

Olympian Confessions
HADES
and
PERSEPHONE

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PART I

LIFE AND DEATH

1

HADES

“Hades, stop them!” Hera’s voice rips through the chaos, sharp and piercing as an arrow through flesh. The earth heaves as I wrench my power upwards, a roaring wall of stone and soil barrelling towards those who have come to destroy us. Having grown paranoid beyond reason, our father, Cronus, has summoned together his siblings, the primordial Titans. Cronus swallowed my siblings and myself the moment we were born; afraid that we would threaten his authority and only Zeus was spared. Zeus is the youngest of us and was protected by our mother, Rhea. He is the one who freed us and consequently created the very circumstance our father feared. We follow him in honor of our liberation from that dark prison and we have agreed to make him our King if we are successful in this war. Now we battle the Titans to gain our sovereignty, fighting for the very right to exist. Zeus rains lightning from the heavens and I struggle against the blinding light to see my opponents, who only appear in alternating flashes of light and dark. The seas crash around us, raging to boiling point as Poseidon thrashes against his foes.

Shrapnel bursts around me as a boulder collides with the ground, crushing a Titan about to bring down his fists upon my spine. I plunge my power

into the Earth, spiraling it up and around, snatching up Titans close by and hurling them into the roiling oceans. The waves conspire, dragging them beneath the water; caging them where they might languish in torment, their immortality forbidding their demise. Some of the Titans have sided with us, fighting by our side against the tyranny of Cronus, but most follow my father, struggling viciously against us.

Demeter forges vines from the ground, using them to strangle any who come within reach of her, subduing them so they cannot move or breathe. A few lose their heads from the force of the constriction. I rub my own throat, conscious that if I surprised her I could be the recipient of such actions. There is no death among us, but there are worse things in this world than death. Every injury that occurs will slow someone down, forcing them to fall back and heal. Our only hope is that we can deal out enough damage to weaken them sufficiently to contain them before they rise up again.

My siblings and those fighting with us all wear gold sashes, to help distinguish us from the Titans in my father's battalions. The years of battle have left our distinctive color stained by dirt and blood, barely visible in the chaos. The shrieks of fury and sound of thunder are overwhelming and I battle on, hoping that soon the end will come. Ensnared in this ritual of slaughter, I focus on breathing, in and out, not allowing myself to become distracted by the hot spatter of blood or the raging limbs that aim to remove my head from my body.

A torrent of fire races towards me and I am knocked breathless to the ground by the small, fierce body of my sister, Hestia. The eldest of us all, she is sweet and quiet by nature, but even she must tap into her skills as a warrior if she ever is to find peace. The heat makes my eyes water and I feel the flesh down my arm and back begin to bubble. Her eyes flash with power and flames erupt from her fingertips, scouring the very flesh off the one who had attacked us. I know none of their names for we flew almost immediately into battle when we were freed from the darkness of my father's belly. The

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scent of ash and smoke fills my nose, clouding my lungs. I press down the urge to cough knowing that any wasted moment could mean the defeat of my family. I scramble across the heaving ground, fighting on, forging ever forward into the landscape of war. Hands close around my head from behind and a sick twist leaves me limp and unseeing, the agony of separated bone searing through my spine.

I BURST AWAKE. SWEAT COATS MY SKIN and the air scrapes against my lungs. I suck in deep breaths despite the acute discomfort, using the sensation to bring myself back to reality. The silk fabric enclosing my body feels too tight and I untangle myself from the bed. The icy feel of the marble floors against my feet a welcome relief. I am safe. The Titanomache, the Great War that nearly destroyed us all, is over. My father and those who stood with him have been locked in Tartarus, the darkest and deepest part of the Underworld, for millennia. Now we are the rulers of the known world, the Olympians, Gods of immense power. Yet, even now I cannot look upon the flames of Phlegethon, that which contains the dark realm Tartarus, without remembering the flames of that battle.

