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# PERSEPHONE

"I really hate these parties."

"Don't let Mother hear you say that."

I glance over my shoulder at Psyche. "You hate them, too." I've lost count of the number of events our mother has dragged us to over the years. She's always got her eye on the next prize, on the newest piece to move in this chess game only she knows the rules to. It might be easier to stomach if most days I didn't feel like one of her pawns.

Psyche comes to stand next to me and bumps me with her shoulder. "I knew I'd find you here."

"It's the only room in this place I can stand." Even though the statue room is the very essence of hubris. It's a relatively plain space—if shining marble floors and tasteful gray walls can be called plain—filled with thirteen full-body statues arranged in a loose circle around the room. One for each member of the Thirteen, the group that rules Olympus. I name them off silently as my gaze skips over each one—Zeus, Poseidon, Hera, Demeter, Athena, Ares, Dionysus, Hermes, Artemis, Apollo, Hephaestus, Aphrodite—before turning back to face the final statue. This one is covered in a black cloth that pours over it, spilling down to pool on the floor at its feet. Even still, it's impossible to miss the wide-set shoulders, the spiky crown that adorns his head. My fingers itch to grab the fabric and rip it away so I can finally see his features once and for all.

*Hades.*

In a few short months, I'll have won my freedom from this city, will have escaped, never to return. I won't have another chance to look on the face of Olympus's boogeyman. "Isn't it weird that they never replaced him?"

Psyche snorts. "How many times have we had this conversation?"

"Come on. You know it's weird. They're the Thirteen, but really they're only twelve. There's no Hades. There hasn't been for a very long time." Hades, the ruler of the lower city. Or at least he used to be. It's a legacy title, and the entire family has long since died out. Now, the lower city is technically under Zeus's reign like the rest of us, but from what I hear, he doesn't ever set foot on that side of the river. Crossing the River Styx is difficult for the same reason leaving Olympus is difficult; from what I hear, each step through the barrier creates a sensation like your head will explode. No one voluntarily experiences something like that. Not even Zeus.

Especially when I doubt the people in the lower city will kiss his ass the same way everyone in the upper city does. All that discomfort and no payoff? It's no surprise Zeus avoids the crossing just like the rest of us. "Hades is the only one who never spent time in the upper city. It makes me think he was different from the rest of them."

"He wasn't," Psyche says flatly. "It's easy to pretend when he's dead and the title no longer exists. But every one of the Thirteen is the same, even our mother."

She's right—I know she's right—but I can't help the fantasy. I reach up but stop before my fingers make contact with the statue's face. It's just morbid curiosity that draws me to this dead legacy, and *that's* not worth the trouble I'd be in if I gave in to the temptation to snatch the dark veil away. I let my hand drop. "What's Mother up to tonight?"

"I don't know." She sighs. "I wish Callisto were here. *She*, at least, gives Mother pause."

My three sisters and I all found different ways to adapt when our mother became Demeter and we were thrust into the shining world that exists only for the Thirteen. It's so sparkling and extravagant that it's almost enough to distract from the poison at its core. It was adapt or drown.

I force myself to act the part of the bright and sparkly daughter who is always obedient, which allows Psyche to play it cool and quiet as she flies under the radar. Eurydice clings to every bit of life and excitement she can find with a borderline desperation. Callisto? Callisto fights Mother with a ferocity that belongs in the arena. She will break before she bends, and as a result, Mother exempts her from these mandatory events. "It's better that she's not. If Zeus makes a pass at Callisto, she might try to gut him. Then we'd truly have an incident on our hands."

The only person in Olympus who murders without consequence—allegedly—is Zeus himself. The rest of us are expected to uphold the laws.

Psyche shudders. "Has he tried anything with you?"

"No." I shake my head, still looking at Hades's statue. No, Zeus hasn't touched me, but at the last couple of events we've attended, I could feel his gaze following me around the room. It's the reason I attempted to beg off tonight, though my mother all but dragged me out the door behind her. Nothing good comes from gaining Zeus's attention. It always ends the same—the women broken and Zeus walking away without so much as a bad headline to tarnish his reputation. There was exactly one set of charges officially leveled against him a few years ago, and it was such a circus that the woman disappeared before the case ever went to trial. The most optimistic outcome is that she somehow found a way out of Olympus; the more realistic is that Zeus added her to his alleged body count.

No, better to avoid him at every turn.

Something that would be significantly easier to do if my mother weren't one of the Thirteen.

The sound of heels clicking smartly against the marble floors has my heartbeat picking up in recognition. Mother always strides like she's marching into battle. For a moment, I honestly consider hiding behind the covered statue of Hades, but I discard the idea before Mother appears in the doorway to the statue gallery. Hiding would only delay the inevitable.

"There you are." Tonight she's wearing a deep--green gown that skims her body and feeds into the whole earth--mother role she's decided best fits her branding as the woman who ensures the city doesn't go hungry. She likes the people to see the kind smile and helping hand and ignore the way she will happily mow down anyone who tries to stand in the way of her ambition.

She pauses in front of the statue of her namesake, Demeter. The statue is generously curved and wearing a flowing dress that melds with the flowers springing up at her feet. They match the floral wreath circling her head, and she smiles serenely as if she knows all the secrets of the universe. I've caught my mother practicing that exact expression.

Mother's lips curve, but the smile doesn't reach her eyes as she turns to us. "You're supposed to be mingling."

"I have a headache." The same excuse I used to try to get out of attending tonight. "Psyche was just checking on me."

"Mm--hmm." Mother shakes her head. "You two are becoming as hopeless as your sisters."

If I realized that being hopeless was the surest way to avoid Mother's meddling, I would have gone with that role instead of the one I chose. It's too late to change my path now, but the headache I faked is becoming a real possibility at the thought of going back to the party. "I'm going to cut out early. I think this might evolve into a migraine."

