

Iris

Iris was not a typical goddess. She didn't sit all high and mighty on a golden throne on a mountain, far above the people she ruled. To be fair, she didn't have a throne. She couldn't, even if she wanted to. No. Her job was delivering messages, being the bridge between the gods and the world. But not the important messages--those went to Hermes. Nobody ever really understood her. It wasn't that people were mean, but they treated her like a pest they had given up on swatting and just tolerated. She felt as if she just buzzed in their peripheral, always noticed but never enjoyed. Since the other gods rarely left Olympus, they did not understand her empathy for humans or her enjoyment of the mortal world. Only her father Zeus ever really made her feel cared about. He gave her tasks so she would feel important, had her interfere with the humans to serve his purposes. But even then, he had so many children, he couldn't pay much attention to her. But, sometimes, when he gave her a job to do that required she go down to earth, he would make it rain, just a bit, so that the mortals could see her rainbow and she would be seen, at least by them.

Back and forth all day long, Iris never complained. Most of the time, she really loved her job. She felt lucky. Most gods didn't even get to spend any time on earth, never mind half of each day. Iris also felt lucky for another reason: her rainbow was infinitely smooth and malleable and helped her whenever she needed it. It listened to her and kept her company on her journey between earth and Olympus. It even helped her organize her thoughts and kept her life in the clouds and her persona on earth separate. She had a hard time with remembering things: she tried, but human lives

moved too fast and she was always about 100 years behind on culture and references. Humans always called her an old soul, which is funny, because on Olympus everyone treats her like an annoying kid.

After finishing up a job, Iris would spend time on earth with demigods, usually cousins or siblings. She felt more like their equal than her family in Olympus. They understood earth and all its wonders. She tried to avoid directly interacting with actual mortals unless she was instructed to by Zeus. Although most gods were easily recognizable by the mortals, Iris had to disguise herself as a mortal or a demigod, otherwise she wouldn't be able to stay on her earth as much as she does. Zeus told her that anonymity was imperative to her job. The deceit left her uncomfortable and uneasy around the mortals, so she preferred the company of demigods, with whom she could be honest and relate.

Iris was supposed to leave in the goddess Ersa's morning dew and be back by Artemis' nightfall. If she fell asleep on earth, she might begin to shift back to her natural splendour and be revealed. If a mortal sees her completely shifted back to her natural state, they will die. Iris always felt that she could still spend a night on earth, as long as she remained only with her demigod friends. But Zeus always insisted. He knew that she would feel really guilty and remorseful for the rest of her life if she accidentally killed a mortal. And for a goddess, the rest of your life is a very long time. Iris never really understood this. Although she was a young goddess, she wasn't as juvenile and undisciplined as the other gods made her out to be. She *knew* she could keep her focus for one night.

Iris' favorite assignment was doing deliveries in Athens. She did all the deliveries in a neighborhood at the Northwest corner of Athens, where Athena had less insight and control. Zeus instructed her to do this and keep an eye out on the little wooden house that's been stained instead of painted at the end of the street. On her first day, she asked the first person she saw, a hunched over woman in her fifties with muted grey eyes. She looked too young to look as old as she did. Her hair was so grey it was white and whatever Iris saw in her eyes made Iris think that, despite the fact that she was immortal, this woman was somehow older than herself. "Could you point me in the direction of the stained wooden house in this neighborhood?" "Stained wooden house, more like a stain on this neighborhood. Over there" she said with a jerk of her hand, thumb lazily sticking out in the direction of a side street. As Iris got closer, she realized the street name had been crossed out and a crude message about her father was written there in its place. As she got even closer, she understood why Zeus was so concerned about this place. Everything felt muted, colorless. It was as if all the magic and warmth that radiated off of Iris was getting pulled into a vacuum. She even felt her senses dull a bit, as if the neighborhood had to make sure that not a single thing was sharp. "How do people live here," she whispered to nobody in particular.

"Oh, we manage," interjected a young voice. Whipping around to the source of the comment, Iris suddenly understood what happened to all the lightness around her. This girl took it all. She had long, strawberry blonde hair, emerald green eyes, and rainbow shoes. Relieved to finally see something as bright and colorful as Iris was used to, she let out a breath she didn't know she had been holding. If her black nail polish

hadn't been chipped and her hair hadn't been all over the place, Iris could have sworn she was a wisp disguised as a human. But Iris knew that was wrong and had to continue her facade, as no wisp would be seen with a piece of hair out of place.