I run a hand over my arm where the physical scar of the flame has long since healed, but in my dreams the vicious burning still remains. I splash water from an urn onto my face, hoping the freshness will drive away the last of the dream. The nightmare, I correct. Even now, thousands of years after we succeeded in taking power from the Titans, I cannot escape the dreams. I take a moment to survey my room. It is stark and black, composed of marble floors and walls with a bed too large for a single person. I am alone and have been so for many thousands of years, but I have created my home in the guise of a place that has a large family. The last time I shared proper companionship

was when I dwelt within the belly of my father amongst my siblings. Since the end of the Titanomache, I have resided in the Underworld serving as the Guardian of Tartarus to ensure that the Titans never rise again, never challenge Olympian rule. In order to do so I have given up many things, but such things are worth the security of my family. So I tell myself, at least.

A shudder glides up my spine as I shake the images of chaos from my mind. Honestly, I am not entirely alone; not the alone that comes from lack of physical proximity to others at least. Since Prometheus created man I have become the Guardian of Souls as well. The first death brought forth Thanatos, the Collector of Souls and the Guardian of the Doors of Death. He frees the mortals from their suffering and Hermes, the Psychopompos, brings the souls to me. We three are the Keepers of Death, the Collector, the Guide and the Caretaker. They are a great comfort to me, but such intermittent companionship leaves me desiring more. Duty does not console loneliness, no matter how I might try to convince myself that it does.

2

HADES

“I am *not* dead!” The cry rings out, one that has been repeated many times before by many others. I join Thanatos and Charon, the Ferryman in Erebus, where the souls await the ferry that takes them properly into the realm. Souls sometimes do not understand that they have moved on without their bodies and require some convincing to cooperate. Thanatos guides them over the River Styx and across the outer borders of the realm, but Charon is responsible for safely transporting them across the River Acheron.

The rich scent of water and earth permeates the air, thick with moisture. I inhale slowly and prepare myself to deal with the rambunctious spirit. Charon has dealt with them in the past, but after a few thousand protests he started to tune them out and his patience runs thinner with every century.

“But you are, now get in the boat.” Charon stands with thin arms crossed over a slim torso, staring down the frantic soul.

“No!” The spirit shouts. “I am not dead.” Spirits, shades, souls, whatever name they go by, tend to have a profound transitional period after death. They quite easily accept leaving their body, until they

arrive in the realm where they will be judged for the choices they made in life.

This spirit in particular still maintains a faded appearance of his mortal body, bearing flaxen hair and gray eyes. He is making a valiant attempt at appearing brave, chewing a trembling lip and clutching his fists firmly together in front of his belly. Fear radiates off him like the stench of a carcass left too long in the sun. He struggles to raise his eyes to meet my gaze, succeeding for only a fraction of a second before his head drops once more.

“You are in the Underworld,” I reason, “so you must either be dead or an intruder to my realm.”

I can see the desire to flee almost overwhelm him, a shiver rippling from his toes to the top of his head. Until souls get used to being without a body, they behave much as they would if they were still in possession of one. You can see non-existent muscles bunch in preparation to fight or flee; sweat breaks across a brow; cheeks flush red with blood.

“I am the son of Gods,” he insists. “I should not be here, I should be immortal.” He speaks slowly and with great deliberation.

This claim is not uncommon, given that the males of Olympus have rather prolific affairs and consequently a plethora of demigod children roaming the earth. It is far too much effort to keep track of things in the mortal world and most of the time I only become aware of individuals or events when they arrive at my own doors. Honestly, the apocalypse could occur up there and I wouldn't know until all the souls came for processing.

I request the information of his parentage and find him to be a son of Zeus and a nymph named Aegina. are vulnerable to death as their lives depend upon a single source in nature. This prevents their children from actually achieving immortality, which I convey to the spirit.

He staggers back, nearly toppling a line of waiting shades. I take

a deep breath, willing myself to be calm. Immortals are not very even tempered by nature, but I have cultivated patience by necessity since my emotions are so intimately connected to the realm. If I become agitated, that energy spreads out and agitates the souls. I cannot allow the souls in my care to suffer because I lack control.

