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CASSANDRA

I hate parties, Olympus, and politics...but not necessarily in that order.

I can avoid two out of the three on good days, but today is promising to be anything but. It started this morning when I spilled my coffee all over Apollo's shirt. A rookie mistake, and one that might get me fired if my boss were anyone other than *Apollo*. He just gave a small smile, assured me it was his fault when it was clearly mine, and changed into the spare suit he kept in his office.

He should have yelled at me.

I've worked for the man for five years now, and even that isn't enough time to stop expecting the other shoe to drop. He's hardly perfect—he's one of the Thirteen who rule Olympus, after all, and there are no saints among them—but he's the best of the bunch. He's never abused his power over me, never turned his position as my boss into an excuse to be a petty tyrant, has never even raised his voice no matter how thoroughly I've fucked up from time to time.

It's maddening.

I shove my hair back, hating that I can feel sweat slicking down my back as I climb the last flight of stairs. Something is wrong with the elevator in Dodona Tower, and for reasons that seem suspect, it only goes halfway up. I glare down at the file in my hand. I *should* have just left well enough alone when I realized Apollo forgot it as he rushed out the door for his meeting with Zeus. He's an adult and is more than capable of dealing with the consequences.

But...he didn't yell at me.

No one who knows me would call me a bleeding heart—more like a coldhearted bitch—so I have absolutely no reason to have caught a cab to the center of the upper city, taken the elevator halfway up, and then proceeded to climb the rest of the thirty floors on foot.

In six--inch heels, no less.

There's something wrong with me. There must be. Maybe I have a fever.

I press the back of my hand to my forehead and then feel extra foolish because *of course* I feel overheated. I just did more exercise than I would ever intentionally participate in unless running for my life. And even then, I'd fight before I ran.

I curse myself for the millionth time as I push through the stairwell door and out into the hallway where Zeus's office is located. Then I get a look at my reflection in the massive mirror next to the elevator. "Oh no."

My red hair has gone flat, and there's a *sweat stain* darkening the line under my breasts—which means there's an answering one down my spine. I'm practically dripping. Without thinking, I dab at my forehead, and then immediately regret it when my blouse comes away with a smear of foundation. My makeup has to be melting off my face right now. I look like I got caught in a rainstorm, except it's not rain, it's sweat, and my face is the color of a tomato on top of everything else.

"Fuck this, he doesn't need the file that bad." I turn for the elevator...and then remember that to flee, I have to make the return trip down fifteen flights of stairs. My thighs shake at the thought. Or maybe they're shaking from the climb.

Does it count as a workplace accident if I fall down the stairs on an errand I technically wasn't asked to do? Apollo would probably find some way to blame himself and pay for my medical bills, but getting hurt like that means no

paycheck, and no paycheck means my little sister might not have the money she needs to buy books or school supplies or all the other random shit being at university requires. I can't risk an injury, even if it means I'm humiliated in the process.

"Cassandra?"

I curse myself yet again and turn to face the gorgeous white woman walking down the hallway toward me. Ares is her name now, but it used to be Helen Kasios. I wouldn't call us friends exactly, but I've attended the parties she used to throw from time to time before she became one of the Thirteen. It always felt a bit like watching animals in a zoo as I posted up against a wall and witnessed the powerful people from Olympus's legacy families poke and snap at one another. I've learned a lot from playing the sidelines; nearly enough to protect me and my sister from the circling wolves.

But Helen isn't too bad, honestly. She's never cruel when kindness will further her goals, and she's perfected a glittery exterior that everyone seems to think means she's empty--headed, but I've always interpreted as a warning not to get too close. No one surfs the political currents as adeptly as she does if they're not smarter than most of the people in the room.

But that was before she became Ares. Now I can't take anything for granted when it comes to her. We aren't on the same level—two women from legacy families, even if mine is disgraced and hers rules Olympus.

She's one of them now, and I'm still me.

"Helen. Or, rather, Ares." I strive to keep my tone even, but her name still comes out too sharply. "What are you doing here?"

"Meeting with my lovely brother." She shrugs. She's built slim the way her mother was, though there's clear muscle definition in the arms left bare by her black sheath dress. She looks cool and professional and untouchable, her light--brown hair perfectly done.

I feel grimy standing next to her. I haven't wanted a thin body in over a decade—I love my curves out of sheer defiance of everyone who acts like they should be part of a *before* picture—but it's hard not to compare us when we stand like this.

I ruthlessly squash the urge to shift, to conceal. There's no fixing how messy I look, and trying to do it will just telegraph how uncomfortable I am right now. I raise my chin and focus on smoothing out my expression instead. "I see."

