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HELEN

"I am so fucking late," I mutter under my breath. The hallways of Dodona Tower are blessedly empty, but that only makes the clock ticking down inside my head worse. Tonight is the night everything changes. The night when I stop being a pawn in other people's games and finally gain the agency I've craved ever since I was a little girl.

And I can't believe I'm fucking *late*.

I pick up my pace, barely managing to resist the urge to run. Showing up out of breath and flustered to an Olympus party is even worse than showing up late. Appearances matter. It's been a long time since Olympus experienced anything resembling traditional warfare, but every day, little battles are fought and won using the most mundane things.

A carefully designed dress.

A sweet word hiding a poisonous sting.

A marriage.

I duck into the elevator that will take me up to the ballroom floor and barely resist the urge to bounce on my toes with impatience. Normally, I wouldn't give a damn about any of this. I make petty rebellions an art form.

Tonight is different.

Tonight, my brother Perseus—Zeus, now—is making an announcement that will change everything.

Less than a week ago, Ares passed away. It was hardly unexpected—the man was old as dirt and had been knocking on the doors to the underworld for three months—but it's opened up an opportunity that's usually only seen once a generation. Of the Thirteen, Ares alone is open to absolutely anyone. A person's history, connections, finances don't matter. You don't even have to be Olympian.

You simply have to win.

Three trials, all designed to cull the wheat from the chaff, and the last person standing steps up to become Ares. One of the thirteen people who create the ruling body in Olympus. Each handles a specific part of keeping the city running smoothly, but more importantly to me, no one can compel any of them to take an action they don't want to.

Not even Zeus can force the hand of another member of the Thirteen—or at least that's the theory. My father never paid attention to those sorts of niceties, and I doubt my brother will now that he's inherited the title. It doesn't matter. If I'm Ares, I'm no longer daughter to one Zeus, sister to another, a spoiled princess with no real value beyond her pretty face and family connections.

Becoming Ares will set me free.

The elevator doors open, and I hurry in the direction of the ballroom. The long hallway has changed since the last party, the dour, dark drapes that hung floor to ceiling on either side of the doors replaced with an airy white fabric that has silver threaded through it. It's still not welcoming, but it's significantly less oppressive.

I'm curious who made *that* design call, because Perseus sure as fuck didn't. Since he stepped up as Zeus after our father's death, the only thing my oldest brother cares about is running his business and ruling Olympus with an iron fist.

Or at least trying to.

"Helen."

I stop short, but recognition brings a relieved smile to my face. "Eros. What are you doing out here lurking in the shadows?"

He steps forward and holds up a tiny jeweled bag. "Psyche forgot her purse." He should look ridiculous holding the purse, especially considering the violence those hands have done, but Eros has a habit of moving through life as if he's untouchable. No one would dare say a word and he knows it.

"What a good husband you are." I take the last few steps and press a quick kiss to each of his cheeks. I haven't seen him much in the last couple months, but he looks good. Eros is one of the most gorgeous people in Olympus—which is saying something—a white guy with curly blond hair and a face to make painters weep at its perfection. "Marriage suits you."

"More and more every day." His gaze sharpens. "You've pulled out all the stops tonight."

"Do you like the dress?" I smooth my hands down my gown. It's a custom piece, the golden fabric molded to my body from shoulders to hips before flaring out the slightest bit. It's heavy with a subtle pattern that's designed to catch the light with every move. A deep V dips between my breasts, and the shoulders have been shaped into sharp points that give the slightest impression of military bearing. "It's a showstopper, as my mother would have said."

I ignore the twinge in my chest at the thought, just as I always do when my mind tries to linger on the woman who died far too young. She's been gone fifteen years, having suffered a *mysterious* fall when I was fifteen. Mysterious. Right. As if all of Olympus didn't suspect that my father was behind it.

As if I didn't know it for certain.

Pushing *this* thought away is second nature. It doesn't matter what sins my father committed. He's dead and gone, just like my mother. I hope he's been suffering in the pits of Tartarus since he drew his last breath. When I think of his death, all I feel is relief. He died before he could marry me off to secure some bullshit alliance, before he could cause even more of the pain he seemed to enjoy inflicting so much.

No, I don't miss my father at all.

"She'd be proud of you."

"Maybe." I glance over his shoulder at the doors. "Maybe she'd be furious over what I'm about to do." Rock the boat? Fuck, I'm about to tip the boat right over.

Eros doesn't miss a beat. His brows rise and he shakes his head, looking rueful. "So it's Ares for you. I should have known. You've been missing a lot of parties lately. Training?"

"Yes." I brace myself for his disbelief. We might be friends, but we're friends by Olympus standards. I trust Eros not to slide a knife between my ribs. He trusts me not to cause him undue trouble in the press. We hang out on a regular basis at events and parties and occasionally trade favors. I don't trust him with my deepest secrets. It's nothing personal. I don't trust *anyone* with that part of me.

On the other hand, everyone in Olympus will know my plans very shortly.

I square my shoulders. "I'm going to compete to become the next Ares."

"Damn." He whistles under his breath. "You've got your work cut out for you."

He's not telling me he thinks he can't do it, but I wilt a little all the same. I didn't *really* expect enthusiastic support, but being constantly underestimated never fails to sting. "Yes, well, I'd better get in there."

"Hold on." He surveys me. "Your hair is a little lopsided."

"*What?*" I lift my hand and touch my head. I can't tell without a mirror. Damn it, I'm going to be even later, but it's still better than walking into that room out of sorts.

