving somewhere to sign your kid up for a battle that could end in death, but I don't think the person who leads them to the maze has any right to judge.

The Amazon is relaxed and athletic. Sure of herself as the highest-scoring competitor, but what do her eyes tell me?

Before I can look, I have a strange tingling at the back of my neck.

I glance up, keeping my face neutral.

Then I spot him, in the row behind me. A boy. About my age, looking at me with undisguised interest.

I check around me quickly, making sure he isn't looking at one of my sisters, but they are at the edge of the box, waving at the crowd.

His long legs are kicked out in front of him. He is broad across the chest, with curly hair and a nose that has been broken at least once. His eyebrows are dark slashes over bright eyes. He has a suit on, like the other men in the box, but he wears it differently, casually, with the tie loose at his throat, the jacket unbuttoned, his posture relaxed. Jiggling his foot like he is full of electrical energy, like he is ready to explode.

If I had a type, he would be it.

I wonder who he is. I have never seen him before in my life. The other VIPs are regulars, but he's new.

I look back at my screen, collapsing my shoulders and deploying the tricks of invisibility, but he doesn't stop looking at me, his eyes crackling with humor and intelligence.

Who is he?

I'm sure my sisters know. Or if they don't, they will soon. He's too cute for them to ignore. I tell myself I won't care, even a little bit, tomorrow or the next day, when a video is released of him in bed with whichever of my sisters gets her hands on him first. I almost believe myself.

No one has ever looked at me like this before.

He raises an eyebrow. At me. I am irritated with him for distracting me, and even more irritated with myself for the

irrational impulse to lift an eyebrow in return. Gods. What is wrong with me?

I scowl instead.

His smile doesn't waver. But here's the thing—it isn't dumb or open-faced, like someone without a thought in his head. It's full of wry humor. Like there's a joke he's waiting for me to pick up on. And he'll take his time. He's inviting me to acknowledge the absurdity of this whole situation—the Spandex, the music from the speakers, the preening VIPs. Everything.

Then, I do it. Across the box, looking at someone I've never met before, I giggle.

When was the last time I did that?

"Ariadne," Daddy says, his voice breaking into my attention. "Get your head in the game. The competitors are almost out of sight."

I blush bright red. In the moment of looking at a boy, I'd forgotten why I'm here. Why we do this.

The Labyrinth Contest is divine vengeance for the murder of my older brother, Androgeous, who died when I was two. He went to Athens for their annual games, and he swept them, winning every event. Which pissed some people off. Late that night, after an evening of drunken celebration, Androgeous was stabbed to death. It isn't clear who did it. Some people say it was the other competitors, and some people say it was the king, Aegeus, himself. No one is telling.

Athens is a no-snitch zone, apparently, but Daddy and the gods believe in collective punishment.

So Daddy led a war against Athens, and won. Daddy demanded an enormous tribute in gold, and Athens paid it. It was still not enough to make up for the loss of my brother. They still had their games, so the gods brought us our own. They sent us the Minotaur and *The Labyrinth Contest* so we could keep making Athens pay.

The gods laid out the details, and it is up to us to follow them, each of us playing our part. Including me. With the gods involved, it could get way worse. Ask my mother and her wooden cow.

This year I am seventeen, the same age as the Athenians. I was a girl when this started, proud of my robes and my mask. Proud to be doing something so important for my daddy, for the gods, but I'm not proud anymore. I hate it.

That doesn't mean I can change it.

I pull my attention back to my phone, where the last of the competitors, a boy with bulky muscles and a crew cut, is parading through the crowd, smiling and waving. I don't even have to close in tight to see his fear. It's right there, on his face, for everyone to see.

Once the last of the competitors passes, we line up and leave the VIP box, my family first. My bodyguards form a circle around me, leading me out of the stadium, and I lose track of the boy. In front of the stadium, the line of long, black SUVs snakes down the hill and I wait for my car, ignoring the

mingling VIPS around me and the crush of the crowd beyond the velvet ropes.

I'm not looking for the boy. Not one tiny bit.

It was nothing—a boy looking at a girl.

An ordinary thing that happens to people every day.

Just never to me.

On my phone, I scan the taped video of the other eleven competitors, the ones I missed while I was looking at the boy. Who I am not thinking about.

After watching and assessing everyone, two competitors stand out to me, Hippolyta and a blond boy named Vortigern.

Finally, my SUV pulls up. One of my bodyguards opens the door and lets me in before taking his spot with the rest of them in the tail car. I'm surprised—and disappointed—to find that I'm not alone. Acalle and Xenodice sit across from me in the rear-facing seats.