“Sorry, I didn't mean-”

“I know what you meant. You probably just came from some palace in the center of Athens with rows of olive trees and green grass. You probably were bored. You probably just thought to yourself, ‘huh, I've never been there, that far from the sea before, let's check that out.’ So you came here and realized there is literally nothing to do and being here is making you so tired and unhappy that you won't even have been here for more than five minutes despite it taking you an hour to get here. Am I close?”

Iris had no idea what to say. That wasn't at all true, but what excuse could she give for her being there that wasn't any worse than that?

“I'm actually here for my new job, delivering parcels and news and such. Get to know people.” Maybe a half-truth would be the best option.

From then on Iris and the girl, Phoebe, spent time together every day. It really was Iris' favorite assignment. She wished she could say she missed spending her afternoons with her demigod cousins, or watching the sunset sitting on her rainbow, or that she even missed sitting on comfortable thrones with a never ending supply of ambrosia and nectar. But she really couldn't. She had so much fun with Phoebe. She didn't miss anything. Only at night, when she went home, did she miss something. Every once and a while she begged Zeus for permission to get a house on earth. She tried to tell him it would help her cover to live there full time. But every time he saw right

through her and refused, slamming his fist into his throne and starting a thunderstorm on earth. Now eight months had passed since she met Phoebe. Iris wasn't sure what she was supposed to be looking out for, but she knew she never wanted it to happen. If her assignment ended, she wouldn't even get to say goodbye to Phoebe before her next assignment began.

Iris had never actually been to Phoebe's house, always making an excuse not to. She knew it wasn't fair to lie more than she had to, but she would feel weird not inviting Phoebe to her own house. Since that was not possible, she always made up an excuse at the last minute. Until today. Now she was in front of Phoebe's decrepit stain house, being invited in, just like Zeus instructed her to do. Except, looking at Phoebe's excited twirling of the hands and broad smile, she didn't feel like she did a good job. She felt like a liar. The door opened with a creak and the first thing Iris saw was a sleeping dog. There was a flea on its ear, and when it heard the door creak it opened one eyelid to see who it was. But suddenly its eyes shot open and it bared its teeth, growling at her and crouching into a defensive position. Iris was definitely more frightened than a goddess should be. *Get it together Iris! You'll be fine*, she thought to herself. Even though divine ichor flowed through Iris' veins, she was afraid of what diseases that mangy dog could give her if she managed to get bitten.

"Themis, shoo!" Phoebe instructed.

"Themis, huh, like the Titan?" Iris asked, still half-focused on wherever that dog might be.

"Yeah. We're all named after Titans."

Iris wasn't sure why, but her face fell. She had never really thought about the fact that her name was Phoebe, the same name as the Titan of prophecy.

"Really, why?" Iris asked, dread bubbling in her stomach.

And so, Phoebe launched into the long history of her family hating the gods and begrudging them every little issue in their life. Her great-great-great whatever had been a henchman for the Titan Hyperion and lived in a mansion in the center of Athens, long before Athena was even born. After the rise of the Olympians, her ancestors were exiled to a dead zone, a place without magic where the gods wouldn't have to look at them. Or, rather, couldn't look at them. At least, that was Phoebe's version. Iris would have to verify when she got home.

"Yeah. That's what my grandmother says. I think she's making stuff up. The gods don't care enough to interfere with our lives. There are so many more of us and so few of them. At least that's what my dad says." Iris was shocked. She never knew anyone felt that way about the Olympians. "Anyways," Phoebe continued, "I don't really care that much. I could never hate them. Zeus gives us rain, Hera taught us how to harvest before the winter, and Iris gives us beautiful rainbows."

Days passed, and Iris couldn't get rid of the knot in her stomach. What if Phoebe knew she was a goddess? She said she didn't hate the gods, but maybe she would feel different if she knew. Could Iris lose her best friend? She tried to put the thought out of her mind. But every time she saw Phoebe, she felt guilty, like she was lying. So naturally, of course, Iris began to avoid her.

“Iris!” Zeus boomed. Before he could even blink, she stood before him. He forgot how fast she could be when she actually *wanted* to be in Olympus. Zeus took a moment to examine his daughter, as he always did. He had always had a soft spot for Iris. His awkward daughter, whose hair and eyes always changed to match her emotions. It made it impossible for her to lie. Not that she would want to anyways. She was his most earnest, empathetic child. That last time she lied was when Heracles, one of her closest confidants and siblings, had gone on yet another forbidden journey. Then, when he had looked at his daughter and asked her where he was, she snapped her eyes closed and hastily repeated, “He’s just on a walk. He’s just on a walk” like a mantra. But even if she had been a better liar, her hair suddenly changing a sickly green would have given her away. Her usually curly, rainbow hair was limp and dull, mousy brown. He had never seen her look so deflated and washed out, even when he was upset with her. At least then her hair was yellow with embarrassment or dark red with anger. “Iris, what’s wrong?” he asked, real, genuine concern coloring his usually stony face.

