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# PSYCHE

Another night, another party I desperately don't want to attend.

I try not to clutch my sickeningly sweet drink as I drift around the room's perimeter. As long as I keep on the move, my mother won't zero in on me. One would think the events of the last few months would be enough to give her ambitions pause, but Demeter is nothing if not driven. She's successfully married off one daughter—yes, she's taking credit for Persephone marrying Hades—and now she's turned her sights on me.

I would rather gnaw off my own leg than marry anyone here. Every single one of them is closely connected to a member of the Thirteen who rule Olympus: Zeus, Poseidon, Demeter, Athena, Ares, Hephaestus, Dionysus, Hermes, Artemis, Apollo, and Aphrodite. The only two missing are Hades and Hera—Hades because he possesses a legacy title and not even Zeus can command his presence at these events, and Hera because our current Zeus is unmarried, which leaves Hera's title empty.

It won't stay empty for long.

For sure a large room, it's remarkably claustrophobic. Not even the giant windows overlooking Olympus can combat the heat from so many bodies. I'm tempted to step outside and freeze for a bit just to get some fresh air, but then I'll be trapped if someone decides to make small talk. At least in the main party, I can keep on the move.

Tonight isn't *officially* a marriage mart, but you can't tell that from the way Aphrodite parades person after person in front of our new Zeus where he lounges in the throne that used to be his father's. It's large and gold and gaudy. It might have suited the father, but it doesn't suit the son in the least. I'm not one to judge, but he lacks the commanding charisma that the last Zeus possessed. If he's not careful, the piranhas of Olympus will eat him alive.

"Zeus," Aphrodite trills. She's been moving back and forth to the throne enough times for me to get a good look at the bright--red dress that hugs her trim figure and contrasts with her pale skin and blond hair. This time, she's towing a young white guy with dark hair behind her. I don't recognize him on sight, which means he's a friend or a distant cousin or has the dubious favor of being one of Aphrodite's pet projects. She beams at Zeus as she cuts through the crowd. "You simply *must* meet Ganymede."

"Psyche."

I nearly jump when my mother appears behind me. It takes all my control to paste a passive smile on my face. "Hello, Mother."

"You're avoiding me."

"Of course not." I most definitely am. "I went to get a drink." I hold up my glass to prove it.

Mother narrows her eyes. Unlike Aphrodite, who seems determined to cling to every last drop of youth she can manage, my mother has allowed herself to age gracefully. She looks like exactly what she is—a white woman in her fifties with dark hair and impeccable style. She clothes herself in power the way some people clothe themselves in jewels. When people look at Demeter, they are instantly at ease because she exudes an aura that promises she'll take care of everything.

It's how she won the title in the first place.

When it came time to craft my own public persona, I looked to her for inspiration even if I took my image in a different direction. Personal experience taught me early that it's better to blend in than to stand up in front of a crowd and make a target of yourself.

"Psyche." Mother takes my arm, angling us toward Zeus's throne. "I am going to introduce you to Zeus."

"I've met him before." Several times in fact. We were introduced ten years ago when Mother took over as Demeter, and we've been attending the same parties ever since. Up until a few months ago, he was still Perseus, heir to the title *Zeus*. Best I can tell, he's nowhere near the predator his late father was, but that doesn't mean he's not a predator at all. He's grown up in the glittering viper's nest that is the upper city. You don't survive this long without being at least a little bit monster.

Mother's hand tightens on my arm and she lowers her voice. "Well, you're going to meet him again. Properly. Tonight." We watch Zeus barely glance at Ganymede. "It doesn't look like he's interested in meeting anyone."

"That's because he hasn't met *you* yet."

I snort. I can't help it. I know my strengths. I am pretty, but I am no traffic--stopping beauty the way my sisters are. My true strength lies in my brain, and I highly doubt Zeus would appreciate *that*.

Not to mention I have no desire to be Hera.

But then, it doesn't matter what *I* want, does it? Mother has plans upon plans, and I'm the best candidate of her remaining single daughters. For all my internal dramatics, I suppose there are worse fates than being one of the Thirteen. As Hera, the only danger I'd truly face is from Zeus. At least *this* Zeus doesn't have a reputation for harming his partners.

I manage a smile as my mother guides me through the crowd toward the gaudy throne and the man occupying it. We're only a few feet behind Aphrodite and Ganymede when Zeus catches sight of us. He doesn't smile, but interest lights his blue eyes and he flicks his fingers at Aphrodite. "That's enough."

A mistake.

Aphrodite turns toward us. Her gaze flicks over me, instantly dismissing me, before turning to my mother. Her rival, though the term is far too mundane for the amount of loathing these two women hold for each other.

"Demeter, darling, I *know* you're not thinking of *this* daughter as a potential marriage candidate." Aphrodite makes a show of looking at my body. "No offense, Psyche, but you're hardly the proper type to become Hera. You just...don't fit in. I'm sure you understand." Her smile goes sugary sweet and does nothing to dampen the poison of her words. "If you'd like, I'm more than happy to send over the health plan I recommend to all marriage hopefuls while I work on their matches."

Wow, she's not even trying to be subtle. Lovely.

I don't have a chance to respond because my mother's grip tightens on my arm and she's turning a brilliant smile at the other woman. "Aphrodite, *darling*, you've been around long enough to learn to take a hint. Zeus dismissed you." She leans forward and lowers her voice. "I know rejection stings, but it's important to keep your chin up. Maybe you can work on another marriage for Ares instead. Lower--hanging fruit and all that."