I summon two dæmons, earth spirits that have pledged their service to the Underworld, and have them escort the soul onto the boat. He struggles against Pamphilos and Aeschylus, but they restrain him easily. The other souls pile into the boat behind him and Charon ferries them all over Acheron. The rushing black water is infused with all of the misery of the mortal world. It drains away into the depths of Gaia where it is cleansed. We'd rather not have any souls topple overboard and be cleansed away along with the waters, so restraints are sometimes necessary.

I assess the situation carefully, no God has come to intervene for him, as they sometimes do for their favorites, so it seems I'm free to Judge him as I see fit. The spirit is muttering about how he needs to go home, how his family and kingdom need him. I take another deep breath and set out to root out the core of him, the part not crippled by fear.

"They will manage," I assert, "it is the nature of death and succession. If you have raised your family well they will care for your kingdom." I opt to take him straight to Judgement and have the dæmons carry him up the stairs and settle him across from me at a long stone table. I unfurl his tapestry. These tapestries are woven by the Moiræ, the Fates, and record all of the choices made by mortals during their lives. Through those choices I can determine whether they should spend their eternities in the realms of Elysium, Asphodel or Tartarus. These three realms are the holders of Paradise, Peace and Punishment, respectively.

 Aecus' most notable moment on the tapestry is when he had been

selected as an adjudicator for the Olympians. Only mortals considered to be just and fair above all others are generally selected for such a role. An idea kindles and I give it a moment to flare to life. I pour Aeacus a cup of wine, the crimson liquid enchanted so that he can taste it. The fizzy texture of the enchantment tickles my throat, but it stokes the little fire. After a few sips of the drink I can see Aeacus' cheeks flush and his shoulders relax.

"I'm often running behind on Judgements, due to the vast number of souls and only myself to decide their eternities. If my kin saw fit to use you as an adjudicator, I wonder if you might be willing to do the same for me. If you, and others like you, would consent to forestall Elysium then I would employ you as a Judge of the Underworld."

Aeacus chokes briefly on the wine as he takes a large gulp. It fortifies him, allowing fear to clear so his choice can be made without extraneous emotions clouding his judgement. "It would be an honor to be of service to the Gods once more."

"Then we are agreed?" He nods and I bind the last threads of his tapestry in gold to claim him for myself. "I will have the dæmons set you up with your own quarters in the Palace and while I search for others to assist, you may begin your study of Judgement."

3

HADES

Hermes lets out a low chuckle, swirling a cup of nectar in a pewter goblet. We are on a rare break, lounging in the Great Hall of the Palace. The expansive room is detailed in black marble with a cavernous ceiling that holds glowing crystals for light. It can comfortably hold about three hundred people, but on most occasions it holds no more than two or three of us. Upon this occasion, it is only Hermes and I sitting at the long table that fills the center of the room.

“They’ve started on your temple, but they tremble as they work. I suspect they fear you might rise out of the Earth and punish them for laying the stonework improperly.” Hermes’ mischievous eyes glitter with humor against a pale face and black curls.

I cannot help the sigh that releases in a huff of breath. “They wouldn’t need to fear me if they were just decent people.” I mutter into my drink, swirling the sweet, fruity liquid over my tongue before setting down the cup. The emptiness of the room amplifies the clacking sound of pewter against stone.

“They look to us for guidance in morality,” he reminds me. “It’s a wonder that any of them make it to Elysium at all. They are right

to fear you.” He stretches his arms above his head, leaning his brow forward so his black curls bounce carelessly. Whipping his head back he sprawls out in the chair like a dog in front of a hearth. “I challenge you to name one of our kin that has not committed some travesty that would get a mortal barred from paradise.”

“Well, Hestia never leaves her hearth at Olympus, so perhaps her.” My eldest sister is the rightful heir to the Olympian throne, but she, like the rest of us, agreed to Zeus’ ascension during the Titanomache. She’s seemed content to tend the hearth of Olympus and has lived out her days in relative peace since then. “Otherwise I can think of none, unless there were some new Gods born that no one told me about.”

