

HERA *Olympian Confessions*

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PART I

PRISONER OF HEAVEN

1

HERA

“Be my bride, Hera.” His arms snake around my waist. The soft gray of his eyes has a magnetic quality, but I have seen them turn as quickly as a storm and I want no part of it.

“Never.” I shove at him and dance out of reach. I’m afraid that one day he will not take my rejection so peacefully. I have managed to evade such an arrangement so far, but he is persistent. He frightens me.

Zeus, the God of Thunder, stalks towards me, lithe muscles poised. I brace myself for him to strike me. I have seen what he is capable of, watched him tear Titans apart and spread their blood across his face like war paint. I tuck my fear behind a stoic face and spine of iron. We are alone in the vast courtyard on Olympus, surrounded by nothing beyond the ornate marble pillars and the wide blue sky. I come here only when he wants to see me, to prevent him from coming to find me on his own. He makes no move to touch me, though fury turns in his eyes. I watch his features arrange into a charming smile, showing off a talent he has for hiding his true nature from those who don’t know him as well as I do. “Find your bride elsewhere, I will never consent to being yours.”

Energy crackles around him. The acrid scent of electricity burns my nose and his smile falters for a brief moment. The emptiness of this place fills me. Zeus crafted himself an elaborate palace on Olympus laden with gold and marble that blinds the eyes with each reflective wink of sunlight. There are dozens of rooms, more than enough rooms for all of our siblings to live here. I have never been sure why he thought to craft such a palace when none of us have ever expressed a desire to live so close to him.

“One day you will.” His words press thickly upon me. The power in them makes it difficult to breathe. I can feel it trying to reach through my mental barriers, to invade my thoughts so he can gain control. He’s not strong enough to do so and my mind remains my own. He picks up an auburn curl and tucks it over my shoulder as he slides his fingers over the curve of my neck. Goosebumps break out over my skin. Zeus is the God of Thunder and Lightning as well as Lord of the Sky. He wields his power with a frightening expertise. In a single thought he can excite the nerves with the gentle brush of electricity and a moment later he can pour so much power into the body that it could tear someone apart from within. He smirks at me. He makes a striking picture with his ebony curls, neatly groomed black beard and gray eyes set against deep gold skin. “One day you will take me in your arms, Hera. On that day you will be mine.”

Fear trips through me, but it’s a laugh that escapes my lips. The complete ridiculousness of his statement drowns me in mirth and anxiety. “Should I ever do so, and I never will, I would be your bride.”

He grabs me sharply and gives me a good shake, rattling my teeth. “Swear it. Swear those words on Styx.” I try to shrink away, but he holds fast. Making such an oath would be true folly, though I have no intentions of ever touching him willingly so how dangerous could it be? The River Styx guards the boundary between this world and the

Underworld. It is the oath-binder, the strange magic it possesses forcing whoever swears upon it to fulfill the oath or perish. “Swear it and I will swear as well, to never lay hands on you until you have consented to take me in your arms.”

Unease ripples in my belly, but I cling to the sense of safety in those words. I could be safe forever if I agree, free of him. I swallow down my discomfort and make the oath, confident that it will protect me. The power of the sacred river binds me, weaving the strands of the oath into the depths of my being.

He makes his own oath and then his lips curve into a smirk. ‘*Oh, Gaia, what have I agreed to?*’ The oath seemed so simple, but it occurs to me he never would have asked it of me if he had not found a way around it somehow. Stupid, I should have just run and not looked back. He does not reach towards me, does not move to touch me at all. His lightning energy vibrates over my skin, but then he vanishes, leaving me shivering under the open sky.

I retreat from Olympus, away from the desolate home of my would-be husband. I slip through the æther, the energy that covers the entire world. Immortals treat the æther much like a portal system, diving in at one spot and appearing wherever they please on the other side. I use it to head home, the one place I feel safe.

