

Excerpt from Herald
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Chapter 1

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Must I follow custom and tradition? Among storytellers, custom and tradition demand pleading to a Muse before telling a tale. I suppose I should follow tradition and seek a Muse's aid, but I'm not certain I trust the Muses. These beings in question—these goddesses who inspire creativity—happen to be my sisters. Their views of my life are not without opinion or criticism.

Also, which Muse do I consult? Thalia, the Muse of comedy? Melpomene, the Muse of tragedy? Perhaps Calliope, the Muse of epics, should help me in my task. My life, epic? That's an arrogant and uncomfortable thought. I'm merely sharing my memories, partly from boredom, partly from curiosity. Men make much of passing on history and knowledge, and perhaps I've some to pass on as well. Ah, but that in itself is an arrogant thought.

I do have at least one specific reason to share my thoughts. Others tell tales of me, and in these tales, the details my life are so mangled that I scarcely recognize myself in them. My very existence is absurd enough without rude embellishments. Then again, perhaps I'm being unkind to the poor creatures who tell stories of me. After all, anyone who says it's simple to weave tales is either ignorant or lying.

I've already disappointed the Muses by abandoning verse traditions, so beloved among their human poets. "Straightforward words are for merchant lists," the Muse Erato told me scornfully. As I'm often called the god of merchants, I fail to see Erato's disdain for how I've chosen to tell my story (though anyone who prefers merchant lists would no doubt scoff at a story like mine). I will, however, appease my sisters by adopting a semblance of delicacy. The customary language of poets is ill-suited to my rather coarse nature, but I'll keep my rudeness curbed.

I'll also accept aid from Mnemosyne, goddess of memory and mother of the Muses. My memory is rather poor at times, and many names and events lie before me. With Mnemosyne's help, I'll attempt to remember the details that have merit.

The Muses have also told me that storytellers must begin their stories with the births of their subjects. I hardly feel that my birth is very interesting. So, purely for the sake of being irksome, I'll begin my story in the middle,

which in and of itself is actually a beginning, and an end, of sorts. Or, because I'm starting in the middle, doesn't that make the middle the beginning?

The middle of my story depicts my nature rather swiftly, which I think makes it an ideal beginning. Before plays, actors courteously describe the settings and main players, so audience members can decide whether to commit themselves to the story. I'm certain my sisters approve of *that* courtesy, at least. Storytellers begin by saying that Odysseus was a clever man, or that Herakles was strong and brave though ill-tempered. Know, then, that the hero of this story is a rather irreverent and absurd god.

Know also that for ease of storytelling, I will tell this tale as if the beings and events in it are long past and long gone, though this isn't true, at least for me. I will tell how twelve gods came together as Olympians to rule over the inhabitants of earth, and I will tell not only how I became one of these gods, but helped others attain their stations. I must approach this story with some patience, for the world changed a great deal from the time of my birth to the time the final twelve Olympians came to power.

So, to the middle of my tale. For those who like to make much of such things, the setting may seem rather astonishing. I must confess, the setting is actually quite ordinary to me. What is ordinary to one is often wondrous to another.

The setting, simply enough, is atop a mountain. Whereas most mountaintops are bare of civilization, this one served as both a home and a seat of council. Concealed by clouds were splendid columns and walls that contained luxurious chambers of gilt and marble, vast porticos and halls, beautiful gardens without equal, and one large structure in particular where a certain group of beings held council. All were within a city, a polis built with as much hard work as any mortal city, but this one was revered solely because it was built by gods.

Formal councils were relatively rare events in Olympus, which is yet another reason I'm beginning my story here. The Olympian council held a trial on the day from which my entire life pivoted. The subject of the trial itself was relatively unremarkable, except in how it displayed my audacity and provided yet another tale for poets to embellish.

The trial was held within the great bouleuterion, the throne room of Olympus. The seats within the room were as varied in appearance as their owners, and the vast stone hearth at the center of the room also served as a throne (of sorts) for humble Hestia, beloved goddess of homes and fires. The thrones were rarely occupied except when council was called, and during trials the room was often crowded with immortal beings of all sorts. The leaders of these beings, holding the thrones of council, were the Olympians. The other immortals present were humbler or otherwise unremarkable in

talent or stature. Gods and their elders, the Titans, all dressed in fine, flowing wools and linens bedecked with sparkling gems, crowded the room in anticipation, their attentions upon the lone figure standing before them.

