HEPHAESTUS
God of Metalworking

Hera, the queen of the gods, was angry at Zeus. Again. He was an inconstant and unloving husband, and she’d just about had it. Then he went and produced a daughter from his forehead. The pompous nitwit. So Hera decided to show him. She produced life all on her own, too. Even when it was still tiny and nestled within her, she knew it was a boy. Ha! He’d rival Zeus’ son Apollo. Ha ha ha!

And then Hephaestus was born. Oh. Hera’s face went slack. Oh, that foot. That tiny, twisted, shriveled foot. Her hand recoiled. She stepped away from the babe. This was too much to bear. Her first child, created solely from her, and now he was a weak, useless thing. This thing shamed her. It disgraced her. With a shriek, she grabbed the child by his pitiful heel and cast him out, far far, into the wide and wild seas, forever lost.

But he didn’t fall lost, despite Hera’s wishes. The lovely silver-footed Thetis held out her hands and caught the babe. Her father was Nereus, the son of Pontus. Her mother was Doris, the daughter of Oceanus. Thetis was born to the watery world and knew very well how to manage life there. She enclosed Hephaestus in a bubble of her own breath and brought him to a sea cave where he grew strong in her love.

The sea creatures laughed at his funny foot. And when Hephaestus was grown and walked haltingly upon the land with the help of a cane, the land creatures pointed in derision,
for they went with two legs or four legs or six or any even number, but who ever heard of a creature with three?

Hephaestus refused to be spurned. He had a good brain. And strong hands and arms. And, most important of all, he was his mother’s son. He would find a way to be powerful. He would show the others. He searched the Earth and came upon Lemnos, an island with a mountain that roared. The soft sand beaches felt like silk under his weary feet. The many trees offered shade at last. He bit into olives fat with oil and loved the way it dripped through his beard. He closed his eyes and delighted in the twittering calls of the little owls. He threw rocks into the fire of the volcano and watched them melt. Ah. This was a good place. The fire would give him all the power he needed.

Soon he’d made himself a hammer, an anvil, and a pair of tongs. He set to work making things—anything he wanted. Armor and helmets and chariots. Necklaces and drinking
cups and graceful little statues. Then he made himself a chair with wheels, so he could cross the land much faster. Everyone still poked fun at him, but they admired him all the same. They came asking him to invent things to meet their needs. He was generous and taught them how to craft things for themselves. Even Zeus came, and Hephaestus forged him a cape that served as his breastplate and came to be known as the Aegis—Zeus’ symbol thereafter.

A sea nymph named Cabeiro fell in love with him, and they had two sons. Then he visited the island of Sicily, and the nymph Aetna fell in love with him and he fathered two more sons. Everywhere he went, someone loved him and someone bore him children.

But the one Hephaestus loved was Athena, the gray-eyed goddess who was the very cause of his existence. She liked to come and work beside him at the forge. She crafted things for household use, but what she excelled at was making anything to help in battle. She invented the bridle—clever girl. She made a soft twitter sound as she worked, almost like an owl in love. And she ate olives like a glutton. What more could he ask? For sure, she’d love him back—females did that.

But Athena had no interest in any man, least of all a lame one. She spurned Hephaestus’ advances and left him seething. Well, he’d show her, too. He’d get himself a wife that was the envy of the world. Just wait.