I was raised by three nymphs; Prosymna, Euboia and Akraia. My sister, Hestia, is stoking the flames of our hearth when I arrive. Her sweet lips curve into a smile as she abandons her post to embrace me. She smells of ash and flame, but also of sweet peas and new leaves. Her flame red hair is bound back in a sleek tail with a few strands escaping to frame a round face and amber eyes. I kiss Hestia’s cheek and try to return her smile, but my lip wobbles.

Our mothers join us in the cave that provides our shelter; mahogany-haired Prosymna, blue-eyed Akraia and dark-skinned Euboia. They

have been the bastion of safety and sanity for me since the moment I came into this world.

“Has the Thunderer been after you again?” Prosymna asks. I nod, Prosymna knows me too well. There is not much in the world that scares me anymore. I have lived through horrific battles and while those memories haunt me, their sources have long since been extinguished. Only Zeus is still a threat to me. We take care not to say his name, instead referring to him as the Thunderer or some other epithet so he isn’t able to tune into our conversations. Directly saying the name of a god can draw their attention and we would rather avoid his notice.

Euboia pushes me towards the river that flows adjacent to our cave. If you live with my mothers long enough you come to realize that their solution for any stressful situation is a bath. They remain convinced that the cleansing power of water is a quick fix for most any problem. I slip into the crisp liquid and settle my bottom on one of the rocks we’d shoved in ages ago to provide a seat. I suppose I do feel a little better. Akraia sits with a basket of vegetables, preparing them with an expert hand for our dinner. Neither Hestia or I need to eat. Though we do technically get hungry, we certainly won’t die from malnutrition like our mothers eventually would.

Prosymna combs my hair tenderly, teasing out the many snarls and tangles from the auburn locks. “What does he want?”

“Marriage.” The word tastes bitter on my tongue and I sink a little further into the water.

“Perhaps you should.” We all look at Akraia as though she’s grown a second head. Seemingly oblivious, she continues on. “You would be the Queen of the New Age of the Gods. Surely that must count for something. The Age of the Titans is past, you would rule the Age of Olympus.” I love her, but her words fill me with distaste.

“How can you say that?” I hiss. “He is horrible.”

“My dear,” Prosymna murmurs soothingly, “she may be right. That god-child is impetuous and he means to have you. We cannot protect you from him if he comes for you.” Betrayal cracks my heart. At first, they had simply cautioned me away from Zeus, but their advice shifted a little each time he asked me to be his wife. They are right, however much I wish they weren’t. They would never be able to stand up to him if he came for me. I might survive such an encounter, but nymphs are not immortal and I could never live with myself if I was the reason my family lost their lives. I vow then that if it comes down to it, I will find the strength to lead myself to a life of misery to protect them. I love them too much to allow them to suffer on my behalf.

“I could stand against him.” Hestia’s words are hopeful, but ultimately my options are running out.

I shake my head. “We have all lived through too much battle, I would not have you fight for me, not when I know how you deplore it.” My sister might be a magnificent warrior and amply gifted with the power of fire, but she hates violence of all sorts and would rather tend her flames in peace. “Besides, he has sworn to never lay a hand on me.” I curl into myself and ignore the curious looks being shot at me. I stare at the wavering image of myself through the water. What makes me more desirable to the Thunderer than any other immortal female? We share the same features, the same sun-kissed skin, wide hips and strong legs, as many of the others. I don’t understand why he wants me.

“You trust his word?” Euboia rests a hand on my shoulder. She’s the darkest of the sisters; black curls, skin brown as the soil from which she once sprung, a beauty like the Earth herself.

“I must, he swore on Styx.” I am just as bound as Zeus by the oaths we swore. To break an oath sworn on Styx is to destroy the innermost part of yourself. It is the closest an immortal can come to true death.

Euboia stares at me, incredulous. “How did you manage that?” I relay the words we each spoke and the circumstances.

My mothers look to one another and Prosymna chews her lip. “Sweet Hera, whether you wed and bed him or not, I doubt you will ever be free of him.”

“What is she to do then?” Hestia asks them. “Our brother is not known for taking no as an answer. There have been rumors about him and his treatment of some of the Titan women.”

