

Chapter One Preview

# Mother of Mortals

*A Tale of the Nepheloid*



Marisol Charbonneau

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By Marisol Charbonneau



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# Chapter One



Ensnconced in the dark hollows of an icy mountain cleft and cloaked in the shadows of gathering dusk, Hera, Queen of Olympus, awaited for starry Night to descend upon the slumbering Earth below her feet. As the daylight slowly surrendered to eventide, the goddess' heart swelled with excitement in anticipation for the launch of the Argo Navis 9 rocket, a true wonder made possible by the ceaseless ingenuity of mortals. On the morrow, she would return among the august company of the blessed gods who dwell on high Olympus. But on this night, the eve of her journey's end, Hera longed dearly for a few hours of solitude, unmolested by the burden of duty or the prying eyes of those forever seeking her across the broad-pathed Earth.

As the Seasons had yet to turn to Spring, nightfall swiftly heeded the Queen's summons, beckoning her to revel in the freedom and serenity that she so fiercely craved. At long last, golden-throned Hera stepped out of the shadows onto the narrow landing of her hiding place. Pulling her cloak off her shoulders, she breathed deeply of the cold wintry night. The wan rays of the silver moon lit up the gems in her crown like innumerable tiny stars upon her ink-black hair, illuminating her perpetually youthful, flawless countenance with an otherworldly glow against the growing darkness. Hera stood on her perch for a long time, presiding majestically over the moonrise and the movement of the planets and stars, as she had done since the dawn of the Age of Taurus, when mortals knew and celebrated her as the Mistress of all life. This was long before their descendants grew fond of commemorating her unjustly in myth and song as the quarrelsome bride of loud-thundering Zeus, she thought wistfully.

Trying with all her might to not linger upon the strange and irreversible turn her existence had taken, Hera set her thoughts to remembering her past glory, as well as her most recent triumphs against the encroaching forces of obscurantism, narrow-mindedness, and complacency that had threatened humanity since they learned to

speak of the gods among themselves. She also contemplated her somewhat absurd inclination to seek stillness and tranquillity during the night, when the unceasing motion of the heavenly bodies was most visible to all. It amused her to no end that mortals once believed that the stars in the Milky Way had come from the milk in her breasts, even though the story they told themselves of her role in this improbable feat flattered her little. Too many stories told about Hera depicted her in an unflattering light, yet she had never allowed the vile tongues of wicked men to drive her to despair. She had dealt with their ilk for as long as she could remember, and still she remained the Queen of Heaven and the protector of heroes.

As her thoughts wandered idly, Hera's well honed senses detected the presence of a fellow immortal nearby. Turning her gaze towards the mountain below, the goddess saw an improbably tall and strapping lad approaching at a measured pace, giving her enough time to recognize the one who had come to break her solitude in this isolated place. The visitor stopped a short distance away, standing perfectly still until Hera acknowledged his presence with a nod.

"Apologies, great lady," the interloper said finally. "I meant no disrespect, nor did I mean to disturb or startle you."

"You did no such thing, Prometheus," Hera replied cordially at her kinsman. "You ought to know, I am quite pleased to see you. For a moment I thought that you were Hermes."

"I am glad to hear that, my lady," Prometheus said with genuine relief, though he kept a decorous distance from the Queen of Olympus.

"Please, come join me on this landing," Hera said cheerfully, her oval face brightening with the warmest of smiles. "It is far more pleasant here than on those rocks where you are."

"Thank you, my lady," Prometheus answered gratefully. He walked towards Hera's landing, then knelt next to where the goddess stood. To his surprise, the Queen of Olympus sat beside him and invited him to do the same.

"It's all right, Prometheus," she said with a hint of mirth in her voice. "My husband does not expect my return until tomorrow. He will have

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no rightful cause to send for me until then. Rest assured, Hermes is unlikely to disturb us.”

“I hoped for as much, my lady,” Prometheus said, returning her smile.

