STONE HEART
A DARK OLYMPUS NOVELLA

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TRINKETS AND TALES LLC
ALSO BY KATEE ROBERT

Dark Olympus
Stone Heart
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Radiant Sin

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Abel
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The Beast
The Sea Witch
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Wrong Bed, Right Guy
Chasing Mrs. Right
Two Wrongs, One Right
Stone Heart takes place before the events of Neon Gods in the Dark Olympus world.
CONTENT WARNINGS

This book contains material that may be upsetting for some readers: attempted murder, drugging, assault (historical, off-page), explicit sex. Reader discretion is advised.
“I need you to do something for me.”

I fall into an easy stance, feet shoulder-width apart and hands clasped behind me out of sheer instinct. Athena doesn’t require as much formality as my old instructors, but old habits die hard. She sits behind her desk, as regal as a queen and seven times as deadly. She’s a beautiful Black woman with warm brown skin and an undercut, her dark curls perfectly styled. Today her customary suit is a lovely cream color that would make me look like a child playing dress-up.

On Athena, it’s perfect.

If she wasn’t my commander, her beauty and perfection would make me trip over my feet and act like a bumbling teenager, but Athena doesn’t suffer fools lightly and I am not foolish enough to harbor a schoolyard crush on one of the thirteen most powerful people in Olympus. Most days.

“Whatever you need.”

She leans forward and arches a brow at me. We’ve known each other long enough, that her gaze doesn’t linger on the scars that mar my face. “Sit, Medusa. This isn’t a dressing down. I have a mission for you, and I require the utmost secrecy.”

Disappointment sours my stomach, and I fight to keep my expression even. I don’t know what I expected. That Athena would call me in here one day and just want to chat? Ask me how my day’s going? That’s not who she is. That’s not the role I play for her.

There are times when I wish it were different, especially lately, but I owe Athena everything. She says jump, I ask how high.

I gingerly sink into the chair across from her desk. It’s sturdy and not what I would consider doll furniture, but my body still feels too big, too gangly, to occupy this space. What if I crush it? That would be just how my luck goes. Shift wrong, flex a little, and now I’ve broken Athena’s favorite chair.

It takes a whole lot of effort to drag my thoughts back into order. “What are the details?” I can guess the parameters. I’m not like the normal squads she has running the valiant tasks to keep Olympus safe. Achilles and Patroclus and Bellerophon are all
practically heroes as far as the city is concerned. The only time people talk about me, it’s with fear. Like I’m the boogeyman hiding under their beds, ready to kill them with a single attack. Still, at least they only talk about me in whispers, instead of saying it to my face. I prefer it that way, even if being called a monster hurts.

No matter how true it is.

The limelight has only shone in my direction once, and that was more than enough. The fear from that time still has me waking in a cold sweat some nights. I dodged a bullet, and Athena is the only reason I didn’t spend years holed up in an apartment in the shipping district, unwilling mistress to the last Poseidon. He’s dead and gone now, his son having inherited the title, but the fear remains.

Better to be feared than desired. Better for me. Better for everyone.

She sighs and leans back. “The situation is not ideal. Two of the legacy families are at each other’s throats over a marital matter. Normally, this would be outside our jurisdiction and I’d be inclined to let them figure it out for themselves, but Zeus has requested I take care of things.” Her expression twists at that last bit, leaving me no illusions over the nature of the request. More like an order. Athena might be one of the Thirteen, the ruling body of Olympus, but Zeus is...Zeus.

“Okay,” I say slowly. I can guess where this is going, and the twisting in my stomach gets worse. My hands are hardly clean, and not likely to get cleaner as time goes on, but I don’t have the nifty ability to click off my emotions like some of Athena’s other people do. Instead, I add to my nightmare fuel and call it a fair deal.

Better than the other option.

“The husband, Odysseus, has a mistress and he’s not being subtle about her existence. His wife is furious, both the families are embarrassed and sniping at each other, and it’s only a matter of time before she poisons his soup or her mother tries to run him over with a car.”

I blink. I have never understood the upper tier families who all scramble for whatever powerful cast-offs they can grab from their proximity to the Thirteen. What’s the point of all that effort with no payoff? There’s only a changeover of title once a generation, give or take, so it all seems so pointless. “Why doesn’t he just dump the mistress?”

“His pride is all riled up and so he won’t end the relationship even though he doesn’t want to deal with the consequences. You’d understand if you met him.” Athena sighs. “Zeus wants her gone in the permanent sense, and quickly.” She slides a manila folder across the desk to me.

Nausea surges as I pick it up, but I swallow down the feeling. Inside the folder, I find a piece of paper with a name and address on it; a key; and a picture. I put the picture back into the folder without looking at it. I don’t want to see the face of the person I’m
being asked to remove, at least not while I have an audience. The address is close, a fancy apartment building right in the center of the Olympian upper city. Odysseus really is bold to have set her up here, right under his wife’s nose.

My gaze lingers on the name above the address. Calypso. Pretty name, no doubt for a pretty woman. She doesn’t deserve what’s about to happen to her, but sometimes the price of grabbing for power in Olympus is that you get violence and blood instead of prestige and jewels. It doesn’t seem worth the risk from where I’m sitting, but when I’m the one they send to cut down people who have reached too far, too fast, I guess I’m not the best person to make that call.

I toss the keys lightly in my hand. “Zeus moves fast to get keys to her place.”
“He didn’t provide them. Odysseus did.”
I almost drop the keys. “Excuse me?”
“Like I said, his pride isn’t allowing him to admit he’s wrong, but he wants this problem taken care of as much as everyone else.” Athena makes a face. “I realize how this looks and it’s not ideal, but Zeus has given his command and we all dance to his tune. There’s nothing to be done about it.”

There’s nothing to be done about it.

She managed to step in when the last Poseidon wanted to treat me like an object to be claimed, but he hadn’t wanted me dead, and once Athena claimed me as her own, he hadn’t dared cross her. But Zeus is not Poseidon for all that they’re two of only three legacy titles among the Thirteen. No one fucks with Zeus when he gets his mind set on something. Not even Athena.

“He’s a coward.” I don’t mean to speak, but the words burst free all the same. “He’s the married one. Why is murder more acceptable than admitting he was wrong and ending the relationship?”

“That’s not our concern,” Athena says firmly. “We do what we have to in order to protect the peaceful balance of Olympus. Sometimes that means doing things that are...” She looks away. “It’s not ideal, and I realize that, but we don’t have another option. Zeus wants what he wants, and if we don’t give it to him, two pissy families will be the least of our worries. Calypso needs to be removed to maintain that peaceful balance.”

Peaceful balance.

Funny, but the so-called peace only seems to apply to those with money and power.

That, I manage to keep internal. Ultimately, my thoughts about this order don’t matter at all. I don’t hold power in this city. I’m just an instrument of the powerful; namely, Athena.

And, right now, she’s telling me to jump.

I stand and slide the keys into my pocket. “I’ll take care of it.”
“Thank you. It’s best to make it look like an accident if at all possible. The woman has no family to speak of, but Odysseus has been public with the affair and if it gets out she was the victim of a violent end, people will ask uncomfortable questions.”

Gods forbid someone ask questions.

I smooth out my expression and turn for the door. “I’ll see it done.” Even though I know better, part of me wants Athena to call me back and say we’ll find a different way. She won’t. She’s made the call and she’s not one to second-guess herself.

No, the weak one in this scenario is me.

It’s late enough that I don’t see anyone as I leave the building and stride down the street, my long legs eating up the distance. It’s tempting to go home, to sleep on this, but ultimately I have no choice. If I don’t obey, then I’ll be the one seeing consequences, and Athena will just send someone else to remove the mistress. My chest tries to close at the thought, a sensation as familiar as my own heartbeat.

I don’t have a choice. I never have a choice. A small price to pay for my life, but it’s easy enough for me to say that. It’s not me who’s paying the price this time.

At least I can ensure its painless. A small comfort, that, but better than nothing. All too many accidents are violent in nature. Another of my…coworkers…might shove her out of her high-rise apartment or send her through a glass shower with some conveniently located cuts to allow her to bleed out on her bathroom floor.

Pills, I decide. Not an accident, but a suicide. A deep sleep that she’ll never wake up from. It’s the kindest way to go.

With that in mind, I take a quick detour to the closest of Athena’s safe houses. We have them scattered about the city, designed to be a perfect hiding place if we need to disappear for a short while or the perfect, fully-stocked location to duck into if we need something for a job. Weapons and medical gear and a few bedrooms to crash in.

This one is blessedly empty. Thank the gods. I’m not sure what my face is doing, and I can’t keep my doubt from surfacing. From the truth from surfacing. This woman doesn’t deserve to die for sleeping with a married man. As best I can tell, it’s practically a sport in the city among the upper crust. They play political games in and out of the bedroom and no one raises any brows as long as they keep things pure and wholesome on the surface. Hypocrites, all of them. If Odysseus hadn’t been so stubborn about taking her out in public, it wouldn’t have come to this, and now she will pay the price instead of the person who rightly should.

She’s not married. He is.

“Not my call to make,” I mutter as I dig through the medical supplies until I come up with the proper pill bottle. I check and double check to ensure it’s the right medication. She won’t suffer. I’ll ensure that much.
Funny how that doesn’t make me feel even a little bit better.

I take the time to crush up enough pills to finish the job and then scrape all the powder back into the bottle. I slip it into the pocket of my pants and go dig through a closet until I come up with a mask. I already knew it wasn’t a social call when Athena summoned me, so I’m dressed for work in black tactical pants, boots, and a long-sleeved black fitted shirt. I pick up the black mask and pause. The mistress dies tonight. Wearing a mask hardly matters, nor does whether the woman sees me, because it’s not like she’ll live to talk about the fact that one of Athena’s people showed up to murder her.

Still...

I shove the mask into my pocket and survey the space. I’m forgetting something...

“The cameras!” I’m sure Athena will squash whatever investigation Ares wants to form, and I bet there will be pressure from both families to keep things quiet, but there’s no reason to tempt fate.

I take a breath and dial Bellerophon. They don’t make me wait long before their low voice answers, “Bellerophon here.”

“I need a favor and it’s work related, but I can’t give details.”

They barely pause. “Of course, Medusa. What can I do for you?”

I rattle off the address of the mistress’s building. “I need the cameras in the parking garage, stairs, and thirtieth floor on a loop for a few hours tonight.” It shouldn’t take long to deal with this, but better safe than sorry.

“Give me a moment.” Movement on their end and then the soft sound of typing. “That security system is one we have a back door into, so that’s not a problem. Do you want a loop or simply want the footage erased?”

I worry my bottom lip. That’s a good question. Missing footage is convenient in that there’s no worry that it’ll be recovered and it’s unlikely the in-house security will realize there’s a problem until they go to search it up and find it gone. A loop is slightly riskier because there’s a small chance someone might notice, but it covers my tracks more effectively. “A loop, please.”

“Got it.” They hesitate. “I’m off through the weekend. I’m more than happy to play backup to whatever Athena has you doing.”

It’s tempting to say yes. So incredibly tempting. I like Bellerophon quite a bit. They’re quiet and competent and they never make me feel like the monster I’m certain I am most of the time. They also don’t treat my scars as either something horrific to stare at, or something to pretend doesn’t exist. The scars are just part of me, and they don’t see a reason to comment on them. I don’t know that I’d call us friends, but I’m closer with them than most of my coworkers, if you can call the other people who follow Athena’s darker orders coworkers. “I appreciate the offer, but this is a lone wolf kind of situation.”
“Got it.” Some more typing. “If you change your mind, let me know. The loop begins in fifteen minutes.”
“Thanks, Bell.”
“Anytime.”
I hang up, unable to decide if I feel better or worse. It doesn’t matter. I know how I’ll feel after the night’s events come to a conclusion.
Like the monster I am.
CHAPTER 2

MEDUSA

It’s child’s play to get into the building. Even if the cameras weren’t on loops thanks to Bellerophon, they have blind spots a mile wide. I slip through them without issue and take the long journey up the stairs to the thirtieth floor. I’m strong and I train daily, but thirty flights of stairs are enough to wind even me and have my thighs shaking a bit as I finally reach the proper landing.