“What do you want?” I say, harsher than I mean to.

“We need a favor,” Xenodice says in her breathy high voice, leaning forward while she flips her long hair and puts one of her French-manicured hands on my knee. I swear, Xenodice would flirt with a brick wall. She doesn't have another setting.

I take her hand off my knee. “You know, the word *favor* suggests some kind of reciprocity . . .”

Her plump, carefully-painted lower lip slides out into a pout. “We'd be *happy* to help you with *anything*, but you never want *our* favors.”

I let that sit for a minute, deciding whether it's worth it to

take the easy shot. Does she even know that *favor* has another, sexual, meaning?

“Now, *that* would send the viewing numbers through the roof,” Acalle says, getting in there before I can. I laugh involuntarily. Acalle is straight-faced; anyone watching at home would never guess that there was any more going on inside her head than in Xenodice’s.

“What? What’s so funny?” Xenodice says, looking back and forth between us.

“Nothing,” Acalle says. “It would take too long to explain it to you.”

Out the windows of the car, the motorcade is making its slow way down Temple Row, the crowd pushing up against our car, trying to get a glimpse of who is behind the tinted windows. They’d be having a fit if they knew the Cretan Paradoxes were in the car.

“What do you want me to ask Daddy for?” I say, making my voice nicer. Because that’s what I help them with. They get me to ask Daddy for things that he would say no to them about, and they help keep Mother away from me. Daddy disapproves of their show and their boys and their Spandex, and Mother disapproves of my hooded sweatshirts and video games. It’s a fair trade, in my opinion.

“Shoes,” Xenodice says. “I need you to talk to Daddy about shoes.”

She holds out her tiny foot in its platform seven-inch stripper heels. “These are *so* over.”

“Didn’t I talk to Daddy about shoes two weeks ago?” I ask.

“Yes. That’s the shoe shelf life,” she says. “I will *not* be the subject of a magazine profile on the Cretan Paradoxes as shoe repeaters. We are not economy-class princesses.”

“Okay,” I say. “Shoes.”

I turn to Acalte. “Is that what you want, too?”

“No, mine’s harder.” She has a businesswoman’s look now. “I don’t want them to bring Heracles here.”

Xenodice spins and looks at her. “You didn’t tell me that! You have to see Heracles! Everyone’s been waiting on it! Do you look at your feed? Everyone is talking about #acalleandthelion, #roundthree . . .”

Last year, when Heracles came to visit my parents, Acalte and the great hero started a torrid affair—everything caught on tape, of course. It was great for everyone—Heracles had been out of the public eye for a while, so it got everyone talking about him again. For Acalte, it pulled her up into the A-list. It’s one thing to be a pretty princess flirting and wearing hot clothes, but when she got the attention of the most famous hero in the world, that sent her into the stratosphere.

They fought and Heracles went away, then he came back in the winter, promising he’d changed. He hadn’t. They fought and made up several more times before he left again.

“The ratings of every episode of *Paradoxes* with you and Heracles beat everything else at the same time, in every demographic,” Xenodice says.

“I know,” Acalle says.

“They’re hoping to stop the ratings slide by bringing Heracles into *The Labyrinth Contest*,” I say, adding my voice to Xenodice’s.

The Cretan Paradoxes have always been wrapped up with *The Labyrinth Contest*. The contest was what first put my sisters on the map. In the first season, ten years ago, when Xenodice was fourteen, she was so beautiful that no one could miss her. A star, even then. My mother loved it. She welcomed the photo shoots and endorsement deals, invitations and opportunities that were coming for Xenodice and Acalle after that. Then they got their own reality show, *The Cretan Paradoxes*, five years ago, and now being famous is a full-time job for my sisters.

The Cretan Paradoxes generally goes on hiatus during the two weeks of *The Labyrinth Contest* because it wouldn’t make any sense to be in a ratings battle with ourselves. Things change, though, because this time we are adding some Paradox energy to *The Labyrinth Contest*. My sisters will be involved in the makeover episode, and the plan is to have Heracles do some individual training for the competitors and color commentary on the runs through the maze.

However, the biggest ratings driver would be Acalle with Heracles. There are fans who would watch fifteen hours of blank screen if they thought they could find out what is going on with Acalle and Heracles.

“I know about the ratings,” Acalle says, frustrated. “But I don’t want to see him!”

“Why not?” I ask. “It seemed like you were into him.”

“I am, when he’s sober.” Her voice is matter-of-fact. “When he’s drunk . . .”

She looks at me, showing the fierce intelligence that she normally keeps hidden behind Xenodice-style doe eyes. “He scared me last time. It hurt.”