I start to turn in the direction of the bathroom back toward the elevators, but Eros catches my shoulder. "I got it." He opens Psyche's purse and digs around for a few seconds, pulling out an even smaller bag. Inside, there is a bunch of bobby pins. Eros huffs out a laugh at my incredulous expression. "Don't look so surprised. If you had a purse, you'd have bobby pins stashed, too. Now, hold still and let me fix your shit."

Shock roots me in place as he carefully fixes my hair, securing it with half a dozen bobby pins. He leans back and nods. "Better."

"Eros." I gently touch my hair again. "Since when do you do hair?"

He shrugs. "I can't do more than damage control, but it saves Psyche some trouble when we're out if I can help like this."

Gods, he's so in love it makes me sick. I'm happy for him. Truly, I am. But I can't help the jealousy that curls through me. It's not about Eros—he's more brother to me than anything else—but at the intimacy and trust he shares with his wife. The one time I thought I might have that, it blew up in my face, and I still wear the emotional scars from the fallout.

I manage a smile, though. "Thanks."

"Knock 'em dead, Helen." His grin is sharp enough to cut. "I'll be rooting for you."

I drag in a slow breath and turn for the door. Since I'm late, I might as well make an entrance. I straighten my spine and push both doors open with more force than necessary. People scatter as I step into the room. I pause, letting them look at me and taking them in at the same time.

This room has changed since Perseus inherited the title of Zeus. Oh, the space is still functionally the same. Shining white marble floors that I can barely see beneath the crowd, an arching ceiling that gives the impression of the ballroom being even larger than it is, the massive windows and glass doors that lead out to the balcony on the other side of the room. But it still feels different. The walls used to be cream, but now they're a cool gray. A subtle change, but it makes a difference.

Most notably, the larger-than-life portraits of the Thirteen that line the walls have different frames. Gone are the thick gold frames that my father favored, replaced by finely crafted black. I would have to get closer to verify, but each looks like they might be custom, unique to each member of the Thirteen.

Perseus didn't make these changes, either. I'm certain of it. Our father might have been obsessive about his image, but my brother doesn't give a fuck. Even when he should.

I start through the crowd, holding my head high.

Normally, I can identify every single person who attends a Dodona Tower party. Information is everything, and I learned from a very young age that it's the only weapon I'm allowed. Some people meet my gaze, others stare at my body in a way that makes my skin crawl, and still others all but turn their backs on me. No surprises there. Being a Kasios in Olympus might have its perks, but it means being born into generations-old grudges and politicking. I grew up learning who could be trusted—no one—and who would actually shove me into traffic if given half a chance—more people than is comforting.

But this party isn't a regular one, and tonight is not a regular night. Nearly half the faces are new to me, people who have arrived from the outskirts around Olympus or been ferried into the city by Poseidon for this special occasion. I don't stop moving to memorize faces. Not everyone here will be nominating themselves as champions; plenty of them are just like the majority of the people here from Olympus. Hangers-on. They don't matter.

I don't pick up my pace, moving at a steady stalk that forces people to get out of my way. The crowd parts for me just like I know it will, whispers following in my wake. I'm making a scene, and while half of them love me for it, the rest resent me.

Everyone has pulled out all the stops tonight. In one corner, my sister Eris—Aphrodite, as of three months ago—is laughing at something with Hermes and Dionysus. My chest gives a pang. I would like nothing more than to be with them now, just like I am at every other party. My sister and my friends are what makes living in Olympus bearable, but the last few months have driven home the new differences between us. It wasn't so noticeable when Eris was still Eris, but now that she's also one of the Thirteen...

I'm getting left behind. Being sister to Zeus and Aphrodite, friend to Hermes and Dionysus? It doesn't mean shit. I'm still a piece to be moved around on someone else's board.

Becoming Ares is my only opportunity to change that.

I catch sight of the Dimitriou clan in the opposite corner, Demeter with three of her four daughters, as well as Hades, husband to Persephone. Like everyone else, they're dressed to perfection. The fact that Hades and Persephone are here only spotlights the importance of what's to come. Every member of the Thirteen is present to stand witness to the ceremonial announcement of the tournament to replace Ares. Eros appears at his wife's side, and the way her face lights up at the sight of him... I turn away.

The throne is my destination.

Well, the pair of thrones—two more changes our shift in leadership has caused. Gone is the gaudy gold monstrosity our father used to love, replaced with a steel sculpture that's attractive but oh so cold. Kind of like Perseus himself.

The second throne is a daintier version of his. Callisto Dimitriou sits on it, a beautiful white woman with long dark hair dressed in an elegant black gown. She's staring at everyone gathered below her as if she'd like to shove each one of us through the huge glass doors that have been opened to let in the balmy June evening air. I doubt she'd stop there, though. More likely, she'd love to see us tossed right over the balcony.

Why my brother chose *her* to be his wife, to become Hera, is a mystery to everyone in Olympus. They certainly don't seem to like each other. Their marriage reeks of Demeter's meddling, but no matter how I dig or pry, I've never been able to find a proper answer. I suppose it doesn't matter *why* Perseus married her, only that he did.

I drop into a quick curtsy that *almost* manages to be polite. "Zeus. Hera."

My brother leans forward and narrows a cold look in my direction. While Eris and I take after our mother's coloring, Perseus is all our father. Blond hair, blue eyes, pale skin, and a ruggedly attractive face. If he put any effort behind it at all, he'd be good-looking enough to charm the whole room. Unfortunately, my brother never excelled at that type of skill the same way the rest of my family does.