"You most definitely are not." She says it pleasantly enough, but there is steel in her tone. "Zeus wants to speak to you. There's absolutely no reason to make him wait."

I can think of half a dozen off the top of my head, but I know Mother won't listen to a single one. Still, I can't help but try. "You know, he's rumored to have killed all three of his wives."

"It's certainly less messy than a divorce."

I blink. I honestly can't tell if she's joking or not. "Mother..."

“Oh, relax. You’re so tense. Trust me, girls. I know best.”

My mother is likely the smartest person I know, but her goals are not my goals. There’s no easy way out of this, though, so I obediently fall into step next to Psyche and follow her out of the room. For a moment, I imagine I can feel the intensity of Hades’s statue staring at my back, but it’s pure fantasy. Hades is a dead title. Even if he wasn’t, my sister is probably right; he’d be just as bad as the rest of them.

We leave the statue room and walk down the long hallway leading back to the party. It’s like everything else in Dodona Tower—large and excessive and expensive. The hallway is easily twice as wide as it needs to be, and each door we pass is at least a foot taller than normal. Deep--red curtains hang from the ceiling to the floor and are pulled back on either side of the doors—an extra touch of extravagance that the space most certainly didn’t need. It gives the impression of walking through a palace rather than the skyscraper that towers over the upper city. As if anyone is in danger of forgetting that Zeus has styled himself as a modern--day king. I’m honestly surprised he doesn’t walk around with a crown that matches his statue’s.

The banquet room is more of the same. It’s a massive, sprawling space with one wall completely taken up with windows and a few glass doors leading out to the balcony that overlooks the city. We’re on the top floor of the tower, and the view is truly outstanding. From this point, a person can see a good portion of the upper city and the winding swath of blackness that is the River Styx. And on the other side? The lower city. It doesn’t look all that different from the upper city up here, but it might as well be on the moon for all that most of us can reach it.

Tonight, the balcony doors are closed tight to avoid anyone being inconvenienced by the icy winter wind. Instead of the view of the city, the darkness behind the glass has become a distorted mirror of the room. Everyone is dressed to the nines, a rainbow of designer gowns and tuxes, flashes of horribly expensive jewels and finery. They create a sickening kaleidoscope as people move through the crowd, mingling and networking and dripping beautiful poison from painted--red lips. It reminds me of a fun--house mirror. Nothing in the reflection is quite what it seems, for all its supposed beauty.

Around the remaining three walls are giant portraits of the twelve active members of the Thirteen. They’re oil paintings, a tradition that goes back to the beginning of Olympus. As if the Thirteen really do think they’re like the monarchs of old. The artist certainly took some liberties with a few of them. The younger version of Ares, in particular, looks nothing like the man himself. Age changes a person, but his jaw was never that square, nor his shoulders that broad. That artist also depicted him with a giant broadsword in his hand, when I know for a fact this Ares won his position by submission in the arena—not in war. But then, I suppose that doesn’t make for as majestic an image.

It takes a certain kind of person to gossip and mingle and backstab while their likeness stares down at them, but the Thirteen is filled with monsters like that.

Mother cuts through the crowd, perfectly at ease with all the other sharks. With nearly ten years serving as Demeter, she’s one of the newest members of the Thirteen, but she’s taken to moving in these circles like she was born to it instead of elected by the people the same way Demeters always are.

The crowd parts for her, and I can feel eyes on us as we follow her into the brightly colored mix. These people might resemble peacocks with the way they go the extra mile for these events, but to a person, their eyes are cold and merciless. I have no friends in this room—only people who seek to use me as a stepping stool to claw their way to more power. A lesson I learned early and harshly.

Two people move out of my mother’s way, and I catch a glimpse of the corner of the room I do my best to avoid when I’m here. It houses an honest--to--gods throne, a gaudy thing made of gold and silver and copper. The sturdy legs curve up

to armrests and the back of the throne flares out to give the impression of a thundercloud. As dangerous and electric as its owner, and he wants to be sure no one ever forgets it.

Zeus.

If Olympus is ruled by the Thirteen, the Thirteen are ruled by Zeus. It's a legacy role, one passed from parent to child, the bloodline stretching back to the first founding of the city. Our current Zeus has held his position for decades, ever since he took over at thirty.

He's somewhere north of sixty now. I suppose he's attractive enough if one likes big barrel--chested white men with great boisterous laughs and beards gone winter gray. He makes my skin crawl. Every time he looks at me with those faded blue eyes, I feel like I'm an animal at auction. Less than an animal, really. A pretty vase, or perhaps a statue. Something to be *owned*.

If a pretty vase is broken, it's easy enough to purchase a replacement. At least it is if you're Zeus.

Mother slows down, forcing Psyche back a few steps, and takes my hand. She squeezes hard enough to convey her silent warning to behave, but she's all smiles for *him*. "Look who I found!"

Zeus holds out his hand, and there's nothing to do but place mine in his and allow him to kiss my knuckles. His lips brush my skin for the barest moment, and the small hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I have to fight not to wipe the back of my hand on my dress when he finally releases me. Every instinct I have is screaming that I'm in danger.

I have to plant my feet to prevent myself from turning and running. I wouldn't make it far anyway. Not with my mother standing in the way. Not with the glittering crowd of people watching this little scene play out like vultures scenting blood on the wind. There's nothing this lot loves more than drama, and making a scene with Demeter and Zeus will result in consequences I don't want to deal with. At *best*, it will anger my mother. At worse, I run the risk of being a headline in the gossip mags, and that will land me in even more hot water. Better to just ride this out until I can escape.

Zeus's smile is a touch too warm. "Persephone. You look lovely tonight."