“It was *hot!*” Xenodice says. “That’s why everyone *loved* it.”

“I didn’t,” Acalle says simply.

The car stops at the palace.

“Okay,” I say. “I’ll make sure they put you in a different plot-line, one that you don’t hate.”

I can do that for my sister. Even though it will probably cost me something big. Nothing is free.

“Thank you,” she whispers, squeezing my hand.

When the car door opens, Acalle’s face is beautiful and sexy, what anyone would expect. She adjusts her skirt, pulling it up the millimeter necessary for the paparazzi to get the flash of underwear that they prepaid for, and she gets out of the car into the flashbulbs that follow my sisters everywhere they go. I give a few seconds for the cameras to trail them before I get out of the car and make my way inside.

I have to walk quickly, weaving my way through the crowd of VIPs, camera crews, and tourists; I don’t want to be late for the debriefing meeting with Daddy. I’m not expected to stay long—I’ll give my report on the competitors and he’ll want to confirm that I have everything I need for tomorrow. But he hates it if I’m late.

When I get to the fifty-ninth-floor dining room, one of Daddy's bodyguards opens the door for me. The other one stands along the wall with his arms crossed, watching the doorway. The two priests stand against the back wall in their white robes, a cage of doves at the ready in case anyone needs to decipher the will of the gods at a moment's notice. My mother keeps lobbying in favor of the throwing of stones, since doves are a mess, but Daddy is a traditionalist.

Daddy is at the head of the big table, facing the plate-glass window that looks out at the sparkling city below, and my best friend, Icarus, is sitting beside him. Icarus is young, only nineteen, the same age as Acalle, but he's been working on our shows since elementary school.

He came here with his dad, Daedalus, from Athens when he was a baby, leaving Icarus's mother behind. Daedalus is a genius, an inventor, producer, visionary, but he's not the most practical person in the world. Daedalus says that before Daddy brought him to Crete, he could barely manage to keep the electric bill paid, much less afford everything he needed for inventions. So they made a deal—Daddy is Daedalus's patron for life, fully funding all his projects, but he and Icarus can never work for anyone else. Like my sisters, they can leave the island for shows or projects, but only for a limited time, and always with minders. For example, he's been in Athens for over a month producing the qualifications shows and training.

I've asked Icarus if he ever wonders what his life would be like if he had grown up in Athens, but he says it's a pointless question. "My dad made the choice he did; what's the point of talking about it?" One time, I asked him if he remembered his mom. "How could I? I was a baby when we left," he said. His voice was expressionless, so I couldn't tell how he felt about it.

He took over producing *The Cretan Paradoxes* two years ago, and he just started as showrunner for *The Labyrinth Contest* because his dad wanted to go back to making inventions. Because Icarus is my best friend, I can tell he's nervous about this meeting—his first with Daddy since he became the showrunner—but I'm not sure anyone else can see it.

Daddy is holding his cold martini in his hand while his dinner waits under chafing dishes on the sideboard. This will be a quick meeting. Daddy cannot stand waiting for his food.

"There's my girl," he says, standing up to give me a hug when I come to the table. With his arm around me, I can smell the wool of his suit, the cigars he smokes, gin, his cologne. The whole complex of things that say Daddy. Safety. Home.

Daddy sits back down, and I take the chair across from Icarus, giving him a little wave.

Icarus has a tablet with the data from this afternoon—it shows the minute-by-minute ratings, comparisons to the year-over-year numbers, and our engagement stats. The trend line is clear. *The Labyrinth Contest* is pulling the lowest first-day numbers in its history. Not that the opening parade is normally a

giant draw or anything, but it's generally better than these dismal numbers.

"You know our problem, Icarus," Daddy says. "If people don't believe that the Minotaur can be beaten, there's no reason for them to watch. No one puts up a camera at a slaughterhouse. Nobody wants to watch an execution. They want a fight. You've seen the same numbers I have. Our best ratings come when the competitors have a fighting chance. Like that one girl, two years ago, the one who used the rope off the wall—what was her name?"

"Lydia," I say. She was a runner, skilled at throwing knives, long and lean, with her hair in a braid down her back. She survived the maze for three hours, the ratings growing with every minute, every obstacle beaten, every desperate stratagem. I wasn't watching at the time, but I've seen the replays. She stripped a rope from one of the obstacles off the wall and used it to set a trap for the Minotaur, tangling and tying him down.

Our audience had tripled by the time he finally finished her off.

The next day, in the maze, I put salve on the rope burns on the Minotaur's body and comforted him from the pain. I got him ready for the next competitor.

My stomach clenches; I don't want to go through it all again. But I will.