Not Hercules. He was as bad at playing the game as Perseus.

I shove the thought away. There's no use thinking about Hercules, either. He's gone, and as far as most of Olympus is concerned, he might as well be dead. No, that's not right. People talk about the dead. They pretend Hercules never existed in the first place. I miss him nearly as much as I miss my mother.

"You're late." Perseus doesn't lift his voice, but he doesn't have to. The people nearest us have gone quiet, tense with the possibility of seeing Kasios family drama play out. I can't resent them for that. I've given them plenty of fodder for gossip over my thirty years.

“Sorry.” I even mean it. “Time got away from me.” The temptation to overprepare isn’t usually one I fall victim to, but there’s nothing usual about this situation.

Perseus shakes his head slightly, his gaze tracking the rest of the room. “I’m making the announcement soon. Don’t wander off.”

I bristle, but there’s no point in taking it personally. Perseus talks to everyone as though they’re a small child or a dog; he has since we were little. I might understand that it’s just the way he is, but his preferred method of communication is already breeding resentment among Olympus’s elite.

That’s not my problem, though. Not tonight. I give him a bright smile. “Of course, dear brother. I wouldn’t dream of it.” After the announcement, people will have a chance to put their names forward to become champions, which will enter them into the tournament for Ares’s title. The window to put a name forward doesn’t technically close until dawn, but from what I understand, it’s rare for there to be latecomers, so I want to make sure I’m on hand to get my name in before anyone can think to stop me.

I turn to study the room, though I can feel my brother watching me. Probably worried I’m going to embarrass him further. Another night, I might even see that as a challenge, but right now, I have my eyes on the prize. I will not be diverted.

After tonight, everyone will know that I’m a force to be reckoned with.

It doesn’t take long for the rest of the Thirteen to drift over, taking up positions on either side of my brother and Callisto—Hera. She looks bored with this whole process, but she’s the only one. A current of excitement surges through the room. I know Perseus just wants stability for Olympus, but this fanfare will be more than that for the city. It will give them something to cheer for, an event to raise civilian morale—something that has wavered recently.

The Thirteen might rule Olympus, but ultimately they are only a handful of people. Without the support of the greater population, that power is in name only. There has only been an uprising once in our history, a few generations back after a war between the Thirteen decimated the city, but it was brutal enough for us to know we never want it to happen again.

Things work best when the current members of the Thirteen play the celebrity game. When someone takes over a new title, they decide how they want to craft their image and run with it. Some—like Demeter, the last Aphrodite, Hermes, and Dionysus—go hard, using public opinion to further their respective goals. Poseidon and Hades have never played the game, though. Hades by virtue of no one on this side of the river knowing he existed until recently. Poseidon because he garners enough goodwill by being one of the few who can come and go across the barrier that surrounds Olympus freely, which means he imports anything industry in the city can’t create for itself.

A bunch of new members of the Thirteen in a short time means uncertainty, and in uncertain times, anything is possible. Even revolution.

My brother will do anything to ensure that doesn’t happen.

The crowd presses closer, and I angle myself away from the front of it, shifting close to where Dionysus stands. He’s a white man about my age with short dark hair and a truly impressive mustache that he’s grown out just enough to curve it up at either side of his mouth. It should look ridiculous, but it’s Dionysus. He makes ridiculous an artistic statement, from his peppy attitude to his brightly colored suit. He grins at me. “Ready for this?”

My stomach is twisted into half a million knots, but I smile back. “Of course. There’s bound to be drama, and you know how I love that.” *I will be the drama shortly.*

A light over Perseus brightens as the camera crew takes up positions across from him. This event will be broadcast to the greater city, which means the impressions champions make, starting now, are vital. Ares doesn't technically need civilian support to do their job, but being popular with the citizens helps smooth the way.

My brother straightens to his feet. He doesn't have the commanding presence our father did, but he *does* have the ability to make it seem like he's looking right into a person's soul. He uses that now, his icy gaze shifting over the people gathered before landing on me. Something flares there, something I don't recognize, but he moves on before I can identify it.

"You all know why we're here." He doesn't raise his voice, but he doesn't have to. My siblings and I were trained to speak in public from a very young age. To be perfect symbols of our perfect family line. "We're here to honor the passing of Ares. He served the title for nearly sixty years, and he's gone far too soon." Nice words. Meaningless words. The last Ares was, quite frankly, a dick.

Perseus turns to the other part of the room. "Tonight, we begin the process of finding our next Ares. Tradition states that three trials will be issued, the first of which you'll know in two days' time. The winner of the three challenges will become the next Ares." A weighted pause. Again, that strange look passes over his face.

It's the only warning I get.

Perseus looks at me, something akin to sympathy in his blue eyes as he seals my fate. "And marry my sister Helen."

2

ACHILLES

“Told you so,” Patroclus murmurs.

I don’t have to look at him to know what he’s thinking. I *always* know what he’s thinking. Namely, too damn much. At least the fawning groupies that descended the moment we walked through the door earlier have dispersed now that the show is underway. It’s a relief; I can turn the charm on when it suits me, but this shit is exhausting.

The last Ares never worried about playing to the public. He was a right old bastard, and he didn’t care if everyone knew it. I don’t know if he started out that way when he took the title, but by the end, everyone hated him. Even his own people.

It’s not how Athena operates, and I learned everything of value I know from her. Better to use honey than vinegar, better to get someone to do what you want with a little manipulation than by bashing them over the head with whatever weapon is closest at hand. Ares could have used a few of her lessons, but he was the type of guy who put himself on a path and didn’t deviate.

