

ASTRA

MYTHS OF THE NIGHT SKY



INTRODUCTION

Stars, similarly to a page of Braille, seem to be incomprehensible dots at first glance: tiny blurred shining spots on the jet-black canvas above us. However, there is far more to them than one could ever imagine. Every single night, the stars are eager to tell us a myriad of glorious and tragic stories of legendary heroes and marvelous creatures. The only question is: will you listen to the stars' calling and allow them to tell you the magnificent myths of days gone by?



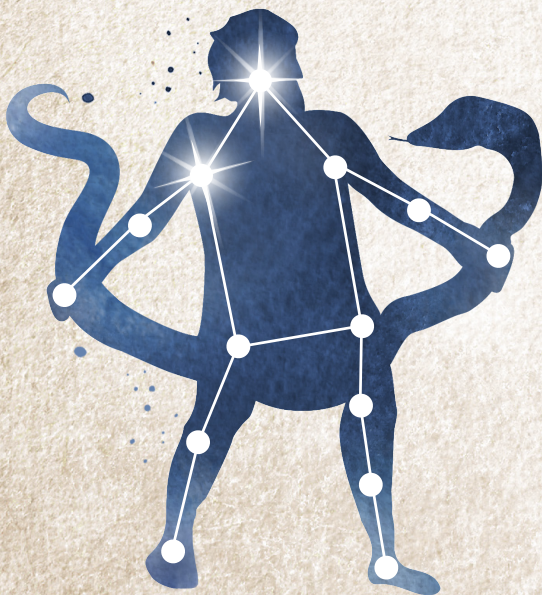
CHAPTER 1.

HELP THAT ARRIVED A LITTLE TOO LATE

According to the Ancient Greek legends, Ophiuchus is none other than Asclepius, the powerful and merciful god of medicine. Asclepius often carried a staff with a snake (Serpens) coiled around it. Whether he used the staff to help with his limp or if it possessed a meaning was a secret that only his serpent could disclose—that is, if it was not already slithering on the sublime skies. To this day, the snake-entwined staff is a symbol still associated with medical science.

According to tales from the distant past, a serpent represents life, death, and continual renewal. What is the best proof of these myths, you ask?

Well, at the dawn of the age of myth, Astra, the chronicler of the stars, witnessed a Scorpion (Scorpius) sting the leg of a great hunter.



The hunter shouted for help in the forest, and his tearful cries reached the ears of the merciful gods. They sent to his rescue Ophiuchus, who concocted an antidote using the snake's venom. However, by the time the god of medicine brought to the dying man's lips this gift sent by the gods, the hunter had already passed away, his soul ascending to the sky to take its rightful place.

The name of this legendary hunter might sound familiar to you, for it was Orion.

Orion was the son of Poseidon, the god of the sea, and according to the legends, he was just as interested in chasing wild animals as he was in chasing young women. One record says that he was relentlessly pursuing Atlas' seven daughters to win their affection when, to their relief, Zeus turned them into doves in the night sky, forming the Pleiades constellation. Countless stories have been sung about Orion, yet the most tragic of them all is a tale not of a hunt for a wild animal but a hunt for a lover's heart. Artemis, the virgin goddess of hunting, was so irritated by Orion's advances that she sent a scorpion after him to sting the man.

Of course, you have already read about the fate that befell Orion after that.

In his grief, the gods lifted not only Orion onto the sky but his two loyal hunting dogs as well (Canis Minor and Canis Major) so they could accompany him on his final journey.

And since that day, Orion and his two dogs have been hunting for large prey amongst the myriad of stars.

The difficult relationship of Orion and the scorpion had not improved, so the gods made sure to arrange the sky in such a way that when one of the two enemies would wake, the other would go to rest. Therefore, it can be said that Orion and Scorpius will never be seen at the same time in the sky.



CHAPTER 2.

THE CURSED CITY

Perseus' objective during his mission was to end the life of the vicious and feared Gorgon named Medusa. The young hero was sent by the gods well-prepared for the fight: he received an invisibility helmet from Hades, a sword from Zeus, a shield from Athena, and winged sandals from Hermes.

After arriving at the Gorgon's cave, Perseus was able to sneak in unnoticed with the aid of his helmet. However, the real challenge would soon begin.

Perseus was told by the gods that when a mortal man looks at a Gorgon with unaided eyes, he immediately turns into stone. In his wisdom, Perseus used the shield to find Medusa in its reflection. Within a matter of seconds, the young warrior struck with his sword.

As Medusa's head separated from her scaly body, the most magnificent horse of myth, Pegasus, appeared from inside of it.



Having reached the end of his mission, Perseus sat on the back of the flying animal Pegasus and journeyed on until he stopped to rest and seek the hospitality of the king of Mauritania, Atlas himself.

The king refused to provide him shelter for the night, nor did he believe that Perseus was able to defeat the Gorgon. In anger, the young warrior pulled out Medusa's head and held it up to Atlas in response. It took less than a second for the king to turn into stone. Perseus — just before he would leave to return back home — said to Atlas the following: ***"Your will is to be as strong and hard as a mountain. I hope the morning light blinds you till the end of eternity."***

Africa's iconic mountain range has since been named the Atlas Mountains.



This specific tale begins with the queen whose name was Cassiopeia. Cassiopeia, wife of Cepheus, the king of Aethiopia, was known for her arrogant vanity. She would constantly claim that she was even more gorgeous than the Nymphs, nature's most beautiful ladies.

Cassiopeia's arrogant words traveled far on the waves of the sea, so far that even Poseidon heard them and in his rage released the sea monster Cetus to destroy the royal couple's city. Cetus killed many civilians, starting with the fishermen and the innocent citizens of the town. In his sorrow, Cepheus sought out the help of a clairvoyant, who predicted an awful future for the king: the city was to be destroyed unless Cepheus sacrificed his most precious possession to Poseidon.

The king came closer and closer to insanity, as the words of the seer weighed heavily on his mind: ***"Your most valuable treasure's blood, whose flesh had been cut deeply by the words of your wife, just like the steel chains that you too will fall prisoner of."***

The king was devastated by this prophecy, but he had no other choice than to save his kingdom.



Therefore, he commanded for his daughter, Andromeda, to be chained down at the rocks along the shore in order for Cetus to kill her and for the curse to be lifted. It seemed that her fate was sealed; however, just before sundown, the curious spectators became aware of the silhouette of a strange figure as it flew before the globe of the sun.

It was Perseus, who was flying across the sea on the back of Pegasus, still riled up by the unfortunate meeting with Atlas. As he approached, it became apparent that the girl was not the only one who was chained and shackled down: he himself fell under a spell at the sight of the princess. According to the locals, Cetus was frightened just by the sight of Perseus' shadow, and the brave hero ended the monster with one strike of his sword. After he freed Andromeda from the captivity of the chains, Perseus asked for her hand in marriage. Happily, she accepted.



Poseidon, following the story as it unfolded, was very moved and decided to pardon the royal couple. Ever since that day, the locals believe that it was not Perseus who defeated Cetus but rather that it was Andromeda's beauty which enchanted the brave man, whose heart finally became peaceful amongst the sea's soft rumble.

CHAPTER 3.