"Yes, Lydia," Daddy says, nodding. "We need more like that. More competitors who are worthy of my Minotaur. More who can put up a fight. The gods sent this contest to me so we could

show our triumph over Athens. To make up for the loss of my son . . .”

He takes another drink of his martini. Talking about my lost older brother always makes him upset.

“*The Labyrinth Contest* is on so we can show that even their best and most beautiful, their strongest and smartest, aren’t enough to beat *my* Minotaur in *my* maze. However, my victory doesn’t mean a thing if no one is watching.”

“Yes, sir,” Icarus says. “I understand.”

Daddy leans in toward Icarus, his voice dropping dangerously.

“I don’t need for you to understand,” Daddy says, then roars, “I need for you to do something about it.”

Icarus stays in place in his chair, staring at Daddy, but he blinks repeatedly. He’s hiding it well, but he’s intimidated. I’m sure Daddy has seen it, too.

Daddy stares at him for a silent second, making sure he has the point, then he turns to me.

“Ariadne,” he says. “You want to tell me what was going on today in the VIP box? Why you were laughing instead of watching the competitors?”

I think of that boy in the box. His eyes on me. His smile. Like this isn’t deadly serious.

“It was nothing, Daddy,” I say. “It won’t happen again.”

“Better not,” he says, patting my hand. “Now, tell me what you’ve got. Any thoughts on the competitors? Anyone we should be watching?”

“The Amazon,” I say. “Hippolyta.”

“Hippolyta is a star,” Icarus says, pulling up a picture of her on his tablet and showing it to Daddy. It’s a still from one of the qualification episodes in Athens last month, and she’s just navigated some insane challenge in booty shorts and a gold sports bra.

“Do you think she’s a threat in the maze?” Daddy asks me.

“Maybe,” I say. “I can’t tell yet. She’s brave, that’s for sure. The question is if she’s smart enough.”

“We’ll see,” Icarus says. “I’ll assign a camera crew to follow her.”

“Also the tall guy who looks like a Visigoth,” I say.

“Vortigern,” Icarus says, calling up a picture on his tablet. It’s a video from weapons training in Athens after they qualified—Vortigern throwing a spear. One of the first things that the competitors learn in their training is to use the maze against the Minotaur. They are not allowed to go in with weapons, but they can use anything they find there.

“He’s good at weapons, and built like a tank,” I say. “He might be able to cause some damage.”

“That’s my girl,” Daddy says, resting his hand over mine. “I’m sure you ask yourself why you have to do this while your sisters are off gallivanting for the cameras, with their shoes and their helicopters and those boys.”

“I don’t care about all that,” I say. Because I don’t. I don’t want to be doing what my sisters are doing. That is for sure. I’d just rather not be doing this, either.

“I know,” Daddy says, his eyes crinkling in a smile. “You aren’t like the others. Not like other girls at all. That’s why you’re my favorite—but don’t tell your mother; she says we’re not allowed favorites.”

I feel the warmth of his hand on mine and I know that I am loved. Safe. Protected. His favorite. Sometimes I think he even forgets that I’m a girl at all. Sometimes I think I might be enough to make up for his lost son.

He lets go of my hand and picks up his glass. “You kids get out of here. I’ve got one more meeting and then I need to eat and talk security with my team.”

Icarus stands up, and I wish I could leave now and go to my room and get lost in VR for a few hours before I have to face the next two weeks, but I can’t because I promised to help Acalle.

“Um, Daddy,” I say, and he looks over at me.

Icarus sits back down. He hates having anything happen that he doesn’t know about, so there’s no way he’s going to leave me alone to talk to Daddy.

“You’re still here?” Daddy says, his light tone softening the words.

“Not for long,” I say. “Acalle and Xenodice wanted me to ask you something.”

“What do those silly girls want now?” he grumbles.

“Xenodice wants shoes,” I say.

“Shoes, shoes, shoes . . . ,” he says, but then he calls to his bodyguard, “Cut a blank check for Xenodice—item, shoes.”

“Yes, sir,” the bodyguard says.

“What else?” Daddy says.

This will be a tough one. “Acalles doesn’t want you to bring Heracles in.”

“What?” Icarus says too loudly, and I glare at him.

Daddy takes a sip of his martini. “Did she say why?”

“She says she’s afraid of him.”

Daddy makes a dismissive sound. “Afraid? What’s that about? That boy wouldn’t hurt a fly . . .”

I decide not to bring up that the reason Heracles had to do his labors was because he murdered his wife. Or that he nearly killed his best friend the last time he was here. The gods have forgiven him, so it’s not polite to mention it. It does seem pertinent to this question, but Daddy wouldn’t appreciate me saying it. He always says that if the gods have forgiven someone, it isn’t our position to judge.