She gives me a long look. "Apollo's in with him now. I don't think he knew you were coming, or he would have waited for you."

There's no getting out of this. I'm here. I might as well see it through. I hold up the file between us like a shield. "He forgot this."

"Ah." She glances back down the hallway. "Well, I'll walk you down there."

"That's really not necessary."

"It really is." She spins on a heel and faces the same direction as me. "With things in a bit of upheaval right now, the security is ramped up. Honestly, I'm not sure how you got up here at all. My people are supposed to have the upper floors locked down."

That explains the elevator "malfunction" and why the guy downstairs was such an asshole. I shrug a single shoulder. "I'm persuasive."

"More like you're terrifying." She laughs, a sound so happy it makes my chest ping in envy. I don't want what Ares has—the title, the power, the responsibility—but it must be nice to be so comfortable in how she moves through the world, sure that it will bend to her impressive will.

I'm not naive enough to think that everything comes as easily to her as it appears, but I've had to fight and claw my way through the last decade of life. People look at me and don't automatically assume innocence. I'm painted with the same shame my parents were, even if I don't deserve it.

Not that it matters. I don't give a fuck what these peacocks think of me.

Not even Ares.

"Your people are specially trained," I snap. "If they can't take me, that sounds like a *you* problem."

"Absolutely." She agrees so damn easily. "By the way, is Orpheus still bothering you?"

Mention of Apollo's brother makes me frown. What does Orpheus have to do with anything? It takes several steps for understanding to settle over me. She's talking about that party where he was being an arrogant little prick, but that was months ago. I'm honestly surprised she remembered at all. "I can handle Orpheus." He might be bigger than me, but he's brittle. I could break him without lifting a finger.

"If you're sure... I know it's a touchy subject because he's Apollo's little brother."

I snort. I can't help it. "Apollo has more or less washed his hands of Orpheus." As much as Apollo can wash his hands of anyone in his family. What it really translates to is that he's stopped smoothing over Orpheus's messes and cut off his money. With how their mother babies the spoiled brat, it never would have worked if Apollo wasn't, well, Apollo. "When he shapes up, he can play prodigal son and get all the attention he's deprived of right now. He has bigger things to worry about than chasing some woman who doesn't want him."

"If that ever changes, don't hesitate to call me."

"Sure," I lie. I know better than to trust anyone in this godsforsaken city. When push comes to shove, Ares will look out for herself and her interests before helping someone else. Expecting anything else is like expecting a fish to sprout wings and fly. "I'll do that."

"No, you won't." Ares smiles. "But the offer still stands. Here we are." She stops in front of a large dark door with Zeus's golden nameplate on it. The current Zeus is Ares's brother. The last one was her father. I'd rather chew off my own arm than deal with either of the men who've held the title during my lifetime, but I'm here. It's too late to go back now.

I do my best not to hold my breath—-not with Ares watching—-and knock.

Apollo's the one who opens the door, and I instinctively brace myself for a whole new reason.

I hate looking at Apollo. He's too fucking perfect, a product of his Swedish father and his Korean model of a mother. Tall, broad shoulders, perfectly trimmed black hair, and kind dark eyes. It's the latter that always hits me like a blow to the chest.

I should have quit a long time ago.

As his executive assistant, I've got my fingers in an information network that spans all of Olympus and beyond. I'm the one who compiles the reports from the various sources, complete with my thoughts, before Apollo gets them. The work is challenging, and I actually enjoy it.

Not that I'll ever admit as much out loud.

But as much as I like what I do, this attraction is getting to be too much. Better to work in an office job I loathe than to have...feelings...about my boss. Even if the feelings in question are something as simple as lust. It complicates things.

I know what happens to people who get tangled up with the Thirteen.

They die.

I shove the file at him. "You forgot this." My voice is too sharp, too bitchy. He didn't ask me to do this, but I'm embarrassed and it's so much easier to snarl and snap than admit it. "I'm not your errand girl, and now I'm in overtime for the week."

Apollo raises a single dark brow. "You didn't have to come all this way, Cassandra. I would have done without."

Without a doubt. He's capable on a truly terrifying level and has nearly perfect recall of anything he's ever read. He would have been fine relaying the contents of the file without having it on hand. He probably only put it together for Zeus's benefit.

But he was nice to me this morning.

I am a *fool*.

"You're welcome." I turn on my heel. "See you tomorrow."

"Cassandra."

I ignore him and keep going. If security is the reason the elevators won't go above floor fifteen, then I bet they'll descend from here. They're keeping people out, not in. My exit won't be marred by having to take a breather on the stairwell and praying to the gods that no one stumbles on me. My pride won't be able to handle it.