My heart beats like a bird trying to escape its cage. "Thank you," I murmur. I have to calm down, to smooth my emotions out. Zeus has a reputation as the kind of man who enjoys the distress of anyone weaker than he is. I won't give him the satisfaction of knowing he scares me. It's the only power I have in this situation, and I refuse to relinquish it.

He moves closer, edging into my personal space, and lowers his voice. "It's good to finally have a chance to speak with you. I've been trying to corner you for the last few months." He smiles, though it doesn't reach his eyes. "It's enough to make me think you're avoiding me."

"Of course not." I can't edge back without bumping into my mother...but I put several seconds of serious consideration into that option before discarding it. Mother will never forgive me if I make a scene before the all--powerful Zeus. *Ride it out. You can do this.* I dredge up a bright smile even as I begin chanting the mantra that's gotten me through the last year.

*Three months.* Just ninety days between me and freedom. Ninety days until I can access my trust fund and use it to get out of Olympus. *I can survive this. I will survive this.*

Zeus practically beams at me, all warm sincerity. "I know this isn't the most conventional approach, but it's time to make the announcement."

I blink. "Announcement?"

"Yes, Persephone." My mother edges in close, shooting daggers from her eyes. "The announcement." She's trying to beam some knowledge directly into my brain, but I have no idea what's going on.

Zeus reclaims my hand and my mother practically shoves me after him as he starts for the front of the room. I shoot a wild look at my sister, but Psyche is just as wide-eyed as I feel right now. What's going on?

People fall silent as we pass, their gazes a thousand needles against the back of my neck. I have no friends in this room. Mother would say it's my own fault for not networking the way she's instructed me to time and time again. I tried. Really, I did. It took all of a month to realize that the cruelest insults come with sweet smiles and honeyed words. After the first lunch invitation resulted in my misquoted words being splashed across the gossip headlines, I gave up. I will never play the game as well as the vipers in this room. I hate the false fronts and slippery insults and knives hidden in words and smiles. I want a normal life, but that's the one thing that's impossible with a mother in the Thirteen.

At least, it's impossible in Olympus.

Zeus stops at the front of the room and snags a champagne glass. It looks absurd in his large hand, like he'll shatter it with one rough touch. He raises the glass and the last few murmurs in the room fade away. Zeus grins at them. It's easy to see how he holds such devotion despite the rumors that circulate about him. The man practically has charisma oozing from his pores. "Friends, I haven't been completely honest with you."

"That's a first," someone says from the back of the room, sending a wave of faint laughter through the space.

Zeus laughs along with them. "While we are technically here to vote on the new trade agreements with Sabine Valley, I also have a little announcement to make. It's long past time for me to find a new Hera and make our number complete again. I've finally chosen." He looks at me, and it's the only warning I get before he speaks the words that light my dreams of freedom on fire so completely I can only watch them burn to ash. "Persephone Dimitriou, will you marry me?"

I can't breathe. His presence has sucked up all the air in the room, and the lights flare too bright. I teeter on my heels, only keeping my feet through sheer force of will. Will the others fall on me like a pack of wolves if I collapse now? I don't know, and because I don't know, I have to stay standing. I open my mouth, but nothing comes out.

My mother presses into me from the other side, all bright smiles and joyful tones. "Of course she will! She'll be honored to." Her elbow digs into my side. "Isn't that right?"

Saying no isn't an option. This is *Zeus*, king in everything but name. He gets what he wants when he wants it, and if I humiliate him right now in front of the most powerful people in Olympus, he'll make my entire family pay. I swallow hard. "Yes."

A cheer goes up, the sound making me dizzy. I catch sight of someone recording this with their phone and know without a shadow of a doubt that it will be all over the internet within an hour, on all the news stations by morning.

People come forward to congratulate us—really, to congratulate *Zeus*—and through it all he keeps his tight grip on my hand. I stare at the faces that move in a blur, a tidal wave of hate rising in me. These people don't care about me. I know that, of course. I've known that since my first interaction with them, since the moment we ascended to this vaulted social circle by virtue of my mother's new position. But this is a whole different level.

We all know the rumors about Zeus. *All* of us. He's gone through three Heras—three wives—in his time leading the Thirteen.

Three *dead* wives, now.

If I let this man put his ring on my finger, I might as well let him put a collar and leash on me, too. I will never be my own person, will never be anything but an extension of him until he grows tired of me, too, and replaces that collar with a coffin.

I will never be free of Olympus. Not until he dies and the title passes to his oldest child. That could be years. It could be *decades*. And that's making the outrageous assumption that I'll outlive him instead of ending six feet under like the rest of the Heras.

Frankly, I don't like my odds.

2

# PERSEPHONE

The party continues around me, but I can't focus on anything. Faces blur, colors meld together, the sound of gushing compliments are static in my ears. A scream is building in my chest, a sound of loss too big for my body, but I can't let it escape. If I start shrieking, I'm certain I'll never stop.

I sip champagne through numb lips, my free hand shaking so badly that the liquid sloshes around in the glass. Psyche appears in front of me as if by magic, and though she's got her blank expression firmly in place, her eyes are practically shooting lasers at both our mother and Zeus. "Persephone, I have to go to the bathroom. Come with me?"

"Of course." I barely sound like myself. I almost have to pry my fingers from Zeus's, and all I can think about are those meaty hands on my body. Oh gods, I'm going to be sick.

Psyche hustles me out of the ballroom, using her voluptuous body to shield me, dodging well--wishers as if she's my own personal security. The hallway doesn't feel any better, though. The walls are closing in. I can see Zeus's imprint on every inch of this place. If I marry him, he'll put his imprint on *me*, too. "I can't breathe," I gasp.

"Keep walking." She rushes me past the bathroom, around a corner, and to the elevator. The claustrophobic feeling is even worse when the doors close, trapping us in the mirrored space. I stare at my reflection. My eyes are too large in my face, and my pale skin is leached of color.