“She seemed very serious,” I say, looking at Icarus this time. “She wants a different plotline.”

“I’ve already storyboarded—” Icarus starts, but I interrupt him.

“She’s scared, Icarus. Acalles is scared.”

I let that sink in. Acalles isn’t scared of anything.

“Can’t you think of something else?” I say.

“What do you say, kid?” Daddy asks Icarus. “If we’re taking out Heracles, I need something even better.”

“Please,” I mouth at Icarus.

“Okay, okay,” Icarus says, the wheels turning. “I’ll come up with something blockbuster.”

“It had better be,” Daddy says. “Now, get out of here, kids, my food is getting cold.”

Icarus puts an arm around me as we walk to the door, giving me a squeeze. “Gods, it’s good to see you,” he says.

“How were your meetings—” I start to ask, but he interrupts me.

“Not now, Ariadne.”

The bodyguard opens the door for us. “Five minutes,” he says to someone standing in the hallway.

When the bodyguard closes the door behind us, I see who he was talking to. It’s the boy from the VIP box, standing right there, leaning against the wall.

His stance is casual, like he isn’t getting ready to go talk to the most powerful man in Crete. The most powerful man in the known world, actually. He isn’t as relaxed as he seems, though, because I can see a tightness to his face. A nervousness.

Who is this kid? Why is he waiting to see Daddy?

Then he sees me, and everything in his face changes. It’s like the sun comes out.

He takes two steps forward.

“Well, hello,” he says, holding his hand out to me.

I let him shake my hand. His hand is much larger than mine, and the calluses brush lightly against my palm. It doesn’t feel like any other handshake I’ve ever had before. There is nothing businesslike or impersonal about his hand on mine.

“Ariadne,” he says, not letting go of my hand. “I’m so glad to see you in person. You’re my favorite Paradox.”

The hair stands up on my arms. “I’m not a Paradox.”

I pull my hand back from his.

“Yes, you are,” the boy says, looking at me with undisguised interest. “You most definitely are . . .”

“No,” I say, shaking my head and fighting disappointment. “I’m not on *The Cretan Paradoxes*. You have me confused with my sisters.”

“I promise that I don’t. You’re there; you have to know where to look—in the background. You’re the one to watch. Not Acalle and Xenodice.”

One of my sisters’ favorite things to do is to try to trick me into appearing on *The Cretan Paradoxes*. They attempt, so far without success, to draw me into their plotlines. I’ve never had a full appearance on their show, but it’s true that I’m sometimes seen walking through a room or slamming my door or flipping off the cameras.

“Whatever,” I say, attempting a withering look. It is compromised by the fact that I’m blushing the color of a pomegranate.

The dining room door opens, and the bodyguard says, “He’s ready to see you now.”

“I’ll find you later,” the boy says, then goes into the dining room.

I don’t answer, my mouth dry.

“Well, well, well,” Icarus says once we are in the elevator.

“What?” I say, daring a look at him in the mirrored wall.

He’s smirking. “Aren’t you going to ask me who that was?”

“Why?” I say. “You’re going to tell me anyway.”

“That, my dear, was the prince of Athens.”

I laugh. “That’s impossible. The prince of Athens is my second cousin and he’s about five years old.”

“Not that one,” Icarus says. “This is the new prince of Athens, Theseus.”

“The new prince of Athens?” I say. “Did he spring out of his father’s head? Rise from the sea?”

“Don’t you watch anything?” Icarus says, disgusted. “It’s everywhere on the gossip feeds.”

I roll my eyes. He knows I hate that stuff. It’s bad enough living in the middle of a gossip feed; I don’t want to watch them, too.

“Apparently he was the product of some fling that the king had years ago,” Icarus says. “The king has made him the prince. The queen is pissed.”

“I bet she is.” The queen of Athens is a witch named Medea, my mother’s cousin. “If he’s taking the place of Medea’s kid, I’m surprised he’s still alive. I wonder why he’s seeing Daddy.”

“Probably some diplomatic business,” Icarus says, then leans in close to me. “The real question is how long it’s going to take for him to get into *your* diplomatic business?”

I punch him in the arm. “Shut up. Whatever.”

“I saw how he looked at you, and don’t tell me that you didn’t look right back, because I know you, sister, and you did.”

“Nope, nope, not going to happen,” I say, telling myself the same thing.

“Because you have *so* much else going on right now,” he says.

“I do,” I say.

“Ariadne, video games do not count.”

