

# ONE

For as long as I can remember, there has been a Labyrinth beneath the palace and, within the Labyrinth, a monster.

There are monsters outside the Labyrinth, too, but they're better at concealing their true nature. They don't *look* like monsters. The monster inside the maze has no such luxury.

He stomps toward me, out of the gloom, into the light that pours in from the corridor at my back. His body is that of a man—musclebound and massive, dressed in obsidian armor, studded with luminescent biotech and edged in silver filigree—but his head and cloven hooves are those of a black bull.

When he catches my scent, his nostrils flare, silver ring glinting in his nose. At his side, his fists clench and unclench. His eyes are brilliant blue; like our star, like the sea, like mine.

My half-brother, Astarion—the Minotaur—reaches a hand toward me.

I reach back and our palms are separated only by the clear plex door that keeps me out—and him in.

“How are you?” I ask.

Astarion opens his bovine mouth, lined with shark's teeth, and howls with the sound of a thousand wounded animals. He smashes his fists into the door as hard as he can—over and over and over—though even he doesn't have the strength to rattle it, much less break it.

“Yeah.” My hand falls away. I lean back against the plex and slide down to sit on the hard stone floor. “Same.”



THE WATER ON CRETE IS cold, but the people are colder. Roiling gray clouds blanket our sky at all times, and when it rains, fat, wet drops the size of grapes batter the walls of the palace. When it's not actively wet, it's damp, and the only time it *isn't* damp is when everything is frozen solid.

As one might imagine, it's a *thoroughly* delightful place to grow up.

A bitter chill hangs about the air today—which is nothing to com home about most of the time, as it's always bitter and chilly here—but it's not raining and it's not freezing, making it practically balmy and beautiful for mid-spring. If I stare hard enough that my eyes water, I can just barely see the pinpoint of blue light from the sun—Hierápytna—peeking through the clouds overhead.

I'm walking along the beach, alone—save for the three Sisters and pair of guards trailing behind me like a wake of unhappy vultures. They're out of speaking distance, which is preferable to the alternative, but they're still *there*.

Within the confines of the Palace of Knossos, I'm mostly free to go where I want, but it's maddening that I can't go for an unsupervised walk on the beach just *outside*.

After what happened to my older brother, it makes sense that my father, King-Emperor Minos Tholos, would worry about the safety of his two remaining children. Though, in my case, he's not worried about me as his child so much as he's worried about me as his *heir*.

My escort is huddled behind a rocky outcropping protruding from the dark basalt sea-cliffs upon which the palace sits, trying unsuccessfully to stay out of the wind.

Despite their long, heavy gowns and thick black coats, the Sisters look frigidly miserable. Their white-and-silver face paint masks their expressions, but since the Sisters are *always* miserable, it's a safe assumption.

Ostensibly, they're here to protect my virtue—though from *what*,

I can't say. Maybe they think a Ketos will rise out of the ocean and carry me off to make me his bride beneath the waves. It's unlikely—but hypothetically, if that were to happen, I don't think there's much they could do about it.

I also don't think I'd complain overmuch about that turn of events. It would certainly be more exciting than the monotonous days spent affecting quiet piety and feigning interest in the “art” of conquering an asteroid colony.

The irony of learning to rule an empire while being simultaneously smothered to death by rules meant to curtail the freedom of said empire's women is *not* lost on me, but pointing this out just makes people angry.

The guards' upper lips are frozen stiff, but anyone can see how bored they are.

Which—fair enough!

I can't even begin to count how many times I've forced them to take this same walk with me. All of us are over it, but they're definitely more over it than I am.

Large, dark-gray seagulls wheel overhead, crying out as they search the sea below for fish. I wish them luck; our sea grows emptier and emptier by the day—not that anyone will actually say it in so many words. But the anemic fishery yields don't lie—and neither do the increasingly desperate prayers to the Moirai, if one knows how to listen.

On Crete, you have to learn to read between the lines—it's that or remain oblivious to what people are actually saying.

Despite the chill—and the foreboding sky *and* my miserable retinue—this is my favorite place in the whole, wide world.

