



CHAPTER ONE

WHEN THEY ASKED ME WHAT I wanted, I said: “The world.”
‘And what would you do with the world?’ my father asked. His words were lined with sharp edges but I didn’t catch their threat until Mother squeezed my shoulder. Her fingers were too hard to be a comfort – a warning, perhaps? Or a threat of her own?

I stared from god to god, no one giving me any indication of what I’d done wrong. They had asked me a simple question. I had given a simple response. Now everyone watched me from the shaded porticoes of the megaron, their faces distorted in the reflections on the bronze pillars that ringed the throne hall. I had no idea what they wanted, no idea why everyone suddenly seemed tense. A few people glanced to my father, whose glower was so fierce he could have passed for one of his own statues.

I considered his question, my mother’s nails digging deeper with every passing second that I remained wordless.

‘I’d fill it with flowers,’ I decided.

A heartbeat as the words landed.

Then my father laughed. Long. Loud. The kind of noise that had me shrinking into my chair. The assembled gods joined in a split second too late.

I wanted to turn to my mother, to see if I'd answered correctly, but her hands held me in place, though her nails were less piercing.

She hadn't let me out of her sight all evening.

'It is good practice to be wary around strangers, my child,' she had said. But these people weren't strangers – at least not to my mother. They were her sisters and brothers, in arms if not in blood. They were gods she had known her entire life.

I'd wanted to know more, but *'Don't ask questions, my child'* was Mother's favourite saying.

Still, at least all this *'my child'* nonsense would stop soon. I was eight years old – or thereabouts. It's hard to keep track when you're immortal, and all the other gods had, until that point, been locked in a war against the lord of time, who shifted it about as he pleased.

But regardless of my age, it was my amphidromia, the day a child receives their name. And, as I was a goddess, I was also due to receive my domain – the aspect of the world that I would be responsible for.

'Very well,' Father said, rising from his throne. The laughing strangers fell silent at once. *'Let it be so.'* He paused, the corners of his lips twitching as he took in the concerned expressions of the other gods, particularly the other members of the council who sat either side of him. They were his advisors, and now they nudged each other and whispered, keen to hear his judgement.

Then Father smiled, though nothing about it eased the tension. 'Goddess of the flowers it is.'

My jaw dropped and my mother's grip became vice-like once more, holding me back. She knew me well enough to sense I was just shy of screaming, my rage intensified by the confusion of having asked for something so large and received something so small. All my hopes, all my lofty ambitions crumbled away. But I kept my mouth closed and curled my hands into fists that I hid in the folds of my dress. My anger was not worth challenging the king of the gods.

'And I name you . . . Kore.'

My eyes widened as the meanings of the name ran through my head: *pure, beautiful maiden, little girl*. Apparently that was all I would ever be to him.

'Goddess of the flowers and of beauty –' Aphrodite made an almost imperceptible noise of discontent before Father continued – 'in nature.'

As the ceremonial fire was lit, I fought back tears.

This felt like a punishment.

And I had no idea what I had done wrong.

I'm thinking about my amphidromia now, while trying not to wince as Mother tugs my hair into place. My thoughts often return to it. There was a lot at play – and I've had years to unpack it bit by bit. But now my thoughts linger where they rarely have before: on the sea of faces lost in the shadows.

Mother told me certain things about them back then – things to keep me safe, but also stupid. Now that she's told me more, the memory is drenched in fear.

So many people, all watching me. Two of the three courts gathered, gods from Olympus and Oceanus surrounding me. None from Hades, of course. I hadn't been near that many people before, and I haven't since. Now, in a matter of days, I'll be married to one of them – and I can't even remember them well enough to imagine who might be waiting for me at the end of the aisle.

According to everyone I know, it's natural to be nervous before you are married, but no one has told me whether it's natural to be terrified, filled with such abject horror at the thought that you can't breathe properly.

'Please hold your head still, Kore.' Mother sighs, her fingers loosening the tangled mess of my hair.

My head is attached to my hair, Mother. Pull it and the head goes with it.