“What? Wrong? Me? Nothing,” Iris squeaked. Even on her own behalf, she really was a terrible liar.

“Okay. Why don’t you go to earth and hang out with your little friend, Phoebe?” Instead of responding, Iris stood with her mouth hanging open and her eyes, which had shifted to bright red with alarm, were so wide they almost bulged out of her head. “Don’t look so surprised. Iris, come on, I am all knowing. I see everything. I know about your little rebel friend,” he said, surprisingly calm.

“She’s not a rebel, she doesn’t--”

“I know. I know,” he interrupted. “You don’t have to tell me. I know. She’s a good person. And being on Earth made you so happy. Go spend time with your friend, it’s been too long.”

“I can’t. I can’t be friends with her and keep secrets from her. Especially now, knowing how her family feels about the Olympians.”

“Okay. Then why don’t you go hang out with some of your cousins on earth. I’m sure Helen or Theseus miss you. It’s been weeks since you’ve seen them.”

“I don’t want to go back to Earth. I mean,” she added quickly, “unless you instruct me to. For a task. I can’t. I’ll feel too guilty.”

“I understand,” said Zeus with more warmth than Iris was expecting. “But, just because you don’t want to keep being friends with Phoebe, which would be fine with me, you shouldn’t cut off the other things in your life that you enjoy. I love having you here, but I would be remiss if you stayed here, in this castle, lonely for the rest of eternity if there were things elsewhere that truly made you happy.”

Iris really wanted to go back, to see Phoebe and pretend like nothing was wrong. She knew Phoebe would ask her where she went, but she wouldn’t press. She would just accept that her friend was back and life would go back to normal. But Iris could not lie anymore. She never wanted to lie again. So she didn’t. She didn’t go back. She didn’t even say goodbye. Iris knew if she went to say goodbye, tried to make up one more lie about why she could never return, that she wouldn’t be able to. There was no way she could look into Phoebe’s eyes after having been gone so long and lie. So she

didn't. Her duty was to deliver messages, to go back and forth, and interfere when instructed to. She wasn't meant to play mortal. So she filled her days spending time with Helen or Theseus or Heracles. And she spent her nights alone, cooped up in her room or on her rainbow, *not* crying, just looking over the world and trying to not imagine how content she *could* have been.

Phoebe

I've never really thought much about what was out *there*. My life was *here*. My family had always spent so much time thinking about up *there* or over *there*. I've had uncles and aunts and parents wither and waste away from all the hate. But I never let myself. Life *here* can be pretty alright if you stop focusing on *there*.

Or at least, it was until I met her--Iris. Suddenly, there was no "alright" or "okay." There was only great and terrible. *Here* was suddenly great when she was here, and then just as suddenly *terrible* when she left. When she left, my mind turned to thoughts of *there*. I'm not sure where *there* is, wherever she goes, only that I want to be there too. She's turned me into "Ms. Sit-around-and-wait-for-you." But I guess it's better to have someone to sit around and wait for.

When it's time for Iris to leave, she just pops up from whatever we are doing, like Themis does when someone sounds the dog whistle. I'm not sure what signals to her that it's time to leave, but all she ever says is a hasty, "Sorry, I gotta go!" Then she gives me a hug and bursts out of there like a tornado. In her wake she leaves me, always confused and sad, already missing her and the half of myself she took with her.

Now I miss that hasty half hug and empty feeling. It's been 42 days since I've seen Iris. 42 sunrises and sunsets wasted. I can't stop asking myself: Where is she? Why hasn't she come back? Is she okay? Why did I never push her to tell me her address? We spent every day together. I can't stop feeling like my life has been cut into three parts: "Before-Iris," "Iris," and "After-Iris." When I think about before-Iris, I don't

really understand what was wrong with that person. She seemed so, I don't know, content. But, now that I am After-Iris, I cannot just act like my Before-Iris self. Nothing feels the same as it used to. Everytime I round a corner I swear I just saw her. I can't get back to my routine. I can't stop wondering where she is or what I did wrong.