I don’t dignify that with a response.

When we hit the lobby, Icarus is met by a crowd of production staffers, all demanding his attention, and I leave him to his work. He’ll be busy for hours.

Not me. I don’t have anywhere to be until lunchtime tomorrow. Unless I’m needed in the maze.

I make it back to my room and eat the dinner that is waiting for me on a tray. Then I change into my favorite pajamas, flannel ones with cherries on them, my ball of silver thread in the hip pocket.

I prop myself up on the idiotic throw pillows my mother insists on installing on my bed, then put on my VR headset. Finally. Now I can get back to playing *First Blood*.

I’m hoping the game will make me not think about that boy. Theseus. The gods-be-cursed prince of Athens. The first boy who has ever looked at me with interest would turn out to be from our greatest enemy. There is not one thing in my life that can be easy.

The techno music from the party my mother and sisters are throwing for our guests and the media is loud enough that I can hear it over the game’s audio, even with my headset on. I turn up the volume. I need to concentrate. The next boss is a pain.

A text bubble crosses my line of vision. It’s Icarus, sending a

screenshot from his live feed of the party. He's set up a secure channel between our phones so he can share the things that no one else in the world will ever get to see.

This is one of those.

It's a picture of Xenodice dancing on a tabletop, but it's an outtake, not one he'll send to the magazines, because her eyes are half-closed and she looks weird. Also, one of her boobs has fallen out of the side of her shirt. I pause my game and reply—*Nothing I haven't seen before.*

I restart the game. I'm playing as Atalanta, and I have to get past Achelous, an old man river god. I've had this game for weeks and still have not been able to get past this one stinking river god. Icarus sends me another picture of Xenodice, still up on the table, but she's dealt with the shirt problem by taking it off. I ignore it.

When you play as Atalanta, you can't defeat Achelous by wrestling him, which is too bad. It stinks to fight a river god with weapons. I pull out my sword. It's worth a try.

More near-pornographic pictures of my sisters cross my view. Icarus thinks they're hilarious. I find them awful and embarrassing, but I seem to be the only one. Icarus will pick the two or three best ones and release those to the media. He'll save the video for the *Paradoxes*. The trick with Acalle and Xenodice is showing enough, without showing too much. They aren't porn stars. Although, based on the look in Xenodice's eyes, there might be a sex tape from tonight. The sex tapes are a whole other business line. They are released separately, through

surrogates who pay millions for them. It's been a few months since one surfaced. She's due.

Do they like it? I wonder.

I would hate it, but I'm not sure about my sisters. I know they love the modeling shoots. Love the clothes. Love the drama. Love the boys. I don't even think they mind the sex tapes, as long as they like who they are with.

My phone rings. Icarus isn't giving up.

"Aren't you at work?" I say, battering Achelous with my sword, beating at his watery form. I fail, epically. He takes my sword from me, then rips my shirt off and carries me underwater. It's the downside of playing as Atalanta. If you're Meleager you get to keep your shirt on when you drown.

"I am at work, at the party. Come down with me," Icarus says in his most charming voice. "It will be fun."

"No, I guarantee you, it won't." What about fire arrows? Will they work on Achelous?

"There's a super-cute boy in a satyr costume. I'll text you his picture."

"Don't," I say, knowing exactly what the guy in the satyr costume will look like. Icarus has one type—ripped and blond, like the barbarian hordes in *Romans v. Germans*.

"The prince of Athens is here, looking hot."

"Perfect," I say. "I'm sure he'll love my flannel pj's."

"He might," Icarus says. "How can you tell if you don't try?"

"I'm not showing Theseus my pajamas," I say, still playing my game.

I can't get my arrows to light because my flint is wet. Acheulous grabs me. This time he rips my pants off, too.

"Crap," I say.

"Ariadne, are you in VR? Pause it and listen to me. Or I won't be your best friend anymore."

I roll my eyes, but I pause the game. "Fine, I'll talk to you, but I'm still not going to your party." Atalanta has been reborn and is standing there, waiting for me to play again.

"I get dumb around cute boys," Icarus says. "I won't be able to introduce myself. I'll look stupid or say the wrong thing."

"Then get Acalle to introduce you."

"Oh Hades no," he says emphatically. "The last time I got Acalle to introduce me to someone, they ended up making out in the banquette right next to me the whole night. Not what I was going for. You can't trust Acalle not to jump on someone."

"If he's gay . . ."

"He might be bi—I didn't send a questionnaire. Besides, Acalle never worries about that particular roadblock. But you . . . You can introduce me to someone and not outshine me."

