



WEARING THE LION

JOHN WISWELL

AUTHOR OF *SOMEONE YOU CAN BUILD A NEST IN*

ALSO BY JOHN WISWELL

SOMEONE YOU CAN BUILD A NEST IN

WEARING THE LION

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Jacket design by Adam Auerbach

Interior design by Fine Design

DAW Book Collectors No. 1983

DAW Books

An imprint of Astra Publishing House

dawbooks.com

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Wiswell, John, 1981- author.

Title: Wearing the lion / John Wiswell.

Description: First edition. | New York : DAW Books, 2025. | Series: DAW Book collectors ; no. 1983

Identifiers: LCCN 2025004198 (print) | LCCN 2025004199 (ebook) | ISBN 9780756419547 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780756419554 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Mythological fiction. | Fantasy fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3623.I8486 W43 2025 (print) | LCC PS3623.I8486 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6--dc23/eng/20250204

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025004198>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025004199>

First edition: June 2025

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Acknowledgments

To all the gods I cannot please.

THE TWELVE LABORS OF HERACLES

- 1** Fetch the invincible skin of the Lion of Nemea.
- 2** Defeat the immortal Hydra of Lerna.
- 3** Catch the evanescent Hind of Ceryneia.
- 4** Defeat the man-eating Boar of Mount Erymanthos.
- 5** Clean the entire Augean Stables in one single day.
- 6** Defeat the man-eating giant Birds of Stymphalia.
- 7** Defeat the Bull of Crete, child of Poseidon.
- 8** Steal the man-eating Mares from the warlord Diomedes.
- 9** Steal the war belt of Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons.
- 10** Steal the world-famous Red-Haired Cattle from the Three-Headed Giant Geryon.
- 11** Fetch the Golden Apples of the Hesperides from Hera's Garden at the Top of the World.
- 12** Defeat Cerberus, Three-Headed Guard Dog of the Underworld, Pet of Hades.

Part One

The Rise



Hera 1

Good news, Heaven,” announces my dipshit husband. “I’ve made a new king of the mortals.”

It’s that same boasting tone he used the morning he conceived Perseus, the slayer of monsters and first King of Mycenae. The same tone he used when he’d conceived giants, and heroes, men who wrote history with their footsteps. This tone beckons me to celebrate that he has sired his newest favorite child, since I am the Goddess of Pregnancy.

I have never celebrated these children for a simple reason: I am his wife, and we haven’t fucked since the mortals discovered bronze.

“Bastard!” I reach for the ivory javelin that a priestess once carried across half the sea to lay at the foot of my temple in Delphi, ready to finally break it in. My aim will be true. I want to get him through both testicles and at least one eye.

Immediately my entourage betrays me and descends. Até is first, the quickest of foot, looping both of her slender arms around my right shoulder so I can’t throw. She’s stronger than her slight frame looks. Até has always been poison disguised as wine, her sunny complexion often leaving her mistaken for a nymph. Being the Goddess of Ruin, she’s destroyed many people who thought she was less than she was.

Spittle flies from my teeth as I yell, “You should be on my side!”

Then Granny’s leathery wings fill my vision, and she is on me too. It’s been a long time since anyone called her a goddess; now they call her kind “furies.” Granny is the oldest of her kind, predating the Erinyes triplets. Great bat wings extend from her shoulder blades, and brown vipers grow from her scalp instead of hair, although with age the vipers are more sloughed-off skins than venomous threats these days.

“Dear, please.” Granny’s face is as creased and leathery as her wings. It is less age and more the stress of her eras of work. She lives in my entourage as a sort of retirement from this kind of stress. I see her dull eyes begging me to

look into them, to slow my violence. “Don’t let anyone make you hurt yourself.”

Até still wrestles my right arm. “And let go of the damned spear.”

“It’s a javelin!” I yell, stampeding forward, dragging them both with me across the halls of Olympus. They are immortal, but I am the Queen of the Olympians, tall and unbowed. The Amazons may kiss Artemis’s ass, but when they want something done, they pray to me.

Até groans, trying to bend my arm downward. “Hera, honey, there’s got to be a better way.”

Granny pleads, “I want better for you.”

“Heraaaaaaa!”

That’s neither Até nor Granny. That’s the tone again, demanding that I adulate him for his great gift to the world of fertility.

“Hera, come look! He’s going to be my best work yet!”

There are not enough gods on Olympus to hold me back.