The figure in question was rather ordinary, humble in appearance, and even somewhat comical compared to the other, more regal beings in the bouleuterion—and I didn't much care what others thought of my appearance. Then, and forever, I resembled a human male somewhere between youth and man, garbed in a humble wool chiton and a rather worn leather belt. I had a light frame with the flat, lean muscles of a shepherd, short brown hair that was as unruly and filled with curls as a ram's, and eyes too blue, really, to belong to a mortal. In addition to my belt and tunic, I wore a rather strange, battered hat—a petasos bearing two small, white wings, one on either side of the crown. My sandals also, absurdly, bore small wings, a pair flanking each ankle. In addition to my attire, I wore a curious expression on my face: a mixture of amusement and bemusement at the scene surrounding me. The expression has been on my face through most of my existence, I'm afraid.

Actually, I *should* have been afraid as I stood there before the hearth, facing the two largest thrones in the room. The other seats lined the walls on either side of me, all surrounded by the murmuring crowd and all but two occupied. One of the empty thrones, a massive seat carved from ebony, was owned by a god almost never seen in Olympus, one that would someday come to abandon his seat of council. The other unoccupied throne was mine, a small, wooden seat at the farthest end of the row to my right—the farthest seat from the two large, gleaming thrones in front of me.

The two largest thrones belonged to the two Olympians who commanded the most respect from me. One was my accuser, the other was my father. There was naught my father could do to help me then—or rather, there was, but I didn't want his help. It would have undone the task I'd completed for him.

No, I wasn't afraid. I needed my wits to preserve my freedom, and I couldn't permit emotions to interfere.

The beings in the room became silent as a commanding female voice broke through the chatter.

"I accuse the herald of murdering the giant Argus, my servant. For this cold and treasonous act, the herald deserves to be cast into Tartarus. Any beings present who disagree with the accusation should step forward and present their claims now."

No one stepped forward, of course, which wasn't surprising. I had very few enemies among the assemblage, but the details of what really happened were fully known by only two beings present. I was one, the other was my father; but as I stated before, he couldn't step forward to defend me without condemning himself. I didn't resent him for this.

The congregation of beings shifted uncomfortably, and some individuals murmured to each other. My gaze darted along the mass of faces and hands, taking in the nuances of gesture and expression. My father looked at no one but me, his face stern yet calm. I longed to tell him to not worry.

My accuser stood next to him before the other magnificent throne, tall, beautiful, and terrifying, as Hera always was. I've known no other being as vengeful as she.

She didn't hold most of my attention, however. That honor belonged to the golden-haired god seated on the other side of my father. To my amusement, the eyes of my half-brother Apollo never wavered from my face. From his eager expression, I think he was trying to anticipate what I was going to do. Apollo needn't have bothered. No one has ever been able to predict my behavior, not even myself. I fought the urge to make rude faces at him.

However, the prospect of being cast into the deep, black pit of Tartarus was not to be faced idly. When one entered Tartarus, one usually stayed there forever.

I stepped forward and looked straight into Hera's eyes.

"No one else can come forward, my queen, for it's true that Argus died because of me," I said calmly.

There were outbursts of disbelief and anger from the circle of beings. My father's expression, however, never changed, and neither did Apollo's.

I heard weeping coming from my left and did hazard a glance at the source. So beautiful that she seemed to glow with golden light, Aphrodite, called the goddess of love, sat on her throne between two more of my half brothers—her lover, the war god Ares, and her husband, Hephaestus, the gentle god of smiths and toil. Hephaestus reached out to lay a consoling hand upon Aphrodite's arm, but she shrugged it away. Perhaps other gods would've felt honored to be wept over by Aphrodite, the most beautiful of beings, but I found her behavior annoying.

Behind her, against the chamber wall, stood another being tearfully regarding my plight—Maia, my mother, as lovely and gentle as spring. *Don't weep, Mother, I thought. There's no need ...*

"He died because of you, herald!" Hera's voice rang out triumphantly, and my gaze shifted back to her. "You admit to this murder!"

"I admit to no murder," I replied in a tone of surprise. "What I said was Argus died because of me."