Well.

Okay.

My whole, wide world consists of: the Palace of Knossos, the Isle of Knossos, and the Acropolis at our capital city, Heraklion, across the narrow inlet. So, it's not like I have a lot of options.

But here, the air smells of salt and ozone, unspoiled by the metallic tang that wafts off the space dock on the other side of the island. There are no parents to storm into the room, to berate me for *insert-flaw-of-the-week-here*. There's no younger sister skipping about, free

to enjoy her life, because the task of learning to rule has fallen to me instead.

Out here, there's no oppressive silence; the sky is filled with the song of the sea breeze, the gulls, and the crash of the churning waves.

The wind tugs valiantly at the hem of my indigo brocade gown, but the fabric is stiff and heavy—double lined against the chill—with my thick, wool coat atop it. Much to the relief of the Sisters, none of my clothing is going anywhere anytime soon.

I'm considering whether to take a seat on a nearby boulder—there's a book I've been meaning to finish on the tablet in my coat pocket—when the com band around my wrist chimes and my entire body tenses.

I tap the screen, bringing up the little holographic display and the message, blinking urgently at me.

It's the King-Emperor's personal secretary, summoning me for a meeting with my father.

Perfect. Wonderful. Exactly what I needed today.



THE WOODEN DOOR TO MY father's office is ancient, and sturdy enough to stand the test of time. It's carved with the crest of House Tholos—a bull's head with Labrys axes crossed above it—and has old-fashioned hinges, so it swings open rather than being pulled into the wall by hydraulic pistons.

All the doors within the upper levels are like this.

The Palace of Knossos is a relic out of time, built nearly two thousand cycles ago, long before humans ever took to the skies, and while the service areas have been thoroughly renovated over the centuries, all updates to the upper levels have been disguised in order to maintain the “decaying ruin” aesthetic—sorry, I mean the “authenticity”—of this living mausoleum for the Crete that once was.

The entire building is sepulchral—dark despite the regularly spaced glow lamps along the walls and chandeliers suspended from the ceiling high above.

It's not the lamps' fault; they're doing their best, but this place is designed to eat light.

Since its inception, the Cretan Empire has been ruled by a series of powerful dynastic families—each inheriting the throne by means of deposing and executing their predecessors. House Tholos has reigned since my great-great grandfather, Dorus Tholos, ousted the last queen of House Aptera a hundred and forty-nine cycles ago.

The overbearing menace of the architecture is just a reflection of that lust for conquest and domination.

Foreboding and gloomy as the palace was from the outset, in the twenty cycles since the decline began, the oppressive atmosphere—like everything else within the bounds of the empire—has only gotten worse.

Or so they say.

I can't say for certain, because things have been bad since I was an infant and I have no memory of what it was like before.

But Daedalus has told me stories.

He's told me lots of things, actually, most of which I'm *definitely* not supposed to know. Lucky for both of us, I'm excellent at keeping secrets—and even better at pretending to have none in the first place.

I'm a few minutes early for my meeting, but I know better than to knock when this door is closed. Minos will open it when he's ready to see me.

There are muffled voices coming from inside. Though I can't make out his words, I recognize my father by the deep bass rumble and clipped cadence. The other voice is quieter and less aggressive, and it takes me a second to realize that—as if summoned by my thoughts—it's Daedalus.

I glance about. There are guards posted out of earshot, at either end of the corridor, but they're facing away from me and the hall is otherwise unoccupied. I tiptoe carefully forward and press my ear against the door.

Eavesdropping on my father's private conversation is a *spectacularly* terrible idea, but that's never stopped me before. I can rattle off the name, model, and commander of every warship in the ludicrously massive Cretan Armada from memory, but no one has ever accused me of having much common sense. In fact, I've been harshly disciplined on many occasions for recklessness.

But what point is there to living in a moldering old ruin full of secrets if you don't learn as many of them as you can?

"He's getting worse, isn't he?" says my father.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Daedalus replies. "Even at a higher dose, the palliatives are wearing off faster and his thirst for blood increases by the day. I'm worried twelve sacrifices might not be enough to satisfy him for another cycle. And if his hunger grows too powerful . . ."