Olympus is an evanescent place, more an idea than a reality. Our great temple reshapes itself to our wills, providing any chambers, or towers, or dungeons as we need them. Architecture is to us what a syllable is to a poet. Every room that I run through hews itself out of living white marble, not painted as the Thebans treat their temples. Doorways open through solid rock, obeying my rage as I race closer, permitting me passage as I grow closer to my dipshit husband’s voice.

There is only one permanent feature atop Mount Olympus: the rim. The great circle of unbroken marble was chiseled from the greatest slab of such rock anyone on the Aegean Sea could find, long before Perseus’s time, and was offered to us to earn our favor. It is the very edge of our temple atop the unclimbable mountain. It is the boundary between our infinite possibility and the mortals’ affairs.

There, at the rim of our temple, stands my dipshit husband. Immense in height, his white beard thicker than brambles. His robe made from the wool of golden lambs is cast away, dangling from one hip. His shoulders block out the sun.

He stands at the very spot on the rim where we used to sit and kiss and gamble on the futures of mortal lovers. A small notch rests in the marble there, the only scratch on the entire rim. It marks where my dipshit husband dropped his thunderbolt in the midst of our . . . better times.

This is the spot where he first called me Queen.

This is the spot where he now calls, “Come look. This kid is going to be your favorite.”

Most of the Olympian Twelve have come out to watch in their curiosity. Zeus’s enormous brother and God of the Seas, Poseidon, stands closest to him, his thick brow dripping with brine. Hestia, Goddess of Homes, and my son Hephaistos, God of Craftsmen, skitter out of my way, opening a space at the rim for me beside another of my sons, Ares, God of War, who swallows hard and avoids meeting my eyes.

As I come close, I’m distracted enough that Até catches the back end of the javelin and tugs it from my grasp. All I manage is to shove my shoulder into Zeus’s side. To my disappointment, he does not fall over the edge.

This close, I can’t resist taking a look. The mortal world is right there. The reason to be angry. The thing my dipshit husband has done.

There, along the wine-dark sea, in the south, within the fruited land of Boeotia, within the walled town of Troezen, within a bedroom streaked with oil and bodily fluids, is the insult.

I am the Goddess of Mothers, and no conception is outside my perception. The bedchambers are wide, thin sashes of blue dangling from the ceiling. The wide-shouldered Queen of Troezen, Alcmene, brown skin aglow, is hurriedly explaining something to her husband, the lumpy King Amphitryon. By her gestures, already she knows she is with child, and she is way too happy about it. She should be apologizing.

At least her husband will be angry with her. I’m rooting for him. His wrath will be a good outlet. Maybe I’ll pick up a few revenges from him to visit upon Zeus.

Except the next time I glance into their bedroom, they’re not arguing. They’re necking so intensely the rest of their bodies get in on it, and next they

tip over the bed in their passion.

I hope they hear me say, “What the fuck?”

It’s impossible. That they’d be happy about this, and that my dipshit husband was so bad in bed this human woman still had strength for more. He must have been off his game. Back in our day, we split mountains with our lovemaking.

“See?” says my dipshit husband. “Everyone is excited. This kid is going to change everything.”

I throw my hand at the image of this blissful king and queen who defy the bounds of marriage, willing my javelin to split their roof. Giving them a good impaling will send the right message.

Then I remember my hand is empty. That damned Até stole my javelin.

My dipshit husband boasts, “He’ll be more man than man. More god than gods. He’ll hold the world on his shoulders and extend Greece’s greatness for centuries.”

Time is so much thinner on our side of the marble rim. I blink, and already Alcmene’s belly bulges. She kisses her fingertips and then holds them over where her baby grows.

My dipshit husband mimics the gesture, kissing a hand and then placing it to my shoulder. He rubs my flesh and beams with pride down at the mortal world.

“You watch over this one. I’m making him king.”

His touch dries up my interest in mortal-watching. I bat his hand away and jab a finger into his chest. He won’t treat the world as his domain alone. It took us both to slay our father, and I can kill again.

I say, “You’re done making kings. Your son won’t rule a fruit stand.”

“Come on,” he says to every other god in attendance, like I’m being difficult. “Goddess of Pregnancy. Goddess of Mothers. Goddess of Family. You can’t hate a kid.”

“You’re a fucking child and I hate you.”

“Plus, this is two kids.”

“Twins?” I ask. “You made two demigods for me to look after?”

I wonder if I can beat a god to death with his own dick.

“Only one is mine,” he says, leaning an elbow on the marble rim. “The other is Amphitryon’s. Balancing each other out.”

I wrinkle my brow in the way a countryside wrinkles in an earthquake. I say, “That is not how pregnancy works.”