I take a few moments to regain my breath and get my head on straight.
The hallway is a study in luxury, from its thickly carpeted floors to the wall lights at regular intervals between the widely spaced doors. These apartments are big. I eye the cameras tucked up against the ceiling. There are no blind spots here, so I’m doubly glad for Bellerophon’s help.

I check the number on the key—that Odysseus provided knowing it what it would be used for—and head down the hall to the door matching that number. It’s on the end, which is just as well. I’ll only have to worry about neighbors on one side, and even then, I’d bet my last paycheck that the soundproofing in these units is top of the line. Gods forbid you see even the tiniest evidence that you’re not in a house with four walls to yourself.

In my apartment, sometimes it feels like I’m literally rubbing elbows with my neighbors. I can tell what they have for dinner and know the cadence of their walk from memory. It’s not exactly a restful living experience, but they’re mostly good people and so I make do. And, truth be told, it makes me feel less alone on the bad nights.

You’re stalling.

I take a deep breath, press the key into the lock, and slip into the apartment. I close the door softly behind me and engage the deadbolt again. It’s late enough that most of the lights in the main living area are off, but the curtains are open and so there’s plenty of city light to see by. It’s a nice space. Big and luxurious with an open concept that will make sneaking around tricky. It’s also empty.

Maybe she’s not home. I don’t know much about mistresses, but judging by the apartment itself, she’s raking in Odysseus’s money. Not that it will do her any good after
tonight. The thought makes me sick to my stomach. She won’t be out with him; he’ll no doubt be spending the evening with his wife, securing his alibi.

I clench my fists and have to count slowly to ten to combat the surge of pure rage. If anyone should be punished for this situation going shitty, it’s him. But that would mean one of the precious legacy families seeing consequences for their actions, and that’s something Olympus and the Thirteen will never allow to happen.

It’s not my business. I might jump at Athena’s behest, but I’m not a person who gets to ask questions. I certainly don’t get to demand justification or changes to the plan.

Somewhere down the hall, a melodious voice rises in conversation. I tense for a long moment until I realize she must be on the phone. At least I can pinpoint her location now.

I survey the space again, this time with an eye for staging. The problem with pills is that I need her to swallow them. I drift into the kitchen and check the wine rack. It’s half empty and there’s an open bottle on the counter. I sniff it and make a face. I don’t drink as a general rule, so I can’t begin to guess if the taste of the wine will cover up the bitterness of the pills. It smells nasty enough to do it, but if she drinks wine regularly, then maybe not. And if she only drinks a little, it might not be enough to get the job done.

Still, she won’t feel a thing, even if I have to smother her afterward.

I shudder.

It has to be done. I don’t have a choice.

I listen closely, but she’s still talking to someone somewhere down the hall. Probably in her bedroom. I ignore the guilt trying to choke the life out of me and carefully tap the entire bottle of crushed pills into the bottle of wine. I pick it up and swirl it a few times, hopefully helping things dissolve.

The voice starts coming down the hall.

Fuck.

I cast a wild glance around, but hiding spots are in short supply. The only option is to fling myself behind the couch in the adjoining living room and hope she doesn’t turn on the lights. I crouch there, working on keeping my breathing under control and silent, as light footsteps pad down the hallway.

“Yes, Daddy, I need a new dress. We talked about this. Yes, I already have a blue dress, but I wore it last time we went to The Dryad. You can’t honestly expect me to wear the same thing twice, can you?” Her tone has a girlish lilt to it that sets my teeth on edge. She laughs, high and sweet as she walks into the kitchen. “Don’t play games, Daddy. You know I need the money tonight or they’ll add another two weeks onto the turnaround time. Please?” She takes on a playfully whining tone. “Please.”
Her phone dings. “Oh, thank you. You’re the best.” She lowers her voice. “Do you want to see what I’m wearing right now? Or, rather, what I’m not?” A beat. “Oh.” She sounds almost normal. “Well, have a good night.”

The mistress hangs up the phone. “Fuck.” Gone is the sugary sweet tone and the playful words. Something slams in the kitchen. “That bastard. That fucking bastard.”

I tense. Surely she doesn’t know. How could she? She must just think he’s getting tired of her. No one in their right mind would take a minor rejection as a sign that their lover intends to kill them.

She rustles around the kitchen, but it’s impossible to guess what she’s doing. There is a clink of bottle against glass, and I have to swallow down a relieved exhale. I doubt she’ll make it through the rest of the bottle before the pills kick in, but that’s fine. She’ll go to sleep and never wake up again. It will be peaceful.

Cold comfort, that. A peaceful death is still a life snuffed out too soon.

She curses again and moves back down the hallway toward what must be her bedroom. A few minutes later, soft musical sounds slink down the hall to my ears. The smart thing to do is to wait here for a reasonable amount of time and then strike, but curiosity sinks its teeth into me and won’t let go. I know better than letting myself humanize her, but I can’t seem to help it.

What is that sound? I don’t know instruments any more than I know wine. It shouldn’t matter. She could have a whole band in her bedroom and it wouldn’t make a difference, but I suddenly need to know.

I ease out of my hiding place and pad into the kitchen to check the bottle. Half of what was in it is gone. That’s good enough, assuming she drinks it all.

Again, I tell myself to wait here.

Again, I ignore my own instincts, drawn closer by the soft music that seems to wrap around my head and leave my thoughts foggy.

The hallway is as nice as the rest of the place, though I note a distinct lack of photos. Instead, she has surprisingly moody art pieces. Not that I know much about art, but when I pause in front of one, it makes my chest feel funny. It feels…lonely.

Overactive imagination.

I shake my head and continue to where the bedroom door has been left partially open, allowing a sliver of warm, golden light to spill down the hall. I avoid it, angling myself to get a look in the room. There’s no reason to do it. Honestly, it’s better if I don’t see her, but that feels like doing her a disservice.

Athena would shake her head if she knew the direction of my thoughts. She compartmentalizes better than anyone I’ve ever met, and that’s the first lesson she strives to teach her people when she takes them on. ‘One does not last long as a member
of Olympus’s special forces without getting one’s hands dirty.’

I catch sight of the mistress sitting next to a giant harp, her fingers plucking at the strings and creating that haunting music that feels like a hand wrapped around my heart. My thoughts tumble over each other like a train derailing the tracks.

She’s beautiful.

Oh, I had known she must be, but she’s absolutely devastating. She’s got long dark curly hair and pale skin and curves. The kind of decadent body that isn’t fashionable right now, but makes my palms sweat. I can only see her profile from here, can only trace the line of her strong nose with my sight, attention snagging on full lips that are currently pulled down in a frown.

She’s also currently wearing a sheer robe and nothing else.

She half turns toward the door, her fingers still moving and gaze distant, and I get a look at her full breasts peaked with rosy pink nipples and her soft round stomach before I jerk my eyes to the floor. Bad enough that I’m here to—Well. I shouldn’t be ogling her like this. It’s wrong.

The thought almost makes me laugh in a horrible kind of way. Wrong is such a strange concept in this situation.

The music trails off slowly and she presses her forehead to the curve of the harp. “I am so fucked.” She shoves to her feet and paces back and forth, appearing and disappearing from the sliver of the room revealed by the open door.

The full wine glass is in her hand.

The urge to stride in there, to knock it out of her grasp, to tell her to run from this place and never look back, nearly overwhelms me. Only cold, hard reality keeps my feet planted. There’s nowhere to run to. The boundary around Olympus can only be passed through by a select few, and they’re choosy about who they allow to leave the city boundaries. The mistress of Odysseus, a woman marked for death by both Athena and Zeus? Poseidon and his people would turn her over without hesitation.

The death she’d suffer after would be miles worse than what I have planned for her.

Not to mention what will happen to me if I fuck this up. Athena doesn’t suffer failures any more than she suffers fools. There’s a marked difference between the circumstances ending in failure, and willfully allowing a mark to escape. One will get a reprimand. The other? I shudder.

No, there is no choice. No other option.

I hold my breath as she stops in the doorway. She swirls the red wine, staring at it contemplatively, and finally lifts it to her lips. The glass stops just before she makes contact. “You can come out now. I know you’re there.”

Fuck.
I’ve made a grave miscalculation. I’d begun to suspect my time with Odysseus was coming to an end. He liked the idea of having a mistress more than he liked dealing with me as an actual person, and his wife was understandably not thrilled to have him parading me to all their normal spots. I’d argued against being so bold, but Odysseus is always so sure he’s the smartest man in the room. He wouldn’t listen.

Now someone’s decided to take care of his mistress problem the old-fashioned way.

I eye the dark hallway, where I can almost make out the tall form of someone standing there, a vague impression of broad shoulders, but everything else in shadow. I lift my brows. They haven’t attacked, which is a small miracle.

I might get out of this mess yet.

I lift the glass and swirl the contents. “It was a good move with the wine. I must have surprised you when I came back into the kitchen, though, because you didn’t place the bottle exactly where I’d left it.” A small taste had confirmed the wine was tampered with, though I don’t know if I would have caught it if I wasn’t looking for it. Frustration had me opening the bottle early and I’m just tipsy enough to not have caught the taste being off.

They don’t answer, but they also don’t move. I have to talk fast to derail whatever their plans are. Common knowledge says humanizing yourself to an attacker or kidnapper is the way to go, but I have my doubts about that. The man I’ve been sleeping with for seven months barely sees me as a person. All my life, people have sought to use or possess me, the same way one uses or possesses a priceless vase or a painting. Not a person. Why would this assassin be any different?

“Did his wife send you?” I wouldn’t put it past Penelope. She’s too smart to believe her husband would leave me if she cornered him, so it’s a ruthless and smart move to go around him. I didn’t anticipate her being willing to murder, but people have killed for less.

I don’t honestly expect an answer, but I get one all the same. “No.” Their voice is low and almost agonized. “Not her.”

Not the wife. Then... “Oh,” I say faintly. Gods, I didn’t expect that. Or for it to hurt so much.
I knew I was taking a risk allowing Odysseus to seduce me and shower me with gifts and this apartment and all the rest. I foolishly thought I could get out unscathed. I should have known better. I certainly flew too close to the sun with this one. “I suppose that’s one way to end a relationship.” I reach out with a shaking hand to set the wine on the dresser.

I realize my mistake of turning my back to the door too late. I try to spin back around, but I’m immediately wrapped up in a strong grip, pinning my arms to my body.

“Let go.” I fight, but they’ve got me in too tight a hold.

“Stop struggling,” they mutter.

“I think not.” It won’t make a difference. They’re too strong. Too big. I almost get twisted to see their face when they shift suddenly and cover my eyes with calloused hands. I go still. “What are you doing?”

“Well, you can’t see me.”

I blink against their palms, my brain trying to kick into gear even as fear and panic surge inside me. I fight it down through sheer practice. To panic is to die. That metaphorical rule has become terrifying literal in this moment. “Blindfold me.”

“What?”

It’s a gamble and not even a good one, but I’ll take whatever hesitance I can capitalize on. “Blindfold me. I promise I won’t take it off. If you don’t want me to see you, then I won’t look.”

“It’s not that simple.” But they’re waffling. “This has all gone so wrong.”

I huff out a laugh. “While I sympathize, I think between the two of us that my night is going worse than yours. I just found out that the man I slept with less than twenty-four hours ago hired an assassin to kill me.” I shake my head, their hands following the movement and continuing to block my sight. “I really shouldn’t have given him the satisfaction of faking it.”

“I—”

“What can I call you?” I’m scrambling and not even elegantly, but if I give them time to think too hard, they might decide on Plan B. I have a feeling Plan B is a violent, bloody death.

Another hesitation. “You can call me M,” they finally say reluctantly.

M. Probably a first initial. Odysseus would think he’s rather clever to have others doing his dirty work, which means this is no random person picked up from the upper city warehouse district. They smell clean, too, like mint and eucalyptus. No, this is someone who would be called by the legacy families or the Thirteen, which means they’re one of Athena’s knives in the dark. Ares’s people are more security and soldiers.

