

The Immortal Fire (Cronus Chronicles #3)

Chapter One

Holes



A few days later, half a world away, one ordinary eighth-grade girl was lying on the couch in her den, stroking her cat and feeling sick. There was nothing too extraordinary about this situation; this girl stayed home from school, and if you looked at her you would not be surprised. For Charlotte Mielswetzski (you know how to pronounce that by now, right? Mealswetski?) was covered in gross yellow bruises and small cuts and wore her wrist in a splint and generally looked as if she had had an unfortunate encounter with a very large falling piano.

But Charlotte's sick feeling had nothing to do with her injuries, at least at the moment. It was caused instead by the most extraordinary images on the television screen in front of her.

Her mother entered the room and looked from her daughter to the television. She watched silently for a few moments, and then shook her head.

"Have they figured out what caused it yet?" she asked Charlotte in a grave voice.

"Uh-uh," Charlotte muttered. On the screen in front of her, helicopters circled around the all-too-familiar wine-dark waves. Water swirled angrily around the great hole that had appeared suddenly in the middle, as if someone had carved out a piece of the sea. The gaping blackness at the center looked like it might suck the world into it at any moment. It was so wrong, it would have made Charlotte ill to look at even if she did not suspect the cause.

"They say all the sea life in a mile radius has just disappeared," Mrs. Mielswetzski said. "Poof! Look!" She pointed at the TV screen. The image had changed to another part of the sea, near the coastline. An entire village worth of people huddled on the beach, staring at the sea in front of them. And it was no wonder why, for the waters in front of them were thick with dolphins. There must have been thousands, leaping frenetically in and out of the waters as if trying to escape. Charlotte's stomach turned, and a low, wary rumble came from her cat Mew.

"You know" -- Mrs. Mielswetzski turned to Charlotte -- "I looked at a map, and I think the...incident...is very close to where our ship was. If we'd been there a little longer..."

Charlotte didn't respond. There was no doubt in her mind that the cavern in the Mediterranean Sea was just where their cruise ship had bobbed helplessly only a few days ago.

"Honestly, Char," her mother continued, "I know it sounds absolutely crazy, but sometimes I wonder if something really...strange is going on. After what happened to us..."

Charlotte eyed her mother. Mr. and Mrs. Mielswetzski had recently had the very strange experience of falling unconscious on a cruise ship off the coast of Virginia and waking up to find themselves on the same ship in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. Everyone seemed to have accepted the cruise officials' completely implausible explanations, because there was no plausible one. Only Charlotte and her cousin Zee knew the truth: The ship had been transported there by Poseidon, who was planning to punish Charlotte by feeding it, along with all its occupants, to a giant Ketos. Her parents, like most of the rest of the world, had no idea that there was any such thing as a Ketos, or that Poseidon and the rest of the Greek gods were anything more than half-forgotten myths.

"I know what you mean," she mumbled. Something very weird was going on. It wasn't just the half-mile-wide hole that had suddenly appeared in the Mediterranean Sea, or the behavior of the dolphins. Strange reports were coming in from the whole region. A fleet of ships from the Croatian navy had disappeared. Sharks off the coast of Rome had gone psycho, swimming after fishing boats and patrolling the beaches. A whirlpool had suddenly appeared in a shipping lane. The waters of the Aegean Sea had turned so choppy that no ship could travel on it. A several-mile-long swath in the Mediterranean had turned pitch-black and cold, as if it had simply died.