“I’m having a new son! I’m being liberal with the miracles today. It’s a celebration. Everybody’s babies will be more handsome than average. You can do that for me, right, oh Goddess of Mothers?”

I’m reaching for his throat when another goddess proclaims, “That’s brilliant!”

I want to kill her before I even recognize it’s Até. My Até, my Goddess of Ruin, the person I soonest turn to to shit-talk this dipshit god. She pushes right up against my side, holding my ivory javelin, her face beatific and radiant up at the King of the Olympians.

She says, “Give your son a mortal twin who is himself better than all other mortals. Bless the shit out of the kid.”

“Exactly!” Zeus says, gesturing to her like I should be taking notes. “See? She gets it. You should listen to her.”

Até prattles on, “And you won’t stop at his twin, right? Everyone born on the same day as your heir should be more beautiful than any mortals before them.”

Zeus puffs out his chest. “Because they live in the era of my generosity. All these babies are going to make grown men blush. You’ll see to it, yes, Hera?”

I don’t know how Até is still talking. I should be strangling her, but I’m dumbstruck. What is she doing?

Até says, “I heard he’s to become some kind of king, too?”

“The greatest of kings! He has my blood, and the blood of Perseus!”

“Do you have a date picked?”

“Oh, it’ll be the solstice. Everyone loves a festival.”

“So it’s destiny, then? No waiting. The child born of yours and Perseus’s line on the spring solstice shall be king?”

“He shall be king of all he surveys!” Zeus said, thunder resonating from the clap of his hands. “Yes. It shall be the law of Heaven and Earth.”

Até looks me full in the face, with that same beatific expression, not dropping it at all. It’s only then that I realize the Goddess of Ruin might be misleading someone.

I keep the disgust on my face as I ask, “Destiny? For the child of Zeus and Perseus’s lineage born on the spring solstice?”

Até clutches at my elbows. “You’ve got to be happy for the King of the Olympians. This is going to be wonderful. For us.”

That pause. That “For us” is what finally gets me on board. This is why I keep such a smart entourage. I’m lucky my dipshit husband doesn’t figure it out himself, but his eyes are glued to Até’s ass.

While Até starts spinning up possible names, I return my attention to the mortal world. They had only to speak this law, and now every oracle in the lands is spreading the same mythology. The one born of Zeus and Perseus’s line on the solstice shall be king of all he surveys.

Great states are already sending tribute to Troezen, to fatten the wealth of King Amphitryon. Queen Alcmene reclines on a bed of feathers, with attendants rubbing her swollen feet. Those feet are going to be swollen longer than she expects.

I sort through souls like a librarian sorts through documents. Perseus was almost as horny as his father, and has left plenty of fools in his wake. For instance, King Sthenelus now rules both his father’s Mycenae and Tiryns, really living up to daddy’s rapacious desire for power. He’s a bully; he exiled his nephew Amphitryon to Troezen in the first place. If his child is king, it might put some impudent whelps from Troezen in their place.

He is a weight upon his suffering wife, Nicippe, who would have done great things had so many power brokers not traded her around. There she is, pregnant with a boy she could shape into something worthwhile. She deserves the ear of the powerful.

And look at that? She just so happens to be due in the spring.

What a coincidence.

It's an invitation for him to catch me. To see what I'm doing. To struggle against my plot, and to scheme back. To fight with me like I deserve to be fought with. To be defeated, like he deserves to be defeated. Those are the only drives that keep our marriage going these days.

And my dipshit husband doesn't hear me.

He's boasting to all the other gods, jumping between them, his tone like his sentences want to fuck their ears.

"So then I said, 'You know, I can look like your husband tonight.' I mean, I could look like a swan if she wanted, but sometimes looking like the husband spices things up just right. And she turned this color, you know, like the dawning of a new day, but that dawn is somehow bashful?"

I rear back to slug him, and there is Até, capturing my hand one more time. She wraps her fingers around mine and squeezes. She still wears the beatific smile of false innocence.

She whispers, "Got the plot?"

I love this evil weirdo.

With the look we share, I find enough calm to wait.

"Look at that!" Até says, so loud that nobody could mistake her for actually surprised. "It's a miracle of the gods down in Greece."

My dipshit husband stops in the middle of miming something like eating a fig. With a grin as broad as any tyrant's ambitions, he leans over the marble rim and to the mortal world. The days have burned by, and the solstice is upon the Aegean Sea again.

"Now you all better bless his kingdom," he commands. "Especially you, Hera. No tricks."

I squeeze Até's hand. "I would never play a trick on the King of All He Surveys."