"Cassandra." He's closer. Damn it, I should have known he wouldn't let this go.

I sigh and stop. It's beneath both our dignities to have him chase me down the hall in front of Ares. Apollo stops next to me, his longer legs having covered the distance easily. He pauses. "Thank you for bringing this. If you'll hold on for a few minutes, I'm just wrapping up. I'll give you a ride home."

The temptation to say yes nearly makes my knees buckle. I've shared enough rides with him on the way from one meeting to another over the years. I know exactly how it will go. He'll slump back against the seat and loosen his perfect black tie. Not a lot. Just enough to drive me to distraction. Then he'll pull out his phone and leave me to my thoughts.

Apollo never prattles on the way some people do. He's not one of those strong, silent types, but he doesn't feel the need to fill quiet moments with inane chatter. The car ride will be comfortable and lovely, and I absolutely cannot say yes to it. It's one thing to have those moments during the workday when I can tell myself there's no avoiding them. After hours?

No. Absolutely not.

"I'm fine."

He searches my face as if he can tell I'm being stubborn for the sake of being stubborn, but Apollo is a man who respects boundaries so he just nods. "Keep the cab--fare receipt and expense it."

I hate how weak I get at the simple thoughtfulness he continually demonstrates. Apollo is too savvy not to know how tight money is for me—his entire job is information, after all—and he also understands me well enough to guess I won't take charity. Not from him. Not from anyone. Not when it's never really charity and always comes with strings attached.

But a business expense?

My pride can handle that.

"Fine."

"See you tomorrow, Cassandra." The warmth in his tone almost brings me up short, before I forcibly remind myself that this is just how he speaks to people. He can get tense from time to time, but Apollo really took that old saying about flies and honey to heart. Especially when it comes to me, as if he can smooth my sharp edges with pure charm.

It's nothing personal. It's certainly not *interest*.

My unfortunate attraction is one--sided and that's just fine with me.

It's only a matter of time before I get out of this cursed city once and for all. The last thing I need is to get entangled with one of the Thirteen—*another* one of the Thirteen—before I do.

2

APOLLO

I have to fight not to stare at Cassandra's big, perfect ass as she stalks down the hall away from me. It doesn't help that she favors pencil skirts and heels, which only serve to showcase her generous curves further. I can't ask her to change her style simply because I want her. It's my problem, not hers. If I've taken more than my fair share of cold showers since hiring her five years ago? Well, that's a small enough price to pay for lusting after my employee.

That's the crux of the problem.

I hired her.

She works for me.

Letting her know I'm interested would be highly inappropriate. Even without the employer--employee power dynamic, I am one of the Thirteen and that skews things too far in my favor. If I asked her out and she felt she couldn't say no...

I shake my head and turn back down the hall. Which is right around the moment I realize I've been staring after Cassandra in front of the new Ares. She gives me a wide--eyed innocent look that I don't believe for a moment. "She's got quite the mouth on her, doesn't she?"

Even though I *know* she's baiting me, I can't help defending Cassandra. "Wouldn't you after everything she's gone through? People in this city treat her like getting too close will poison them too." The worst part is that they're not entirely wrong, if not for the reasons everyone believes.

Twelve years ago, Cassandra's family was one of the most powerful in the city...until, almost overnight, they weren't. As far as the greater population is concerned, her parents did something to anger the last Zeus and were set to be exiled. They died in a car crash before he could enact that punishment.

The truth is far more sinister. Her parents attempted to exploit an ancient, barbaric clause in Olympus's laws and were removed as a result.

The clause states that if someone manages to assassinate a member of the Thirteen—exempting the legacy titles of Zeus, Hades, and Poseidon—then that person will take the title. Our history is filled with black holes where information should be, but best I can tell, this immutable clause was added to protect the city if one of the Thirteen turned corrupt beyond all reason.

For obvious reasons, its existence is kept a closely guarded secret. It effectively paints a target on ten out of the Thirteen and would breed utter chaos if widely known. Yet if Cassandra's parents had succeeded, her role in Olympus would be very different. She'd be the daughter of one of the Thirteen, rather than the daughter of a disgraced house.

Her parents would still be alive.

Ares shrugs. "Olympus is what it is."

A vague and unsatisfying statement. Our city might be home, but very few people would go so far as to claim it's fair and just. Not with power skewed so heavily in one direction. Maybe that will change with our new leadership...

I turn my attention back to Zeus's door as Ares nods goodbye and leaves me to my work. He truly entered a trial by fire when coming unexpectedly into his title. Between how things hashed out with his sister claiming the title of Ares and

the exile of the old Aphrodite, the transfer of power has been anything but easy. I glance down at the file in my hands. The information it contains is worrisome if not downright damning.