Things are going to change when I’m in charge.

Zeus is still talking, spinning a whole lot of bullshit about tradition. Olympus is up to its tits in tradition. It’s their excuse for everything, a line of reasoning that conveniently takes the responsibility from the people actually doing the actions.

“Yeah,” I mutter. “You don’t need to say it, though. I was already hearing the I--told--you--so loud and clear.” Patroclus had been *sure* the title would come with a wife. It’s been a long time since this title passed over, so I had my doubts, but one of Patroclus’s many skills is gathering all the available information and running scenarios until he finds the most likely one. It makes him irritating as fuck to be around sometimes, but he’s brilliant.

I glance around the room. No one seems particularly surprised by the announcement, so either they did their research like Patroclus or they have excellent poker faces.

He moves closer, pressing his shoulder to mine. He’s frowning, that big brain of his working overtime. “I didn’t expect it to be Helen, though. I didn’t expect Aphrodite to choose *her*.”

“Yeah.” Even though I know better, my gaze tracks to the white woman standing in an empty circle, as if the people around her inched away to avoid being associated with what happens next. I can only see her profile, but it’s enough.

To call Helen beautiful is the understatement of the century. She’s *flawless*, the kind of perfect that only comes around once a generation. Her whole family is full of attractive bastards, but she’s on another level entirely. She’s also a reckless party girl whose exploits are constantly splashed across the gossip sites. She doesn’t follow the same rules as the rest of us. She’s never gone hungry or had to fight for anything.

The woman is a princess in a tower, and what’s a princess good for except bait?

She shifts, the subtlest squaring of her shoulders. When she turns to face the room, she looks happy...as long as one doesn’t stare into her amber eyes. They’re as cold as Zeus’s. She gives the room a little finger wave. “Lucky you.”

A scattering of laughs. Neither I nor Patroclus make a sound. I glance at him. He’s a few inches taller than me and built naturally leaner. Tonight, he’s wearing the glasses I like so much and a suit that I can’t help wanting to rumple. The man is always so fucking put together. Nothing fazes him, because before he takes action, he’s already run half a dozen scenarios. Surprising him is damn near impossible.

Still. “You sure about this?” I murmur. He may have expected a wife to be offered as part of the tradition, but Helen complicates things. Might as well get into bed with a snake and pray it doesn’t sink its fangs into you. It will bite. That’s

what snakes do. The woman is loyal to her family and her family alone. Being married to her means every interaction, both in and outside our home, will be a battlefield. She's a Kasios. She can't be trusted.

"This is the only way."

He's right. I don't know why I'm even questioning it. This is what I've wanted since I was old enough to realize the only thing people in Olympus respect is power. Getting a taste of it as I climbed the ranks beneath Athena? Yeah, I'm willing to sacrifice a whole lot to get that title. "Then we move forward with the plan."

He glances at me, handsome face completely calm, and gives a subtle nod. Patroclus never wanted to lead, let alone claim a spot as one of the Thirteen, but he's going to put his name forward so he can help *me* win it. This was the plan from the moment I decided on Ares. The first two trials are designed to whittle down the champions until only five remain for the final one. Alliances aren't unheard of, but I'm not willing to wager my success on the unknown. Which is where Patroclus comes in. He'll provide any assistance necessary to ensure I reach the final trial. I'm reasonably certain I could do it on my own, but he insisted.

Truth be told, I didn't protest that hard. Patroclus has been at my side since we met at eighteen. We've hit every major milestone since then as a pair. It would feel wrong to compete and win the title of Ares without him watching my back.

Still. "If you're sure."

"I'm sure. Stop trying to give me an out. I'm competing. End of story." He turns back to study the crowd. "I have files on every single possible champion from Olympus. You're the best. With me at your side, your win is all but guaranteed."

My win. Becoming Ares. Marrying Helen. Patroclus and I have an unconventional relationship, at least according to some, but I keep waiting for the idea of me being married to someone else to bother him. It sure as fuck would bother *me* if he married someone else. But he's as unruffled as always. It drives me up the wall. "Marrying Helen Kasios is going to be a giant pain in the ass."

He gives me another of those censoring looks. "Ares."

As if he needs to remind me. I'd marry a literal fucking harpy if it meant becoming one of the Thirteen. Unfortunately, Helen Kasios isn't far off from that. She's a spoiled brat who's always gotten her way, and even through her lying smile, I can see she's furious about this development. She'll make whoever wins this thing regret it, probably for the rest of their lives. That's not even getting into the fact that any information she gleans from me will be fed right back to Zeus.

It's a smart play on his part. Worthy of a plan Patroclus would put together. Ultimately, though, it doesn't matter. I will become Ares. I'll deal with all the other shit once the title is mine.

Movement on my other side makes me glance over. Paris. He's a lean white dude who obviously spends a shit ton of money on his appearance. It's there in the smoothness of his skin, in how perfectly styled his blond hair is. Too bad money can't buy a good personality; Paris is a fucking asshole. All the good--person genes in his family went to his older brother, Hector.

Hector, I like and respect.

Paris is looking at Helen like she's a piece of meat he can't wait to consume. I don't make a habit of paying too much attention to the gossip sites, but Paris and Helen's breakup was nasty enough to make headlines for weeks. Now the little shit is practically rubbing his hands together with glee.

He glances at me and grins. "Sorry, man, but she's mine. She can't say no if I become Ares and marry her."