I can't stop shaking. "I'm going to be sick."

"Almost there, almost there." She practically carries me out of the elevator the second the doors open, taking us down another wide, marbled hall to a side door. We slip into one of the handful of courtyards that surround the building, a little bit of carefully curated garden in the midst of so much city. It's dormant now, dusted with the light snow that started to fall while we were inside. The cold cuts through me like a knife, and I welcome the sting. Anything is better than being up in that room for another moment longer.

Dodona Tower is in the very center of downtown Olympus, one of the few pieces of property that is owned by the Thirteen as a whole rather than any one of the individuals, though everyone knows it's Zeus's in every way that counts. It's a grand skyscraper that I used to find almost magical when I was too young to know better.

Psyche guides me to a stone bench. "Do you need to put your head between your knees?"

"It won't help." The world won't stop spinning. I have to... I don't know. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I've always seen my path before me, stretching out through the years to my ultimate goal. It's always been *so clear*. Finishing my master's degree here in Olympus, a compromise with my mother. Wait until I turn twenty--five and gain my trust fund and then use the money to break free of Olympus. It's hard to fight your way through the barrier that keeps us separate from the rest of the world, but it's not impossible. Not with the right people helping, and my money ensures that will be the case. And then I'll be free. I can move to California to do my PhD at Berkeley. A new city, a new life, a fresh start.

Now I can't see anything at all.

"I can't believe she did this." Psyche starts pacing, her movements short and angry, her dark hair so like our mother's swinging with each step. "Callisto is going to kill her. She *knew* you didn't want any part of this, and she forced you into it anyway."

"Psyche..." My throat feels hot and tight, my chest tighter yet. As if I've been impaled and am only now noticing. "He killed his last wife. His last *three* wives."

"You don't know that." She answers automatically, but she won't quite meet my gaze.

"Even if I don't... Mother knew what everyone believes he's capable of and didn't care." I wrap my arms around myself. It does nothing to quell my shakes. "She sold me to cement her power. She's already one of the Thirteen. Why isn't that good enough for her?"

Psyche perches on the bench next to me. "We'll figure out a way through this. We just need time."

"He's not going to give me time," I say dully. "He's going to push the wedding through just like he pushed the proposal." How long do I have? A week? A month?

"We should call Callisto."

"No." I nearly shout the word and make an effort to lower my voice. "If you tell her now, she'll come straight here and make a scene." When it comes to Callisto, that might mean yelling at our mother...or it might mean taking off one of the spike heels she favors and trying to stab Zeus in the throat. There would be consequences either way, and I can't let my older sister bear the burden of protecting me.

I have to figure my own way through this.

Somehow.

"Maybe making a scene is a good thing at this point."

Bless Psyche, but she still doesn't understand. As daughters of Demeter, we have two choices—play within the rules of Olympus or leave the city behind entirely. That's it. There is no bucking the system without paying the cost, and the consequences are too severe. One of us stepping out of line will create a ripple effect impacting everyone connected to us. Even Mother being one of the Thirteen won't save us if it comes to that.

I should marry him. It would ensure my sisters remain protected, or as near to it as is possible in this pit of vipers. It's the right thing to do, even if the very thought makes me ill. As if in response, my stomach surges and I barely get to the nearest bushes in time to be sick. I'm vaguely aware of Psyche holding my hair away from my face and rubbing my back in soothing circles.

I should do this...but I can't.

"I can't do this." Saying it aloud makes it feel more real. I wipe my mouth and force myself to stand.

"We're missing something. There's no way that Mother would send you into a marriage with a man who might harm you. She's ambitious, but she loves us. She wouldn't put us in danger."

There was a time when I agreed. After tonight, I don't know what to believe. "I can't do this," I repeat. "I *won't* do this."

Psyche digs through her tiny purse and comes up with a stick of gum. When I make a face at her, she shrugs. "No use getting distracted by puke breath while you're making life--changing statements of intent."

I take the gum and the peppermint flavor *does* help ground me a bit. "I can't do this," I repeat again.

"Yes, you've mentioned that." She doesn't tell me how impossible this situation is going to be to get out of. She also doesn't list all the reasons fighting it will never go my way. I'm just a single woman against all the power Olympus can bring to the fore. Stepping out of line isn't an option. They'll force me to my knees before they let me go. Getting out of this city was already going to take every resource I had. Getting out now that Zeus has claimed me? I don't know if it's even possible.

Psyche takes my hands. "What are you going to do?"

Panic bleats through my head. I have the budding suspicion that if I walk back into that building, I'll never walk back out again. It feels paranoid, but I'd felt weird about how furtive Mother was acting for days now and look how that turned

out. No, I can't afford to ignore my instincts. Not any longer. Or maybe my fear is clouding my thoughts. I don't know and I don't care. I just know I absolutely *cannot* go back.

"Can you go get my purse?" I left both it and my phone upstairs. "And tell Mother that I don't feel so well and that I'm going home?"

Psyche is already nodding. "Of course. Anything you need."

It takes ten seconds after she's gone to register that going home won't solve any of these problems. Mother will just come collect me and deliver me back to my new fiancé, trussed up if necessary. I scrub my hands over my face.

I can't go home, I can't stay here, I can't *think*.

I shove to my feet and turn for the entrance to the courtyard. I should wait for Psyche to get back, should let her talk me down into something resembling calm. She's just as cunning as Mother; she'll come up with a solution if given enough time. But letting her get involved means running the risk that Zeus will punish her alongside me the second he realizes I desperately don't want his ring on my finger. If there's a chance to spare my sisters from the consequences of my actions, I'm going to do it. Mother and Zeus will have no reason to punish them if they had no part in helping me defy this marriage.

I have to get out and I have to do it alone. Now.

I take one step and then another. I almost stop when I come even with the thick stone archway leading out onto the street, almost let my rising reckless fear fail me and turn back to submit to the collar Zeus and my mother are so keen to put around my neck.