On impulse, I reach up and clasp their forearm. They’re wearing long sleeves but I can
feel the ragged scars beneath. Which means it can only be one person. Or, rather, it’s a reasonable assumption that Athena would send her best.

Medusa.

Fuck.

I’m not getting out of this alive.

I close my eyes and take a slow breath. No one escapes Medusa. She’s become something of an urban legend in Olympus. Some years ago, the last Poseidon tried to make her his mistress, despite the fact that she reportedly wasn’t interested in the job. He took it poorly and there was an attack, but she fought her way free and threw herself upon Athena’s mercy, such as it is. Or perhaps Athena intervened. The details are a little fuzzy. Athena, being Athena, wasn’t one to ignore a wonderfully made tool to add to her arsenal. Since then, it’s said that the only time people see Medusa is when she’s the last thing they see.

It’s obviously a rumor designed to bolster Athena’s reputation, but I can’t shake the suddenly feeling that I most certainly don’t want to see Medusa. “Blindfold me,” I repeat. “Please.”

“Close your eyes,” she finally says.

I obey. I don’t dare do anything else. “I am.”

Slowly, oh so slowly, her hands lift from my eyes. The temptation to look at her is nearly overwhelming, but I manage to wrestle down the urge. A few moments later, a cloth comes down around my eyes. I can’t tell exactly what it is, but it hugs my face tightly enough that no light gets through. I gingerly lift my hands to it. Cotton. A face mask folded up? “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. Not with what I’m here for.”

To kill me.

I make myself smile. “Yes, well, you haven’t done it yet, so thank you all the same.”

“I will.”

Does she realize how doubtful she sounds? It’s practically an invitation to dissuade her. Or perhaps that’s wishful thinking on my part, but I’m good at people and I’m a survivor. Even in this less-than-ideal situation, I can’t stop my instinct to find her fault lines and exploit them. “Do you often kill mistresses of powerful men?”

“You’re my first.”

I carefully lean back against my dresser. Impossible to say what her sexual inclinations are—that’s one thing rumor never speculates—but there’s no harm in testing the waters. I arch my back a little, letting my robe part farther, and am rewarded with a sharp little inhale. “Do you like women, M?”

“What? I... Um... Do you?” She sounds flustered, which I should not find charming, but
I somehow do.

“I don’t have preferences when it comes to gender. Beauty is beauty.”

She clears her throat. “I’m not beautiful.”

“That’s not really for you to say.” I don’t know what she looks like, but that doesn’t matter. Not for this. “You’re strong. You’re clever. You’re ruthless. Those things are beautiful.”

“Really?” She manages to regain enough control to sound suspect. “Because the entirety of Olympus would beg to differ when it comes to standards of beauty.”

“The entirety of Olympus is far too shallow when it comes to image.” I shrug. My robe slips off that shoulder. At this point, it’s more garnish than covering. “They don’t think too fondly of me, either.” Too fat. Too bold and unwilling to play the game of virtue. Too strong of features. “Do you know that Odysseus offered to get me a nose job?”

“Fuck him. Your nose is perfect.” She seems to realize how forceful she sounds and makes a blatant attempt to dial it back. “No one could look at you and find you anything less than perfect.”

Oh yes, she likes women. Or at least she’s not immune to my charms, which is a shaky foundation but it’s not nothing. I smile slowly. I’ve dealt with worse odds and come out on top. “I realize this is a little unconventional, but I have a last request.”

A pause. She’s not moving, as best I can tell, but I haven’t actually heard her move to date. She’s as silent as a cat. Finally, she says, “That’s not really how this works.”

“Oh?” I cock my head to the side. “Do you often blindfold your victims and then have conversations with them?”

“…No.”

“I didn’t think so.” I don’t know if reminding her that I’m her victim is a good thing or a bad thing, but I have limited cards to play. “Indulge me.”

She sighs, and it’s so exasperated that my smile threatens to shift from charming to genuine. For an assassin, she seems rather out of her element. If the situation were different, I think I’d like her quite a lot. Medusa curses. “Well, spit it out. You obviously want something.”

Got you.

“I want you.”

She makes a choked sound. “That’s not funny.”

“Neither is knowing that I won’t live to see the morning.” This time, I can’t entirely keep my shrug loose. “As I mentioned earlier, Odysseus is a selfish lover.”

“You didn’t say that.”

“I said I faked it. It’s the same thing.” I flick my hair off my shoulder. “He wasn’t one to share, so I’ve been enduring mediocre sex for the better part of a year. If I’m going to
die at your hands, I'd prefer to do it well sated."

She's still making that delightfully shocked choking noise. "No. Absolutely not. Out of the question."

"Why?"

"Why?"

"Yes, why?" It's tempting to step forward, to attempt to close the distance between us, but I'm already giving her the hard sell. If I push physically, too, then she's liable to shove me out a window or something. I shudder at the thought of falling thirty stories to an untimely end. "Do you find me attractive?"

"We've already established that I do," she grinds out. "But it's still wrong. I know what you're doing and it won't work. This only ends one way." She lowers her voice, almost as if talking to herself. "No matter what I think of it."

Just as I suspected, she's wavering. She has to be, in order to have given me the opportunity to talk to her at all. An assassin without conflict would have just ambushed me and gotten it over with. I'm not sure what Athena was thinking sending her, but then Medusa has a reputation for always getting the job done. Maybe she didn't realize her sharpest tool was faltering.

I like her for that faltering. I like her even better that she's reluctant to take advantage of me.

Unfortunately for her, I'm the one taking advantage in this situation.

"Assuage your conscience with the knowledge that you sent me to my fate well-loved."

She sputters again. I spare the thought to wonder if she's blushing, too. I'd bet good money that she is. I'm a fool because that pleases me entirely too much. After spending years moving among people who take it as a point of pride to act like they're better than others—better than me—and conceal their emotions and thoughts, Medusa's frankness is rather refreshing.

She finally clears her throat. "I can't believe you're asking for this. I don't even know how to respond. This is wrong."

"Another sin to add to the list." I take a gamble and step forward. She doesn't protest, so I do it again, except this time I let my leg buckle.

Medusa catches me before I hit the floor.

She's strong. Taller than me by a good six inches and with a body that is carved with muscle. It makes sense, given her line of work, but I can't quite help an appreciative noise as I run my hands over her arms. She sets me back on my feet easily but can't quite seem to make herself release me. Her grip pulses on my hips as if she wants to touch me more but is working hard to restrain herself.
In the past, when I’ve made this same offer—albeit for different reasons—no one has ever paused before they’ve all but leapt on me in an effort to take what I’m giving before I can change my mind. Ironic that an assassin is the one who hesitates, who acknowledges the motive beneath the offer. “This isn’t right,” she murmurs. “You can hardly consent when I’m here for...the reason I’m here.”

I reach her broad shoulders and feather my fingertips over her collarbone. “Plenty of people have taken what they want with less care over my feelings on the matter.” I cup her jaw with one hand and drop the other to her hip so I can tug her closer. She follows my guidance without hesitation. “Please, M. If this is to be my last night, I don’t want to die with the memory of his hands on me. Kiss me.”
I don't know what's happening.

I came here with a plan but now that Calypso's soft body is pressed against mine, I'm having a hard time thinking of anything but her. This is so far beyond wrong that I'm not sure there's a word to describe it. The blindfold should make her less powerful, but it only seems to embolden her. She tugs me against her and, fool that I am, I allow it to happen.

She smells really good. Kind of flowery in a subtle way that entices instead of overpowering. Everything about this woman entices.

Her sheer robe didn't cover much to begin with, and it's pooled in the bend of her elbows now, leaving her all but naked. All but naked and pressed against me.

"We can't."

She slips her hand from my jaw to the back of my neck. "Please." To anyone else, it might sound like she's begging, but it feels more like a command. It's everything I can do not to hit my knees as she gently guides me down, closer and closer to her face. To her lips. "Please, M. Just a little taste. No one will ever know."

I'm still trying to dredge up a good protest when she kisses me. Her lips are just as soft as the rest of her and she wastes no time teasing my mouth open. Or maybe I open for her on first contact. My head is spinning so intensely, I can't be sure. She tastes of red wine, but she somehow manages to make that a good thing.

I don't mean to move. I have every intention of breaking the kiss and putting some much-needed distance between us. But somehow my hands are in her hair and I'm kissing her back. She makes a delicious little needy noise and yanks me against her so strongly that we stumble back against the dresser.

Gods, this is a mistake. I need to stop. I need to...

Something pricks my thigh.

I jerk back and look down to find a needle sticking out of my pants. "What..." The strength goes out of my limbs in a rush. "Fuck."

Calypso catches me, though it's a little awkward and I get a face-full of her breasts as
she eases me to the ground to lean against her bed. “Sorry, love. All’s fair in love and war and all that.” She arranges my head so it’s tilted back against the corner of the bed and I can see her clearly.

“What is…” I can’t move. No matter what commands I send to my body, it remains loose and placid and absolutely worthless. It’s everything I can do to force the mumbled words past my lips. “Killed me.”

“Don’t be dramatic.” She whisks the mask off her eyes and, gods, she’s even prettier up close. Her eyes are dark and intense and far too clever. “It’s just a light paralytic. You’ll be right as rain in about an hour.” She pulls the needle from my thigh and tosses it onto the dresser. “Just long enough for me to make my escape.”

She played me. Of course she played me. No one like her would ever be interested in someone like me, even in the best of circumstances, and my arriving at her apartment to murder her is hardly that. I can’t blame her for defending herself, but the implications of this fuckup are...a lot. “Fuck.”

Calypso disappears into her closet and comes back with a suitcase in tow. I watch helplessly as she dresses in jeans, an expensive-looking knitted sweater, and tall boots. Then she makes several trips back and forth from the closet, unloading a truly impressive amount of clothing into the suitcase. The bathroom is next, cosmetics and jewelry thrown with a startlingly lack of care.

She disappears for several long moments and comes back into the bedroom with a small black bag, which goes into the suitcase more gently than the rest. The whole packing has taken maybe ten minutes, but likely less.

“Ready for this,” I manage.

“When you’ve had a life like mine, you know the value in being ready to run at a moment’s notice. The thing with Odysseus was never going to last forever, but I didn’t expect the cowardly bastard to take out a hit on me.” She sets the suitcase by the door and returns to stand at my feet. That dark gaze coasts over me, lingering on my thighs, breasts, and finally my face, tracing my scars with her gaze. “You really are beautiful, Medusa.” She laughs when I startle. “Yes, I figured it out. It wasn’t particularly hard.”

“How?”

She ignores my question and leans down, propping one hand on the mattress next to my head. “You’re too honorable to be wasting your life as Athena’s knife hand.”

“Wha—?” Gods, my mouth won’t work properly. I can barely get the garbled question out.