Olympus is in trouble.

But, even with all the resources at my disposal, I can't say for certain *how much* trouble.

Up until this point, Olympus has mostly existed in its own little snow globe. The greater world wrote us off long ago as an unreachable prize. We all took for granted that it would always be that way, that the barrier keeping Olympus from the rest of the world would hold forever.

Now, it's failing. And no one can figure out why.

A problem for another day. We have enough to worry about right this second.

I step back into Zeus's office and close the door behind me. "Sorry about the interruption."

He sits behind the big desk in the middle of the room, a white man with blond hair and a perfectly tailored suit. He's the spitting image of his late father, though he wouldn't thank me for pointing it out. That's where the comparison ends, though. This Zeus doesn't have the same mercurial charisma that the last one could turn on at the drop of a hat, and that fact has made his taking of the title challenging.

Honestly, I prefer it. He might be difficult to work with at times, but I don't have to worry about any nasty surprises. It's a relief after dealing with his father.

He nods, and I resume my seat across the desk from him. Only then does he speak. "You were saying..."

I set the file aside. I don't need it, though I appreciate Cassandra taking the time to bring it all the way here. The woman is as foul--tempered as a wet cat, but she's remarkably kind when she forgets to snarl at everyone around her. "Despite exhausting my information network, I still don't know where Minos came from. He and his people are ghosts. For all intents and purposes, they appeared out of nowhere a few weeks ago to participate in the Ares tournament. We can't even pinpoint how they knew to come in the first place."

Zeus steepled his hands before his face. "They paid dearly to enter the city. That kind of money doesn't just appear when someone wishes upon a star."

"I'm aware, but maybe Poseidon should have asked more questions before he arranged transport."

"That's his prerogative." Zeus leans back. "If I start asking too many questions, he'll start growling about overreaching."

He's not wrong. Poseidon doesn't participate in most of the political squabbling, but he's no pushover. "This is important. Surely he realizes that."

"Possibly." Zeus shrugs. "But that's less important to him than protecting his territory and his power base. We know he brought in Minos and his people. That's enough. He was entitled to do so, thanks to the tournament. It's open to everyone."

I hardly agree that it's *enough*, but I let him move us along all the same. Ultimately, all that matters is that Minos and his people are still here despite the tournament being over. "It's no accident that Minos pushed his way into the city and is now brokering secret information about Olympus's enemies in order to stay."

"I know." Zeus sighs. "He was planning this from the beginning. If one of his people became Ares, we'd have less maneuvering power than we do now, but we're still not in a good position to ignore whatever information he claims to have."

If there *is* an enemy capable of taking the city, we need to know about it before we lose our main defensive measure—-and so far, Minos has given us very little of what he supposedly knows. "I've spent the last few weeks searching, and

there's nothing. Either Minos is bluffing or this group rallying against Olympus is good enough that they're essentially invisible."

"Fuck." Zeus presses his fingers to his temples. "We can't risk it if he's not bluffing. The information he's already let drop is enough to make me think there really is a threat."

"I agree." I, of all people, am aware that knowledge is power. There's no telling how much this shadowy enemy might know about us. Olympus might not broadcast all its secrets, but there are always exiles and I imagine most of them would be willing to talk for a price. Or out of sheer spite. "We have to assume worst--case scenario; that they know plenty about us."

"And we know nothing about them. Not without Minos."

Minos is well aware of the position he's put us in, and he's leveraging it for all he's worth. That's why we're having this meeting today. He's offering to tell us *all* he knows about this supposed enemy. In exchange, he wants money, a home, and Olympic citizenship for all the members of his family.

The first two are easy enough. The latter is complicated because Zeus granting citizenship is as good as elevating the family to the highest levels of Olympic society. It will change the balance within the upper crust of the city, and we might have a revolt on our hands as a result.

If there's anything Olympus hates, it's change, and we've had more than our fair share of it in the last year.

"We have to give him what he wants." Zeus curses. "This had better be worth it, because we can't take it back without an even bigger mess."

That's what I'm afraid of. No matter what steps we take today, the consequences are far--reaching. "If you give me more time--"

"I can't do that." Zeus pushes slowly to his feet. "Every day counts right now, and we've already spent too long trying to find a different solution. Another week or two won't make a difference."

Impossible not to feel the sting of his blunt statement. It's my job as Apollo to be plugged into information streams that aren't accessible to anyone else. I'm essentially Olympus's spymaster, and even with my team and all the resources at my disposal, I've failed. Between this and my inability to figure out *why* the boundary is failing, I can't help bristling. "There has to be another way."