“Actually,” Hermes swallows down the last of the nectar in his cup, “there is one.” Of course there would have been an Olympian born and I am not informed. Clearly I am not deemed important enough to alert when familial events such as this occurs. A spike of irritation flares in my belly and the sensation must have been obvious on my face because Hermes throws up his hands in a defensive posture. “Demeter has kept the poor girl locked up since her birth, even I have only recently discovered she exists.”

It is exceptionally uncommon for any deity to go unknown. Traditionally they flaunt themselves, exposing their names and gifts to the mortal world and one another as soon as possible. I’m not particularly knowledgeable about Demeter. I took up my place in the Underworld after the Titanomache, and she tends to ignore the other Olympians with every fiber of her being so we have never had the opportunity to become close. I know only that she gifted mankind with the knowledge of Agriculture, and that she has one other child, a Horse-God named Arion, who was fathered by Poseidon, despite her protests. I would imagine that this new daughter is fathered by Zeus since it seems unlikely she ever let Poseidon get near her again.

“How are the mortals to know the name of this new Goddess if Demeter will not even expose her to her own family?” Demeter is denying the poor girl her entire purpose. The Gods must serve the mortals and the mortals must know their names and worship them.

“I highly doubt that Demeter cares, she has always kept to herself.” Hermes heaves a sigh, rubbing at his ears. “Duty calls, and I mean that literally. Zeus is making my ears ring.” Hermes is the Messenger of the Gods in addition to the role he plays in guiding the souls. It’s a tiresome duty, but if he shirks it he finds no rest from his father’s demands.

Hermes waves at me as his winged sandals whisk him away to Olympus. I take another few moments for myself, finishing the last of the nectar. My curiosity has been piqued by this new immortal. Despite her chronological age being quite young, she will be physically an adult by now in both mind and body as immortals have an expedited growth pattern in their early days. I wonder if this new Olympian will be any different than the others. I cannot bring myself to hope that she might treat me in a positive manner, or even consider meeting me for that matter. Hope allows you to be vulnerable and vulnerability allows you to be hurt. I don’t want to be hurt anymore. I shall have to wait and see whether this cloistered Goddess manages to avoid the carelessness and cruelty that plagues so many of our kind.

4

PERSEPHONE

The rich green grass of the meadow cushions my body as I sprawl on the ground, swimming in self-pity. A cacophony of laughter wars against bird calls for who can draw the most attention. I draw my hands up and press them against my ears, seeking out a moment of peace. The wind tugs at my hair, teasing locks the color of hazelwood to dance in the breeze.

I breathe, slowly and deliberately, inhaling the scent of green. It is the sort of scent you can only find when you are surrounded by nature, wrapped in a cocoon of delicate leaves, petals and blades of grass. It all lends itself to enhance the feeling of being part of something much larger than yourself. I am a part of nothing else, so it is a comforting feeling. The meadow is my only solace, my only escape and even there I am under guard. My mother has assigned nearly a dozen nymphs to keep an eye on me when she is not around. Nymphs have always been the caretakers of young Gods, though some are more responsible than others. I flip over on the grass and burrow my face into it, squeezing my eyes tightly shut in a pointless effort to stop the tears that leak out between the lashes.

“Daughter of Demeter!” The epithet rings out, snapping through the chatter and startles me. I hastily wipe my eyes before the nymphs can see the tears. Daughter of Demeter. Sometimes I feel like that is all I will ever be. All of my siblings have wonderful titles; Lord of Light, Goddess of Wisdom, Smith of the Gods; but I am nothing. When I was first born I questioned the nymphs constantly about who was in my family and the purposes they fulfilled. My mother became uncomfortable with my curiosity when she found out and the nymphs have been silent on the subject since then. My days have been a waste of an existence, doing nothing but pretending to be pleased with my complete lack of freedom. I want to go to the mortal world, to help people as my mother does, but I have never been allowed there, nor even allowed to ask questions about it. For reasons she has never shared with me, my mother gets very agitated, almost angry, when I ask about things beyond the small sliver of the world she has given me to enjoy. I cannot even mention my father, Zeus, without provoking the same reaction.