Hector steps forward on his brother's other side and slaps him upside the back of his head with a familiarity that says he's done it enough times for it to have become muscle memory. "Don't be crude." He nods at me. "Achilles."

“Hector.” He used to head one of Ares’s squads, but after he got married and had a baby, he ended up transferring to work for another of the Thirteen, Apollo. I haven’t seen Hector much in the years since, but he was a formidable fighter when I knew him. “How’s the kid?”

“She takes after her mother.” He gives a small smile. “I thank the gods every day that she didn’t get my ugly mug.”

Hector is good-looking in a rugged sort of way with his sandy-blond hair and kind eyes, but he’s right; he won’t be winning any beauty contests anytime soon. I grin at him, completely ignoring Paris. “Surely you’re not going to fight? You already have a wife. I thought you were halfway to retired at this point.”

He shrugs. “Family.”

I nod as if I have any idea what he’s talking about. My only family is Patroclus and the squad we run together. My parents are mysteries. Apparently they didn’t want a kid, so they followed the old tradition of leaving the baby—me—on the temple steps. I grew up in one of the orphanages that’s run in Hera’s name, but I don’t think an actual Hera has set foot in them since before I was born. At eighteen, I got a choice of working for Ares, Poseidon, or Demeter. Really, it wasn’t much of a choice at all. I was a grunt for Ares for a few years before Athena plucked me out of obscurity and showed me what greatness can be.

I was always destined for this.

“Now, it’s time for those who would be Ares to step forward.”

Zeus steps back and motions to the tall Black woman at his side. She’s wearing a suit instead of a gown, the pale gray setting off her warm brown skin, her black hair cut short on the sides with the curls longer on the top. Athena.

She surveys the room as if measuring every person’s weaknesses. Knowing her, that’s exactly what she’s done. “Once you put your name forward, the only way out is elimination or resignation. While these trials aren’t meant to be to the death...accidents happen. Be willing to sacrifice it all.”

Paris ducks from under Hector’s hand and moves forward. “I’m Paris Chloros. I will sacrifice it all.”

I can’t help it. I glance at Helen to see her reaction. Her pale skin has gone a little green as she glares at her ex. Paris winks at her as if he can’t see the murder in her eyes. If he wins Ares, I don’t like his chances of surviving the wedding night.

It won’t be a problem, because Paris isn’t even a contender. The bigger worry is Hector, who steps forward and repeats the traditional phrase. Ajax—another of the former Ares commanders and someone I consider a friend—is next. Then a Black woman with locs pulled back from her scarred face. Her name is Atalanta, and she’s light enough on her feet that I already know she’ll be quick as fuck.

Person after person comes forward in an endless stream. I note the ones Patroclus expected and the ones he didn’t. None of them matter. There are a few actual contenders but mostly they’re people from the elite families that move in the extended circles of the Thirteen. They’ll attempt the tournament because they can’t afford to ignore a chance to take the title, but they aren’t true threats.

A wave of murmurs rises behind me, and I glance over my shoulder as two men stalk through the crowd, people practically scrambling over one another to get out of their way. They have similar coloring—medium-brown skin, dark-red hair, dark eyes—and are both even larger than I am. “Big bastards,” I murmur.

The taller of the two gives me a look that’s eerily empty as they pass by. The entire room has gone silent, probably sensing the same thing I do—these are true predators in our midst. Even more importantly, they’re *strangers*.

The shorter of the two steps forward first with a showy bow. “I’m Theseus Vitalis, and I’m willing to sacrifice it all.”

Athena raises a brow. "New in town?"

"It's within the parameters of the competition."

"I'm aware of the rules." She glances at the taller one. "And you?"

"I'm the Minotaur." His voice sounds like someone hacked open his vocal cords and then poured burning embers into the wound.

Athena gives him a sharp look. "That's your name?"

"It serves its purpose." He pauses barely long enough for her to nod before continuing. "I will sacrifice it all."

"Dangerous," Patroclus murmurs.

"Yeah." I wait for them to move to the side before Patroclus and I step forward. I can't help looking at Helen again as Patroclus speaks the words to become a champion. She's doing a shit job of masking her expression, and I hate the sympathy that I feel in response. She obviously didn't choose this. Fuck, she obviously didn't know about it before Zeus made his announcement. This woman is nothing to me, but when I win the title Ares—and I *will* win—I'll ensure she's not mistreated. After the wedding, I don't care what she does or who she fucks around with as long as she stays away from me and Patroclus. It's a better deal than she'll get from anyone else.

Then it's my turn to speak, and I shove all thoughts of Helen effortlessly away. "I'm Achilles Kallis, and I'm willing to sacrifice it all."

Athena doesn't smile, but approval warms her dark eyes. It's about as effusive as she gets, and it makes me feel a little strange in response. I'm not someone who needs outside approval for validation, but I respect the fuck out of Athena, and her opinion matters to me.

She waits several long moments, but no one else steps forward. She lifts her voice to be heard in every corner of the room. "The deadline for putting your name forward is dawn. Best of luck."

The lights brighten slowly, signaling the end of the pageantry. The party will go on for hours, but our reason to be here is over. I turn to Patroclus. "Let's go."

For a second, it seems like he might argue, but finally he nods and turns with me for the door. People get out of our way. I've been to these kinds of parties a handful of times in the years since I was promoted to Athena's second--in--command, but she prefers to keep her people out of the viper's nest. Her words, not mine. I don't see the big deal, but then I'm not one to be swayed by a pretty face or prettier words. I know my fate.