THE FRUIT OF A LIE

As we approach the forest of the stars, enchanting singing sweeps through the branches, accompanied by the sound of Apollo's legendary lyre.

Apollo's loyal companion and messenger was a beautiful white bird, a crow named Corvus. The young god was preoccupied with mastering his craft as a poet, so he asked Corvus to bring water for him in his goblet (Crater), to quench his thirst. Corvus held the goblet between his claws and took off to complete the task. However, during his flight, just before he could reach the spring, he stumbled upon a huge fig tree. Corvus was amazed by the huge tree and its produce, but as he flew closer, he realized that the fruits of the tree were not unripe.

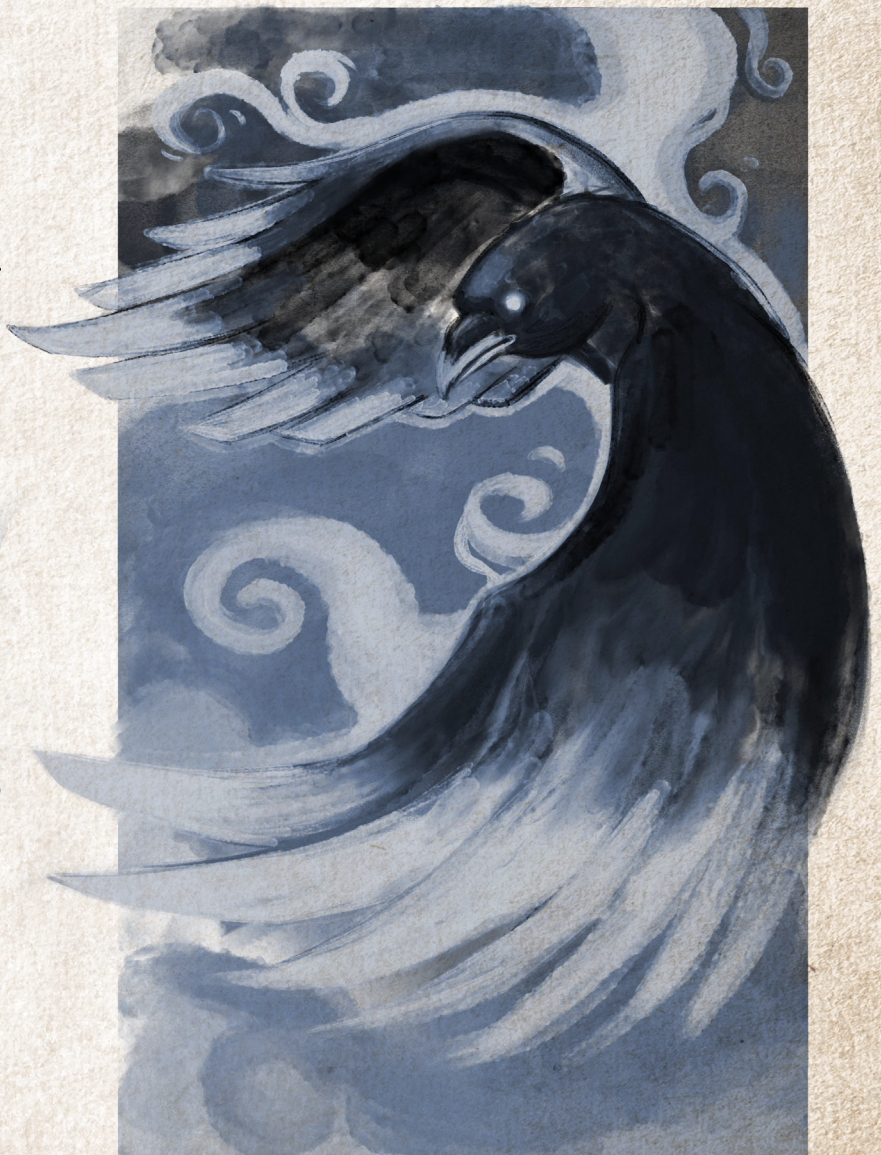


The bird waited patiently—only the gods know how many nights—until the figs had finally ripened. Corvus feasted heavily on the heavenly fruits, then flew on to complete Apollo’s wish. However, by the time it arrived at the stream, Corvus realized with disappointment that the stream was without a drop of water inside its bed.

The crow seemingly deflected its task for so long that the spring dried out. Panicked for an alibi, Corvus spotted a watersnake, the Hydra, and immediately picked up the snake with its beak, held onto the goblet with its claws, and headed back to Apollo. By the time it arrived back, the god was fuming; he could not understand what took so long for the bird, since the task that he entrusted it with was not particularly challenging.

Corvus lied that the snake, which by that point it had thrown at Apollo’s feet, was the one responsible for the disappearance of the water. As it told its lies, the bird’s feathers became darker and darker, and by the time it finished its story, the bird looked as though it was covered in soot. Apollo saw through the bird’s lies and in a fit of rage, he cast the crow, the snake, and the goblet onto the sky.

According to the songs of the nymphs, ever since that day, the sorrowful crows can only caw.



CHAPTER 4.

BLOODLINES

I.

Innumerable myths exist about the achievements of brave heroes and the terrible destruction of ferocious titans and creatures. However, there are also tales told of the strongest connection: one tied by blood and brotherly love. The story of the Dioscuri is exactly like that.

Tyndareus, the Spartan king, and his wife Leda had two sons. The legitimate Castor was to be successor to the throne, while Pollux was born from an affair between Leda and Zeus.

Castor was gifted with the curiosity and fearlessness of mortals, while his brother was granted the gift of immortality. Even though they were half-brothers, their love towards each other was so powerful that it made the Sun and the Moon shine brighter. From their early childhood, the brothers played together, dreamed together, and observed the vast starry night sky together side by side until they fell asleep, guarded by the gods' affectionate smiles above them.



As time passed by, the siblings matured into impressive young men. The chroniclers of Olympus described Pollux (due to his divine ancestry) as a fearsome warrior excellent at fistfighting, while Castor was reported to be an exceptional charioteer and able to successfully tame any wild horse that crossed his path.

So it happened that one day, Hermes showed up at Castor's house and asked the boy to tame a horse he had previously seen in the wilderness. Castor did not hesitate to provide his assistance to the god, and he soon got to a beautiful plot of land where he spotted an unruly young foal. As the two approached it, the foal started neighing and galloping back and forth. Castor began to follow it, chasing it for hours until the foal finally grew tired. Stopping to rest, they looked deeply into each others' eyes. Castor fell into a trance as he stared into the horse's pitch-black eyes. A vision of stars coming to life in front of him, and he saw the sea as its waves tossed around a weathered ship. Then, the stars began to take the shapes of people, who were fighting an eternal war on an endless battlefield.

By the time the vision came to an end, the young horse standing in front of Castor was as gentle as a lamb. The man and the foal were like two old friends who had not seen each other for a long time. When Hermes caught up to them, he could immediately tell that Castor and the horse had developed some divine connection, so he gave up his claims on the potential mount and gifted it to Castor. There was nothing left to do except to name the steed, so Castor named the foal Celeris (Equuleus), meaning "fast, brisk."