“Tell them that I’m gone where they can’t reach me, and that I won’t be returning.” Her gaze drops to my mouth and I must be hallucinating, because I swear there’s genuine heat there. “But if you decide you want out, cross the River Styx and come find
me. I think we could have some fun.” She brushes a light kiss to my lips.
Then she’s gone, her footsteps retreating and a door closing in the distance.
I just fucked up spectacularly.
I can’t believe I fell for the seduction routine. I can’t believe I’m still falling for it, because I can taste Calypso on my lips and there’s a not-insignificant part of me that wants to follow her right across the River Styx and into the lower city.
Athena would never sanction it. Not even to tie up this loose end. The lower city is traditionally the territory of Hades, except there hasn’t been a Hades among the Thirteen for something like thirty years. The last one died in a fire, and there was no heir. Or at least that’s how the story goes. It’s so far above my pay grade as to be laughable.
But, for whatever the reason, the rest of the Thirteen don’t cross the river and don’t meddle in lower city affairs. If Calypso truly intends that as her destination, she’s effectively beyond Athena’s reach.
It means I’ve failed.
I close my eyes and sit with the conflicting feelings that brings. I knew from the start that killing Calypso felt wrong; I wouldn’t have hesitated otherwise. I certainly haven’t in the past, even when the deaths at my hands began to feel like a weight too heavy to bear.
I’m…relieved.
By the time I’m able to wiggle my fingers and then, a short while later, struggle to my feet, I have no answers. The temptation to follow Calypso is strong, but it’s just as foolish as the impulse to kiss her earlier was. I don’t fault her for using all the tools at her disposal to ensure her survival, but I’m not naive enough to believe the offer was genuine.
I sigh and dig my phone out of my pocket. There’s no help for it. I have to report in. I take a deep breath and exhale slowly. When I dial Athena, I almost feel like myself again. Almost.
She answers on the first ring. “What the fuck happened, Medusa?”
I keep my tone even. “She was gone when I got here. It looks like something tipped her off because she packed her things and she’s gone.” A lie, but I am not telling Athena what really happened.
“Gone, and with all of Odysseus’s money in the mix.”
Clever woman. I find myself smiling and have to concentrate to wipe the expression from my face for fear that it will be apparent in my tone. “That’s a shame. How did she access his accounts?”
“That’s not important.”
Which means that this, too, is Odysseus’s arrogance coming back to bite him in the
I bet he gave her a debit card or something, never once assuming that she could use it against him. She’s working fast, too. She must have someone at the bank, because clearing him out isn’t something she can manage at an ATM.

Athena pushes forward before I can figure out if I’m supposed to respond or not. “Find her, Medusa. Retrieve his money and remove her.”

I turn to the large windows overlooking the center of the upper city and frown. I can’t exactly explain that I know Calypso’s plan, but maybe… “She’s too smart to stay in the upper city if she’s cleaned him out. She’ll cross the river into the lower city.”

“Normally that would be enough, but these are special circumstances. Go after her, but do it carefully.”

I straighten. Maybe I should have anticipated this, but I’m honestly surprised. “We’ve never chased someone across the river before.”

“I’m aware.” Her tone doesn’t invite further challenges to the order. “Get it done.” She hangs up without another word.

I stare at my phone for a long moment. This felt bad before, but now the weight of Athena’s order threatens to crush me. Calypso was clever and ruthless and she could have easily killed me instead of just paralyzing me. She spared me, flirted with me, and made an escape that should have been enough to secure her freedom.

“Why did you steal from him?” Even as I voice the question, I suspect I know the answer. She wanted to make him hurt even a fraction of the way he’d made her hurt. Even if she was as practical about the whole mistress thing as she seemed, I didn’t imagine the shock she experienced when she discovered it was Odysseus responsible for my being in her apartment with murderous intent.

She wanted revenge, and I can’t blame her for it.

This is wrong.

I press my hands to either side of my head and curse. I owe Athena everything. I don’t always understand her motivations or her actions, but when push came to shove, she had my back. Ignoring this order, failing to do as she commands, means spitting in the face of everything she’s done for me. She took me in, she taught me the skills I needed to survive, and she’s ensured I’ve wanted for nothing in the intervening years. More than that, she’s ensured I’ve never had to deal with the Thirteen again after that disastrous experience with Poseidon.

What is a beautiful, selfish woman like Calypso compared to all that history?

The thought feels strangely like a betrayal, but I shove that awful sensation down deep. I wavered before and look what happened. I can’t afford to do it again. I know where Calypso is going; she practically invited me to chase her. Granted, she had a different outcome in mind, but I’ll do what I have to.
And if watching the life fade from her pretty eyes tips me over the edge? Well, that’s the price I’ll pay for safety.
Olympus is a city that loves its legends. I can’t speak for other cities, but here they seem to have more than a grain of truth. Cold wind whips my hair around my face as I approach the middle of three bridges that cross the River Styx. The Cypress Bridge looks like something from outside time, its marble pillars stretching high overhead. My only chance at survival lays on the other side.

I shouldn’t have baited Medusa. Honestly, I shouldn’t have left her alive, but while I’ve committed many sins, murder is not among them. I couldn’t start with her. She’d looked so put out and shocked as I propped her up, and I hadn’t been able to stop myself from looking my fill. Her muscles are even more impressive to see than they were to feel, her tight black shirt clinging to well-defined shoulders and biceps. If the fit of her pants was any indication, her thighs are downright bitable. And her face...

She’s right. She wasn’t traditionally beautiful, even before something happened that left her marked with jagged scars. Not pretty or cute or any of those lesser adjectives. When I looked at her face, the only word I could think of was strong.

I can appreciate strength, even if Olympus can’t.

Unfortunately, she’s not for me. Athena has her leashed too tightly and the same honor that made Medusa hesitate to harm me is the thing that will keep her from shucking off Athena’s shackles and coming to me.

What would I even do with an assassin that, if I don’t miss my guess, has big himbo energy?

The thought brings a smile to my lips, but the cold whisks it away. I’m stalling, and I can’t afford to. I wasted too much time draining Odysseus’s accounts, and I’ve lost my lead as a result. I can’t wait any longer.

The first step onto the bridge almost convinces me that the tales are bullshit, but the second step brings the pressure. It doesn’t hurt exactly, but the farther I get from the bank of the upper city, the greater my desire to turn around and run to escape the sensation of being squeezed like a lemon. I will not be deterred. I duck my head and pick up my pace, reaching the midway point in short order.
That’s when the pain begins.

It starts in the soles of my feet, sharp little pinpricks that feel like I’m walking barefoot over glass. My exhales sob out, but I press forward. I’m almost there. If I can reach the lower city, all sources say that I’ll be beyond the Thirteen’s influence. I’ll be safe for the first time in my life and have the resources to ensure that safety is protected. I can have a life of my choosing.

That determination gets me to within ten feet of the end of the bridge.

That’s when I see the man. He’s wearing a thick black coat with a hood, but I catch sight of his face as he stares at me. He’s a white man with a truly impressive square chin, and broad enough shoulders to give Medusa a run for her money.

I stop short, squinting against the darkness and his hood hiding most of his face.

“Hello?”

“Go back.”

Yeah, not likely. I hesitate, mentally flipping through my options before deciding on the truth. “I can’t. If I don’t make it to the lower city, I’ll be killed.”

“Why?”

It’s hard to concentrate past the pain radiating up my legs, but I give it my best shot. I have a feeling that if this man turns me away, I won’t get another chance. I don’t know who he is or what gives me that impression, but my instincts have gotten me this far, so I’m not about to question them. “Athena and Zeus want me dead because one of their favorites was too cowardly to dump me as his mistress.”

“If you’re lying, there will be consequences.”

“I’m not.”

He nods briefly and steps back. “Come on, then. You’ve made it this far, you can make it ten more feet.”

The pain becomes agonizing, but I’m not about to fail this strange test. The moment I step off the bridge, it disappears as if it never existed. I glance back, but the bridge appears just as unassuming as it did before. “Quite the welcome.”

“We don’t encourage visits without an invitation.”

I peer up into his hood, getting a flash of blue eyes. “Why not issue the invitation, then?”

“I’m not the one in charge.” He shrugs. “You’re safe enough now. If you need assistance, I can set you up in a temporary room, or if you’re looking to settle down properly, there are a couple places with availability.”

Just like that. It seems too easy. I blink. “I could be a complete monster and you’re just welcoming me with open arms?”

“Hardly.” He gives a tight smile. “Your story will be vetted. If you’ve lied, then I’ll truss
you up and deliver you back across the river myself.”

“Oh.” I don’t even know what to say to that. I’ve spent my entire life surrounded by suspicious people and this stranger is acting against type. I narrow my eyes. “Are you a monster looking for a tasty bite and thinking I’m easy pickings?”

“No one who braves the trip across one of our bridges is easy pickings.” He turns and slides his hands into his pockets. “You coming or not?”

It happens so fast. One moment, I’m calculating what my chances of finding a hotel or something akin to that and the next this stranger is ushering me into a warm and inviting lobby. The person behind the reception desk is an East Asian woman with her long dark hair pulled back into a slick ponytail and wearing a slouchy sweater that I can only describe as a grandpa-style. She looks up as we come through the door with a bright smile. “Charon. I didn’t expect to see you tonight.”

He pushes back his hood, giving me my first good look at him. Handsome fucker. He’s got a jawline that looks like it would crush the fist of anyone who tries to punch him and a full head of dark hair. He grins at the front desk woman. “I heard you baked cookies, Sandra. You’ve been holding out on me.”

She blushes prettily. “Chocolate chip.”

“My favorite.” He motions to me. “I know you’ve got a vacancy and I have someone who can fill the slot. If she gives you any trouble, give me a call.”

I shoot him a sharp look. “I am not going to cause any problems. I’m just looking for a safe place to land on my feet.”

“We can make that happen.” She eyes me with interest, but to my surprise, doesn’t pepper me with the questions I can see lingering on her face. “We normally need first and last month, but since Charon brought you in, we can waive that.” She rattles off the details of the agreement. It’s cheaper than I expected, which makes me wonder about the state of the apartment.

But when Sandra leads us upstairs, Charon trailing behind and happily munching on his third cookie, I discover it’s utterly charming. And furnished, which is something I hadn’t really thought to consider in the midst of all this.

It’s about half the size of the apartment Odysseus set me up in, an open space with only the bathroom blocked off. The bedroom is separated from the rest of the loft by a floral folding screen that looks hand painted.

There are dozens of little touches like that around the space. A mirror with what appears to be a hand-carved frame. A crocheted throw blanket folded over the back of a thread-worn chair. Through the glass doors in the kitchen cabinet, I can see a bunch of mismatched dishes and cups, but they’re all in coordinating colors. Someone put a lot of love and care into decorating this place. “It’s lovely. I’ll take it.”
Sandra smiles. “Perfect. I’ll go grab the paperwork.”

The second the door closes behind her, Charon turns to me. “Like I said, I’ll be checking out your story and verifying the details.” He scrubs a hand through his dark hair. “But if you run into any sort of trouble, call me.” He fishes a card out of his pocket and hands it over.

It’s a plain black card with his name and a phone number and nothing else. I raise my brows. “Very mysterious of you.”

“I’m a mysterious guy.” Anyone else saying such an absurd sentence would try to put a flirtatious edge on it. Not Charon. He says it with the utmost seriousness.

I don’t know what to think of that.

Honestly, I haven’t begun to process the events of the evening, from Medusa’s appearance in my apartment to fleeing across the River Styx and receiving a strangely warm welcome. “Do you monitor everyone who crosses the bridges?”

“Not personally.” He shrugs. “There isn’t much traffic to speak of, so it’s hardly a full-time job. I just happened to be in the area tonight and got notified of your crossing.”

Based on what he’s said, this man has some power but he’s not the one in charge. Which begs the question of who is in charge in the lower city. I tuck the question away.

I’ll have plenty of time to indulge my curiosity later. And it will only be curiosity. I have enough money that I never have to depend on another person again.

I can’t quite process the swift change in reality, so I tuck that away, too. I smile at Charon. “Lucky me.”

“Yeah, we’ll see.”

Sandra chooses that moment to come back through the door, a stack of papers in her hands. I take my time reading them over, but they’re a relatively standard rental agreement…at least until I get to the last paragraph. I tap the pen against it. “What’s this?”

“A standard agreement in the lower city,” Charon says, his tone guarded.

I read it a second time. “It says that the entire agreement can be terminated by the leader of the lower city.”

“Yes.”

I raise my brows. “Shouldn’t I get a chance to meet this person before they kick me out of my apartment?”

“That’s not how it works.” He crosses his arms over his chest. “Sign it or don’t, but every rental and buyer’s agreement in the lower city comes with that clause. He doesn’t abuse it, if that’s what you’re worried about, but it’s important for everyone’s safety that he gets veto rights.”

He.
More information to file away. Maybe the lower city isn’t as different from the upper city as it first seemed. Not even Zeus has this kind of power over the citizens that live on the other side of the river.

I cast another look around the apartment. Ultimately, I don’t have much choice. Beyond that, I like this place and Sandra seems like a lovely landlord. I sign with a flourish and pass the agreement back to her. “Thank you for the quick acceptance.”