They sat in silence on the landing for some time, each quietly enjoying the company of the other, like old friends who had not spoken for many years, but always ready to resume their last conversation from the point at which it had ended. For the moment, neither felt the inclination to fill the peaceful silence with idle talk, nor would they ever need to do so. Both could read into the hearts of mortals and immortals alike through their shared gift of prophecy – something only a few gods, and even fewer mortals, possessed. That was how Hera knew that Prometheus was as reluctant to have any dealings with Zeus' son and messenger as she was to cut short her seasonal journey to the boundaries of the Earth. Still, Hera wondered whether Prometheus had any inkling of how much she loathed the way Hermes followed her everywhere across the vast Earth, calling her back to Olympus whenever Zeus declared that his bride had lingered among mortals for too long.

After their complicit silence had run its course, Prometheus turned to face his Queen.

“My lady,” he asked reverently, “I am quite pleased to see you here as well, and I welcome your company as always, but I must ask, what brings you to this particular place in this lonely corner of the world? I was certain that you favoured warmer climes near the end of your seasonal journeys. You are ending your circling of the Earth for the year, are you not?”

“I am,” Hera answered, “and I usually return to Olympus by way of Nauplia to bathe in the waters of the Kanathos Spring, that is true. But tonight I thought I would take a moment and treat myself to watching the launch... You see that base across the bay?”

Hera pointed to a bright spot in the distance. To mortal eyes, this place would have looked like an unremarkable faraway settlement on the banks of a frozen body of water, however Hera and Prometheus could both see with the superior sight of deathless gods various buildings at the edge of the base, as well as a gigantic rocket ship in its centre flanked by mobile scaffolding.

“You know about the Argo Navis 9...” Prometheus said, amazed.

“Of course I do,” Hera replied. “And I know about its mission to carry the very last components and crew of the Corona space station above the heavens. The Corona is already partially operational, but still fully dependent upon the massive space elevator that connects it to the Earth in locked geostatic orbit. Once the Argo Navis 9 delivers its payload, the Corona will be fully autonomous within a year, after which it will be disconnected from the elevator. This is the most wondrous achievement of mortals to date and I wanted to be here to witness it.”

Prometheus nodded. “That is why I'm here as well,” he said with much gladness.

“Oh, good. So I'm not the only one who finds this rather glorious – that mortals have at last found the means to build cities beyond the sky,” Hera replied beatifically. “Almost all the gods who dwell on Olympus are rather jaded at the whole notion of human colonization of space... I think they should be put out to pasture, really, the whole lot of them. Nowadays, all that they do is their damndest to uphold Olympus' reputation as a golden, lofty pit of debauchery.”

Prometheus laughed softly, in spite of himself.

“No, really,” Hera said with mock outrage. “I have the sneaking suspicion that they wait until I leave on my journeys to misbehave! Hephaestus told me that the last time I was gone, just before I was due to return, Aphrodite led a Bacchanalia that put Caligula to shame!” Hera shook her head. “It's one thing for that shameless wench to be unfaithful to my son, but must she flaunt her wickedness by cavorting with Ares in front of the whole Olympian court?”

Prometheus bit his lip. Of course he knew the tales told about her sons and their dealings with the goddess of love, Hera thought. Though amusing to outsiders, Aphrodite's casual attitude towards the sacredness of the marriage bed only reminded the Queen of how little the blessed gods who dwell on Olympus, and especially their King, cared about marital fidelity.

“Idiots...” Hera said, more to herself than to her companion. “And they have the nerve to wonder why I spend most of my time among mortals!”

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Prometheus gave Hera a sympathetic smile, leaving no doubt as to whether he fully understood why the Queen of Olympus had recently grown fond of spending ever-increasing lengths of time away from the company of the gods. Like himself, Hera had long been a friend and protector of human beings, in spite of the unkind way mortals often spoke about her. Unlike Prometheus, Hera favoured guiding the actions of a handful of men and women of each generation, conveying long-forgotten truths to the few she deemed of singular worth. In the last three hundred years though, Hera had grown restless at the state of the world and resolved to take a greater role in influencing the course of human events.

At first, Zeus greatly encouraged his wife's renewed interest in humanity, hoping that the goddess' noble pursuit would give him more opportunities to engage in extramarital adventures away from her watchful gaze, as he had shamelessly done for centuries. Unfortunately, the King of Olympus soon came to perceive his Queen's laudable vocation as a subtle form of abandonment. It was one that caused her to dwell in the presence of mortals for longer periods of time than the other journeys she took at the times appointed by the Seasons. At least he knew better than to reprimand Hera for undertaking the latter, as these had been part and parcel of her duties since time immemorial. What Zeus resented most was Hera's habit of leaving Olympus surreptitiously whenever she was displeased with him, or when she felt the need to distance herself from her faithless husband. This was far more often than either were willing to admit.

