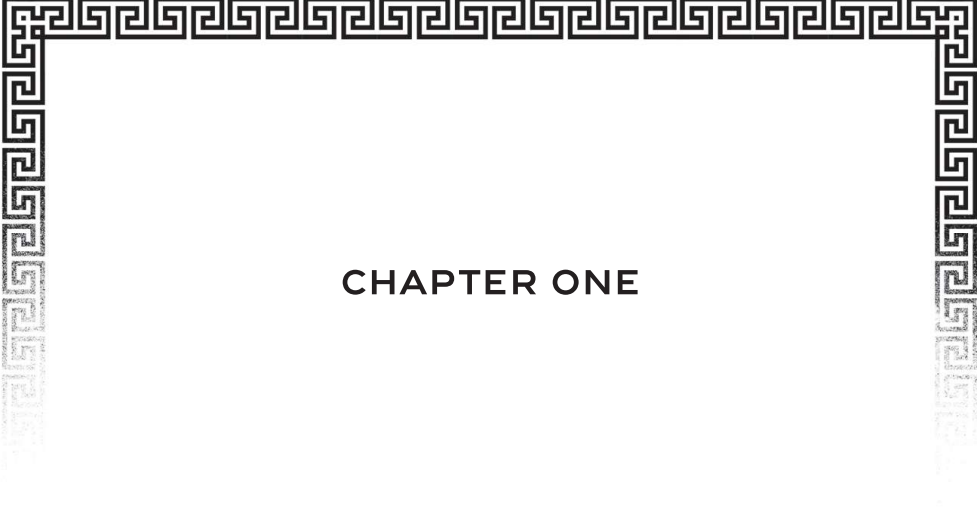




CHAPTER ONE

THE KING OF THE GODS demanded a beautiful evil – and so I was born.

They're reckless things, words, especially on the lips of gods. Beings have been created from less – from blood and flesh, from seed and soil, from hopes and wishes. A good handful of the pantheon spewed forth from errant thoughts. And there I was: a command.

Kalon kakon. A beautiful evil.

Words made me, ones issued by Zeus himself – but then . . . hands, careful and precise, and I became more than the furious venting of an impetuous god. I wasn't supposed to *be* yet, and I knew even as the gods crafted me that I ought to hide myself away until they declared me whole. They would be so much happier to believe I owed everything to them.

I was the first human woman – and this was to be my foundation: smile, keep my mouth shut and listen.

The gods bickered among themselves as Hephaestus worked, carefully carving out each individual tendon in my hand, chiselling each freckle and mole.

‘Make her hair longer, give him something to hold on to.’

‘Oh, come on, you can go bigger than that with the breasts.’

‘Are you serious? We’re going to need to reinforce her back at this rate.’

‘You’ve got good hips there. Give her thighs to match – yes, just right with the stomach! She looks so delightfully soft.’

‘Soft? She’s made of clay.’

‘Well, she’s not always going to be, is she? She’ll be a full-rounded woman, flesh and blood, with a belly to lay a head down upon and thighs to bury yourself –’

‘Yes, yes, I get the point. Are you sure about the nose, though? Looks a little too upturned.’

‘He’s not going to care about her nose with ankles as enticing as those.’

I didn’t know them all, but one boy arched a coy eyebrow in a way that identified him, with an instinct drawn from whatever forces had conceived me. He was mischief incarnate – Hermes. Now cutting a half-amused sneer at the man who had just spoken.

‘Her *ankles*, Poseidon?’

‘Yes. What’s wrong with admiring a nice shapely pair of ankles?’

‘At this point, I’m beginning to believe that if it turns you on, it’s intrinsically wrong.’

I didn’t like it, the way they picked over me piece by piece, like I was deficient if I did not align with their ideal – one they couldn’t even settle on themselves, each one shouting their preferences. No sooner had Hephaestus made an adjustment than they changed their minds, like my form would be an

ever-racing thing, chasing after their whims in a competition I could only, inevitably, lose.

But as much as Hephaestus indulged their wishes, he alone seemed more considered: the god of blacksmiths creating me to be more than the sum of my parts – and I realized as he inflated my lungs and pumped blood through my heart that he was pouring something else into me, too. A sort of resolve, solidifying with each chip of vertebrae down my spine.

Love.

He was creating me with love – the sort of adoration an artist has for their creation, and I did not care that to him I was just another thing he had made. Because it was a thing one step removed from the intentions that had birthed me. And soon there was so much love within me that the words Zeus had spoken – whatever they were – slipped clean from my newly formed mind.