"Thanks," I say, trying not to let his words sting. I don't want to go to the party. I don't want people looking at me. However, that doesn't mean I want my undesirability announced to me, either.

Icarus knows me too well. His voice is conciliatory. "I didn't mean it bad, Ariadne. Come on, please? This one time?"

I imagine it. Seeing Theseus. Talking with Theseus. Dancing with Theseus. Being normal. That's not my life.

Achelous is shaking his fist at me from the river. There has to be some way I can beat him.

“I have to go now, Icarus. You’re on your own with the satyr. You’ll figure it out. You always do.” I hang up the phone and go back to my game.

I finally manage to defeat Achelous using a weighted net, which seems like it goes against all physical laws, but okay. Then I defeat a bunch of mini-bosses and finally, I’m standing there with the rest of the heroes, facing the Caledonian Boar in an open clearing in the middle of a forest. The boar is huge, with bristling red fur and tusks longer than my arm. Its deep-set eyes are dark red, like dried blood.

An idiot NPC runs forward, only to be gored by those tusks and tossed into the nearest tree, where he hangs grotesquely. The spear is heavy in my hand, even though it’s only pixels. I can do this. Atalanta *will* draw first blood. I throw my spear and it hits the boar’s shoulder, bringing it to the ground. A rush of triumph fills me. I did it.

I am the hero.

Then the boar cries out in rage and confusion, an animal in pain, before it is surrounded and chopped to pieces by my fellow heroes. I hate myself a little, and the game makers, and the gods. Here was this miraculous creature, giant, chthonic, and I’ve thrown my sharpened stick at it, bringing it down. Pixels, I know. Still.

My phone rings again. It’s Daddy. I take off the headset and answer.

“Hi, Daddy,” I say.

The party is still bumping downstairs, but that isn’t the reason why when I put my feet on the floor, it rumbles beneath me. Far down, in the maze under the city, the Minotaur is making an earthquake.

“I need your help,” Daddy says.

“Sure,” I say, standing up, pushing away my tiredness, thinking of everything I need to bring with me.

“I’m so sorry to ask you to do this, sweetheart,” Daddy says. “The fourth time this month, too.”

Fifth, I think, but don’t say. What would be the point of saying? Daddy doesn’t make the earthquakes. It isn’t his fault.

So I say, “No, no, it’s fine.” I hang up the phone. I put on my rainboots. I say a quick prayer.

Then I leave my room, headed to the maze.

A decorative floral ornament with a central diamond shape, featuring symmetrical scrollwork and leaf-like patterns in a light gray color.

THREE

WHEN I GET IN THE HALLWAY, I HEAR ACALLE AND Xenodice before I see them. They are each being supported by a different guy, trailed by a crowd of burly guys with shoulder-mounted cameras, lights, and boom mics. My sisters stumble, giggling, when the floor shakes.

Xenodice did, at some point, put her shirt back on. However, given the way she is hanging all over the dude who is holding her up, I have to guess it won't be on for long.

I stuff my hands in my pockets. I would go back in my room, but it's not worth it. It's unlikely that they will even notice me anyway.

Acalle stops, letting Xenodice and the camera crew go on down the hallway past her.

“Ariadne,” she drawls, stepping away from the guy. The floor rumbles slightly, and it is too much for Acalle’s balance. She tips toward me and I grab her to keep her from falling on the floor.

“Hey,” she says, her words slurred. “You did me a solid today, with Daddy. Icarus told me they changed my storyline. I’m getting a competitor.”

I realize the guy she’s with is Vortigern, the competitor who looks like a Visigoth.

“No problem,” I say. I hate seeing her like this, but I don’t have a leg to stand on when it comes to judging people for what they do.

“Ariadne . . . ,” she says, like she’s going to ask me something.

“I have to go,” I say, passing her back to Vortigern, who takes her on down the long private family hallway toward her suite, and I turn away.

My boots sink into the thick pile carpeting as I walk by the doorways—my parents’; the fifty guest rooms, because sometimes people need to host a party with fifty close friends and family members who are too important to stay in the high-rise hotel Daddy built a few years ago.

Along the walls, giant pictures of my family hang in gilded frames. Acalle and Xenodice on horseback when they used to compete in dressage. Pictures of them skiing. Before they were the Paradoxes. Before they were famous. My brother who is dead, the one we went to war with the Athenians over. Even me in a pink dress, identical to the ones my older sisters are wearing.

It's another life.

There is one picture missing from the walls. My younger brother, Asterion, who no one ever talks about.

I pass a few of the uniformed workers, but they turn their faces to the wall. They aren't allowed to put their eyes on us. No matter what happens. The security cameras are watching, but they don't bother me much. If there's one thing you get used to in Crete, it's cameras.