"We've looked. There's not."

"You can't deny this feels like a trap. He has the whole world. Why settle here?"

Zeus sighs, suddenly looking a decade older—and even more like his father. Sometimes I wonder what it must have been like growing up knowing that someday the role would be his. Zeus has been a Kasios since the founding of the city. My distant relatives have been Artemis, Apollo, Hephaestus, and even Athena, but there are no guarantees among any but the three legacy titles. There were no members of the Thirteen in my parents' generation, so they were particularly pleased when I was named Apollo thirteen years ago.

Each position within the Thirteen is filled a little differently. Demeter is voted on citywide. Aphrodite names their successor upon stepping down. As Apollo, I was appointed by vote among the Thirteen.

I've been trying to live up to the expectations of that appointment ever since. In this way, I suppose, Zeus and I are the same.

"There has to be another way," I say.

"It's bad news no matter which way we look at it. We need the information he has, and we can't get that without bowing to his demands. He hasn't done anything to justify more...extreme measures."

"No, he hasn't." I've been coordinating with Athena to ensure we have a bead on Minos and his people at all times. Between covert operatives and my access to various information streams, we have as full a picture of these people as possible.

Which is the problem. They haven't given us anything at all. None of them have done anything noteworthy since the competition for Ares ended. It should be a relief, but it just makes me more suspicious. "It's a trap," I repeat.

"It's a trap we're going to walk into. We don't have another choice. We're just going to have to hope we can deal with the consequences when he springs it on us."

I intensely dislike being propelled to a course of action that's not of my choosing. Olympus isn't exactly a secret, but it's intentionally difficult to get information on the rites and rituals that keep the city running. Minos has more familiarity with our customs than is comfortable.

Almost as if someone is feeding him information.

But even if I can't track Minos's history, I *do* keep an eye on all people exiled from Olympus. Best I can tell, Minos hasn't had contact with any of them. Unfortunately, I can't trust that information. I can't trust anything. "If you'd just—"

"Apollo." He doesn't snap, but the harshness in his tone is enough to stop me in my tracks. Zeus holds my gaze. "We have to grant his request for citizenship. Whatever he's waiting for, he needs that first. I will get that process started so we can finally get to the bottom of this."

I stand and straighten my suit. "Fine. I'll keep looking in the meantime." I'll call in my people and see what we can come up with. The meetings so far have been fruitless, but the people who work for me are the best. We'll figure something out. We have to.

Thinking of my team has me thinking of one member in particular. I wish Cassandra had waited for me. She's more than capable of taking care of herself, but she lives on the edge of the upper warehouse district. It's not safe there, even if she cabs in. At least if I'd accompanied her, I could see her to her door...

The thought of her response to *that* almost makes me smile. She wouldn't be a fan. Ah well, boundaries exist for a reason and it's just as well. She wouldn't thank me for my interest. She might actually push me in front of a moving vehicle. Cassandra's made her opinion of the Thirteen and the people who aspire to be them clear—and honestly, who can blame her after what they did to her parents all those years ago?

The only reason she took a job with me was because I pay her nearly double what she can find anywhere else. I won't lie and say that charity didn't play into it. I saw her get turned away from job after job for weeks before she finally came knocking on my door. With her parents gone, she's been supporting her sister this entire time. I couldn't let them starve.

Ironic that she ended up being invaluable to my operations. She's smart and sees things I don't. Her reports have been priceless over the years. Truly, I should give her another raise.

"Apollo." From the edge to Zeus's tone, it's not the first time he's said my name.

Unfortunately, my fascination with Cassandra tends to have this side effect. Which is why I don't usually allow myself to think about her during work hours. "Yes?"

"Stay close to Minos. We need know what he's up to."

Only a lifetime of practice keeps my distaste for the order from showing on my face. It's a logical thing for Zeus to command, but that doesn't mean I relish the idea of being in close proximity with Minos. The man is cunning and there's a glint in his eye I don't like. He's the kind of person who thinks he's smarter than everyone else in the room.

I mean to prove him wrong.

3

CASSANDRA

TWO WEEKS LATER

“You’re late. Is everything okay?”

I drop into the seat across from my sister and slump back against the chair. “Sorry, I got caught up in a report and lost track of time.” Apollo has me wading through reports from the lower city. Hades rules there and doesn’t take kindly to the rest of the Thirteen infringing on his territory, so information can be scarce, but ever since he married Persephone, there’s been slightly more communication allowed. Which means more information.

Truly, the lower city doesn’t sound half--bad. If I wasn’t so determined to get the fuck out of Olympus the first chance I get, I’d consider crossing the River Styx and seeing if the lower city embraces toxic culture and ruthless power plays the same way the upper city does.