Considering Ares has to be over eighty and is practically knocking on the doors to the underworld, it's no wonder Aphrodite practically shoots fire out of her eyes at my mother. "Actually—"

"What are we talking about?"

The question comes from a tall, dark--haired white woman as she steps between Aphrodite and Demeter with a confidence only a member of the Kasios family can pull off. Eris Kasios, daughter of the last Zeus, sister of the current one. She weaves a little on her feet as if she's had too much to drink, but the sharp intelligence in her dark eyes is undimmed by alcohol. An act, then.

Both Aphrodite and my mother straighten, and I can see the exact moment they decide it's in their best interest to be polite. Aphrodite smiles. "Eris, you look stunning tonight as always."

She's telling the truth. Eris wears her customary black—a long dress with a deep V in the front that dips nearly to her belly button and a slit up one side that flashes leg with every step she takes. Her dark hair falls around her in waves that seem effortless, which is just an indication of how much time she put into them.

Eris grins at her, a slice of crimson lips curving in a way that has the small hairs rising on the back of my neck. "Aphrodite. A pleasure as always." She turns toward me, and her glass tips, sending green liquid that smells like black licorice to splatter both Aphrodite's red gown and my mother's green one. Both women let loose little shrieks and jump back.

"Oops." Eris presses a hand to her chest, her expression perfectly sincere. "My gods, I'm so sorry. I must have drank too much." She weaves a little on her feet, and my mother jumps forward to grab her elbow, nearly running into Aphrodite attempting to do the same.

No one wants Zeus's sister to collapse in the middle of a party and make a scene, potentially embarrassing him and putting an end to the night's festivities.

They're so busy ensuring she stays on her feet that neither of them notice her look at me and...wink. When I stare, Eris jerks her chin in a clear command to make an escape while I can.

What is *that* all about?

I don't stick around to ask. Not with Aphrodite already aiming those barbed arrows she calls words in my mother's direction and Demeter stepping right to the line in the sand between them. When they get going like this, they can keep it up for hours, just snipe, snipe, sniping at each other.

I glance at Zeus, but he's turned away, speaking to Athena in a low voice. Ah well. If Mother is so determined to introduce me properly to Zeus, it looks like tonight won't be the night.

Or maybe I'm simply looking for a good reason to escape.

I don't stop to worry about my mother. She can handle Aphrodite. She's been doing it for years. "Excuse me," I murmur. "I have to use the ladies' room." No one pays me any attention, which is frankly just perfect.

I'm already moving, slipping through the crowd of tuxes and luxurious gowns in a rainbow of colors. Diamonds and priceless jewels glitter beneath the lights scattered throughout the room, and I swear I can feel the eyes of the portraits lining the walls follow me as I move. Up until a month ago, there were only eleven—and one frame kept empty for the next Hera—each depicting one of the Thirteen. As if anyone needed the reminder of who rules this city.

Tonight, all thirteen are finally here.

Hades has been added to the mix, his dark painting a direct counterpoint to the lighter tones of the other twelve. He glowers down at the room the same way he glowers at the people here when he actually chooses to be present. I wish he were here tonight, if only because that means Persephone would be here, too. These parties were so much easier to suffer through when she was at my side. Now that she's gone, ruling the lower city at Hades's side, being in Dodona Tower is tedious in the extreme.

*It will be so much worse if I'm Hera.*

I let the thought go. There's no point in worrying about it until I know the shape of my mother's plans and how receptive Zeus is to them. In the corner, I catch sight of Hermes, Dionysus, and Helen Kasios gathered around a high table. They look like they're playing some kind of drinking game. At least *they're* enjoying the party. They don't have anything to lose in this space, moving through the power games and carefully veiled threats as naturally as sharks through water.

I can fake it—I'm rather good at faking it—but it will never be instinct the same way it is with people like that.

Without breaking stride, I push open the door and head out into the quieter hallway. It's after business hours and we're at the top of the tower, so it's deserted. Good. I hurry past the evenly spaced doors with their floor--to--ceiling curtains bracketing each one. They creep me out, especially at night. I never can seem to escape the feeling there's someone hiding there, just waiting for me to pass. I have to keep my gaze straight ahead, even as a low rustle behind me has my instincts screaming to run. I know better; it's my own footsteps echoing back, giving me the impression of being chased.

I can't outrun myself.

I can't outrun *any* of the danger waiting for me back in the main ballroom.

I take my time in the bathroom, bracing my hands on the sink and breathing deeply. Cold water would feel good on my face, but I won't be able to properly fix my makeup and going back with even a hair out of place will have the predators circling. If I become Hera, those voices will get louder, will be inescapable. I'm already not enough for them, or, rather, I'm *too much*. Too quiet, too fat, too plain.

"Stop it." Saying the words out loud grounds me, just a little.

Those insults aren't my beliefs. I've worked hard for them not to be. It's only when I'm here, having my face shoved in what Olympus considers perfection, that the toxic voice from my teenage years rears its ugly head.

Five breaths. Slow inhales. Even slower exhales.

By the time I get to five, I feel a little more like myself. I lift my head but avoid looking at my reflection. The mirrors here don't tell the truth, even if those lies are only in my head. Best to avoid them entirely. One last breath, and I make myself leave the relative safety of the bathroom and move back into the hall.