Akraia nods. “He has taken others without their permission, forced them to his bed. He has not done this with Hera. It is obvious that he desires you, but the question remains, why does he not just take you as he does the others?”

2

HERA

Blackness smothers me. The oppressive darkness sticks to my skin and flares of madness burst through my skull. I miss breathing, that one glorious inrush of air before I was shoved back into nothingness. When I was born I was swallowed by my father, along with every child my mother gave him, minus the last. My siblings and I languish in purgatory, without nourishment, without light, without air. I am aware of nothing but the darkness and the muted presence of the others.

Pain slices through me as a blade is plunged into my father's belly. Sweet light and air, vibrant sensation, floods over me. My father's body is flayed open and we pour into the world. Zeus wraps around me though we are both covered in blood. He grins at me, manic glee filling his eyes. "Prepare for battle, sister, the King is wounded, but his armies gather." How can I prepare for battle on the day of my rebirth? "What power do you have?"

"How do I know?" He casts me off disgustedly and turns to the others who he freed along with me. Hades, Poseidon, Demeter and Hestia, our brothers and sisters.

"What of the rest of you?" Hestia knows of her affinity for fire and Poseidon relays his for water. The others have no answer for him. He sighs. "I

am your new leader and you had best determine where your strengths lie or you'll be sent back to oblivion. Before we get into things, you all must swear on Styx to accept me as your King and to not overthrow me as we are going to do with Father." We all agree, not knowing the truly terrible power of a vow made upon Styx.

A handful of Titans approach Zeus, he introduces them; Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus, Leto, Themis and Metis. Epimetheus watches me with intensity, his warm brown eyes pouring over me. Zeus turns back to us. "Allies, meet my family."

Pain bursts through my shoulder and I pitch forward with a scream. Zeus roars and yanks at the arrow embedded into my flesh, tearing it free along with significant blood and skin. Hestia lays her hand over the wound and a bolt of heat seals it. Half blind from the agony, I am pulled along by the golden warrior introduced to me as Leto. She shelters me with her body as arrows fall upon us like rain and we scatter with the winds.

"HERA, WAKE UP." HESTIA SHAKES ME, but I ignore her and burrow my face into my arms. "Sister, you were shouting in your sleep. Our mothers are worried." I push her away and try to do the same with my memories. I feel Hestia settle next to me. "What part of the war did you dream?"

One eye peels open and takes her in. She smiles sadly down at me, face framed by wickedly red strands. Her amber eyes are as hypnotic as the flames she presides over. "Before the first battle." She nods and strokes my hair, so I continue. "I wish you had been the one that was saved. You would be a far better Queen than he is a King."

"I appreciate the confidence, but I have no desire for politics or leadership. Besides, who's to say that I wouldn't go mad with power if I were a Queen?" She teases and I laugh. Mad with power is the last thing I'd ever suspect of my sweetest sister.

A rainbow glides over the sky and Iris materializes at the shore of the river in a burst of color. She can travel both through the æther and through her rainbows by dissolving herself into light. The æther is more inconspicuous for travel, but when she feels safe she uses her rainbows. During the war she fought by our side and now we are simply friends. Her bright and loyal nature are a blessing that I cherish. She grins at us, silvery hair whipping in her incandescent aura. Violet eyes wink at me. The Goddess of Rainbows hugs me tightly. “Hello Iris, what news from the skies?” I ask.

“The titanic brothers are crafting a rather interesting project.” She glances from me to Hestia. My sister’s cheeks are painted a pretty pink. “They asked after you two.” Prometheus and Hestia are darling together, a true meeting of the minds. I’ve tried to press her for details, but she insists that she admires Prometheus for his thoughts and not his form. I’d be blind to not notice his body considering it is nearly identical to his twin, Epimetheus. My mothers have cautioned me away from a romance with him, at least until Zeus loses interest in me, but I’m not very good at listening in regards to this. “Do you want to go and see what they’ve made? I’m sure your mothers won’t mind.”

Iris side-eyes our nymph mothers. Prosymna sighs. “You shouldn’t encourage them, Iris.”