“My Lady, what flowers would you like us to gather for your mother’s temple?” Alexis inquires, tossing her golden brown hair over her shoulder. It is a casual movement that is characteristic of nymphs. They are prone to flaunting, twirling and prancing, anything that draws the eye. They mellow with age and become more reserved over time, but my nymphs are still young.

Flowers for mother’s temples are the only reason I am generally allowed as far from her sight as the meadow. I grow them for her, the nymphs gather them and distribute them in the mortal world. The mortals think the blossoms are a gift from my mother, but they are brought into existence by myself and by Gaia. The Earth Goddess, my great-grandmother has been my teacher since I first set foot upon her, and she is the only other immortal I have ever actually met. Technically I have not physically met her, but I have heard her voice and felt her

power as she reaches out to me. I mentioned hearing the primordial Goddess' voice only once to my mother, and promptly learned never to do so again. I am unsure if it is only my mother or the other Olympians as well, but mention of the Gods that ruled before them seems to be a controversial topic.

"Perhaps myrtle, I will grow both white and purple ones," I tell Alexis. I enjoy creating them and watching them grow, but I want more.

Alexis grins so widely I am almost afraid that her face might crack. "Wonderful, my Lady." I suppress a sigh and try to make myself savor the interaction. It is shallow and repetitive as is almost every other interaction I have with them, but it is the only opportunity for conversation I have with someone who is not my mother and who I can physically see. I take a deep breath, digging my fingers into the grass.

'Gaia, be with me.' My thoughts are barely a whisper in my mind, but I can feel her energy brush against me. The energy coaxes my head to turn until I see Chloe sitting in the grass alone. She is the quietest of the nymphs that guard me and oftentimes can be found practicing her craft. She is quite talented at coaxing seedlings into life, but after that loses all influence. I crawl over the grass, ignoring the green stains forming on the pale gold fabric of my gown. I sprawl on the cushiony green next to her and she turns startled soil-brown eyes on me.

"Come help me grow the myrtle, Chloe." She looks intensely nervous, but bobs her head, swishing the silvery blond hair. I call upon Gaia and pick up the myrtle seeds that form beneath my fingers before tossing them across the field. Chloe breathes very carefully and spreads her fingers in the grass, muttering to herself as tiny leaves poke above the grass where the seeds had fallen. She goes red faced with the effort, but they do not grow any taller. I smile and pat her shoulder. "Rest now, you have done your part and I thank you for it."

A sweep of power sends the myrtles shooting into the air, glossy

leaves and fragrant blossoms bursting into being. The nymphs shriek with excitement and scamper around collecting the flowers. They twirl as they do so, forming a dance and moving between the plants and one another in an intricate pattern.

“Persephone, my dear.” I whip my head around as my mother materializes in the meadow. She draws me up and into a bone-crushing hug, pressing me into her ample bosom. Her golden skin glows like the midday sun and is just as warm. Her wheat gold hair tickles my cheek as I squirm.

I wiggle free and smooth down my hair. “Mother,” I paste a smile onto my face, “I selected myrtle today, and I hope it pleases you.” She nods her head and I immediately prepare to follow her to Olympus. She never takes the time to speak to the nymphs, but rather appears only to collect me and return me to my Olympian confinement.

I shake away the tingling sensation of traveling through the æther. Our private rooms in our Temple are alight with gold, white marble and vases of ripe wheat. There are fountains and streams of cool water in neat, straight paths in the marble that give the only sound. There’s a small hearth that perpetually smells of baking bread and herbs, which fills my senses with delight.

Mother and I sit across from one another on plush cushions and she instructs me to relay the events of my day to her, though they are little different from every other day she has had me do this. Each word is a pinprick in my chest, adding to the feeling of discontent. She nods at the end of my story and leaves me to my own devices as she disappears into her own quarters. I hug my knees to my chest and push down the despair; the longing to be anywhere but here. Can’t she see how unhappy I am? I want to be in the mortal world, assisting them by bringing fruitful trees and flowers touched by the sun, but unfortunately it does not seem to matter what I want.