Hopefully my mother and Aphrodite will have either finished their spat or taken it to some corner of the ballroom so I can return to the party without getting drawn back into the drama. Hiding in the hallway until it's time to leave isn't an option. I refuse to give Aphrodite any indication that her words affected me in the slightest.

It takes two steps to realize I'm not alone.

A man staggers down the hallway toward me, coming from the direction of the elevators. For a brief moment, I consider ignoring him and heading back to the party, but that means he'll be shadowing my steps. Not to mention there are only two of us out here and there's no way to pretend I'm doing anything but ignoring him. He doesn't look too good, either, even in the low light. Maybe he's drunk, a little pregame party that went too far.

With an internal sigh, I slip my public persona back into place and give him a tiny smile and a wave. "Late arrival?"

"Something like that."

*Oh shit.* I know that voice. I take great pains to avoid the man it belongs to.

Eros. Aphrodite's son. Aphrodite's *fixer*.

I watch him approach warily, stepping out of shadow as he comes near. He's as gorgeous as his mother is. Tall and blond, though his hair has a distinctive curl that would be cute framing any other face. His features are too masculine to ever be something as harmless as *cute*. He's tall and has a strong body, to a point where even his expensive suit can't hide how broad his shoulders are, how muscled his arms. The man is built for violence with a face that would make a sculpture weep. Apt, that.

I catch sight of a stain on his white shirt and narrow my eyes. "Is that blood?"

Eros looks down and curses softly. "I thought I got it all."

No point in examining *that* statement. I need to get out of here, and fast. Except... "You're limping." Staggering, really, but not because he's drunk. He's speaking too clearly for that.

“I’m not,” he answers easily. Lies easily. He’s most assuredly limping, and that’s most certainly blood. I know what that means; he must have come straight here from committing some violence on Aphrodite’s behalf. The very last thing I want is to get involved with *those* two.

Still, I hesitate. “Is it your blood?”

Eros stops next to me, his blue eyes holding no emotion at all. “It’s the blood of the last pretty girl who asked too many questions.”

2

# PSYCHE

*Eros Ambrosia thinks I'm pretty.*

I shut down *that* useless, foolhardy thought immediately. "I'm going to pretend that's a joke." Even though I know better. There's nothing more dangerous in Olympus than being a pretty girl who manages to enrage Aphrodite enough that she sends her son calling.

*Especially a pretty girl who might stand in the way of her plans to secure her choice for the next Hera.*

"It's really not."

I can't tell if Eros is being serious or not, but better to err on the side of caution. He obviously doesn't want to talk, and spending any more time in his presence than strictly necessary is a terrible idea. I open my mouth to make some excuse to go back into the bathroom to hide until he's gone, but that's not what comes out. "If you go in there injured, someone might decide to finish the job. You and your mother have more than your fair share of enemies in that room." Surely I don't have to tell him that any perceived weakness will have those enemies descending like wolves to a slaughter?

Eros raises his brows. "Why do you care?"

"I don't." I really don't. I'm just a fool who doesn't know when to quit. No matter what else is true of Eros, he didn't choose to be a child of one of the Thirteen any more than I did. "I'm also not someone who wishes you harm. Let me help you."

"I don't need your help." He turns and heads back the way he came, in the direction of the elevator.

"I'm offering it all the same." My body makes the decision to follow him before my brain can catch up, my legs moving on their own and carrying me further from the relative safety of the party. Stepping into the elevator feels like stepping past the point of no return. I wish I could say I'm overreacting, but Eros's reputation precedes him and it's...very, very violent and very, very dangerous. I clasp my hands in front of me and fight the urge to babble.

We only descend a few floors, and then he leads me through glass and stainless--steel offices to a door that opens easily beneath his hand. It's only when we're closed in together that I see it's a fancy bathroom. Like the rest of Dodona Tower, it's minimalist with black tile floors, a few stalls, a tiled--in shower, and a trio of stainless--steel sinks. There's even a small area near the door with a pair of comfortable--looking chairs and a small round table between them.

"You seem to know your way around here rather well."

"My mother often has business with Zeus."

I swallow hard. "There were bathrooms upstairs." Closer to the relative safety of the party.

"This one has first--aid stuff." He starts to lean down to open one of the cabinets beneath the sink and winces.

That prompts me into motion. This is why I'm here: to help, not to watch him struggle. "Sit down before you fall down."

I'm surprised when he doesn't argue, just limps to the chairs and sinks onto one of them. Thinking about this whole situation too hard is a mistake, so I focus on the task of figuring out how badly he's hurt, patching him up, and getting back to the ballroom before my mother sends out a search party.

Considering last time one of her daughters went missing at a Dodona Tower event, said daughter ended up crossing the River Styx and throwing herself into Hades's arms...

Yes, better not to be gone too long.

As promised, there's a first--aid kit in the cabinet below the sink. I grab it, turn around, and freeze. "What are you doing?" My voice comes out squeaky, but I can't help it.



Eros stops in the middle of taking off his shirt. "What's wrong?"

Everything's wrong. I've been moving in similar circles to this man for a decade, but I've never seen him anything less than perfectly pressed and polished and downright gleaming at these parties. His beauty is breathtaking and almost too perfect to be real.

He doesn't look too perfect right now.

No, he's all too real. Impossible to keep the mental fence I have around Eros as *dangerous playboy* when he's peeling off his shirt and revealing a body carved by the gods. The exhaustion on his face only makes him more attractive, which I might find horribly unfair later, but right now I can't find enough oxygen in this room to breathe.