I hold the door open for Patroclus, and we exit into the long hallway leading to the elevator down. He's got *that* look on his face, and I inwardly roll my eyes. "Tell me you're not worried about that golden princess."

"I feel bad for her." He shrugs, completely unashamed of his bleeding heart. "It can't be that comfortable being so close to so many members of the Thirteen. Her life was never her own, not even from birth."

This time, I can't stop myself from rolling my eyes. "Right. Poor little princess, born into the richest family in the city, having everything she could ever dream of at the tips of her fingers. She's never had to fight for a single thing in her life. Not like me. Not like you."

"That's not entirely true, at least for me. If things had fallen out differently, I'd be Aphrodite's son."

"It's different."

"If you say so." Another shrug. "I don't have the same ambition you do, Achilles. Working for Athena is just a job for me. It always has been."

I love the man, but sometimes I really don't understand him. If you're not fighting for something, you're going to get used as a stepping--stone for the people who are. Patroclus is one of the most brilliant people I know, but he's too soft. Without me to watch his back, he would have been fucked over dozens of times since we met each other as teenagers.

Then again, without me in his life, I don't think he'd be in Athena's special forces. With his love of knowledge and research, he might have gravitated to Apollo's businesses the same way Hector did.

Something like guilt slaps me in the face, but I shove it away. When I'm Ares, Patroclus will be free to do whatever he damn well pleases. With that much power at my disposal, that many resources, he won't have to work at all if he doesn't want to.

I sling an arm around his shoulders and press a quick kiss to his temple. "Don't worry so much. When I'm Ares, I'll take care of both of us." I grin. "Fuck, I'll take care of Helen, too, if that will make you feel better." Even if she is a spoiled brat.

3

HELEN

“Are you *fucking* kidding me?” I dig my fingers into the fabric of my dress. It’s do that or punch my brother in his infuriatingly square jaw. No matter how satisfying it would be, I can’t risk injuring my hand. Not if I want to be Ares. Except how the fuck can I be Ares when Patroclus named me Ares’s *wife*? “You made me a prize to be won! Married off to a stranger! Without even talking to me.”

I managed to hold it together until the party wrapped up and a small group of us ended up in Perseus’s office—me, Perseus, Eris, and Callisto. Me, Zeus, Aphrodite, and Hera. Perseus sits behind his large desk, looking bored with my theatrics. Eris has one hip perched on the desk and is smiling in a way I really don’t like. I love my siblings. I do. But I can never forget that they’re focused on power and ambition before all else. They always have been, even before they became members of the Thirteen. It’s how we were raised, after all.

The only exception was Hercules, and look what happened to him.

Callisto stands in front of the floor--to--ceiling windows, seeming to be totally checked out of the conversation. Or argument, more accurately.

Eris examines her nails. “It’s tradition for a wife to be part of Ares taking the title.”

Somehow, in all my preparation, I missed that little detail. I was so focused on what the trials could be that I never bothered to look into the rest. The last Ares had several wives over the course of his time holding the title. It never occurred to me that one of them was the result of him gaining the title itself. “That’s no excuse. You could have chosen someone else. You should have chosen *anyone* else. Why did it have to be me?”

Perseus steepled his hands before his mouth. “Because you’re a Kasios.”

I flinch. I didn’t ask to be born into this family. I didn’t ask for the consequences I’ve lived with my entire life. “So I’m going to be punished for having our father’s blood in my veins?”

“Stop being dramatic, Helen.”

I *hate* how patronizing he sounds right now. “No, fuck you. You don’t know what it’s like—”

He pushes slowly to his feet, cutting me off. “I don’t know what it’s like to... What exactly? Sacrifice in the name of the Thirteen? Marry a stranger for the sake of a greater good?” He doesn’t look at Callisto. “I’m not asking anything of you that I haven’t already done myself.”

“I didn’t ask for this,” I finally manage.

“Don’t be a child. You’re not special. None of us asked for this.” He turns for the door. “You were always going to be married off in a power match. You know this.”

Honestly, it’s a minor miracle that I’ve avoided it to this point. My father thought to break me before offering me up as a pawn to someone else, which is the only reason I haven’t had a ring shoved on my finger and been carted down the aisle. But I didn’t expect it from *Perseus*.

Silly me.

Of course my brother would never let a little thing like my happiness get in the way of his bottom line. Our father taught him too well. He taught all of us too well. Even Zeus, with his petty cruelty, protected Olympus in his own way. No one could protect Olympus from *him*, but at least we didn’t have to worry about outside enemies with him on the throne.

“But—”

“The Thirteen are too fractured, and with the changeovers, that’s causing unrest. I will bring them all to heel, one by one, no matter what it takes. *You* will do your part by influencing Ares to my side. Exactly like you were taught to.”

The side effect of being destined for a political marriage? It wouldn’t stop being political the moment I said “I do.” I will be walking a tightrope between my spouse and my family, and gods know my family might not be perfect, but they still have my loyalty. No matter how much it kills me to do what’s required. Which means there’s only one answer available to me. “I understand.”

“Good.” He turns and pins me with a cold look. “You will be there tomorrow during the opening ceremony, and you will sit next to Athena in a pretty dress and inspire the candidates to greatness. They need to put on a show for the ages, and I need your help doing it. It’s your duty, Helen. You haven’t forgotten the price of the life we live, have you?”

Shame lances me and it’s everything I can do not to bow my shoulders. No matter how awful it’s been growing up as one of Zeus’s children, the fact remains that when it came to having my material needs met, I wanted for nothing. The best schools, the best clothing, a home in the upper city, moving through the circles of the rich and powerful. All of it was because of the family I was born into.