According to some myths, Celeris' sibling was Pegasus. Pegasus was known for his prudence, while Celeris recklessly galloped in the endless wilderness, constantly leaving his brother behind. When their lives came to an end, the gods lifted the two steeds to the sky, where they turned into stars. Since then, the two horses still gallop towards eternity above us. Celeris—being the faster one—is always the first to be seen by the enthusiastic observers of the stars, followed by the shining stars of Pegasus.



II.

After this short detour, we must return to the story of the two brothers, because as the years went by, they encountered numerous adventures. They adventured with Jason and the Argonauts on the Argo Navis (the ship that Castor saw in Celeris' eyes), took part in the Calydonian boar hunt, fought next to Heracles in a war against the Amazons, and rescued their sister Helene from Theseus' captivity.

When it seemed like Castor and Pollux had been through everything an adventure seeker could ask for, the brothers decided to embark on one final adventure before giving up their audacious way of living to live a serene life. Castor and Pollux accompanied two friends, Lynceus and Idas, in stealing cows from a cattle herder who was rumored to be cheating a village's people out of their money. Although it started as a simple lesson to the cattle herder, it ended in a family tragedy. Lynceus and Idas tricked the brothers, who in return stole the tricksters' brides as revenge. After this incident, a bloody family dispute occurred, which turned into a merciless battle between the four men. Castor was the first and only victim. After he closed his eyes for the last time, he found himself in Hades' realm, the Underworld.

Pollux mourned his brother night and day, with grief and sorrow suffocating his soul and pain tormenting his heart. It was impossible for him to imagine a life without his beloved friend and brother. The gift of immortality became a curse in his eyes, and he was willing to refuse the gods' gift and join the realm of the dead just to reunite with his brother. His painful sobbing—which could allegedly be heard both on Mount Olympus and in the Underworld—was noticed by Zeus, who was so moved by the young man's will to sacrifice himself, that he gave an offer to his son: if Pollux were to share his immortality with Castor, they would be able to meet again. Pollux accepted the offer.

Since then, numerous myths have been sung about the two inseparable brothers spending eternity together, sometimes wandering in the Underworld and other times flickering on the night sky as the Gemini constellation.

III.

Some say that it was the legendary Icarius of Athens who invented plowing. Icarius had always been mesmerized by the world and all of its beauty, including the divine gifts of the farmlands and the eternal cycle of life which defines our universe.

One day, Dionysus, the god of wine, rapture, and frenzy, gifted Icarius a grape vine and introduced him to the art of winemaking. In possession of this newfound knowledge, he soon put the Athenian men to work, and their endurance and devotion rewarded him with the most delicious wine in the region.

The joyful Icarius decided to share the gods' gift with the villagers, who did not hesitate to claim their share of the divine contribution. The villagers sipped the intoxicating sap from dusk to dawn. However, as the night wore on, they began to feel increasingly strange. Soon, the joviality was followed by dizziness and stumbling.

The people from the village had never experienced such a level of drunkenness before and grew suspicious of Icarius, believing that he had evil intentions and poisoned them. In a wine-fueled frenzy, the crowd grabbed Icarius and buried him alive.

Unfortunately, Icarius' goodwill and unquenchable thirst for knowledge had unwittingly led to his demise.



IV.

As the sun appeared at the dawn of a new day, Icarius' maiden daughter, Erigone, arrived to see her father. She reached their house, only to be welcomed by grave silence on the estate. The only noise to soon break the silence was Icarius' dog, Maera, barking nervously at Erigone's feet. Maera's restlessness soon transferred to Erigone, too, as she anxiously began to search for her father. Almost immediately, Erigone noticed that Maera kept holding onto her clothes and trying to pull her by the legs. Erigone understood that the dog wanted her to follow it, so she did.

Not far from the estate, the dog stopped at a vineyard and crouched on a freshly covered grave, whimpering.

Erigone soon noticed peeking out of the dirt a piece of fabric belonging to her father's clothes. Those living close to the vineyard—to these days, if they are questioned about it—claimed to hear soul-wrenching sobbing and whimpering that lasted until sunset.



Seeing the grief and separation between father, daughter, and loyal animal friend, Zeus immortalized them to the stars. Since then, Icarius has been watching us from above as the Boötes constellation. Erigone became the Virgo constellation, and Maera's soul found its peace as a star in the Canis Major constellation.

V.

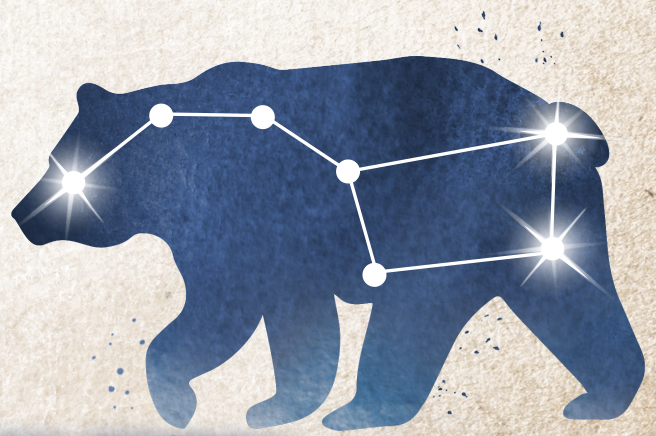
Before we continue our adventure amongst the stars of glorious songs and legendary warriors, we have to remember the unfortunate story of Arcas and a nymph called Callisto.

Callisto, whose name means “the most beautiful,” was a nymph, a mythical woman of the forest. Preferring the forest to her father’s house and enjoying hunting, she quickly got into the favor of Artemis. Soon, she accompanied the goddess wherever her journey took her and, in solidarity with her mistress, swore to remain unwed and chaste.

However, Artemis was not the only one who took notice of the nymph’s beauty and good deeds: Zeus had noticed her as well. He appeared to Callisto in the form of Artemis. Instead of rejecting Zeus’ approach, Callisto accepted her mistress’ passionate embrace.

Months later—despite her best efforts to hide it—Artemis noticed Callisto’s pregnancy. The goddess became enraged; however, instead of killing the nymph, she showed mercy to both Callisto and her unborn child by simply banishing her to the endless wilderness. Callisto wandered aimlessly in a vulnerable and lonesome state and had no choice but to give birth to her son in a hidden cave. Yet, her hurdles were not to come to an end... Soon after, Hera, fueled by vengeance, hatred, and an undying desire to punish all of her husband’s previous mistresses, appeared in front of Callisto. Hera lifted the nymph into the air and hurled her onto the ground.

As Callisto fell down into the dust, she turned into a bear. Hera then made her way towards the infant with the intention of striking him with the wrath of the gods. Just before she got to him, however, Hermes blocked her way and picked up the baby, saving him from Hera’s fury.



As Callisto found refuge in the forest as a bear, her son was adopted by Hermes' mother, Maia, in Arcadia and was named Arcas.

So it happened that one day, when Arcas was on a hunting trip, he spotted a big, old bear. Overjoyed to see her child again, Callisto began to make her way fast towards the boy in order to hug him, forgetting the bear form she had worn for decades.

Arcas was startled by the rapidly approaching bear, so he quickly reached for his bow, but before he could end his own mother's life, Zeus intervened. The almighty god stopped the arrow in the air and placed Callisto (Ursa Major) onto the sky along with their son Arcas, who is depicted as a bear cub (Ursa Minor), to be together on the canvas of the night.