Zeus, who earned the title of Father of gods and men without irony or exaggeration, was ever a notorious skirt chaser. To make matters worse, he often felt his prodigious carnal appetites wane whenever Hera left Olympus for too long or became aloof about their marriage. In recent centuries, she had done both with increasing frequency and without an iota of remorse. Whenever Hera did return to the abode of the gods, after what the Thunderer judged to be an inordinate amount of time, he would scold her as one would a wayward child. He would reproach her for neglecting her duties as his wife and Queen. Then he would take her to their bedchamber and allow her to show contrition by undertaking their nuptial rites until the following afternoon.

The exalted gods who dwell on Olympus grew rather amused at this increasingly predictable pattern. Aphrodite in particular was fond of



contending that Hera remained among mortals for as long as she did to deliberately provoke Zeus and that, in truth, she craved her husband's affection like a drowning person in need of rescue from the depths of loneliness and despair. Others took to speculating that Hera had surreptitiously abandoned her role as the patron goddess of marriage, home, and family to reinvent herself as a Muse of enlightenment and social progress, providing elusive guidance to a world in desperate need of balance and sanity. Such widespread insolence, compounded with the worsening decadence of Olympus, gave Hera little cause to seek the company of the gods who, in the past, held her with awe and reverence.

“At least I raised my daughters properly,” Hera continued dolefully. “They would never dare to embarrass themselves without facing dire consequences from me... And my husband, well, we shouldn't even talk about that billy-goat, wouldn't you think so?”

Prometheus answered with a slow, silent nod, respectfully conveying that he did not want to talk about Zeus either.

“Oh dear,” Hera said after an awkward pause. “Here I am lamenting my fate, when you've had a much worse go of it than I ever have. That was inconsiderate of me. Apologies, Prometheus, I did not mean to...”

“It's all right, my lady,” Prometheus interrupted her. “I understand completely.”

“Thank you,” Hera replied with sincere gratitude. “You are kind and generous to a fault. That is a rare quality among our kind... one shared only by our dearly departed Chiron, the gentlest and wisest of us all...”

Prometheus bowed his head when Hera mentioned Chiron's name. Though he had died thousands of years before, all those who had known the centaur wondered what sagacious counsel he would have given the venerable gods and their heroic offspring in these wondrous times.

“I wept for a month,” Hera continued, “when he surrendered his immortality in exchange for the mercy of a quick death, when he was struck with that poisoned arrow... But I am glad that he gave his ceaseless life to you in his moment of weakness, and that you are free from your ordeal.”

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“My lady is too gracious,” Prometheus replied humbly.

Hera smiled at him. “Oh, please, I've known you since you were a babe at Klymene's breast,” she said. “Your mother has been my handmaiden for as long as I can remember, and I've seen you grow when I lived in the house of Okeanos and Tethys... I am almost your aunt by upbringing! Call me by my name.”

“But, my lady, I cannot...” Prometheus stammered in protest.

“I insist upon it,” Hera said flatly. “We are not on Olympus; here we are simply two old friends having a pleasant chat. No one will know nor think anything of it. Now please, don't make me scold you.”

“As you wish... Hera,” Prometheus replied, lowering his gaze as he suppressed a smile.

“Good lad,” Hera said, holding back her own amusement. “So, did I hear it true? You said you also came here to witness the launch?”

“I did, my lady... Hera,” Prometheus answered. “The Argo Navis 9 is scheduled to take off in thirty minutes from the CARINA Borealis base, over there.” Prometheus pointed due north towards the isolated settlement on the horizon. “Its trajectory will take it towards the Northern Canadian territorial waters around the Arctic Circle, until it reaches a low orbit...”

“Yes, go on,” Hera said, looking up raptly at the stars above them, her expression radiant and serene.

“Once there, the craft will split up, releasing the payload to the four primary components of the Corona,” he continued, “the Vela, the Puppis, the Pyxis, and the Carina...”

“And the rocket proper will be re-purposed for parts once the seal from the airlock to the space elevator is shut forever,” Hera said, finishing Prometheus' line of thought.