Panic. That's what I'm feeling. Pure panic. It's not attraction. It can't be. Not to *him*. "You're stripping."

Beneath the white fabric, I can see that someone—likely Eros himself—has slapped a scattering of bandages across his chest. He gives me a charming smile that's only slightly strained around the edges. "I was under the impression you wanted me out of my clothes."

"Pass." I blurt the word out, my hard--won public persona nowhere in evidence.

"Everyone else does."

Weirdly enough, his arrogance calms me. I take a breath, and then another, and give him the look that comment deserves. Banter. I can do banter. I've been trading artful insults with people like Eros for my entire adult life. "Am I supposed to feel sorry for you? Or are you bragging? Please be clear so I can adjust my reaction accordingly."

He bursts out laughing. "Clever."

"I try." I frown. "I thought your leg is injured."

"It's just a bruise." If anything, his charming smile ramps up a few notches. "Trying to get me out of my pants, too?"

If him being shirtless is enough to cause this uncomfortable reaction, I most certainly don't want him to lose any more items of clothing. I might combust, and if the embarrassment doesn't kill me on the spot, it will hand Eros a weapon to use against me. "Absolutely not."

He finishes shrugging out of his shirt and gives a rough exhale. "That's a shame."

"I'm sure you'll live." I set the kit on the table and eye his chest. Some of the bandages have already come loose, and there are red smears where the blood made contact with his shirt. What *happened* to him? Did he get into a fight with a rosebush? "These need to be redone."

"Go for it." He leans back and closes his eyes.

I'm about to make a sharp comment about him having me do all the work, but the words die in my throat when I peel back the bandage to find... "Eros, this is a lot of blood." I can't tell how serious the wounds are with the mess between the blood and bandages, but some of them are still bleeding.

"You should see the other guy," he says without opening his eyes. Confirming what I already suspected.

*Is the other guy still alive?* No need to ask that question. The fact that he's here at all means he was successful in whatever his task had been. I finish removing the bandages and sit back, examining his chest. There are at least a dozen cuts. "I'm going to need to clean this or the new bandages won't hold."

He waves a hand. Permission.

I don't allow myself to think as I rise and dig around beneath the sink until I find a basket of clean washcloths. I wet two of them and bring the dry ones over to try to mop up the worst of the mess. It takes several long minutes to clean it away.

Which is right around the time I realize I'm essentially giving Eros Ambrosia a sponge bath.

I sit back abruptly. "Eros, some of these might need stitches." They don't look nearly as bad as they did before I cleaned him up, but I'm not a doctor. Surely he has one on staff like every other household of the Thirteen. I don't understand why he didn't call that person instead of trying to show up for this blasted party.

"It's fine. It'll hold until the end of the night."

I frown down at him. "You can't be serious. You're prioritizing attending a *party*, rather than finding a doctor and getting the medical attention you might require."

"You know better than anyone why I need to." At that, he finally opens his eyes. They seem even bluer than before, and a strange look passes through them. It must be pain, because there's no way that Eros Ambrosia, son of Aphrodite, is looking at *me* with desire.

Despite myself, my gaze flicks to his mouth. He's got a very nice mouth, lips curved and sensual. It's really a shame he's a dangerous murderer.

To distract myself from such foolhardy thoughts, I stand and move to the sink. It feels remarkably like running away, but I'm just washing the man's blood from my hands. I glance at the mirror and stop short. He's staring at me with the strangest expression on his face. It's not the desire I've already convinced myself I imagined. No, Eros is looking at me like he's never seen me before, like maybe I've acted against his expectations.

That can't be right, though. It doesn't matter if I've occupied the same parties and ballrooms and events as this man for the last ten years; there is absolutely no reason for Eros to think of me at all. I certainly don't spend much time thinking about *him*. He might be gorgeous, even for Olympus, flawless enough to have his likeness plastered across every billboard if he wanted the work, but Eros is *dangerous*.

I dry my hands and move back to the seat across from him. Somehow, without all the blood in play, this feels even more intimate. I push the thought away and get to work bandaging him. Though I half expect him to push my hands away and do it himself, he stays perfectly still, barely seeming to breathe as I carefully apply bandage after bandage. There are about a dozen cuts, all said and done, and despite my assertion that he needs to see a doctor, most of them are small enough that they've nearly stopped bleeding.

"You're rather good at that." His low voice is filled with edges. I can't tell if he's accusing me or merely making a comment.

I choose to take it at face value. "I grew up on a farm." Sort of. It was technically a farm, but it wasn't what people picture when they think of so-called farm life. There was no quaint little house with a faded red barn. My mother might have expanded her fortune with her three marriages, but she was hardly starting from scratch. We were an industrial farm and the setup reflected that.

His lips curl, something light flickering in his eyes. "Are there a lot of stab wounds on farms?"

"You admit it, then—that you were stabbed."

Now he's actually smiling, though there's still pain evident on his face. "I admit nothing."

"Of course not." I realize I'm still too close to him and back up quickly, moving to the sink to wash my hands again. "But to answer your question, when there are a variety of large machines, not to mention various animals that take exception to foolish humans, injuries happen." Especially when one possesses adventurous sisters like I did. Not that I'm going to tell Eros *that*. This interaction has already been too intimate, too strange. "I need to get back."

“Psyche.” He waits until I turn to face him. For a moment, he looks nothing like the confident predator I’ve worked so hard to avoid. He’s simply a man, tired and in pain. Eros touches one of the bandages on his chest. “Why help Aphrodite’s pet monster?”