Unfortunately, Hera, driven by her endless drive for revenge, asked the world's ancient ocean and the god of all water, Oceanus, to forbid both Callisto and Arcas to drink from his water. This is why Ursa Minor and Ursa Major never descend under the horizon and continue to shine on the sky until the end of time, still wandering together inseparably amongst the magical abundance of the stars.



CHAPTER 5.

CURRENTS

I.

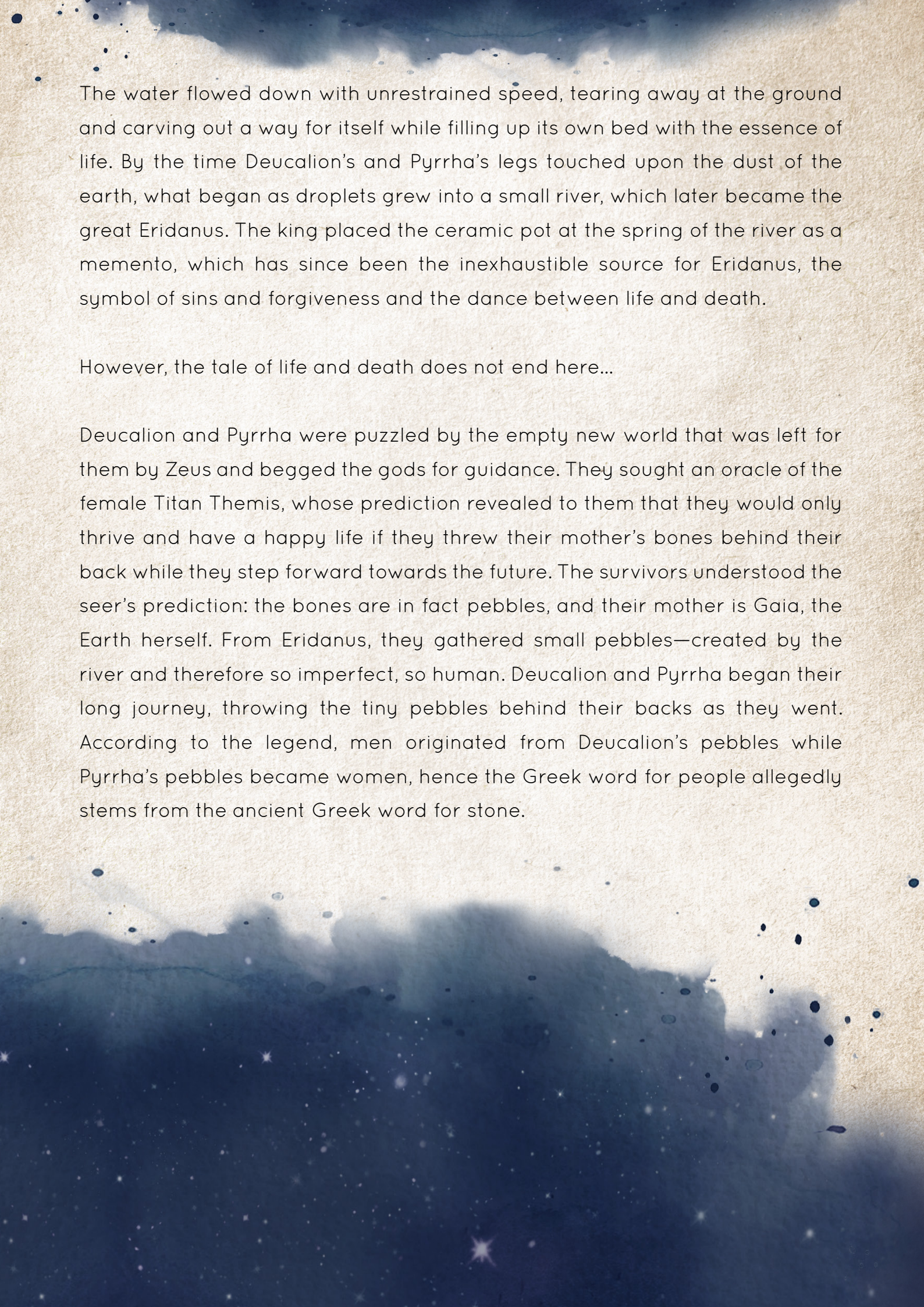
Water. One would not think that the droplets can signify both creation and damnation. As one drop falls, it rolls forward and makes way for itself to be able to multiply and grow.

On the dreamy lands of Arcadia lived a king called Lycaon. The king—afraid of the possibility that gods would punish his people for their sinful and abhorrent actions with drought and fruitlessness—offered the cruelest sacrifice to Zeus anyone has ever heard of: the life of an innocent child.

Since Zeus believed human sacrifice to be the most terrible of them all, he turned Lycaon into a wolf and threw the king at the feet of his people in a fit of rage. Upon witnessing all of humanity's cruelty, evil, corruption, and destruction, Zeus decided mankind was a mistake and the earth needed to be cleansed of it with a flood. After Zeus warned the gods on Mount Olympus of his plan, Prometheus warned his son, King Deucalion, and his wife Pyrrha, Epimetheus' and Pandora's daughter, to build a ship and stock up to survive the impending cataclysm. Deucalion and Pyrrha were tossed around on the riotous sea for nine days.

The water slowly but surely began to recede. As a result of the oceans and the seas recoiling into their beds, the couple could finally reach land. When the ship was about to dock, Deucalion grabbed a ceramic pot, held it under the water of the sea, and poured it out onto the dry land.





The water flowed down with unrestrained speed, tearing away at the ground and carving out a way for itself while filling up its own bed with the essence of life. By the time Deucalion's and Pyrrha's legs touched upon the dust of the earth, what began as droplets grew into a small river, which later became the great Eridanus. The king placed the ceramic pot at the spring of the river as a memento, which has since been the inexhaustible source for Eridanus, the symbol of sins and forgiveness and the dance between life and death.

However, the tale of life and death does not end here...

Deucalion and Pyrrha were puzzled by the empty new world that was left for them by Zeus and begged the gods for guidance. They sought an oracle of the female Titan Themis, whose prediction revealed to them that they would only thrive and have a happy life if they threw their mother's bones behind their back while they step forward towards the future. The survivors understood the seer's prediction: the bones are in fact pebbles, and their mother is Gaia, the Earth herself. From Eridanus, they gathered small pebbles—created by the river and therefore so imperfect, so human. Deucalion and Pyrrha began their long journey, throwing the tiny pebbles behind their backs as they went. According to the legend, men originated from Deucalion's pebbles while Pyrrha's pebbles became women, hence the Greek word for people allegedly stems from the ancient Greek word for stone.

II.

One day, a curious and adventurous young man called Phaeton and his friend Cycnus, the prince of Liguria, were sitting on a beach, contemplating their life and reminiscing about the adventures they had together in the soft light of the setting sun. Phaeton bragged to his friend—even though he had never met his father—that he was the son of the god of the sun, Helios. Upon hearing his friend's wild ideas about his ancestry, Cycnus burst into laughter and asked Phaeton to provide proof of his father's identity. Phaeton did not hesitate and began his journey to Helios' palace only a few days later. Just before sunset, he reached Helios, who greeted the son he had never seen before gladly and with a warm welcome. Helios promised Phaeton that he would fulfill one wish for him if he continued to walk the path of the brave, bold, and true.