“Why not?” She asks. “They have as much right as any to pursue love.”

Akraia sets down her weaving and turns her snapping blue eyes on us. “You know the Thunderer pursues Hera.”

“Yes, but no one is in the way of Hestia’s happiness. Besides, what harm is there in Hera spending time with someone she enjoys? She cannot live in a box just because some ill-mannered God has decided he wants her.”

“That ill-mannered God is our King.” Prosymna points out. “These are dangerous days Iris, we cannot afford for him to be tempted

into hurting anyone. We don't want him to feel threatened by the brothers."

"He hurts people without temptation." Iris crosses her arms and stares down my mothers. "He is just as much a monster as the one we overthrew. We fought in that war so we wouldn't have to live our lives under tyranny anymore."

"Oh, let them go." Euboia touches each of her sisters' shoulders and implores them. "Our girls deserve to be happy."

"We're not debating their happiness," Akraia snaps, "we're debating the intelligence of flaunting Epimetheus before the Thunderer."

"If I agree not to flaunt can I go?" I don't really need their permission, but it's never fun to alienate those who lovingly raised you.

Euboia nods on behalf of my mothers. "Go, but be discrete."

Hestia, Iris and I leap through the æther before my mothers can protest and pour out where the brothers are working on their project. We find them standing in a stream, knee deep in murky water as they shovel handfuls of clay onto the wet bank. Their naked bodies are smeared with mud and their hair so caked with it that it stands on end.

They pause in their task and wait for us to join them. Prometheus and Epimetheus fought on our side in the Titanomache and have been welcome friends since those days. They appear to be the same in all ways except their manner. If they remained silent you might never tell the difference between the bronze-skinned, black-haired brothers. Epimetheus is more impulsive than his brother, given to following his passions and worrying about the consequences later. Prometheus is more careful and quiet, though he is keenly intelligent and committed to any task he takes on.

Prometheus stares at my sister with adoration in his eyes. Epimetheus tromps through the mud and wraps his arms around me. Our bare skin collides, slathering me with mud. I haven't bothered wearing

garments of any sort since the war when we used color to distinguish one side from the other. Now I'm glad because his carelessness would have ruined anything I'd worn today.

"Hera," he kisses my cheek and smiles broadly, "come and see what we've made." I brush his smooth cheek with my fingers, loving the movement of his smile under my hand. He grabs my wrist and pulls me along enthusiastically. "I'll make one for you." He stops in front of a series of clay figures. There's two sets of figures, one of all fairly similar bipedal forms and the other is a haphazard collection of mostly quadrupedal things and strange winged creatures.

Epimetheus looks so proud that I can't bear to tell him I think the bipedal statues his brother made are more beautiful. The ones Prometheus made look like us and they are gowned in colorful fabric. Clothing among the immortals is generally a rarity. I've always associated it with battle, but now that I see such wonderful colors and designs I might have to see if my mothers can make me something to wear once in awhile.

I marvel appropriately over Epimetheus' creations, examining one with large eyes and floppy ears. Curved horns adorn its head and the sloping back and round belly give it a look of sweetness. "What is it?" I touch the creature gently, mindful not to smudge the clay.

"I thought I'd call it a cow. Do you think you could bring it to life?"

I stare at him and wonder if I have that power. All immortals have some basic abilities such as telepathy and using the æther for transport, but otherwise our gifts are highly specific. I cannot tame flame like Hestia or summon the rains like Zeus. Deities who can create life of this complexity are rather rare, I'm not even sure I could name one besides Gaia. "I can try."

I press my lips to its forehead and summon up the divine flame that burns at my core, passing over a tiny spark. White fur erupts over

the creature and it gives a head shake before letting out a gentle lowing sound. It gazes up at me with large brown eyes before wandering over to Iris to take a meal of fresh grass. Excitement buzzes in my blood. I'm a Goddess of Life. I have a power that almost no immortal possesses.