“Even monsters need help sometimes, Eros.” I should leave it at that, but his question felt so unexpectedly vulnerable that I can’t help the impulse to soothe him. Just a little. “Besides, you’re not really a monster. I don’t see a single scale or fang to speak of.”

“Monsters come in all shapes and sizes, Psyche. You should know that by now, living in Olympus.” He starts to button up his shirt, but his hands are shaking so badly, he fumbles it.

I move before I have a chance to remember why this is such a terrible idea. “Let me.” I lean over and button him up carefully. My fingers brush his bare chest a few times, and I’m certain I imagine the way he hisses out an exhale in response. Pain. That’s all it is. Eros is certainly not responding to *my* touch. I hold my breath as I finish the last button and move back. “There you go.”

He climbs to his feet. I watch closely, but he seems a little steadier than he was earlier. Eros pulls his jacket on and buttons it up, hiding the worst of the bloodstains. “Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me. Anyone would do it.”

“No.” He shakes his head slowly. “They really wouldn’t.” He doesn’t give me a chance to respond to that. Just motions to the door. “Let’s go. Head up without me; I need to find a replacement shirt.” He hesitates. “It wouldn’t be good for us to be seen returning to the party together.”

It really wouldn’t. It would get Olympus’s gossipmongers chatting, and Aphrodite and Demeter might stroke out in pure rage in response. The very last thing I want is to be linked to Eros in any way, shape, or form. “Of course.”

As we step into the hall, Eros presses his hand to the small of my back. The contact jolts through me with the violence of lightning in a bottle. I miss a step and he moves quickly, catching my elbow and keeping me from ending up on the floor. “You good?”

“Yes,” I manage. I don’t look at him. *Can’t* look at him. It was difficult enough to ignore this unfortunate spark between us while I patched him up. I don’t like my chances with him standing so close, one hand on my lower back and the other cupping my elbow. I should most definitely not...

I lift my face and Eros looks down and, gods, we’re so close. This is a mistake. At any moment, I’ll pull away and put a respectable amount of distance between us and it will be like this strange little interlude never happened. At...any...moment...

A bright flash sears my eyes. I jerk away from Eros and blink rapidly. Oh no. *Oh no, no, no, no.* This can’t be happening.

Except it is happening. My vision clears slowly, and any hope I have of pretending some light bulb shattered at random goes up in smoke. A short white man with bright ginger hair and a camera in his hands stands a few feet away. He grins at us. “I *knew* I saw you get in the elevator together. Psyche, care to comment about what you’re doing sneaking away from Zeus’s party to get alone time with Eros Ambrosia?”

Eros takes a menacing step toward the photographer, but I grab his arm and fight for a smile. “Just a friendly little chat.”

The man doesn’t miss a beat. “Is that why Eros’s shirt is buttoned up incorrectly? And you looked like you were about to kiss in this picture?” He’s gone before I can come up with a lie that might make sense.

“We’re fucked,” I breathe.

Eros curses far more creatively than I have. "That about sums it up."

I know how this goes. Before the end of the night, pictures of me and Eros will be plastered across the gossip sites, and people will start theorizing about our *forbidden romance*. I can see the headlines now.

*Star--crossed lovers! What will Demeter and Aphrodite think of their children's secret relationship?*

Forget stroking out in rage. My mother is going to *kill me*.

3

# EROS

TWO WEEKS LATER

“Bring me her heart.”

“My chest is healed up just fine. Thanks for asking.” I don’t look up from my phone as my mother paces from one side of the room to the other, her skirt swishing about her legs. Knowing her, she chose her clothing today to maximize her dramatic flouncing.

She’s nothing if not a showwoman.

The phone isn’t the distraction I’d like it to be. In the two weeks since the party, the speculation and gossip about me and Psyche Dimitriou hasn’t died down. If anything, our refusal to make a public comment about it has only fanned the flames. There’s nothing Olympus loves more than a good story, and the children of two public enemies hooking up is nothing if not a good story. The truth doesn’t matter when there’s a compelling lie to be told.

Not to mention the photographer got a stellar shot.

In the picture, we’re standing so close, nearly in an embrace, and she’s looking up at me in question. And me? The look on my face can only be described as *hungry*. I wouldn’t have done something as foolish as to kiss Psyche in that hallway, but no one looking at our image will believe it.

“Stop playing with your phone and look at me.” My mother spins on her tall heel and glares down at me. She’s fifty, and though she’d skin me alive for saying as much, no wrinkles or gray hair betray her. She spends a fortune to keep her skin smooth and her hair a perfect icy blond. Not to mention the countless hours with her personal trainer to accomplish a body twenty--year--olds would kill for. All in the name of her title, Aphrodite. When one has the role of the matchmaker of Olympus—the peddler of love—one must meet certain expectations.

“Eros, put down that godsdamned phone and listen to me.”

“I’m listening.” My bored tone betrays my waning patience, but I’m already tired of this conversation. We’ve had some variation of it about a dozen times in the last two weeks. “I already told you what really happened.”

“No one cares what really happened.” She’s almost screeching now, her carefully curated smoky tones going high and sharp. “They are dragging your name through the mud by attaching it to that upstart’s daughter.”

I don’t point out that the title Aphrodite has no more legacy than Demeter’s. The only titles in Olympus that pass from parent to child are Zeus, Hades, and Poseidon. The rest of the Thirteen come to them as adults, in ways both aboveboard and clandestine. My mother can’t stand the fact that she was appointed by the last Aphrodite, while Demeter was chosen through a citywide election.