But, as my brother likes to remind me, there is a price to be paid.

Perseus is right in a way; he’s not asking me for anything he’s not willing to do himself. He married one of Demeter’s daughters, after all. No matter my bitching, even I can recognize that alliance as valuable, even if I don’t fully understand why it had to be *Callisto*. Of all of us, he’s most aware of the horrifying legacy we carry in our blood, of the sins our father committed while he was Zeus. Perseus is already going out of his way to ensure he follows a different path. He might aggravate me in the extreme, but I can respect that about him.

But...

I don’t *want* this responsibility. I didn’t choose this.

It doesn’t matter. I lift my chin, blinking past the burning in my eyes. I am a Kasios and Kasioses don’t cry. “I’ll do my duty.” What are my other options? Run? The idea is laughable. The only way out of Olympus is at Poseidon’s hand, and there’s no way he’ll help me. He doesn’t like me, but more than that, he knows how valuable I am to this whole plan. Helping me means alienating Zeus, Aphrodite, and the next Ares, all in one single action. Probably Demeter, too, though that one isn’t guaranteed. Perseus is too measured to do anything so reckless.

“Do I need to put one of Athena’s people on you?”

I draw myself up. “Absolutely not.”

“Fine. Don’t make me regret this decision.” He nods and then he’s gone, leaving me alone with Eris.

Eris pushes off the desk. She’s wearing a slinky gunmetal--silver gown and has her long dark hair pulled back in a complicated series of twists. “I know this isn’t ideal, but he’s right. A new Ares means we’re introducing a wild card into the Thirteen. We need you to pave the way to secure a new Zeus--Ares alliance.”

I love my sister. A lot. But that doesn’t change the fact that like everyone else in my family, she’s out for Olympus first, herself second, and everyone else dead last. Family might rank higher than the greater Olympian population, but not by much. She loves me. She’s just not one to let that get in the way of decisive action—and stirring the pot every chance she gets. “You could have chosen someone else. Anyone else.”

She shrugs, a small smile pulling at the edges of her lips. “You’ll come out on top, Helen. You always do.”

I tilt my head back and stare at the ceiling. "That was quite the backhanded compliment." My voice is high and tight. I have too much control to throw a fit over this turn of events, but I want nothing more than to throw something at my sister's smug face. "I'm very angry at you right now."

"You'll get over it. It's dog--eat--dog in this city, especially among the Thirteen. You know that."

"Yeah, well, I *would* have secured an airtight Zeus--Ares alliance if you'd let *me* become the next Ares."

She jolts like I've surprised her. "You can't really mean you considered stepping forward as a candidate. I thought you gave up that ridiculousness when we were still children."

It shouldn't hurt so much that my sister doesn't take me seriously. Of everyone, I'd think she'd realize my ambitions go more than skin deep. Apparently I was wrong. "I never gave it up."

She gives a tight smile. "Honey, I know you mean well, but look at the champions. Achilles, Hector, Atalanta, those two strangers. They're huge and they practically sweat violence. That's not even getting into the other thirty--odd people who put their names forward. You're..." She hesitates. "You're capable, but you're no warrior, Helen. There's no way you could win."

Somehow, this is worse than the fact she hadn't taken my ambitions seriously. She honestly doesn't think I could do it. My chest tries to close, and only years of practice keep me from buckling. "I *would* have won."

"I guess we'll never know now." Eris presses her lips together, looking almost apologetic in a way she wasn't when she effectively sold me in marriage without asking first. "I'm sorry, Helen. Truly, I am. But you know how it goes. Olympus comes first. Sometimes that demands sacrifice."

"Keep telling yourself that. You're not sacrificing a single damn thing." I'm so angry, I'm shaking. The temptation to let the rage out here, when it's just family in this room, is almost too strong to ignore. It's been many years since I brawled with Eris; the last time was when we were teenagers. It would feel so damn good to let off some of this horrible feeling inside me. The betrayal lies thick on my tongue, threatening to choke out everything else.

"Don't make that face. It's going to give you wrinkles. This will work out, Helen. Trust us." She turns and strides out of the office. Eris always did like to leave arguments unfinished.

It's so damn naive of me to believe my siblings would treat me differently than my father intended to. Helen Kasios, princess of Olympus, destined to marry someone who will bring more power to her family—as if they need it. "*Damn it.*" I force my hands to unclench the folds of my dress. "I wanted the title so fucking bad."

"Why not do it anyway?" Callisto's voice comes from the shadows, low and almost seductive.

I jolt and spin around, my heart racing. I'd completely forgotten she was in the room with us. She melts out of the shadows near the window where she'd been standing, near invisible. In her black dress with her dark hair, she looks like some creature of the night who wandered into this office by accident. I still can't believe my brother married *her*. I understand wanting to settle Demeter and her significant power firmly on his side, but surely Eurydice would have been a better choice. She's so much sweeter; marrying her would mean a much less tumultuous life.

Then again, Olympus would eat Eurydice alive if she became Hera.

"I can't do it anyway. That's not how things work."

"Isn't it?" Callisto examines her nails. "I'm a fan of asking for forgiveness instead of permission. That's what your brother did, after all. Why not give him a taste of his own medicine?"

I stare. "You're trying to cause trouble."

“Olympus is nothing but trouble.” Something dangerous shifts through her tone. She’s not entirely wrong, but that doesn’t mean she’s right, either. Her mother, Demeter, won the title and brought her daughters into the city proper a little over ten years ago. In that time, Callisto has made her derision of everything connected with the Thirteen known. Before she married my brother, she didn’t show up for parties. She didn’t play the game. She was always willing to step to the line and fight, no matter the opponent.

