

THE COLOSSUS CRISIS

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extract from prologue

The day the earthquake turned Aura's world upside-down began like any other.

Before breakfast, she took her sponge sack and her knife, left her mother sleeping in the hut, and went diving. She worked alone. Occasionally, she would glimpse other divers from the neighbouring islands through the clear turquoise water, but she never spoke to them and they kept well away from her. This suited Aura just fine. She loved swimming through the colourful sponge beds with shoals of fish tickling her bare legs and the water whispering in her ears. Down here, deep beneath the human world, she could forget she was a half-breed and an outcast – at least until her breath ran out and she had to surface again.

She ignored the first warning tremors that stirred sand from the bottom. Small quakes were not uncommon around the islands, and underwater was the safest place to be when Poseidon shook the earth. Also, she had just spotted an unusual blue sponge tantalizingly out of reach in a crevice.

Aura smiled, thinking of her mother's delight when she brought it back. Then the worst happened. As she worked her knife under her prize, the seabed cracked open like a giant clam, sucked her upside-down in a powerful rush of bubbles and bit closed on her ankle.

The pain was so sharp and unexpected she swallowed water. That had been a big one! Panicking, she twisted her foot until blood swirled, but it was held fast. The sea, that had been calm when she'd dived, was already cloudy with falling debris. Boulders covered in feathery anemones bounced down the underwater cliff around her.

She forced her knife into the crevice and levered with all her strength, trying to free her foot. More blood darkened the water as the rock scraped her ankle raw, but she remained trapped. She gripped the ledge above her head and pulled. Nothing worked. Her lungs were bursting. Being half telchine, the old race from the sea, Aura could hold her breath longer than a human diver. Even so, if she didn't get out of this crevice, she was going to die.

Great Poseidon, she prayed. Help me!

She had grabbed the sponge out of instinct. It glowed with a light of its own and felt unusually warm, but she had no time to wonder at this. As her lungs emptied of air, black holes appeared before her eyes and something very strange happened. Through the holes, she glimpsed... *the roofs of a city... a harbour... tiny people fleeing... buildings collapsing... the ground rushing up to meet her...* As suddenly as it had come the vision faded, and her head filled with rainbows. They were beautiful and painful and like nothing Aura had experienced before.

If she hadn't been so desperate, she might have been more afraid. But she was drowning, so she didn't stop to question why the god had answered her when he never had before. *I'm Aura of Alimia, daughter of Leonidus of Rhodes and Lindia the telchine!* she told him. *I'm trapped underwater. My foot's stuck! Please open the rock so I can go back to my mother. She needs me.*

The rainbows faded. Poseidon didn't speak to her again. He was really angry now, opening canyons in the seabed and spitting dead fish from the guts of the earth.

There was no time left for prayers. If the sea-god wouldn't help her, she would have to help herself. Aura thrust the sponge into her sack and gripped her knife in a determined fist. Her layer of telchine fat was keeping her prisoner. She set the blade above her ankle, gritted her teeth, and carefully sliced the flesh from the bone. There was a moment of blackness, when the knife slipped out of her hand and spiralled into the depths. Then her foot scraped free in a cloud of blood, and she was out of the trap.

Weakly, she kicked for the surface. The bubbles had stopped coming out of her mouth and nose a while ago. She became aware of water in her lungs, heavy and cold. *I should be dead*, she thought. Yet now she'd stopped trying to hold her breath, the pain in her lungs had gone. She swam as if through a dream, kicking with one leg only, her injured foot trailing behind her, while the light grew slowly brighter above.

Her head broke the surface. She gasped air into lungs that were once more on fire, coughed and coughed until she thought she'd be sick. As her heartbeat speeded up to normal, so did the amount of blood flowing from her ankle. The dreamlike feeling vanished.

Waves reared all around her with foaming crests. Beyond them she glimpsed a harbour, its boats smashed against the rocks. The earthquake must have been worse than

she'd thought. This was Khalki, the main island off the coast of Rhodes. She had been carried a long way from where she'd dived. Aura looked anxiously for her home, but couldn't see the smaller island of Alimia past the heaving sea. She was too weak to swim there now, anyway.

Stay away from Khalki! Her mother's warnings echoed in her head. The humans who lived there would make fun of her fat thighs, her webbed feet and scarred fingers. They would call her a sea-demon and hurt her because they wouldn't understand. Yet she had no choice.

If she didn't get help, her mother would die.

The blue sponge turns out to have magical powers... discover what happens when Aura finds herself caught in the middle of an ancient war between humans and the lost race of telchines in "The Colossus Crisis".