Epimetheus slips his arm around my waist. I lean into his warmth. "I had hoped the eyes would turn out that beautifully. They remind me of you." He plants a light kiss on the curve of my throat and my breath flies out of my lips in a gasp. Almost oblivious, Epimetheus moves to a partially completed creation and settles down to his knees. He takes out a small gold knife to carve out the fine details. "I'll make you another, one that possesses your beauty."

I watch in fascination as he works, fingers sliding over the clay and the blade carving out individual feathers. I never would have guessed that Epimetheus had the patience for such intricate detail. His hands are large, but surprisingly nimble as he crafts, smoothing the clay in long sweeps. He glances towards me and catches me watching intently. "Come, help me."

I crouch close and use my nails to carve out a few more details though I'm not quite sure of his vision for the finished creation. I relax as he tucks me against his chest so we can work together. Epimetheus loves to create and share it with others, one of the many things I love about him. He thinks nothing of having me be a part of this though my skills are rudimentary at best. He's easy to be around and has a warmth that snares me in whenever I am near him. He tugs me back into the long grass, abandoning our task for the moment. His lips are sweet and there is a taste of clay, that flavor of the earth that so often permeates him. The grass ripples around us and obscures us from the view of Prometheus and Hestia.

Epimetheus presses his forehead to mine. "Be my bride, Hera."

The words send a shiver down my spine. How different they sound coming from him. How different my response to them is. A ‘yes’ sits poised on my tongue, but the rumble of thunder in the distance stills my voice. If I say yes, what would happen to him? His brother Atlas is cursed to hold up the sky for the rest of eternity for crossing Zeus in the Titanomache. I can only image what Zeus might do if I agreed to marry another after rejecting him. I answer him with a kiss instead of words, memorizing the taste and texture of his mouth, tucking it away because there’s no way I can safely marry him. He seeks out my lips with hot desperation, gently insistent hands spreading over my skin. He sprawls to the side, head propped on one hand so he can look down at me. “I should not have asked, I know he pursues you.” Thumb and forefinger tease a lock of my hair as he sighs. “I can’t help but desire you as well. If he were not around, what would your answer have been?”

“I would be yours,” I whisper against his flesh, the words barely loud enough for me to hear myself, let alone loud enough that the wind might carry them to Zeus. I pull away as the thought sobers my desire. “I should go.”

He catches me and holds me close for a moment. “Stay, at least see what my brother has created.” He pulls me to standing and we find his twin still pulling clay from the riverbed while Hestia and Iris sit on the shore and dips their toes into the water as they speak. He pauses in his task and conversation to join us before the statuary he made.

“These are exquisite imitations.” I trail a finger over the cheek of a female, in awe of the handiwork. “You have a great talent, Prometheus. What is their purpose?” The brothers have never really needed a reason to create, but it strikes me as a bit odd that they would make so many in such a short timeframe.

Prometheus gives me a sour look. “Our King wants a race of creatures to worship him. Apparently, our obedience is not enough for

him.” He adjusts the cheekbones of one man and corrects the slope of another’s shoulder.

“Why would they want to worship him?” Hestia asks, crossing her arms over her chest.

“They’ll worship all of us once they figure out we exist.” Prometheus answers. “I am gifting them with cleverness and dedication, but they will not have the fur or claws like the creatures Epimetheus is making. They will fear the world around them and search for answers, at which time they will encounter us.”

Hestia surveys them and places a smooth hand on Prometheus’ arm. “It seems a pity to create them only to have them live in fear.”

“I have to agree.” Iris snaps. “Creating an entire race of beings simply to assuage his ego is preposterous. How does he even plan on giving them life?”

“I have that power.” Prometheus glowers at his hands as though despising his possession of such a rare gift. “You do as well, Hera.”

“I can give them life, take some of the burden onto myself.” I say, and Prometheus eyes me curiously. I continue. “I know you feel guilty about what you’re doing, I can see it on your face. Let me share some of the responsibility for this.”

Epimetheus presses his palm to my hip, tucking me close. “You are tender-hearted,” he says. “What a world we might live in if you were our leader instead.” If I married Zeus I would be their Queen, though I would be delusional if I thought Zeus would share his authority so readily. To be honest I’m not sure why he just doesn’t marry someone who wants him. There must be someone somewhere.