The young man swore to this oath, then presented his wish to his father: on that day, he himself wanted to drive Helios' sun-chariot through the sky. Helios found Phaeton's request to be dangerous and tried hard to change his son's mind. His attempts were in vain, however, because in Phaeton's eyes he recognized the same fire that burned in him at a young age: one of adventure and passion. Finally, he handed over the reins, along with the chariot that carried the Sun itself. However, as soon as Phaeton jumped on the chariot, the horses were overcome with confusion and started to rampantly gallop through the sky.

The young man tried his best to calm down the animals in order to stop the blazing chariot, but it was already too late... Flying at first too far away, the Earth froze. Then as the sun-chariot made its way too close, it burned everything along its path. Wherever the chariot appeared, cities burnt to the ground, farmlands became dry and fruitless, rivers dried up, seas disappeared, and people were killed by the flames of the uncontrolled carriage.



Helios desperately begged Zeus to stop the destruction caused by his son. Using a lightning bolt, Zeus made the chariot fall apart in the air. As it fell into pieces, the horses were free to gallop ahead on the sky along the Sun, and Phaeton's lifeless body fell into the river (Eridanus).

His body was soon washed up on the shore of the river. As soon as news of the terrible tragedy reached the ears of Cycnus and Phaeton's brothers, they rushed to mourn their loss. Cycnus and the seven brothers held a vigil that lasted for weeks. No matter how many people suggested that it was time to let go and move on, they refused to leave Phaeton's side. Zeus was so moved by Cycnus' and the brothers' loyalty and love for Phaeton that he turned the grieving brothers into poplar trees by the river, so that they could continue to remember their loved one, undisturbed. Cycnus had a different fate. Zeus watched with sorrow as Cycnus blamed himself for the death of his friend. To lighten the man's heavy heart, Zeus turned Cycnus into a swan, yet the bird still retained the memories of his friend's passing and refused to bask in the sun's warmth atop the river.

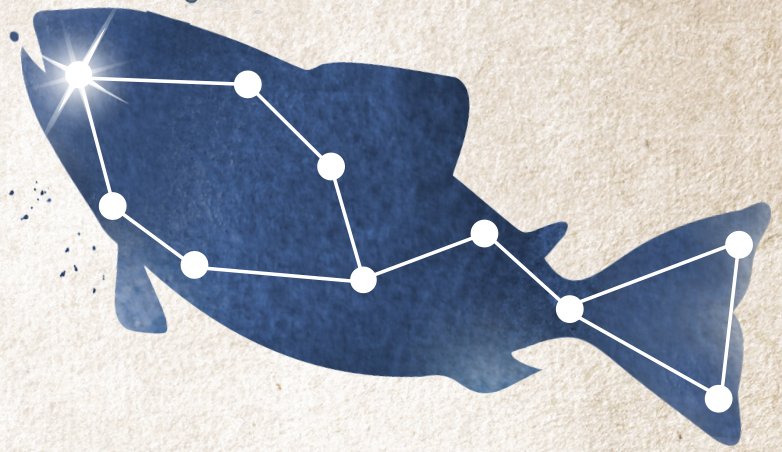


Zeus ultimately lifted both the swan and Phaeton into the dusk sky so that the two friends could witness the sunset together.

By the time Helios finished his work for the day and went to bed, Cycnus was shining on the sky in the form of a swan (Cygnus), and Phaeton took his place as the bird's eye in the constellation. Since then, people often talk about the swan who visits the poplar trees next to Eridanus every single night and how they embrace until Helios sits on his chariot again.

III.

Legends say that as Deucalion poured out the water onto the dry land, a creature appeared on the surface of the endless sea: an enormous fish.



The fish — being of divine incarnation — remembered everything that the chronicler of Olympus had ever written before the flood. It remembered the actions of the people, the shapes and sounds of the animals, and all the goodness and the sorrow of the world.

Many, many years passed by until the fish finally met with a good old acquaintance, but let's not get too much ahead in the story!

The myths of the southern fish (Piscis Austrinus) and the two fishes (Pisces) dates back to much earlier times...

One would have a difficult time trying to estimate the exact moment when two of the greatest entities of the world, Gaia, the primordial goddess of Earth, and Uranus, the primordial deity of the Sky, had emerged from chaos and order. The Titans and Titanides are the fruits of their love, and the youngest of them was Cronus, Zeus' father. However, the young Titans were unable to enjoy a peaceful life, since their father had succumbed to madness. Fearing that he would eventually be murdered by his twelve children in his sleep, Uranus grabbed his children and pushed them deep within Gaia into the abyss of eternal torture, pain, and punishment, called Tartarus. Angry and in pain, Gaia begged her children to punish their father.

Only Cronus stepped up to the task, and, holding a diamond sickle crafted by Gaia from her own tears, he set off to find his father.

The next time that Uranus would lay with Gaia, Cronus rose up and castrated his father, casting his genitals into the sea. There, a white foam had formed from Uranus' immortal flesh and from it arose a seashell that drifted slowly to shore.

Inside this shell was not only a pearl but something that was even more beautiful than anything else that has ever existed in the world. From the shell stepped out the world's most beautiful maiden, the goddess Aphrodite. As she appeared, the sky suddenly filled with lighting bolts, blinding every creature. Observing her surroundings at the beach, she became aware of a fish with a broken tail, beaten by the storm, and squirming in the sand. The maiden's gaze wandered to a nearby tree, and as she made her way towards it, she left a trail of delicious fruit trees, lush plants, and magnificent flowers. She tore off a leaf from the branch of a tree and placed it onto the broken tail of the struggling fish, healing the little creature, and shortly after saw it find its way back into the sea.

This was the goddess' first encounter with the old fish, who also goes by the name of Piscis Austrinus, as well as the southern fish. However, this myth is far from complete. Having overthrown Uranus, Cronus freed his brothers and sisters from Tartarus, and they in return elected the youngest Titan to be primordial god. After Uranus' reign of terror began the Golden Age of mythology. The Titans married Titanides, who gave birth to countless gods and goddesses. Cronus married Rhea and ruled over the Titans, gods, and eventually humans (which were molded by the Titan Prometheus from clay and received the breath of life from the goddess Athena) as well; together, they all lived beside one another in perfect harmony. However, this peace would be short-lived. Cronus' mother predicted a dark future for her son and foretold a story similar to that of Uranus: Cronus would be dethroned by his own children if he was to become an unjust ruler. However, the story of what ended up happening to Cronus will be saved for another time. What I can tell you, though, is that Uranus was succeeded by a son whose name could be heard even over the sound of the thunder that this god controlled, for he was Zeus.

It would be hard to count the years that have passed since the freeing of the Titans, but the tale of the two fishes is slowly coming to its end. Fueled by jealousy, one day, Hera brought to life the most vicious being in Tartarus, Typhon. A very destructive entity, Typhon was also a grotesque, horrifying creature.