There was more, too, things that would never make it to the TV news. Someone had started a blog cataloging all the incidents, and Charlotte spent the morning pressing reload on it until she couldn't stand it anymore. There was a tiny deserted island that had somehow become cloaked in eternal night. In Rome a fisherman showed up at a hospital covered in animal bites; he babbled some story about his boat being set upon by a monstrous woman with a pack of dogs for legs. On the small Greek island of Tilos, the mayor's daughter had gone missing, and there were rumors she'd been seen chained to a cliff face above the sea. She wandered back into the town after a day with no memory, but a vague impression of being rescued by a tall, dark-haired man. The captain of a sailboat racing team was found swimming desperately for shore. He said his boat had been wrecked on a small island he'd never seen before. They were very surprised to find a young, beautiful woman living there, a woman whom the man could only describe as bewitching. When asked about his shipmates, he just shook his head and said they had decided to stay. On the isle of Rhodes, a twelve-person caving expedition had disappeared. In Croatia twenty people disappeared from a city street midday. Whoever had taken them had left, in their place, perfect stone statues of each person.

As the scene of the TV shifted to a reporter standing on the beach interviewing people, Charlotte's mother shook her head grimly. "I guess I'd better pick up your cousin. How are you feeling, sweetheart?"

Horrible. Terrified. Furious.

"All right," Charlotte said with a half shrug. Anything more hurt too much.

Her mother frowned at her, her face full of sympathy and concern. As far as she knew, Charlotte had woken up on the cruise ship with the rest of them, with no memory of how she'd suffered her injuries. There was no way for Charlotte to tell her they'd all been inflicted by Poseidon himself.

"Do you need anything?"

"No. Thanks, Mom."

"All right," she said, glancing between Charlotte and the TV. "Listen, don't worry about all of that. I know it's scary. But it will be okay. We're safe." She leaned in to kiss Charlotte gently on the forehead and then left.

On the TV the reporter was interviewing a whitehaired, rough-skinned woman from Cyprus who was babbling excitedly in a foreign language. All around her, fish were flopping on the sand while children scurried to pick them up and throw them back into the water. A voice-over translated the woman's words:

"It's the end of the world."

A terrible shiver passed through Charlotte, and the woman turned to the camera and said something to it, her dark eyes a challenge to everyone who saw her. But whatever she said, they did not translate. The scene cut to the newsroom, where the reporter appeared on a big monitor next to the shiny-haired anchor. "As you can see," the reporter said, "explanations for the mysteries in the Mediterranean are in short supply, but" -- she smirked -- "theories abound. Susan?"

"Fascinating," said the anchor. "What did she say at the end there, when she looked at the camera? Do you have it?"

The reporter looked at her notes. "More superstitions, Susan. 'Find the heir,' she said. 'It's our only hope.'"

"Huh. Another mystery in the Mediterranean!" exclaimed the anchor, as a banner appeared below her, echoing her words. "Thanks, Brittany. Coming up next, who says you can't teach an old dog new tricks?"

Charlotte glared at the TV and changed to another news channel, then lay back on the couch to wait for her cousin.

It was not long before Zee appeared in the family room, looking rather out of breath. He was staying with the Mielswetzskis while his parents were in London on business, and Charlotte was glad, as she didn't think she could endure any of this without him. Carefully shutting the door behind him, he whispered, "Any news?"

Grimly Charlotte filled him in on the day's events, while Zee listened pale-faced. When she was done, he sat down on the couch, looking stunned. They sat for a

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moment, watching the images on the TV. A helicopter had flown into the inside of the immense cavern and shot video; the sea just stopped, like a wall of water.

"I don't get it," he breathed as Mew crawled on his lap.

"I don't either. Maybe Poseidon was trying to destroy the ship by taking the sea out from under it? Anyway" -- she lowered her voice more -- "I guess he has his trident back."

"Brilliant," Zee muttered.

Charlotte grimaced. Zee had never even really seen Poseidon in his full glory. Poseidon had wanted to kill Charlotte before she stole his trident, aided in the destruction of his yacht, humiliated him publicly, and ultimately defeated him with the very timely help of her cousin. He hadn't really seemed like the type to forgive and forget. And now he had his trident back. And Charlotte would have to spend the rest of her life staying away from oceans, seas, lakes, rivers, and possibly even showers or baths. She was going to be very stinky.