“That's right,” Prometheus replied. For a moment he looked as though he felt honoured to witness a moment of candour from one who was usually so reserved around the gods of Olympus.

“It's marvellous, the ingenuity of it all,” Hera continued, “although the names of the rocket and space station components do not match that of the finished product.”

“How do you mean?” Prometheus asked, perplexed.

“I think it is adorable that everything should be named after constellations,” she replied, “but there should be some thematic consistency in the naming of the parts and of the whole... The Argo Navis constellation refers to the ship of legend, which my dear hero Jason once captained. It makes sense that the very first rocket which brought the original structures of the space station into geostatic orbit some fifteen years ago should bear the name of a ship that now sails the stars, likewise its components... But the Corona? What did Ariadne's crown have anything to do with the mighty ship Argo?”

“They had to name the station after something that is round,” Prometheus answered, “because it is laid out as a series of large concentric circles rotating around the core, to simulate gravity, so that the mortals will not wither from the ill effects brought on by being away from the Earth for too long.”

“I understand why the city-ship is round,” Hera said, “but did they come up with Corona by drawing the names of the constellations out of a hat, or are all such seemingly trivial decisions made by committee?” Hera shook her head, feigning disappointment.

“At some point they wanted to name the station Ourobouros,” Prometheus replied with a laugh, “because the outer structure looks somewhat like a serpent eating its own tail, but that name is quite a mouthful over satellite communications... Corona is a far more appropriate name for a round, tiered structure.”

“All right,” Hera conceded. “That explains one thing, but there's another detail that they haven't really thought through...”

“Oh? How so?” Prometheus asked.

“Well, do you not find it odd that one of the components of the space station should bear the same name as the space research conglomerate that is responsible for this whole venture?... What does CARINA stand

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for again? The Centre of Aerospace Research and Invention of the North Atlantic? Or something to that effect?”

“Close, but no,” Prometheus answered. “It is the Centre for Aerospace Research and Innovation of North America.”

“And this base, with the launch pad across the water, is called CARINA Borealis because it is located in the middle of the great North American Boreal forest?”

“That is correct.”

“So,” Hera replied, “when the mortals are up there finishing the construction of the Corona, won't the builders and engineers become confused when they speak of the Carina when they relay their progress to the CARINA project managers here on Earth? I mean, this is ludicrous! The nomenclature almost sounds like something your idiot brother Epimetheus would have devised!”

Prometheus bit his lip at that last remark, but said nothing.

“And that massive elevator that connects the Corona to the CARINA Polaris base in the high Arctic? What random, marginally appropriate name did they give it? Did they name it Omphalos, after the fabled navel of the universe?”

“That is actually a great idea,” Prometheus answered with a nervous laugh, “but they decided to call it simply the Hub, since it connects to the components of the space station with corridors through the centre. They almost decided to call it the Node, but that sounds too much like the word for “no” in almost every known human language.”

“Then they should call the construction site the Placenta, until the 'baby' station is ready to be severed from the Earth Mother,” Hera jested.

“I ought to remember that one,” Prometheus replied with a laugh, “when the board of Directors will gather when the time comes to build the next space station.”

“Well, then,” Hera said with a knowing smile, “it almost sounds as though you and your brother had a hand in the whole operation.”

“We did,” Prometheus answered, before he caught himself and froze, dropping his gaze to the ground below the landing.

“Prometheus? Is something the matter?” Hera asked, sensing her companion's unease as she placed her hand upon his shoulder.

Prometheus did not answer. Perhaps he thought he had already said too much, that it was unwise to boast about such things to Zeus' wife, even though Hera had never been his foe, intentionally or otherwise, nor had she ever borne him any ill will. Perhaps Prometheus feared that Hermes lurked nearby, looking for his Queen and listening for any sign of her presence on Earth. If Zeus' messenger discovered that Prometheus was part of the ambitious CARINA venture, he would have no choice but to relate this to his King who would be most displeased. It had taken Zeus far too long to forgive Prometheus for stealing fire from Olympus to benefit humankind, an act which the Father of gods and men feared would make mortals too clever for their own good; Zeus ought not to know that Prometheus was now helping them achieve their goal of building cities beyond the sky, as Hera put it so eloquently.