The monster had the body of a dragon and millions of tangled snake heads that spat suffocating poison at mortals. Its claws and wings were forged in the darkest pit of Tartarus, and if anybody dared to touch them, the essence of life evaporated from their body instantly. Without a doubt, Typhon was one of Hera's most deadly creatures, and it was sent by the goddess to end the lives of Aphrodite and her son, Eros. However, to gain a better understanding of Hera's intentions, we must travel back in time again to learn about her reasons behind creating Typhon. For centuries, Aphrodite and her son had been working on filling the world with love and passion. The two were admired both across Mount Olympus and on Earth. Celebrations and wedding ceremonies were held in their honor, and their journeys were typically accompanied by miracles. On her travels, Aphrodite was followed by the Horae and the Charites, the goddesses of fertility, grace, and the eternal cycle of the seasons.

The Horae, or Hours, took turns accompanying Aphrodite, depending on the time she decided to visit certain places. Augue was the first light, the first Hour, followed by Anatolia, the sunrise. Musica was the third Hour, representing the morning hour of studying and music.

They were followed by Gymnasia, the hour of physical exercise and the will to act. Nympha came in fifth; she was the goddess of cleansing, bathing and intellectual refreshment during morning time.



Mesembria welcomed the time of noon, and Sponde was the persistent chaperone of the hour of libations, which came after lunchtime. Elete came next, representing the time for prayer, and then Cypris for the hour of eating. The last few were Hesperis, the hour of nighttime; followed by Dysis, the sunset; and Arctus, the hour of the last beam of light. The Charites also played a very important role during the travels of Aphrodite. Later down the line, Romans would refer to them as the Gratiae. The three Charites were Aglaia, the messenger of elegance; Euphrosyne, the messenger of mirth and happiness; and Thalia, the messenger of youth.

While Aphrodite watched over the working of the infinite cycle, her son was mostly responsible for helping mortals find love. The god carried a quiver of inexhaustible arrows in his bag, which contained two types of arrows. One kind was made of gold and was embellished with the feathers of doves; the second type was made of lead and was accessorized with the feathers of owls. If Eros used the first kind of arrow on someone's heart, the person's body and spirit were overrun with joy and would fall in love immediately. However, if he used the second one, his target would lose all happiness and be surrounded by loneliness. It is believed that Eros uses these two arrows interchangeably in a person's life, since neither emotion can exist without the other.

During these centuries, Aphrodite and Eros both gained such a prominent presence on Mount Olympus that Hera grew rather jealous of the duo. And why wouldn't she have been? After all, Hera was the goddess of marriage and birth, so she was bothered by the fact that people were keener on Aphrodite and her son.

This is how we arrived at this part of the story where Hera's jealousy and bitterness met with the darkest shadows of the Tartarus, resulting in the birth of Typhon. And it was this monster who attacked Aphrodite and Eros on their return home from Mount Olympus one night.



Realizing that neither of them would be able to defeat the giant, the two gods tried to escape. However, their endeavor was soon cut short when they arrived at the tempestuous sea. In their desperation, they both jumped into the water, holding each others' hands tightly in an effort to prevent the waves from separating them.

Struggling to stay afloat, they were ultimately swallowed up by the darkness of the sea. In what seemed to be their last moments, from the depths swam towards them a fish, who recalled how Aphrodite helped him years and years ago. The old fish gathered all of his strength to turn the gods into fishes (Pisces) as well in order to save them from the waves of the sea and help them escape Typhon's pursuit. Later, when the goddess and her son had finally reached safety, Aphrodite lifted the old fish onto the sky as a way to show her gratitude, ensuring that it would live forever in the minds of people as the creature of self-sacrifice and goodness. The goddess also lifted their shedded fish forms onto the sky as a reminder of how love and togetherness can conquer sadness and hopelessness.

Many centuries have passed since this adventure took place, but Aphrodite and Eros have since remained focused on their goal of spreading the arrows of happiness—sooner or later, hitting as many targets as possible.

CHAPTER 4.

THE WORKS OF HERACLES

Who hasn't yet heard of Heracles' legendary name and heroic achievements?

Heracles was an exceptionally strong young man, as evidenced by his strangling the two venomous snakes sent by Hera to kill him as a baby. The secret to his strength most likely lay in his divine ancestry; you see, although Heracles was raised by the king of Mycenae, Amphitryon, Zeus was his father by blood. In addition to his innate strength, Heracles was lucky to have the best of teachers. The well-known centaur, Chiron (Sagittarius), taught Heracles the art of archery; Castor trained him in swordfighting; Pollux helped him to master fistfighting; and Linus, Orpheus's brother, taught him how to play the lyre. Heracles excelled at almost every subject, with music being the only exception. According to the legend, one day, Linus scolded Heracles over his poor performance, claiming that he had no talent in the art of music, so the boy flew into a rage and struck his teacher's head with his own lyre, killing him instantly with a single blow.

Amphitryon was startled upon witnessing the immense strength and the uncontrollable emotions possessed by his step-son, so he exiled the boy and sent him to the mountains far away to find his peace while herding cows. Years passed by, and Heracles acquired the virtues of patience and calmness.



As he reached the 18th year of his life, Heracles decided to begin a new chapter in which—hopefully with the support of the gods—he would journey to see the world, find a wife, and settle down somewhere in peace.

He walked down and arrived at the foot of the mountain, but the shining stars in the sky were mysteriously leading him towards the city of Thebes. Perhaps this was simply the way his story was meant to be written. Heracles contemplated at the crossroad for a few seconds before finally taking his first step on the road, unsuspecting of the amount of pain he would endure in this adventure, but the gods' intentions were unpredictable and the young man was also led by his heart. Along the path, he met King Erginus' tax collectors, and it soon turned out they were heading to Thebes as well to collect the annual tribute of a hundred cows from the defeated king, Creon. Heracles disagreed with the tax collectors — he did not find it to be fair to collect the tribute multiple times — thus, to send a message to their kingdom, he cut off the men's ears and noses, tied their hands behind their backs, and sent them back to Orchomenus. ***“Tell your king that the people of Thebes have already paid their debt!”*** he shouted after the men galloping away on their horses.

Not a week passed by before the vast army of the offended King Erginus reached the fortress of Thebes to take revenge on Heracles and Creon's people. It was rumored that Erginus offered his soldiers one silver for every dead Theban man and one gold for every woman and infant. According to the myth, Erginus' pouch was empty by the evening, yet no Theban citizen was harmed. How can this be so? On the day of the attack, Heracles had volunteered to defend the city. The planned siege ultimately lasted for only half a day due to Erginus's army being stunningly frightened by Heracles' incredible strength, which he used to crush the enemy's skulls with his bare hands. His screams deafened the mercenaries, and his steps opened the ground under the feet of the attackers. After Erginus fell to his knees in defeat in front of Heracles, the heroic young man crouched down next to the king and whispered to him, ***“You will pay back double the amount you took from the Thebans.”***

Following the glorious victory, the people of Thebes dressed in flower garlands and laurel crowns, and King Creon blessed Heracles with the hand of his beautiful daughter, Megara, and half of his palace as a token of his gratitude. Their loving marriage would eventually result in the birth of three boys: Therimakhos, Deikoon, and Kreontiades. Heracles was the savior and hero of Thebes, but his success made Hera, still bitter over Zeus' infidelity and resulting son, increasingly furious with every passing day. Hera was well-known for appearing on the earth in the form of shadows and decided to stop by Thebes to exact revenge. During her stay among the mortals, she whispered into their ears and planted the seeds of the darkest thoughts in their minds. To Creon's son, Lycus, she said, **"Your father will turn against your bloodline in a war. End his life before it's too late."** Driven mad and unable to sleep, Lycus killed Creon that night.

