

# First Quiver

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## 1 The Fall

It occurred to Cupid as his fingernails slipped off the edge of Mount Olympus that Mother had finally called his bluff. His sandaled feet flipped toward the sky, almost, but not quite entirely, blotting out the grim faces peering down at him. If only he hadn't seen that tear rolling down Aphrodite's cheek, perhaps he could have avoided the sting at the back of his own eyes.

No. He wouldn't give Ares the satisfaction.

He sank like a shuttlecock—head down, feathers up—swifter than he would have thought possible, but then what could a boy with wings know about falling? His attempts to join in when the other boys went cliff diving had always ended with a cowardly, last-minute swoop before reaching the water, but today would be different. He'd resolved to take his punishment like a man.

The sky slapped his cheeks, thrashed his eyes, burned the tips of his ears. He clenched his jaw with determination, but it was no use. Reflexes kicked in, bringing a surge of relief followed by a sharp spike of shame. His wings flexed, lifted, and flapped.

*Nothing.*

Faster he fell, though his wings beat harder. Flapping then flailing then flipping, an end-over-end freefall. Feathers flew every which way, clogging the sky like a giant pillow fight until there were no more feathers to lose and no way to slow his descent. Wind whistled through the scant folds of his half-chiton, all that preserved his last shred of dignity.

He sucked in a shallow breath, then another. Blood pounded in his ears. His heart raced as if trying to beat the rest of him to the mountain's base. The vivid colors of Mount Olympus ran together like a smeared oil painting as he tumbled past, dizzy and disoriented and utterly at the mercy of the laws of physics he probably should have paid more attention to at the academy.

His first glimpse of the Great Cloud choked his lungs with dread. The gray vapor formed a chilling likeness to the jaws of Zeus, open to swallow him whole. Breaching the border of the mortal world was expressly forbidden, but he could not have stopped his ghastly tumble to beg entry even if he wanted to. He braced for a crash, but the gate stood wide open.

Cupid dragged in his last breath of Olympian air, committed to memory his final blurry glimpse of the only home he'd ever known, and disappeared into the blinding froth.

The cloud closed around him like a thick, wet fleece. Icy droplets slipped between his lips and clung to his eyelashes. The fluffy mist slowed his drop to a sufferable pace, more drifting leaf than falling brick. Foam plugged his ears with silence. All he could hear was the wildly erratic beat of his own heart and the thoughts banging around in his head. Suspended between two worlds, he was profoundly alone.

Not even his own mother had stood by him.

Would she still not care if the gods were to decide to torture him? The prospect of physical harm sent a violent shiver through Cupid's body. He had never much concerned himself with the fate of Prometheus, but now he couldn't shake the image of the great Titan chained to a rock while a giant eagle tore away at his exposed liver, day after day for all of eternity.

What if the gods required feats of great strength? He no more possessed the brawn of Hercules than he did the forbearance of Prometheus, thus the ultimate fear: *What if I fail?* He wouldn't be the first fallen god not to see his home again, he recalled with a heavy heart.

Fear worked itself into a knot of bravado. To the Underworld with all of them! He'd run once his feet hit the ground—or drag himself if his legs were too mangled—and not even try to earn back his boring, predictable life. *You'll be sorry then, Mother.*

As if answering for the goddess who'd birthed him, the Great Cloud spat Cupid out with a brutal shove into Earth's atmosphere. The mortals' air tasted bitter, he decided with a smack of his lips. The color palette dulled to muted blues, greens, and browns, as if someone had drawn a curtain over his eyes. He wondered if he'd adjust to this new world or if he'd even want to. A forceful tug cut short his speculation.

Invisible arms dragged him toward the ground with alarming velocity. Earth's gravity, he recalled suddenly, was serious business. His shoulders twitched out of habit but only reminded him he had no landing gear whatsoever.

He fought back terror with the might of three thousand years of faith in his mother's love, though he had to acknowledge he'd sorely tested Aphrodite this time. Cupid was still weighing his mother's heart when the grassy field rose to meet his bottom.