"Yes, yes; he'll break free and kill us all," my father replies dismissively.

"Perhaps it's time to discuss putting him down—"

A heavy *thud* from behind the door makes me jump.

"Watch yourself, Daedalus. If I didn't know better, I might think you were blaspheming," Minos says, voice colder than permafrost. "If we need more sacrifices, then we will demand more. Fourteen should suffice, don't you think?"

"But the ceremony is only two weeks away and King-Emperor Aegeus is sure to object—"

"That's his prerogative," my father scoffs, "but he'll comply nonetheless. Aegeus is obstinate, but he's no fool; he understands that a handful of his soldiers is a small price to prevent a war between us. I'm certain that you will convey this message appropriately and that the Athenians will fall in line."

He says "war," but what he means is annihilation.

Even now, some fourteen cycles later, I recall the first time I was allowed to ride along with him and my brother Androgeus on an inspection of an orbital construction station. I gagged when we stepped out of the shuttle—not even the air scrubbers could filter out the stench of hot iron, and it burned so powerfully in the back of my nose that I could taste it.

Neither my brother nor my father noticed. They were too busy staring through a massive plex viewport, marveling over the half-constructed dreadnought. With its naked struts, it resembled the rotting carcass of a gargantuan monster.

My father looked at that starship with far more affection than he'd ever shown me, and I never again saw him so happy as he was when the foreman told him that there would be two more just like it by the end of the next cycle. And another two the cycle after that.

Dreadnoughts are too large and unwieldy for fast-paced space combat. They have one use, and one use only. They're world-killers. And Crete has sixteen of them.

If Minos put his mind to it, he could reduce the Athenian Empire to rubble in less than a cycle. The only thing stopping him from doing so is that such an attack runs the risk of retaliation from their allies—and while none of them could challenge us on their own, put together they've got enough firepower to give him pause at the very least.

Still, the threat remains, and as such, he could probably bully their king into dancing naked in the streets of Lycabettus, if he so desired.

"Very well, Your Majesty," Daedalus replies with grim resignation.

"You're dismissed," my father says. "If you see Ariadne, send her in."

"Of course, Your Majesty."

The sound of footsteps approaches the door, and I scamper back to the opposite side of the hallway, affecting my best "I have no thoughts and my head is empty" expression. It won't fool Daedalus, but since my father already thinks I'm an idiot, it'll work well enough on him.

Seconds later, the door swings open, and Daedalus steps through. His expression of abject misery turns the ever-present crease between his brows into a deep chasm.

He's in his late sixties with thinning gray hair, a short, wiry beard, sharp brown eyes, and the stooped posture of someone who has spent his entire life hunching over his work.

"Your Highness." He bows when he notices me. "Your father will see you now."

"Thank you," I reply with practiced indifference; there's nothing else worth saying within earshot of my father.

He executes an appropriately subservient bow, then departs without another word, leaving me to steel my nerves, gird my loins, and enter the office.

Unlike the dim corridor behind me, the study blazes with light, and it takes a few seconds for my eyes to adjust.

My father stands on the far side of the room, hands clasped behind his back, facing a massive wall of holoscreens that scroll endlessly with

incoming communiqués from the armada and production reports from the new shipyards in the Lasithi System.

Just going by the numbers, the ceaseless construction of new ships still proceeds apace. Every resource necessary for the sustained existence of human life might be dwindling, but the resources necessary for building weapons of war continue to flow like water from both the colonies and Crete itself.

The people of Crete call Minos the Bull King, after our crest, but the name is more fitting than most of them realize.

Power radiates from him in waves. In my mind's eye, I picture him as an *actual* bull: hooves pawing at the ground, head down, horns pointed toward my chest. That I'm his daughter and his heir does nothing to make me feel safer in his presence.

Though my father and Daedalus are nearly the same age, you couldn't tell by looking at them. Minos's broad shoulders—emphasized by the silver epaulets on his heavy woolen jacket—might as well belong to a strapping young soldier. He's tall with coal-black hair, shot through with only a smattering of gray, and what lines mark his face make him look intimidating rather than aged.