“Yes, well, Charon brought you in. That’s better than most references you could come up with.” She shrugs and heads for the door. “If you want to walk down with me, I’ll give you the keys to the place and the mail.”

It takes no time at all. As I head back upstairs, my mind is spinning by this turn of events. I can’t help a goofy smile. I really pulled it off. Not only did I get away, but the situation is showing all signs of me landing on my feet.

I shut and lock the door behind me, pausing only to toss the keys into the cute little bowl shaped like a flower, on the table by the door. Really, Sandra should be charging more for this place, but what do I know about the lower city rental prices?

I’m so busy examining my new surroundings with delight that I don’t realize I’m not alone until a strong arm wraps around my waist and jerks me back against an equally strong body. I don’t get a chance to fight before a knife presses to the hollow of my throat.

“Don’t do anything foolish,” Medusa says softly in my ear.
I wasn’t in a good mood going into this night, but after the disastrous conversation with Athena and the subsequent pursuit of Calypso into the lower city, I’m absolutely finished with this bullshit. “Put your hands out in front of you.”

“How did you find me?”

“You took your phone with you.” It required another favor from Bellerophon, but they were only too happy to do a quick trace and pass along the information. A rookie mistake by Calypso, which makes me think she’s more rattled than she seems.

“I don’t have any drugs on me, if that’s what you’re worried about.” Calypso, damn her, sounds almost as unruffled to have my knife at her throat as she is to be back in my arms.

Wait, no. That’s the wrong line of thought to have. “Why did you take the money?”

“I earned it.”

Her words surprise me so much, I forget to keep hold of her. She pushes my arm away and steps out of my grasp. As she turns to face me, I’m once again struck by the sheer beauty of her. It’s downright wrong for her to be so gorgeous after the night she’s had, but she’s as perfect as ever.

I realize I’m still holding the knife aloft and let it drop to my side. “You stole it.”

“He gave me the debit card. Did he really expect me not to use it?” She shrugs a single shoulder. “Odysseus liked to brag that he’s the smartest person in any room he walks into. Surely he saw this coming.”

Her logic might be slightly flawed, but it’s the same flavor of what I thought privately during the call with Athena. “You had to know they wouldn’t let it go.”

“So they sent you. Again.” She tilts her head to the side, her long hair sliding over her shoulder. “Will you finish the job properly this time?”

That the question, isn’t it? I want to tell her that of course I’ll finish the job, but I’m having a hard time even gripping the knife let alone wielding it. I…can’t do this. “You should leave,” I blurt.

Calypso’s brows wing up. “Excuse me?”
“Poseidon smuggles people out for the right price. Or, if not him, then Triton does it even more often. You have the money to get out of Olympus. Athena won’t send me after you if you leave the city. Not even Zeus will bother with you then.”

Calypso studies me, a strange expression on her face. “You really are honorable, aren’t you?”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have stolen from Odysseus, but it’s not right what they’re trying to do.” Saying the words aloud feels a little like a betrayal. But that strange, soft expression isn’t going away, and I can’t mislead her. “And I’m not honorable. My hands are stained with the blood of a whole lot of people.”

“We all do what we have to in order to survive. I’ve happily lied, cheated, and stolen. No one is innocent.”

Perversely, her defending me only makes me want to dig in my heels more firmly. “Those things are forgivable, Calypso. What I’ve done isn’t.”

She narrows those dark eyes. “You don’t like what you do.”

This conversation has veered off the tracks I intended it to stay on and I’m not sure how to get it back. I drag my hand through my short hair. “It doesn’t matter if I like what I do. I’m trying to get you out of Olympus alive.”

“I don’t want to leave.”

I stop short. During the whole awful trip through the city and across the river, the thing that had gotten me through was the intention to get Calypso free, even if I couldn’t admit it to myself until just now. If she’s beyond Athena’s reach, then I don’t have to choose between doing the right thing and doing the thing I’m required to. It won’t help me the next time the choice comes around, but this is egregious, even for Zeus.

Then again, the man is rumored to have killed all three of his wives.

I shake my head. “You have to leave.”

“No.” She crosses her arms over her chest. “For better or worse, Olympus is my home. I just signed a rental agreement, and Sandra is too nice to fuck over.”

I blink. “Who’s Sandra?”

She waves that away. “Go back to your boss and tell her it can’t be done.”

“Calypso,” I say gently. “I’m standing in the same room as you are right now. It was difficult to get across the bridge, but not impossible. Athena’s too smart to believe a weak lie like that.”

“Then tell her you finished the job and I’m dead.”

“She’ll check. And when she finds out you’re alive, she’ll send someone else.”

Now it’s her turn to blink. “She doesn’t trust you.”

“I didn’t say that.”

Calypso pushes off the edge of the bed and takes a step toward me. “Not in so many
words, no, but if Athena is checking up on your jobs, then that’s what it means. She doesn’t trust you.”

I flinch. I can’t help it. The words sting, and not because they’re wrong. I need to shut this down now. I don’t know this woman, and she’s been all but declared an enemy of the upper city. Athena and Zeus want her dead. I most certainly shouldn’t be pouring out my heart to her.

I force myself to look away from her. “She knows I waver from time to time. It’s normal for her to check up on that. She’s one of the most powerful people in Olympus, but she wouldn’t maintain that title without being smart and ruthless.”

Looking away from her was a mistake because I don’t notice Calypso closing the distance between us until she reaches up and presses two fingers to the bottom of my jaw. Her nails prick my skin lightly as she guides me to look down and meet her gaze. I expect derision. Or shock. Or even anger.

Instead, she offers empathy. “Are you trying to convince me or yourself?”

“Stop,” I whisper. “I owe Athena everything. I can’t… I don’t…”

“Medusa.”

My name on her lips makes me a little woozy, but not in a bad way. I’m hardly inexperienced, but all my flings and relationships—such as they were—were with people like me. Special forces. Or, in a few rarer cases, with one of Ares’s soldiers. They were not soft, generously curved, artfully beautiful people like Calypso.

She’s a songbird to my…

I don’t know birds that well, honestly. Something predatory and plain.

I clear my throat. “Yes?”

She still hasn’t removed her fingers. She’s shorter than me. Weaker. I could break the contact at any time. Instead, Calypso holds me immobile with two perfect fingers. She’s oh so serious as she says, “Do you still want to kill me?”

I should lie. Maybe if I scare her, I can get her to leave the city and flee to safety. Now’s the time to strike, to throw her off-guard and ensure the end result won’t add to my nightmares. If I don’t remove Calypso, Athena will send someone else, and they aren’t likely to be as concerned about saving her from pain or suffering.

Instead, the truth springs free. “I never wanted to kill you.”

She uses that tiny touch on my chin to bend me in her direction, bringing our faces even. “I know.” Then she kisses me.

It’s not like last time. My panic about the situation is mostly negated. I’ve admitted to myself—to her—that I don’t want to hurt her. Relief makes me a little weak, or maybe it’s the taste of her on my tongue. Our kiss has my jaw pressing harder to her fingers, but she doesn’t give at all. The tiny show of strength thrills me.
She thrills me.

Calypso turns us and backs me toward the bed, never once breaking the kiss. It’s only when the backs of my legs hit the mattress that she stops long enough to push me to sit down. She looks down at me, lips plumped from our kiss, her eyes already hazy with anticipated pleasure. “I really, really would like to strip you down and spend the rest of the night enjoying each other. You can get back to arguing with me in the morning if you insist.”

I lick my lips, tasting her there. Her words are more statement than question, but I find myself nodding. “Yes.”

“Yes?”

I pull my shirt over my head and toss it to the side. I watched her get dressed earlier. I know she’s got a fancy lace bra beneath her sweater and a matching pair of panties under her jeans. Every part of her is perfectly curated, and while I can deeply appreciate that, I want to see her when she’s messy and losing control.

I, on the other hand, am wearing a sports bra and boring briefs. Or at least it feels boring until Calypso drinks in the sight of me. She steps between my legs and runs appreciative hands over my arms. “You have tattoos.”

Truthfully, sometimes I forget they’re there. I follow the path of her fingers as she traces the curving lines of the snakes writhing down to the handful of heads at my wrist, mouths opened and fangs glistening with poison. They twine with my scars on my arms, not quite covering them up but not really accenting them either. “A reminder.”

“Of what you’re capable of.” She grabs my hand and brings my arm up to kiss each of the snake heads around my wrist. “Oh, Medusa, you are so delightfully dramatic. I love it.”

“I’m not dramatic.”

She smiles. “Yes, you really are.” Calypso steps back long enough to strip down to her bra and panties before resuming her place standing between my thighs. She clasps my wrists and brings my hands to her body. “Touch me. You won’t hurt me.”

“I could.” I don’t know why I’m arguing. I want to touch her, and I certainly don’t want to hurt her. She, of all the women I’ve been intimate with, understands what I’m capable of. By all rights, she should be running from the room screaming, or injecting me with something more permanent than whatever was in that needle back in her high-rise apartment.

“But you won’t.”

I skim my hands down to catch her hips and pull her closer. Her breasts are full and heavy and I desperately want them out of that bra, art piece that it is. I’m not the most patient lover, but I try now, leaning forward and tracing the scalloped edge of the lace
with my mouth.

Slow. You can do slow.

I reach up and ease the straps off her shoulders, easing them down and bringing the lace with them, until her breasts are bared and her arms are half trapped at her sides. I lean back to take her in. I lick my lips. “I don’t know where to start. You’re like a... something really cool and filled with all my favorite things and I want to play kid in the candy store with your body.”

“Oh. Wow. I—” Calypso gives a breathless little laugh. “You have a way with words, Medusa.”

I search her face for the mocking light I’m so familiar with. I’m not good with words, not polished or suave or anything that’s required of public-facing officials or the people who use their charm to navigate treacherous circles.

But she’s not mocking me. There’s amusement in the curve of her lips, but her eyes are searing hot. Calypso digs her fingers into my short hair and guides me back to her breasts. “I like it. A lot.”

Her breasts deserve worship, and I’m only too happy to kneel at the altar of her body. I drag my mouth over her curves, appreciating every inch before moving to her nipples. She tugs and pulls at my hair as I play with her, finally giving a delicious little whimpering sound as her legs go out.

I’m there to catch her, grabbing her behind the knees and lifting her up to straddle me. I arch up to catch her mouth even as I skate my hand up her thigh to cup her pussy over her panties. The lace is drenched. It seems to defy belief that she’s wet for me. I don’t deserve this, but I’m just selfish enough not to stop and demand how she could be even remotely into me as I am into her.

She is. That’s enough. I stroke her over her panties, wanting her to make that sound again, to tease her until she’s shaking and whimpering and begging me for more. But when you are only getting one taste of paradise, it’s impossible to maintain control.

She’s so close and I want her too much.

I delve my fingers beneath the lace and press two into her wet heat. “Gods,” I murmur against her skin. “You feel good.”

“You...too.” She clutches my shoulders, her nails pricking my skin. She rolls her hips even as I explore her, searching for the spot that will make her melt for me.

I desperately want Calypso to melt for me.

My need rises up with a strength that overwhelms me. I don’t intend to move, but my body takes over. I stand, lifting her as I do, and turn to set her on the bed. She blinks those big eyes at me, but eagerly lifts her hips without a word so I can tug her lace panties down her legs.
I force myself not to rush, to drink in the sight of her, to pause long enough to get out of my tactical pants. I run my hands up her thick thighs, pausing over the tiny stripes of stretch marks that I hadn’t noticed before. Some might call them imperfections, but they just make her that much more real to me. A goddess, yes, but a woman made of flesh and blood.

A woman I wish was mine.
I’ve had many partners over the years. Men and women and non-binary, rich and powerful and ruthless enough that I never forgot my place. Or, rather, my perceived value. Love is all well and good, but love doesn’t pay the bills and love doesn’t offer the kind of safety that comes with money. My relationships were always transactional, even if most of my partners pretended otherwise.

I have no shame about that. Certainly no regrets.

But the result is that, until this moment, I’ve never had anyone look at me the way Medusa does. As if she can barely believe I’ve allowed her hands on my body. As if she’s about to pinch herself because this can’t possibly be real.