“Be mindful of your words, brother.” Prometheus snaps and Epimetheus has the good sense to look chastised. “I can’t ask you to do that, Hera, but I would not refuse if you wanted to bestow a blessing on them.”

Olympian Confessions: Hera

It seems like a day for discovery in terms of new powers. I never gave much thought to what I might possess. I had been so focused on honing anything related to battle that all else fell by the wayside. I suppose if I can create life from nothing I should be able to bless it as well. I press two fingers to the forehead of the nearest female and visualize a gold thread reaching from me to her. The threads shoot out in a lace-work fashion until there is a delicate, shimmering web between us all.

Prometheus laughs and pulls us all close and Epimetheus tucks against me as we all stand together. “Thank you, Hera.” Prometheus grins, “I may give them life and form, but you have given them a soul.”

3

HERA

The sky opens and weeps. Zeus drives a blade into our father's face, pinning him to the ground. Cronus lays unmoving as Zeus howls with laughter. "I am King!" He pumps his fist into the heavens, blood dripping from his hand. The others who fought against us are similarly subdued, wrapped in strangling vines, pinned under boulders or writhing in flames. A few of our own lay in agony, but for the first time in Gaia knows how long we have a significant advantage. "Demeter, restrain them all!"

My golden-haired sister summons vines from the earth and trusses up the incapacitated Titans. I lean my weight on Hestia, thankful for the few moments of peace. It will take time for them to heal, to regain their strength and come after us once again. If we don't strike now while they are down, we may never have another chance. Hades reaches his hands into the soil and pulls apart the ground. Deep inside of Gaia lives Tartarus, a primordial realm that will function as their prison for the rest of eternity. It has taken us years to deal this crushing blow to my father's Titan armies and now, we claim our victory.

Zeus kicks our father into the gaping hole and orders the rest of us to push in the others. One by one our enemies are swallowed up. I turn my face

to the sky and let the rain wash away the horror and blood. Now that the battle is over, the full impact of the violence I've enacted and had expressed upon me hits home. I weep into Hestia's arms, mimicking the sorrow of the ashen clouds.

RAIN PELTS MY FACE AND I OPEN MY EYES. The sky is an opalescent pearl gray above me. Cool droplets drag away the lingering smears of clay from my skin. My mothers and Hestia are inside the cave around a cheerful fire. I love the rain and have since that heavenly deluge had cleared away years of blood. Restless, I pull myself off the sodden ground and poke through the curtain of water to warm myself by the flames. "I'm going for a walk."

Prosymna pauses in combing Hestia's brilliant hair and purses her lips. "This is hardly the weather for walks, Hera," Akraia admonishes and Prosymna nods her agreement.

"I will return before long, you know how I love this weather." Eubolia sighs and pulls me into an embrace. I gaze imploringly at her and she turns her own gaze towards her sisters.

Prosymna sighs and relents. "Go out, then."

Akraia casts them a petulant look. They always overrule her when I want to venture out. I hug them each, breathing in the fresh scent of petals and smoke. Akraia has never understood my affinity for the rain. I have walked in every downpour since the war was over and she always reacts the same. I know it is out of concern for my safety, but I get unsettled if I merely watch the cleansing waters instead of experiencing it myself. "Be safe."

"Always." I slip out of the warmth of the cave. Cold rivulets dance down my skin and the ground squishes beneath my feet. I give over to the feeling of freedom, running and twirling through the downpour. I

walk until I reach the sea and throw myself with abandon into the surf. Eddies coast around my body, teasing me away from the shore but I plant my feet into the sand and just let the power tug at me. The ebb and flow of the ocean is greater than Poseidon who claims dominion over it. He may say what he likes, but it is not the power of a God that I feel in the tides.