"But it's everything. The shipwreck on the island -- that's Circe, right?" In *The Odyssey*, Circe was a sorceress who lured Odysseus's ship to her island and turned all his crew into pigs. She and Odysseus canoodled for about twenty years while the pig-men roamed around and Odysseus's wife waited for him to come home. Men were weird. "Someone was attacked by a woman with a pack of dogs for legs -- that's Scylla. The people turned to stone...there was a Gorgon in the city! In the city! Zee" -- she lowered her voice -- "they're letting themselves be seen."

Charlotte hadn't even realized it until the words were out of her mouth -- but that's what was so wrong about all of this, even more than the great hole in the sea. The gods had retreated because Zeus didn't want to deal with humanity anymore. And they kept it so humanity didn't know they existed. That didn't mean they didn't interfere -- some gods used the mortal realm as their playground, and people as their playthings. The policy seemed to be that they could do whatever they wanted as long as no one noticed them.

Well, people were noticing them now.

The implications didn't escape Zee. "Something's changed," he muttered, almost to himself.

Charlotte looked at her cousin, eyes wide. "What do we do? People are going to get hurt." An image flashed in her mind -- the woman being interviewed on TV while the voice-over proclaimed, "It's the end of the world." She was just a crazy person, though. Wasn't she?

The cousins looked at each other. There was nothing they could do, not by themselves. But they could join the fight. Because Mr. Metos was coming for them.

Mr. Metos had been their English teacher in the fall, but that was just a cover. He was really one of the Prometheans -- a group of descendants of the Titan Prometheus who worked to protect humanity against the gods. The small mischiefs, the under-the-

radar interferences, the stray monsters loose in the mortal realm -- the Prometheans were there, keeping the worlds apart, keeping people safe.

And Charlotte and Zee were going to join them. It was all they'd wanted since they'd come back from the Underworld after seeing the condition of the Dead -- left to fade and suffer because no one tended to them. But there was nothing they could do.

Now Mr. Metos was coming for them. Just after they came back from the sea, they'd gotten a letter from him. I believe that you are in danger, it had said. Since Zee had just been kidnapped by their immortal enemy Philonecron and Charlotte had nearly been killed by Poseidon several times over, this news was not exactly new. But the end of the letter was:

There is something afoot, something that may affect the fate of us all, and I'm afraid you two are involved. My first priority is to keep you safe. I will come for you soon.

Humanity needed protection -- now more than ever -- and the cousins were going to help. They were going to be god-fighters.

Mr. Metos did not say when he was coming -- just soon. The cousins' hearts ached for him to appear, for him to take them, for them to get started. In the meantime, they'd decided they would bone up on their myths so they'd be prepared for whatever awaited them. (It had been Zee's idea; Charlotte was not prone to extra-curricular research.) Zee's backpack was bulging, and he put it down and began to pull out some books.

"I got these all from the library. There were a lot, actually. Mr. Peaberry said Mr. Metos had ordered a bunch in the fall."

"Huh," Charlotte said. "I guess he expected us to use them." She watched as Zee's stack of books kept growing. "Wow. Mr. Peaberry must have been impressed."

Zee looked embarrassed. "I told him we were in a mythology club." He glanced at Charlotte, who raised her eyebrows at him. "I froze under pressure. But I'm British; you lot believe we do that kind of thing."

He had a point. "So what did you find? Did you get a chance to look at any of them?"

"Well, there're a few collections of myths. I got some plays, too, though I'm not sure they're really, you know" -- he lowered his voice -- "true. A lot of them are just about mortals, really, with gods pulling the strings in the background, but this one" -- he lifted up a small green volume -- "is about Prometheus."

Charlotte exhaled. Prometheus made humans. When his creations were not faring well in the world of beasts, he appealed to Zeus to give them fire. Zeus refused, because that's just the kind of guy he is, so Prometheus stole the fire that gave humans knowledge of the gods. As punishment, Zeus chained Prometheus to a mountain where an eagle would gnaw on his liver every day. The first time Charlotte had heard that story, she had thought it was particularly disgusting, and she didn't even know it was real.