*No.*

The single word feels like a battle cry. I surge forward, past the entrance and out onto the sidewalk. I pick up my pace, moving at a brisk walk and turning south on instinct. Away from my mother's home. Away from Dodona Tower and all the predators contained within. If I can just get some distance, I can *think*. That's what I need. If I can get my thoughts in order, I can come up with a plan and find a way out of this mess.

The wind picks up as I walk, cutting through my thin dress as if it doesn't exist. I move faster, my heels clicking along the pavement in a way that reminds me of my mother, which only serves to remind me of what she's done.

I don't care if Psyche is likely right, that Mother undoubtedly has some scheme up her sleeve that doesn't put my head on a literal chopping block. Her plans make no difference. She didn't talk to me, didn't give me the benefit of the doubt; she simply sacrificed this pawn to get access to the king. It makes me sick.

The tall buildings of downtown Olympus do a bit to cut off the wind, but every time I cross a street, it barrels down from the north and whips my dress around my legs. It feels extra icy coming off the water of the bay, so cold my sinuses hurt. I have to get out of the elements, but the thought of turning around and walking back to Dodona Tower is too awful to bear. I'd rather freeze.

I laugh hoarsely at the absurd thought. Yes, that'll show them. Losing a few toes and fingers to frostbite will definitely hurt my mother and Zeus more than it hurts me. I can't tell if it's panic or the cold making me loopy.

Downtown Olympus is just as carefully polished as Zeus's tower. All the storefronts create a unified style that's elegant and minimalist. Metal and glass and stone. It's pretty but ultimately soulless. The only indicator of what kind of businesses are contained behind the various glass doors are tasteful vertical signs with the business names. The further from the city center, the more individual style and flavor seep into the neighborhoods, but this close to Dodona Tower, Zeus controls everything.

If we marry, will he order clothes for me so that I fit seamlessly in with his aesthetic? Supervise my hair stylist visits to mold me in the image he wants? Monitor what I do, what I say, what I *think*? The thought makes me shudder.

It takes me three blocks before I realize my footsteps aren't the only ones I hear. I glance over my shoulder to find two men half a block back. I pick up my pace, and they match it easily. Not quite trying to close the distance, but I can't shake the sensation of being hunted.

This late, all the shops and businesses in the downtown area are closed. There's music a few blocks away that must be a bar still open. Maybe I can lose them in there—and get warm in the process.

I take the next left turn, aiming in the direction of the sound. Another look over my shoulder shows only a single man behind me. Where did the other one go?

I get my answer a few seconds later when he appears in the next intersection from my left. He's not blocking the street, but every instinct I have tells me to stay as far away from him as possible. I veer right, once again heading south.

The farther I get from the center of downtown, the more the buildings begin to break away from the cookie--cutter image. I begin to see trash on the street. Several of the businesses have bars on their windows. There is even a foreclosure sign or two taped to dirty doors. Zeus only cares about what he can see, and apparently his gaze doesn't stretch to this block.

Maybe it's the cold muddling my thoughts, but it takes me far too long to realize that they're driving me to the River Styx. True fears clamps its teeth into me. If they corner me against the banks, I will be trapped. There are only three bridges between the upper city and the lower city, but no one uses them—not since the final Hades died. Crossing the river is forbidden. If legend is to be believed, it's not actually possible without paying some kind of terrible price.

And that's if I even managed to reach a bridge.

Terror gives me wings. I stop worrying about how much my feet hurt in these ridiculously uncomfortable heels. The cold barely registers. There has to be a way to get around my pursuers, to find people who can help.

I don't even have my fucking phone.

Damn it, I shouldn't have let emotions get the best of me. If I'd just waited for Psyche to bring me my purse, none of this would be happening... Would it?

Time ceases to have meaning. The seconds are measured in each harsh exhale tearing itself from my chest. I can't think, can't stop, am nearly sprinting. Gods, my feet hurt.

At first, I barely register the rushing sound of the river. It's almost impossible to hear over my own ragged breathing. But then it's there in front of me, a wet, black ribbon too wide, too fast to swim safely, even if it were summer. In the winter, it's a death sentence.

I spin around to find the men closer. I can't quite make out their faces in the shadows, which is right around the time I realize how quiet the night's gotten. The sound of that bar is barely a murmur in the distance.

No one is coming to save me.

No one even knows I'm here.

The man on the right, the taller of the two, laughs in a way that has my body fighting off shudders that have nothing to do with the cold. "Zeus would like a word."

*Zeus.*

Had I imagined this situation couldn't get worse? Foolish of me. These aren't random predators. They were sent after me like dogs retrieving a runaway hare. I hadn't really thought he'd stand idly by and let me escape, had I?

Apparently so, because shock steals what little thought I have left. If I stop running, they will collect me and return me to my fiancé. He will cage me. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that I won't get another opportunity to escape.

I don't think. I don't plan.

I kick off my heels and run for my life.

Behind me, they curse, and then their footsteps pound. Too close. The river curves here, and I follow the bank. I don't even know where I'm headed. Away. I have to get away. I don't care what it looks like. I'd throw myself into the icy river itself to escape Zeus. Anything is better than the monster who rules the upper city.

Cypress Bridge rises up in front of me, an ancient stone bridge with columns that are larger around than I am and twice as tall. They create an arch that gives the impression of leaving this world behind.

"Stop!"

I ignore the yell and plunge through the arch. It hurts. Fuck, *everything* hurts. My skin stings as if being scraped raw by some invisible barrier, and my feet feel like I'm sprinting on glass. I don't care. I can't stop now, not with them so close. I barely notice the fog rising around me, coming off the river in waves.