It makes my chest feel funny. I am a realist, but I can’t identify the emotion that surges within me in response to the way she runs her hands up my thighs in a wondering kind of way. “Why are you looking at me like that?” It’s a question I never would have voiced with past partners. I am confident and well aware of my assets; both things that drew the kind of people I allowed into my bed. But this is different.

Medusa is different.

“Why are you asking me that?” She shakes her head slowly, her gaze settling on my pussy. “How can you ask me that when you know who you are and who I am? It’s like one of the gods descended from wherever the fuck they reside and spread her legs for me. You’re lucky I haven’t passed out from the shock.”

I love how frankly she speaks. Maybe others would consider it awkward, but she’s honest in way that feels revolutionary. “Have you considered that the feeling is entirely mutual?”

She blinks at me for a long moment before she bursts out laughing. “Very funny.”

“I’m serious.”

“No, you’re not.” She motions between us. “Look at you. Look at me. I’ve seen the guy you were sleeping with, and I know who you were rumored to be with before him.” She holds up a hand. “It’s okay. I’m not looking for sweet lies or bullshit. I know who I am.”

“Do you?” I reach out and cup her jaw. She’s right. She’s not beautiful or suave or any
of the other things my past lovers have been. But how can she look in the mirror and not see her value? It’s written there in the stubborn line of her chin, in the obvious way she hones her body into a weapon, her muscles clearly defined beneath her gorgeous tattoos. For fuck’s sake, the woman has a six-pack, which is not a common occurrence.

What attracts me to her goes beyond that, though. “Surely you’re not foolish to think that looks matter more than the core beneath? You’re honest.”

“Awkward.”

“Honestly awkward, then.” I shrug. “Awkward isn’t a bad thing, Medusa.” I don’t have to ask who made her feel that she was lesser. Even as carefully polished and poised as I am, I’ve still spent most of my life being very aware of what little value I offer in the eyes of those who hold the purse strings of Olympus.

I can see her formulating more arguments, and it makes something twist deep inside me that this woman has been so cut down that she won’t believe a simple compliment. That she sees her valuing my life as something to be hidden and ashamed of, because she’s supposedly failing Athena.

As if Athena isn’t just as bad as every other member of the Thirteen. She might have saved Medusa all those years ago, but she didn’t do it out of the kindness of her soul. She did it because it was an opportunity to stick it to the last Poseidon, who she had issue with. And if she got a loyal pet out of the bargain? She was savvy enough to see the value in that as well.

I don’t know if Medusa is ready to hear that. I’m probably not the person she wants to hear it from, either.

Instead, I kiss her.

Just like that, her hesitance disappears and she presses me down onto my back, her weight a comforting counterpoint to how floaty everything feels with her mouth moving against mine. She touches me like she’ll never get enough. For my part, I cling to her strength even as she kisses her way down my body.

She lingers on my breasts, working me up with an expert tongue until I’m shaking and whimpering. Only then does she continue her path south, peppering my stomach with kisses even as she pushes my thighs wide. Her soft exhale shakes just the tiniest bit, as if the mere sight of me, wet and waiting for her, is enough to affect her deeply.

I could get addicted to that sound, to her deep appreciation. It’s entirely mutual, and I want her to feel just as valued as she’s making me feel in this moment. “Medusa—”

She descends to press an open-mouthed kiss to my pussy and I forget how to speak. She might be delightfully awkward with her words, but she knows what she’s about in this act that doesn’t require speaking. She worships me with her mouth, exploring me with slow swipes of her tongue before moving up to focus on my clit.
“Softly,” I moan. “I’m too sensitive.”

She gives a purely satisfied chuckle. I should know by that sound alone that she has no intent of showing me mercy, but she still manages to surprise me all the same. There’s a distant part of my brain, a portion of myself that I can never quite manage to turn off, that says I need to stop this, to flip her over and show her exactly what I’m capable of.

That if I don’t, she’ll walk away.

Medusa chooses that moment to press two fingers carefully into me, and then a third. She looks up, expression intent. “Too much?”

“That’s not the problem.” I might laugh if I had breath. “Come here. Let me take care of you.”

Her smile is slow and somehow both intense and sweet. “When’s the last time someone took care of you, Calypso?” She twists her wrist and flutters her fingers against my G-spot. “If I do something you don’t like, tell me.”

I can barely think past the pleasure building inside me in ever-increasing waves. I certainly can’t quite comprehend that Medusa seems perfectly happy to do the giving, instead of expecting it to be an unequal exchange favoring her. “You won’t do something I don’t like.”

“All the same.”

I wet my lips. She still hasn’t stopped that mind-blowing stroking against my G-spot. I whimper. “I’ll tell you. I promise.”

“Good.” She settles more comfortably between my thighs and resumes lavishing my clit with attention.

It’s too good. I’m going to lose control.

The temptation rises to shove her away, to do whatever it takes to regain the upper hand. The idea that there isn’t an upper hand in this scenario? That we’re just two equals sharing pleasure? I can barely comprehend it. I fist my hands in the sheets to keep from doing something foolish and it’s as if that single submission creates a cascade of others.

There’s nothing left to do but enjoy the ride.

Medusa finds the exact motion that has every muscle in my body going tight and hot and she keeps doing it again and again and again. I don’t mean to cry out, but I’m no longer in control of my body. Pleasure surges through me, and when I come, it’s with her name on my lips. “Medusa.”

For a moment, I think she won’t stop. But she slowly brings me down with increasingly gentle kisses before easing her fingers out of me. She presses her forehead to my lower stomach, her breathing coming just as harsh as mine. “Gods, Calypso. I could get addicted to you.”
Do it.

I dig my hands into her short hair and tug. This time, she allows me to pull her up my body and settles on top of me, our legs intertwined. By all rights, I should be completely sated from orgasming so hard, but all it did was stoke my need for her higher. I pour that need into a kiss, getting drunk from the taste of myself on her lips.

Medusa makes a little moan and then her arms are tightening around me. She pulls me closer yet, wrapping me up in her strength. It’s only when her strong thigh slides between mine that I realize her aim.

I break the kiss. “I want you to come.”

“Later,” she murmurs against my lips. She hooks the back of one of my knees and hitches it higher around her waist, guiding me to ride her thigh. “Kiss me.”

I shiver at the intense look in her dark eyes. “I don’t understand why you won’t take what I want to give.”

“Because, Calypso.” She presses a kiss to one corner of my mouth. “Watching you come brings me pleasure.” She kisses the other corner of my mouth. “And people have been taking from you for too long.”

“But—”

“We have all night.” She nips my bottom lip. “Don’t rush me.”

That, of all the things she could say, startles a laugh out of me. “Gods forbid.”

“Now you’re getting the idea.” She keeps rocking me against her. “Now, kiss me.”

“Bossy.” I loop my arms around her neck and tug her face down to mine. She kisses me the same way she touches me; as if I’m something—someone—beyond price. Firm, yes, but the tenderness makes my head spin. I wish I could blame that on the orgasm blooming inside me from the delicious friction of her muscled thigh, but it’s not the source of the warmth surging in my chest.

I’m terribly afraid that I might be falling in love with Medusa.
I don’t know if I believe in the gods and some blessed afterlife, but I get as close as humanly possible in the moment Calypso comes apart in my arms, drenching my thigh with her desire. She’s panting against my lips, her skin dewy with sweat and her hair a tangled mess.

She’s never been more beautiful to me.

I expected the desire that flares hotter between us with every passing moment. I didn’t expect the tenderness. I didn’t even know to look for it. I sure as fuck didn’t anticipate how protective I feel at the sight of vulnerability in her dark eyes.

It only drives home the truth I knew from the moment Athena handed out the order; no one has ever taken care of Calypso. She’s been taking care of herself and not letting anyone close. Considering the current circumstances, I don’t blame her. But I want to protect her. I want to wrap her up in my strength and step between her and whatever hurt the world wants to throw in her direction. It’s a fanciful thought and not one I think she’d welcome, but I can’t fight my brain. Or my instincts.

If she won’t allow me to be her shield, then I’ll just have to take care of her body in the only way she’ll let me.

I meant what I said: we have all night and I fully intend to take advantage of every minute before dawn comes, bringing with it several reality checks that I’m not ready to experience.

For how intent I am at tracing her reactions, I really shouldn’t be surprised when she shifts her weight unexpectedly and flips me. It’s well done, too. One second, I’m plotting another descent between her thighs and the next I’m on my back, blinking up at her.

“Nicely done.”

“Thank you,” she gasps. She shifts to straddle my stomach and as much as I enjoyed being on top, I can’t deny the sheer joy I feel at the sight of her, naked and in a disarray. She hooks her thumbs under my bra. “Off. I want you naked.”

This time, I don’t argue. She doesn’t budge as I wrestle out of my bra and underwear, which doesn’t make the task easier, but I like the weight of her holding me down just as
much as I enjoy being on top of her. More, she keeps touching me. Tracing my collarbone, the slope of my shoulders, the faint lines of my abs. Those seem to delight her to no end, and I have to swat her hands away. “I’m ticklish.”

“Oh?” Her smile goes devious. “How fortunate for me.”

“Calypso—” My protest dissolves into helpless giggles as she goes after me. It’s... playful. And before it gets to be too much, she skates her hands up to cup my breasts. I’m not as generously built as she is, but she doesn’t seem to mind.

She flicks my nipple piercings lightly. “Medusa, you are a treasure trove of delights.”

I bite my tongue before I freely offer what else I have pierced. If she’s this pleased by the nipples... I can barely finish the thought. She leans down and flicks one and then the other with her tongue. “Is it true that they’re more sensitive now?”

“I don’t know if there’s a universal rule.”

She arches a brow. “I don’t care about everyone else’s pierced nipples. I care about yours.”

No reason for that statement to make me melt. None at all. I try for a smile. “They’re more sensitive.”

“Lovely,” she breathes. She starts to ease down and pauses. “If I do something you don’t like, tell me.”

It’s nothing more than the same thing I said to her, but it feels important. Tender. Caring. She licks her way down my abs and presses my thighs wide. Calypso goes still. “Here, too?”

“Yeah,” I manage. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“You truly are full of surprises.” She exhales against my clit and then flicks her tongue against my piercing there. “A true delight.”

I soon learn that Calypso is a little fucking tease. She plays with my body, plucking my strings to have my need surging...only to move to another part of me to luxuriate her attention on. My orgasm is thwarted again and again, the pleasure compounding each time. I don’t have words to describe what she’s doing.

It feels a lot like being loved, but even I’m not foolish enough to mistake sex for emotion. I think.

She finally kneels between my thighs, her pale skin flushed and her hair shoved back from her face. “You’ve done beautifully, love.”

“Calypso, please.” The thought that she might leave me hanging on this precarious edge has panic fluttering in my throat. “Don’t stop.”

Her lips curve sweetly. “I won’t.” She eases two fingers into me and presses her other hand down on my lower stomach, angled so she can get at my clit with her thumb. Calypso watches me as she guides my body higher and higher until hers is the only face I
I’m distantly aware of her murmuring in a low, melodic voice as she smooths her hands over my body before settling in next to me, tucking herself under my arm like she was always meant to be there. It feels like she was always meant to be there, but that’s got to be the post-orgasmic bliss talking.

There is no reality where a woman like Calypso actually looks at me like I might be someone she could love, but sex chemicals do funny things to brains. I’ve never heard of them making a person hallucinate, but here we are.

That doesn’t stop me from pulling her closer. “You’re a miracle.”

“Hardly.” She huffs out a laugh against my throat. “How can you possibly keep that innocent thread, while doing what you do for Athena?”

The reminder sobers me, but only a little. I stare at the ceiling and let the comforting weight of this woman draped half on top of me convince my heart it doesn’t need to race. It only mostly works. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you do.” She idly sketches her fingertips down my arm. “You’re nice, and I don’t mean that as an insult. Good people in Olympus are rarer than diamonds.”