The sun fades beneath the horizon before I leave the sea and sprawl across the sand. Droplets splash around me and decorate the ground. In the light of morning, it will look as though the world is awash with diamonds, renewed by the tears of heaven. Those early hours are my favorite, before Eos wakes to bring the dawn and there is a deep peace that settles over everything.

A thunderclap startles me. Lightning strikes down so close that I feel the tingle of electricity in the air and the heat of the bolt on my skin. The clouds grow darker, heavier as the rain intensifies, obscuring my sight. I scramble away from the beach, through the scattered seagrass and race towards home. A blast of wind knocks me off my feet and I hunker down in the tall grass. There is no path to follow, even if I were able to see it through the now sheeting rain. Lightning flashes and thunder screams around me. I need to focus to use the æther, but panic is kicking a steady rhythm in my chest. I quickly grow disoriented and press near to the soil, sucking in lungfuls of the pungent essence of moist earth.

A small frantic sound catches my attention and I shuffle through the blades of grass until they reveal a tiny creature. I didn't know Epimetheus had set any of his creations free into the world yet, but it looks like his work. The little bird is fluffed up into a ball of dark, patterned plumage. It's soaked through and looks positively miserable.

"This is a poor welcome to the world little one." I reach out towards it and smile at the hesitant peep it makes. I rub its forehead with one

finger and gradually scoot it closer so I can cup it in my hand. “Come little one, do not be afraid.” I snatch it up and tuck it against the warmth of my breast. “There now, I will keep you safe until the storm is over.” I stroke the feathers until it stops shivering and falls into a restless slumber. I follow its example and curl into the grass to sleep off the tempest.

My elbow burrows into someone’s collarbone. I feel the satisfying crack, my arm propelled by a burst of power even as a stone bashes into my side. I collapse breathless, several ribs broken. Hades grabs me and hoists me away from the thick of the battle, shoving a torrent of rock and soil through a line of Titans. He presses his hand to the shattered bone and calls up a series of stones, fashioning them into a temporary brace. “There’s no time to rest, can you still fight?”

Breathing is agony, but I nod anyway. I grab power from inside of myself and launch a fistful of it at Atlas who is ready to drop a boulder on us both. He groans and stumbles backwards, dropping the stone onto his leg. He howls and shoves it off, but the damage is done. My father’s voice tears through the battle. “Charge!” The Titans rush us, those that are able to, at least. Prometheus and Epimetheus work as a unit, linking arms and barreling through three of our enemy. Truthfully I barely know any of their names, they were mere flashes of color, malevolence in motion, to me. I suppose it is easier to deliver punishment upon someone who is nameless and faceless. Leto glides a golden sickle through one Titan, they look so similar they might be sisters. I couldn’t imagine visiting such anger upon my own sisters.

Fire races towards us. Hades throws me aside and Hestia slams into him just in time to avoid us all being incinerated. Fire erupts from her fingers in a torrent, incredible power surging and devouring those in its path.

HEAT RUSHES OVER MY SKIN, softening into gentle warmth. It cocoons me, wrapping around my waist and ghosting over my neck. Tendrils

play over my breast and down my torso. The rain has stopped and there is nothing but moonlight and stars overhead. I lean back into the warmth and realize that it's a body I'm pressed against. My first thought is Epimetheus so I snuggle into it. Hot breath brushes against my skin and rough fingers grope at my hip. I feel a beard brush against my flesh. Epimetheus doesn't have a beard. My body freezes instantly. Panic makes me shoot away, but the limbs around my waist hold fast.

"Be still!" Zeus hisses at me. "You have taken me in your arms, cradled my form to your breast. You have fulfilled your half of the vow, Hera."

No. No, no, no, no. The word repeats in a terrified cycle, erupting from my mind and into spoken words. I thrash wildly, but he is strong and presses a hand to my mouth to stifle the scream. Fear makes my powers flounder and try as I might to vanish into the æther, I am held fast. I had no idea he could alter his form, I'd never seen animals before Epimetheus showed them to me, how could I have thought Zeus would contrive such a plan as he had? I feel smothered, I need air. I heave away from my brother and cry out, screaming the names of my mothers into the wind.