I'm halfway across the bridge when I catch sight of the man standing on the other bank. He's wrapped in a black coat with his hands in his pockets, fog curling around his legs like a dog with its master. A fanciful thought, which is only further confirmation that I am not okay. I'm not even in the same realm as okay.

"Help!" I don't know who this stranger is, but he's got to be better than what pursues me. "Please help!"

He doesn't move.

My steps falter, my body finally beginning to shut down from the cold and fear and strange slicing pain of crossing this bridge. I stumble, nearly going to my knees, and meet the stranger's eyes. *Pleading*.

He looks down at me, still as a statue draped in black, for what feels like an eternity. Then he seems to make a choice: lifting a hand, palm extended toward me, he beckons me across what remains of the River Styx. I'm finally close enough to see his dark hair and beard, to imagine the intensity of his dark gaze as the strange buzzing tension in the air seems to relax around me, allowing me to push through those final steps to the other side without pain. "Come," he says simply.

Somewhere in the depths of my panic, my mind is screaming that this is a terrible mistake. I don't care. I dredge up the last bit of my strength and sprint for him.

I don't know who this stranger is, but anyone is preferable to Zeus.

No matter the price.

3

# HADES

The woman doesn't belong on my side of the River Styx. That alone should be enough to make me turn away, but I can't help but notice her limping sprint. The fact that she's barefoot without a fucking coat in the middle of January. The plea in her eyes.

Not to mention the two men chasing her down, trying to get to her before she reaches this side. They don't want her to cross the bridge, which tells me all I need to know—they owe allegiance to one of the Thirteen. Normal citizens of Olympus avoid crossing the river, preferring to stick to their respective sides of the River Styx without fully understanding what makes them turn back when they reach one of the three bridges, but these two are acting like they realize she'll be out of their reach once she touches this bank.

I motion with my hand. "Faster."

She glances behind her, and panic sounds from her body as loudly as if she'd screamed. She's more afraid of *them* than she is of me, which might be a revelation if I stopped to think about it too hard. She's almost to me, a few short yards away.

That's when I realize I recognize her. I've seen those big hazel eyes and that pretty face plastered on all the gossip sites that love following the Thirteen and their circles of friends and family. This woman is Demeter's second daughter, Persephone.

What is *she* doing here?

"Please," she gasps again.

There's nowhere for her to run. They're on one side of the bridge. I'm on the other. She must be truly desperate to make the crossing, to push past those invisible barriers and throw her safety in with a man like me. "Run," I say. The treaty keeps me from being able to go to her, but once she reaches me—

Behind her, the men pick up their pace, fully sprinting in an effort to get to her before she gets to me. She's slowed down, her steps closer to hobbling, indicating that she's injured in some way. Or maybe it's purely exhaustion. Still, she stumbles on, determined.

I count the distance as she covers it. *Twenty feet. Fifteen. Ten. Five.*

The men are close. So fucking close. But rules are rules, and not even I can break them. She has to make it to the bank of her own power. I look past her at them, an ugly recognition rolling through me. I know these men; I have files on them that stretch back years. They are two enforcers who work behind the scenes for Zeus, taking care of tasks he'd rather his worshipping public not know he engages in.

The fact that they're here, chasing *her*, means something big is happening. Zeus likes to play with his prey, but surely he wouldn't try that game with one of Demeter's daughters? It doesn't matter. She's almost out of his territory...and into mine.

And then, miraculously, she makes it.

I catch Persephone around the waist the second she hits this side of the bridge, spin her and pin her back to my chest. She feels even smaller in my arms, even more breakable, and a slow anger rises in me at the way she shivers. These fuckers have chased her for some time, terrorizing her at *his* command. No doubt it's a punishment of sorts; Zeus always did like driving people to the River Styx, letting their fear build with each block they passed until they were trapped on the banks

of the river. Persephone is one of the few to actually attempt one of the bridges. It speaks to an inner strength to attempt the crossing without an invitation, let alone to succeed. I respect that.

But we all have our roles to play tonight, and even if I don't plan to harm this woman, the reality is that she's a trump card that's fallen right into my hands. It's an opportunity I won't pass up. "Hold still," I murmur.

She freezes except for her gasping inhales and exhales. "Who—"

"Not now." I do my best to ignore her shivering for the moment and bracket her throat with a hand, waiting for these two to catch up. I'm not hurting her, but I exert the slightest bit of pressure to keep her in place—to make it look convincing. She stills against me. I'm not sure if it's instinctive trust or fear or exhaustion, but it doesn't matter.

The men stumble to a stop, unwilling and unable to cross the remaining distance between us. I'm on the bank of the lower city. *I* haven't broken any laws and they know it. The one on the right glares. "That's Zeus's woman you have there."

Persephone goes rigid in my arms, but I ignore it. I draw on my rage, injecting it into my voice in icy tones. "Then he shouldn't have let his little pet wander so far from safety."

"You're making a mistake. A big mistake."

Wrong. This isn't a mistake. It's an opportunity I've been waiting thirty fucking years to find. A chance to strike right to the heart of Zeus in his shining empire. To take someone important to him the same way he took the two most important people to *me* when I was a child. "She's in my territory now. You're welcome to try to steal her back, but the consequences for breaking the treaty will be on your head."

They're smart enough to know what that means. No matter how much Zeus wants this woman returned to him, even he can't break this treaty without bringing the rest of the Thirteen down on his head. They exchange a look. "He's going to kill you."

"He's welcome to try." I stare them down. "She's mine now. Be sure to tell Zeus how much I intend to enjoy his unexpected gift." I move then, throwing Persephone over my shoulder and striding down the street, deeper into my territory. Whatever held her paralyzed up to this point shatters and she struggles, beating my back with her fists.

"Put me down."

"No."

"Let me go."