I tense up, caught between wanting to get away from this conversation and not wanting her to stop touching me like I’m someone valuable. She knows what I’m capable of, so to call me innocent by any definition of the word seems like some bullshit. But Calypso is dead serious.

Somehow, that almost makes it worse. “We covered this,” I grind out. “I’ve killed people, as in multiple. I am not a good person. If you look up bad person in the dictionary, pretty sure murderers are listed there.”

“Bad person isn’t a term in the dictionary.” She shifts closer yet, throwing one of her legs over mine. “Don’t run. I’m being serious.”

“So am I.”

Calypso is quiet for a long moment, and the steady drift of her fingertips lulls the tension from my body. I don’t have the energy to keep it up right now, even if I’m smart enough to tell she’s just circling to approach the subject from a different angle. The thing is...I don’t know why she cares so much. No one else gives a fuck if I think I’m good or bad. They only care about what I’m able to do for them. I don’t expect quite the same thing from her, but old habits die hard.

Finally, she says, “I grew up with nothing. I think those at the top forget that it’s not like that for everyone, but even though my parents did their best and tried their hardest, they were barely getting by. Maybe it’s selfish or materialistic, but I saw my mom work herself to the bone, saw how it wore her down month after month, year after year.”

She trails off, and I can’t help offering my understanding. “My parents were
dockworkers—or are dockworkers, I guess. They worked hard to hide, well, how hard everything was, but I started to notice as a teenager.”

“Yeah.” She sighs. “I had big dreams, you know? I busted my ass, got really good grades, and got accepted into the university on a full scholarship.” She doesn’t have to explain which university; there are several colleges in the upper city, but only one university. Colleges and universities always seemed like the same thing to me, but one accepts everyone and the other only seems to be populated by the elite, with a scattering of those not blessed by being born into the right family. Calypso sighs. “It took less than a quarter for them to put me in my place.”

“I’m sorry.”

She pushes forward, her words coming faster. “The scholarship only covered the basics, so I was on my own for books and all the other little expenses that add up really quickly. I tried to work, but then my grades suffered. Then one of my professors came on to me.”

“What?”

“Don’t sound so shocked. It’s far more common than you’d expect.” Tension bleeds into her body. “I resisted at first. But he kept sneaking little gifts to me—little expensive gifts. I...let him seduce me after that. And then he started buying my books and funding the things I needed.” She lifts her head and looks at me. “He wasn’t terrible. This thing with Odysseus might give you the wrong idea, but I don’t make a habit of sleeping with people who treat me badly. My relationships have just been more explicitly transactional than most.”

I smooth her hair back. “I’m not judging.”

“Most people do.”

“I think we’ve established that most people suck.”

She huffs out a laugh. “Yeah, I guess we have. I misjudged Odysseus. I knew it was never going to be permanent, but he’s charming in his way. I let him convince me it was love.”

And then he turned around and facilitated her attempted murder.

I gather her closer, once again wishing I could stand between her and all those who used her and hurt her. “You deserve to be valued for more than fucking, Calypso.” I frown. “I realize that seems really hypocritical considering what we just did, but I mean it.”

“I know.” She presses a quick kiss to my throat. “Like I said earlier, I’m no innocent. Maybe I haven’t done the exact same things you have, but I understand doing what you need to in order to survive. There’s no shame in that.”

She keeps saying that, but the choices she’s made and the ones I have are markedly
different. She’s offered me her past, her truth, and I can do nothing but meet her halfway. I exhale slowly. “I said my parents were dockworkers, right? It’s kind of a generational thing. I wasn’t like you. I didn’t have lofty goals. I’m a hard worker and good at the physical stuff, but I barely passed my classes growing up. I was visiting my parents when I was eighteen and that’s when I ran into Poseidon—the last Poseidon.” From all accounts, the current one isn’t quite the same as his father, but what would I know about that? I’ve taken great pains to avoid him and the rest of the Thirteen, aside from Athena.

I frown at the ceiling. It’s a nice ceiling. No water marks or faded spots. “He decided he liked the way I looked, and I’m not good with words or subtly. I told him to fuck off, that I wasn’t interested. He...didn’t take it well.” The understatement of the century. “He hit me. Several times. And I was too damn stubborn to go down even when he pulled out a knife, which might have stopped it. Or not. Maybe it would have just made him bolder. No one stepped in. Not the other dockworkers. Not even my parents. Because he was fucking Poseidon and the Thirteen can do whatever they want.”

“Oh, Medusa.”

Now it’s my turn to rush, to get the words out so that the story is over. “I don’t know what Athena was doing at the docks that day, but if she hadn’t intervened, I think he would have killed me. She saved me. Took me back to her office building, got me stitched up and bandaged, and offered me a job with the promise that I’d never have to see him again.” I blink past the burning in my eyes. “My parents didn’t try to help, Calypso. I...Maybe one day I’ll get over how much of a betrayal that feels, but I don’t know. We don’t talk much anymore.”

“I don’t blame you,” she murmurs. “And I understand that you feel like you owe Athena for that, but how long has it been since that happened?”

“Twelve years,” I whisper. Athena didn’t send me out right away. There were several years of training before she decided I was ready. I was still as naive as Calypso undoubtedly believes I am now; I honestly thought that I would just join the main special forces population, serving in a squad beneath one of the people I so admire. It didn’t occur to me that it was strange she kept me mostly apart, aside from my instructors. I can’t pretend it would have made a difference.

Athena saved me. I worshipped the ground she walked on.

It wasn’t until recently that I noticed the cracks in the flagstones beneath my feet.
Medusa falls asleep in my arms. I’m too damn jaded to believe this could be love after a few hours, but I can’t deny the connection I feel with her. Maybe it’s trauma bonding. Maybe it’s something more. I don’t care. All I know is that I’m not willing to give it up without a fight.

I want her with me, to chase this thing between us until we figure out the full shape of it. But, even more than that, I can see how the jobs she does for Athena are leeching away her life. It’s not the same kind of thing that I witnessed growing up with my parents, but it’s close enough that I recognize it in the way she carries herself, how she speaks, how desperate she is to ensure I make it out of this alive.

She’s done her part. She spared me back in my apartment and again here. Her plan might not be one I intend to follow through on, but it is a plan.

I am fully committed to meeting her halfway and doing whatever it takes to ensure she doesn’t feel like her only option is going back to Athena.

I leave her in my new bed, her big body sprawled out with a carelessness that warms my heart. No matter what she thinks, there is a strange sort of innocence to her. Or maybe not innocence. Maybe it’s a purity of character. I can’t quite define it, but it draws me all the same. She just so fucking honest.

Charon’s card is in the back pocket of my jeans and I stare at it for a long time. It’s not in my nature to trust. If my life has taught me anything, it’s that everyone has an agenda, and those with power are only too happy to use it to get what they want—even if it means stepping on those below them. Maybe even especially then.

He didn’t ask for anything when he gave me this card, or when he led me to this apartment building. I’m not quite willing to believe he did it out of the goodness of his soul, but even only being in the lower city a few hours, I get the impression that there’s something different here than in the upper city.

Asking Charon for help is a risk. He might name a price that is too high.

I grip the card until its edges imprint on the pads of my fingers and look back at Medusa. There’s no escaping this life. Even if I left Olympus—if I convinced her to come
with me—I don’t imagine the greater world is somehow kinder than what we have here. It’s simply different.

Better to deal with things here and now, instead of wishing on a shooting star.

I take a breath, hold it for five seconds, and release it slowly. When I dial the phone sitting on the dresser, I feel slightly more like my old self again. I can do charming. I can do whatever’s required to secure our safety, even if I lose the fledgling fantasy of a future with Medusa in the process. It’s worth it if she’s safe, if she’s free. If we both are.

Charon answers on the second ring, his voice heavy with sleep. “Yeah?”

“You’re not the one in charge of the lower city.”

A pause. When he speaks again, he sounds alert and suspicious. “Did you call me in the middle of the night to tell me something I already know?”

“No.” I take a deep breath, cast one last look at Medusa, and gamble everything. “I thought crossing the river would be enough to deter my pursuers. It wasn’t. I need help.”

Another pause, longer this time. “Tonight?”

I refuse to give up even a moment with Medusa if I don’t have to. “The morning is soon enough.”

“I’ll be there at eight.” He hesitates. “I can’t guarantee anything, but I can get you in front of someone who can help. After that, it’s up to you.”

Someone who can help.

The leader of the lower city.

It seems that tomorrow, a mystery will be solved, though I can find no joy in the discovery. It’s not just the strange boundary that lines the River Styx that keeps people—and the Thirteen, in particular—out of the lower city. It would take a strong leader; someone like the last Hades and his lineage that stretched back to the founding of Olympus, the same as the other members of the Thirteen.

But Hades is dead and gone.

“Thank you,” I manage.

“Don’t thank me. I haven’t done anything yet.” He hangs up before I can argue.

Tomorrow, I’ll consider that Charon thinks several rather large acts of kindness to be nothing. He might be trying to manipulate me, but I don’t think so. I think this is genuine, though I can’t begin to guess what that means.

I use the bathroom, grab a quick drink of water, and then slip back into bed. Medusa murmurs in her sleep and turns without opening her eyes to wrap an arm around my waist and tug me back to be little spoon to her big spoon. She sighs in utter contentment, and that soft feeling in my chest expands in a truly worrisome way.

But when I close my eyes and slip into a dreamless slumber, it’s with a smile on my lips.
"This is too risky."

I cling to patience with everything I can. "So is your plan." I hold up both my hands when Medusa starts to protest. "Just hear me out, please."

She crosses her arms over her chest and slumps back against the headboard. She’s completely unreserved in her nakedness, and I’m doing my best not to be too distracted, but with her nipple piercings shining in the morning light and how her tattoos seem to shift on her skin with every move of her arms, it’s a challenge.

I clear my throat and force my gaze to her face. "I realize that Athena sent you over here, but even you have to admit that isn’t the normal mode of operations."

A line appears between her brows. "Usually if someone manages to get across the river, that’s the end of it. I think if you hadn’t stolen from Odysseus, it would have been true for you as well."

I’m not about to apologize for stealing from him. He took a hit out on me, for gods’ sake. That’s not the part I’m debating right now, though. "Haven’t you wondered why that was? The Thirteen are essentially only answerable to each other. There is absolutely no reason for them to call off pursuit. Yes, there’s a bit of a barrier, but you managed across just fine."

"It was uncomfortable." I give her a look and she sighs. "Okay, fine. It is weird when you put it like that. What’s your point?"

It’s only a theory, but we’ll find out the truth soon enough. "I think whoever is the leader of the lower city is powerful enough to give even the Thirteen pause."

She frowns. "That seems impossible."

"That’s because we grew up in the upper city. What if it isn’t impossible? What if this person can help us, and it won’t mean me leaving the city or you dealing with coming back to Athena empty-handed?"

Medusa’s frown melts away to a curiously blank expression. For the first time since meeting her, I can’t begin to guess what she’s thinking. She uncrosses her arms. "You don’t want me to go back."

Every instinct I have—and my entire history—is clamoring for me to be quiet and play my cards close to my chest. Offering your heart to another person on a platter is a good way to get it thrown in the trash. Or a meat grinder.

I’m asking a lot of Medusa. For her faith, for her trust. If I can’t return the favor, what motivation does she have to listen to me?

It feels like balancing precariously on a high-wire above a fall to my death. I speak slowly, feeling my way. "I realize this may be difficult to believe considering how little
time we’ve known each other and how we met, but last night meant something to me. It wasn’t just sex. I like you, Medusa. A lot. I feel very taken care of when I’m with you, and you make me want to take care of you, too. It…” Gods, this is hard. She’s still giving me nothing, but I push through. “It doesn’t feel transactional. I realize that might not be mutual, and I understand completely if you were just having fun, but—”

“It wasn’t.”

I blink. “It wasn’t fun?”

“What? No, that’s not what I meant.” She drags her hand through her blond hair, making it stand on end. “Or I don’t know if I’d qualify last night as fun. It was more like a religious experience, except I’m not religious and I don’t even know if I believe in the gods.”