Hera's eyes narrowed suspiciously. The assemblage was quiet for a moment before renewed murmuring broke out. Apollo sat straighter on his throne, his eagerness to hear more all too apparent. My father's reaction was more subtle. I was certain he was smiling, but his brown beard hid his mouth.

Hera swept her eyes over the crowd briefly before she regarded me again. She didn't trust me. She had reason not to.

“What did Argus die from if not murder?” she asked, her voice admirably calm.

“Boredom,” I replied simply.

In the wake of my statement, there was a long silence in the chamber. Then someone tittered, and someone else sniggered, and soon the entire assemblage rippled with muffled laughter and giggles. I raised my eyebrows at Hera, but I kept my expression solemn.

Hera glared back at me. “Explain,” she snarled impatiently.

“I spent the day as a shepherd, as I often do ...” (Various beings present nodded to each other, smiling. I usually dressed as a shepherd, anyway, so my claim came as no surprise.) “... and I was still in shepherd garb when I happened by your western gardens. I saw an astonishing creature there. I’d heard of Argus, of course, but I’d never met him, and there was no mistaking a giant with eyes covering every bit of his body! Well, the poor giant was very bored, as his only companion was a white calf tethered to a tree. I sought to give him company and entertain him, but I failed miserably. He fell asleep in the middle of the story I was telling. Every one of his eyes closed, if you can believe that, and then he died, poor creature. I didn’t think my story was so boring, but—”

“Enough prattle!” Hera shouted, managing to be heard above the crowd, which was now roaring with laughter. She was so furious (whether at me or at the crowd’s reaction, I don’t know) that she trembled as she pointed at me and said, “You *are* responsible for Argus’ death, murderer!”

“I apologize, my queen,” I said. “I deeply regret the giant’s death, but I didn’t know boring someone to death was considered murder.”

“What of the calf he was guarding, then?” Hera cried as her hands bunched into fists. “Do you deny that you freed the calf?”

“Forgive me, but what else was I to do?” I retorted gently, “The calf’s caretaker was dead, I had to leave the gardens, and I saw no one else close by to tend the calf, so I set it free. I wasn’t going to let the poor beast remain tied there, not knowing when someone would arrive to—”

“You had to leave?” Hera interrupted, narrowing her eyes again. “Why?”

The question was genuinely surprising and (I thought) astonishingly stupid. I frowned at her and in complete seriousness answered, “I had to escort Argus’ soul to the Underworld. It resides there now, in the Elysian Fields.”

The throne room immediately became silent. Of all the Olympians, my powers were the weakest, but I had an ability that only one other being shared, an ability that even gods found unnerving—I could enter and leave all portions of the Underworld completely at will. Only the powerful elder god Hades, lord of the Underworld, could do the same.

Herald

All creatures fear death, but immortals fear it most, for the very idea of death is strange to them. I liked to think then that death didn't frighten me. After all, one of my tasks was to escort the souls of deceased mortals to the Underworld, a task I'm certain no one else would have willingly shared with me.

Hera cleared her throat in the quiet chamber and looked at me sadly. "At least his soul made it to the Elysian Fields," she said. "He should be happy there."

"Yes, my queen," I replied with a bow of my head.

Angry though she was with me, I knew my words comforted Hera somewhat. She was extremely fond of Argus, and the Elysian Fields rivaled the beauty of Olympus itself, despite being contained underground. The fields contained the souls of heroes both great and modest, who dwelt there in complete joy and bliss.

Hera gave me one last, searching look, and then she sighed with apparent acceptance.

"All beings present are now to let their preferences be known," she said. "Those in favor of releasing the herald, cast your pebbles at his feet. Those in favor of condemning the herald should cast their pebbles at mine."

Not a single pebble touched the ivory toes of the goddess. My own feet were soon so covered with pebbles that I was in danger of tripping and toppling over. My winged hat and sandals carried me into the air as laughter and chatter again filled the room. Hovering, I swept a grateful salute to my fellow immortals, who met me with applause. I bowed slightly to excuse myself from the attention and then flew to my mother's side.

Maia laid a gentle hand on my shoulder and kissed my cheek softly, her eyes filled with grateful tears. I didn't have an opportunity to speak to her, however, because two strong hands suddenly grabbed my other shoulder from behind and spun me about.

"Ha!" yelled Apollo, throwing his arms around me in a brotherly hug. "I knew you'd talk your way out of it, Hermes! How could you not, being the most clever of gods?"

