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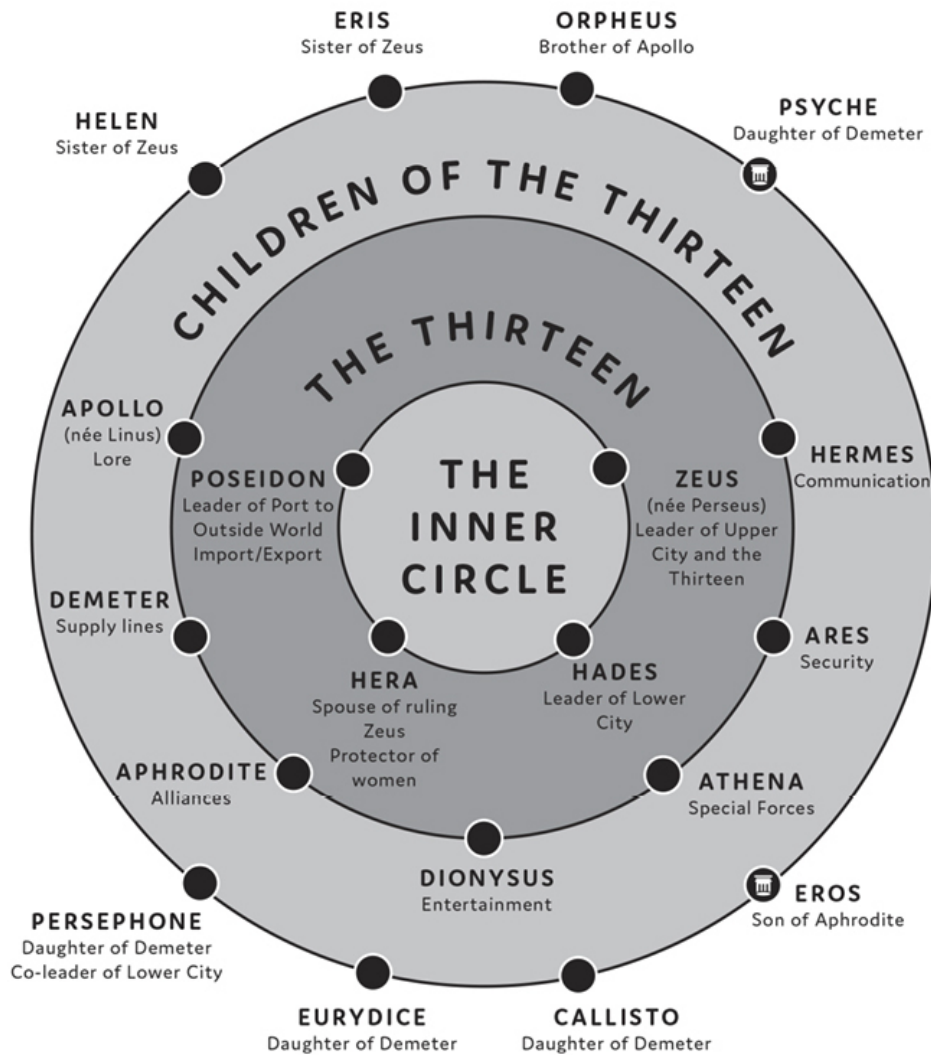
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*To Jenny. It's a pleasure to share an Id with you!*



# THE RULING FAMILIES OF

# Olympus



# Olympus



# 1

## *Psyche*

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

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

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

It won't stay empty for long.

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

Tonight isn't *officially* a marriage mart, but you can't tell that from the way Aphrodite parades person after person in front of our new Zeus where he lounges in the throne that used to be his father's. It's large and gold and gaudy. It might have suited the father, but it doesn't suit the son in the least.

I'm not one to judge, but he lacks the commanding charisma that the last Zeus possessed. If he's not careful, the piranhas of Olympus will eat him alive.

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

"Psyche."

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

"You're avoiding me."

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

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

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

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

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

"I've met him before." Several times in fact. We were introduced ten years ago when Mother took over as Demeter, and we've been attending the same parties ever since. Up until a few months ago, he was still Perseus, heir to the title *Zeus*. Best I can tell, he's nowhere near the predator his late father was, but that doesn't mean he's not a predator at all. He's grown up in the glittering

viper's nest that is the upper city. You don't survive this long without being at least a little bit monster.

Mother's hand tightens on my arm and she lowers her voice. "Well, you're going to meet him again. Properly. Tonight."

We watch Zeus barely glance at Ganymede. "It doesn't look like he's interested in meeting anyone."

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

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

Not to mention I have no desire to be Hera.

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

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

A mistake.

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

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

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

I don't have a chance to respond because my mother's grip tightens on my arm and she's turning a brilliant smile at the other woman. "Aphrodite, *darling*,

you've been around long enough to learn to take a hint. Zeus dismissed you." She leans forward and lowers her voice. "I know rejection stings, but it's important to keep your chin up. Maybe you can work on another marriage for Ares instead. Lower-hanging fruit and all that."

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

"What are we talking about?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What is *that* all about?

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

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

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

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

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

Tonight, all thirteen are finally here.

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

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

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

moving through the power games and carefully veiled threats as naturally as sharks through water.

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

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

I can't outrun myself.

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

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

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

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

Five breaths. Slow inhales. Even slower exhales.

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

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

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



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

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

"Something like that."

*Oh shit.* I know that voice. I take great pains to avoid the man it belongs to. Eros. Aphrodite's son. Aphrodite's *fixer*.

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

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

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

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

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

Still, I hesitate. "Is it your blood?"

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