I stare at her helplessly. I think I understand what she’s saying, but I’m suddenly terrified that I’m misreading things. It strikes me that while she has shown me a degree of kindness and care that I’m not used to, she’s obviously a good person, and that might just be how she moves through life. It’s a foreign concept to me, but that doesn’t mean it’s foreign to everyone. “Okay,” I say slowly.

“Oh no, I’m fucking this up.” She shoves to her feet and starts pacing around the tiny apartment. It’s a glorious sight. She’s fucking magnificent, and I can’t even allow myself to enjoy the sight because this conversation is too fraught. She finally spins to face me with an agonized expression on her face. “I like you, Calypso. I wouldn’t have done all this—I wouldn’t have had sex with you—if I didn’t. If you’re saying you want to—”

“Date you,” I rush in. “I want to date you. Exclusively. As your girlfriend.”

A slow smile dawns on her scarred face. “My girlfriend.”

“Yes…” I swallow hard. Why is this so difficult? “If that’s what you want.”

She takes one large step and then she’s on me, bearing me down to the mattress and kissing me hard enough to make my head spin. She peppers kisses across my jaw. “Yes, it’s what I want. Are you kidding me? I’m warning you now, Calypso, I’m going to fall in love with you. Prepare yourself.”

My laugh goes more than a little breathless as she skates a hand down my side, her destination obvious. “Wait, wait, we can’t get distracted. We have to meet Charon at eight.”

Medusa makes a show of looking at the clock. “It’s seven.”

“And if we get started, it will be hours.” I kiss her quickly. “I need to get ready. We’ll have one shot at this, and we can’t afford to mess it up.”

She eases off me, her dark eyes going worried. “Promise me something.”

“What?”

“Promise me that you won’t bargain anything away for me. That if this person asks for
something outrageous or unforgivable, that we’ll leave Olympus. Together.”
“I promise,” I lie.
Calypso is lying to me.

I can’t even be mad about it because she’s doing it for me. I can see it in the determination on her face when she thinks I’m not looking. She’s willing to bargain herself to ensure I stay safe. I won’t let her make that sacrifice, but there’s no use fighting about it until I know the parameters of the arena. First, we meet this leader. Then, we’ll figure the rest out.

After we get ready, Calypso leads me down to the main entrance where a white guy with artfully styled black hair is waiting. He doesn’t smile when he sees us, which makes me like him better. My instinct says that this guy is a soldier like me, though he’s out in the open where I clung to the shadows. He takes me in, but he doesn’t stare at my scars the same way some people do. It’s not enough to make me warm to him, but I don’t hate him on sight so that’s something.

“Like I said, I got you a meeting, but after that, it’s beyond my control.” He directs this to Calypso. “So, make a good impression.”

“I always make a good impression.” She’s got her charming facade in place, though it’s dampened a bit. I don’t know if that’s for his benefit or for mine.

“Yeah, well, we’ll see. Come on.”

I expect him to take us to a vehicle, but instead we start down the sidewalk. The morning is brisk and clear, and I sneak a glance at Calypso to see if she’s warm enough. My jacket is hardly a thick one, but I’m happy to wrap it around her. In fact, I kind of want to.

The thought barely crosses my mind before I’m following through on it. I shrug out of the jacket and drape it around her shoulders. She opens her mouth like she might argue, but instead snuggles down into it in a way that makes my heart thump too hard.

Girlfriend.

She wants to be my girlfriend.

If I keep looking at her, I’m going to trip over my own feet, so instead I turn my gaze around us. I only got the vaguest of impressions of the lower city last night while I snuck
around like a, well, like an assassin. In the cool light of morning, it’s rather charming. The storefronts are an eclectic mix of styles that should look mismatched but feels intentional the same way a patchwork quilt is intentional. Every so often, I catch sight of carved pillars on either side of a doorway, but Charon’s pace discourages lingering.

If we pull this off, there will be plenty of time to explore. I’ve never been one to overly care about my surroundings—not when I went through great lengths to avoid being noticed—but there’s something about this area that draws me.

Charon takes us around a corner and I almost stop short. Before us rises what appears to be a Victorian mansion. It’s such a strange place for a mansion, let alone one of this style, that it seems plopped down in the middle of the lower city as if placed here by a giant.

This is, of course, right where we’re led. Charon walks through one of the massive front doors. Calypso and I exchange a look and follow him in. She seems certain that he’s on the up and up, but I brush my hands over the hidden hilts of my knives, mentally preparing to fight our way out if it comes to that. So far Charon is the only person I’ve seen, but surely a building like this has a full security force? Especially if the leader of the lower city is here.

“If you don’t stop fingering your weapons, I’m going to take them from you.” He speaks over his shoulder without looking at me.

I drop my hands, and then curse myself for doing it. “You can try.”

“I don’t mean you any harm.” He stops in front of a door and finally looks at me. “No one here does unless you plan on trying to attack one of ours. I let you keep the knives as a courtesy.”

My skin heats under his direct stare, embarrassment making me want to shuffle my feet. Gods, how can he make me feel chastised when I haven’t actually done anything wrong? It takes effort to hold his gaze, but I manage. “I have no intention of harming anyone here unless they attack first.”

“Good enough.” He opens the door and steps back. “Go ahead.”

Calypso moves first, brushing her shoulder against mine as she steps into the shadows of the room. I cast one last suspicious look at Charon and then follow her in. The room is like the rest of the house we’ve seen—expensive but not particularly lavish. It feels like a house a rich person actually lives in, rather than entertains in. The massive mahogany desk dominates the space...or maybe it’s the man sitting behind it who does.

He’s another dark-haired white guy, though his hair is a bit longer than Charon’s and he’s sporting a neatly shaped beard. He looks vaguely familiar, but it’s Calypso who recognizes him while I’m still trying to figure out why he looks familiar. She sucks in a shocked breath. “Hades?”
I jerk back and then look closer. A lot of Olympians get curious about the member of the Thirteen who’s essentially the boogeyman of the city. Or at least he was before his death. There aren’t many photos of the last Hades, but Athena and Apollo both keep good records, and so I’ve seen a picture of that man.

This one could be his doppelgänger.

Except that’s impossible, because even if Hades hadn’t died thirty years ago, he’d be in his late fifties now, at least. Maybe sixties? I’m not exactly great with guessing ages. This guy can’t be more than thirty-five. Understanding hits me like a lightning bolt. “You’re his son. You’re supposed to be dead.”

“Call me one of Olympus’s best-kept secrets.” He doesn’t smile, and his dark eyes don’t warm at all. “You’ve come to claim sanctuary.”

We hadn’t planned it in so many words, but that’s a good way of putting it. I suck in a breath to explain ourselves, but Calypso gets there first. She walks toward the desk, and she’s even moving differently than she normally does, her hips gaining a seductive sway. Her voice has lowered, too. “Yes. We’ll do anything.”

His brows raise so little, I almost convince myself I’ve imagined it. “Explain the situation.”

She starts to speak, but I grasp her shoulder. “Let me.” I don’t give her a chance to argue, just jump into a slightly chaotic explanation of how we got to this place. It’s not perfect but this Hades can get the general idea of what we’re up against.

He listens silently, never showing a sign of exasperation that it takes me a little longer to get to the point or cutting in to demand a cleaner explanation. When I finish, he sits back and steeples his fingers beneath his chin. “I see.”

“We’ll—”

Once again, I speak over Calypso. “We’re willing to work or do anything that’s a reasonable ask, but we will not be willing to do anything. I’m not going to kill anyone, and Calypso is not going to be your mistress.”

At that, his brows wing up. “This is the lower city. We don’t make a habit of murdering people who inconvenience us, and no one will be compelled to enter into any kind of sexual or emotional relationship if they’re not consenting.”

“So you say.” I’m being a dick, and I know it, but I don’t trust this. “What’s the catch?”

He turns his attention to Calypso for a long moment before returning it to me. “You’re hardly the only two people who have been wronged by the Thirteen.”

“You’re a member of the Thirteen.”

He continues as if I didn’t interrupt. “I can offer you the safety of the lower city, with the understanding that if you’re not being honest about why you’re here, the consequences will be...severe.”
“You’ll kill us,” Calypso says softly.

I glare. “You just said you don’t make a habit of murdering people who inconvenience you.”

“I did.” His nod is slight, but undeniable. “I will do anything to protect my people, no matter how distasteful. Harming them is hardly something that can be labeled an inconvenience. If your motives are true, you’re welcome to stay. But you can never go back to the upper city. My domain stops at the River Styx. I can’t protect you if you’re foolish enough to go where you’re not protected.”

I wait, but it seems he’s finished. “That’s it?”

“Yes.” He lowers his hands. “I sympathize with being used and discarded by those more powerful than you. Beyond that, Charon is prepared to vouch for Calypso here, and I get the feeling that all your bristling spikes are in defense of her.” He shrugs. “We have space for you in the lower city. Don’t make trouble and you can live out the rest of your life here in peace.”

“What about Athena? And Zeus?”

For the first time since we walked into the room, his expression goes dark and ruthless. “I’ll handle them. They should have known better than to send an assassin into my territory.”

Too good to be true. I open my mouth to keep arguing, but Calypso’s hand finds mine, her fingers lacing tightly between mine. “We’ll stay. We won’t cause trouble.”

“Time will tell.” He gives us each a searching look and then waves his hand. “Go on. I have things to do today.”

We don’t exactly flee the office, but we beat a hasty retreat, nonetheless. I don’t see Charon on the way out, but it’s just as well. I don’t know how to process what just happened. It seems too easy. Calypso and I stumble out of the strange mansion and make it one block down before we find a bench to sink onto.

She slumps against me. “What just happened?”

“What was that seductress bullshit? Anything? Really, Calypso?”

She straightens almost reluctantly. “Olympus is our home. I don’t want to start over somewhere else.”

I look around us. It’s late enough in the morning that the foot traffic has increased. People move differently in the lower city. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but it feels just as seamless as the mix of shops. Like it’s truly a community instead of being whatever the upper city is. Another thing that seems too good to be true. “What if there’s a catch?”

“What if there’s not?”

We share a long look and it feels as if there’s a possibility this might be real. The threat of Athena’s disappointment—of what she might ask me to do next—has pressed
down on me for so long, I can barely comprehend that it’s no longer there. I can see the same relief and disbelief in Calypso’s eyes.

She tentatively reaches for my hand. “I...” She swallows hard. “I meant what I said this morning. I would like to be your girlfriend, Medusa.”

I tug her closer and lean down to capture her mouth in a quick kiss. “I meant it, too.” “We’re free,” she says wonderingly. “I’d hoped, but having it actually happen...”

“I think it’s going to take time for it to feel real.” I find myself smiling. “I’ll need to look for a job and all that, but I think it’s okay to start tomorrow. I have a few ideas to pass the time today.”

She laughs. “I bet you do.” Calypso stands and tugs me up with her. “Come on, Medusa. Let’s go home.”

Home.

It might be too soon to feel this way, but as I follow Calypso down the street and back to her cute little apartment, it really feels like home could be a person, rather than a place.

That, given a little time and a whole lot of love, Calypso can be my home. That’s the beauty of this turn of events, of something that started out like a nightmare and now feels more like a dream.

We have all the time in the world.

* * *

THANK you so much for reading! If you enjoyed this foray into Olympus, be sure to check out Neon Gods, which follows Hades as he falls for the one woman he shouldn’t want... Persephone.
Society darling Persephone Dimitriou plans to flee the ultra-modern city of Olympus and start over far from the backstabbing politics of the Thirteen Houses. But all that's ripped away when her mother ambushes her with an engagement to Zeus, the dangerous power behind their glittering city's dark facade.

With no options left, Persephone flees to the forbidden undercity and makes a devil's bargain with a man she once believed a myth...a man who awakens her to a world she never knew existed.

Hades has spent his life in the shadows, and he has no intention of stepping into the light. But when he finds that Persephone can offer a little slice of the revenge he's spent years craving, it's all the excuse he needs to help her - for a price. Yet every breathless night spent tangled together has given Hades a taste for Persephone, and he'll go to war with Olympus itself to keep her close....

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