The people chose Demeter, and she’s never let my mother forget it.

“It won’t be long before the next scandal hits. Just be patient.”

“*You* don’t tell me what to do, Son. *I* give the orders, and you obey.” She stops in front of me and glares. “This is your mess. If you’d done the last job properly, you wouldn’t have been photographed with *that girl*.”

“Mother.” I don’t know why I’m arguing. Once my mother goes on a rampage, it’s all but impossible to divert her. It’s one of the reasons people step so carefully around her. Even *I* have to step carefully around her. She might present our relationship to the public as adoring mother and loyal son, but the truth is far less appealing. I am Aphrodite’s knife. She tells me where to go, what revenge to exact, and I follow along like a fucked--up toy soldier. My input is never asked for and sure

as fuck never heeded. I *told* her that we needed to wait to deal with Polyphonte instead of rushing into things the night of that party, but Aphrodite pushed the subject.

She always pushes the fucking subject.

“Her heart, Eros. Do *not* make me ask again.”

I swallow back my irritation, but only barely. “You’re going to have to be more specific, Mother. Do you *literally* want her heart? Do you have a silver box all picked out for it? Maybe you can stick it on your mantel next to my graduation photo.”

She makes a sound suspiciously like a hiss. “You are such a little shit.” This is the Aphrodite she doesn’t show anyone else in Olympus. Only I get the dubious privilege of witnessing what a monster my mother truly is.

But then, I’m not one to throw stones on that subject.

*I don’t see a single scale or fang.*

I nearly flinch at the memory of Psyche’s soft voice. I really thought she was smarter than that; she’d have to be a fool to move in nearly the same circles I have for ten years and *not* call me a monster.

I make a show of turning off my phone screen and giving my mother my full attention. “You’ve decided on this course of action, so don’t be shy now.”

Another person would flinch in the face of my mild tone with the threat of violence threaded beneath it. Aphrodite just laughs. “Eros, darling, you really are too much. After that stunt Demeter pulled last fall with her other daughter and Hades, she really thinks she can bypass me completely and set up *Psyche* as the next Hera. Over my dead body. Or, rather, over *hers*.”

My chest goes strangely tight, but I ignore it. “If you’re so furious at Demeter, then do something about her, rather than the daughter.”

“You know better.” She flicks that away with her fingertips. “Both mother and daughter need to be taught a lesson. Demeter has been throwing her weight around, thinking she’s anything other than a glorified farmer. This will bring her down a notch.”

Only my mother would consider the death of a child to be bringing someone down a notch.

But then, she’ll do anything to maintain her power. Aphrodite is responsible for a number of things, but her most popular task is arranging marriage between the rich and elite within Olympus. The Thirteen and their families, yes, but also those in the wider circle of influence that never quite make it into the parties at Dodona Tower.

With Demeter inching in on her territory, it’s no wonder my mother’s head is about to explode. She arranged all three marriages for the last Zeus—the fucker kept killing off his wives, which suited my mother quite nicely as she loves a wedding and hates everything that follows. Securing a new Hera for the new Zeus is her top priority, and it seems like Demeter is determined to launch Psyche into the position of Hera without consulting Aphrodite.

I try to picture it, but my mind rebels at the thought. All I can see is the line of concentration between Psyche’s brows as she bandaged me up. Surely someone foolish enough to show kindness to the son of their enemy is the same kind of someone who will be eaten alive in the position of Hera.

I clear my throat. “How’s Zeus doing these days? Does he not like any of your eligible options?” Up until a few months ago, he was Perseus, but names are the first thing sacrificed at the altar of the Thirteen. Once upon a time, we were friends, but Olympian life has a way of forcing people apart. The older we got, the more Perseus became embroiled in training to

become the next Zeus. And me? Well, my life took an equally dark path. We're still friends, I guess, but there's a distance there that neither of us can quite recover. I don't even know where to begin to try.

I let the thought drift away. Perseus has been Zeus's heir for his entire life. He knew he'd take the title when his father died. If it happened a bit earlier than anyone expected...well, he's more than capable of handling it. It's not my problem. It *can't* be my problem. After all, *I* didn't kill the man.

"Don't change the subject," she snaps. "Ever since Persephone ran off and shackled up with Hades, Olympus is unbalanced. Now Demeter thinks she's going to pair up another daughter with another legacy position? What's next? Marrying off that feral older daughter of hers to Poseidon?" She huffs. "I think not. Someone needs to check Demeter, and if no one else will step up, then we'll have to."

"You mean *I'll* have to. You might be demanding a heart, but we both know that I'm the one doing all the work." I have no desire for someone to start calling for my head, so I try to keep the murders to a minimum. It's so much easier to remove an opponent with a well--placed rumor or simply observe them until their own actions provide the ammunition for their downfall. Olympus is filled to the brim with sin, if one believes in that sort of thing, and no one in the Thirteen's shining circle is without their fair share of vices.

Except, apparently, Demeter's daughters.

They've tried hard to stay out of the spotlight, and it even worked...at least up until a few months ago. Ever since the old Zeus decided he wanted Persephone for his own---for all the good that did him---Olympus has gone rabid for the Dimitriou sisters. After all, Persephone's story seems like an epic one for the ages, the kind of shit the gossip sites eat right up. Zeus drove her right into Hades's arms, which in turn brought Hades out of the shadows of the lower city. No one saw *that* coming.