When the news of the king's death reached Heracles, the demi-god flew into rage, which Hera planned to exploit his uncontrollable wrath in her next wicked deed. She visited Heracles as a shadow while he was on his way to mourn the dead king and whispered into his ears: **"Creon's grandchildren, your own blood, will be the cause of your downfall. Your sons will take the sun away from you."** Heracles entered a catatonic state, no longer able to command his body yet jerking forward to an unintended destination. As he entered his home, he saw himself from an outside perspective, with all the terrible acts he had ever committed. Megara noticed Heracles' bloodshot eyes as he proceeded in the direction of their children, who played gleefully nearby. Then, Heracles did something even the bravest of the chroniclers would not dare document onto parchment.

His madness was so tremendous that, for that night, the stars stopped shining and all the gods turned their eyes away.

After Heracles gained consciousness, he found himself in the deepest, darkest pits of grief. He looked down at his hand drenched in blood and then turned his attention towards his unconscious wife laying in the corner of the room.

Sorrow and shame tore Heracles' heart into pieces. He knew well that he had to leave the house, and so, led by his grief and seeking guidance to atone for his sins, he went to the Oracle of Delphi, where he was told that he must go to his archenemy, King Eurysthemus, and overcome his challenges. If he managed to conquer all of them, he would be pure again and freed from his sins. Furthermore, he would also be given the most valuable gift of the gods: immortality. And so, Heracles began his biggest journey yet. His first given task was to kill the ferocious Nemean Lion (Leo).

The beast was feared by the residents of a small town, so Heracles rushed to their rescue. Following many hours of the tiresome fight, Heracles chased the lion into a cave. The animal's golden fur had repelled both arrows and the edge of a sword. After realizing that he was unable to wound the lion, Heracles grabbed the animal's neck and choked it until the lion took its last breath. After his victory, he skinned the lion and made use of its invisible skin and head as armor to serve him in his future battles.



Next, Heracles needed to defeat a swamp monster, the nine-headed Lernaean Hydra, which many believed that if you were to cut off one of the monster's heads, two new heads would grow in its place. When Heracles arrived at the town of Lerna, he was overcome with joy at the sight of his nephew, Iolaus. Heracles believed this meeting could not have happened by accident, so he invited Iolaus on an adventure together.

In order to cut off all of the monster's escape routes, Heracles set the lake of Lerna on fire, and as soon as he cornered the beast, it started to attack.

The demi-god did not hesitate and immediately cut off one of the Hydra's heads, resulting in two more growing in its place. To aid the Hydra, which she had raised from birth specifically to kill Heracles, Hera sent a giant crab to distract the hero as he attacked the monster. Easily crushing the crab with his foot, Heracles called out to Iolaus for help. Iolaus shouted to Heracles with his idea: Heracles would cut off the Hydra's heads one by one, while Iolaus would follow him with a flaming tree branch to burn the bloody stumps where the heads used to be.

As soon as they finished with the last remaining head, Heracles sliced the Hydra in half. He then dipped the ends of his arrows into its blood, knowing that the venom harvested with this method was powerful enough to defeat the world's strongest creatures. To show her appreciation for their service, Hera immortalized the Hydra and crab (Cancer) as constellations in the night sky.

Heracles' tasks eventually took him to the island of Crete, where his mission was to kill Minos' unleashed and raging bull (Taurus), which had been decimating the island's orchards and farmland. Later, he slayed the huge dragon (Draco) to acquire the famous Golden Apples of the Hesperides. And throughout all his assigned labors, Heracles stood undefeated; no matter where the road took him, his perseverance and strength allowed him to overcome every challenge. Only one thing remained in Heracles' life that was more powerful than him: his own vanity, which on numerous occasions proved to be a more dangerous weapon than his fists.

One day, just after killing a cruel bandit, Saurus, Heracles decided to visit an old friend he had not seen in a long time: a centaur by the name of Pholus. Although Pholus (Centaurus) would normally eat his meat raw, he built a fire pit out of respect for his friend and served up a royal feast for his guest.



Heracles' hunger seemed to be growing with each bite and with each of his heroic tales he would tell. He tried to convince Pholus to open up the jug of wine that he inherited four generations ago from Dionysus himself. Pholus made an effort to explain why this wine in particular was the centaurs' most sacred drink and why everyone was forbidden to open it, but Heracles remained persistent...



As soon as the cork shot out of the mouth of the jug, the scent of the gift of gods started to spread across the area. This fiercely attracted other centaurs, who besieged Pholus' residence by the dozen. Heracles was frightened by the attackers and immediately started to shoot arrows at the centaurs from the window. The centaurs rushed off, but there was one arrow that hit an unintended target... Chiron, a centaur who was just arriving at the scene to reassure everyone Heracles meant no harm, had been struck. When Heracles realized that his selfish behavior caused him to inflict suffering on his old teacher and friend, he broke out of the house and rushed towards Chiron. Although Chiron was immortal (a trait that he inherited from his father, Cronus) Heracles' arrow, being soaked in the Hydra's poison, was unhealable and resulted in an eternal, unbearably painful injury for the legendary centaur.

They both knew that Chiron was about to face endless misery, worse and grimmer than to live out numerous lives in the Underworld. Heracles' solution was to pick up his wounded friend and carry him towards the Caucasus Mountains on his back. On the twentieth day, by which they were both barely alive, Heacles, using the remainder of his strength, took his agonized friend to the headland, where they met the Titan Prometheus, who was tied onto the rocks. The pain and misery visible on the Titan's face would take over thousands of years to describe accurately. Prometheus' only crime was that he created humanity and showed humans how fire should be used at the dawn of civilization.

Zeus became so angry with the Titan that he had him shackled to the rocks and gave an order to the mythical eagle, Ethon (Aquila), to feast on the Titan's liver every day. Because Prometheus was immortal, his liver would regenerate; and so, he had been suffering relentlessly every day for thirty years, ever since his punishment was decided. The only way of freeing Prometheus would be if another immortal volunteered to go down to Tartarus, the lower of the two parts of the Underworld. After Heracles and Chiron arrived and saw the pain that the Titan was in, the hero took out his bow and with one arrow (Sagitta) ended the eagle's life. Heracles then stood in front of the Titan and with one move tore apart his chains. The tormented Prometheus fell to the ground.

"I am here to put an end to your misery, Prometheus," said Chiron with a faint voice. Heracles knew that by jumping off the cliff, Chiron would end up in Tartarus; however, that would also put an end to both his and the Titan's agony. Just before they could say their final goodbyes, Heracles stumbled upon a laurel crown in the dust, which he then placed on top of Chiron's head. This crown (Corona Australis) was the reason that Chiron would not be forever swallowed up in Tartarus: instead, his soul would move on, purified. As they were parting, Chiron said the following to Heracles: ***"Your broken heart saved two souls today from eternal pain. I hope that yours too will soon find the warmth of a home."***

By the time nightfall rolled around, Prometheus was accompanying Heracles on his journey. With him too was his dear friend in the form of an archer (Sagittarius). For the first time in a long while, Heracles felt as though he was not alone, no matter where his journey took him.