'Put whatever sarcastic comment you're thinking out of your head.'

In her weary words lies the echo of the lecture she's given a dozen times: *'Men don't take sarcasm well, Kore. They take it as a challenge to their authority.'*

I wonder if her lessons will ever sink in or if they'll forever ring through my mind in her voice, oil on water, condemning my actions without helping me stop doing the things that so annoy her. The things that apparently make me undesirable.

I've tried. Fates know I've tried.

'Demeter, are you sure you wish for such a tightly coiled look? The fashion now is much looser,' Cyane says from the doorway, the only space left with Mother and I both crammed into my tiny bedroom. She is the nymph ordinarily entrusted with the important and arduous task of combing my hair,

and, from the way she's worrying at the edges of her own tightly coiled curls, I assume she's quietly livid that Mother has decided to interfere on such an important day.

Gods forbid my hair looks a mess – the universe might end. Or curse shame upon my household at the very least.

I grit my teeth as Mother's fingers catch on another knot.

'Loose?' Mother sneers, as expected. 'What would that imply about her? No, a traditional look is best. She will look beautiful but still virginal, precisely what is needed.'

'Yes, because if I don't look virginal how will the fine suitors know that the girl whose name literally means chastity and who has lived her entire life alone on an island is pure?'

'None of *that* today, Kore.' Mother sighs again. The sound has become so common that my name feels odd without it.

Still, there's something about hearing her sigh on a day like today that pulls at a cord in my chest. I'm disappointing her, even when I'm agreeing to the biggest thing she's ever asked of me.

She puts the final pin in place. 'There, you look just as beautiful as all the rumours claim.' She holds a looking glass up and I take in her work: my thick, unruly hair pinned tight against my scalp, frizzy black strands already trying to escape. Hair aside, I try to see myself the way a stranger might, the way my future husband might – smooth olive skin and a long straight nose, thick eyebrows and hollowed cheeks. Eyes that are just a bit too big, too dark, that always look inquisitive and naive, like those you'd expect of someone named 'little girl'.

She's right. I'm beautiful. Of course I am. We're goddesses. We're all beautiful.

What I notice isn't my beauty, it's how defeated I look. Like I have resigned myself to my fate.

In other words, I look perfect.

'We'll have you a husband in no time,' Mother chirps happily, setting the glass down. It clatters on the table a little too roughly and when she pulls her hand back I see it's shaking. I don't like seeing evidence of her fear that I won't get a good match. Especially when I'm terrified of getting one at all.

I tug at the ridiculous dress Mother has forced me into: a monstrosity of lilac silk, draped and twisted again and again to hint at the body on offer while obscuring enough to keep my modesty intact. It's less an outfit than gift wrapping. It's also too long to be practical, trailing along behind me. Considering how shallowly I'm having to breathe, I suspect it's been designed to stop me running away.

I nearly trip down the stairs following Mother to the kitchen. Cyane stays behind to tidy up but she must have been cooking before she joined us because the kitchen is steamy – worryingly so in a house made almost entirely of wood and several twisting trees – and the smell of bread is crushing in so small a space. Normally I'm too impatient to wait for the bread to cool down, burning my fingers as I tear it into chunks, but my dress is cinching my stomach so tightly that the very thought of eating is nauseating. My fingers fumble, trying to loosen the strands that tie it all together.

Mother swats my fingers away and straightens the bow instead. 'You should always look your best for your husband.'

What would you know? You aren't married, I want to scream.

'Will he always look his best for me?' I ask instead.

Mother jumps, glancing around like an Olympian could be lurking round the corner, like she hasn't spent the last decade weaving intricate magic to bar the uninvited from our island. 'Don't say things like that, Kore!' she scolds. 'No one will believe that a woman who talks of attraction is virginal. Do you want people to believe you're a whore?'

'Well.' I feign consideration, the *naive little girl* role I slip into for self-preservation. 'If they did then no one would want to marry me. Maybe I *would* like that freedom.'

Mother's face falls and she takes my hands in hers. 'That's not freedom,' she says gently. 'Men see a reputation as an invitation.'