Now that she’s officially become Hera, I don’t know what to make of her.

I cross my arms over my chest and try to calm my racing heart. No matter how dangerous she seems, she’s just a woman, and I’ve been playing this game longer than she’s been in the city proper. I inject some false cheer into my voice. “It’s really sweet that you’re trying to be a supportive sister--in--law, but I am not about to become a pawn in whatever game you and my brother have going on.”

Callisto gives me a long look, her hazel eyes downright predatory. “This has nothing to do with your brother.”

“Lovely. Now I have some snake oil I’d love to sell you. It’s great for the skin. Practically a fountain of youth.”

Her lips curve. “Regardless of my motivations, we’re talking about *you*. Is there some rule that says you can’t be both prize and champion?”

I consider her. Despite my better instincts, I’m thinking her words through. “I’d have to check, but probably not. They don’t have a rule against it because I doubt it would have occurred to anyone to even attempt it.” I hate to lend any strength to Eris’s doubt in me, but... “You’ve seen the people who stepped forward. That’s a lot to combat.”

Callisto shrugs. “If you were planning on making an attempt for Ares, you already intended to fight them and come out on top.”

She’s not wrong, but it still sounds like a trap. It’s just...I’m not sure I care. If I compete and win, I knock out two birds with one stone. I become Ares and successfully dodge being married to someone I don’t know. Despite myself, I picture Paris’s smarmy face leering at me as he stepped forward earlier. *Or being married to that man*. I dodged that fate once and I’m determined to do it again.

Still, one thing doesn’t add up. I carefully wrap up my growing excitement and inject coolness into my tone. “Again, what do you have to gain from suggesting I do this?”

Another shrug. “Maybe I have a thing against people being forced into marriages they didn’t choose. Maybe I want to live vicariously through you because I would have competed to be Ares if I weren’t already Hera. Maybe I want to stick it to my lovely husband in any way I can. My reasonings really don’t matter, do they?” Again, that predator’s smile. “You want to compete, Helen? Do it. All those fuckers who think you’re just a pretty prize to be won? Prove them wrong.”

It feels like she fired an arrow right into the very heart of me. I can’t trust this woman, sister--in--law or no. But...that doesn’t mean her idea is without merit. “You really hate my brother, don’t you?”

“I hate all of the Thirteen.”

“*You* are one of the Thirteen.” Even if Hera has become a weakened title since my father became Zeus. Over the course of his three wives—three Heras—he stripped the title of what influence it had until it became nothing more than an empty term for Zeus’s spouse.

“Yes. I am.”

The door opens and Perseus steps back into the room. His gaze jumps from me to his wife and back again. “There you are.”

Her smile is downright poisonous. “Just having some girl talk with Helen.”

He doesn't comment on that, which is just as well. "It's time to leave, Hera."

"Of course, Zeus." The words seem polite enough, but fury lurks in their edges. She turns to me. "Congratulations on your pending nuptials, Helen. I'm sure you'll make a lovely piece of arm candy for the next Ares."

I watch her stalk across the room toward my brother, and the small hairs at the back of my neck rise. This woman is more predator than most of the Thirteen, and I can't shake the feeling that Perseus is going to greatly regret marrying her. For his part, he turns easily and places his hand at the small of her back. Always worried about appearances, my brother, even when no one else is here to witness the lie except me.

I follow them out of the office, and we take the elevator down to the parking garage. Only when we've walked well out of hearing range of the guard near the door does Perseus speak. "Do not, under any circumstances, take action to endanger this process. Promise me, Helen."

Damn him for throwing this curveball at me and then demanding I promise good behavior. Damn his wife for using clever words to poke holes in my already shaky determination to do what my family asks of me. I shake my head slowly. "You know, you really do take after our father."

He flinches, a barely perceptible movement that instantly has guilt surging through me. It was a low blow, and I did it intentionally to hurt him. I never mean to be a bitch, but sometimes the thorns inside me squeeze too tightly and horrible things burst from my lips. Words meant to strike to the very heart of a person.

Perseus nudges Callisto toward his SUV, and I wonder again that he touches her so easily, as if he's not worried about losing a hand. Surely he sees the sharp look she sends in his direction every time he gets too close?

He waits for her to climb into the passenger seat before turning to me. "I deserved that, but it changes nothing. Promise me, Helen."

"I promise," I lie without hesitation. I don't even feel guilty while doing it. It's practically a love language in our family. He searches my face, the cold thawing for the barest instant. "Whoever becomes Ares will treat you well. I'll ensure it."

I laugh bitterly. "*How?* Are you going to set up surveillance to ensure my spouse doesn't abuse me? Please."

"Yes."

He's...not joking. I stare. "And then what, Perseus? What will you do if you sentenced me to be married to a monster?"

"It won't come to that. You're too savvy, and most of the champions recognize that harming you would alienate a good portion of the Thirteen."

Surely my ambitious, ruthless brother can't be this naive. "Most, but not all."

"The unknowns won't win, Helen."

No, they won't. Because I'm going to. The resolution takes root in my chest, steadying me. *I'm going to be Ares.* Still, I can't help pressing. I don't know what I'm looking for. Reassurance. Comfort. Something. I'm a fool. "What if one of the unknowns wins? What if *Paris* wins?"

"They won't harm you. If they do?" My brother turns for the SUV. "I'll make you a widow."