I grinned back at my half brother and gently pushed him away. "Peace, brother," I chuckled in a low voice. "Not so loud, else Hera *will* have her vengeance!"

I turned back to my mother, but she'd gone. I wasn't surprised.

Most gods and Titans had already left the chamber and returned to the duties they'd briefly abandoned for Hera's council. Hera herself was gone as well, but my father was still there. He stood before his seat and gestured for me to remain.

"We'll talk later, brother," I whispered to Apollo.

I rose into the air and flew across the room to land before my father. The bouleterion was soon empty of everyone but the two of us, allowing Zeus his own private council. The walls had almost seemed alive with gods during Hera's trial, but now that everyone else was gone, the still, brightly painted marble seemed rather dull to me.

Zeus sat himself on his large, gilded throne and wearily rubbed a hand across his eyes. I remained standing with my hands clasped behind my back in a posture of respect.

"A near thing, Hermes," Zeus sighed finally, smiling at me.

"I wasn't worried, Father," I shrugged, "Hera's emotions always cloud her actions. I regret the harm done to her servant, but I knew I'd have no trouble defending myself."

"It was still a near thing," said Zeus. "I appreciate the help you've given me, but I've no wish to see you imprisoned in Tartarus. I'll not ask you to intervene in any more of my affairs."

I shrugged again, not quite believing him because he swore no oath. My father's appetites and infidelity were already legendary, and as patriarch of the gods, he was free to indulge himself however he pleased. Most of the time, Hera's jealousy curbed Zeus' behavior. If it didn't, his offspring would have completely populated the world in very short order.

I aided my father in some of his amorous pursuits when he asked for my help, partly because I loved my father and would do almost anything for him, and partly because it amused me to do so. Despite her vengeful nature, I was fond of Hera as well, or at least I was at that time. However, I couldn't resist an opportunity to outwit her, if only to see her rage over her inability to completely stop my father.

Because of his unpredictable lust, Father's promise meant nothing to me. I knew I'd soon be asked to hide or disguise another woman who'd found his favor, or guard another bastard child of his.

"What of Io, the white calf?" I asked, curious about the fate of Zeus' latest lover. Zeus had magically changed the human girl into a lovely white calf to disguise her from Hera. Hera, of course, hadn't been fooled. She had claimed the calf as her own and imprisoned it in her gardens with the multi-eyed giant Argus watching over it. Zeus had asked me to rescue the poor girl, as he usually did when his love affairs went awry. Argus' ever-watchful eyes presented a challenge that Zeus thought would be a match for my peculiar talents. Yes, I'd freed Io from her predicament, but did poor Argus have to die?

"Io now resides south across the sea, along the Nile," Zeus said sadly, "I helped the white calf flee there once you freed her. I was then able to restore Io discreetly to her human form. She will live out her days as a queen,

worshipped by the Nile people. I owe her that for the suffering I brought her.”

I nodded and looked down at the polished marble floor, frowning to myself. I wasn't thinking of Io, really.

“Tell me what troubles you,” said Zeus.

“I didn't intend to kill Argus,” I said, shaking my head slightly in bewilderment. “I merely wanted to lull him to sleep and then slip the calf away. He was so quick and powerful, and his senses were so sharp ... I had to trick him into sleeping. But when all of his eyes closed ...” I faltered, confused, and kept my own eyes fixed on the floor.

“You had no way of knowing Argus was so vulnerable,” Zeus sighed, “His constant alertness was a condition of his existence, else his body wouldn't have been covered with eyes. If all the eyes were to close at once and Argus were to fall asleep, he would die.”

“You deliberately didn't tell me, then?” I replied, looking up at Zeus. It wasn't an accusation, merely an observation.

“I didn't know how you planned to free Io, so I didn't think to tell you,” Zeus replied. “I didn't wish Argus dead, either, but his death is not your fault. I assume he wasn't resentful when you led him to the Underworld?”

“No,” I said, and it was true. Argus' soul, in fact, was overjoyed when I brought him to the Elysian Fields, to dwell forever in the company of heroes. “I never hoped to be honored this way!” the giant exclaimed. “To be brought here!” The mighty spirit then cuffed me gratefully and left me to my amazement and relief.