'But I don't understand,' I say, blinking vacantly though I understand perfectly well. 'I thought you kept me on this island to keep me away from men. But now I have to marry one? Is sex okay then, if it's with your husband?'

'Yes, but only then.'

'But you weren't married when you had me.' I furrow my eyebrows to really drive home my confusion. *Remind me of how I was conceived, Mother.*

'That was before the goddess of marriage became queen of the gods. Rivers of Hell, I might not like Hera but at least she gained power somehow. She made marriage mean something, enough to bind even her own husband.'

Gods, not Hera as an example again. How is my stepmother the shining hope of marriage? My father forced her into it and they're both miserable.

'Hardly,' I snort without thinking better of it.

'Marriage is *protection*, Kore. A ring on your finger binds you to one man and that's all the gods respect.'

‘Another man’s property?’ I sneer. I can’t stop myself now that I’ve started.

‘Yes,’ she snaps, mirroring the vitriol in my own voice. ‘By the Fates, Kore, I didn’t design this system, so stop blaming me for it. If I have to arrange a marriage to keep you safe then I will.’

‘I’m safe *here*. Why can’t I just stay on Sicily?’

‘Oh, *now* you want to stay here – funny, Kore, you’ve spent the last decade begging for me to let you visit other lands.’ She shakes her head but when she speaks again it’s without the bite of her anger. ‘You’re safe here because we’ve been lucky. The wards won’t last forever, and certainly not now you’re of age. Do you really think that if I had the power to keep you safe myself, then I wouldn’t choose to have you by my side forever?’

‘No, actually, I don’t.’

That’s not true. I know it’s not. But I want to hurt her.

It works. I see my words land, the wince across her brow, her outstretched hand faltering. I don’t even feel guilty when tears spring to her eyes. I want her to cry. I want her to feel a fraction of the pain the thought of marriage causes me. I want her to realize just how much I don’t want this.

Her hurt turns to anger in seconds. Good. I want her to shout so that I can scream. ‘For your entire life, everything I’ve done has been for your protection. Stuck on this island, begging charms and wards off the other goddesses, barely going to Olympus, rarely leaving – all to keep you safe.’

‘I never asked you to do that!’

‘And I did it anyway! Anyone else would be grateful, Kore. Every single god thinks they’re entitled to take whatever they want, and that includes you. The only thing gods respect is

each other. Do you not see that marriage is the only way to protect yourself? I'm sure I don't need to tell you the fates of other girls who thought they could survive alone.'

I don't care, I want to snarl but my words falter on my tongue as I remember myself. There is no point in arguing and, worse, it could undo everything. All this time, I've been pretending I'm fine with this arrangement so she'll lower her guard and give me the opportunity to escape, and here I am, pushing her barriers back up at the last moment for the sake of an argument I'll never win.

I know my mother will never understand because what it comes down to is this: safety isn't enough for me. I'd rather perish, rather be another tragic tale for a mother to use in warning, than become a long, drawn-out sigh in a hymn, an immortal life spent in misery.

But my safety – and my reputation – has and always will be my mother's priority.

'I know you're scared,' she says, her anger cooling at the opportunity for a lecture. 'I know if you had your way you'd go off exploring the world, planting flowers, probably wearing a vastly inappropriate outfit and no shoes. But you can't. The world is too dangerous.'

'You can,' I say quietly, defeat heavy in my voice.

'Kore. I'm only going to say this once and you need to listen to me.' She steps towards me again and strokes my cheek. 'I love you, my dear, but you are not powerful. There are gods out there with untold powers and Zeus gave you flowers. How do you plan on keeping yourself safe with petals? Our lives are not the same. I'm one of the first gods, the goddess of sacred law, nature, the harvest – all powerful domains. Even then I'm

not powerful enough to protect you, because Zeus gave all the more powerful things to men. By the Fates, when the war ended he awarded whole realms to the boys and one of them was ten years old.'

'To be fair, you would never have wanted the Underworld.' Too cold, too dark, too full of horrors.