Soon after making a sacrifice to the gods in honor of Chiron, Heracles found the entrance of Hades' kingdom, the Underworld. And so there was nothing else left for him to do but to complete his final task: killing the three-headed dog, Cerberus, who guarded the Underworld.

As he arrived in the Underworld, the hero was greeted by Hades. Fully aware of why Heracles paid a visit, Hades informed Heracles that he must complete his task with his bare hands. Otherwise, his last trial will not be considered successful. After ridding himself of all of his weapons and leaving behind only the skin of the Nemean Lion to cover his body, Heracles charged against the beast with a loud battle cry: the fight began. Heracles' determination and experience filled him with so much strength that even Hades could not stomach the sight of Heracles making quick work of his task, quickly vanquishing the guardian of the Underworld. After Heracles completed his mission, Hades took a step towards him and said, ***"Mortals can only arrive at the world of the dead with an empty heart. Your heart is once again in one piece and alive, and your soul from here on out is eternal."*** Even though he achieved what he desired, Heracles felt nothing but pain and sorrow in his newly beating heart. What is eternal life worth if it is empty and there is no one to share it with? The man stood in front of Hades and said the following:

"Take away my immortality; I do not need this pain. Give me instead three souls in exchange for the three heads of Cerberus, and when my time comes, you can decide upon my fate."

Hades was surprised by the request but accepted the deal. He resurrected Cerberus and let the man jump into the lake of the dead. As the bottomless pool swirled into nothingness, Heracles was getting pulled down deeper and deeper by the claws of the dead. He could feel his life leaving him, but when

he recognized the souls of his children, he felt his strength come back to him and started to swim towards them. When he finally reached them, he hugged the three little souls tightly, and with the remainder of his power, he climbed out onto the shore with his children.

Hades had not seen anything like this before, but in that moment, something incredibly strange occurred: as Heracles' children sat down around their dying father and they hugged him tightly, Hades realized the immense power of love and forgiveness. In each other's arms, Heracles and his children left the Underworld with Hades' permission.

Two weeks later, the hero and his children reached their family home, where in its doorway stood a sobbing Megara. The children immediately ran towards their mother and hugged her even tighter than they ever had before. Now a mortal, the exhausted Heracles fell on his knees for the first time. He held onto Megara's hands with tears in his eyes and would not let go ever again, until Hades requested his visit decades later in old age. Arriving at the Underworld, Heracles and Hades greeted each other like old acquaintances, and Hades only said, ***"No matter how you were during the beginning of your life, what is important is the person you became. Someone who will be remembered by everyone."*** Heracles' (Hercules) soul then turned into dust to take its rightful place amongst the legends of the sky.



CHAPTER 7.

THE JOURNEY OF THE ARGO NAVIS

Athamas, the king of Thebes, and his wife, a cloud nymph named Nephele, had two children: Prince Phrixus and Princess Helle. The relationship of the king and the goddess was not to be a long-lasting one. Early on, the king was seduced by Cadmus' daughter, Ino.

The ruler banished Nephele from his palace and proceeded to marry Ino, who—in addition to being a terrible stepmother to the infants—drove the city of Thebes into poverty and famine.

Ino's trickery and deceptive practices bewildered all men, and her enchanting eyes were able to hypnotize everyone who looked into them. Those who would hear her voice would no longer find the song of the Muses to be as beautiful. Ino, however, was terribly jealous of his husband's children and would feel herself overcome with suffocating hatred even at the sight of them.

One night after the children fell asleep, Ino approached Athamas, looked deep into his eyes, and began to speak: ***“Your people are angry, Athamas. Your children were born into a cursed marriage. If you want the people of Thebes to live in abundance and glory again, you must sacrifice them to Zeus.”***

Fortunately, that night—like every single night since their birth—Nephele was sitting on the edge of a cloud and watching her children from above with a bittersweet smile on her face. The words of Ino reached the goddess' ears, and, guided by her ancient maternal instinct, she rushed to her children's rescue.

Moments before the king would order his soldiers to execute the horrifying act, a golden ram descended from the sky and began to canter towards the palace. The ram pushed any and all obstacles out of its way, grabbed the young prince and princess, and crossed the sea to take them to the city of Colchis and find them safe haven.

During the lengthy journey, the children were rapidly losing their vitality and strength: the cold would make them shiver and the wind would cut as deep as a blade into their flesh. Princess Helle could no longer hold onto the ram; thus, she fell into the sea, and the waves immediately swallowed her body. The strait where the tragedy happened was later named Hellespontus. The golden ram still succeeded in delivering the young prince to Colchis, where King Aeëtes took him under his wing and eventually allowed him to marry his daughter, Chalcioppe, when he came of age. The woman later blessed the prince with four children: Argus, Phrontis, Melas, and Cytisorus.

The golden ram's life was much shorter. Aeëtes sacrificed the beautiful creature to Poseidon, skinned it, and pinned its pelt to the tallest tree in the city. In return, Poseidon promised Aeëtes that as long as the Golden Fleece would cast a shadow on the city of Colchis, the enemy's blade would never soak in its people's blood.

Generations later, Aeson, a wise king, was the powerful ruler of Thessaly for many, many years. After his half-brother, Pelias, betrayed and executed him, the whole of Thessaly was seized by the usurper.



Luckily, Aeson had a brave son, Jason, who managed to escape from his own execution after Thessaly's invasion. During his years in exile, Jason became familiar with an exceptional ship builder called Argus, and the two men quickly formed a strong friendship. Jason asked Argus to construct for him a ship with fifty oars to aid him in returning to Thessaly, his goal being none other than acquiring the Golden Fleece that was the center of many of his father's fables when he was a child. Jason, in addition to the desire to claim the Golden Fleece, was also motivated by revenge: he was determined to end the life of the usurper of Thessaly's throne. Since this was not an ordinary favor, the ship (Argo Navis) was specially built by Argus over three long years. During this period, Jason embarked on countless adventures, forming friendships and a loyal crew to run the ship. In the final month of the ship's construction, Jason had recruited 50 people to ensure his mission's success.

Chiron, a legendary archer, prayed to Poseidon for good luck for the upcoming journey. During his prayer, he sacrificed a wolf (Lupus) on an ancient altar (Ara) and drank from its blood to prevent any curse falling on him and his friends. At dawn on the first day of the journey, the foolhardy twins Castor and Pollux, who had joined the adventurers due to a bet they had lost, joined the crew.

On arrival, they burst with loud laughter and glee when they were surprised to see their own student, Heracles, along with many other mythical figures. By sunrise (or, as the Ancient Greeks would say, by the time Helios threw the sun into the hour of Anatolê), the crew of Argo Navis set sail with the legendary warriors led by Jason to reclaim the Golden Fleece.

However, the events of the journey of the Argo Navis and its Argonauts would have to be a story saved for another day...



CREDITS

Written by:

Patrik Porkoláb

Editing & Proofreading

Emanuela & Robert Pratt

Graphic design:

Csilla Fekete

Illustrations:

Bálint Cservenyi

Patrik's stories were inspired by:

Ian Ridpath: Star Tales

Apollodorus: The Library

ASTRA