My sister, Alexandra, smiles sweetly. Everything about her is sweet. No one can look at us and mistake us for anything but relatives—we have red hair, skin that the sun seems to have a personal vendetta against, and bodies that people call *curvy* when they’re trying to be oblique—but her lips naturally turn up at the corners instead of down. Our father used to joke that I came roaring into the world with a war cry and Alexandra arrived with a sunny giggle. She leans forward, dark eyes sparkling. “That seems to happen a lot since you started working for Apollo. I’m glad you like the job.”

“Like’ might be overstating things a bit.” My voice is too sharp, but I can feel a flush creeping across my skin. “It’s interesting. Apollo has nothing to do with it.”

“Sure he doesn’t.”

I open my mouth to snap, but I’ve worked hard to protect Alexandra from the worst Olympus has to offer. She’s seven years younger than me and was still a minor when my parents attempted their ill--fated coup. I worried that she’d see the same derision and suspicion that I did once our parents’ exile had been announced...so I made myself a target. It was easy enough to do. I’m already prone to spikes and snarls. It took very little effort to ensure they focused on *me* instead of Alexandra.

Mostly.

I take a quick sip of water. “Enough about me. How are classes going?”

“Cass, we never talk about you.”

“Because there’s nothing to talk about. I work and I go home. The most exciting thing about my week are these lunches with you.” It’s better that way. Most of the time, people forget I exist, which means they aren’t staring and whispering behind their hands about the liar Cassandra, who once loudly proclaimed that the Thirteen had murdered her parents.

It’s the truth.

Not that anyone believes me.

Alexandra smiles, oblivious to my dark thoughts. “Classes are going wonderfully. We’re just wrapping up the summer quarter in a couple weeks and gearing up for fall.”

With only a little prodding, she entertains me through lunch with tales of what her friend group is getting up to. I worried when she insisted on applying to the university instead of taking advantage of the free colleges Olympus offers. It put her directly in the paths of the scions of the legacy families, and I'm all too aware of what *that* can be like.

But Alexandra isn't like me. I've worked so fucking hard to ensure she doesn't have to fight her way through life. Our parents were selfish beyond belief when they put their own ambitions and desires above their children's safety.

I will never make the same mistake.

It's nothing less than a miracle that Alexandra has managed to maintain her sweetness through the years. I worry that it won't last past the reality of graduation. It doesn't matter that she's somehow managed to avoid the worst of the bullying and bullshit up to this point. As soon as she starts looking for her dream job, she's going to run face--first into the fact that everyone with a drop of power in the upper city hates our family and would love to see us both torn apart.

I have to find a way to get us out of here before that happens.

The waitress brings the check and I glance at my phone. "I have to get going or I'm going to be late." Apollo doesn't usually care if I take slightly longer lunches with Alexandra once a week, but he's been in a strange mood since that meeting with Zeus.

"I can pay this time."

I smile even as I snag the check. "Save those pennies for school."

"*You* pay for my school."

I pull out my credit card and tuck it next to the bill. "Here's a wild thought. Why don't you do something fun?"

My sister's brows draw together. "I'm an adult now, Cass. You don't have to keep mothering me. We're equals."

"Of course we're equals." But that doesn't change the responsibility I feel for her. Twelve years ago, I was thrust into the role of her guardian, and I am still achingly aware that my sister needs protecting.

Whether she realizes it or not.

After the waiter returns with the bill, I sign the receipt and rise. "Same time next week?"

"You have a permanent spot in my calendar." She pulls me into a tight hug. "Do something nice for yourself, Cass. Promise me."

"I promise." It's even the truth, though I expect Alexandra wouldn't consider an early evening with a book, a bubble bath, and a jumbo glass of wine *something nice*. But then, my sister likes people. I don't.

"See you next week."

I walk her to the bus stop that will take her back to the university district and wait until the bus arrives. Only then do I check the time, curse, and hurry back to the office.

It takes me several minutes after arriving back at my desk to realize that something's wrong, and another few seconds to locate the source of that wrongness.

Apollo's door is closed.

I stare at it. It's never closed. Ever. Honestly, I wish it were because he has the nasty habit of singing under his breath, but like everything else about him, his baritone voice is delightful. It's highly distracting. Sometimes I have to go over reports two or three times because I catch myself zoning out, trying to identify what song he's focused on.

A closed door should mean uninterrupted work. A closed door *should* make me happy.

I glare at it, arms crossed under my breasts. I can't very well go knock on it and investigate. Not only would that give him the wrong idea, but it's frankly none of my business.