‘She’s a bit young, isn’t she?’ a woman asked, something about her painful to look at, though I didn’t understand why until she brought her hand to my temple, filling me with thoughts of longing and desire. *Aphrodite*. The name was the barest whisper of sea foam against waves. Goddess of a trickling array of responsibilities, yet *beauty* sang loudest. Looking at her triggered lust and envy in equal measure. I wanted to tear my gaze away, the embarrassment too fierce – but it would have been worse to reveal that I was conscious for my own creation. Indecent, somehow.

‘Epimatheos has only just reached adulthood,’ Hephaestus said, the first words he’d spoken, as he stepped back to review his work. Throughout, he would chip away a piece just to brush it back over, or carve out a little too much, then pat clay

back on – rounding me out, smoothing me down, not resting until each aspect of me was exactly as he demanded. And now, finally, he gave a satisfied nod. ‘She’s perfect.’

Another woman approached. She did not wear her famed helmet but those piercing grey eyes, shrewd and dissecting, labelled her as Athena, goddess of wisdom. She began draping cloth around me, clasping it in place with delicate gold filigree pins. They had just quibbled over my every part and now they covered the mound of my breasts, the gentle rolls of my belly, the curve of my hips right down to my supposedly covetable ankles. When my body was art, it was a thing to be admired. But to become flesh, it was layered in rules of decency and modesty. It was a thing to shield.

With each fold of the sheet, Athena whispered in my ear – words so quick I could not work out their individual forms. But my mind filled with images of the loom and threaded needles until my fingers itched for them, to prove this talent I felt burgeoning inside me.

Aphrodite stepped forward to touch my face again, let her slender fingers run down my cheek, and I shuddered, hoping no one saw. It was the first movement of my body – and suddenly it was all I wanted: to touch and be touched, to feel desired, to find someone who might adore me in every way I suddenly craved.

‘There,’ she said. ‘Now she’s perfect. She’ll be irresistible.’

‘We’ll see,’ Hermes answered, stepping up to take her place. He stared hard into my eyes, and I wanted to run, to hide – to pretend I was never here at all. He whispered into my ear and his words sank through my skin and slid down my throat. There they solidified into long cords, giving me voice – language that

could be a disguise. Words that could be wielded as weapons. I wanted to take all I was and every precious thought I had and hide it from view, to twist it into something else and declare it to the world, like the truth would only be safe concealed from the light.

I'm not sure what he did to me, exactly, only that afterwards I didn't want to let them do what they wanted to me any more.

More women entered the room, carrying jewels which they layered about my throat on long golden chains. They tucked flowers into my hair until they ringed the golden diadem Athena had placed there, and studded them through the embroidered veil that brushed down the back of my neck.

I felt beautiful – and somehow also ashamed of the fact, even though I knew any beauty I had was the intentional work of these gods. Anything of mine was theirs. And still it seemed my shame to bear, like I ought to apologize for my own existence.

When the women were finished, Hermes hummed, tilting his head this way and that. 'I think she'll do.'

He entered then, loud steps clashing with the immediate silence that fell upon the gods about me. His words were so distant to me now that I didn't recognize him as the man who had spoken them and demanded my invention.

'This is her?' he asked – his voice a harsh crack, like a lashing whip, like thunder wrenching apart the sky.

'Yes, Lord Zeus,' Athena said assuredly when no one else made any indication to speak. 'Is she to your satisfaction?'

Zeus took another step towards me, his eyes narrowed like he was taking aim at a target. He ran his eyes over my face, my body – and even though I was now clothed, it felt so much

worse than the scrutiny of the other gods. I had no doubt that if the answer were no, that I did not suit his purpose, the gods would simply scrap me and start again.

And I liked who I was now, all the things they had made me: a girl who hoped for love; who enjoyed working the loom and could spin lies that were just as pretty; who feared the hunger inside herself as much as she longed to satisfy it.

‘She’ll be the ruin of them,’ Zeus said at last. ‘I name you Pandora.’

Oh.

A piece of me I did not know I was missing.

A name.

A summary of all that I was and all I might be.

With it, Zeus makes me whole. I had existed, but now I come alive, clay softening to warm creamy skin, eyes blinking, and I am stretching my hands out before me, moving within the empty space, part of the world I glide through, marvelling at the feeling of the cold air, of the heavy metal jewellery draped about my throat.

I am Pandora.