“Come now, it's all right,” Hera told him gently, as a mother would to soothe a frightened child. “I do not share my husband's reluctance at taking an active part in guiding mortals into greatness... Except when it comes to begetting demigods who have no other advantage than the accident of their bloodlines...” she trailed off, having lost her good humour.

Prometheus looked at Hera as though he felt rightfully ashamed for causing her undue melancholy.

“I apologize, my lady... I mean, Hera...” he said.

“You have no reason to apologize to me, Prometheus,” she replied dismally. “It is I who must apologize to you, for not having done more to spare you from Zeus' wrath, when he condemned you to be chained to your rock and to have his eagle devour your liver each day for so many centuries. I tried to dissuade him, as did Athena, always the favourite among his children. Apollo, Chiron, and many of the other gods and even some of the immortals who dwell at the boundaries of the Earth did so as well... We tried to reason with him, to convince him that you stole fire from Olympus as a kindness, as a boon for mortals to help them prosper and to relieve them from their wretchedness, but

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he would have none of it. I could only stand there helpless while he made an example of you.”

“That was not your doing, Hera,” Prometheus said, reaching to hold the hand she had placed upon his shoulder. He looked at her lovely, graceful fingers for a moment before he spoke again. “I know that you had no part in Zeus' judgement for my defiance of his will, and I know that there were times when you also suffered terribly for incurring his wrath. Rest assured, I never blamed you for your King's intransigence.”

“But... I did try to thwart Herakles for all of his mortal life, and he was the one who freed you in the end...” Hera's voice began to tremble.

“You did not know that at the time,” Prometheus replied. “I knew why you hated Herakles when he was mortal, and I never held that against you. The Fates decreed that I was to be freed by a descendant of Io, and there was nothing you could have done to help or hinder the outcome. Even loud-thundering Zeus cannot escape the will of the Fates...”

Hera closed her eyes to hold back her tears.

Prometheus gave her hand a gentle squeeze, and told her, “If you hadn't challenged Herakles during the span of his mortal life, he would not have accomplished his great Labours, and Zeus would not have made his peace with my release, as he would never have seen it fit to let this deed contribute to his son's fame and renown. Also, had you not arranged for Herakles' battle with the Lernaean Hydra, his poisoned arrow would never have struck Chiron, who in turn would not have granted me his immortality in exchange for a swift release from the terrible pain of the Hydra's venom...”

“That arrow was meant for me...” Hera whispered, raising a hand to her left breast where Herakles once struck her with a three-barbed arrow tipped with the same venom.

“So, in a strange way,” Prometheus continued, “you set into motion the events that culminated in my release from my rock. You could almost say that if it hadn't been for you, I would not be here on this mountaintop, in your glorious company, about to bear witness to the beginning of a new era, as humanity takes another crucial step towards escaping the bonds of Earth to dwell among the stars...”

Hera bowed her head, and covered her mouth with her other hand.

“Speaking of which,” Prometheus said as he leaned closer to his Queen, “they should be lighting up the engines at the launch area any moment now...”

Braving her tears, Hera opened her eyes and turned her gaze across the sea to the CARINA Borealis base, where the site had been cleared for launch some time before. Though hidden from the sight of mortals, Hera and Prometheus could see from their mountain landing the rocket's primary detachable components very clearly beyond the fixtures of the scaffolding. They did not wait long before the engines sprang to life with a deep, thunderous roar, creating an immense billowing cloud of smoke and dust illuminated by the ignition at the base of the rocket. The Argo Navis 9 rose from the ground slowly at first, a conical colossus lurching towards the sky, before it accelerated at a speed once thought impossible by the minds of the brightest mortals centuries earlier. The rocket then arced northward, leaving only a thin trail of spent fuel in its wake, until it became to the naked human eye another small wandering point of light in the boundless Cosmos.

Hera and Prometheus watched the spectacle unfold above them, too awestruck to speak, and too stirred to mind the bitterly cold wind descending upon them from the Arctic. They saw with their immortal eyes the Argo Navis 9 reach its destination far above Northern Canada's countless floating ice mountains, where it broke off into four pieces around the central rocket. The mortals who had boarded the original Argo Navis rocket had brought with them wondrously clever machines that were immediately put to work in assembling the smaller sections of bridges and adjacent structures, by manufacturing the basic building components with the use of several three-dimensional printing devices invented only two hundred-odd years earlier. These devices had been perfected to the degree that they could replicate almost any inanimate object in metal or polymer. The latter could be done rather easily since large quantities of raw materials were still delivered daily from the Earth to the Corona through the Hub. The former was at first a far more complex task which involved harvesting the abundant metallic space debris that had been orbiting the Earth since the once great nations of the world began their race to conquer the vast expanses beyond the sky.