"That's why I married you. You know when to follow—wait."

The hairs of his white beard curl further, like they are winding up around a spindle. Static sparks pop around his eyebrows. He grips the marble rim of Mount Olympos, probably not noticing that his left hand rests over the old

notch he once made. He leans so far over that he could spill down into Greece.

“Who is that in the palace?”

I pretend to look. “Why husband, that is the King of All He Surveys.”

Not a single idea on our plane of existence dares move. Everything becomes taut, tensing with anticipation for Zeus’s revelation.

“What the fuck?”

I brush Zeus’s bare arm as I lean over the world again, to watch. There are so many processions of states and tribes pledging their allegiance to the new king of kings. The infant who carries with him the destiny of Zeus.

He is a skinny baby with little brawn in his frame, but he will grow strong enough to wear his crowns.

“King Eurystheus,” I say with a cold laugh. “Strange. I don’t see twins.”

I watch until the procession from Troezen arrives. King Amphitryon has to swallow his bile and kneel before someone else’s newborn. Behind him, his wife Alcmene struggles to hide her disappointment—or maybe that’s her going into labor. I’m sure her children will be worth the wait.

Temptation overtakes me. I start to slip down into the palace, in the guise of a midwife who will really be able to rub this in. They thought they would control the world through the insult of a child my dipshit husband gave them. Nobody insults me.

I feel the chill of the stone floor under one foot and am about to put the other down when I hear the thunder cracking. The skies are shining and clear, and yet thunder fills the air and stings my nostrils.

In a tone I haven’t heard since the last great war, I hear my dipshit husband ask, “Até, aren’t you the Goddess of Misfortune?”

“Yes, my lord. Why do you ask?”

“Then you should’ve seen this coming.”

I’m back on Olympus in time to see Zeus lifting Até in one hand. She is less than a feather in his grip, and he straightens her as stiff as a javelin. Her entire body crackles with lightning, her face a portrait of agony. Her cries are imprisoned in her throat. Nothing save sizzling sounds escape her lips.

With her captured in a thunderbolt, Zeus raises his arm. No Olympian dares catch his arm.

He hurls her downward, and she passes as a shooting star over the palace, and across the islands. She hits the sea so hard that Poseidon crosses his legs.

Zeus holds his bearded chin high. “Até is exiled from Mount Olympos. She will never set a misfortunate foot on this mountain again. That is part of the new era, too. Am I understood?”

He does not actually wait for the Olympians to agree. Perhaps he knows I’d shout him down. I’m already parting my lips to argue when he continues.

“And her domain is vacated, as well. Ruin. Misfortune. Whatever the fuck she thought she was peddling, any of you can have it. Who wants it? Hm?”

That piece of shit Apollo immediately raises a hand to claim it. He’s been a thief of domains since the day he was born. I don’t let him speak, elbowing him aside and shoving him into Ares. Ares will know enough to shut him up.

“You had no right!”

“I am the King of the Gods! Olympos is my war-won domain. No one but me has the right.”

“You fucked around and you found out.”

“Do you want to see more lightning?”

“Do you want to see a javelin pierce both your testicles and at least one of your eyes?”

“That’s . . . imaginative, but no. No more disobedience.”

I slap a hand down on the marble rim, and it cuts my hand. Shocked, I realize I hit the notch in the stone.

What pulls me out of the surprise isn’t my husband’s swearing and threats. It’s the wailing of twin babies. Never have newborns begging for milk made me sick to my stomach before. I could vomit across the mortal plane.

Both Zeus and I look down, together, upon that household in Troezen. There is a crib of wood so freshly lathed it must have been built this very week. The parents must have built it on the journey back home.

There they are. The twins. The mortal, and the insult. His face is wrinkled, his arms flail erratically. There’s nothing unusual about him. And yet I hate

him from my depths.

Zeus is still looking at his newest favorite son when he says, "You are done, Hera."

"No," I said. "I haven't begun to get my justice."

From the crowd of Olympians comes Granny, who must feel out of place. She is the only non-Olympian left here, with Até being exiled. She knows she could be next, and still she comes to my side to rub my back and coax me away.

I will not be coaxed. I look upon the aging vipers of her hair and take inspiration.

"I will not suffer that insult to live. I'll put fucking snakes in his crib."

Zeus says, "Do not put snakes in his crib."

"Oh, like you'll even notice. You'll be too busy turning into a fence to have sex with a rake, or whatever you're into at that point."

"I'm the King of the Gods. I run the mortal world. Of course I'll notice."