I ignore her and stalk around the corner, moving quickly. Once we're out of sight of the bridge, I set her on her feet. The woman tries to take a swing at me, which might amuse me under other circumstances. She's got more fight in her than I expected from one of Demeter's socialite daughters. I had planned on letting her walk on her own, but lingering out in the night after that confrontation is a mistake. She's not dressed for it, and there's always the chance that Zeus has spies in my territory who will report this interaction back to him.

After all, I have spies in *his* territory.

I shrug out of my coat and shove her into it, zipping it up before she has a chance to fight me, trapping her arms at her sides. She curses, but I'm already moving again, lifting her back over my shoulder. "Be quiet."

"The fuck I will."

My patience, already whisper thin, nearly snaps. "You're half-frozen and limping. Shut up and be still until we get inside."

She doesn't stop muttering under her breath, but she *does* stop struggling. It's enough. Getting away from the river is the first priority right now. I doubt Zeus's men will be foolish enough to attempt to finish the crossing, but tonight's already brought the unexpected. I know better than to take anything for granted.

The buildings this close to the river are intentionally run--down and empty. All the better to preserve the narrative the upper city likes to tell itself about my side of the river. If those glittering assholes think there's nothing of value down here, they leave me and my people alone. The treaty only lasts as long as the Thirteen are in agreement. If they ever decide to band together to take the lower city, it means the worst kind of trouble. Better to avoid it altogether.

A great plan up until tonight. I've kicked the hornet's nest and there's no unkicking it. The woman over my shoulder will either be the tool I use to finally bring Zeus down, or she'll be my ruin.

Cheery thoughts.

I barely reach the end of the block before two shadows peel off from the buildings on either side of the street and fall into step a few feet behind me. Minthe and Charon. I've long since gotten used to the fact that my nightly wanderings are never truly solo. Even when I was a kid, no one ever tried to stop me. They just made sure I didn't get into any trouble I couldn't get out of again. When I finally took over the lower city and my guardian stepped down, he handed over control on everything except this.

A softer person would assume my people do it out of care. Maybe that's part of it. But at the end of the day, if I die now without an heir, the carefully curated balance of Olympus teeters and crumbles. The fools in the upper city don't even realize how vital a cog I am to their machine. Unspoken, unacknowledged...but I prefer it that way.

Nothing good comes when the other Thirteen turn their golden eyes this way.

I cut through an alley and then another. There are parts of the lower city that look like the rest of Olympus, but this isn't one of them. The alleys stink to high heaven and glass crunches under my shoes with each step. Someone who only saw the surface would miss the carefully concealed cameras arranged to take in the space from all angles.

No one approaches my home without my people knowing about it. Not even me, though I've long since learned a few tricks for when I need *actual* alone time. I turn left and stride to a nondescript door tucked into an equally nondescript brick wall. A quick glance at the tiny camera angled at the top of the door and the lock clicks open beneath my hand. I shut the door softly behind me. Minthe and Charon will sweep the area and double back to ensure the two almost intruders don't get any foolish ideas.

"We're inside now. Put me down." Persephone's voice is as frigid as any princess at court.

I start down the narrow staircase. "No." It's dark, the only light coming from faint runners on the floor. The air goes breathtakingly cold as I reach the end of the stairs. We're fully underground now, and we don't bother with climate control in the tunnels. They're here for easy traveling or a last--minute escape route. They're not here for comfort. She shivers over my shoulder, and I'm glad I took the time to throw the coat on her. I won't be able to see her injuries until we're back in my home, and the quicker that happens, the better for everyone.

"Put. Me. Down."

"No," I repeat. I'm not about to waste my breath explaining that she's running on sheer adrenaline right now, which means she's not feeling any pain. And she *will* be feeling pain once those endorphins wear off. Her feet are fucked up. I don't think she has hypothermia, but I have no idea how long she was exposed to the winter night in that sad excuse of a dress.

"Do you often kidnap people?"

I pick up my pace. Gone is the spiky fury, replaced by a calm that has concern rising. She might be going into shock, which will be damned inconvenient. I have a doctor on call, but the fewer people who know Persephone Dimitriou is in my possession right now, the better. At least until I figure out a plan to use this unexpected gift.

"Did you hear me?" She shifts a little. "I asked if you often kidnap people."

"Be quiet. We're almost there."

"That's not really an answer." I get a few seconds of blessed silence before she keeps talking. "Then again, I've never been kidnapped before, so I suppose expecting an answer about your kidnapper's prior experience is just silly."

She sounds downright *chipper*. She's definitely in shock. Continuing this line of conversation is a mistake, but I find myself saying, "You ran to me. That's hardly kidnapping."

"Did I? I was just running to get away from the two men pursuing me. Your being there or not is immaterial."

She can say that all she likes, but I saw the way she zeroed in on me. She wanted my help. Needed it. And I had been unable to deny her. "You practically threw yourself into my arms."

"I was being chased. You seemed the lesser of two evils." The tiniest of pauses. "I'm beginning to wonder if I've made a terrible mistake."

I wind my way through the maze of tunnels to another set of stairs. This one is nearly identical to the ones I just descended, right down to the pale runners on each stair. I take them two at a time, ignoring her faint *oof* in response to my shoulder jarring her stomach. Once again, the door clicks open the second I touch it, unlocked by whoever is on shift in the security room. I slow down enough to ensure the door is properly closed behind me.

Persephone twists a little on my shoulder. "A wine cellar. I don't think I saw this coming."

"Is there a part of tonight that you *did* see coming?" I curse myself for asking the question, but she's acting so strangely unflappable that I'm genuinely curious. More than that, if she's actually verging into hypothermia, keeping her talking right now is the wise course of action.

At that, her strangely cheerful tone fades down to almost a whisper. "No. I didn't see any of it coming."

Guilt pricks me, but I ignore it with the ease of long practice. One last set of stairs out of the wine cellar and I stop in the back hallway of my home. After a quick internal debate, I head for the kitchen. There are first aid supplies tucked in a number of rooms around the building, but the two largest kits are in the kitchen and in my bedroom. The kitchen is closer.