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"Anything interesting about Zeus?" Like directions to Olympus and ideas for devastating insults?

Zee shrugged. "Not yet. Mostly he likes to change himself into various animals and chase mortal women."

"Charming," said Charlotte. "But probably not helpful."

From downstairs came the sound of the doorbell. Mew looked around, then sprang toward the door of the room, leaping through as Zee opened it.

"Good watch kitty," Charlotte said with a small smile. Mew liked to appraise anyone who came into the house, in case they carried with them ill intent (or maybe cat treats).

"Char," said Zee, sucking in his breath. He was pointing at the TV screen, and, with a feeling of doom, Charlotte turned her head to look.

People running, carrying overstuffed bags, animals, children. A parking lot filled with buses and vans. Dark-haired men in suits, ushering them forward. A coastal town emptying out, its shell awaiting its doom, silent and brave.

Charlotte hit the volume button. In the background a siren blared.

"The tsunami will hit within the hour. The Italian armed services have been hurriedly evacuating the coastal villages since a naval ship called in the warning. Oceanographers are calling the tsunami mysterious; there was no seismic event in the area. For now, the cause will remain unknown. Now the focus is getting these people out of harm's way."

"It's our fault," Charlotte whispered, tears in her eyes. "Somehow. We did this."

Zee did not disagree. They watched in silence, in horror, as the town emptied out and the wave approached.

Suddenly Mrs. Mielswetzski's voice came traveling up the stairs. "Char! Zee!" she called. "Can you come down here?"

"Just a second, Mom," Charlotte said weakly, unable to take her eyes from the TV.

"Somebody's here to see you!"

Charlotte looked at Zee and shrugged. This was not really the time for a visitor, but what could they do? Charlotte wiped her eyes.

But when they got downstairs, everything changed.

There he was, standing in the Mielswetzski living room talking to her parents as if no time had passed. He looked the same, tall and thin, with a gaunt face and messy dark hair and clothes that had seen better days. There was a time, way back before anything had happened, when Mr. Metos had seemed sinister to Charlotte. Now he seemed like the friendliest face she'd ever seen, and the sight of him almost made Charlotte want to hug him.

Almost.

Charlotte's heart threatened to leap right out of her mouth. All the waiting was over. They were going. The world needed them now, and they were going.

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"Look, Charlotte," said Mr. Mielswetzski, "your old English teacher came by!"

"Isn't that nice?" said Mrs. Mielswetzski.

"Very friendly of him, I think," said Mr. Mielswetzski.

"Um," said Charlotte, her voice squeaking slightly. It was important not to show how excited she was. "Hi, Mr. Metos. It's nice to see you."

"Hello, Charlotte, Zachary," said Mr. Metos in his calm, stern voice. His eyes flicked over the cousins, and when they landed on Charlotte, they showed a flash of alarm.

"You've been injured?" he asked, his voice impassive.

"Um, yeah," said Charlotte. "I had an...accident."

She could feel her parents shift behind her. It was hard to concentrate, so loud was her heart.

As for Mr. Metos, he clearly had no idea what had happened to them the week before. It was strange, for once, to have more information than he did. "I see," he said, gazing at Charlotte. "Well, I've just come back into town, and I wanted to return one of your books, Charlotte." He nodded toward a book on his lap that Charlotte had never seen before. "I found it while unpacking some boxes."

Charlotte frowned. "Unpacking?" she repeated. Why would he need to unpack when they were just going again?

"Yes," he said. "I've just taken out a lease on an apartment a few blocks from here."

Charlotte and Zee exchanged a glance. "Are you... staying here?" Charlotte asked in a disbelieving voice.

Mr. Metos knitted his eyebrows. "Why, yes," he said. "I have some...pressing concerns that have brought me back. I should be here for some time."

"Oh," said Charlotte, staring at him. "Because I thought...I thought you would be going away again."

"No," said Mr. Metos, a note of finality in his voice. "No, I'm staying right here with you."