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“You know,” Hera told Prometheus after a few minutes of contemplative silence. “I am glad that you stole fire from Olympus all those millennia ago.”

“My lady!?”

“I mean, I am absolutely not glad for what you've suffered,” Hera replied, “but if you hadn't done the deed, mortals would have remained forever ignorant of the cosmos, believing only what their limited senses allow them to perceive... It took them far too long to figure out the simplest of things, such as how life renews itself. If it hadn't been for you, mortals would still think it possible that I could have conceived any of my children without male seed, or that Athena could have been born from Zeus' head without him first swallowing her pregnant mother whole.”

Prometheus held his tongue, likely wondering where Hera's thoughts would lead. Did he think it curious that the fantastic stories mortals began telling themselves millennia ago about the birth of the younger gods continued to occupy Hera's thoughts in such a pernicious manner?

“They once believed that, when my father was King,” Hera continued, “there were no mortal women to regenerate life among their kind! They thought that your brother's wife Pandora was the first mortal woman that ever was, and they blamed her for all of their ills, in the same way that I am often blamed whenever misfortune befalls anyone I dislike... as if I had nothing better to do than to hunt down and torment everyone who catches my husband's wandering eye!” Hera shook her head. “The first few times that mortals took to the skies in their manned ships,” she said, “I wept with joy! That is, the first few times they did this without crashing or catching fire... But still, I was so proud of what they had accomplished! You should be singularly proud of what mortals have achieved since you gave them fire. This feat of building autonomous cities beyond the sky is as much your doing as it is theirs and no one could deny you this victory, not even Zeus...”

“That may be so,” Prometheus said, taking some time to choose his words carefully, “but I fear that my deed ultimately caused you a great deal of harm in the end.”

“You truly think so?” Hera asked quizzically.



“As mortals learned of the workings of the cosmos,” he answered, “they sought increasingly to possess the Earth and all that dwells therein, and in doing so they eventually grew to care little about observing and celebrating the seasons of Earthly life for its own sake... In humanity's earliest days, you were their most beloved protector, but after I gave them fire, mortals grew ever bolder and more arrogant. That led them to favour the fierce and ruthless gods of the bright blue sky instead of the gentle goddesses of Earth and loam.”

“I'm afraid that this is only a half-truth, young one,” Hera replied gravely. “I was once known to be a fierce and ruthless goddess of both the Earth and the sky, even before I wed the Cloud-gatherer. Mortals once knew me as the one who anointed heroes among their kind. I was the one who chose those who would be cut down in their prime on the field of battle, and given the glory of a short season, so that they could be reborn in other forms of Earthly life in the Spring upon my return from my yearly journeys circling the Earth. I was the one who tamed women and men when they came of age, the one who destroyed the flower of their youth and bound them in the sacred rite of marriage so that they could renew their lives and their tribes for the next generation... I was once universally loved and revered, that is true, but I was also very much feared. The mere threat of my wrath could strike terror into the hearts of my enemies... Even Zeus admitted more than once that my rage has made him tremble!”

Hera paused and suppressed a smile, momentarily enchanted by the thought of Zeus trembling before her wrath. “No, it wasn't your gift of fire that turned mortals away from me,” she continued. “That was the doing of those singers and storytellers who spread vicious, slanderous lies about me, those who no longer saw it fit to recognize me as the heir to the goddess-queens of old. Even so, they could not be rid of me so easily, and neither could Zeus, for all the times he tried to replace me as his Queen. Try as he might, he was never successful in casting me aside, for that would have meant losing the favour of those countless mortals and immortals who continued to view me as their rightful ruler. But then again, none of that mattered once mortals decided to replace us with the Nazarene...”

Prometheus said nothing. The triumph of the Nazarene, coinciding with the fall of Rome's might, dealt a terrible blow to countless immortals across the known world. Many of the deathless gods who

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dwell at the boundaries of the Earth saw themselves dismissed into the realm of fable and fantasy, whereas those who made their homes on starry Olympus continued to enthral the minds and hearts of mortals.