Zeus and the rest of the upper city like to pretend Olympus stops at the River Styx. Hades was something of a dirty little secret only the Thirteen and a few choice others had knowledge of. Now he's out in the open and the entire power balance of Olympus is in flux. It will be months yet before things settle, possibly longer.

Hades's romance with Persephone has only amped up Olympus's fascination with the Dimitriou sisters. They're all attractive, but none of them quite *fit*. Persephone always had her eyes on the horizon, her determination to find a way out of the city clear to anyone with a drop of perception to their name. Callisto, the oldest, is just as feral as my mother claims. She's constantly getting into fights or saying things she shouldn't, a blatant refusal to play Olympus's power games that people both resent and are drawn to. Eurydice, the youngest, is pretty and sweet and far too naive for someone in this city.

And then there's Psyche. It's not just that she's different physically from her sisters---she's just flat--out *different*. She plays the game and plays it well, all without seeming to. She's got this unassuming thing going on, but I've been watching her long enough to notice that she never makes a move by accident. I can't prove it, of course, but I think she's got just as savvy a brain in her head as her mother does.

None of *that* explains what happened the night of Zeus's party. If Psyche were really as conniving as her mother, she never would have let herself get caught alone with me. She wouldn't have patched me up. She wouldn't have done *any* of the things that happened from the moment I saw her in that hallway.

I don't have much of a moral center, but even I think it's shitty to reward her kindness by ending her life.

"Eros." Mother snaps her fingers in front of my face. "Stop daydreaming and do this task for me." She smiles slowly, her blue eyes going icy. "Bring me Psyche's heart."



“Have you really thought this through?” I raise my brows, working to keep my expression disinterested. “She’s rather beloved by hundreds of thousands of Olympians—at least according to her social--media follower counts.”

I realize my mistake the second Aphrodite sneers. “She’s a fat girl with little style and no substance. The only reason MuseWatch and the other sites follow her around is because she’s a novelty. She’s not even close to my league.”

I don’t argue with her because there’s no point, but the truth is that Psyche is gorgeous and has a style that sets trends in a way Aphrodite can only dream of. Which is exactly the problem. My mother’s decided to take down two birds with one stone. “I wasn’t aware you were in competition.”

“Because we’re not.” She waves that away as if I’m foolish enough to believe her. “This isn’t about me. This is about you.” She props her hands on her hips. “I want this taken care of, Eros. You have to do this for me.”

Something in my chest twinges, but I ignore it. If I believed in souls, my actions would have guaranteed I’d sacrificed mine long ago. There is a price for power in this city, and with a mother in the Thirteen, I never had a chance at innocence. If you’re not at the top of the Olympus power structure, you’re being crushed beneath someone else’s heel as they use you to get ahead. I have no choice. I was born into this game, and the only option is being the best, the scariest, the one people would do anything to avoid fucking with. It keeps both me and my mother safe. If it means that sometimes I’m required to do these little *tasks* for her? It’s a small enough price to pay. “I’ll see it done.”

“Before the end of the week.”

That doesn’t give me much time at all. I stomp down on the flicker of resentment and nod. “I said I’ll see it done and I will.”

“Good.” She twirls away, her skirt once again flaring dramatically around her, and strides out of the room.

That’s my mother, all right. Here for the proclamations of revenge and heavy with the demands, but when it comes time to actually do the work, she’s suddenly got somewhere to be.

It’s just as well. I’m good at what I do because I know when to be flashy and when to fly below the radar. Aphrodite wouldn’t know how to be subtle if her life depended on it. I wait a full thirty seconds before I push to my feet and walk to my front door. If she changes her mind and comes back to spout off some more bullshit, she’ll be pissed to find my door locked, but I don’t like being interrupted once I get to planning.

And frankly, it’s good for my mother to be foiled from time to time. She controls so much of my life, it’s important to have at least one space that is Aphrodite--free—even occasionally. As much as I chafe at being under her control, my options are limited. My mother is one of the Thirteen. No matter where I reside in Olympus, the fact remains that she holds all the cards—all the power—and I am merely a tool to be picked up at her leisure.

I’m no saint. I’ve long since made my peace with my path in life. But fuck if it doesn’t smother me sometimes, especially when Aphrodite gives an order that feels especially cruel. Psyche *helped* me, and now my mother’s commanded *my* hand to be the one that strikes her down.

I head through the penthouse to what passes for my safe room. I use it to store things I don’t want nosy guests—or Hermes—to get their hands on. She’s tried at least a dozen times to break into it, and so far my security has held, but I’m all too aware that eventually she might prevail. Still, it’s the best option available to me.

Once I lock *that* door, I sit behind my computer and consider my options. This would be so much simpler if Aphrodite just wanted to make a nonlethal example of Psyche. She might be crafting a reputation as an influencer in that quiet way of hers, but reputations are easy to burn to ash. I’ve done it dozens of times over the years, and no doubt I’ll do it many more. All it takes is some patience and the ability to play the long game.

But no, my mother wants her literal heart. How very Evil Queen of her. I shake my head and bring up my files on the Dimitriou sisters. I have files on all the Thirteen and their immediate families, as well as close friends. In Olympus, information is 90 percent of the battle, so I work hard to keep myself informed. Since the party two weeks ago, I've taken a particular interest in Psyche, and I can't even blame my mother for it.

Psyche didn't have to help me.