I don't even have anyone to ask about her. I didn't realize it when I was with her, but I know so little about her, and she knows everything about me. I mean, I know some things. I know that she seems to color her hair differently every morning. I know she dresses brightly, and seems strangely enthusiastic about rainbows. I know that when she hears a song she likes she closes her eyes and taps her foot but it's slightly off beat. I know that when she's in a conversation she listens with her body turned towards the other person, as if she's trying to demonstrate that she's taking it all in. But I don't know her last name. Or where she lives. Or anyone else who knows her. I asked around the neighborhood, but everyone seems to think I'm making her up. Maybe I am. Does it matter? If no one else remembers something, did it really happen? Was she an apparition? Did a witch come and cast a spell on me, trying to make me go insane?

I've decided that 42 days was enough missing and wanting and wasting time. Day 43 is going to be so much better. I'm not going to think about Iris once today. Or, okay, not again, starting now. I'm going to spend the day running the cart for my brother. That means I'll take his cart into Athens and try to sell all of the parcels at three in the afternoon. Whatever isn't sold, I take back here and return them to him. At least I'll be kept busy until three.

My journey to Athens was uneventful enough. It's a Wednesday, which means the products will probably sell slowly, since most consumers will wait until Friday for big purchases. This isn't so bad. I can keep occupied talking to passerbyers and vendors and haggling with entitled old men. I even see some friends and they stop to talk to me. On my journey home, I feel a sense of alrightness that I had not felt since before-Iris. I ponder this as I try to fall asleep. Alrightness is not as intoxicating as I felt with Iris, not as exciting as when I first see her bouncy curls coming at my full force from the corner of my eye, but I can live with it. Alrightness is alright.

Heracles

Heracles, despite all his bravado and grandeur, felt strange. Not specifically today--today was not an unusual day--but just in general. He got so much attention he did not want, so much honor and esteem he didn't deserve. Growing up, all he ever desired was to watch the sunsets with his sister Iris on her rainbow. After she finished her daily tasks, she would stop by his house and whisk him away to look at the sky together and talk about their day. If they waited long enough, they looked at the constellations, imagining what theirs would ultimately look like.

Heracles also enjoyed playing with wooden swords and bow and arrows. His siblings always insisted that they defeat imaginary beasts and save some imaginary princess. But Heracles didn't want to do that. Why couldn't they just play? Why did it have to be a rescue mission or a way to bring honor to themselves and their names? Heracles spent his infancy on earth, so the closest to Olympus he had ever gotten was on Iris' rainbow. He was surrounded by demigod cousins, each of whom dreamt of growing up and making a name for themselves as Greece's most dashing hero and being taken up to Olympus to win some medal, only to be dumped back on earth with that thing weighing down their neck until it snapped. He had seen so many others needlessly die because of their hubris, just trying to get name recognition. He wasn't sure what his dream was, but it certainly wasn't that.

As Heracles got older, he became too strong to live on earth, and too strong to play with his cousins and siblings. So Zeus took him to Olympia, without asking how *he* felt. While Heracles barely recognized anyone, everyone seemed to know who *he* was.

They had big smiles for him and even bigger expectations. He had hoped coming to Olympus would mean he got less attention. He was a demigod surrounded by gods. Why should they focus on him? But that was not at all the case. They all seemed to have a vested interest in training him and modeling him in their own image, regardless of his own desires. Everyone but Iris. She was really his favorite person. When he grew up, occasionally she would convince everyone he was on some honor-seeking mission when he just wanted to be alone. He would come back and everyone would look at him, pride shining in their eyes, waiting for stories of heroics. They would ask him if he tried some specific move they had taught him, or if it was a beast they had seen before, or if the King from that town had been so grateful he had offered to abdicate the throne to Heracles and give him one of their daughters to be his first wife. He always said yes.

When Heracles was 25 years old, he went on a mission. Go fight a beast and save a girl and a town to win glory. It was the same as all the other missions. And just as all missions began, he tried to refuse his father and not go on the mission. There was nothing exceptional about this mission, except for what happened once he got there: he lost. The beast killed him. He died. Heracles is still fuzzy on the details, but he knows that. He suddenly felt something sharp pierce his chest, and the poison quickly reached his heart. He remembers passing out, or falling asleep, or, technically, dying. Just as suddenly, he remembers waking up in Olympus to the sound of his mother crying. He opened his eyes, blinded by the bright lights for just a moment before his eyes adjusted, and saw basically every god and demigod in all of Greece. He tried to speak, but he just began coughing. Suddenly everything was silent and all eyes were on him. After a

moment, Zeus cried out, "I knew he was too strong to die!" That was the moment Heracles found out he was even less like the other demigods than he thought. He was immortal, and they weren't. All his friends and family he grew up with, short of Iris, would eventually die, but he wouldn't. But he still wasn't a god. He really had nowhere to go, nowhere to belong.