He makes no move to acknowledge my presence, but I curtsy nonetheless. "You asked to see me?"

"You're late," he replies by way of greeting.

I'm not, but that doesn't matter.

"My deepest apologies."

At last, Minos turns to fix his cold, gray gaze on my face. Hair and stubborn brows aside, we look nothing alike. I take after my mother, Queen Pasiphaë Atabyrius—with her honey-gold skin, voluptuous figure, and startlingly blue eyes she passed on to all her children—including the one in the basement, of whom we do not speak.

"Your tutors tell me your studies are progressing well."

In my adolescence, I took the sort of lessons deemed appropriate for a girl of my station—etiquette, diplomacy, formal dance, and classical art—all of which were halted in favor of other, more "serious" studies after Androgeus died. Since then, a small army of tutors have been teaching me Cretan history, economics, command protocol, diplomacy, military strategy, *and* statecraft—meaning I have to juggle all of that,



along with the theology lessons the Sisters have subjected me to since I was five.

The greater portion of these lessons revolve around the who, what, where, when, why, and how of the sacrifices that the Moirai supposedly require of us.

In preparation for my eventual ascension to Archon of the Order, it's their holy obligation to drill their particular exegesis of the doctrine into my head if it's the last thing they do. Given how decrepit the three of them are, it might just be. Though, the effort they're expending to teach me has less to do with my inability to internalize it and more with my inability to care.

In general, I *love* learning and I'm a quick study, but I've struggled with the latest additions to my curriculum from the start. It's not that I find the subject matter challenging—quite the opposite. But therein lies the problem. Each time a new piece of the puzzle clicks into place—each time my understanding of the horrifying calculus of Necropolitics advances—I grow more fearful that I'm slowly losing myself to the cold logic that sees atrocities as nothing more than numbers on a holoscreen.

This preoccupation has taken its toll. I can't concentrate like I used to, and I've discovered that there's a limit to how much information I can cram into my head before it runs out of space and begins pouring out my ears.

As such, my progress through my father's curriculum has actually slowed, so this revelation comes as a surprise.

"I'm glad they think so," I say, wary of sounding overconfident; my father loves to twist my words back around on me.

"They do," Minos says. "They also mentioned that you've finally accepted the command tactics lessons without complaint."

I grit my teeth behind closed lips and say nothing.

"Given this development, it's time for you to take a more active role in governing the empire," he says with the same casual disinterest with which he'd spoken to Daedalus. "To that end, you will preside over this cycle's Labyrinth Ceremony. You will see to the care of the Athenians while they are guests in our home, and on the day of the ceremony, you will send them into the Labyrinth to meet their fate."

My stomach plunges into the abyssal cavern below our feet. Wind rushes in my ears and bile rises in my throat.

It was a foregone conclusion that, one day, Minos would command me to join the family tradition of slaughter, but now that “one day” is only two weeks away, this might as well be the first time I’m hearing about it.

A welter of rage the likes of which I’ve never known eats through my self-control like acid, and the words escape before I can stop them.

“I refuse.”

Minos’s expression darkens, the smooth facade of the King-Emperor of Crete melting into that of my displeased father.

“Despite your progress, you’re still soft.” His lip curls. “This will help cure you of that. It’s for your own good, Ariadne.”

“How is becoming a murderer good for *anyone*?” I fire back.

“Silence!” Minos roars, and I flinch involuntarily. “This is *exactly* the sort of foolish sentimentality I’m talking about! If I’m to leave my empire in your hands, then I must know that you have what it takes to protect it—from the wrath of the Moirai, from traitors amongst our subjects, and from our enemies, who would see us resume their heretical worship of the False Gods once more.” He looms over me with a face like thunder, and my mouth goes dry as the distant salt plains on Polyrrinia.

“But—”

“By the stars, Ariadne!” Minos snaps, cutting me off. “Perhaps I’ve been too patient—too *gentle* even—with you, because I know ruthlessness isn’t in your nature. But that ends now.”