'That's beside the point,' she says. 'The only way you get more power and carve some space for yourself in this world is by aligning yourself with a powerful man in marriage. Give the others something – or, rather, someone – to fear. Do you understand me?'

I swallow and my hands are trembling, but I manage to keep my expression neutral. I want to scream that she's wrong but I honestly don't know if she is and I think if I try to say anything I might end up crying.

'I understand,' I whisper.

'You cannot stay a girl on an island forever.' At least we agree about one thing. 'I know you're scared but I'm the goddess of vegetation. There is no place on Earth you could go where I would not be able to find you.' I know that too. 'You won't be leaving us forever.'

I press my hurt down, push it to where all my fear and rage coalesces into an impossibly heavy nothingness.

'You're a woman now.' What an arbitrary word. I don't remember much of a transformation on my birthday but apparently the whole world saw one. 'You're too old for these tantrums. Promise me you won't be like this when your father gets here.'

There it is. Her disappointment sucks the final dregs of anger from me.

My eyes fall to the floor. Even that is enough to hurt me. I stare at the orange tiles I might never see again, the home I'm leaving – one way or another. 'Yes, Mother.'

'You're beautiful, Kore. And you're wonderful, so accomplished, *normally* so obedient and gentle, so easy to love,' she says pointedly. 'Keep that up and any man would be lucky to have you.'

They'd be bloody blessed.

'Are you only looking at Olympians?' I manage.

'Of course. I'm going to find you a good match. With an Olympian you'll still be a part of this court. Besides, I don't trust anyone under the rule of Poseidon to be the sort of man you marry.'

Right, because Zeus's rule is so much better.

'What about the court of Hades?'

Mother laughs sharply. 'Hilarious, Kore. I know you think I'm sending you off to a fate worse than death but I wouldn't send you to the actual realm of it.'

'Okay,' I say, not wanting to continue this conversation and cursing myself for even bringing it up. 'Can I go see my friends now? Before Father gets here?'

'Oh,' she says, a little wary. 'I really don't want you to muddy your dress.'

'Oh please, Father's the one who made me the goddess of flowers. He can hardly be surprised by a bit of mud, can he?'

'I'm the goddess of the harvest and you've never seen me with straw in my hair, have you?'

Yes, actually. Once. She was two bottles of wine into a 'mothers' evening' with Selene and Leto. Mother loves inviting other goddesses over to regale me with horror stories about

the men she's protecting me from. They would gather round, tell me the worst things I've ever heard in my life and then give me tips for staying safe. *'Don't wear a gown if you have to travel,'* from Aphrodite. *'Disguise yourself as a man if you can and at the very least travel as part of a group.'* Or Athena patting my head, telling me the places to hit a man to break free of him if, gods forbid, one ever made it on to the island and took me away. Hestia isn't much older than me, but she would harp on about how it was always safest to stay at home – though admittedly, I assumed she'd say as much as goddess of the hearth. She'd say that if I ever found myself stranded I should march straight to the nearest palace or estate and request *xenia*, a bond of hospitality of her own creation that would make anyone there unable to hurt me without consequence. They could still hurt me, of course, but there would be consequences. Before *xenia*, men could do whatever they liked to those foolish enough to be unprepared for their advances.

'I'll be gone in a few days,' I plead. 'Who knows when I'll next see my friends.'

'You know I don't like you spending time with those girls,' she says, gnawing on her lip. 'Oh very well, I can hardly say no, not with . . . everything else.'

Which I suppose means if she's forcing me to bind myself to a man I've never met, then stopping me from talking to my friends is a moral line she's unwilling to cross.

'Cyane!' Mother calls and the nymph appears at the foot of the stairs. 'Go with her to the river, but if the girls start corrupting her I'm counting on you to stop them.'

Oh, Mother, they corrupted me long ago. And a good thing

too, or I'd be heading off to my wedding night with no idea of what goes where.

'Be back soon,' she calls when I'm already halfway out the door. 'Your father will be here in an hour.'

An hour. I can practically hear sand trickling through an hourglass – counting away my last moments of the only life I've ever known.