I arrive at the elevator at the end of the long hallway. This elevator doesn't have openings on most floors of the palace—only this floor, the lobby, and the maze. This is the family entrance to the maze, although I'm the only one who uses it. The elevator doors are white and gilded, like the others, but this one requires a retinal scan.

The elevator car is the last taste of the palace before I drop into the other world of the maze. When I first started taking this elevator, I was eye level with the golden buttons on the white leather-upholstered walls. Now my head nearly touches the dangling pendants of the crystal chandelier. I always wonder why Daedalus continued the decorative theme of the family hall into this elevator. Did he think my parents would take this ride into the maze? That my mother would visit the Minotaur?

Laughable. My mother never mentions the Minotaur. I wonder if she even remembers his connection to her.

After a long, silent drop, the elevator glides open and I step into the maze. It's dim and damp, like a cave, and the poured

concrete wall is cool as I run my fingers along it. On the walls, mounted cameras record my every move.

Daedalus could have designed anything he wanted. He could have put in rubber floors or glass rooms or hung marble on the walls. He could have made it look ancient, with stone walls and grottoes, like catacombs.

He chose concrete. The brutalist maze.

He says it made it easy to design the obstacles. Easy to expand. It also hoses off for cleaning.

Here I'm in the safe part of the maze, where the cleaning staff sweep and handymen tackle their punch lists. This part of the maze is where the competitors are housed during *The Labyrinth Contest*. Where there is a heavy metal door that leads to a loading dock where I bring the cows for the Minotaur to eat on Sundays.

From here, though, it's only a few steps to the dangerous part of the maze, the winding, twisting prison where Crete keeps its monster. The Minotaur.

The maze is enormous, at least fifty acres, underground, spreading under the palace, under Temple Row, under the stadium. During *The Labyrinth Contest*, the competitors will enter through the large and fabulously decorated gate in the stadium, but that's not necessary for the things I do in a normal week. My entrance is an unadorned titanium door with a retinal scanner beside it.

I endure the scan. I know what's coming for me once the door

opens, but there are some things you can't prepare for, no matter how many times you face them. I hold my breath against the smell as the door slides open.

I have exactly five seconds to go through before the alarms start going off. Nobody wants to take any chances on the Minotaur breaking out. Once I step through, the door slides closed behind me, and I am plunged into darkness. Water drips. The floor vibrates under my feet. I feel, more than hear, the rumbling growl rising from deep in the maze.

He's out there, somewhere, raging. On a normal day, he would run the maze, making the obstacles look easy. Not now. He's not playing. He's destroying.

I take the ball of silver thread out of my pocket. I'm the only person who has one. It lets me navigate the maze. After Daddy told me about the gods' plan for me, Daedalus gave me the thread, cool and metallic.

Daedalus doesn't go into the maze with the Minotaur. If he needs to fix an obstacle or make repairs or expand anything, he manages it from the control panel upstairs. He isolates the portion that needs work using retractable titanium-alloy doors that descend from the ceiling. But I'm the only person who ever goes *into* the maze. The only person the Minotaur won't attack.

It's why the gods chose me to be the Keeper of the Maze.

I attach the thread to the hook in the wall, the one that tells the maze it's me. It turns off the obstacles. The greenish-yellow track lighting along the floor turns on with a hum, and I make my way down. The concrete under my feet is textured slightly,

so it isn't too slick. Cow bones cluster in the corners, like rocks that gather in the bends of a river. I make my pattern, a right and two lefts, a right and two lefts, while my thread spools out behind me, a sparkling tether to the world above.

The cameras record my picture. Even here, the cameras are on me.

As I walk, I sing. So he will know it is me.

The smell of a slaughterhouse surrounds me; the hundreds of gallons of water that Daedalus runs through the maze can't completely obliterate the smell. The Minotaur is roaring, wailing, bellowing with the call of a maddened bull; the walls shudder with his rage.

When I get near the last turn, I rest my hand against the coolness of the concrete, letting it steady me, as I prepare for what I'm going to see. It trembles under my hand.

I can already tell it's going to be bad. But there's nothing else for me to do. I hang my ball of thread from the final hook and move out of the dimness of the corridor and into the bright light of the room at the center of the maze, where the cameras don't go.

It is only now that I can say his name. My voice is barely audible under his roaring, but shouting would only make him worse. I do what I've always done, calling to him like I always have, bringing him back from the edge. I close my eyes, preparing myself for what I'll see in his room.

Preparing myself to help my brother.

"Asterion, Asterion," I say, walking forward.