I push open the door and stop short. "What are you two doing here?"

Hermes freezes, two bottles of my best wine in her small hands. She gives me a winning grin that isn't the least bit sober. "There was a snore--fest of a party in Dodona Tower. We cut out early."

Dionysus has his head in my fridge, which is enough to tell me that he's already drunk or high—or some combination of both. "You have the best snacks," he says without pausing in his raiding of my food.

"Now's not a good time."

Hermes blinks behind her oversize yellow--framed glasses. "Uh, Hades."

The woman over my shoulder jolts as if struck by a live wire. "*Hades?*"

Hermes blinks again and shoves back her cloud of black curls with one forearm. "Am I really, really drunk, or is that Persephone Dimitriou thrown over your shoulder like you're about to role--play some sexy pillaging?"

"That's impossible." Dionysus finally appears with the pie my housekeeper left in the fridge earlier today. He's eating it directly from the container. At least he's using a fork this time. He also has some crumbs in his beard and only one side of his mustache is curled; the other is only a little crimped, as if he's scrubbed a hand over his face recently. He frowns at

me. "Okay, maybe not impossible. Either that or the weed I smoked with Helen in the courtyard before leaving was laced with something."

Even if they hadn't told me they'd come directly from a party, their clothing says it all. Hermes is wearing a short dress that would double as a disco ball, reflecting little sparkles against her dark--brown skin. Dionysus probably started the night with a suit, but he's down to a white V--neck and there is a ball of wadded--up cloth on my kitchen island that's no doubt his jacket and shirt.

Over my shoulder, Persephone has gone stock--still. I'm not even sure she's breathing. The temptation arises to turn around and walk away, but I know from past experience that these two will just follow along and pepper me with questions until I give in to frustration and snap at them.

Better to rip off the Band--Aid now.

I set Persephone on the counter and keep a hand on her shoulder to prevent her from taking a nosedive. She blinks big hazel eyes up at me, little shivers racking her body. "She called you Hades."

"It's my name." I pause. "Persephone."

Hermes laughs and sets the wine bottles on the counter with a clink. She points at herself. "Hermes." She points at him. "Dionysus." Another laugh. "Though you already knew that." She leans against my shoulder and whisper--yells, "She's going to marry Zeus."

I turn slowly to look at Hermes. "What?" I knew she had to be important to Zeus in order for him to send his men after her, but *marriage*? That means I have my hands on the shoulders of the next Hera.

"Yep." Hermes works the cork out of one of the bottles and takes a long drink directly from it. "They announced it tonight. You just stole the fiancée of the most powerful man in Olympus. It's a good thing they aren't married yet, or you would have kidnapped one of the Thirteen." She giggles. "That is positively *devious*, Hades. I didn't think you had it in you."

"I knew he did." Dionysus tries to eat another bite of pie but has a bit of trouble finding his mouth, getting the fork tangled in his beard instead. He blinks down at the utensil as if it's the one to blame. "He's the boogeyman, after all. You don't get that kind of reputation without being a tiny bit devious."

"That's about enough of that." I dig my phone out of my pocket. I need to see to Persephone, but I can't do that while fielding dozens of questions from these two.

"Hades!" Hermes whines. "Don't kick us out. We just got here."

"I didn't invite you." Not that that's stopped them from crossing the river whenever they feel like it. Part of that is Hermes—she can go where she pleases, when she pleases by virtue of her position. Dionysus technically has a standing invitation, but it was only meant to be for business purposes.

"You *never* invite us." She pouts red lips that she's somehow managed not to smudge. "It's enough to make a person think you don't like us."

I give her the look that statement deserves and dial Charon. He should be back by now. Sure enough, he answers quickly. "Yeah?"

"Hermes and Dionysus are here. Send someone to take them to their rooms." I could toss them in a car and send them home, but with these two, there's no guarantee that they won't get a wild hair and come right back—or make even more questionable decisions. Last time I sent them home like this, they ended up ditching my driver and trying to take a drunken swim in the River Styx. At least if they're under my roof, I can keep an eye on them until they sober up.

I am aware of Persephone staring at me like I've sprouted horns, but getting this pair of idiots taken care of is the first priority. Two of my people arrive and usher them out, but only after a strained negotiation that has them taking the pie and wine with them.

I sigh the moment the door closes behind them. "Those are thousand-dollar bottles of wine. She's drunk enough that she's not even going to taste it."

Persephone makes a strange hiccupping sound, which is my only warning before she shoves my coat off—having unzipped it while I was distracted—and makes a run for it. I'm surprised enough that I stand there and watch her try to hobble for the door. And she *is* hobbling.

A glimpse of red streaking the floor in her wake is enough to snap me out of it. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"You can't keep me here!"

I snag her around the waist and carry her back to the kitchen island to drop her on it. "You're acting like a fool."

Big hazel eyes glare at me. "You *kidnapped* me. Trying to escape you is the smart thing to do."

I grab her ankle and lift her foot to get a good look at it. It's only when Persephone scrambles to hold her dress in place that I realize I probably could have gone about this in a different way. Oh well. I carefully touch her sole and show her my finger. "You're bleeding." There are several large gashes, but I can't tell if they're deep enough to need stitches.

"Then let me go to the hospital and I'll get it taken care of."

She's nothing if not persistent. I tighten my grip on her ankle. She's still shivering. Damn it, I don't have time for this argument. "Let's say I do that."

"Then *do* it."

"Do you think you'll get ten feet inside a hospital without the staff calling your mother?" I hold her gaze. "Without them calling your...fiancé?"

She flinches. "I'll figure it out."

"Like I said—you're being foolish." I shake my head. "Now hold still while I check for glass."