Maybe he's not even in there. Maybe he left and locked up behind him. That makes more sense than him shutting himself up for privacy.

For a spymaster, he's really shitty at being secretive. If I were a romantic, I'd believe that means he trusts me, but it's really that he's strangely absentminded when he's not focused on something. And when he *is* focused on something, sometimes he mutters under his breath. At least when he isn't singing.

Gods, I'm a mess. Why am I obsessing over this man? I have work to do.

I start to turn for my desk—the only other piece of furniture in the small office that Apollo inhabits. He owns the whole building, of course, but he claims not to deal well with people—bullshit, people love him—so he prefers to have me run his communications with those outside the Thirteen. Technically, I guess that makes me some kind of manager, but my official title is executive assistant.

I'll never admit it aloud, but I actually like my job. It's challenging, and there's nothing quite like the thrill of putting together two seemingly unrelated pieces of information and having the full puzzle snap into place.

The door swings open hard enough to bounce off the wall. I jump and then fight to smooth my expression into cool disinterest. Not a moment too soon.

The man who limps out of Apollo's office is a beast. He's got to be six two and built like a tank with broad shoulders, broad chest, just *broad* body. Medium--brown skin, reddish hair cropped close to his skull, a nicely trimmed beard, and empty dark eyes. He catches sight of me and sweeps a look over my body that shouldn't feel threatening...but does.

I know who this is. I saw him compete—and fail—in the Ares tournament. Helen herself eliminated him, busting up his knee in the second trial before moving on to win the third and become Ares. The fight between them was brutal and I hadn't been sure she'd win. He'd looked like he wanted to murder her. If she hadn't prevailed, I think he might have attempted it.

Theseus.

"What are you doing here?" I don't mean to speak, but the words fly out all the same, sharp and brittle. Olympus is full of predators—I know that better than anyone—but they usually pretend they're just like the rest of us. Richer, more glamorous, more beautiful, maybe, but average and to be underestimated all the same.

There's no underestimating this man.

Theseus doesn't answer. He dismisses me nearly as quickly as he registers my appearance, brushing past me and out the door, violence in every uneven step.

I don't stop to think. I just rush into Apollo's office, half--sure I'm going to find his body instead of *him*.

Except...he's fine.

He sits at his desk, staring at something a thousand miles away, and appears entirely unharmed. I stop short, but it's too late. He focuses on me. "Cassandra. Come in and shut the door."

Annoyed with myself for having been worried—and worse, *betraying* that worry to him—I carefully shut the door behind me and move to sink into the chair across from his desk. Apollo's office is the very essence of rich--man chic with his oversize dark wood desk, a wall filled with floating shelves containing books and other knickknacks that are worth more than six months' rent on my shitty apartment, and a single large window that overlooks the street below. We're only on the third floor, which provides lots of people--watching opportunities; in the blocks around Dodona Tower, people purposefully walk the sidewalks looking to see and be seen.

He sits back with a tired sigh. "You're aware that Minos and his people now have Olympus citizenship."

"Kind of hard to miss it." The gossip sites have gone wild with the news. I'm sure it has to do with them covering the same players and same families since the city was founded. New blood is rare enough, let alone an entire new family to gawk and poke at. The last time that happened was when the Dimitriou family moved into the city proper when their matriarch became Demeter, but even then, they were still Olympians, if country ones.

Minos and his people are decidedly *not*.

"I've been invited to a house party he's hosting." Apollo's full mouth twists. "To celebrate."

"Sounds like you're going to have a ton of fun." The sarcasm flicks off my tongue without my thinking about it. What am I supposed to say, though? He's *Apollo*. Part of the job is hobnobbing with powerful assholes and getting close to people he hates because they have information he needs. Information *Zeus* needs.

He chose to take the title. No one forced it on him. I will not pity him, no matter how miserable he looks right now. He could always say no. He won't, but he *could*, which is more than most people in this city can manage if the Thirteen start meddling in their lives.

"I have a favor to ask."

"No."

He gives me a long look. "Will you hear me out before telling me no?"

"Let me think." I glance at the ceiling and then back at him. "No. You have that scheming look about you, and I don't want any part of it."

"Cassandra." There's a rare edge in his voice. Theseus must have really gotten under his skin. "Hear me out. Please."

I could walk out. Refuse to hear him out. I could...but I don't. My second mistake of the day, and one I'll no doubt come to regret.

He doesn't wait long to prove me right. "Minos has ulterior motives for being here, but I can't figure out what they are."

"I know that." Apollo has been muttering about it for weeks, ever since Minos's party showed up and two of them competed for Ares.