He has been neither of those things to me—nor anyone else, for that matter. He wouldn’t know patience or gentleness if they stabbed him patiently and gently in the chest.

“How exactly do you plan to rule *anything* if you’re unwilling to spill a little blood?” He leans farther into my space, forcing me to lean back in turn. “Do you think people respect rulers they do not fear? The fate of the empire is in the hands of the Moirai; do you think they’ll be kind to a ruler who refuses to give them their due?”

I honestly can’t tell if my father actually believes human sacrifice

will convince the Three-fold Goddesses to save us from the desolation creeping slowly across the empire. But that doesn't matter. Not when the Sisters continually insist that the Moirai demand blood, granting Minos an excuse to murder his enemies with impunity.

Reason tells me to hold my tongue, but I'm moving further from reason by the second. Minos is asking me to send innocent people to the slaughter so Astarion can kill them while we all pretend this is Good and Holy.

Panic closes a fist around my heart and squeezes. In my state of distress, the words I've been shoving down for the last six cycles slip their restraints and spew forth from my lips, with such force that I'm almost surprised they don't break my teeth on the way out.

"This isn't about protecting *anything*! It's about revenge, and we both know it!"

"You tread *dangerously* close to heresy." The words glint like the sharp edge of a blade.

I narrow my eyes. "If you're doing such an outstanding job of appeasing the Moirai, then why did they let the Athenians assassinate Androgeus?"

One doesn't invoke my late brother's name lightly. But his death is at the heart of this; there's no way to talk about it without talking about him.

Seven cycles ago, my father sent Androgeus to their capital planet, Attica, to restart stalled trade negotiations between our empires. But there was a faction of the Athenian court that was no longer interested in talking, so they decided to settle the matter in blood.

It *was* settled in blood, in the end, but not the way they hoped. Minos turned a quarter of the Athenian Fleet to space dust within two months. A month after that, he had full control of trade rights with Athens and its colonies—and a treaty, signed by King-Emperor Aegeus, promising a cease-fire in exchange for his promise to send a group of young soldiers, once per cycle, as sacrifices to the Moirai. And even if by "sacrifices to the Moirai," he really meant "food for the monster that lives in the Labyrinth in our basement," there's nothing anyone can do about it.

Androgeus had the proper temperament and disposition to rule in

the same way as our father. Everyone in House Tholos—everyone in the galaxy—would have been better off if he hadn't died.

But he did. So here we are.

Minos's open hand connects with my cheek with a vicious *crack*, so hard that my head rings like a bell and stars erupt in my vision. I stumble backward, the force of the blow nearly knocking me off my feet. The skin where his palm struck me burns as though he branded me.

I'm no stranger to pain—it is, at times, my most faithful ally—and it's enough to bring my forbearance back online. My eyes water, but I hold back the tears; it'll be a sunny day on Crete before I let Minos see me cry.

“You forget your place, *Crown Princess*. Until the day I die, your life is *mine*, and your disobedience is tantamount to treachery. From this moment on, I will treat it as such.” He's drawn tight as a bowstring by his anger; a vein in his temple throbs with every beat of his heart. “The Moirai took Androgeus and left me with you as a reminder of what happens when we fail to venerate them. I will *not* give them a reason to forsake me again.”

My father's eyes pin me to the spot like stakes driven through my feet into the marble floor.

“You will oversee the sacrifices or I'll withhold the palliatives from the beast you love so dearly, and you can watch him suffer. Of course, without them, he will need more sacrifices to subdue his rage, so next cycle I'll send in twice as many, and after they've all died, I'll send in one more and we'll see how the Moirai like the taste of royal blood.”

The air goes out of the room. My status as heir affords me a small amount of protection. Murdering me out of hand would raise questions in the wider galaxy about how valuable his *first* heir actually was to him.

But if I defy him—defy the *Moirai*—and make myself a heretic, I'll lose the protection of my station. Heresy is the highest crime in the empire, save treason, and no one would bat an eyelash if he executed me for *that*. He's finally found the loophole he's been searching for.

And with a younger sister waiting in the wings to take my place should I die, I know better than to take this as an idle threat.

I am not irreplaceable.