“You're guiltless, son, so worry not,” said Zeus, smiling. “It was naught but an unfortunate accident. I thank you again for your help and your loyalty, Hermes. I don't foresee having tasks for you for quite some time, so please take leave to enjoy your freedom.”

I smiled back at him and bowed, acknowledging his dismissal. I turned to walk from the room and leave him in peace.

The huge metal doors of the bouleterion opened as I walked toward them, and the elder goddess Hestia quietly slipped into the room and hurried to her hearth at its center. She sat down beside the fire and smiled up at me as I walked past.

“Congratulations, nephew,” Hestia said in her soft, warm voice. She then turned her attention to her fire, not seeking a reply.

Hestia never really expected acknowledgement of any sort, quiet and humble being that she was. I replied anyway: “Many thanks, aunt.”

I left the throne room and walked through the surrounding gardens into the mountain polis. It gleamed in the late sunlight, as the sun god Helios had not yet completed his daily path across the sky. Even so, the gate that led into Olympus proper was shrouded in a mist that shafts of sunlight couldn't

penetrate, at least not completely. The mist came from dense, magical clouds that obscured the gate from those who would cause the gods harm.

Olympus truly was beautiful, but I could never bear to stay there long. My presence was no longer required, so I could leave.

Just before the gate, sitting cross-legged on the ground, was a young, dark-haired goddess frowning at a heap of spun flax in her lap. She was one of the three Horae, goddesses that guarded the entrance to Olympus. Like most goddesses, the Horae were lovely and young in appearance. They were my half sisters, but I never called them by name as (though it shames me to admit it) I could never tell them apart.

“Trouble with your spinning, sister?” I asked as I approached the Horae. I grinned at her exasperated frown as she looked up from her work.

“As ever, Hermes,” she replied. “I have no gift for spinning, yet I keep trying.” She stood up and impatiently kicked her work aside.

“You’re stubborn,” I said. “That means you’ll succeed eventually.”

“Eventually,” she sighed. “I assume you’re to leave us now?”

“Do I ever stay?” I asked teasingly.

“No, never,” she smiled back. “I wish you would stay, especially after your triumph in Hera’s council. No desire to celebrate, brother? One would think you have no love for your family.”

“Love, yes, but I’m also fond of the outer world. There I can see both the world and my family. So, if you’d please ...?”

The Horae sighed again and waved an arm. Instantly, a gentle breeze blew the clouds aside and revealed the elaborate and ornate bronze gate, one of Hephaestos’ proudest creations. I nodded my thanks to the Horae, who waved my gesture aside with impatient good humor as she sat back down on the ground to resume her battle with the flax. As I stepped through the gate, the clouds instantly closed back over it behind me, making my surroundings appear as unremarkable as any cloud-shrouded mountaintop.

Before I could take flight, slim golden arms slipped around my middle from behind me, and perfect fingers slid upward to caress my chest.

“I would have another son from you, Hermes,” a voice as lovely as a lyre’s purred into my ear.

I grasped the hands with my own and drew them away as I turned to face their owner. Aphrodite, of course. She must have been waiting for me outside the gate, staying invisible until I emerged. I’ve been called the merriest of gods, but the sight of the beautiful goddess leached all the joy from my heart. It didn’t use to.

“No, Aphrodite,” I said to her, managing a slight smile. “You’ll have no more children from me. Forgive me, goddess, but I’ve no wish to touch you again.”

Herald

I released the goddess' hands and stepped back from her to regard her calmly. The loveliest of frowns crossed her face. Aphrodite wasn't used to being rebuffed. Indeed, I may have been the first being to ever do so.

"Why, Hermes?" she asked in an angry whisper.

"You do have a husband—"

"Hephaestos cannot give me children," she snapped.

"—and your lover Ares rarely leaves your side."

"His daughter through me shows me neither respect nor devotion!"

"Less than the devotion you've shown *our* youngest child?" I retorted angrily. "A child conceived in lust, not love, and so loathsome to himself that he longs for death?"

"A child like Eros!" pleaded Aphrodite. "Please, Hermes, like Eros. I long to have another son like him or better. A child with beauty to rival Apollo's."

"Join with Apollo then, goddess," I replied. "I swear by the Styx, you'll not have *me* again."

I flew off, leaving Aphrodite with my oath. She remained standing at the edge of the mountain, cursing at me, and I little suspected how much I would come to regret that oath.