She would have been so much smarter to turn away and pretend she never saw me. Anyone else would have done as much. Even some of the people I consider friends would have made that choice. I don't blame them for it. In Olympus, it's every person for themselves.

I click through the most recent articles on MuseWatch. Persephone visited her family last weekend briefly and caused quite the stir because she brought her new husband with her. The Hades--Demeter alliance is one nobody saw coming, and it's feeding into my mother's paranoia. She had the last Zeus on a leash, but his son hasn't taken the bait she keeps dangling in front of him. It's got her worried.

I stop on a picture of Psyche and her sisters shopping. The Dimitriou sisters seem to genuinely love and support each other. They might dip their toes into playing the power games, but they mostly hold themselves separate. I don't know if it's because they think they're better than the rest of us or if the rest of us are just so naturally insular that we didn't exactly welcome them with open arms when they first showed up. My mother likes to label the whole family as social climbers, and more than a few within the Thirteen's inner circles have taken to doing the same.

But if that were true, Persephone Dimitriou wouldn't have braved crossing the River Styx to try to get away from a marriage with Zeus.

And Psyche wouldn't have helped her.

Even I'm not sure exactly what happened that night, but I know Psyche was involved—and it wasn't to play the part of the rational party convincing her sister that this marriage would help their family's position. If they were any other family, Psyche would have taken advantage of her sister's absence and placed herself in front of Zeus as a candidate for the new Hera.

Instead, she helped her sister. Just like she helped me.

I study the image of Psyche. She's got long, dark hair and full lips that always seem curved in a secretive smile. Looking at her, I can't blame the gossip sites for being so obsessed: she seems comfortable in her body, and that kind of thing is sexy as fuck.

She's extremely photogenic, but the pictures still don't do her justice. There's something about her presence in person that makes people sit up and pay attention, even when she's dimming her light as best she can the way she always seems to at the parties we've both attended over the years.

She wasn't dimming herself in the hallway or down in the bathroom where she patched me up. I don't think it was on purpose, but I caught a glimpse of a bright and inquisitive mind behind that pretty face. She might play as if her looks are all she has going for her, but she's smart. Too smart to get caught alone with me, and yet she took that risk and got burned. Why? Because I so obviously needed help. *Because even monsters need help sometimes.*

All this leads me to one very unfortunate conclusion.

Psyche Dimitriou might actually be what passes for a unicorn in Olympus—a good person.

I curse and close the window. It doesn't matter if she's hot or that I respect the way she's so effectively dodged the power games since her family arrived on the scene or that she's *nice*. My mother has a task, and I know the consequences of failing.

Exile.

Being left with nothing. *Being* nothing.

Aphrodite likes to remind me that the only thing I'm good at is hurting people. Even recognizing the blatant manipulation for what it is...she's not wrong. I don't know how to run a corporation like Perseus. I don't know how to charm people and put them at ease like Helen. Fuck, I'm not even that good at breaking and entering like Hermes.

Not to mention more than a few victims of Aphrodite—of *me*—have suffered exile. If I end up sharing their fate, I don't like my odds of lasting a year without one of them tracking me down and taking their just revenge.

Best not to think about that too closely. I'll take care of the task, and then I'll find a few partners and lose myself in a week of fucking and drinking and anything it takes to numb me out completely. Just like I always have.

With another curse, I pick up my phone.

A chirpy female voice answers. "Eros, my favorite little sex god. It's my lucky day."

Normally, it's difficult to keep a smile off my face when I'm dealing with Hermes. She's incorrigible and the only one of the Thirteen whose presence I actually enjoy. I don't feel much like smiling today. "Hermes."

She gives a sigh. "So it's business, then?"

"It's business," I confirm. It's not always business with Hermes and me. She and I have hooked up a few times over the years but ultimately settled into something resembling friendship. I don't necessarily trust her—her title is practically spymaster, after all—but I like her.

"All business and no play makes Eros a dull boy."

"We can't all spend our time playing jester in Hades's court."

She laughs. "Don't be mad just because Hades banned you from his sex dungeon. You would have done the same thing in his position."

She's right, but that doesn't mean I'm about to admit it. The only reason Hades let me come and go across the River Styx without an issue was that we had something of a mutually beneficial relationship. He controlled the information I reported back to my mother. I enjoyed his hospitality. That all changed when Persephone entered the scene. She expanded his allegiance from himself to his now wife—and her mother, Demeter.

Seeing as how Demeter and *my* mother hate each other, that means I'm persona non grata in the lower city these days. When Hades cut me off, he cut off my main outlet to blow off steam. Not that that matters now, but Hermes always did know how to find a person's buttons...and then do jumping jacks on them. "I have a message I'd like you to deliver, but it's delicate in nature."

A pause. "Okay, you have my attention. Stop toying with my emotions and tell me what you're up to."

I force a small smile as I sketch out what I need from her. Hermes's role in the Thirteen is a little bit messenger, a little bit spy, a little bit agent of chaos for her own amusement. Her only real allegiance is to Dionysus, and even then, I'm not sure that friendship would hold if things got really intense. He's not my aim, however, so I have no doubt she'll do exactly as I request.

When I finish, she gives a merry laugh. "Eros, you sly rake, you. I'll have the message delivered by morning." She hangs up before I can respond.

I sit back with a sigh and rub my chest. No matter my personal thoughts on this, things are in motion. It's too late to go back and change the past; I can only do what I've always done—come out on top.

Psyche Dimitriou will be dead before the end of the week.