"He had bargained with Zeus to trade information for citizenship, but so far everything he's offered has been too vague to be of use. I'm sure that's intentional."

"Probably." If it's his only bargaining chip, he'll want to squeeze out every bit of its worth. It seems foolhardy to want the attention of the Thirteen on you, but what do I know?

"This house party is going to be my best opportunity to find those answers. It will last for a week, which would theoretically give me plenty of time to dig around for evidence. Someone bankrolled his trip here, and if I can find out who it was, we won't need Minos."

Apollo is something of a jack--of--all--trades when it comes to information. His title is technically Keeper of the Lore, and he does that by preserving records of Olympus's history. But he's also more than a little bit of a spymaster, sourcing information for the Thirteen and his own purposes constantly. Even after working for him for five years, I'm still not entirely sure how he comes by some of the info he finds. But it's always accurate.

A week in Minos's house should be more than enough time to get to the bottom of this mystery. I frown. "Why do I sense a *but* coming?"

"But..." He sighs again. "You've worked for me long enough to know my strengths. I am more comfortable with data and archives than I am scrying out people's motives."

It's true. If Apollo has one failing—and I'd hesitate to qualify it as such—it's that he's too honest. His brain doesn't work in the twisty, deceptive ways required to understand the layers beneath layers of plots that play out in this city. He's not naive; he knows the plots are there—he just can't divine out the shape of them instinctively. "You've survived this long. I'm sure you'll be fine."

"Cassandra." He gives a rueful smile that makes my chest ping. "You know better. I'm only as strong as my team, and I won't be able to have you all there with me. If I can only bring one, I want you."

I want you.

Not going to think about how those words make me feel. Not even a little bit. "Well, you can't have me. Ask Hermes. She's good at this sort of thing."

"Hermes plays her own games and you know it." He shakes his head. "And I'm not on her level. I can't whisk in and out of rooms like magic."

What Hermes does isn't magic, though anyone who's walked into a locked room and found her rooting through their shit might believe otherwise. Most people don't pause long enough to realize breaking and entering is basically her love language and that she only does it to people she likes, but if I say *that*, then I have to explain how I would know such a thing, and I'm not about to get into my exes with anyone, let alone Apollo.

"You're very good at what you do, but *no one* is on Hermes's level," I finally say. "You'll have to find another way."

"Agreed. *I have* another way." He levels a look at me. "Come with me. Play the part of my date. You see things I don't, and I need that perspective to successfully navigate this."

Come with me.

Play my date.

At a house party that will last a week.

My brain skips and I shove to my feet. "No. Absolutely not." Bad enough that I spend so much time in close proximity with him while we work together. Attending a party like that... We'll be expected to share the same *room*. The same *bed*. He'll have to touch me. He's dated a few people in the years since he took his title. The soldier Hyakinthos. The model Coronis. Enough that everyone knows he's touchy--feely with his partners. Enough that if he *wasn't* that way with me, it would raise questions.

I can't do it.

I won't.

"You're out of your fucking mind, Apollo. I can't believe you'd ask me this." I'm still talking too sharply, my words filled with blades born of panic. "You know what that would mean for me and what everyone already thinks. You'd prove them right, and *I'd* have to deal with the consequences." No one in Olympus believes that I have no interest in power. They look at me and see the sins of my parents.

The bitter irony is that if my parents had just been content with their privilege and power, no one would look sideways at Apollo dating me. We were a legacy family, which meant I would be an acceptable marriage option for one of the Thirteen.

Everyone expects me to try to reclaim what we lost. They've been watching me like a bug under a magnifying glass for twelve years, and what Apollo's asking for means putting myself into the public eye in a way that invites attacks.

Even Hermes knew better than to ask *that*.

I had thought Apollo understood why I avoid anything resembling the spotlight, at least in theory. He's the one who offered me this job, who pays me far too much for the work and constantly seems concerned about my welfare. For him to ask me to play sacrificial lamb... It hurts. It has no right to hurt this badly.

"No," I repeat. "I won't do it."

"Okay." Apollo holds up his hands, looking guilty. "I'm sorry. It seemed the smartest route, and I trust you to be able to hold your own. I understand why you won't." His voice goes soft in a way that threatens to make me weak. "Cassandra, I'm sorry. I should have considered the implications."

I can't let him be soft to me. If he's soft, then I'll go soft, and then I'll end up agreeing to something against my best interests. It takes far too much effort to straighten my spine and offer him coldness when he's only given me warmth. "Yeah, you should have thought of it. If that's all?"

His sigh is nearly soundless. "Yes, that's all."

I flee from his office. If only it was so easy to flee from the guilt nipping at my heels.