“None of that matters now, really,” Hera said wistfully. “The rule of the gods has come and gone, and yet here we are, though why we are still here, I cannot say for certain.” She looked at the sky above them for a moment, her large, beautiful brown eyes tracing the path of the Argo Navis 9, then smiled when she found the mortal adventurers bouncing comically in microgravity around the payload components cast off from the rocket.

“I’ve often wondered whether we remain in this world because mortals still need us,” she continued, “or if it is still in our power to guide them. I like to think it is so. I like to believe that my hand can still hold the reins on the course of human events, even if mortals no longer love and revere me, for all the many horrible things they believed that I have done, and the few I actually have done.” She turned her head away and closed her eyes, as if this gesture could shield her from the blows dealt to her after centuries of slander.

“Hera, you are not despised among mortals,” Prometheus told her truthfully. “Of course, some will repeat the frightful tales told about you because they do not know the full magnitude of your glory... But I know of the many blessings you have bestowed upon human beings in the last few centuries alone. These have brought enlightenment and compassion upon the world and have done more than enough to expiate any harm your past transgressions could have caused. Your unfailing protection and watchfulness over mortals will reap its own rewards and many of those even your powerful gift of foresight cannot yet divine.”

Hera sucked in a breath, and took Prometheus' hands into her own. “You are kind to say so,” she said gratefully at his comforting words. “And I hope that you are right – that the future holds a brighter promise for our kind and that our efforts to preserve mortal life despite our fall from glory and splendour will not have been in vain.”

“Fear not, my Queen,” Prometheus told her. “Your days of anointing heroes among mortals have not come to an end. They will need your unwavering guidance more than ever in the years to come, in their endeavour to sow the seeds of Earthly life wherever they roam.”

Hera gave Prometheus a sad smile. She took a deep breath to regain her composure, and said, "I know that you are right, for you foretold your own release and divined many other prophecies that changed the course of our existence... I only hope that throughout your own ordeal, you never cursed the womb that bore you into life, as mortal men often curse the women who bear them when they fall victim to wretchedness and pain... For I am certain that your mother, my dear, loyal Klymene, never intended for your life to have been usurped by the ill-tempered judgement of the Thunderer."

"I could never do that, my lady," Prometheus replied. "It was Zeus who condemned me to my fate, and he alone is responsible for his judgement..."

Hera nodded, but was too overcome to speak. Prometheus smiled at her, and leaned ever so slowly towards her to offer her a comforting embrace, but froze at once when he heard the piercing cry of an eagle circling in the distance.

"Oh, dear," Hera said, startled.

Prometheus gently released Hera's hands and slid away from her, putting as much distance between himself and the goddess as he could while trying to appear inconspicuous.

"Now, really, Prometheus," Hera said, feigning annoyance. "Zeus made his peace with you centuries ago, in front of witnesses. Is this truly necessary?"

"As you know, my Queen," Prometheus replied deferentially, "our King holds grudges even when he does not mean to... and he is a jealous god."

"And he is well aware that I am a virtuous wife," Hera replied. "Besides, it would never occur to him that you could even entertain the thought of abducting me..."

"That may be so," Prometheus said with a nervous laugh, "but there is also the small matter of our present conversation..."

Hera pondered Prometheus' words for a moment.

## Nepheleid

“You have nothing to fear,” she told him. “My husband has come to terms long ago with the ingenuity of mortals rivalling the might of the gods. He has had little choice but to grow accustomed to having ever increasing numbers of mortals look down upon the Earth from beyond the topmost reaches of the skies over which he rules...” She bit her lip as a wickedly amusing thought formed within her venerable mind, which she carefully deliberated sharing with Prometheus. At long last, she smiled at him and said, “You ought to know, it took years before he finally stopped grumbling and muttering under his breath every time he sees an airplane fly by in front of him!”

Fighting the urge to snicker, Prometheus bowed his head respectfully and said with undue formality, “My Queen, it was a pleasure to spend this time in your company, but I must take my leave.”

“So you must,” Hera sighed. “We shall finish this conversation some other time... Be well, Prometheus.”

Prometheus bid farewell to golden-throned Hera, then disappeared from sight, while the Queen of Olympus resumed her placid stargazing on her lonely mountain perch.